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Why I Can't Embrace My Grays, Even Though Everyone Else Is

When I saw my first gray hair, aging wasn't even on my radar. Then, suddenly, it really was.

By **Jesse Sposato** | Updated Apr 19, 2019 @ 11:55 am

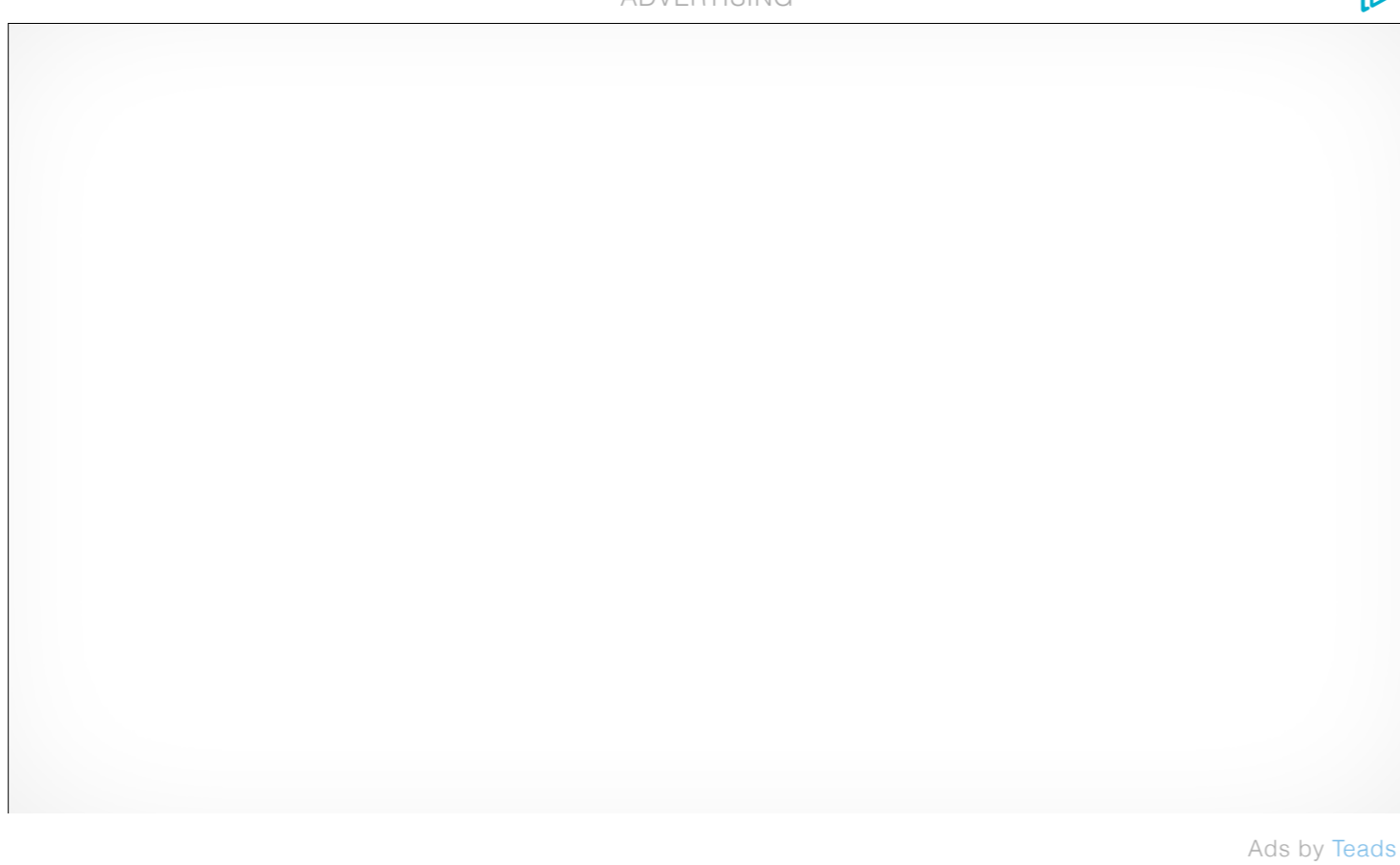
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I can recall the beginning of my gray hair days vividly: the night my college friends spotted a gray hair on my head and plucked it out like it was a rare artifact to save and study later, hard evidence that we may, in fact, not stay in our twenties forever. The hair was a curious find at the time; I wasn't concerned.

I was around 26 or 27 when I started to notice silver strands peeking through the top of my otherwise dark brown mane, and I wasn't sure what to make of them at first. But it didn't take long to come to a verdict: I would make peace with these new, foreign hairs. The idea of getting old, that unknown, amorphous concept, wasn't yet on my radar. It didn't occur to me to feel old because... I wasn't — I was just a young person with some strands of light hair. This was something I could live with.



I had wanted to be the kind of person who embraced her gray hair, really I did. I hadn't adhered to society's beauty rules so far — I'd shaved my head in high school and stopped shaving my legs in college — why start now? (I was also a freelance writer/odd-job hustler in New York City; I didn't have the time or money to be bothered with the upkeep of dyeing my hair!) And I liked the way gray-haired women around me looked, and the confidence with which they carried themselves. After all, I was a feminist, a riot grrrl; and a true feminist accepted her natural self.

So it was a surprise, even to me, when I ended up landing on #TeamDye, in the end.

"Going gray" was easy enough at first, and it stayed that way for a while. I rode the slightly salt-and-pepper wave for years, in fact, sometimes liking the unique look of having subtle gray highlights, though not always. But what kept me firmly tethered to #TeamNatural, no matter my conflicted feelings, was the fact that I was being authentic. It almost didn't matter whether I was into the grays or not — this was what I looked like, and I wanted to be OK with just being me. I was being true to myself and that was what mattered. But was I?

After years of forcing myself to "love my grays" even when I wasn't sure if I did, the truth began to poke through, along with more gray hairs. It was so subtle at first, I barely noticed it, but at some point, around my mid-to-late thirties, as the grays became more visible, I started to notice my behavior change.

I'd stopped wearing my hair up in buns or ponytails because right around my temples was where most of my grays clumped up, and I didn't like the way it looked. It wasn't even the gray itself that bothered me, but the unevenness with which it grew in. If my hair had been more uniform, if I'd had one of those perfect gray stripes, I could get into it, but as it was, the haphazardness, the random placements of silver strands... I didn't love it.

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And the real kicker? I didn't feel like myself with gray hair. Which, I know, I know, what does it even mean to "stay yourself" when our bodies, ourselves are constantly changing? On the one hand, I'd had dark chestnut brown hair my whole life — the self I was used to, that I'd seen reflected back in every mirror I'd looked in almost forever, was a self with brown hair. I'd experimented, mostly unsuccessfully, with Kool-Aid and Manic Panic as a teenager, I'd even bleached my hair blonde once for a short stint, but that never felt like me (which friends were quick to point out the entire time I had it).

But it was more than that. As a curly-haired person whose hair had always seemed to match my ebullient personality, so much of my identity was wrapped up in my hair, and that hair was (almost always) brown! I was a brunette Patti Mayonnaise; the real-life counterpart to the brown-haired Cabbage Patch Kid I'd had growing up, Jessie (only I spell my name without an i). My best friend texted me things like, "I'll look for your brown curly hair!" when meeting up at a crowded place. Who was I if I didn't have that?

I was stuck, afraid dyeing my hair would mean I was contributing to the unfair beauty standards I wanted so badly to buck; scared that giving in would be a bad example to the growing number of friends I had who were on the fence about dyeing their hair, too. There was also the matter of how I would be perceived, by myself, and others. Men are considered distinguished when salt-and-pepper appears, but women are often seen as... old. I've been fortunate enough so far that, when I tell people my age, they're usually surprised, they think I look younger (which also has more to do with the misconception of age in the modern era, but that's a thought for another time). I wanted to continue the air of mystery around my age, not hand over evidence that I am, in fact, aging.

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Despite how this sounds, I'm actually OK with growing older, grateful even. I know all too well what it means to not have the chance to age, and I appreciate the wisdom, perspective and maturity that comes with age — but I don't want to look like I'm aging. Which is shitty. I don't love that that's how I feel, but for now, it is, and to pretend otherwise feels even more disingenuous to me than lying to myself about it. Some people buy fancy sports cars or get their belly buttons pierced. I'm getting my natural hair color back. Because I want to.

After internally wrestling with the decision to dye or not to for almost a decade, the actual making of the appointment and getting the job done was less memorable than the buildup. I hardly knew what I was getting into, whether the procedure would be double-process or demi-permanent (terms I still barely know), but it kind of had to be that way for me to rip the Band-Aid off. I'd asked a friend who dyed her hair for a recommendation (almost a whole year earlier, I realized), and one day, maybe from work, maybe over the weekend, I don't recall, I made an appointment, and that was that. I'd consulted a close friend and my trusted hair stylist; I'd let my partner know, and as soon as it was done — I'd gotten a single-process color treatment to match my shade of brown — I immediately felt better. I liked the way I looked. I felt, dare I say it, like myself.

The funny thing is, I was having these revelations at what felt like the exact moment the rest of the world was coming to the opposite conclusion. Women who had dyed their hair for decades were letting their natural hair grow in and accepting their white and gray locks. Not to mention the countless articles written on the subject that, honestly, made me feel empowered just taking them in. As did scrolling through the Grombre Instagram page (and entire website, with merch to boot!), each pic proof of just how stunning hair, when left to its own devices, could look. Even celebrities were joining in the revolution — Katie Holmes and Salma Hayek were just a few among the many who'd recently chosen to embrace their grays. Reese Witherspoon, even.

The other interesting thing was that living in New York City and having primarily hippie and punk friends, most of the women in my circle either hadn't gone gray yet, or were so cool, so confident and at one with their gray hairs that, for me to make the opposite choice felt like the real anomaly. But still, none of it was enough to change my mind — I wanted to embrace my browns.

When Karen Kilgariff talked on her podcast, My Favorite Murder, about having to dye her roots every three weeks, I felt liberated, even free! Knowing that this badass feminist whom I deeply admired dyed her hair made me feel like maybe this was a choice I could be OK with, too. Ironically, this was the same language I noticed women on #TeamNatural were using once they'd made the decision to stop dyeing: words like liberated and freedom. I mean, this wasn't Stonewall or the March on Washington, but still.

Maybe the real feminist conclusion was that being "truthful" to yourself doesn't always look the way you expect it to. It can mean saying "fuck it" and doing what you want.

By **Jesse Sposato**



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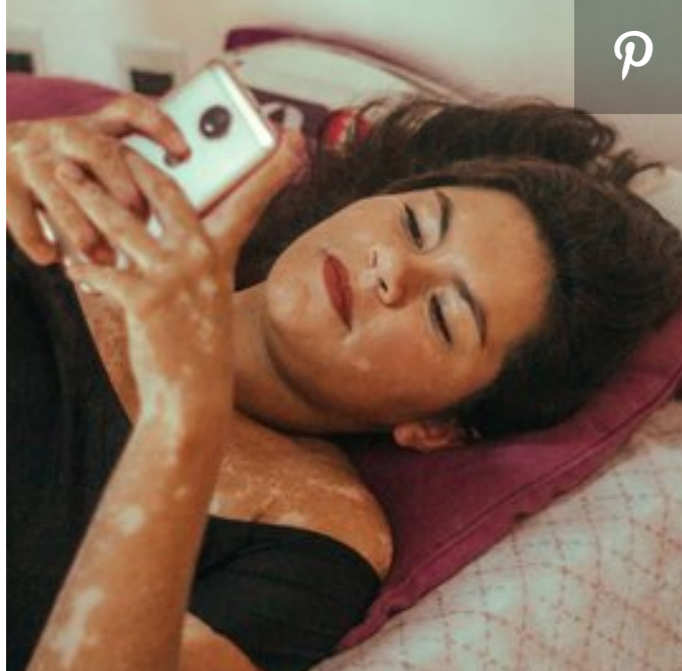


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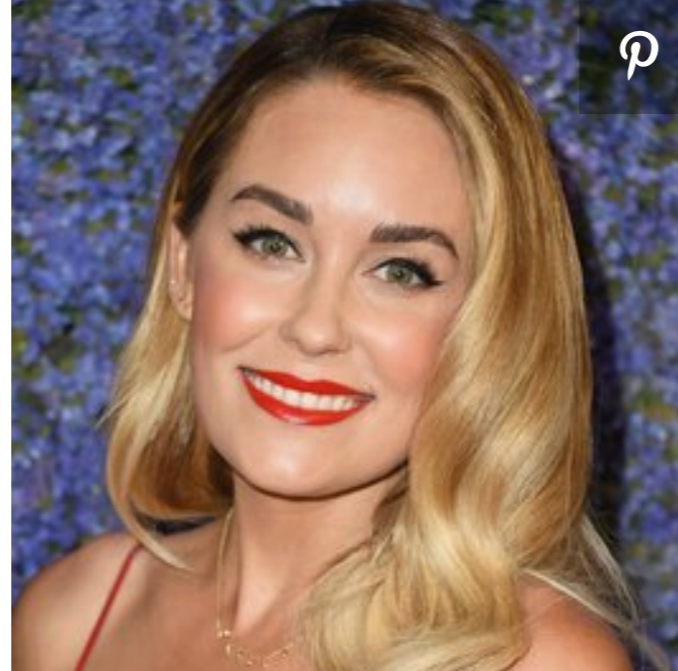
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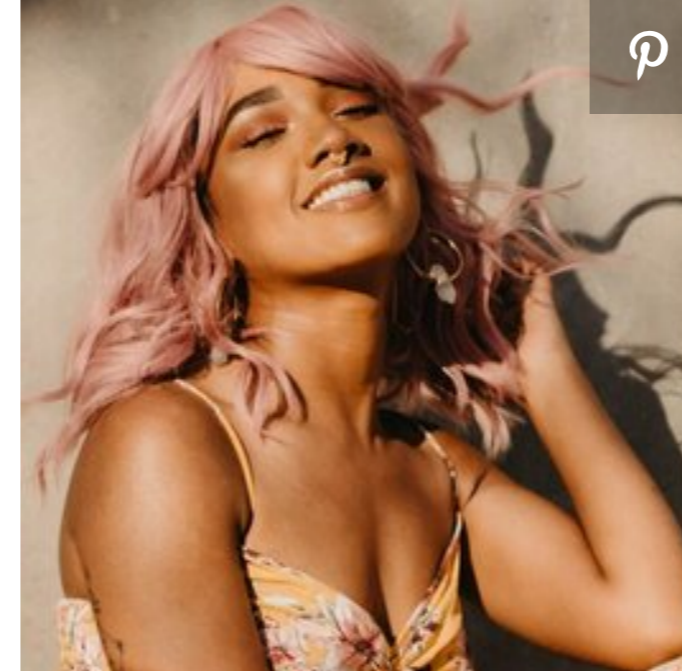
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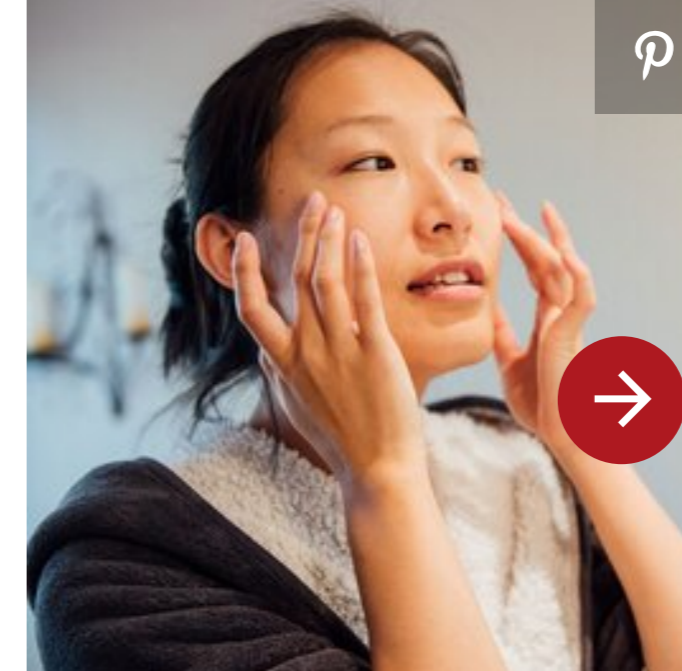
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