

Clothes of Possibility
Sunday, March 5, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
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A couple months ago I was at an NAACP meeting when someone talked about her parents' ritual on election day. They would come home and shower and put on their Sunday best before they would leave to vote. Now her parents were not mechanics or factory workers or household workers who would have come home in greasy overalls or stained uniforms. They were a teacher and a business person, but they still took the pains to dress up more to vote.

As I thought about this I thought of an African American friend who always dresses to travel, and I thought of the pictures from the March on Washington with people dressed up to stand in August Washington heat for the day. The striking Sanitation Workers put a sign around their neck that said, "I am a man," but dressing up says the same thing without the literal sign. I am a man, a woman, a person. I deserve respect.

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but many people know from too many generations of experience that when going to vote, traveling, or protesting their worth and dignity may be threatened. A suit and tie, a dress and pearls are protective armor. Our inherent worth and dignity is inherent and has nothing to do with how we are dressed, but how we dress may be one way of demanding an honoring of that worth and dignity.

When I was a child I had three sets of clothes: play clothes, school clothes and church clothes. My parents had house clothes, work clothes and church clothes. The church clothes were the fanciest. And while I dressed up every Sunday for church Easter Sunday was even fancier. On Easter I had a new dress - one year with multiple petticoats, a hat and gloves. I know that other faiths have similar traditions. One year when I was serving the UU congregation in Columbia, MD I happened to go by the interfaith center where we met on Eid. The Muslim congregation was just coming out and the children were all excited about their new clothes. Some may say that dressing up is not what a religious service is about. Indeed the comic strip artist Ray Billingsley regularly has his two young protagonists Curtis and his brother Barry making fun of the church ladies' hats. But dressing up for one's religious service is about showing respect for the tradition and acknowledging that you are a respected person within it.

And while many of you may not believe in heaven the old Johnny Cash song notes that, "I got shoes, you got shoes, All of God's children's got shoes. When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes. I'm gonna walk all over God's heaven." Shoes may not be for the poor down here below, but in heaven we will all have them. There everyone is to have the dignity of shoes.

Today many young people may not go to church, temple, synagogue or mosque, but they too have a place where they shed their fast-food worker uniforms and mechanic's overalls for their fanciest duds. Go to the clubs to see the young people in their finest. Some of the clubs even have dress codes. And the point is the same. Here you are not just a burger flipper or someone's service worker. Here at the club you are a person with your own inherent worth and dignity.

I remember my great aunt Ethel today. The day she was supposed to be licensed or ordained, I forget which, within the Evangelical United Brethren Church she got a phone call. It was not going to happen. She had a husband and a child and that, she was told, was where she should focus. But my great aunt didn't exactly take "no" for an answer. She went to plan B. She belonged to the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and she went around the various churches as a guest preacher for the Temperance Union. I remember Aunt Ethel today because she had a hat, gloves, purse, and shoes set in just about every color of the rainbow. She dressed when she went out to preach. The church may have dismissed her, but she would not dismiss herself. She had worth and dignity, and she was going to show it.

I titled this sermon clothes of possibility because when we resist a world that refuses to acknowledge our inherent worth and dignity by our dress as well as by other actions we declare that we will not let ourselves be limited by others. The possibilities of our lives will not be curtailed by those who think they have power over us. Dressing up is a statement of reclaiming our own power. We will not be kept down.

Sometimes society tells us the uniform we need to wear for others to acknowledge our power. The American writer Victor LaValle says, "Clothes are a kind of uniform. A nun's habit, a surgeon's scrubs, a cop's uniform. People often say that when they put on a certain uniform, they actually think of themselves differently." That can be good or bad or both. I was in my mid-twenties when I became the minister of my first churches. I would go to the hospital, say I was the minister and get sideways looks. Then I started wearing a clergy collar. I was often addressed as "Sister," but I wasn't questioned and was signed in.

About that same time my mother insisted on one of the last portrait photos of my brother, sister and me together. My sister is in her Army uniform, I am in clergy collar with black suit and my brother is in a business suit with tie. We had been launched. We had careers. And yes, perhaps we did think of ourselves differently. We were claiming a place in the world for ourselves as individual adults and not as our parents' children. Our clothes declared it.

But sometimes dress does not empower but limits. Perhaps the most well know poem about escaping the limits of dress is "Warning" by the English poet Jenny Joseph.

"When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

"You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

“But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

“But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.”

Notice it is by dressing against the limits of dress that she resists those limits. She will wear purple, apparently not a proper English woman shade, and with a red hat that doesn't go. She will do this when she is old and she expects some of society's restrictions on her to be relaxed, BUT she ends that perhaps she will practice a little now so that when she is old no one will be surprised when she starts to wear purple.

Both dressing to the nines and resisting the societal rules of dress are ways of declaring our own worth and dignity. Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo puts it succinctly, “When you put on clothes that are fighting against something, you can feel your courage grow. Clothing can set you free.”