

Peer Pressure? Nah, we're grown-ups...

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



It's about 8:20 on a Tuesday morning as I inch my car forward in the drop-off line at my daughter's school. It's a long line this morning, and I watch the children emerge from the cars, one by one, with a growing sense of dread. They look like typical fifth graders – fresh faces, tidy school uniforms, clean and scrubbed, hair neatly combed.

I feel sick.

In the back seat, Amelia sits with Seussian sprouts springing from her head in screaming shades of neon green, hot pink and purple. Glittery blue highlights complete the whimsical look. It is Hilarious Hair Day at Lady's Island Intermediate – or so we've been told – and we got up half an hour early to create this daring do. I left the house with a confident, exuberant girl by my side. Now, ten minutes later, I feel her anxiety burning a hole in the back of my head.

The children keep getting out of the cars and my heart is starting to race. I see no Hilarious Hair. I don't even see any witty hair.

"Oh my gosh, Mom!" Panic from the backseat. "Nobody's doing it! I don't think I can get out of the car. Can we please go around the circle one more time? Please? Mommy, please... don't make me get out of this car!"

What's a mother to do in this situation? Seriously, I ask you, because I had no idea. My rational mind said, "Make her get out of the car. It'll be good for her. Build character! She loved her Hilarious Hair ten minutes ago; and she committed to doing this. She even *insisted* on going all out... made us buy all that spray paint and glitter and those funky clips. Make her get out of the car!"

But my inner awkward preteen – who still holds quite a bit of sway in my psyche – just wanted to flee the scene, with my beloved baby in tow.

Thankfully, I was spared this excruciating decision. Just as we reached the drop-off point, a kid emerged from the car in front of us... sporting the most Hilarious Hair you've ever seen.

For the second time in ten minutes, my daughter's entire countenance changed. I saw her in the rearview mirror, and the light had returned to her eyes. "Bye, Mom!" She practically jumped from the car, her smile as bright as her garish Seussian sprouts. She joined the other girl with Hilarious Hair, and together they strode boldly through the doors, ready to take on the world. Or at least the fifth grade.

As I drove away, relief flooding my body, I had to laugh. Because we adults aren't really that different from our kids, are we? Not deep down. We worry about making fools of ourselves, just like they do. Like them, we fear being laughed at. Or frowned upon. And just like our kids, most of us grown-ups need to feel part of a group. Oh, we may talk a good game – many of us fancy ourselves individualists or iconoclasts or radicals of some sort – but even then, we seek out other "rebels" like ourselves. Despite what we tell each other, and even what we sometimes tell ourselves, very few of us honestly relish being the only kid at school with Hilarious Hair.

Yes, we grown-ups live under our own powerful system of peer pressure. And I'm not just talking about the obvious "Keep Up with the Jones's" kind, either – making the right money, buying a house in the right neighborhood, wearing the right clothes, sending our kids to the right schools, etc. Even if we come to see that path as empty and futile – if we set out to buck that system – we typically start looking around for peers who are bucking it, too. They shore up our confidence. Validate our choices. Give us courage to go with our convictions.

But settling into that new group of peers – the ones more like you – often means you're

expected to buy into a whole *new* system... a whole new slate of values and beliefs that serve as a litmus test, of sorts, for your membership in the club. No matter what grown-up peer group you gravitate toward, you'll find it has passwords and secret handshakes and all sorts of other insider signals. There are certain things you can't say – or even think – in certain groups, and if you do, your membership is tenuous. If you can't get with the whole program – if you're more an "a la carte" style values shopper – you're never quite "in." You always feel a bit like the kid who showed up at school with Hilarious Hair on the wrong day.

I've been thinking about this phenomenon, lately, while watching the Occupy Wall Street movement unfold and trying to understand what it means. In several conversations with politically conservative friends, I've tried suggesting (ever so gently) that OWS and the Tea Party might effectively work together, as they share a common foe – the cozy relationship between big corporations and the federal government. I made the same observation to a few left-leaning, OWS-loving friends. In both cases, you'd have thought I'd just suggested putting ketchup on fig newtons. Apparently, some things just don't go together, no matter what. (And only a rube would suggest otherwise.) Drum-circling, patchouli-redolent progressives and God-talking, flag-flaunting conservatives must not join hands for any reason, even when they share a common cause. Because those "other guys" are bad. Very bad. They may agree with us on this one issue, but that's just a fluke. It doesn't excuse them for being wrong about everything else under the sun. And weird. Don't let your guard down. They're not our kind of people. Get with the program.

And by the way, what's up with your hair?

I'm exaggerating, of course, but only a little. Grown-up peer pressure is a bit more subtle, mainly because we adults don't want to acknowledge – even to ourselves – that we're engaging in it. Or susceptible to it. We like to imagine ourselves as magnanimous free thinkers, fearless and bold and un-swayed by common opinion... or Jon Stewart's eyebrows. But, geez... it's so much easier to admit you find Herman Cain's tax plan intriguing, or 'freedom' a bit overrated, or Barack Obama increasingly boring, or socialism kind of enticing, or Ayn Rand eerily compelling... when somebody else is admitting it, too.

Not that the incoherent hodgepodge of opinions above is mine! Uh uh. No way. Just a random sampling of things one might say, without feeling nervous, if one could find a group of "like-minded" peers who didn't value like-mindedness so darned much. People still forging their philosophies, still polishing their politics, still wending their way toward the truth of things. People uncommitted to one pure slate of attitudes and opinions and fashion choices – but drawn to many – and just happy to meet a fellow explorer. (And one who likes wine, at that!)

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Even philosophical misfits need a peer group, for support. To that end, I'm thinking of starting a club. Maybe I'll call it the Hilarious Hair Society.

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