

# unMASKED



Dear Friend,

**This study is the fruit of Annesley Writers Forum.** So many writers have excelled at proclaiming the gospel through the written word that we decided to turn their work into a Bible study. Thus was born, *Unmasked*.

In this study you will read essays from six women about what it means to take off our masks and live vulnerably. There were many vibrant articles to choose from, but we lighted on these six because their work represented the diversity of voices in the forum with a depth of wisdom.

Each writer has approached the theme of unmasked from their unique position in the world. Kate Lee, a missionary to a Muslim country, reflects on the implications of being unmasked for a beautiful friend who wears a hijab. Dr. Katie Karnehm-Esh, a university professor, writes about leading an academic trip to Ireland while hiding the fact that she was in the middle of a divorce. Leslie Rideout, a middle school teacher, writes about her attempt to help girls let go of insecurities and bullying in order to be authentic with one another. Pastor Megan Koch shares the life-changing moment when she chose to be vulnerable before God and follow his leading into radical new directions for her ministry. Author Marian Green confesses the long journey she's taken toward sexual intimacy after a past of promiscuity. And author and speaker, Gwen Jackson, searches for a way to redeem past hurts from adults who belittled, intimidated, and humiliated her. You'll also hear the carefully crafted discussion questions and Bible study tailored to fit these essays by two of our gifted writers and Bible scholars, Lindsey Priest and Erin Crisp.

By participating in this study, you are not only opening yourself up to new growth and reflection, but you are supporting the work of the Annesley Writers Forum. You are giving these women the gift of your time and attention. You are allowing them to lead you. Thank you.

Remember as you go through this study that God has not only given these women voices to minister, but God has given you a voice, too. Your presence in the church is an integral part of God's plan for his children. Stand up, friend. You were anointed to take off your mask—strip away the voices that have called you unworthy or unable—and to lead in God's kingdom. Whatever your situation, God sees his child that he is waiting to unleash for his kingdom.

Writing mercies,

**Christin Taylor**

*Chief Editor, Annesley Writers Forum*



**Christin Taylor** is a PhD student at the University of Waterloo studying rhetoric and composition. She has written two books as well as essays and articles, which have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Sojourners*, and other online publications. She is a missionary kid who happened to marry another missionary kid, and they now live in New Hamburg, Ontario, Canada with their two kids, Noelle and Nathan.

For more information about Annesley Writers Forum visit [www.annesleywriters.com](http://www.annesleywriters.com).

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by Kate Lee



I stood in the hallway with my first grader on the first day of school, nervously pretending to examine the display of dried macaroni art that adorned the walls, when I met Jenny. I knew the moment my gaze caught her cheerful and reassuring brown eyes that we would be fast friends. She was short and petite, and looked about twelve years old with barefaced skin and a girlish grin. Still, I knew from the baby clinging to her jean jacket and preschooler hiding behind her striped maxi dress that she must be older than she appeared. Her eyes were expressive and kind, and they denoted a maturity that her youthful face concealed.

I soon began to see Jenny every day. She was a local girl who had grown up right down the street and attended this same school as a child. I was the out-of-towner who was still trying to figure out how things worked. Somehow she looked at me and knew that in all my outsidership, I needed a friend. So she kindly shared her belongingness with me by introducing me to the other mothers.

Jenny is like that. She is the thoughtful mom. You know the one. She is the mom who makes sure that Teacher Appreciation Day and the teacher's birthday are remembered. She is the mom who brings new shoes for the little boy who sits in the back of the class and never raises his hand because his pants are frayed and his shirt is too small.

She is the mom who asks the teacher for the names of the kids who don't have the necessary school supplies—pencils, crayons, notebooks, etc. She gathers some parents together at school pick up and asks if any of us can help her fill their backpacks. She is the one who lets me know that the girl with long, brown pigtails is brought to school by her grandpa because her mom recently died of cancer. She is the one who encourages her son and his friends to include my daughter (a tomboy at heart) in the boys' games at recess. She is always looking for ways to extend kindness and always on the lookout for the marginalized.

But the truth is that if you saw Jenny in the grocery store checkout or at the playground with her kids, you wouldn't see any of these things. You wouldn't see them because Jenny wears a mask. For some people, that mask makes her warm and genuine personality invisible.

You see, Jenny's mask is a long, black hijab—a Muslim head covering worn by women in Central Asia where I live. And for many Americans, Jenny's hijab is a mask that blurs her face and floods us with negative associations and harsh labels like radical terrorist, oppressed woman, and hateful enemy.

She is not any of those things. Jenny is not her real name, but she is an actual person who is probably not so different from you and your friends. She loves to knit and to try new recipes. She worries that her son keeps forgetting his math homework, and she worries that her husband might get laid off from his job. She enjoys being a stay-at-home mom in this season of her life, but she also confides in me that sometimes she misses her job as a journalist because raising kids full time is hard.

She dreams about getting a master's degree. She dreams about traveling to Europe. She dreams about taking a photography class and maybe someday doing photographs for a magazine or cookbook. She enjoys the same fullness of personhood that you and I do, and yet as Americans, it is hard for us to see that. We don't see her as a person at all. We see her as a political statement or a threat or a news clip. It is as if the hijab covers not just her hair but her complex and nuanced existence as a woman.

What Jenny taught me is that as women, we are naturally gifted at connection. We empathize. We nurture. We have a unique ability to go deep and to go the distance. We can open our arms and extend belonging to each other in big and small and dazzling ways. We are thoughtful and considerate and creative and kind.

And yet sometimes we let our masks divide us and squelch our God-given abilities to foster sisterhood.

Maybe it isn't a hijab, but we sum up people by their appearance and preemptively short-circuit connection. Instead of seeing the person, we choose to see an immigrant, a single mom, an African-American, a soccer mom, an Asian, a hipster, a high-powered professional, a hippy, or a chubby white girl.

Listen, that woman behind the mask may well be any number of those things and more. But we don't have to reduce each other to these trite masks. We can choose instead to connect with the person and learn her intricacies. We are good at making room for others. We are women. Connection is what we do! We are exceptionally good at creating safe havens for each other. We are the all-stars of encouragement. We are gold medalists in the compassion Olympics.

Sure, connecting with someone different can be hard. Really hard. Just ask Jenny how hard it is. But it is those barrier-crossing connections that teach us about our barrier-crossing God.

If he didn't let the barrier between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, divide us from him, maybe we shouldn't let any barriers divide us from each other. Maybe we should pause for a moment when we see another woman and look beyond the mask to see our sister made in God's image.

Let's try to meet her eyes and look into her person. Let's choose to see her and to be seen by her. Let's refuse to let masks come between us. Let's choose connection over division. Jesus shared his belongingness with us when we were outsiders and enemies of God. Let's be that belonging for each other, shall we? Because we belong to him, we can extend that belonging to others. Let's all choose to be women who dare to look beyond the mask, to forge connections, and offer unveiled faces.



*Because of the sensitive nature of her work in Central Asia, Kate Lee's name is a pseudonym, and the details of her life and writing must be kept anonymous.*