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### Lessons from a Spice Girl

In adolescence, life always dramatic, but when something injects itself uninvited into a teen's little world, well, the world is over. That's what happened to me in May 1998. Life plopped itself smack into the middle of my universe and proceeded to stink it up the same way my stepfather would when he sat down in the living room. I consider my eighth grade year of middle school the quintessential teenage soap opera. I was self-absorbed, guy-absorbed, everything-absorbed beyond cognition. Just like every young adolescent, I was doing and saying everything in a quest to be something, which was, of course, the same something as all my friends. In more theoretical terms, I was in Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development: identity vs. role confusion. Despite that, at the end of my eighth grade year, I was having the time of my life. I was getting ready for the summer with my friends and high school was still something of a fantasy. Then reality hit my adolescence head on. In the same day in May 1998, Ginger Spice left the Spice Girls and my dog of ten years died.

Memories of the Spice Girls seem more of a dream than of the past. The group was always slightly surreal, always dolled up in fun outfits and

prancing, or clodhopping as my stepfather would say, in funky platforms. They were always holding lollipops and goofing off like little girls. My best friend, Lynn, and I worshipped them. We had all their albums, all two of them. We knew every song by heart, beginning with "Wanna Be." We knew every dance from every video, and if there wasn't a video for a song, we had our own routine for it. We tracked and recorded every TV appearance. We took turns buying every magazine and between to the two of us, possessed hundreds of posters and pinups. We were basically obsessed. When a movie was announced, we thought it was too good to be true, and we were not the only ones.

The movie, SpiceWorld, was as appealing to us teens as to grown men, but for different reasons of course. I remember going with my best friend to see SpiceWorld when it came out in the theaters. Shortly after the movie started, I realized she and I were the only two teenagers there and the only two females there. Besides us, the packed theater was full of Marines from Camp Lejeune. No wonder my mother wouldn't let us dress up like Spice Girls when we went to see it! Despite our company, we loved the movie and swore that it would win awards. Last fall, I finally obtained my own copy of Spice World; I purchased it at a local gas station for \$2.50.

But to me, the Spice Girls were something more than just fun. Ginger Spice, or Geri Halliwell, became my role model. What initially set her apart from the others girls to me was her confidence and pride in her body and

looks. Like me, she was 5'2" with short legs and a busty chest. In middle school, this was awful. It seemed that it was better to be less. I never understood it but since I was more, it was often pointed out to me in unpleasant ways. I now understand that middle school is where everyone's imperfections are scrutinized. (What was interesting was how, in one year, it was suddenly better to be more!)

The way Geri handled her body with confidence made a strong impact on me. She would wear all sorts of outfits, and many were revealing or tight. She wore them with pride like she was telling the world that although she was far from being a supermodel, she was still going to show off who she was. Now, I was not about to wear anything close to what she wore because my mom would surely end my life, but her example showed me that how you looked and what you wore should make you comfortable and happy, not self-conscious or negative. Through Geri, I learned that how I looked should reflect me, not what is popular around the eighth grade. This was the first step in becoming my own person and my first step in not caring what other people thought of me.

To me, Geri was an important part of the Spice Girls. Although they never would elect a leader, as much as the media pushed, I could only see her as the leader. Her personality was dominating in comparison to the other girls. In interviews, she was the one who went past simply answering questions with a forced smile. Geri inserted messages into everything. She

wanted people to know what she was thinking, and they usually heard her. Although many would characterize her as loud and brassy because of it, she was still successful in getting the attention she wanted.

This became a huge influence on me. My parents were always on me about being loud and opinionated because I was usually rude. Around my house, there was always disagreement between my opinion and everyone else's. I just thought I knew everything. What I didn't know was how to handle having a different opinion and sharing it. I looked to how Geri did it and learned a lot. She was loud and expressive, but she did it while sounding thoughtful and intelligent. She made sense and while the other girls didn't, Geri's message stuck. Time was not spent in meaningless ranting. Her example helped me to realize the difference and strive to be as effective as she was. It had worked well for her. She sounded like the expert on everything, even when it was just her Spice Girl opinion.

Everyone knows the phrase the Spice Girls adopted and overused in their campaigns: "Girl Power!" Everyone had an opinion about what it meant this time around. The girls never came to just one ultimate meaning for why they were using it. Instead, they demonstrated how open-ended the phrase was through the many applications they fitted it to in the course of their reign. It was Geri who was the most adamant about its serious meanings. She often used it to describe her success in a man's world. She used it to describe her admiration for her own role models and other inspirational

women. She used it to advocate for those who struggled to make ends meet, to reach their goals, and who were doing it in a world where they had natural disadvantages.

For me, constantly repeating the quote showed that I was a Spice Girl fanatic and clueless. I decorated notebooks with it, shouted it to aggravating boys, and practiced it religiously in my absolutely perfect British accent. That was at first, though. I did develop real insight that year into why that phrase existed. Although middle school is only on the cusp of the real world, it did provide me opportunities to experience the challenge of being female. Competition in the classroom was always present. There was always someone who liked to challenge me and he was usually a boy. My mom would always tell me “welcome to the real world” – the real world of male and female competition. I also began to realize its existence in other places as well, for example, P.E. Both physical education instructors at my middle school were male, and they only looked out for their budding soccer players. Since every boy in Swansboro played Rec soccer, they got all of the coaches’ attention. That left us girls to “work on our mile run requirement” while the coaches fanatically did whatever needed to be done to make the boys better athletes. Just these small frustrations allowed me insight into what Geri was always talking about. I was beginning to understand the idea of a man’s world, but she was telling me that despite what it seemed to be, I didn’t

have to live in that world. What I ultimately realized was that, regardless of whatever world you live in, reality would be there.

This brings me back to that horrible day in May. My sweet beagle was very ill. My mom told me it wasn't even worth carrying her to the vet; she could tell Sparky's kidneys were failing. I checked on her often throughout that particular day but was unable to stay with her. Being there when she took her last breath was too much to think about, let alone experience. At one point during the late morning, I decided to watch television. I had no idea that MTV was about to deliver more devastating news. Kurt Loder's announcement still grimly echoes in my mind: Geri had left the Spice Girls. It was completely unexpected. There were no details or reasons. It was over. My role model quit. She didn't want to be Ginger Spice anymore. I was stunned. What was so surreal to begin with soon became incomprehensible. Things began to feel like they were out of control in my world. Soon after, I realized Sparky left me as well. It was a one-two punch of reality.

That night was extremely painful. It was the first night I went to my bed without meeting a warm pillow and a wet tongue. As I lay there in the dim light, I scanned my walls covered with Spice Girl posters. I searched every one for some sort of understanding. Geri smiled in all of them, seeming satisfied with herself. I scrutinized the timing of these two events for hours. Although I knew what hurt more, I couldn't find a clear distinction between the pain of each event and the turmoil they created. It was all an

enormous sadness. In the strange timing of the two events, I couldn't help but question the meaning, as if it were all intentional.

I thought about Sparky a lot. She was my support and my friend. She moved everywhere with us, suffered asthma in the dry Cuban climate, and tolerated the ticks from the woods of North Carolina and Virginia. She put up with little girls pulling her ears and the unnerving racket of a not-so-aspiring drummer/Marine. She put up with a lot; she was strong. She gave me strength and showed me strength in the years I grew up with her. Her value to me was suddenly evident after she was gone. Sparky, like all loyal dogs, hardly left my side. That night, I found myself alone for the first time.

Geri's decision to leave the group made no sense to me. I would come to understand that by leaving the group, she was reaffirming her own power as a strong individual. She was becoming just someone in the group. The next step to making yourself something was doing it all on your own. It took courage and strength to leave the fame she worked years to find in that group. Of course, she would never really leave the spotlight afterwards because she did find her own role in life; she has since become successful as a solo artist, writer, television personality and most importantly, public servant through work in many charities and the United Nations. It was being strong that made it all possible. It was understanding that, even though it would be difficult, doing it by yourself would ultimately be the only way of doing it. As I would later learn, doing something for yourself, and feeling

that success inside, is a powerful and proud feeling. That was what Geri needed to do, I guess.

I decided what the two events meant; I was being told to be strong for the future and be strong for the past. My role model for strength was testing my own strength and helping it grow. She was, unknowingly of course, showing me that despite my loss and current state of loneliness, I needed to take the situation and make it important. Sparky and Geri were special to me for my own reasons. Their departures were unique experiences to me – no one else felt the same way I did that night. Overcoming my sadness and learning from my experiences was only going to benefit me. I was going to become a stronger person by finding value in my relationships, like with Sparky, and by learning from others, like I had with Geri. It brought everything I had learned about myself that last year of middle school together and helped me climb a step closer to adulthood, all because of a Spice Girl.