

Drag Liberation

Drag is the courage to manifest the queen you already are.

Brandi Amara Skyy

When you're in character and you're dressing like a guy, it's almost like you have a mask on so you have that shield and that character to hide your insecurities or your issues...

Spikey Van Dykey

Edinburg, Texas. Circa 1973. My hair is pulled into double ponytails and I'm sporting a cotton dress. The dress I have come to terms with because I have to wear one every day but Friday. I am a girl. Therefore, I must wear dresses. That's the rule in my house. My parents will not budge on this. But the ponytails, they take the "girlification" effort too far. Not only do I find the idea of ponytails repugnant, they are not a good look for me. My hair is short. The ponytails look like little hairy horns. I don't ditch the ponytails because I have been warned that if I remove them, I will have to wear ponytails for a month and lose my dress-free Friday privileges. My brother is eager to rat me out so the ponytails stay. My classmates think it's funny. I am mortified.

When I get home, I ditch the ponytails and the dress and climb into my superhero duds: green tights, green and pink gym shorts, old fashioned red track shoes with white stripes, a plain white t-shirt, a blue and green floppy sun hat that was folded to look like Robin Hood's, and a cape made from a "magical" towel with a picture of an elephant on it. Once I tie on my cape, I become Super Reggie. Like Superman, I am amazingly strong and I can fly. No one is telling me what to do or laughing at me now.

Super Reggie was my alter ego. In real life, I was a misfit. Not only was I a tomboy crammed into a dress, I was painfully shy, socially awkward, had a speech impediment and was already a full-blown nerd. But in my *Super Reggie* suit, I became someone else. I was invincible. I was confident. And I was cool. In the alternate world I created, I was important. People looked up to me.

At eight, I understood the power of doing drag, even though my performance was for an imaginary audience. By dressing up as a member of the opposite gender, I was able to escape the demands and limitations imposed upon me because I was born a girl.

Doing drag entails a lot more than just putting on a pair of heels or a taping your chest and drawing on a mustache. It means putting on a character and making it your own. It means becoming someone else, at least for a while. This is why doing drag can be so liberating. You get a vacation from a role that has grown old or that feels draining. You get to step outside of the gender box and put on something that feels more expansive. Playing a character can give you a shield to hide your insecurities and issues behind. And oddly, playing someone else lets you show parts of your authentic self that you are too self-conscious to express in your own skin.

In drag, men can feel pretty or sexy. They get to freely cry, be outrageous, and talk about things besides sports, the weather, politics and the economy. They don't have to know everything. They don't have to do everything on their own. They actually get to ask for help without feeling like a failure. And, people are more willing to buy them drinks.

Women doing drag get to feel powerful and important. They aren't expected to "be nice" or fade into the background. What they say matters. Diane Torr, a drag king in NY City puts it this way. "You have a lot more credibility in the world. As a man, people immediately pay you attention. You walk into the room as a

woman, people check you out to see if you're sexy." Plus, doing drag is empowering. Slipping on a male character helps to quiet the nagging fear that if you drop your guard, you risk being assaulted or raped.

The key drag is not in the costumes. You can slip into a pair of heels or put on a tie without changing the way you engage the world. The key to drag is changing out of the "you" that you present to the everyday world and into a new character that acts and feels different. And it turns out that stepping into a different role is good medicine. When you shift into a different role, even for a moment, you can shift your mood, tap into power you didn't know you had, break through self-imposed limitations and expand your options. Social psychologists have found that this is helpful for anything from scoring better on tests to shooting hoops to self-defense. But don't take my word for it. Try it for yourself for 3 to 5 minutes.

Take a moment to quiet your mind. Sit comfortably. Let your self get still and then think of a superhero or someone who has a lot of power. Imagine what it feels like to be in their shoes. Notice if you breathe differently or hold your body differently as a superhero. Notice if you feel stronger or more confident. Does it feel easier to deal with problems as a superhero?

Now try stepping into shoes of a member of a different gender. Be mindful of how you hold your body. Gender is very embodied. Men tend to spread out and take up a lot more physical space while women tend to tuck everything in and often cross their legs to keep the gateway to the vajayjay closed and locked. If it helps to imagine that you are in drag to feel into the physical aspect of the other gender, do that. Also be mindful of your emotional responses. Let yourself explore the feelings you might have as a member of a different gender. Perhaps you have more access to sadness or compassion. Perhaps you have more access to determination or anger.

You don't have to be a drag king or a drag queen to feel a bit of drag liberation. You can use this exercise to take a vacation from any role that feels draining or constraining.

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