At Any Age

In a blog post titled “Freedom to Be Fabulous,” former New York state Senator Tom Duane encourages his fellow long-term survivors to shine boldly at any age. Below is an edited excerpt.

August 17, 2026 By Tom Duane

Often, people comment delightedly about the blue highlights in my hair. I always have to correct those people because, darling, the highlights aren’t just blue—they’re actually teal.

The story goes like this: Last year, I was at a Kylie Minogue concert. I saw this young man in front of me, a friend of a friend named Justin, with this hair color that I just loved. I complimented him on his stylish highlights and asked where he got them done, and he generously gave me the name of the beauty salon.

The next day, I went to the salon and asked for Justin’s teal, and the hairdresser knew exactly what I was looking for and streaked my silvery-gray crown with the blue-green jewel tone. I love it so much that I have a standing appointment with Caitlin every five weeks for teal touch-ups.

By the way, the word teal comes from a duck called the Eurasian teal, which has a distinctive stripe around its eyes. Tibetan monks consider teal a symbol of the infinity of the sea and the sky, representing boundless compassion, clarity of thought and spiritual truth. Teal also represents open communication.

All of that is great, but I believe that I’m so attracted to the hue because it’s fabulous.

When I was in office as a New York senator and before that a New York City Council member, I’m not sure I could have gotten away with teal highlights. I probably could’ve, but it was a different time (I was in the City Council from 1992 to 1998 and the state Senate from 1999 to 2012). I think it was enough that I was already out as a queer man living with HIV. I was the only openly gay member of the Senate, and I figured my constituents, though very progressive, should have a senator who dressed like the other cis male senators. I sported conservative suits and ties. You should see my tie collection!

This is not to say that I've lived an inauthentic existence, not at all. The fact that I've been openly queer and openly living with HIV for all of my time in elected office and public life is evidence of my commitment to truth and genuineness. While in office and out, I've been a champion not only of queer issues but also of issues that affect many strategically marginalized communities: fair housing, tenant protection, prison reform and healthcare, just to name a few. I couldn't have faced the legislative opposition about major issues without standing tall in my own truth. To dress conservatively was a small concession in the name of advancing progressive issues.

That said, I now have no obligation to look a certain way or compartmentalize my rebellious side, and I'm free to put teal in my hair or satisfy any other fabulous notion. It's about being 100% my authentic self.

I think that's what Pride was about for me this year: being my authentic self and encouraging others to do the same. At this time, when our community, especially trans people, is under attack, being authentic is a radical act.

I encourage everyone reading this to be your authentic, queer, fabulous selves, not only during Pride but all year round. I was not put into the world to blend in, and neither were you. Queer people are put here to make the world a more bold, passionate, sexy, creative, colorful place.

Pride is not just a parade, a party, a march or a month on the calendar; it is a mighty declaration. It says that we belong, that our stories matter and that our lives are worthy of celebration. In a world that too often asks people to dim their light, Pride gives us permission to shine brighter.

And if that brightness comes in a fabulous shade of teal, all the better.

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