

Dressing Down: Casually Going Downhill

T-Shirts and jeans (tattered with decorative holes and tears) at one's place of work? No problem! You won't be "dressed down" for dressing down by wearing these singular items of "clothing." As a culture, we've gone from classy to cool—also known as "informal"—and from thence to "casual," and finally to cruddy and coarse.

One can only hope that given enough time, the pendulum will swing in the other direction before everyone—no matter what his or her body type!—is buffaloeed into making an appearance in the buff and such an affront to our sensibilities becomes *de rigueur*—in warmer climates, anyway.

For it has become clear that certainly one of the most profound cultural changes originating in the 20th Century was the gradual rise of casual dress. As with any other such change, it began slowly, in the beginning limiting itself to more personal settings—home, athletics etc.—but as the century went on, the social circumstances in which such raiment was considered "acceptable" moved into areas previously restricted to more formal attire such as church, public celebrations and the workplace.

Of course, in one sense, these "new" fashions released us from generations of tight fitting and physically restrictive clothing that hampered blood flow and body movement, and probably emotional development as well. But in the process of clothing becoming both loose and less, its wearers were *also* being reshaped, eventually becoming altogether too little and too loose both morally and ethically! Indeed, they were influenced by the attitudes radiating from and signified by the new "looser" styles of raiment. The goal of "comfort" went much further than mere fashion; it also produced a desire to

be “comfortable” morally, ethically and practically. Such a desire required the abandonment of far more important things than corsets and high starched collars—that is, standards and principles!

As Americans, our casual style of life and dress represents a sort of “utilitarian chic” composed of an admixture of comfort and practicality, two concepts relatively new in the “fashion” industry. One hundred years ago, the closest thing to casual was sportswear—tweed blazers, plus-fours, knitted golf dresses and oxford shoes. As the 20th Century “progressed”, casual came to encompass and absorb everything from workmen’s garb (work boots and lumberman jackets) to the khaki and camo of Army regalia. The quest for the low-key—or off-key—has overwhelmed entire fashion sectors: millinery, hosiery, shoes, evening and formal wear, fur coats (if you can avoid being attacked by PETA!) and everything else that can be draped on the human form! It has infiltrated every hour of the day and every locale from the boardroom to the courtroom to the classroom—and even the bedroom.

Americans routinely adopt casual dress. Supposedly, the new dispensation represents the freedom to be “me” and do “my thing.” But the question then arises, has “my thing” blurred the lines between beauty and ugliness, between taste and tastelessness, between dignity and an appeal to the approval of the mob or even between man and woman? It would seem that the real question must be, how does wearing sandals, slippers, flip-flops and/or tattered jeans or shorts provide traction in business or demonstrate taste or even rationality?

Some of today’s CEOs wear sandals to work while intelligent kids from decent backgrounds copy the “fashion statements” of “da hood” and wear their baseball caps backwards and their pants so low that they need “fashionable” underwear rather than outerwear! Cargo pants can’t carry much cargo but along with dungarees, they can drag so low as to pick up anything from detritus to dung. But no matter how low you may go in

your dress, you may still consider yourself “middle class,” although a truly definable middle class—that is, the people who actually define *any* culture—is fading in character and shrinking in size as it takes on the worst characteristics of both the upper and lower classes.

To dress casually has become quintessentially American—albeit Western Europe in many instances has unfortunately followed in our unhallowed footsteps! Our dress code has deliberately taken on the false appearance of a lighthearted, relaxed and cheerful culture. However, driving in the fast lane with our eyes closed and becoming amoral and apathetic is the final outcome of this particular pendulum’s swing and if we cannot stop or slow down its momentum the pendulum—and the culture—may just become fatally unhinged.

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