

Author's Journey: The Masks I've Worn

He stands in line, fist buried deep in his pocket, gripping something yellow. Around him, other kids wave dollar bills and laugh, trading snacks and stories that belong to easier lives. He stays quiet, shoulders tight, rehearsing invisibility. The yellow ticket in his palm feels radioactive, a brand, a confession, proof of something he can't explain.



He waits until the last possible moment. With a quick, nervous gesture, he slips the ticket into the lunch lady's hand, as if passing a guilty secret. She takes it, and for one suspended moment, it feels like the world has stopped. It's as if she's displaying it for all to see, before the metallic click of the hole punch pierces the card.

Another hole. Another reminder. Another mark of not being enough. The laughter around him grows louder, sharper. The smell of greasy tater tots and humiliation hangs in the air, and beneath it all rises a slow, burning shame.

He's not afraid of people seeing it; he's afraid of what it means. Afraid someone will see the yellow ticket and understand the truth: something is wrong with him, his family is falling apart, and the shiny world he once knew has come to an end.

Just one year before, he had been the golden child, part of the perfect family, big brother, advanced program, the kid other kids followed. His world felt certain, steady, untouchable.

Then the divorce. Mom cries. Dad leaves. The confusion. The demotion. The yellow free-lunch ticket. That little piece of paper said what he couldn't say aloud: his family was broken. He was broken.

That broken boy was me.

At seven years old, I learned what I thought was the first rule of being a man: *If you can't take it, fake it.* It was really the first rule of survival, the beginning of a lifetime of performance as protection, wearing a mask as a shield.

That moment imprinted something deep within me, a quiet, lifelong fear of being discovered. The shame didn't stay in the cafeteria. I carried it everywhere. Through every phase of life, student, athlete, entrepreneur, husband, father, leader, the feeling remained.

The Athlete's Approach to Everything

Sports became my sanctuary, my proving ground, and my hiding place. On the field, there were no lunch tickets, no whispers, no shame, just rules, results, and the absolution of performance. If I ran faster, threw harder, and hit farther, I could maintain the charade.

By high school, I wasn't just playing, I was mastering. I practiced longer, studied harder, and analyzed game films until the flaws disappeared. Discipline disguised the wound. Structure concealed the shame. I brought this mindset into everything: ***practice, analyze, refine, repeat.***

From high school through college, my dream was simple: make it to the big leagues. In my senior yearbook, I even wrote that my future goal was to play professional baseball and do shaving commercials as soon as I could grow some whiskers.

Then, in my sophomore season in college, arm pain, rehab, and surgeries. Suddenly, everything I'd built collapsed. The athlete was gone.

The world called it an injury. To me, it was the end of a dream. Without "the athlete," who was I?

That same feeling from the lunch line returned, the same shame. The same yellow ticket, just a different uniform.

So, I did as I always had, I put on another mask.

Marriage, career, achievement. If I couldn't be a ball player, I'd have to be the best at something else. I became a builder, poured myself into work, and wore confidence like armor. Yet hearing on the radio that an old college teammate signed a record-breaking contract reignited the old hunger, the old ache, the unfinished story.

So, I got a fake ID, shaved four years off my age, and bet everything on one last shot. Miraculously, the Houston Astros signed me after an open tryout, a million-to-one shot.

From the outside, it looked like a miracle, a prodigal return, a second chance, proof that performance could rewrite the past. But inside, I was still that boy in the lunch line, performing for permission to belong.

I told myself I earned that contract, but deep down, I never truly believed it.

Even at the height of my comeback, the same pattern showed up again: **success, then collapse.** The 1994–1995 MLB strike hit. I was invited to the Boston Red Sox spring training camp, and I crossed the picket line even though the players' union warned against it.

I was the biggest surprise coming out of spring training.

I led all Red Sox pitchers.

And when the strike ended, they signed me to play for their Sarasota minor-league affiliate.

They told me I could be up with the big-league team by the All-Star break.

Then I reported to Sarasota.

The manager, an ex-union rep, pulled me aside and told me to follow him into his office.

"Close the door," he said.

He sat behind his desk. When I went to sit down, he stopped me.

"That won't be necessary. This won't take long."

He leaned back in his chair, looked me up and down, and let the silence stretch just long enough to sting.

"I don't have a problem with your pitching," he said. "It's *you* I have a problem with."

Then he leaned forward, locked eyes with me, and delivered the three sentences that ended my dream:

“You’re no big leaguer.

You crossed the line.

You’re a fucking scab.”

For a second, I didn’t move.

Face hot, head reeling,

like I’d just taken a line drive straight off the forehead.

Those three sentences hit harder than anything I’d ever taken on the mound.

Three sentences.

Three strikes.

I was out.

He sat back and said, almost casually,

“That’s all I have to say.

Now get the fuck out of my office.”

Three sentences.

Game over.

I was released three weeks later.

And again, the same story:

build the mask, wear it well, watch it crumble, start again.

When I returned home, my wife filed for separation. She said she couldn’t breathe, that being with me was like living with a machine. That I never let up, that nothing was ever good enough, that I was always pushing, prodding, over-analyzing.

My worth had always been tied to output, control, and impossible standards. Without performance, I didn’t know who I was or how to love without fixing, correcting, or perfecting.

When she said she couldn’t breathe, I realized I couldn’t either.

From the outside, I seemed driven, focused, unstoppable. But underneath, I was exhausted.

Perfection isn’t power, it’s a prison. I have been serving a life sentence since the second grade.

After baseball, I threw myself into business the way I once threw fastballs, all power, no pause: telecom, construction, entrepreneurship. The same relentless formula: outwork, outthink, outperform.

And it worked, until it didn’t.

I built companies, made money, lost more. In building cellular towers, rated as the most dangerous industry in the world, the biggest threat wasn’t falling off a tower; it was customers going bankrupt. Feast or famine. For me, it was usually famine. Several clients went under, leaving me with losses of

more than a million dollars. Two years later, I was back on top, named T-Mobile's Contractor of the Year. Two years after that, the economic downturn hit, Bust again.

For a long time, I wondered if I was cursed, if every breakthrough was doomed to fall apart.

Turns out,

maybe I was the curse.

Every time I approached something real, success, intimacy, stability, the air thinned and panic rose. Fear of being found out. The shame of the yellow ticket now appeared as overwork, control, and endless motion.

I didn't trust success. Success brought visibility. Visibility brought exposure. Exposure meant someone might see that I wasn't who I pretended to be. So, I'd burn it down before anyone else could.

I called it pivoting. I called it strategic. In reality, I was running, running from stillness, imperfection, and from the boy who still couldn't stand in line without feeling less than.

When you live that way long enough, chaos starts to feel like aliveness. Crisis becomes your comfort. That was my pattern: build it, break it, rebuild it, never realizing I was rebuilding the same prison every time.

The Systematic Search for Truth

Eventually, I could no longer outrun myself. The pattern followed me through every field, every business, every relationship, and every version of my life. The same rise, the same fall, the same hollow victory followed by quiet implosion.

And the same haunting question: "Why"?

Like an elite athlete, I approached the problem methodically, dissecting, studying, obsessing. If my life were a game, there had to be a film to review, a weakness to fix, a formula to perfect. I'd mastered performance; surely, I could master peace.

But this wasn't a game to win with discipline. It was one to surrender to.

I could lead teams, negotiate contracts, win awards, yet still feel like a boy among men I'd outperformed.

Each year, T-Mobile hosts a regional kickoff for its contractors. It was a big event, hotel ballroom, stage lights, executives, everyone waiting to hear who would be named Contractor of the Year.

That year, I was just another face in the crowd, a smaller company, not especially connected.

T-Mobile's Regional Manager began describing a contractor he didn't think much of at first, a small firm that consistently succeeded through grit, precision, and perseverance. He talked about a company that had started small, fought through bankrupt clients, survived downturns, and continued to show up when others quit. As he spoke, the story grew familiar. Then he called out the contractor's name.

At first it didn't register. Then it hit me, he'd said my name.

You could've knocked me over with a feather.

The room erupted, applause, smiles, congratulations. Inside, my stomach dropped. Recognition brought exposure. I was back in the cafeteria, holding the yellow ticket, praying not to be seen.

Perfectionism became my religion. If I could get everything right, business, body, marriage, image, maybe I could silence the voice saying I wasn't enough. But perfection isn't wholeness. It's camouflage. I spent my life hiding in plain sight.

So, I began to search, not for success, but for truth. I devoured books, psychology, philosophy, spirituality. I went through therapy, coaching, and leadership programs. I built vision boards and burned them. I tried everything except the one thing I'd avoided, sitting still and feeling what was beneath the noise.

When I finally did, when I let silence in, the masks began to fall.

In my search, I attended a guided spiritual retreat, a place where the noise of the world finally fell silent. For the first time in years, the walls I'd built around myself began to loosen. Something in me softened. Something in me opened.

During a deep meditation, I felt the atmosphere shift.

It wasn't imagination.

It wasn't suggestion.

It was presence.

A presence that was not mine.

It surrounded me, filled me, and moved through the space with a weight that was both terrifying and tender.

The presence of God.

And within that presence, **He appeared.**

Jesus stood before me, radiant, steady, impossibly real. There were no theatrics, no booming voices, no clouds parting. Just a profound stillness that made every part of me aware of how small and how held I truly was.

He reached down and gathered the edge of His robe.

Then, slowly and deliberately, He lifted it.

On His side, just beneath the ribs, was the wound, His wound.

Except it wasn't disfigured or grotesque.

It glowed.

It pulsed with a light that was alive, as if the wound itself was a doorway. Not a scar of suffering, but a portal of power.

He looked straight into my eyes, through every defense I'd ever built, every story I'd ever told, every mask I'd ever worn, and He spoke with a clarity that cut straight to the soul:

“Your strength is in your wounds.”

The words didn't echo.
They landed.
Heavy. Holy. Final.

In that moment, I understood:
He wasn't showing me His pain.
He was showing me my path.

I wept, not from sadness, but recognition. My wounds weren't proof of weakness; they were the openings that let strength and light return.

When the vision faded and the room came back into focus, something inside me had shifted. Not fixed. Not perfected. **Shifted.**

That moment didn't make me holy; it made me *honest*. It made me real.

For the first time in my life, I stopped running from the boy in the lunch line. I could finally see him without shame, small fists clenched around a yellow ticket, shoulders tight, doing everything he could to disappear. And instead of turning away from him, I felt myself move toward him.

I was ready to hold him.
To tell him it was okay.
That he never needed to fake it.
That he was enough all along.

That was "my" experience, how truth found me. For you, it might come through stillness, heartbreak, fatherhood, loss, art, or something you can't explain. It doesn't have to look like mine. What matters isn't the form; it's the realization that what once broke you open was never meant to destroy you, it was meant to enlighten you, to turn pain into wisdom.

The principle remains: *your strength is in your wounds*.

This book isn't about converting you to any particular faith or philosophy. It's about the universal human experience of waking up, seeing yourself clearly for the first time, and choosing to live differently. The framework that follows draws on psychology, philosophy, and spiritual wisdom from various traditions. Take what serves you. Adapt what doesn't. But most of all, do the work.

After that moment of clarity, I noticed that every man around me was performing too, holding his breath, wearing his own mask. Different stories, same wounds. Some hid behind work, humor, anger, spirituality, success. Beneath it all was the same quiet ache: Don't let them see me. Don't let them know I'm not enough.

And as I began doing that inner work, unmasking, facing my own wounds, something unexpected happened.

Men started coming to me.

Not because I had all the answers, but because I was finally telling the truth. They came for coaching, strategy, and direction. But beneath all the talk about deals and deadlines, there was always the same unspoken desperation:

They were terrified someone would see through their act.

So, I started sharing my real story, not the highlight reel, but the uncut reality. And something shifted. Men began to breathe again. They dropped their shields, told the truth, their truth.

Somewhere along the way, the world forgot how to make men. Not the caricature of strength that hides behind performance, nor the modern version that apologizes for having any. Real manhood, embodied, disciplined, compassionate, was once forged in the presence of elders who knew what courage cost. That lineage broke. Most of us entered adulthood uninitiated, still wearing the boy's defenses.

This book restores that missing passage. It is the framework for a ninety-day initiation; forged from decades of mistakes, breakdowns, awakenings, and resurrections. You'll confront the masks you built to survive and reclaim what they've been hiding: the integrated masculine power beneath them. This isn't the past calling; it's truth that never left. Under every mask is the same invitation: to stop performing, to face the truth without looking away, and to live from the center of who you are.

If you're reading this at 3:00 a.m., wondering why success feels hollow, why your body's tired but your mind won't stop, I know that place. You're not broken. You're just tired of pretending. *You can't breathe behind a mask. You can't love through performance. You can't lead from a lie.*

The journey ahead demands honesty, discipline, and humility. But on the other side is the man you were destined to be before the world taught you to perform, the man who knows his worth isn't found in applause, approval, or perfection. That's the man waiting for you.

That's the man this book was written for. Let's unmask together, one mask, one truth, one day at a time.

With respect for your courage and brotherhood in your becoming,

— Christopher Zek