

In the World, But Not of It

The Adventures of an Almost-Plain Friend

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Let not our minds rest upon goods, things, houses, lands, inventions of vanities, or foolish fashions.

- George Fox

Several years ago, I found myself strongly led to work toward greater simplicity in my life, including something approximating plain dress. This leading came as a surprise, since I was then an urban Friend and member of a liberal, university-town Monthly Meeting. I work as an editor and photographer, which leaves me immersed in technology and travel.

I have adapted my wardrobe and my appearance in stages: collarless shirts were first, then suspenders instead of belts. These changes brought little comment, since, as my fashion-conscious daughter assured me, both were then fashionable, an awkward coincidence indeed. I limited my slacks and suits to black with plain buttons, and my shirts to white or unbleached cotton and linen, or chambray in blue or gray. I stopped wearing neckties and discarded my cellular phone and my wristwatch. I began to feel that I was making some progress - and with my defective color vision, I found my revised wardrobe much simpler.

I have worn a full beard all my adult life. I felt led with increasing strength to shave off my moustache, another surprising leading with which I sat for some months before acting. That moustache had been part of my face for twenty-five years, and it was not easy to make such a change in the identity I presented to the world. This very consideration came to weigh heavily in my decision, but I ultimately found that it simply felt like the right thing to do. This aspect of my leadings has perhaps been the most difficult to explain to others: the sense that something is simply right, not necessarily supported by extensive or persuasive logic.

When I finally shaved off my moustache, people began to comment, ranging from "O, my God!" through "It makes you look more Quakerly," to "What's with this Abe Lincoln stuff?" I vacillated briefly, and considered re-growing my upper lip whiskers. . . but somehow, I kept shaving my lip each morning, and the world and I got used to the change.

A broad brimmed hat posed a greater challenge, since I am a large person, and require a particularly large hat size. Broadbrims are not to be found in every discount store these days, and my size proved elusive. I eventually obtained hats in black felt and straw from a store in an Amish and Mennonite community in another state. Initially, my courage was only sufficient to allow me to wear a broadbrim to Meeting and while walking in the forest for exercise.

It was the addition of the broadbrim which brought the most definite responses from F/friends. In the liberal, university-town Meeting, this completed the transformation: I was definitely regarded as plain, even though my clothing was off-the-rack and conventionally constructed. Within my home Meeting, reaction was chiefly in the form of questions, both curious and sympathetic: "Have you gone plain full time, or is this just for Meeting?" and "How has your employer reacted to your plain dress?"

One friend questioned the proper form for contemporary plain dress, suggesting that T-shirts, jeans and sneakers would be more in keeping with the original intent of plain dress: a preference for the practical, serviceable and comfortable, with a disregard for fashion. Further, she pointed out, traditional plain dress is now so distinctive as to border on ostentation, an advertisement of one's faith and beliefs.

Unprepared, I fell back upon the illogic of faith: it seemed to me to be the right thing to do. With hindsight, I see a contradiction in her points: if to avoid ostentation, plain dress must be periodically updated or modified to avoid an overly sharp contrast with the contemporary mainstream, the practice

has been re-enslaved to fashion, at one remove. If one truly disregards fashion, plain dress (contemporary or traditional) will necessarily be or become distinctive with the passage of time and divergence from mainstream fashion. The choice is whether to follow fashion one step behind and thus mute the visible witness to simplicity, or to embrace the traditional (rather visible) form of the testimony.

Matters have been different in the wider Friends community. When I visited another Meeting, I was welcomed warmly, but afterward a Friend confronted me: "Why do you dress like an Amishman?" This Friend was apparently unaware of Friends' plain history.

A week at Friends General Conference Gathering produced a range of reactions: a number of Friends welcomed me to the event and expressed the hope that I was enjoying the Gathering. Others inquired as to my provenance, guessing that I was a Conservative Friend, a Mennonite, or Amish. All were certain I was *other* - an outsider of some sort, different from themselves. When I explained that I was [then] simply a liberal, FGC Friend like themselves, some insisted on a qualifying distinction: "with Conservative leanings," or "in Mennonite garb." Some seemed to find me an affront to their sensibilities - an anachronism with little or no place at a late Twentieth Century Gathering. One Friend described a discussion which took place in a photography workshop, concerning myself as an unwilling target for the group's photographers, and whether the word "plain" properly applied to one such as myself.

Students on the university campus during Gathering were even more direct, bluntly asking if I were Amish (and often mispronouncing the name in creative ways).

At Yearly Meeting, while working with the Peace and Social Concerns Committee, I had occasion to use a borrowed notebook computer to type a letter - and found myself being stalked by the official photographer, who could not resist the image of a plain fellow using a computer.

The following Yearly Meeting, one Friend inquired, "Are you a farmer?" When I admitted I was not, he demanded to know why I dressed the way I did. I was startled by the implication regarding contemporary farmers and plain dress, being more familiar with the John-Deere-cap-and-overalls variety back home in Illinois, but I managed to recover in time to explain. Curiously, this Friend was quite aware of our plain history, but it had not occurred to him that a contemporary, liberal Friend might dress plain.

Among Conservative Friends, my appearance met with acceptance rather than questions and confusion. I fell around the middle of the spectrum in that group, which ranged from conventional casual dress to undeniably plain garments. To the potential confusion of the not-plain, many Friends who were plain in dress and speech seemed to feel no reservations regarding technology, and the list of participants included many e-mail addresses. After a few days among these Friends, I had become comfortable with plain speech, and now use it at times with other Friends.

When one considers the idea of walking for several miles each day through the forest, one imagines a solitary experience. Actually, one encounters a number of people walking, running, bicycling, and on horseback. As I made my daily walks, I became a familiar local figure, and over time, met with assorted reactions. Several asked if I were Amish; one more knowledgeable than the others added, "or Mennonite." Some only asked where I lived, and expressed surprise: "I didn't know there was a colony of folks like you around here." Two were certain I must be Mormon, and one couple inquired after the "Mormon commune" to which they assumed I was attached.

A small girl on a bicycle stopped to ask if I were Native American. When I responded in the negative, this seemed to confirm her thought, and sent her on a mental quest for the term she wanted. "You're not an Indian, but you're one of those guys, like an Indian. . ." I eventually realized that, in the forest setting, she had connected me to the Hollywood image of a mountain man or fur trapper. When I explained I was a Quaker, she brightened: "Oh, like the guy on the oatmeal box!"

One incident still intrigues me: A party of novice horse-people from a riding stable was passing through the forest along a trail converging with my path. I could hear the guide as they drew closer, offering a running commentary: "Up ahead on the left, we sometimes see deer in the clearing. . . *There*

he is, on the right!” I paused to look around and to allow the troop of horses to pass. I concluded tentatively that I was the landmark being identified, though how I had been described, or for what purpose I was included in the tour, I do not know.

As I began to wear the broadbrim more often, in more mundane places, the local confusion continued. Particularly when wearing a long overcoat, I have been greeted in Yiddish by individuals who quickly realized I was neither Hassidic nor a rabbi.

These instances of mistaken spiritual identity frequently provide an opportunity to explain myself and Quakerism in brief, particularly when my new acquaintance offers a follow-up question like, “Well, aren’t Quakers and Mormons practically the same thing?” or “You can’t be a Quaker; they all died off except for two sisters who are about a hundred years old.”

To appear plain in public is to become a target for photographers, particularly the amateurs and semi-professionals. These folks almost never ask permission; they simply want photos and assume I am there to be photographed. It is certainly true that, during a typical rally at the State Capitol or a Labor Day parade, there are very few folk in plain dress present. This apparently causes some people to assume I am part of the show, like the clown making balloon animals. I find this painful; I do not regard myself as a tourist attraction.

A visit to a public tourist attraction like the restored nineteenth century village a few miles from my home carries an added set of risks. During the summer season, the village is partially populated by volunteers in period costume who demonstrate crafts, explain exhibits, and generally add life and an intended authenticity to the village. Strangers often approach me requesting information or directions, assuming I am one of the volunteers. Most of my conversations begin, “I am a visitor here myself. . .” Some sheepishly admit their mistake; others react with disbelief. I prepare for these encounters by noting where the first aid station, restrooms, and other conveniences are located, to supply the requested information.

The reverse of this coin is a visit to a plain community of Amish and Mennonites. Where the plain folk belong and the tourists are tolerated, I find myself in a curious middle ground. Tourists take me for a resident; the residents know I am not one of them, but recognize me as different from the tourists. It is sometimes possible to enter into conversations with local plain folk. These typically open with exchange of names, then the inquiries: “Where is thee from? What is thy faith?” As I explain, I meet with surprise: first, no one has heard of a community of plain folk in my area, and second, there is no such community; I am an almost-isolated, almost-plain person. When I identify myself as a Quaker, the immediate question is always, “What does thee believe? Is thee a Christian?” Liberal Friends’ reputation precedes us, and universalism is so widely perceived as anti-Christian that liberal Friends are viewed with distrust. This, coupled with the unfamiliar nature of our unprogrammed worship, seems *other* to these plain folk.

I dislike travelling by air. A person of plain appearance attracts a measure of unwelcome attention in most airports, chiefly from those handling security measures. In Detroit, although my bag and I passed through the metal detectors without difficulty, security insisted on inspecting my hat and the top of my head beneath the hat, to assure that no contraband was concealed there. In Los Angeles, the same bag and I were unable to clear the metal detectors, a curious phenomenon, since nothing had changed between Detroit and Los Angeles. Security required me to empty my pockets, and seemed upset that I was not carrying a wallet; this is suspect in our culture. They concluded the metal clasps of my suspenders had upset the metal detector, but posed no greater hazard. They did not check under my hat.

Any trip to the market is an adventure. One sunny afternoon after tending the lawn, I ventured into a local market in straw hat and chambray shirt. In the produce section, I realized three other customers were discreetly following me, observing and imitating my selections. They had apparently concluded that I had specialized, inside knowledge of the quality of fruits and vegetables.

I find that people - store associates and customers alike - seem more courteous and helpful, even during busy times, when the aisles are jammed with carts and the check-out lines are long. I have drawn two conclusions:

First, the broadbrim is the defining article of masculine plain dress. Given the diversity of styles currently permissible, most casual observers find me only slightly odd without the hat, and do not appear to give me a second thought. When I don the hat, most regard me as *other*.

Second, most respond to me differently when they perceive me as a plain person. I have given this long consideration, attempting to understand this phenomenon (and examining my own reasons for dressing this way). My different, *other* appearance causes most people to give me that proverbial second thought, and to react to me *as an individual* rather than as one in an interminable succession of interchangeable customers. Our interaction is transformed from the perfunctory automatism of daily commerce to contact between two people - and in most cases, we respond to that of God in one another.

My next step was the attempt to sew my own plain clothing. This took me into the sewing and fabric shops, where large bearded men in plain dress were rare. The associates and my sister customers seem bemused and uncertain at my intrusion, but so far, none has ventured any questions at all. I have achieved a degree of success in sewing shirts (I am able to wear the result), but have been less successful in efforts to sew broadfalls.

The transition so far has not been difficult, and I have become comfortable as an almost-plain Friend. My sense that "it is the right thing to do" continues to be strong. I cannot imagine reverting to mainstream fashions, nor would I wish to do so. I have not given up anything, and I now enjoy greater freedom and greater truth - to myself and to my faith.

I may add that in 2005 I transferred my membership from that liberal, university-town monthly meeting to Stillwater Monthly Meeting (Ohio Yearly Meeting), and have become in fact the Conservative Friend the liberals perceived. This has been a source of relief and joy to me, and very likely to the liberal Friends who could not quite categorize me before.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in Friends Journal.