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The Adventuress

Our game-for-anything reporter
CYNTHIA KLING
does everything we'd do if only we
had more nerve and more time.



let's talk
about me
Can a call with a
couple of New Age
image consultants
change my life?
I'd soon find out.

phone date with (style) destiny

If someone asked you to describe your style in two words, what would you say? Nothing, right? Same here. The whole concept of being reduced to a tiny phrase seems mindless. So when I heard about these image consultants in Vancouver who charge \$500 to do just that, I rolled my eyes. But there was a lot of buzz surrounding these women, known as "Carrie & Danielle"—from some very smart, reliable sources. I did a little research and found more positive feedback (including tearful Oprah-esque accounts of lives changed), plus details on their process: Turns out, it all happens by phone. The so-called experts spend an hour asking you pseudoscientific questions, then present you with your "style statement," a two-word mantra meant to guide your choices in everything from clothes and perfumes to couches and companions. In a nutshell, it's instant personal branding.

That got me thinking about my own style struggles. Years ago, I'd gone to Chanel on an assignment and, somewhat unprofessionally, pressed the director of the atelier for fashion advice. "You should dress like an American," she said, looking me over dismissively. I clung to that for

personal branders

Carrie McCarthy (left) and Danielle LaPorte dole out custom-made self-actualization advice long-distance. [CARRIEAND DANIELLE.COM](http://CARRIEANDDANIELLE.COM)



years, wearing turtlenecks and jean jackets, until I realized that I'd built a wardrobe around a Gallic put-down.

Still, how could anyone possibly figure out in an hour what I hadn't been able to in a lifetime? I needed to check this out.

uncovering my inner brand My appointment finally rolls around. Danielle calls. "Where do you think style comes from?" I ask, before she gets started. "We think it comes from your heart," she says. Carrie murmurs assent in the background. Hmm, I hadn't thought to look there.

Danielle's deep, gravelly voice intrigues me. She doesn't sound a bit shyster-y, just wise and peaceful. She begins by posing questions that get me thinking about the subject sideways—through fantasy and emotion. "What would you wear to the Oscars?" she says. I know the answer right away: "Red Valentino and vintage Harry Winston diamonds." "If Annie Leibovitz took your photo, how would you art-direct?" "I'd be in the garden with my dogs, wearing the Valentino." "What's top on your list of places to travel?" "Mysore, India," that dusty, ancient city of castles and holy men. "What piece of art has moved you the most in your life?" "Um... um." "It can be music, literature...." I suddenly remember how *Alice in Wonderland*—slipping into that bizarre world and meeting all those wonderful nuts—had given me the idea to become a journalist.

I never would have thought I could spend so much time talking about this. Even more unusual, Danielle is really listening, not just

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

The gurus nailed my creative identity by analyzing the things I love.

wild crocuses

They pop up and save your spirit from a seemingly endless winter.



"alice in wonderland"
My all-time favorite work of art.

classic valentino

In case I'm ever invited to the Oscars.



mysore, india

A holy land for yogis like me.



vintage harry winston

The baubles of my dreams.

waiting for me to finish so she can talk. This encourages me to dig deeper. I surprise myself when I say my favorite flower is the yellow crocus because it blooms just when you can't tolerate another gray day.

The conversation ends after about an hour, though I could have yakked forever. Danielle goes off to examine the data with Carrie. Then I start to worry. What if she gets me almost right—but wrong? Think of poor Marilyn Monroe. She was susceptible to suggestion, like the rest of us, and spent all her energy trying to live up to her too narrowly cast self. Her life was ruined by an ill-conceived style statement!

born again About 30 minutes later, Danielle calls back with my style statement. "Cultivated Wonder." I actually get tears in my eyes. It feels just right. *Cultivated*, she explains, isn't just my love of the garden, but of things ancient, things with a past—because everything I own has a story. My sense of wonder is what draws me to the curious, the odd. There is, Danielle cautions, an 80/20 rule, with the first word dominating. I need to keep my "wonder" side in check or I cross into "wacky." If I were buying a sofa, for example, my choice would be guided by "cultivated"; I'd add in some "wonder" with the throw pillows.



my favorite things

Asked to imagine my fantasy sofa, my mind keeps going back to the recamier in my own study.

My next thought: What am I doing in these pleated corduroy pants? They are so not Cultivated Wonder. I get off the phone, change into black jeans, then start looking around the house. In a minute, I realize that every mistake—from the mongrel green couch to the ugly bathroom knobs—was made in a moment of weakness, when I'd felt overwhelmed by some giant corporate brand bearing down and bullying me into believing that its way was the right one. I do have my own voice, but sometimes I can't hear it amidst all the distractions.

I clean out my closet, get rid of about half my stuff—but hold on to sentimental items. Not sure what to do next, I contact other Carrie & Danielle clients. One, whose style statement is Creative Natural, says she dumped all her synthetic underwear. Another (Sophisticated Era) says that now, when she needs to make a decision, she asks herself what Cleopatra would have done. A third (Classic Genuine) tells me she splurged on a string quartet for her otherwise inexpensive wedding.

I call the gurus back and ask how they do it. Carrie explains that their work is based on a psychological concept called "pattern recognition." Each of us has a creative thumbprint, whether we recognize it or not. By sifting through my history and dreams—and ID'ing the repetition of things I love—Carrie and Danielle located mine. The style statement gives me access to it, like a bank card.

It was, of course, the same thing that the good corporate marketers do—clarify a message and hammer it home. And it gave me a sense of peace and validation: I may be a tiny tugboat floating in a sea of power brands, but now I have style ballast—my own personal brand—to help keep me afloat. ::