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'Would You Let Your Daughter Color Her Hair Blue?'

By **Rebekah McCloud**
UCF Forum columnist
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I recently took a ride on the new SunRail. I was among the throng onboard for a free ride and to see, as Dr. Seuss would say, "Oh, the places I could go." When I entered the overstuffed car, a young woman immediately stood up and said to me, "Here, Momma, take my seat." And I did. I thanked her and commented about the kindness of her gesture.

We chatted for a couple of stops and then she got off of the train. As soon as the doors closed and the train took off, the woman who was sitting directly in front of me said, "Did you see the color of her hair?" I did; it was blue. I pretended not to hear my fellow rider. She asked again and this time she tapped my foot with her cane and spoke in a slightly raised voice, "Did you see the color of her hair?" I did; it was blue.

Not getting a response from me a second time, she said to the woman sitting next to her, "She must be deaf."

I responded, "I'm not and I did; it was blue."

"Well, what color is that for hair? It's not natural."

"I imagine," I said, "that young woman selected a hair color she liked. Perhaps she chose a color that made her feel good, adventurous, rebellious, artsy, young...who knows. It was her choice."

"Would you let your daughter color her hair blue?"

"Maybe," I said, as I gave the bottle blonde who appeared to be in her 80s an appraising look.

“Well, I wouldn’t. That’s what’s wrong with young people today.”

And so it began. I listened to the woman and the one next to her talk about the woes of the world caused by young people. According to her, young people are slovenly, unpatriotic, uncouth, unkempt, not as smart as young people in her time, and many of them look weird.

I did my best to tune out the conversation, but I could not dismiss the prejudice of her words. Nor could I dismiss the thoughts of myself 40 years ago when I was about the same age as the young woman with the blue hair.

While my hair was not blue, my eye shadow was. Peacock blue was my favorite color. My lips were always colored a vibrant red with Revlon No. 440—Cherries in the Snow (which had replaced the white lipstick I had used prior). I guess you could say I looked weird. I wore micro-miniskirts, platform shoes (or go-go boots) and psychedelic shirts. When I looked in the mirror, it said I looked hot—not weird.

But I have to admit, now when I look at some of the television shows and movies from the 60s and 70s, what we called “high fashion” then just looks weird now. I often have laugh-out-loud moments when I look at old pictures of myself. I dare say that if my fellow train passenger would look back on herself 40, 50 or 60 years ago, she might have a laugh-out-loud moment, too.

Possibly 50 or 60 years ago she may have known a blue-haired woman. It may have been her grandmother. Older women in that era often had their beauticians use blue, green or pink ROUX Fanci-ful Hair Color Rinse. My grandma did; her hair was sometimes blue, but most often green.

As I tried to tune out the women’s conversation, I also could not dismiss the thoughts of myself 20+ years ago when I was a high school teacher. I’ll never forget the first four students who walked into my classroom on the first day of school one year.

The first one was dressed from head to toe in black, including a black dress, black lipstick, eye shadow and nail polish; and I could not tell if the student was a he or a she. He taught me all about the “goth” movement and the need for self-expression. I guess one could say he looked weird.

The second one was dressed in a kilt, complete with a sporran and a sgian-dubh (a traditional knife that was confiscated posthaste by the school dean). He fancied himself as a follower of Duncan MacLeod, a fictional character from the television show “Highlander.” This student was creative and had a brilliant mind. I guess one could say he looked weird.

The third student was dressed like “RoboCop.” He never ceased to amaze me. Every week he would come in dressed in some getup that he had assembled as a conversation starter. His outfits included a full cavalry uniform, Bip the Clown (made famous by French mime Marcel Marceau), and Pee-wee Herman. He was an extrovert with a capital E. He once told me that if people would talk, we could solve all of our problems. I guess one could say he looked weird.

The fourth student had spiked hair and an earring that was attached by a long chain to a nose ring. Midway through the year he wanted to play varsity basketball but needed to get rid of the spikes. He had to shave his head because he had rolled the spikes in Super Glue. He graduated with honors and went on to medical school. I guess one could say he looked weird.

After student four walked in that first day, I went into my closet to pray. I asked God to help me look past the exteriors, to help me not to look through the glass darkly. Instead, I wanted to see the interiors, the eager students waiting to learn.

I thought about sharing these memories with my train mates. I thought better of it. This chance encounter on a train was an opportunity to listen and to reflect. Through the years I have had many conversations with folks who say they “just don’t understand young people.” Sadly, I think they have forgotten at one time they were young. I don’t agree with George Bernard Shaw who said: “Youth is wasted on the young.” Without the young, we do not have the old. We need both, that’s the beauty of the yin and yang of the human experience.

I have spent 40 years working with young people with a variety of hair colors: blue, green, pink, purple, rainbow. Some of them have been mine!

If I’m honest, before those four students walked into my life, I thought like the woman on the train. My micro-miniskirts and go-go boots had given way to pencil skirts, cardigan sweaters and high-heeled shoes. And my sense of freedom and adventure had been lost somewhere in the mix.

But that year, those four taught me a lot about daring to look weird, to think weird and to just be.

I was both the teacher and the student, and I am forever better for the experience.

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