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Better to look good than cool; clothes do make the person

*By Diether Haenicke
September 17, 2008*

On some things I have terribly old-fashioned ideas, and I do not expect many to agree with me. One such area is what used to be called "dressing with respect."

By that I mean that one chose clothes carefully when one went to a job interview, made a presentation, or attended a concert, a funeral or a church service. In these much more relaxed and informal days, many of these old conventions have passed into oblivion, much to my regret.

I don't mind at all that the tie seems to be on the way out. Ever more men appear on TV or in their offices and executive suites with open shirt collars and without a tie. We all want to work in comfortable clothes, and the "casual Fridays" enjoy great popularity among office folk, although I find that in some work places the staff on casual days looks as if on their way to the hot tub or to Montego Bay.

But comfort is in and formality out, and eventually the catalogs from Land's End will push aside those from Brooks Brothers.

A women's sports team, at the White House for a recognition ceremony with the president, showed up with bare feet in flip-flops. At the Oscar celebration, world-renowned actors mixed tuxedo jackets with blue jeans and open-collar shirts. They would not be admitted to the Kalamazoo Country Club dining room in those pants. Last Thanksgiving, we ate out and I came to sit behind a young woman with an extremely low-cut pair of jeans. Throughout the meal the plumb cleavage on the lower back was broadly visible and attracted uncomfortable as well as pleased glances from around the restaurant. A waitress at a local bar wears as a top the same lacy corset familiar from bordellos in Western movies and made fashionable by the material girl, Madonna. Progress has carried us a long way. Respect for the occasion and consideration for our

fellow man's sensibilities no longer carry the day. When it comes to fashion, the motto is: anything goes.

A young man of about 20 showed up at my office the other day inquiring about a job.

I found him a very pleasant fellow, bright and relatively well-spoken although a Niagara of "likes" and "you knows" cascaded from his lips. But his choice of clothes diminished his chances for employment — by me or anyone. He wore the uniform of many young people: an ill-fitting, vastly oversized T-shirt; baggy pants whose seat swung between his knees; pants legs many inches too long and folding around his ankles like an accordion. As he sat down, a good 4 inches of his underwear sprouted prominently out of his pants. His Nike shoes were fashionably untied; the tattered visor of his baseball cap covered his right ear, and a big chain with dozens of keys dangled from one of his pockets, giving him the look of an apartment complex super.

The student smiled brightly at me and said he needed a job. I liked the kid, but my first thought was that more than a job he needed a full-length mirror and a few moments of critical self-assessment. But then it occurred to me that he would probably like what he saw in the mirror. Nobody dresses like that out of thoughtlessness. This outfit is a carefully composed fashion statement that wows much of the youth scene, horrible as it may look to people from a generation or two older.

Some sociologists claim that the trend to intentionally oversized clothes emerges from the prison culture which affects so many of our youth and which spilled over into our general popular culture. Whereas fashion and clothes in general aim at accentuating the positive and attractive aspects of a physique, prison clothes are supposed to do the opposite. I don't know how valid this observation is, but it appears credible. I remember, for instance, when basketball teams wore uniforms that made the athletes look good. Now they want to look cool, and that is baggy, loose and limp.

Let each generation have their own taste in fashion. But I liked it better when people looked good rather than cool.

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