

Self-Realization in Practice

By Bruce Petherick

Sometimes I am too clever by half. (I actually don't exactly know why this phrase means what it means, but I have been around enough to know that this is a correct usage). Sometimes I have good ideas that I know will make other people's lives better, or I have a plan to do something really cool and creative, and then I have to actually implement the plan or the idea, which often causes me (figurative) pain.

One of the important projects I have going is to create workshops for Fine Art teachers (and other community members) to help them understand how to relate, and to better connect, to neurodiverse students at the upper high school level. Outside my music, this is the most important public duty I have. After some prompts reading Kara Dymond's book "The Autism Lens", I had a great idea for a workshop: I should work up a performance of what it would look like if I didn't have to mask whilst teaching at school, and then, in the second half, we would have a discussion unpacking what happens and what supports would be needed for a neurodiverse student. To make the presentation even better, I contacted a couple of current and past students and have asked them to write down, in detail, what their lives would be like at school if they didn't have to mask. I would then incorporate their experiences into the performance so that we could see what a number of different viewpoints, and differing diagnoses, would look like.

I know this is a good idea. It is a great idea. So, today I sat down to start working on my perspectives: what would my life look like if I didn't have to mask. Today I realized how much masking I have to do, and how much masking every neurodiverse person has to go through ...every...single...day.

Since I discovered my Autism, I have been very open with almost everyone about my Autism. I have shared my story in many different places, and I try to encourage other neurodiverse people to be proud of their story. People have called me "brave" for doing this and for being so open - for being so vulnerable. I don't see this myself because I am being authentic and not being afraid or ashamed of my differences. When I am performing music, there is absolutely no filter. When I was younger people asked me why I danced when I played, and I was honestly totally surprised that I did. It still amuses me when I see video taken of a live performance, and I see for myself how much I move when I play. I am completely unaware of this in the moment. **Just like masking.**

I don't consciously mask in the moment. It is, for me, learned behaviour that I may be aware of after the fact but not during the process. I have been trying to think about what it would look like not to mask, or at least not to mask as much, but I realize that I have no idea how much of my masking is now a core part of my being, and how much I could remove. This is a moment of self-realization that I'm not sure what is authentic and what is not. Now I am trying to be aware of when I am masking and what that means, and even if masking is necessary. This is going to be a long process and a long journey, and I hope some authenticity appears at the end!

About the Author

Bruce Petherick is a neurodiverse (ASD) musician and a creator of acoustic spaces living in Calgary, Canada. He has performed music around the world, playing various styles from classical to jazz and musical theatre. He is married to Meredith, an artist, and a social worker, and is a parent to 3 children, 2 of whom are also neurodiverse (ADHD).

As well as being an active performer and composer, he has taught at tertiary institutions in both his home country of Australia and in his new home of Canada.

Bruce has presented at many musicological conferences around the world and is an infrequent speaker at churches where he performs.

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