

Open and Clothed

For the Passionate Clothes Lover

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*For Ruth Stone and Andrew Gelman
with love and gratitude.*

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Preface

So I was heading across 96th Street toward a store called Better Your Home (don't ask. . . I mean, is it like, "Better this garbage is in your home than in mine"? Or a directive, as in "Better yourself. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps"? Whatever. They had something I needed, so I went. . .). Anyway, I'm walking up 96th toward Columbus, I've just crossed Amsterdam, and I see this tiny old lady—an old seventy, I'd guess—in this incredible dress. It's a cotton pique floral number with huge flowers on it in a wonderful range of colors (the whole range). And each cloth-covered button down the front is a different color.

I say to her, "Great dress."

She says, "Thank you." Then she comes up close to me and says, "A Saks Fifth Avenue dress. I got it for three dollars. At my age I need to economize. I bought it at a thrift store. I'm not long for this world." She pauses. Some people walk by us. She says, "I'm eighty-eight years old. And when I see a dress like that"—she points to the woman who just passed us wearing a tight, stretchy dress with visible panty line, which clings to her enormous behind—"when I see a dress like that," she continues, "It hastens my end."

I ask her what's her secret, how she found the great dress. She says, "People ask me for advice all the time. But I need to keep it to myself." She pulls her hands to her heart and holds them in fists. She says, "I need it for me."

"To stay alive?" I ask. She nods. I say, "Then don't tell me. I'd rather have you with us and wearing great dresses." She agrees.

A young man walks by. She points him out to me: "He held open a door for me in my building once. I remember that. I remember people who are kind to me." She continues, as if we have known each other a long time, "I can feel my end coming. I'm not myself. I ran into an old friend at the laundromat recently and she said, 'Lil, what's wrong?' I know I don't look like myself. I don't feel myself lately. I've been around here long enough." I tell her I hope that's not so because we need her to wear great dresses in New York. She says, "Thank you for your compliment." I wished her the best of luck and we parted ways. I absolutely loved her.

I walked to the newsstand ten feet away and bought a ballpoint pen for fifty cents and wrote this encounter down on the back of a receipt in my wallet. For some reason I've felt overwhelmed by New York and not kept up my habit of carrying a pen with me everywhere, like it's too intimidating to write here. Maybe writing down stuff like this will help.

Encounters with people like Lil inspired me to write this book. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

A. Siegel

Introduction

*Thus in this one pregnant subject of clothes, rightly understood,
is included all that men have thought, dreamed, done, and been. . . .*

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*¹

This is a \$52 billion industry and we still don't have the right clothes.

—Olivia Goldsmith, author of *Fashionably Late*²

Inner Life Quiz

1. Regarding clothes, I worry:
 - a) It's vain to think about clothes.
 - b) It's one of my secret pleasures to think about clothes.
 - c) I'll never look good in anything.

2. I hate all my clothes:
 - a) However, I do have good taste in underwear.
 - b) However, I do have good taste in _____.
 - c) With no exceptions.

3. I care more about a perfect pair of shoes than world peace:
 - a) Often.
 - b) Sometimes.
 - c) Only if Manolo Blahnik is having a sale.

The clothing tip that most people remember hearing from their mothers is, “Always wear clean underwear.” This is often followed by “just in case you're in a car wreck.” After a friend was in a car accident, he was cut out of his clothes and underwear by the emergency crew. He reported he was so covered with grease and dirt by the time he reached the emergency room, no one could tell whether his underwear was ever clean. This made me wonder if the things we know about clothes, things we say in our sleep, are completely irrelevant.

Soon after, I was arguing with someone about clothing happiness. She said, “If there is a God, do you think God would want you to be happy or would God want you to be out sacrificing goats?” “Goats, definitely,” I said, but upon reflection I reconsidered. This book is the result of that reconsideration.

A greater variety of clothing is available than ever before. Most of our conflicts about clothes aren't about a lack or surplus of clothes, but about a lack of inner clarity. Good judgment about wardrobe may be clouded by a host of factors, among them:

- your mother's opinions
- the state of your closet
- fashion's whirlwind of dictates
- cultural and historical imperatives
- the role you played in your family
- the difference between what you yearn for and what's possible
- the difference between how a garment looks on you and how it feels to you
- and how you feel about your body, your job, your mirror, your life, and even who you shop with.

In addition, society as a whole denies and denigrates the depth of our attachment to clothing. Many of us absorb and parrot those messages without ever exploring what we want. While most of us have been dressing ourselves for years, perhaps we've been doing so with a sense of shame. Maybe there are parts of our clothes or our bodies we hate, or maybe there's nothing we like. One person whom I interviewed, when pressed, said, "Well, my earlobes are OK."

As a result of these influences, gracefully answering the question "What do I wear?" each morning may be a profoundly complicated challenge. How someone feels about even the smallest detail can be intensely personal.

Laurel Fenenga, a hat designer, sees her interest in clothing stemming from her childhood. Laurel's mother had cancer for eight years and died when Laurel was twelve. Her mother taught the kids certain things they could do in the house with her, among them embroidery and origami. Laurel explains:

We all learned how to fold paper. I like pleats. I like crispness, and I like zigzags. I'm always attracted to harlequin patterns or any kind of rickrack, anything with that edge. Origami lends itself well to that kind of thing. And the hats are very paper-like in texture. So is the straw that I work with. Repeat patterns are probably important to a child whose life is kind of chaotic, repeat patterns and the conciseness of the pleats.

Many other people spoke with me about their mothers' attempts to convey loving guidance through dress instruction. These events, however, were often stressful. Clothes lover Daphne Stannard comments about an altercation she and her mother had while Daphne packed for college:

She kept pulling out these ugly things she had bought me, and saying, "Oh, take this." I'd say, "No, Mom, I'm going to take this instead." And I'd pull out, for example, my Army jacket. She cried and said, "I just want you to get everything you want, and I think if you wear the clothes you want to wear, you're going to make mistakes, and you won't get everything you want." And I said, "I have to make those mistakes. You can't protect me from them."

I tell Daphne I feel touched by the idea that something you wear could prevent you from having what you loved. Daphne responds, "It's so true, though, in this culture, because we size people up

very quickly. Judgments are made at the drop of a hat.”

Laurel’s story made me reflect about my own motivations and clothing roots. Daphne’s example spoke to me about how mothers’ love and dreams for their daughters can play themselves out through clothing conflict.

I am a writer and fabric artist. In my craft, I specialize in customized designs which ornament and enhance individuals’ self-expression. Because the stories I heard from clients, friends, and people in the fashion industry were so different from what the media usually bleat about clothes, I wanted to record an alternative. For this book, I took a few years of my life to have conversations with everyone fabulous I could think of, specifically people who work in the rag trade or who simply love clothes. I studied the history of fashion, looked up facts I wasn’t sure about, and even read *The Heritage of Cotton* from beginning to end. Throughout the rest of this book, I want to share with you a mosaic of the best of the stories and discussions. I hope these will enable you to ask yourself the deeper questions that lead to wardrobe happiness.

What do clothes do? At their worst, they are an expression of poverty or craziness (the layers of grime and dirt worn by the bag lady), sex-for-sale (the abbreviated, tight, flashy garb of the prostitute), or false dominance in the social status food chain as worn by the shiny set (the ice-perfect designer outfit).

At the most basic level, my friend, the advertising executive and fabu-dresser Lisa Star says choosing clothes is about “Is-it-clean-and-do-I-have-socks-that-match?”

At their best, clothes express something entirely different. Clothing scholar Grace Margaret Morton notes:

The consumer is a designer in that through assembling a costume she is creating a background for herself as the theme or center of interest, and is expressing her individual personality through use of becoming color, lines, shapes, and textures in accordance with the principles of design. Each completed costume ensemble becomes a new expression and gives satisfaction to the human desire to continually create and conceive a new unity which is beautiful.³

On a simpler human level, writer Rhonda Pretlow says, “I know I’m not my body. I know I’m not my skin color. I know I’m not the job I’m doing. I know the essence of me is something that a person can only really see by experiencing me. So the clothes that I wear at different times are just to allow me to get close enough to people so that they can see the real me, basically.”

Despite the influence of feminism, in women’s traditional arenas such as dress and clothing selection, some of us still wait for the magic wand, diet, or garment to transform us. We moan “What am I going to wear?” as if someone else had the answer. Designer Oscar de la Renta points us in the direction we need to go when he says that being well dressed is “a question of good balance and good common sense, a knowledge of who you are and what you are. There are many kinds of taste. The rules that apply to one person do not hold true for another.”⁴ For this reason, I wrote *Open and Clothed*.

This is a sourcebook for the clothes lover, a guide through the quagmire of choice. However,

I'm not about to tell you what to wear because, quite simply, that approach does not work. This book focuses on understanding the forces that subvert clarity about dress and, after that, tailoring individual history and personal preference into a vision of wardrobe happiness specific to each person.⁵

Why bother? Maybe it's important to take a stand for what we love. Maybe it's important that we be happy with our clothes, have clarity about how we want to look, and focus our ability to express that. What on earth does a happy centeredness have to do with wardrobe? This idea came to me from watching the pattern of the planets swirling through the star-speckled dark sky of the fabric of a skirt: there is no center to the universe. Or rather, each person, tree or stump has the right to declare her⁶ or itself the center.

Too often in the past I have put another at the center of my personal universe. This created an imbalance, an untruth. I ended up dancing around someone else as though I were their satellite, dressing for them, eventually resenting them, because I always felt out of balance, leaning on and looking toward them. I didn't know that I could stand wide-legged and easy, hold out my arms as if to hug the world, and say, "Yes. I sense the weight of my body against the soles of my feet, and the vitality pulsing through my body." I felt this position to be selfish, not seeing that the other option would eventually cause me to coast into that person and crash.

I had understood centeredness to be the same thing as narcissism or big ego. We all know "Big Ego." He struts around the room *as if* he knew everything, and orders people around without knowing what is important. Big Ego ticks people off. Centeredness, coming from a profound experience of joy, comfort, and ease, moves carefully and surely through the world, sensitive to the limits and boundaries of others because she acutely knows her own place in the dance. Her experience is available to people like you and me. With practice. From centeredness comes a whole, unique, integrated person, and a whole person you can dress.

Is this a self-help book? From a glimpse at a random page, it sure looks like one. It might serve those who want that kind of guidance. But if you're seeking miracles, look away. If reading this book helps, the change will be so incremental that no one will notice. Except maybe you, sometimes. No one will applaud you on your cool new look. Lovers will not beat down the doors, fighting for entry with prospective employers begging to pay you seven-figure salaries. Hollywood won't come looking for you. Guaranteed. Change that works occurs subtly. It's hard to create a change that's big enough to matter yet doesn't feel so scary that you react by retrenching deeply into old habits. And we are seeking the keys to the kinds of power that make those changes big enough to matter.

Notes:

1. Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus*. Page 67.
2. Bargreen, Melinda. “‘Fashionably Late’ arrives just in time for summer fun,” *Seattle Times*, August 11, 1994. Page M-1.
3. Morton, Grace Margaret. *The Arts of Costume and Personal Appearance*. Page 114.
4. Morris, Bernadine. *The Fashion Makers*. Page 185.
5. A gentle reminder: To have more than one set of clothes is a luxury, and having the time to think about these issues is a privilege in a world where most people are poor and exploited. Many people in the United States and the Western world live in unprecedented ease: hot and cold running water, electricity, free entertainment on call twenty-four hours a day, and the opportunity to have meaningful relationships and work. Any item of food or clothing is available to us almost immediately. Given the speed with which we consume and throw out new goods, it is important to consider our impact and be grateful.
6. While many wonderful men participated in the making of this book, the pronouns address a female reader. For the men in the audience, just change the pronouns as needed for clarity. Also, many of the sex-related examples are heterosexual. By this I do not mean to imply an endorsement of heterosexuality. Please change the pronouns and protuberances as needed to suit yourself.

