

The Day I Returned to Myself

I became a Black woman the day I wore my natural hair to work for the first time.

This was around 2011, and to someone else, it might have sounded perfectly normal. But for me, it wasn't. I had pressed my hair and gone to work with no braids, no weave, no perm—just me and the hair that grew from my scalp. And I was full of anxiety.

I remember feeling nervous about how people would see me. Would it still look “done”? Would I still look polished? Would I look acceptable?

“*I became a Black woman the day I wore my natural hair to work for the first time.*”

And the wild part is, I was a grown woman. In my 30s. Fully aware that I should not have been carrying that kind of shame around my own hair. But there I was.

The anxiety made me sweat, and the sweat made my hair start puffing up. I could feel it changing while I was at work, and I remember feeling so uncomfortable in my own skin. What made it even deeper was knowing this feeling didn't start there. It had roots.

I flashed back to fourth grade, when one of my rubber bands broke on a misty day, and I ended up with an afro I did not want. I remember feeling embarrassed and exposed. Like, somehow, my natural hair had betrayed me. That may sound small to some people, but Black women know it's never just about hair. Hair carries memory. Hair carries messaging. Hair carries the stories you've been taught to believe about yourself.

And I had already learned, early, that people will put things on you before they ever get to know you.

In seventh grade, there were three girls who used to scowl and stare at me all the time. I was quiet, shy, and mostly tried to stay out of the way, so I never understood what their issue was. One day, I went to get my hair braided and one of those girls was there. She snickered when she saw me, and somehow we ended up talking. That's when I

found out they had wanted to jump me because they thought I was stuck up. I remember being so confused. I hadn't done anything to them. But once we actually started talking, we found things in common, and by the end of the conversation, she said, “You're actually pretty cool.” Years later, somebody finally gave me language for what may have been going on: that because I was light-skinned and they were darker-skinned, they may have assumed I was conceited. That realization broke my heart.

Because what I began to understand is that so much of being a Black girl is being interpreted before you're understood. People assign meaning to your skin, your body, your hair, your silence, your confidence—or lack of it—before you even have the chance to define yourself.

So that day at work, when I was sweating and silently panicking over my hair puffing up, I wasn't just reacting to that moment. I was confronting years of internalized messages about what kind of Blackness was beautiful, professional, feminine, and acceptable.

And when I left work that day, I made a quiet but serious decision: I will never feel this way about myself again.

That was the shift.

I started looking for styles, images, and inspiration that helped me return to myself. I grew in my confidence. I grew in my acceptance of my own beauty. And when my mom and grandmother would ask, “So when are you going to straighten your hair again?” my answer became simple: I'm not. Not with dangerous chemicals. Not for approval. Not to make other people more comfortable with how I show up.

At some point, it became spiritual too. I remember telling my grandmother, “God made me this way, as I am, with this hair that grows from my scalp—who am I to tell Him that it's not good enough?” I would later pull up these roots with a song line that I gathered from a Malcolm X speech. My song Black Diamond begins, “Who taught you to hate the skin that he gave.” Though about skin, the message was clear. Challenge every perception of myself and decide for myself what beauty is.

That, for me, was womanhood.

Not age. not accomplishments and not having it all figured out.

It was the moment I stopped asking if I was acceptable and started deciding that I already was. “Fix the angle of your crown NOW, fire disperse NOW... you are not spoiled, turn your pain into goals, Black Diamond.”

I am Sherinda Bryant TS#18 of 52 of The Soutltown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL! ✨

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