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Codes of Dress and Stress

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Codes of Dress and Stress

THEODORE J. SZPAKOWSKI

When I was a kid, I wanted to be president. I didn't realize how much there was in between first grade and the presidency, but it didn't matter. I cared so much about everything. I wanted to be able to make those opinions known, so naturally I needed to occupy the highest office in my country.

My mom, always more pragmatic than me, decided I should start with issues a little more manageable for my age. I hated my school's dress code. The handbook required white, light blue, or navy collared shirts and navy or khaki pants. But, according to my mom, the rules were even more specific than that. I thought that the best thing to match navy with was navy, but apparently I was wrong. So I had to plan out my outfits carefully to avoid being left with just two navy items. I thought that wearing light blue and navy looked strange together, which added another layer of stress—I could only wear my navy pants with white shirts and I had to have khakis to match with the others. Then, when I got home, I'd have to pick out a whole second outfit of “play clothes.” It was a lot of work for a six-year-old, and I was not pleased.

So, I did what any first grader with undiagnosed autism, a love of writing, and arguably too much time on his hands would do... I wrote a letter to the superintendent. I clearly stated my reasoning for why we shouldn't have a dress code. I was very impressed with myself. First step to president, right?

No. I had not yet learned that presidential candidates need to start with power to get anywhere. The superintendent wrote me a nice letter and made no changes to the policy.

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Three years later, things were changing. My parents had decided that I would not go to middle school based on where I lived. Those urban schools weren't safe. I could either go to a charter school in a different part of the city or to the public middle school in a suburb about a half-hour

away.

There were many differences between the two. But the one that stuck in my ten-year-old head was the dress code. If I went to the suburbs, I could wear anything I wanted. Anything! That was unimaginable freedom in my mind. Just open up my dresser and pick out a shirt and pants? A T-shirt, even? Jeans? Or I could go to the charter school, and if the shoes I wore were not completely black, I would be given a Sharpie to fill the white parts in.

I chose what I thought was freedom. I chose the suburb. And then I proceeded to be bullied for the year and a half I was there, so was it really freedom? Back in that superintendent's letter, he pointed out that the differences in people's clothing, without a uniform policy, could cause issues. Was that what was happening to me? I didn't notice any differences between what the other kids were wearing and my own clothes. But then again, there were many differences I hadn't caught yet.

I moved schools again, partway through my sixth grade year. Again, no uniform. There was a dress code, but at first I didn't pay much attention to it. Then, in my freshman year, a girl I admired started the conversation about the inequities in the dress code at our high school. The features targeted there—thin straps on shirts, necklines that could expose cleavage, sheer clothing, short shorts—were overwhelmingly found in women's clothing. Yet the stores and sections that targeted girls my age had almost exclusively that type of clothing for sale. How could these high schoolers be expected to wear clothing that wasn't being sold to them?

It turned out that not having a school uniform didn't mean you could just pick any two clothing items, after all.

I never wrote a letter to my high school superintendent asking him to change the dress code, but I did write a newspaper article about it. Why prevent students from wearing spaghetti straps, a low neckline, or shorts that don't reach the fingertips? The most commonly cited reason is potential for distracting other students, although other concerns like professionalism also exist.

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Working in food service, my uniform was intended for a different purpose. The polo shirt and khaki pants created a cohesive look around all of the staff. The hats or hairnets and gloves protected the food from contamination. Nonslip shoes or shoe covers protected us from a fall. The apron literally tied together the rest of the uniform and protected it from

spills.

Protection. My dining hall uniform was partly about conformity, like every other uniform I've worn. But it was also supposed to be about creating a safe environment.

My work uniform would have fulfilled all of the requirements of my high school's dress code. No cleavage escaped my polo shirt, the sleeves reached halfway down my forearms, and the pants more than cleared my fingertips.

I left that job because of the uniform, to put it simply. Not because it was too much. No one handed me a Sharpie for the logo on the shoes. No, this time, the uniform wasn't enough. I was still a distraction to one of the men around me. I didn't slip on the kitchen floors. No hair made it into the food I served. No food got on my apron.

But I wasn't safe. So I left.

When I must visit my old workplace, I question what I'm wearing. I wonder if I can make myself unrecognizable somehow. But what I was wearing was so normal. A navy polo shirt and khaki pants: practically what I wore as an elementary schooler, just with an apron added on top. What more than that could be expected of me?

I was just following the rules. I wasn't trying to take over, get some high office, become president. I just wanted to get my eight dollars an hour. And still, that was too much to ask.

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As a child, the dress codes in my life were written down so that I could follow the rules by the letter. As I become an adult, I've learned those dress codes are the least common. Adults are expected to just know what's acceptable to wear.

When my public policy professor was a young Southern lawyer, she was held in contempt of court for wearing a pantsuit. I don't know the details of it, but I'm imagining neatly pressed navy, perhaps with a pink blouse underneath. I do not think she's opposed to dresses or femininity, but rather to a lack of options. She was warned not to wear pants again after the first day; she refused, and went to jail for it.

I'm not sure much has changed since then. My aunt became a judge last month, and she spent the days before the investiture trying to find navy pumps. She had a pair, but they hurt her feet. In the end, she had to wear them anyway. Flats or dress shoes were not an option—it had to be pumps. She couldn't find a single comfortable pair in the state of Maryland. This

was a day she had been working for since she left law school, and she had to do it with aching feet. Because she was a woman, and being a woman meant she was expected to wear a dress and pumps. That's not written in the state constitution; it's just how it is.

I wonder if the women on the Supreme Court have to wear pumps every day. Does having the highest office in their profession save them? Or are they just as uncomfortable?

Last summer, it was this unwritten dress code that I stretched to the breaking point. At my graduation, I was a guy in a dress. The impact that such a statement could have made was greatly lessened by the fact that only four people in attendance knew I was a guy at the time, including myself. What meant more to me was not wearing a dress to convocation. Again, few people knew I was a guy, but I was one of them. I found a way to fit between my longing for masculinity and the feminine expectations that surrounded me. Temporarily.

By December, the rubber band I kept stretching had snapped. Instead of seeing if I could extend femininity widely enough to fit myself in, I gave up on it. People say quitters never win, but I've never had a greater victory in my life—not even the Junior History and Social Sciences award I worked so hard for in high school. That victory was expected of me. This victory is one that was never supposed to be mine. Others may hate me, but my happiness turns their taunts to cheers. These days, I build my own dress code, and rule number one is no dresses. I am balancing the clothing I have in my dressers with the boundaries of weather, comfort, and masculinity. I have been preparing for this since first grade, making sure I wore the white shirts with the navy pants and the navy shirts with the khakis. The tightrope is just higher now, and the audience bigger.

With all the emotions I've felt about my clothing restrictions, this is the first time I'm grateful—because I'm the one who's in control. I decide what I can put up with—whether I want to look as masculine as I can or just get comfy in sweatpants and a tee.

Clearly, I'm not going to be the first woman president the way I'd imagined when I was six. A woman president would need to learn to walk in heels and I am far too clumsy for that. But I've realized I don't need control over my country to be happy. I just need control over my wardrobe.