Suit Yourself!

By Stanley Bing

I read in my local style section that we're supposed to start wearing suits and ties again. I don't wanna.

The function of the business uniform is to provide a costume in which our idiosyncratic selves can be disguised, allowing us to go about our work without revealing too much of our resplendent humanity, or at least displaying only what we choose.

In the 1930s, for instance, everybody wore hats. Men all had the same hat—fedoras —that make one individual look much like another.

Later on, men and women were all stuffed into suits of subdued hue, which they might wear with their hats to blend in with their fellow workers. Shirts were white, ties narrow, the rich symphony of human character reduced to a pleasant monotone. They looked drab, our forebears, so they got away with more.

In the '70s and '80s, everybody kind of looked like a clown. Ties were egregiously wide. Pinstripes broadened to create that just-incarcerated look. But it was still a disguise in which one could hide. I remember putting on my red suspenders and yellow power ties back then, and laughing at my reflection. Who was that man? A savvy financial burgher with a finger on the pulse of the bucking economic bronco that was going to make everybody a big fortune! What a crock.

Then came the '90s and the new millennium—the democratization of capital! Put on your T-shirt and Levi's! The kids were in charge of the classroom. Not since the '60s were old people listening so closely to the nattering of the young. Young people aren't any smarter than old ones; they're just more sure of themselves.

Anyhow, the one thing left of value from the past 10 years is the relaxation of the assumption that working people need to be stuffed into a uniform to function properly. Only in brokerages, steak houses, and perp walks do you see guys in three-piece suits these days.

I kind of like things the way they are, which is, at this point, nowhere at all. Instead of creepy, goofy, constricting wingtips, I often wear soft shoes that would have gotten me a good talking-to a decade ago. Sometimes, I wear a suit just because I feel like it. Other times, khakis and a blazer give me a nice, informal panache. I have yet to show up in jeans, leather jacket, and black T-shirt. But if they make me come in on the weekend in the next couple of months, I just might.

There is, however, one thing I'm feeling pretty staunch about. If I never wear a necktie again, it'll be too soon. I went to my closet the other day and looked at all of them. Red ones with tiny blue dots, yellow ones with little navy flecks, one that I've worn to every merger, bright crimson with a black geometric pattern. So pretty. So carefully chosen over the years. I hate them. Every single one. There was a time when I was so proud of them, but now when I put one on I feel like a monkey on a chain. More than usual, even.
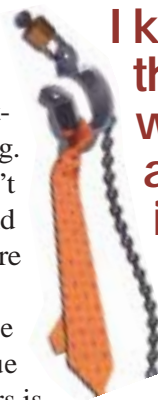
So I don't need the style fascisti to reinstitute a dress code that makes me button my collar again. After decades, perhaps centuries, of conformity, we live in a nice, easy business universe that is virtually standards-free, particularly for those who have attained a certain level of success. To achieve that kind of freedom in past years, one had to be in college or unemployed. I don't know about you, but I never want to be in either of those places ever again. Freedom is an excellent thing, but for some reason it is sweetest when enjoyed within a context of servitude.

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CPM