

“Sit Like a Lady”

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Sit. Sit like a lady. I grew up haunted by this phrase, “Sit like a lady.” Sit like what lady? Legs crossed at the knee or the ankle. Back straight. Shoulders strong. Hands placed gently on lap. Mouth Closed. This is what we were taught as children, this is how we were expected to present ourselves. These are words I heard daily.

At the age of eight, the mantra ‘sit like a lady’, permeated my being. I didn’t want to sit like a lady. To me the word lady meant old, stuffy, boring, restricted. I was repeatedly asked to become this person, this lady.... whomever she was. Sit like a lady, act like a lady, talk like a lady, eat like a lady. The list goes on. The problem was I didn’t want to be a lady. I wanted to be a girl, not a ‘pink bows and ruffles’ type of girl but a girl. I wanted to take advantage of all that was female, but I also wanted to live. Somewhere along the line it was decided by a choice few that females just don’t get to do everything. I remember hearing, ‘you can’t do that’, or ‘Nichola, sit down’. I was not told these encouraging phrases because of my lacking abilities, I was told them because I might get dirty or whatever I was flirting with wasn’t ladylike.

Why have we done this to our women? We put women on pedestals and tell them they can be all they could ever dream of; professional, mother, wife, entrepreneur, friend, leader, etc... and then we remind them of all the things they just shouldn’t do, if not acting as a ‘lady’. Who is deciding this for us? What is a lady and why must we sit like her? Who is this lady of reference and what mark did she make on this world besides her obviously over-popular way of sitting?

Quiet, well-behaved women are lost. They are lost behind the men and children and mothers and bosses and norms that hold their identity for them. Quiet, well behaved women who accept the rule, obey it, live it to the death and then pass it along are missing out. They are missing out on themselves, their passions, their opinions; their identity. Of course the term ‘lady’ will apply differently to each; holding a new meaning within each context. I spent the first thirty years of my life as one of these women, always remembering to ‘sit like a lady’ as I moved through life. I didn’t believe this statement, nor did I agree with it, but I did it and chanted it in my own head because this is what I was taught, what I was made to believe and what I had to do to be a good girl; not disappoint.

I felt muffled, quite honestly, like there were so many things I wanted to say or try or do or explore but my muffled voice was not able to project over the clear voices. No one had any idea of this voice because I never allowed anyone to hear it, why? Well, because that would be rude. Saying what you thought was rude, questioning those above you was rude, disagreeing with anyone was rude, not sitting crossed-leg with hands placed gently on the lap and mouth closed was rude. Societal norms or expectations dictate our behaviors. If we want to fit in we abide by these norms and jump into the sea of ‘normal’. If we are of the non-conformist brand we negate these norms and become our own person...the same as all the other non-conformists. Where is individuality? Where are our identities? It appears; to my mildly educated eye that there are two major groups in this societal realm; ‘believers and non-believers’. We either fit the mold or we do

not, no matter how hard you search for your own individuality or identity you still belong to one of these predetermined groups.

We as a society must determine if these groups help or hinder. Do they allow us to be, to see acceptance, and move forward with a life unlike so many others or do they keep us from growing or exploring or experimenting from the unexpected? These are the thoughts, inquiries, and visions that encompass my work and continue to inform my practice.

Community needs stem from societal norms. How can communities see beyond these norms to understand their own needs, beliefs, goals, and above all, identities? For thirty years of life I couldn't see through the shadowed veil of a societal picture. A picture that told me what I should look like, what I should believe, who I should like, what I should wear, who I should stand next to, what I should say, what I should want, and where I should see myself in society. I was so consumed with the 'what if's', but never in a way that allowed for evolution. "What if I say this, what will they think?" "What if I wear that, what will they say?" What if I do this, who will laugh?" I have learned to turn my 'what if's' into my practice. I have learned to use the 'what if's' to reach a personal identity instead of a demoralization of self. I have learned to be me, the real me, not the veiled person wearing a superficial costume for the world to approve. The girl trying to 'be this lady' now has an identity. She is a strong woman that sees the world around her, is driven to expose truths about humanity, and is passionate about making sure no little girl will ever sit again like a lady she has never met.