

Peter J. Donaldson

Growing Old: Blue Suits

The first recorded instance of my wearing a blue suit to mark an important occasion is from my June 1958 primary school graduation. In a graduation day photograph, I am standing in the backyard of my Brooklyn home, shaking hands with Paul Handal, my best friend then and for years thereafter. My blue suit, white shirt, and striped tie are still (or again) fashionable.



Paul Handal and the author in June 1958

The navy suit of my grammar school graduation was worn in the early years of high school. My college—Fordham—required young men wear jackets and ties to class. Tweed and herringbone were the norm; my navy suit spent most days in the closet. Jackets and ties weren't required in graduate school, but living on a modest budget, I bought a new navy suit at a

men's shop on Thayer Street in Providence. The suit cost \$100, an extravagant amount, spent only because of my wife's urging. I purchased the suit for a friend's wedding and a year or so later I wore the suit to a job interview at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for my first professional position. The morning I arrived, I felt out of place on a campus populated by casually dressed students and staff. I got the job, so perhaps my blue suit was read as a sign of how seriously I took the occasion.

Navy blue suits have been my favorites, never abandoned although they were given a lower place in the hierarchy in the 1970s in favor of bold and now outlandish looking plaids. I recently passed my seventy-fifth birthday wearing a navy blue suit. There are two in my closet—a Calvin Klein from Nordstrom Rack and another from Joseph A. Bank. I prefer the Calvin Klein, which cost little more than the model I bought in Providence 50 years ago.

The cut of men's suits has changed over the years but for me these changes have been mostly inconsequential. More noteworthy is the stability of male fashion which means that the width of lapels may change and trousers may have pleated or flat fronts, their legs may become wider or narrower, cuffed or not, but men's suits are wearable from one year to the next. The length of shirt collars and width of ties change too, but these too matter most to cognoscente.

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I sometimes use the variations in suit styles to estimate the age of the male passengers on Washington's Metro. Younger men favor the currently fashionable short, close fitting suit jackets and narrow, cuff-less trousers. Older men are in longer, looser fitting jackets and wider, pleated trousers. One reason for the differences in dress is economic. Middle aged, white collar working men have closets full of suits and see no need to buy another to keep up with the current style. Younger men are adding to not yet established wardrobes, and are more attuned to the latest fashion.

Identity and dress are closely linked. My blue suits not only denoted a personal style but also suggested a social class, a set of aspirations, and a birth cohort, all of which were evident in that first Brooklyn suit. In the ethnic Catholic borough of my youth, the emphasis was on order and propriety, on conformity to established standards. Young men were encouraged to model decorum, respectability, and rectitude. Blue suits embody those values and add a touch of anticipatory socialization to a hoped for upward mobility.

The world has become a lot more informal and easy going since my grammar school graduation. Sometime ago I met my techie son for lunch in mid-town Manhattan, once a center of decorous dress. He wore canvass slip-ons, jeans, a dark T-shirt, and a hoody. There was no hint of the propriety that guides my clothing choices. Rather than a finance industry technologist, he could have been an actor, an artist, or the operator of one of the food trucks that are popular on the streets close to his office. He has never owned a blue suit. His wardrobe reflects the casual ambiance of the 1990s when he came of age and his socialization in an industry where Steve Jobs' jeans and black turtlenecks set the norm.

From time-to-time, I worry that my allegiance to blue suits signals a lack of gumption and is a sign of the missed opportunities of life's stripes and glen plaids. My blue suits epitomize the things in my life that have not evolved over the past 60 years. They represent me in ways that were set in 1958, when being proper was all, when appearances counted more than they should have.

It's too late to do anything about the limited evolution of my haberdashery or other missed opportunities. At this stage my wardrobe is what it is. Like my age-mates on Washington's metro, I'll stick with what I have in my closet.