



*Prologue: I first published this piece in 2008, at Halloween. By some small miracle, I still like it and – even more amazing! – still stand by every word. My daughter is now nine, not seven, and her taste in costumes has continued to evolve. Other than that, all pertinent information remains the same.*

Just when I'm sure I can't possibly muster any interesting food for thought, ever again – ever – life serves up a big bowl of metaphor stew too savory to pass up...

My daughter has two Halloween costumes this year. (If you find that excessive, you obviously haven't had young children in a while. Once a lean, mean, one-day affair – and blessedly so – Halloween is now a bloated, month-long monstrosity. Amelia has no fewer than five dress-up occasions this season.)

For a little background – gulp, *poignant* background – neither of these costumes is the one I intended her to wear. Amelia was supposed to be an Autumn Fairy. My mom ordered her a beautiful costume from the *Chasing Fireflies* catalogue – a sequin-trimmed leotard of shimmering russet and burnt umber, flanked by peachy, leaf-like ruffles, complete with a sparkly fall-toned crown and matching scepter. The costume also included a pair of gossamer wings, which Amelia had already informed us she had no intention of wearing. At age seven, she's done the wing thing – plenty of times – but now finds them beneath her dignity. As it turns out, she found the whole costume beneath her dignity. Or something. It was too large when it arrived, and despite her grandmother's skill with a needle, and my skill with flattery, we couldn't seem to make Amelia happy. According to her, the costume was, in turn, too loose... too tight... too short... too long... too itchy... too uncomfortable... too annoying.

So finally, and with great sadness, I put away this lovely, ethereal, expensive confection, hoping

“maybe next year,” and drove my daughter to K-Mart, where the garish, mass-produced costumes were plentiful and cheap – 40 per cent off, to be specific. I cheered up a little.

As Amelia and I began perusing the racks, it quickly became clear that the poor Autumn Fairy had been doomed from the start. My daughter promptly nixed every fairy, every princess, every Dorothy, Alice or Red Riding Hood I held up for her scrutiny. Instead, she kept thrusting Hannah Montanas in my face, along with the teen divas from High School Musical, Gabriella and Sharpay. I couldn't quite stand to go there – not yet – and boldly asserted my maternal authority (“Why not? Because I said so!”) despite her impassioned pleas. Finally, we settled on two costumes that made us both happy, mainly because Amelia looked so darn cute in them.

This year, for Halloween, my daughter is dressing as a Hippie and a Cheerleader.

Amelia, of course, has no real cultural understanding of either the Hippie or the Cheerleader – only a vague idea that they're both pretty cool things to be. It would never occur to her, as it does to her nerdy mother, that this Halloween season, she'll be representing two well-worn American archetypes – opposing symbols that, to this day, help inform many a self-image. Some of us identify quite strongly with one symbol, while firmly rejecting the other; others of us tend to ricochet between the two – sometimes gracefully, but often rather awkwardly. In my case, the Cheerleader and the Hippie are not so much polar opposites as two sides of the same coin – moi – eternally struggling for dominance.

Let me expain:

First, I was never actually a cheerleader. One must have athletic ability – or at least an interest in sports – to thrive at such pursuits, and, alas, I have little of either. But I was – and am – a Cheerleader in the more figurative sense. By Cheerleader, I mean a loyal supporter of the home team... a cheerful follower of the rules... an enthusiastic embracer of community values... a respector of authority... an upholder of polite manners and accepted morality... a Nice Girl. All of this I am, I think, because I am a daughter of the South... and of my gentle, genteel parents. I am glad to be these things. I believe they are important to a healthy, functioning society. I also believe they're growing rare. So, I embrace my inner Cheerleader.

But I can't quite shake my inner Hippie...

Okay, I was never actually a hippie, either. But as a profoundly sensitive, serious child – one more enamored of books than balls – I was always inclined toward introspection and analysis, always questioning the status quo... never accepting things at face value. I was so gravely bookish and contemplative, in fact, that my mom was constantly threatening to slap tape across my furrowed brow to prevent the permanent lines that would surely come... and have. (Ironically, I resisted that tape – so certain that old age could never happen to me! – as ferociously as I now resist the botox needle, out of certainty that old age can't, and probably shouldn't, be avoided. But that's another column, and I think I've already written it...)

In graduate school, the free-thinking, philosophical Hippie in my head was irresistibly drawn to some *full-fledged* hippies – I even dated a few – before my inner Cheerleader finally rebelled, forcing me to face the fact that I'm not, at the end of the day, terribly simpatico with people who reject traditional morality, the rule of law, and deodorant. I may *like* them, but I am not *like* them. (It was a disappointing blow at the time, but I'm fine with it now.)

So, I'm not a Hippie. But I'm not really a Cheerleader, either – especially when the role calls for some sort of blind boosterism. The simple, complicated truth? I am neither. And both.

I have friends and family members who come down pretty hard on either side of this divide; they have regular default modes – rebellion or conformity – from which they rarely waiver. I envy them sometimes. For me – and for many of us, I think – life is a constant tightrope walk along that line between Hippie and Cheerleader: between respecting authority and questioning it, between following the rules and challenging them, between supporting the home team and trying to keep it honest, between honoring the boundaries and pushing up against them, between faith and skepticism.

My hope for my daughter – my prayer – is that she'll make peace with that line between Hippie and Cheerleader, which, to paraphrase Solzhenitsyn, runs not through the schoolyard or the cafeteria, or even the US Senate chamber, but right through the human heart. I hope she'll obey the rules, but work to change them when she believes they're unjust. I won't mind her being a rebel, but only when she has a (righteous) cause. I hope she'll be introspective and philosophical, but not if it keeps her from turning outward in love and service. I hope she won't live "the unexamined life," but I sure hope she'll put more stock in the living than in the examining. I hope she'll feel free to criticize the "home team," but not with so much hubris – and so little forgiveness – that she ends up without one. I want her to question what she believes in,

but more importantly, I want her to believe in something. It troubles me that she's growing up in a world that no longer agrees on what that something should be.

As Amelia was preparing to trick-or-treat in downtown Beaufort yesterday, she stood mulling over her costumes – the “Team USA” Cheerleader uniform, with its peppy, patriotic pompoms... the Hippie garb, with its flower-power bellbottoms and mod, floppy velour hat. They lay across her bed, side by side – cheap, tacky... resplendent.

“I can't decide which one to be, Mama,” she said, looking up at me, her pale gold-green eyes narrowed in concentration, her furrowed brow... so familiar.

“Me neither, baby,” I told her. “Me neither.”

*Postscript: This Halloween, my daughter is dressing as a “Midnight Fairy.” Her costume is all black – kind of a punk/goth look that she's pulling off with much greater aplomb than I'd like. The silver lining? It has wings!*

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