

Put on faith: The holy work of transformation

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

Last summer around this time I was on the island of Nantucket, once a whaling port and now a tourist destination, where I noticed numbers of people wearing canvas clothing in a peculiar shade of pink. Men wore trousers made of it, women wore jumpers, and I even saw a baby in a stroller wearing a pair of bib overalls made of it. When I asked my innkeeper what I was seeing, she sent me to Murray's Toggery Shop down on Main Street, where I learned all about "Nantucket Reds."

The material, I discovered, was originally red sailcloth from France. After years in the sun and salt water, the red faded to that peculiar pink—a.k.a. Nantucket Red—which became emblematic of the island. Eventually Mr. Murray had the idea of making clothes out of it, but rather than wait for the weather to fade the cloth, he weathered it ahead of time, so that people who had just stepped off the ferry could walk into his shop looking like landlubbers and walk out again looking like old-time sailors for just under 50 bucks apiece.

Back home, I placed this tidbit in the same folder with the ad for prefrayed sun visors from a beachwear catalog and prestained cowboy hats from a western wear store. "Made to look just like they rode in off the range," the ad reads. "Have the look without all of the long hours on the range." Since I own more than one pair of prewashed Levis, I cannot look down from too great a height on those who purchase such items, but it does seem to me that their very marketability points to a human desire worth examining.

On the face of it, it is the simple desire to belong, no different from a teenager's desire to wear the clothes that will identify him as a dude and not a geek. By purchasing a Nantucket Red jumper at Murray's, a visitor from Arizona may be able to distance herself from the comments she overhears in the ice cream shop about the obnoxious tourists who clog the cobblestone streets of Nantucket in the summer. She may be able to persuade herself that she is an islander, at least in spirit, by

wearing that peculiar shade of pink.

But since the value of these prefaded, prefrayed, prestained items depends on their looking *worn*, I believe that those who purchase them have an even deeper desire, and that is the desire to have belonged for a long time. Who wants to show up at a dude ranch in a brand new cowboy hat, so stiff that it rubs a raw spot in the center of your forehead? It is worth at least \$64.98 to avoid something like that.

The problem, of course, is that a prestained cowboy hat does not teach you how to ride a horse, any more than a Nantucket Red jumper helps you know when the wind calls for a spinnaker instead of a storm jib. Those things take time—at least as much time as it takes canvas to fade from red to pink—and those who mistake the appearance of experience for the experience itself are in for some rude surprises.

Since most Christians do not wear distinctive clothes or hats I am not sure that I can press the analogy, but it seems to me that a version of Nantucket Reds is available in many churches. Back when I was still doing baptismal preparation, I used to meet with candidates and parents for an hour and a half on the day before the ceremony. Such preparation once took up to three years, I would explain to them. Then, as Christianity took off, the period was shortened to a year, then to six weeks, and now—well, now we do it in an hour and a half. Thanks for coming.

We also give Bibles to children without ever thinking that some of what they find there may be at least as hard to handle as what we protect them from on the Internet. In antiquity, the symbolism of the first chapter of Ezekiel was considered so overpowering that the rabbis allowed only mature people to read it, and then only in the presence of an older and wiser chaperone. These days I imagine that such supervision would strike most people as tedious if not invasive. Isn't the idea to let scripture speak to you directly, without any meddlesome nannies in your way?

Most seriously of all, we tend to speak of becoming a Christian as if it were the easiest thing in the world to do. "All you have to do is believe," my students witness to one another. "God will do the rest." In this way, divine grace becomes the gift of a prestained hat instead of the gift of a life that may produce such a hat.

Fortunately or unfortunately, many people are not fooled. They continue to give themselves to the hard things in their lives, not the easy ones—to the workouts at the gym that reduce their legs to rubber, to the rehearsals that go on past midnight, to any cause that lures them out to the very edge of their abilities—because they

have learned that it is the hard things, and not the easy things, that change their lives.

It is difficult to imagine how the average church might raise the bar these days without losing even more members, but it would be a mistake to let our fear of nonexistence distract us from the only reason for our existence, which is to engage the holy work of transformation. The work itself is God's own gift, but it remains work, especially since there is no changing the world without changing ourselves first. Where faith is concerned, there are no pink clothes for sale—just free red ones, and a life worth living under the sun.