

Cultural Daily

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The Why of Things: A Lesson in Caring

Carl Louisville · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

Recently, I've been challenged a lot about the why of things. Take this particular situation for instance: why should I spend \$500 on a jacket? The question is often followed by the statement: I don't care that much.

Someone said to me recently "you seem to be someone who worries a lot about how you look." This had never occurred to me. I quipped back, "Worry? I'm not worried." Rather, I care about my appearance and there's a big difference.

I'm in the business of selling clothing and all manner of lifestyle enhancements. It's these details – the right dress, a coat that actually fits – that carry over into the act of caring. The nature of my business has given me many opportunities for reflection, primarily around how I go out into the world and what the effort of my appearance says to the rest. Worry and attention can both be obsessive tendencies, sure. But where do they come from? And how do they differ?

My attention to detail didn't come from 25 years in the luxury fashion business. It wasn't from my ongoing obsession with certain brands every runway exit. Finally, it wasn't from the fact that I've gone through what might amount to two life savings in my commitment to the idea of a uniform. I believe every much in uniforms, and the right one takes time to develop. My journey as a bespoke businessman has lead me to an important kind of ministry that feeds the larger goals of owning an atelier. It brings me great joy when I see a client dancing in the mirror as they discover what details illuminate the person inside. An attentive approach to dressing brings you closer to a real working wardrobe that fits your lifestyle.

I recall a conversation with another client whose annual clothing budget is in the very high six figures. Mind you, she is one of the wealthiest ladies in Los Angeles, and a socialite with a calendar similar to Princess Diana's. It's the lifestyle that accompanies enormous wealth earned running a global, multi-billion dollar business. One day while we were talking she described the fetishistic approach her mother brought to getting dressed. A complete preoccupation with maintaining the grooming standards that affirmed her family's image and status in social circles. How she looked was an important part of how they were presented as a family in society. This life-long commitment to caring was the social norm.

It brought to mind how every Sunday morning my grandmother would line up my six brothers and me in the living room before church for inspection. We laugh now at this, but back then she was serious. She would examine us from head to toe. Hair properly combed, blue suit fitted and clean, white shirt starched to the nines, and shoes spit-shined. As kids, we had cans of spray starch and shoe-shine kits at all times, and we were responsible for taking care of our appearance. She wanted to ensure we looked proper and could accompany her to church and other social functions big in the south. Her voice still rings in my head: "Boy, I know you have clean shirts in this house," and "You ain't going nowhere with me looking like that." There was no getting anything past this lady.

We would stand single-file until everyone was perfect. Not a hair out of place on the girls or a speck on the boy's shoes. Our shirts better be white and starched or we couldn't leave the house. We certainly weren't socialites. Pristine appearance was about an attitude and attention to our image in the world. It wasn't about a consumer lifestyle and certainly not about money. My client and I laughed when I pointed out her mother and my grandmother were doing the same thing, or at least the end result was essentially the same. We were raised to pay attention. We were raised to care about our appearance.

Years later in college I would wash, dry, and starch my shirts every Sunday, although I no longer attended church. The fabric could almost stand up on its own. My girlfriends would marvel at this process. I laughed again when my dry cleaner recently said to me, "Carl, we have to change the setting on the machines every time you come in because you're the only client who requests heavy starch for all your shirts.

No longer am I that five-year old boy readying himself for his grandmother's inspection. Yet the attention to detail and my commitment to caring remains to this day. I am fortunate that now I run a successful atelier where I can impart this attitude to others and help people find unique ways to present themselves to the world.

Another one of my favorite sayings from my grandmother: "These kids were raised; they were not brought up." To me what she meant by this saying is that us kids were taught to pay attention to the details. So was my wealthy socialite client. Attention is not worry. Appearance is about a continuous effort to consider cleanliness, fit, fabric, and coordination. In other words: a uniform. When dressing for your life, consider a closet that tells the world you pay attention and the world will perceive you differently. Consider whether your shirt is pressed, your shoes shined, your dress fitted. When you approach dressing in this way, you will no longer worry about your looks. It's what I do everyday.

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