

WHY ARE YOU WEARING THAT?
First Unitarian Saint Louis, October 14, 2012
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STORY FOR ALL AGES: *Elmer*, by David McKee

READING: "McLuhan's Tailor" By Rubin Friedman.

<<<http://funnymy.wordpress.com/2007/11/15/mcluhan%E2%80%99s-tailorthe-medium-is-the-material-the-clothing-is-the-message/>>>

SERMON:

There is an old saying that echoes the tailor's sentiments, "The clothes make the man." Mark Twain, the nineteenth century author of Tom Sawyer, affirmed this. Yes, he said, "Clothes make the man; naked people have little or no influence on society." Yet clothes have their deceits; thus we speak of wolves in sheep's clothing. We know that people can be, as Jesus put it, "white-washed tombs". We know that clothes can be deceiving, showing not persons' characters but an illusion of what they are. We also know clothing can be the cause of judgment and even can be the cause of death. It is in our deepest nature, to make judgments based on appearance. The hair and skin of other creatures are important cues for behavior in the animal worlds, and likewise for some people. In this country people have been murdered simply because they were wearing a turban. In recent decades in France a great debate rose about clothing. A deeply held value in France is *égalité*, or equality. So they said that Muslim girls could not set themselves apart by wearing head-scarves in school. But the girls said that the scarves were part of their religious practice and that in effect the government was telling them they had to choose between being French and being Muslim: that Muslims could not be French. Some protests turned violent on both sides. Unity and equality, identity and social norms, we and our clothing are all wrapped up together.

The story this morning by Dr. Rubin Friedman is marvelous because it says that what you wear tells something that is important about you and yet, no matter what you wear, you are still the same person. I disagree with the elder Friedman when he says, "A man is vot he does, yes. So seys the world. But I am a tailor. So I say, more that vot a man does, a man is his clothes... And his clothes is him." So the world sees, yes, but the world is not always right or good, its judgments are not always just. Clothes don't tell you everything, though they do tell you something. What I want is for your clothes and your actions to all speak of dignity and strength. I say, clothe yourself in dignity, and let the rest follow.

Sometimes I go to the shopping malls in part just to look at the people. Sadly, to my eyes, a lot of people look lazy, as if they don't care what they look like to others. All that seems to matter is that they feel comfortable. In some other countries most people dress up in order to go out shopping. And at different times in different parts of our country the expectations have varied. During the early '60s, young men in middle-class white-America wore ties and jackets to parties. By the end of that decade only "nerds" did that and it was *de rigueur* to attend all parties in faded jeans, and

open-collar shirts, or even t-shirts. In the 50s people traveled in their “Sunday best”: not so anymore. We all have our dress codes. So it is even with ministers.

When I first decided to be a minister I thought ministry was only about exploring the deep questions of existence, being a compassionate person, and helping lay people run a church. When I was in my first year of seminary I worked for a few months at a hospice hospital on the bereavement team. The Hospice of St. John was run by a marvelous priest of the Knights Hospitallers. He demanded that all on his pastoral staff wear the classic clergy shirt with the tab collar. I did not think much about it, except for the seemingly unnecessary expense, until the first time I walked into a room with a family standing by the bed of a dying woman. The moment they looked at my collar their attitude shifted to one of respect. I felt instantaneously “ordained”. Even my fellow UUs reacted differently to seeing me in that shirt. When I began in my first full-time church I never wore a robe. This was in Texas, where formal means wearing your “good boots”. Some people even found my suit and tie a little too formal. On one Christmas Eve I decided to wear my off-white robe with a green, peace-dove stole. A member of my congregation saw me in that outfit and in a troubled voice asked “Why are you wearing that?!” What you wear does not say everything but it always does say something.

The main reason Ministers in churches wear robes is the same reason the fiddler stays on the roof, “tradition”. In early Christian tradition robes were more common dress than togas, so ministers wore robes like everyone else. Later, as Christianity began to be more centered in northern climes, where robes were impractical, robes had become associated with the tradition and long-standing sources of authority. They were associated with the piety of the Desert Fathers who rejected the wealth of cities and lived lives of simplicity in the desert. So, priests wore robes. Over time elaborate traditions developed about the kind of robe to be worn, the colors of the stole (or scarf), and elements like the chasuble (which is actually a glorified poncho). In the Middle-ages religious scholars in cold European universities wore robes with hoods to keep themselves warm. These were adapted to the academic gowns of modern times. (Note that the academics put velvet stripes on their sleeves and we clergy do not. I say, jokingly that clergy do not put on the stripes because we are more modest.)

However, during the Reformation some in the radical wings of the reformation decided to drop the heavy distinction between clergy and laity and wear the same “worship clothes” that everyone else in the congregation wore. Not long after that, in the industrial age, government ministers and religious ministers, who both wore robes, began to decline in social power while merchants and business people, who wore suit coats, began to increase in social status and material power. Thus the robe became a symbol of stuffy and backward tradition separate from earthly influence. As a result, Protestant ministers began to wear suits instead of robes to claim their power as part of society. You can see how ideas of men’s dress and power shifted by looking at the official portraits of U.S. Presidents. In these portraits they all are wearing a suit coat, of varying styles. However, it is Teddy Roosevelt, who became President of the U.S. in 1901, which is the first not to be painted wearing the high collar and short tie or ruffles of the previous 22 Presidents. Instead he is depicted in the modern power suit and tie.

Unitarians and Universalists were influenced both by the “robe as symbol of authority” tradition and the “suit as symbol of power” tradition. Some of my colleagues still preach in robes, though I usually do not. Some of my female colleagues like the robe because it vastly simplifies the fashion choices they have to make every week. It also eliminates the judgment of members of the congregation who might look at a dress or pant-suit and ask “Why are you wearing that?”

Back in the spring I gave a sermon that was comprised mostly of questions from you all. One of the questions asked why I did not wear a dress, like the choir did. My first response was that I am not a cross-dresser: I don’t wear a dress because the proper term is “robe” not “dress” or “gown”. This was a flip response, a joke. But it does bring us back to the last part of the story of the tailor, about fitting a male for both pants and a woman’s dress. It is striking that the first response of Mr. McLuhan was “Didn’t you throw him out?” The younger Friedman tells this story about his father because it is a story of tolerance and Dr. Friedman has centered his life on undoing the power of prejudice. We also seek to be opponents of racism and prejudice. We affirm human diversity on principle because we have seen how tolerance serves the cause of the Beloved Community: what Muslims call the Umma and what Christians call the Kingdom of God. We know that we often are caught up in the judgments and segregation of the society around us even as we try to be different. We are known as very tolerant people. However, generalized tolerance is not as valuable as understanding and true acceptance. Like Elmer in the Story for all ages this morning, we don’t simply want to be another gray elephant, but truly appreciated for what we are. We may value a color-blind society, but that is not enough.

I have learned this in my work fighting Racism. No one wants to be pre-judged or trapped by categories of ethnicity or race, certainly. But the fact is that our skin color, our ethnic background, our unique personality are all essential to who we are. We want to have equal opportunity and equal treatment under the law, but we also want to be accepted and included as we are, with our faults and our heritage and our unique traits. Often categories, which are useful in some sense, are also terrible traps, like straight-jackets, restricting and repressing people from being their best and beautiful selves.

Gender is one of these categories, and so is sex. We dress people in these categories and fail to accurately see the person within. Note these two words ‘gender’ and ‘sex’. They are not the same. Gender has to do with socially constructed notions of appropriate behavior, dress, and roles for ‘men’ and ‘women’. In some societies there is a third gender, but not in ours. I have known men, men who were sexually attracted to women, but who also liked knitting and flower decoration. They were demeaned because of their interests. The word ‘sex’ on the other hand refers to biologically, determined traits. But even this category is not as simple as it seems. Throughout history certain individuals have been born with ‘indeterminate’ sex. We call these people ‘intersex’. In recent times the tendency in our civilization has been for doctors to perform sexual assignment surgery on these people when they are infants. Many times a person who was given by surgery the genitals of a male or female would later say, I don’t think I was assigned the correct sex.

Now there are three words that help us talk about gender and sex. The first is ‘Transvestite’. Note that it includes the word “vest”. It is about clothing and other social externals. It refers to those people who enjoy wearing the clothing of the opposite gender. A parallel term is cross-dresser. These people,

usually men, still think of themselves as male, but they enjoy putting on the socially determined clothing of women. A woman transvestite would find pleasure in putting on the image and style of a man. Though to a much greater degree it is a little like people who really enjoy becoming monsters or superheroes for Halloween.

“Transgender” on the other hand is about transcending gender. The transgender person identifies to some degree or another with a gender different than that assigned to them by society. Gender roles are stereotypes created by human cultures and thus only roughly correspond with the actual, and very diverse, people we put into those categories. In fact we are all a little bit transgender at times, we can identify with one another through movies and books and theater, we may have some traits that our culture associates with the opposite sex and are willing to accept that fact. At times the distinction between the genders becomes blurred.

But a transgender person is different than a transsexual. This is someone who fully identifies with the other sex. Sex refers to biological and physiological characteristics that define the categories of males and females. Not all transgender people undergo sexual reassignment surgery. Some do, but others decide they will simply be a man in a woman’s body, or visa-versa.

When I was a small boy we had a finished apartment in our house that we rented out to various couples. I remember one couple owned a little monkey who escaped one day and climbed high up into our pine trees. Another couple were two women named Jo and Katie. One day my mom told me that Jo had decided that he was actually a male and that we were to refer to him as him from now on. I thought to myself, “Oh, OK”. I was young enough to just accept that was how the world worked sometimes. My parents were very open-minded, compassionate and tolerant people. So, for most of my life I have known of transsexual people. I have known of transgender people and even one transvestite. I have seen how these people can live with more dignity and honor if they are able to accept who they are and make wise choices about how to live with their truth. I have seen people in all these categories be clothed in dignity, like the woman of Proverbs 31, “She is clothed in dignity and strength.”

One of the things I loved about becoming involved with Unitarian Universalist youth groups in the late 70s was that I felt I not only could be myself, without hiding behind a shell of shyness, but I could be celebrated. My interest in science fiction for example became something cool, rather than odd and quirky. We often talked about integrity, about letting down facades, about how everyone else was so fake and we were so honest, able to wear whatever we wanted and to be whoever we wanted. While most of us wore jeans and the beaded peace-jewelry we made ourselves, there was one youth, the younger sister of one of my peers, who always wore fashionable make-up to weekend conferences and sleep-over events. While we liked the ‘hippy’ aesthetic, Her clothes were the latest of what we called “preppy” fashion. She sometimes was caught reading the latest commercial fashion magazine at our “oh-so-cool” and “free-of-convention” gatherings! She got a lot of ribbing for it. Behind her back some people wondered why she even came. She tolerated our intolerance for a year, but finally when one other youth made a comment about the intolerance of “preppy people”, she exploded. “You people think you are all about freedom but you are pure hypocrites” she accused. “If anyone is truly different than you, *like I am*, instead of affirming my choice you ridicule me, just like you say everyone else does

to you.” She was on a roll; this speech had been forming in her mind for some time. “You say you have no facades, but you have your own script, your own show you put on for each other. You criticize my clothes,” she asserted “but I like what I wear, I am proud of the creativity and intelligence that goes into fashion. I Unitarianism is supposed to be about tolerance, but here I see only fear and judgment.” In that moment she was clothed in truth, dignity and the strength that comes from deep wounds.

Of course some teens there did not get it; they were so caught up in their own self image they could not understand what she was saying. But I heard her: ‘You can’t judge a book by its cover, but the cover can still be essential to the book.’ I have felt that with some books, where the cover enhances my understanding and enjoyment of the book. So it is with some people. It is difficult to put into practice ideals about seeing beyond the surface to find the true self. Part of the problem is that the surface is part of what we want to say about ourselves, and the other part is tied in with what other people think of us. The best way is not to ignore our appearance, but instead clothe ourselves in dignity, and spiritual strength, then let everything else that you wear be woven of the same cloth.