Returning to What’s Natural

Amelia Baxter-Stoltzfus - New York, New York

As heard on *The Bob Edwards Show*, September 14, 2012

High school student Amelia Baxter-Stoltzfus believes in the freedom offered by semi-permanent hair dye. As much as she likes trying a new look, Baxter-Stolzfus knows there are some things worth coming back to, no matter how much her life may change.

**Age Group**: [Under 18](http://thisibelieve.org/essays/age/under18/)

**Themes**: [change](http://thisibelieve.org/theme/change/)

I believe in semi-permanent hair dye: The kind that lets you have a few wacky purple-headed weeks in the depressing months of winter term, but leaves you plain and brunette again in time for graduation pictures. The kind that lets you be whoever you want without letting go of how you got there. The kind that lets you embrace those internal contradictions that make up an entire, oxymoronic, complex, complete human being. I believe in hypocrisy, just a little.

Semi-permanent hair dye is about finding security within unlimited freedom. It’s about recognizing what I have in my life and holding on to it, even if only at the base of a follicle, because I also believe in roots.

My mother always tells me that the hair color you’re born with is the one that looks the best on you, and I want to make sure that there’s something inside of me that’s always going to be worth returning to. Maybe the house I lived in with my parents will never be home for me again. Maybe I’ll fall out of touch with people I thought I was pretty close to in high school. Maybe I’ll hate the way a darker brown washes me out. But I’ll know that in 20 to 26 washes, I’ll come back to something that I’ve had naturally forever, and I’ll know it looks pretty good.

Here’s where the hypocrisy comes in. Every time you get away from home, thinking how you’re going to reinvent yourself, you end up hanging on to the things about yourself that are the most familiar. Feeling safe isn’t about setting limits on the outside. It’s about hanging on for dear life to what’s on the inside, no matter how your context changes. Because, honestly, you’ll never know whether you look fantastic as a redhead unless you’ve tried. What you will know is that you have brown to return to, when you’re ready.

I’ve just moved into my first apartment all on my own, and New Jersey has never felt so far away. But this new independence could only come from dependence, from knowing that there are unshakable things in my life that have made me ready to face all the Big Bads in the world. We can’t be toddlers or teenagers forever, and there’s too much out there to experience to make me want to dwell too much in the past. So I do believe in permanent change; just not for my hair.

*Amelia Baxter-Stoltzfus wrote her essay when she was still in high school in Princeton, New Jersey. She graduated from the University of Chicago with a degree in anthropology. Since then, her hair has been black, red and purple in addition to her natural brown.*

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/13023/>

Do What You Love

Tony Hawk - San Diego, California

As heard on NPR’s *All Things Considered*, July 24, 2006



Tony Hawk has turned what many consider a childhood activity into a professional career. Now for Hawk, skateboarding is not only a job, it’s a means of expression and a foundation for personal belief.

**Age Group**: [30 - 50](http://thisibelieve.org/essays/age/30-50/)

**Themes**: [creativity](http://thisibelieve.org/theme/creativity/), [family](http://thisibelieve.org/theme/family/), [work](http://thisibelieve.org/theme/work/)

I believe that people should take pride in what they do, even if it is scorned or misunderstood by the public at large.

I have been a professional skateboarder for 24 years. For much of that time, the activity that paid my rent and gave me my greatest joy was tagged with many labels, most of which were ugly. It was a kids’ fad, a waste of time, a dangerous pursuit, a crime.

When I was about 17, three years after I turned pro, my high school “careers” teacher scolded me in front of the entire class about jumping ahead in my workbook. He told me that I would never make it in the workplace if I didn’t follow directions explicitly. He said I’d never make a living as a skateboarder, so it seemed to him that my future was bleak.

Even during those dark years, I never stopped riding my skateboard and never stopped progressing as a skater. There have been many, many times when I’ve been frustrated because I can’t land a maneuver. I’ve come to realize that the only way to master something is to keep it at — despite the bloody knees, despite the twisted ankles, despite the mocking crowds.

Skateboarding has gained mainstream recognition in recent years, but it still has negative stereotypes. The pro skaters I know are responsible members of society. Many of them are fathers, homeowners, world travelers and successful entrepreneurs. Their hairdos and tattoos are simply part of our culture, even when they raise eyebrows during PTA meetings.

So here I am, 38 years old, a husband and father of three, with a lengthy list of responsibilities and obligations. And although I have many job titles — CEO, Executive Producer, Senior Consultant, Foundation Chairman, Bad Actor — the one I am most proud of is “Professional Skateboarder.” It’s the one I write on surveys and customs forms, even though I often end up in a secondary security checkpoint.

My youngest son’s pre-school class was recently asked what their dads do for work. The responses were things like, “My dad sells money” and “My dad figures stuff out.” My son said, “I’ve never seen my dad do work.”

It’s true. Skateboarding doesn’t seem like real work, but I’m proud of what I do. My parents never once questioned the practicality behind my passion, even when I had to scrape together gas money and regarded dinner at Taco Bell as a big night out.

I hope to pass on the same lesson to my children someday. Find the thing you love. My oldest son is an avid skater and he’s really gifted for a 13-year-old, but there’s a lot of pressure on him. He used to skate for endorsements, but now he brushes all that stuff aside. He just skates for fun and that’s good enough for me.

You might not make it to the top, but if you are doing what you love, there is much more happiness there than being rich or famous.

*Tony Hawk got his first skateboard when he was nine years old. Five years later, he turned pro. Hawk’s autobiography and video games have been best-sellers, while his foundation has funded skate-park construction in low-income communities across America.*

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/22870/>

A Grown-Up Barbie

Jane Hamill - Chicago, Illinois

As heard on NPR’s *Morning Edition*, May 22, 2006

As a child, Jane Hamill thought Barbie was the ultimate in cool. Now a fashion designer in Chicago, Hamill realizes her belief in a doll was a belief in her own skills, creativity and ability to succeed.

**Age Group**: [30 - 50](http://thisibelieve.org/essays/age/30-50/)

**Themes**: [creativity](http://thisibelieve.org/theme/creativity/), [popular culture](http://thisibelieve.org/theme/popular-culture/), [work](http://thisibelieve.org/theme/work/)

I consider myself a feminist and I feel like a moron admitting it, but it’s true: I believe in Barbie.

For me, as a kid, Barbie was about cool clothes, a cool job, cool friends and cool accessories: the airplane, the apartment building and the camper. I learned to sew so I could make outfits for Barbie and her friends, who took turns being the airplane pilot, the doctor, the fashion designer. Barbie was never about Ken. He was always a little dusty and in the corner. My Barbie didn’t enter beauty contests, get married or have children. She went to Paris and New York for fancy dinners and meetings.

Years later, I became a fashion designer. I lived in Paris and New York and went to fashion shows and fancy dinners. It was all about the outfits and I began to wonder: am I just a grown-up Barbie? I am a strong, intelligent woman. My idols are supposed to be Georgia O’Keeffe or Gloria Steinem or Madeleine Albright. Am I in danger of becoming a puff piece like Barbie?

When I achieved my Barbie-style life, I wasn’t so sure I wanted it. My husband is a prosecutor. He can change a person’s life forever in just one day. I come home from work and say, I sold a great green dress today and you should have seen the shoes!

Today, I’m sort of the anti-fashion designer fashion designer. I don’t particularly like shopping and if someone says fashion is silly, I’m the first to agree. It’s just clothes. But if the sleeve is cut just right, it makes a difference. It makes a difference in how you present yourself. So many people have body issues. I hope I can help people like themselves more.

Clothes are personal. And they’re part of your identity. A few weeks ago, I got a call from a customer. She told me now that she has my clothes to put on in the morning, she’s never felt so confident in her life. They may just be clothes, but they help her to be who she wants to be and to believe in herself.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed Malibu Barbie I loved looked nothing like my red-haired, freckled self. But that didn’t stop me from thinking I was just like Barbie — cool and independent and smart. It’s only as an adult that I realize that my belief in Barbie is really a belief in my own imagination, in whoever I imagined I could be, and whatever I imagined I could do. I believe in imagining a life, and then trying to live it.

*Jane Hamill grew up designing and sewing clothes for family members in her hometown of Chicago. She studied fashion in New York and Paris before opening her own boutique at age 25. Hamill is on the advisory board of Columbia College in Chicago, and a member of the Apparel Industry Board.*

# <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/21259/>

# This I Believe

Mallory - East Syracuse, New York

Entered on June 12, 2005

**Age Group**: [Under 18](https://mail.harpercreek.net/owa/redir.aspx?C=cxBZ0vK4pE-cCf1ZahPkYLYs5EhgV9AIVt_CBt7iWmmVH-dEd041QwWyruhWUpCKFuUH_RRj6Ls.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fthisibelieve.org%2fessays%2fage%2funder18%2f)

**Themes**: [courage](https://mail.harpercreek.net/owa/redir.aspx?C=cxBZ0vK4pE-cCf1ZahPkYLYs5EhgV9AIVt_CBt7iWmmVH-dEd041QwWyruhWUpCKFuUH_RRj6Ls.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fthisibelieve.org%2ftheme%2fcourage%2f), [setbacks](https://mail.harpercreek.net/owa/redir.aspx?C=cxBZ0vK4pE-cCf1ZahPkYLYs5EhgV9AIVt_CBt7iWmmVH-dEd041QwWyruhWUpCKFuUH_RRj6Ls.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fthisibelieve.org%2ftheme%2fsetbacks%2f)

It hurts. It isn’t back or leg pain. It hurts to get out of bed each morning and face the world. It’s a burning in my chest that escapes to blister my esophagus. Anger. On November 17, 2004, it was anger that almost got the best of me.

Since I was ten I have hated waking up and facing the world. While I watch my friends disrespect their mothers in front of me, I came to a conclusion: You have to lose something to appreciate what you have. At ten years old I lost the only person that ever protected me. I was angry that she died, angry with her for being so selfish to die and leave me here alone. Years later I realized that in many ways she still protects me.

Twenty-four painkillers. I can’t calculate how much rum I swallowed, but it was enough to burn. The last thing I thought wasn’t how much I hoped everyone would miss me or how many people would be at my funeral. It was how much better off everyone would be without me. I thought everyone was going to thank me someday for this. They didn’t thank me. All they did was hug me and tell me they love me when I came home from the hospital. They thought I had almost lost my life, but that wasn’t it; I lost my will to live.

It still hurts. I still feel the burning every morning when I wake up. I have to try and roll myself out of my bed to fight every honest fact that I don’t want to face. I never told them that I lost my will to live, just like I have never told them that they are now the only reason I exist now. They give me the strength to wake up again when I know I don’t want to. They believe in me to keep going when I don’t think I can take one more step. I never told them that it was not my wanting to live, but it was my mom telling me that I had to. It was just one more time when she gave me no choice but for me to let her protect me. Mom was long gone but her love still lived on, forcing me to live with it.

You have to lose something you think you need to appreciate what you had all along. It is when you are searching for what is gone that you find what really matters. I did not pay attention to my friends’ and family’s love until I needed it because I had run out of my own reasons to wake up. I appreciate the support and the strength every friend or family member has given me because each one of them is part of why I am here today. I finally found my reasons for living while for so long I was searching for my selfish motive to stop.

 <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/3457/>