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## GET REAL? AT MY AGE? BY JAN JOHNSON

**I**n my early thirties, my brown-black hair began forming a silver streak across the front. Over the years, I had great fun making the most of the black-silver contrast framing my face. But a while ago, gray hair began filling in all over my head. The contrast faded. I looked old. Was that okay?

I was stuck because I had vowed I would never color my hair to look younger. I'd been proud that my fingernails, toenail color, and hair color were real. I reasoned that Scripture offers positive comments about gray hair: "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life"; "the glory of youths is their strength, but the beauty of the aged is their gray hair" (Proverbs 16:31; 20:29 NRSV).

With great inner turmoil, I agreed to let my hairdresser friend put darker color on my hair while not touching the silver streak. Now and then, I'd feel my conscience pierced, and I'd ask her not to mask the natural tones. But a few months later I'd practically plead with her to use the color.

I moved back and forth that way until I wrote *Abundant Simplicity*. Imagine how I felt the day I wrote these words about simplicity of appearance:

Simplicity of appearance flows from the biblical principle of lack of duplicity—not pretending to be someone I'm not—and not allowing the outer person to outshine the "hidden person of the heart" (1 Peter 3:4–5 NASB). Peter applied this general principle specifically to women, talking about how elaborate hairstyles and pretentious clothing can overshadow the beauty of the person's spirit, but this fits everyone in our appearance-conscious society.

This transparency of spirit results in an authentic, unaffected way of being. We let nothing distract others from the person we are inside and let nothing deceive others about who we are. This gets at that deep issue of "impression management."... Must I manage what others think of me or can I trust God by being my real self to others?<sup>1</sup>

By the time I edited that paragraph a few times, I could no longer live with myself. Was the "hidden person of the heart" enough? Did I value "transparency of spirit" enough to own my gray hair? Could I move away from impression management and trust God to hide or show the hidden person of the heart? So I took a deep breath and moved through the transition stage into the real deal.

**In my current gray-hair phase, I get to let God form my character as I let go of one more piece of impression management. I have to let who I am speak for itself even though the container has less color than before.**

Some people responded negatively. Magazine editors and event planners preferred to use older pictures of me with darker hair. It took audiences and classes longer to warm up. I know because students told me afterwards that they'd almost dismissed me because of my hair color.

**I**t's ironic to think that when my husband and I were young in a paid ministry position, we wanted gray hair! Without it, we had no street cred with the older leaders of the inner-city church we pastored. We felt so ineffective that we invited a consultant couple in their fifties to help us accomplish what we were hoping to do. The husband teased us, "You two just need some gray hair. Then they'll listen to you." Quite frankly I struggle at times with this truth: when I didn't have it, I was dismissed; now that I have it, I'm dismissed.

<sup>1</sup> Jan Johnson, *Abundant Simplicity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 136.

## Must I manage what others think of me or can I trust God by being my real self to others?

So I liked reading what Julie Gorman said in her article “Aging and Maturing”: “The Spirit of Christ gives us opportunity to reflect him in the situations that come with each stage of life.” In that younger episode, I got to reflect Christ by being glad to partner with older and wiser folks to implement our vision. In my current gray-hair phase, I get to let God form my character as I let go of one more piece of impression management. I have to let who I am speak for itself even though the container has less color than before.

My hope is that we as the body of Christ are open to learning from each other across the stages of life.

In recent years I’ve gotten to sit with young church planters and do some teaching but also to listen to the wisdom they offer me. I dare not dismiss them because of hair color, tattoos, or piercings. I love to think about Jesus being their age when he lived out such grace and power in front of people my age. Jesus thought someone their age could have a lot to offer. I agree. I need them now as my husband and I needed our mentors who helped us when we were young. Jesus is doing something in their lives that is different from what Jesus is doing in mine at the moment. I love watching the wisdom be passed around among us.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jan Johnson is the author of twenty books, including *Invitation to the Jesus Life* and *Abundant Simplicity*, and a thousand articles and Bible studies. She speaks at retreats and conferences, and teaches (adjunct) at Azusa Pacific University and Hope International University. Also a spiritual director, Jan holds a D.Min. in Ignatian spirituality and spiritual direction. She lives with her husband in Simi Valley, California. You can visit her at [JanJohnson.org](http://JanJohnson.org).

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