

ON GOING GRAY

Alison Ash Linnell

Standing in front of the sink rubbing the soap on my palms and through my fingers, I focus more on my gray hairs in the two inches of undyed regrowth reflected in the mirror than the actual washing of my hands. And as I tilt my head toward the mirror and study the mousy brown hair with gray streaks on the crown of my head, I compare that color to the caramel brown with honey highlights, and I contemplate if I will or can or should follow through on letting the gray grow in, and whether I'm ready for this transition—or the judgments.

When I attempted to go gray a year ago, my husband warned: “You know that will likely age you ten years or more.” Even if it doesn't sound like it, he was being helpful, pointing out that I like people thinking I'm younger than I am and letting the gray grow in will ruin that. My daughter spouted: “*Why* are you doing that?” She also knows the struggle I have with accepting my age and how I will be tested by the gray, and perhaps she, along with my husband, doesn't want to watch me come to terms with looking my age, and how ugly that might get, especially with my sixtieth birthday approaching.

When one friend noticed the gray, she told me how she remembers one of her college professors, some twenty years ago, growing out her gray hair and how awkward she looked all semester long, and I wondered if my gray hair—and not the important things about writing and rhetoric—might be the only thing my students would remember from their semester with me.

Last year, I had two and a half inches of regrowth before changing my mind. I hoped to get a job interview and worried about how the half-gray, half-caramel brown hair might look to a potential employer who was looking for someone energetic and active, which I interpreted

as young-looking. So, thinking the comparison of gray to brown would age me more than ten years, I colored the gray again. But I didn't get the job. And I'm tired of the damage and the regrowth and the coloring, and so, again, I'm going to see if I can be open to the gray.



While gray hair does indicate growing older, gray can also denote wisdom and maturity and sophistication. Yet, the color gray can also symbolize dullness or neutrality or indecisiveness.

For many years, I believed God was against gray—not my gray hair, but the kind of gray that indicates indecisiveness; the gray that makes one uncertain and unresolved or lacking determination and dedication. I believed God worked in black and white. I thought gray to Him was similar to the lukewarm of Revelation 3:16, and if one was lukewarm, God would spew them from his mouth. Therefore, I saw most things in black and white, in right and wrong, and avoided the gray.

When my children were little, we attended church—the full three-hour block—and never missed for naps or family gatherings; we participated in firesides and church activities and temple open houses and temple dedications and family home evening and family scripture study. On Sundays, we didn't watch television, except movies like *Prince of Egypt* or *Veggie Tales*, and we didn't play with friends but played Uno and Sorry and Battleship together instead, hoping to strengthen religious ties and family bonds.

On all our vacations, whether to San Francisco or Disneyland or Zion National Park, we not only found a church to attend on Sunday, but we bought sandwiches and snacks the day before the Sabbath to minimize what might be seen as not honoring the day.

I wanted my children to understand the importance of being clearly on the Lord's side, especially with things that were harmful to them. Growing up I'd seen firsthand the damage drugs and alcohol could cause a family, so to not normalize anything contrary to the things in

the Word of Wisdom, I used the term “breakfast cake” instead of “coffee cake.” That may sound fanatical, but I was determined to show God that there was no gray in my dedication to Him.

And yet, now I wonder how damaging it was for my family that I shunned any traces of gray. What would it have hurt to let my children’s friends be included in our board games on Sunday? What would it have hurt to let my daughter go to prom a week before her sixteenth birthday? What would it have hurt to let my children jump and splash and float in the hotel swimming pool on a Sunday morning during our vacation instead of rushing to an unfamiliar ward and listening to some stranger speak about their faith crisis?



I’m not sure when the first gray hair came in. I started dyeing my hair before any gray was evident. I didn’t like that my hair went from sandy blond to medium brown in my late thirties and so the highlighting and coloring to look younger began then.

I’m also not sure when the black and white I believed I needed to be with God started turning gray. It could have been when my kind brother-in-law came out to us as gay and was concerned that we would no longer let our young children be around him, and I wondered which of my actions had given him that impression.

It could have been when my husband was sustained as stake president after five years as bishop, and I was asked by the General Authority who extended the call to share my testimony during stake conference. I spoke about how difficult a calling like this can be for a wife and family, hoping it might invite some grace when my children or I didn’t meet the expectations others might have for us. After the meeting, the General Authority’s wife warned me to be careful about how honest I was about serving in the Church because it could possibly damage another’s testimony if I looked vulnerable. I wondered why it was the honesty and grace—and not the unrealistic expectations—that should be shunned.

It could have been when my adult son, who had stepped away from the Church, asked for an espresso coffee maker when I asked him what he would like for Christmas one year, and I knew this request was a test to see if I could love him even when he wanted things contrary to what I believed, and I knew that I wanted him to know that I could.



At church, I often study the women who are close to my age sitting in the pews around me. Some have gray hair. Others have blond hair or solid black hair or brown hair with blond highlights, and I wonder who is coloring their hair and who isn't. Still others seem to have their natural hair color, and I notice the few strands of gray growing in with their brown or blond or black or red hair. And I contemplate who might be doing it right, as if there is only one right way of letting gray grow in (or not grow in), and I'll find the right thing for me.

I also wonder, as I'm sitting on that pew, why there is a need—for me, for others, especially in a church—to look a certain way. I contemplate if it is the comments and the judgments and the expectations that often propel this look that makes it hard to allow any gray.

Even before I had children, or was married, I understood the judgments people make if your family doesn't look the part. I grew up in an inactive family, and although I was welcomed at church, and even encouraged to come, there was still a level of acceptance I felt I would never achieve. I knew certain families didn't want me to be best friends with their daughters or to date their sons; they worried my gray gospel family might influence their children.

When I had children, I worried that my gray gospel history could be blamed if my children didn't stay strong in the Church. I don't know if this idea was born or solidified from an experience when my children were just babies, but either way I believed I couldn't allow any gray. I recall talking to a neighbor of our bishop at the time. The bishop's

teenage son had left the Church, and not only did he leave, but at eighteen, he also joined a gang and got a tattoo confirming his departure from his family's values and his commitment to that gang. This neighbor said his mom just wasn't strong enough in the gospel to keep her children strong. At the time, I believed a parent's gospel standing could predict their child's outcome.

But now, I wish I had defended that bishop's wife. I wish I had said that we didn't know her commitment or the amount of gray in her life and why it was there or how that gray might benefit her child or other people she interacted with. I wish that instead of adding to those judgments, I had listened to this bishop's wife's experiences and her advice on how to show love to your child and accept your parenting flaws.

Those judgments took on new life when my teenage daughter began drifting from the Church and doing things contrary to the things she'd been taught. While I wondered what others might say about what gray they might have noticed in my parenting, I mostly hoped for a friend who would help me work through the guilt, sorrow, and confusion I was experiencing over my daughter's choices. In my young ward and neighborhood, it was hard to find someone who had experienced similar things who was willing to talk. I reached out to a neighbor whose daughter several years earlier had made similar choices my daughter was making; I hoped she would offer help and comfort and advice. Instead, this neighbor colored over these events her family had experienced and acted as if they had never happened. While I appreciated this neighbor's desire to protect her daughter's reputation, it felt more like she was protecting her own parenting and her family's perfect church standing from any judgments. I realized there is a cost to hiding the gray—lost friendships, lost opportunities to offer grace to ourselves and others, lost lessons of compassion and understanding and growth.

I recall one friend who, in her late thirties, said she'd never dye her hair because she was proud of her first few gray strands; she said they were hard-earned, and she was going to keep them. Yet, one day, after many gray hairs, she colored them. I never asked why, so I don't know if she wanted to look younger, or if she decided they were too hard to accept, or maybe she didn't like the judgments about her age and her choices. I believe many of my gray strands are hard-earned too. Although I wouldn't say I am proud of them, I have embraced many grays, and I don't feel a need to hide them anymore; those grays align with who I am.

I embraced the idea that my neighbors may have made some judgments about our family when my son's espresso machine showed up on our porch earlier than expected on a Sunday, while we were at church. It came in its original packaging, and it was clear for our entire neighborhood to see that we'd bought a coffee maker.

I embraced the idea of skipping church on a Sunday while on vacation with my grandchildren, and I laughed and played with my family as we built sandcastles on the beach and surfed the ocean waves.

I embraced the idea that maybe my friend had it right when she let her fifteen-year-old son go to his high school prom with a date. I didn't make any judgments because my friend believed it was the perfect thing for her child at that time.

I embraced the idea that I don't know how my brother-in-law or other LGBT+ individuals fit into the gospel plan. And when I was asked to give a lesson on President Oaks's talk about the plan of salvation, I showed a picture of my brother-in-law and his partner and his partner's two children, and I testified of God's love for them. I told my Relief Society sisters that I knew these men were good people and that my focus in my life should be about how my thoughts and my actions fit into God's plan of kindness and love and compassion and not about keeping others out of that plan.

I embraced the idea of talking with a ward member about some of my children's choices when she asked how I handle the heartache that

often comes with parenting, and I mourned with her as she shared her anguish and uncertainty over her parenting grays.



As I study other people's gray hair at church, at Walmart, or along the campus where I teach, I consider how similar my hair might look to theirs when the grays are all grown in, and I wonder if I can follow through this time. Yet, there is a gray trend I don't understand. As I'm searching the various strands of gray on my school's campus, I often see a student in her late teens or early twenties who has dyed her hair gray. I think their gray hair looks as unnatural and artificial as the auburn hair on my eighty-three-year-old neighbor.

I can't decide if the analogy for this artificial gray is that gray can't be forced. Or maybe it is that gray shouldn't be embraced in everything and that we shouldn't seek it out. Or perhaps the analogy is that if gray is there, we might ask why they have embraced it, what they have learned, and how they have become comfortable with it.

Still, when I look in the mirror, I'm not sure if I will ever be comfortable with my gray, or even how long I will let it grow this time. I don't know if I'm ready to admit my age or embrace all the uncertainty that comes in life. If I do let the grays grow in, it might be because I have a substantial strand of hair on the front right side of my head that is growing in white instead of gray, and that strand is stunning. And if I let that strand grow in, the rest of the grays come with it.

ALISON ASH LINNELL loves teaching (but not grading), writing (but not submitting), and mothering (but not disciplining). When she is not teaching, writing, or mothering, she can be found running, reading, or rearranging words or numbers or pieces for whatever puzzle she is fixated on at that moment. One of her current goals is to solve the easy *New York Times* Pips puzzle in under ten seconds; her fastest time so far is twelve seconds.