

4-1-2016

Wearing Brown

S. Ray Granade

Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work

Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray, "Wearing Brown" (2016). *Creative Works*. 62.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work/62

This Autobiographical Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

WEARING BROWN

by S. Ray Granade

4/1/2016

Blue has always been my favorite color for personal attire. Perhaps that came from wearing jeans—dark blue early on but increasingly and exclusively light throughout high school. Perhaps Mother marked me in that era when certain colors had strict gender assignments. I almost felt improperly attired without some blue article of clothing upon my body.

Growing up in the small South Alabama county seat town of Evergreen severely limited my sartorial options. Its small size and economic status as a market amidst rural surroundings guaranteed what sociologists would have called blue-collar selections. While I was fine with that, my parents had other ideas.

As pastor of the largest county-seat congregation, Daddy felt the need not only to dress the part, but have an appropriately dressed family as well. Country boy that he always fancied himself, even after moving to Montgomery, he nonetheless firmly believed that a workman was only as good as his tools allowed him to be. He eschewed ostentation, but when it came to clothes, which to his mind were some of the tools of his trade, he always bought really good suits—well-tailored from good fabric. As the son of a small merchant, he knew—and believed—the old saw about cheap suits. So he purchased apparel with names like Hart Shaffner Marx and even on occasion Hickey Freeman—always the best he could afford. Evergreen stores offered limited-to-no options in those lines, so he developed a relationship with a men's clothier in Montgomery. Department stores like Gayfer's or Montgomery Fair were not acceptable; he wanted people who knew what they were doing, were conservative, would be truthful about a suit's look, and would be horrified if one of their customers wore something from their shop that didn't fit exactly right. He felt that the little more he paid in that setting was an investment that yielded huge dividends in return. Periodically he would visit to secure another suit (or on rare occasions a sport coat; not until well after I left home did he ever wear a sport coat in the pulpit), and I would become a legacy at the store by the time I went to college.

Being reared in Montgomery, and being more attuned to the artistic than the mundane life, Mother also preferred dressing well, though she was no clothes horse. Her desires were more driven by aesthetics than by pragmatism, but she took her role as pastor's wife very seriously and hence her clothes were as conservative as her husband's. Her diminutive size necessitated even more careful shopping than Daddy undertook, and certainly excluded her from Evergreen shops—where anything in her size would perforce be children's styles.

Outlook and necessity meant that most of my clothing purchases for everything other than everyday wear (jeans) happened in Montgomery. That reality also helped engender my lifelong distaste for clothes shopping. My first college roommate, Ray Williams, opened a new world to me. Ray paid attention to clothes and loved shopping for them; if he were down in the dumps, he window-shopped for clothes. And his tastes were very particular. While my father had suit brands, Ray purchased only Gold Cup socks and Bass Weejuns and the brands that he preferred in every other article of attire from overcoats (London Fog) to underwear (I didn't ask). While he and I shared the same name, we lacked the same obsessions. He was a clothes snob. Clothes to me merely provided covering, something necessitated by society. Clothes as status or statement I came to understand but never truly appreciate. Pragmatism ruled my choices, for I always preferred comfort above all. But, true to form, I did have very specific likes and dislikes—color and texture included. And I suppose I wasn't overly fond of change. So the stage was set for one of my most memorable shopping experiences ever, fondly remembered though it happened when I still announced my age in single digits.

Most of the shopping trips on which I accompanied my mother took us to the stores surrounding the fountain that graced the foot of Dexter Avenue. Her department store of choice for me was the

Montgomery Fair, though J.C. Penny's would do in a pinch. I loved the store's pneumatic tubes and being able to aurally follow the carrier's path and watch it "thunk" to rest at the central desk. Shopping provided at least some redeeming experiences. Boys' clothing—like girls', I suppose—adjoined women's on the ground floor not far from the door. The saleswoman met us with her practiced smile and an aura of preferring little girls to little boys. Mother announced that she sought Sunday slacks for me, and the clerk escorted us to a table of wares. On it lay a paltry selection of pants in various fabrics and colors. Commenting on what a "nice pant" it was, she picked up a brown corduroy pair and extended the garment to Mother over my head. Being astute for my age, I realized immediately that she was ignoring me and selling Mother.

The pants were nice enough. The brown was a rich medium chocolatey color, avoiding tan (for which I did not care; my tastes ran to saturated, darker tones) or a darkness which would show every speck of alien substance that my active lifestyle was sure to inflict upon its surface. Though not a blue, the color was probably acceptable enough, since a blue shirt would coordinate nicely with it. The fabric told another story. Even in my youth, and despite my proclivity for aping a perpetual motion machine—indeed, running everywhere I went—I was built for stability in high wind. For that reason, I hated corduroy with a passion. Having my every movement accompanied by the "whick," "whick," "whick," "whick" of corduroy wales appealed to me not in the least. Its softness could not make up for the sound. Its durability appeared more of a liability to me than an asset.

Being, as my mother exasperatedly and often admitted, "all boy," I seized the opportunity to tell the clerk in my loud little-boy voice "I don't wear brown! It doesn't fit my personality!" Barely diverting her attention in my direction for an instant, the clerk quickly asked Mother if she were going to allow me to talk like that. I'm sure that her question rolled several queries together: are you going to let him be impudent (though she would probably have thought "sassy"); are you going to let him tell you what to do; are you going to let him get away with telling you, the authority figure, what he will and won't do; and (perhaps most importantly) are you going to let him be disrespectful to you and deprive me of a sale? Mother was a wise woman. And she was well-acquainted with what in the family we call "the Granade stubbornness" (though it's really "the Calhoun stubbornness" traceable to our intractable Scot ancestors). Even more, she was not about to be bullied by a sales clerk or have that clerk disparage her son. She drew herself to her full almost-five-foot height and responded "Of course. If he doesn't like them, he won't wear them. What else do you have?"

I know that she purchased new pants for me; Mother would not have wasted a trip. They were probably blue. The glory of the trip lay in my assertion that brown didn't fit my personality. It became a family story, first told by Mother immediately upon our return to my grandparents' house. And I did not wear brown until, as a middling adult, I chose to add that color to my wardrobe. Perhaps by then the education which my sons would later decide was more than could do anybody any good had changed my personality enough that brown did indeed fit it.