

Mad about Uniforms!

All dressed up and no place to go!

GEOFF RYAN, MARCH/APRIL 2003

*“The universal dilemma can be specified succinctly: everyone must wear a uniform, but everyone must deny wearing one, lest one’s invaluable personality and unique identity be compromised.” (Paul Fussell, *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear*)*

“...you are all individuals! (Brian, to mindless, adoring crowd)

“We are all individuals!” (crowd in unison)

“I’m not!” (lone individual in crowd)

“Shut up! Yes, you are!” (crowd in unison)

*Monty Python, *Life of Brian**

Of all the consciously incendiary statements I have penned in various essays and articles over the past years, the one to raise the most temperatures and attract the lion’s share of scorn, derision and dismissal has been this sentence from an essay originally written for Commissioner Ed Read’s 1995 book “Discipleship: Vision and Mission” and subsequently reprinted in “Sowing Dragons”:

“Therefore I believe that one day I will stand before the Lord in my “Army uniform” and that He will inquire of me how faithful I have been to my calling as a Salvationist.”

On its own it seems innocuous enough, but at the time it caused quite a stir. Personally I still think it was polemic at its finest, one of my better efforts at dialectical prose. As a consequence, however, the “trad boys” hugged me to their bosoms as an eloquent spokesman for retro-Salvationism and the “non-traditionalists” were confirmed in their suspicions of my rank conservatism, nostalgic traditionalism and generally fascist approach to life. This one-line assertion continues to dog me to this day. People still bring it up in conversation and it occasionally gives pause for thought to those considering asking me as a speaker at their youth councils.

This disproportionate reaction fascinates me. Instead of choosing one of the myriad of ecclesiastical issues I have targeted over the years or the gentle heresies I have briefly flirted with or even the hard criticism of certain philosophical underpinnings of our Movement...instead of all any of these “important” issues - it’s the uniform thing that constitute fighting words. My short defence is that the sentence which was allegorical in nature (hence the quotation) and so you either get the point or you don’t.

I have concluded that the reason for all the fuss is due to one of two things. Either it is another wearying example of Salvationist / Christian proclivity for fighting and dying (metaphorically speaking) over matters of religious ritual, observance and ceremony rather than tackling the deeper stuff (the sort of picayune head- games the Pharisees and Sadducees liked to play with Jesus). The alternative is that in spite of all the cant and scorn heaped upon the long-suffering serge suit, it remains a powerful symbol that carries with it a heap of historical and emotional baggage tied both to identity and mission. On charitable grounds, I will go with the latter. The uniform seems to be a lightning rod that marks the divide between the old and the new, the truly spiritual (in love with God) versus the unspiritual (in love with the Army), the relevant and the irrelevant.

Paul Fussell, award-winning author and retired professor of literature, recently came out with a new book entitled, *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002). It is a fascinating, subjective study of uniforms ranging from scouts to nurses to priests to the military to high school janitors and bus drivers. Admitting that all his life he has “had a thing about uniforms”, Fussell is quite benevolent toward the Army and devotes three pages to us right at the outset of chapter twelve. An excerpt is worth reprinting (apart from anything else, it gives a good idea of how even well disposed “outsiders” view our distinctives at times):

“It cannot be said that taste has ever been among the group’s characteristics, but with so much good will, perhaps it’s not needed. Today, you’re likely to see a soldier of the army in a baseball cap with a red Salvation Army shield on the front, or an officer in full fig, with the ugliest cap device ever invented on the front of his dress visor. This device, aping a coat of arms, manages to crowd in as many “symbols” as possible: a five-pointed “crown of life,” a capital S worked around a cross, the whole mixture imposed upon crossed swords with “Blood and Fire” surrounding all that, and, below, seven “bullet holes,” representing seven verses of Scripture that no one seems to remember very clearly. In case you’ve missed it, the words “The Salvation Army” at the bottom of the whole presentation explain what you’ve been puzzling over.”

Fussell’s findings centre around the paradox of uniform as observed in various settings throughout the world: “The universal dilemma can be specified succinctly: everyone must wear a uniform, but everyone must deny wearing one, lest one’s invaluable personality and unique identity be compromised.”

Much of what he observes and comments on is relevant for the Army. I particularly enjoyed the following observation (note: “business offices” and “Salvation Army corps” are interchangeable here): “And what about the recent fad for “casual” dress in business offices with its delusive suggestion of escaping regulation and unleashing hitherto stifled individualities? It took about a month of the casual fad to reveal that an equally rigid uniform code was now in action, and the obligatory polo shirt came into its own.”

The fact is, when all is said and done, everybody wears a uniform. The question is *what* uniform are you going to wear? And further - why? My teenage years were spent in London, England during the 1970’s when myriads of tribes roamed the streets preening and fighting, dressed usually according to musical allegiance: Teddy Boys, Skin Heads, Soul Heads, Suede Heads, Mods, Barrow Boys, Rastafarians, Rockers and Punkrockers.

Clothing, for those of us in the West who have the luxury of choosing what we wish to wear every day, is an expression of how we see ourselves and what persona we wish conveyed. I attended a conference of evangelical leaders recently and beforehand joked to the person accompanying me that the room would be full of middle-aged men wearing sweaters and open-necked shirts. The accuracy of my prophesy earned a chuckle. I simply had

known beforehand what uniform would be worn given the context and the players present.

A film was showing recently in some of the more avant garde theatres in Toronto. Entitled “Das Experiment”, it was in German with English subtitles and suggested that uniforms and the roles they assign amplify underlying psychological tendencies. In the experiment 20 men are recruited to spend two weeks in a prison environment. Eight are made into guards and given quasi-military uniforms. Twelve become prisoners and wear nightshirts with numbers sewn on them. The movie is based on a novel, *Black Box*, by Mario Giordano, which in turn was likely inspired by the renowned Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971 (see www.prisonexp.org). Roger Ebert (of Siskel and Ebert fame) gave the film a three-star review in the Chicago Sun-Times and made a few interesting observations in his review:

“Human behaviour is determined to some degree by the uniforms we wear. An army might march more easily in sweat pants, but it wouldn’t have the same sense of purpose. School uniforms enlist kids in the “student body”. Catholic nuns saw recruitment fall off when they modernized their habits. If you want to figure out what someone thinks of himself, examine the uniform he is wearing.”

My point again? Everybody wears a uniform and usually more than one. We all conform to something, or someone, based on what is important to us and what we wish to express about ourselves. The urge to tribalize is virtually irresistible – even for avowed individualists and avid post-modernists!

In the newer seeker-sensitive community churches that the Army has opened in various suburbs over the past few years, traditional Salvation Army uniform is generally eschewed. In some of these congregations the issue of uniform wearing has raised issues which have threatened to prove almost fatal to the whole venture and certainly caused much heartache. And yet, and yet...this new church, in common with pretty much all of the other new suburban plants I know of, have produced and wear identical...well... uniforms. Polo/golf shirts with an embroidered logo over the left-breast pocket. A friend of mine (a Salvationist who “does not wear uniform” but who carries responsibilities with most of these new openings) admitted sheepishly to me that he has five brush-denim shirts from five of the newer Army congregations, identical but for the church name and logo over the left breast. *We are* all individuals, it seems!

Territorial Headquarters attempted to standardize a “casual uniform” in Canada and Bermuda a couple of years back. If you do not remember this, it is because the whole affair was quickly hushed up and locked away like a loud and embarrassing relative. The resulting new uniform was, well... the less said the better. Most of the initial order was quietly shipped off to Salvation Army forces in the developing world where, apparently, they were welcomed. Pretty much the only thing left of this venture is the cardigans known affectionately as the “Mr. Rogers” sweaters. These can still be bought at Trade at subsidized prices. A costly experiment, but a good lesson in shared leadership, decision-making process and the ability to tell people how to dress.

The standard Salvation Army uniform time was created in an age when the military and militarism was positive thing - in England, at any rate. It represented safety and security, pride, the empire, progress. Times change though and so has the view of the military and of militarism, particularly in the West and Canada. The military itself has recognized this and in recent recruitment campaigns both in Canada and the UK, the image presented has been of soldiers as career professionals and saviours doing humanitarian work rather than killers fighting wars.

The Salvation Army uniform was originally conceived as a working class tool and a strategy that resonated with the urban poor. It imposed a lifestyle discipline, a standard of behaviour to aspire to, an external imposition of morality that was desperately needed by people whose lives were sinful messes. It was inclusive. It allowed the excluded an opportunity to belong and be accepted, and was achievable by anyone. It provided the safety of a known, trusted and needed entity in dangerous parts of the city where even the police might think twice about walking. We find these factors largely still applicable in Regent Park and at 614 today. But move the uniform out to the suburbs and of course it definitely stops making sense.

In his “throne speech” following election as General John Larsson, outlines principles that will guide his leadership of The Salvation Army during his term in office. Expanding on his predecessor’s three-fold mission of saving souls, growing saints and serving suffering humanity, Larsson details the type of force needed in order to renew our God-given mission. Point two of his

five-point plan says the following: *“A force that is visible – We are a gloriously visible part of the Body of Christ. We even witness by what we wear. **It is the principle rather than any particular style of uniform that is important.** Many young Salvationists of today, even in their informality, are showing their grasp of the principle. The principle of visibility needs every encouragement.”*

The General was no doubt influenced by his tenure as Territorial Commander of Sweden in the late 1990’s, during which time that territory adopted T-shirts, sweat tops and other casual gear for youth and youth workers as official Salvation Army uniform on par with the traditional Salvation Army garb. Regardless - the facts are that according to our international leader – it is the *principle* and not the *particular* that matters.

So if a standard, one-size-fits-all uniform cannot be imposed on people, as our Territory’s recent experiment with casual uniform proved. And if the “tribes” are too numerous and the individualistic, post-modern melange of the 21st century (“I don’t want to work for William Booth, I want to *be* William Booth”) will not countenance such overt paternalism. We must acquiesce and encourage people to commit to the vision while allowing them to work out the details themselves, follow the principle and give the freedom to allow context to shape the particulars. Not a bad thought, really. The popularity of Steve Court’s ArmyBarmy alternative uniform wear would suggest that people are have a grasp on the principle. Certainly we have taken advantage of it at 614 with our black windbreakers emblazoned with the Red Shield - we have been asked about “our gang” during a prayer walks. Besides, wearing my tie gets me more stares than if I walked down the street stripped to the waist and if I don the Full Monty – shirt & tie, tunic and trousers I am usually asked whether I am off to a funeral a wedding or Headquarters?

I’ll let Paul Fussell have the last word...for now.

“...there’s always going to be an internal conflict between one’s aggressive urge to register a singular identity and the opposite impulse, the need to join the crowd and thus risk ridicule, if not contumely...It’s hard to avoid seeing this as a form of madness. Conflicts like this are known in psychiatry to lie at the root of many mental disorders.”