

AN ESSAY

Wear

On pants made of trees, choosing the same thing again, and wearing the good pair out

BY CHRIS WYATT · A SEVEN-MINUTE READ

I OWN THE BEST PAIR OF PANTS EVER MADE, AND I AM WEARING them out.

They are called Cobra pants, from a company called Bhujang Style. They are yoga pants. I want to be clear about that, because there is a version of this essay in which I call them lounge pants, or performance joggers, or some other term invented so a man can buy stretch fabric without saying so. They are yoga pants. I have worn them nearly every day since the pandemic sent me home to work, and I am not alone. The whole country put on soft pants in the spring of 2020 and has been quietly declining to take them off ever since. I work from home a lot. Why not be comfortable. That sentence has done more for me than any book on the subject, and I have read the books.

The company describes the fabric as largely MicroModal, made from beech trees. The pants are made of forest. They stretch enough to survive a Great Pyrenees deciding, at ninety pounds, to sit in my lap.

I have the pairs I have. I am not going to tell you how many. I will tell you that I know the number, that I have thought about it more than a grown man should think about pants, and that the thinking turned out to be about something else.

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A remarkable amount of advice about a good life contains the word new. Try something new. Go somewhere new. Variety is the spice of life, and notice that spice is always the metaphor, as if the meal itself were a formality.

So here is a question. If novelty is what people want, why do people keep ordering the same thing?

Partly because imagining the repeat and living it are different experiences.

In 2019 Ed O'Brien at the University of Chicago studied people revisiting experiences they had already completed: a museum exhibit, a movie, a video game. Some predicted how much they would enjoy doing it again. Others actually did it. Across seven studies involving more than three thousand people, the work found that people could underestimate the enjoyment of a repeat, even when they enjoyed it less than the first time.

The useful part was discovery. Going through something once can leave you with the impression that you have seen it. Going through it again reveals what you missed. The more there is in the thing, the more there may be left to find.

You have not necessarily seen it. You have seen the outline.

It makes me suspicious of the forecast that the same thing again must be a lesser thing.

The pants I put on this morning meet a slightly different man, in a slightly different mood, with a slightly different amount of dog hair on the couch. A whole day happened between this wearing and the last one. I do not arrive at them used up. I arrive wanting them again.

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There is a familiar explanation for wearing the same thing every day: one less decision. Find something that works, buy several, and spend your

attention elsewhere. I believe in that. It is perfectly possible to love a thing and appreciate not having to shop for it.

But fewer decisions do not quite explain what I am doing. I am not wearing these pants so that I can stop thinking about pants. I am wearing them because they are the pants, and every morning I choose them, and the choosing is not fatigue. It is the opposite. It is one decision I have made a few thousand times and never once regretted, and I do not know another word for that except love.

Repetition can be the shape caring takes.

There is a word for the body's knowledge of where it is in space: proprioception. Close your eyes and touch your nose. Your arm knows where it is without waiting for you to look. I found the word in the company's product copy. It stayed with me.

I think a good marriage can feel proprioceptive. The person you have chosen a few thousand times helps you know where you are. My wife does that for me. Not always by saying so. Sometimes by being there, familiar enough that when I drift out of alignment I feel it before I have worked out what happened.

That is a large job to give a word I found while reading about pants. It has held up.

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I love these pants the way I love my wife. That is a sentence that should end a marriage, and the only reason it will not end mine is that Erin will understand it before I finish saying it, because she is the one who taught me what it means.

The comparison sounds as though it demotes her. It runs the other way. The pants have acquired some of the qualities I recognize from living with someone I love. Familiarity has made them more particular. I know the differences between the good days and the less good ones. I keep choosing.

They are not perfect every day. Some days they are great. Some days, and I am reporting this as a matter of record, they are terrible. Some days they are dirty, because I have been on the floor with the dogs or out in the yard or it has simply been too long, and there is no glamour in a dirty pair of pants, only a decision about whether to wear them anyway.

And then there are the days when I do not fit into them.

Every argument I have ever had with a waistband was an argument with myself in which I recruited an innocent bystander for the other side. The pants do not deserve most of what I say about them on those mornings.

People are more complicated. We both change, and a poor fit between us cannot be explained by appointing one person the garment and the other the problem. But the waistband has taught me a useful first question. On the mornings when nothing sits right, when the two of us are pulling against each other and every seam is in the wrong place, what have I brought to this? What changed in me, and when, and did I notice?

I can ask that before I start making alterations to someone else.

The Book of Common Prayer gives the vow its familiar language: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. Read it again and notice how much room it makes for a bad day. The worse, the poorer, and the sick are there in advance, with a promise attached to each.

The couple are promising to show up for those days too. Every vow is a garment. It is not that you feel the same every day. It is that you wear it every day, and the wearing, not the feeling, is the thing you promised.

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The word does two jobs. You wear a thing, and the thing wears. Put on, and erode. Every morning I choose the pants, the pants get a little thinner, and the soft spots at the knees are a record of every floor I have sat on with a dog. That is not damage I would undo. That is the receipt.

The temptation is to keep the good pair from becoming the old pair. Save them. Wear the older pair on the dog days and keep the good pair for the good days, as if the pants were wine.

I understand buying a supply of something you love. I have already declined to disclose mine. But a drawer full of replacements only puts the question off. You get a supply, and a life, and the job is to wear one out with the other.

So I have stopped saving them. The good pair is on. It is on now, as I write this, and it has dog hair on it, and it is a little tight this month, and I have never been more sure of a pair of pants in my life. When they go, they go. That is not the tragedy. The tragedy would be a drawer full of pants that never got dirty, and a man who kept his best things folded, waiting for a day that deserved them.

There is no day good enough. There is this one, again, and the same pants, again, and a woman who has watched me pull them on a few thousand mornings and has not yet said a word.

Put them on. Wear them out. ♦

Sources

Ed O'Brien, "Enjoy it again: Repeat experiences are less repetitive than people think", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2019). Seven studies, total N = 3,356.

Bhujang Style, Classic Cobra Pant. Product description and size guide.

Bhujang Style, CobraLuxe fabric. The company's description of its beech-based MicroModal fabric.

The Church of England, "The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony", *The Book of Common Prayer*.