

The Bald Truth

BY GENEEN ROTH

“**S**HAVE IT,” I SAY TO ELIZABETH, my San Francisco hair stylist. “I can’t stand to see it coming out in bunches. I can’t stand to see the blanket of hair on my pillow every morning. Just take an electric shaver and buzz it off.”

No, I do not have cancer. I am not dying.

I have vitamin A poisoning, which I got because my doctor and I had a serious miscommunication. Instead of taking four drops a day, I took four droppers—the difference between twenty thousand units and four hundred thousand units. Since vitamin A is stored in the liver and is not washed out of the body in urine, it is an especially toxic vitamin to misuse; the symptoms will take at least six months to disappear. In the meantime a new plague develops every week. Bone and joint pain, weeping rashes, migraine headaches, bright orange skin. Every inch of my body itches and burns, but nothing compares to losing my hair.

“I don’t think you are ready for a full shave,” she says. “It’s a huge change. You don’t need to be so drastic. I can cut your hair shorter, and then in a month if you still want to shave it, we will.”

I agree to a short haircut. She parts my hair in the middle instead of at the side, cuts it so that the bald spots don’t show as much. From the back I don’t look as if I am losing my hair. But in front I can see the pale curve of my scalp, bare as the moon in August.

It took me a while to realize my hair was falling out. I

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**Losing your hair,
the author learns,
can be good
for the soul.**

was too itchy to think, feel, care about anything. But while brushing my teeth one morning, I noticed a monochromatic line from my eyes to my hair, and then I realized that my eyebrows had fallen out. The fistfuls of hair on the pillow meant my hair was falling out. I stood at the sink and wept.

It’s only hair, I tell myself over and over, like a mantra, like a song. It’s only hair, they’re only eyebrows. My face is not me. But I don’t believe myself. It’s not only hair, they’re not only eyebrows. My face *is* me. I didn’t know that before, but I know it now. If I thought meditating daily for twenty years had helped me detach from temporal phenomena, I was wrong.

I DECIDE TO GO TO TASSAJARA, A ZEN MOUNTAIN-RÉTREAT center in Carmel Valley. No one will know me there, and the monks are bald. I can study the creases in their scalps, notice how necks look when there is no hair car-

peting them. I can meditate, try to get some perspective on the situation, remind myself that I am not dying, it's only hair.

In the hot spring baths I see a woman who has lost both breasts and has one arm that is three times the size of the other. I watch as she maneuvers out of her wheelchair and slides into the hot water. We are the only ones in the tub. A blue jay caws, and the woman asks my name. What I really want to answer is, "My name is Geneen and I've been

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sick for three years and I am losing my hair, but I have both my breasts and I am not in a wheelchair, so will you tell me how you make sense of your life?" Instead we talk about how many years each of us has been coming to Tassajara, about living in Berkeley, about our work—she is celebrating her seventieth birthday; her new book will be released in the fall.

In the baths the next morning, I gather my courage and ask her when she lost her breasts, why she's in a wheelchair. She tells me about having polio fifty years ago, about having breast cancer thirty years ago, about the radiation that enlarged her arm, the post-polio syndrome that has put her in a wheelchair. I tell her about being diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome and candida, then getting vitamin A poisoning.

"But it's losing my hair that has sent me over the edge," I say, "and I am stuck in the grief of it. I feel silly for caring so much about my hair. I'm not in a wheelchair, I'm not dying."

She is looking at me with so much compassion that it makes me cry. "Will you tell me how you manage so many physical losses?" I ask.

"You can't compare one sickness with another. I don't think about being in a wheelchair. I don't let it stop me from

living my life. I'm not self-conscious about having no breasts.

"But last week I got an awful haircut, and when I look in the mirror, my hair bothers me terribly. When I don't like my hair, I don't like the way I look, and that is what makes me self-conscious."

I stare at her, dumbfounded, then begin to laugh. I realize I am hearing fifty years' worth of coming to terms with illness, and a week's worth of irritation about her hair. But still, the idea that her hair bothers her most dissolves my shame and loneliness like a tendril of smoke.

I spend the week writing, taking naps, eating warm, crusty homemade bread with fruit soups. I read Reynolds Price's book *A Whole New Life*. Price writes that after an appallingly painful and life-altering battle with cancer, after becoming a paraplegic, after years of howling and suffering, when he compares his present life to his past he'd "have to say that, despite an enjoyable fifty-year start, these recent years since full catastrophe have gone still better."

Better. He says his life is better now than it was when he could walk, run, go to the bathroom without Olympic maneuvers. He says, "I've yet to watch another life that seems to have brought more pleasure to its owner than mine has to me." If his life is better now, when he can't live alone, when his legs are limp dead fish hanging from his torso, when he is in constant pain, it is because he has taken the pain and traveled with it, taken the suffering and planted it in the seething, fertile soil of his consciousness, where patience grows from endless hours of waiting and love pushes through. Where the sheer pleasure of friendship and work and Eros are enough if you are willing to be melted and forged by the pain. If you are not attached to matching your life with the way you think life needs to be. If you accept yourself the way you are.

WE CAN ACCEPT THE WAY WE ARE OR REJECT it. Rejection takes many forms: shame; an intense focus on self-improvement; the belief that if we left ourselves alone, we would never work, we would never exercise. Rejection can feel like

determination, will power, relentlessness to change. Fantasizing a parallel life is a rejection of ourselves, our present lives.

Acceptance is believing that we want to know the truth, and that there is a part of us, our "essence," that recognizes truth, that clings to truth. Essence is the part that cannot be weighed or measured. It's the you that remains when your body has cancer and you can't lift your children, when you break a leg and

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can't exercise every day, when you overdose on vitamin A and lose your hair. When everything you thought you were disappears, there is still something that remains. A being-ness, an is-ness, a presence. And it is that something (and the recognition of it) that brings peace, strength, fulfillment, and happiness.

This much I know from losing my hair: My face doesn't look like me, and yet the part of me that is most me has not changed. As long as I keep hanging on and trying to go back to the old me, as long as I think I know what I am supposed to have, look like, and be, as long as I keep rejecting what I have now in favor of a fantasy of what I think will make me happy, I will be frustrated and in pain.

I LOOK CAREFULLY AT THE NAKED HEADS of the Tassajara monks. I decide that I like the folds in bare scalps; that I prefer round heads to pointy heads; that if much more of my hair falls out I will shave my head and, for the first time in my adult life, see the shape of my scalp, run the palm of my hand on the crown

of my head, feel the softness, the smoothness, bare pink skin touching bare pink skin.

When I notice myself believing that only people with hair (with thin bodies, who work at politically and spiritually correct work for little or no money and if not that, then they are as famous and rich as Julia Roberts) deserve kindness, I remind myself that that voice is not my friend, is not true, is not real. This takes a lot of reminding. It takes a long time.

But slowly, over the next few months, I find myself relaxing into the hair loss, touching the bald spots gently. I begin to have confidence that if my hair never grows back, if I am sick for the next forty years the way I have been for the past three, I will carve a new life for myself. I will stop trying to be who I was with hair and a healthy body. I will become who I am, with no eyebrows, no eyelashes, no hair, a quarter of the energy. My face *was* me—the me I was when I looked like I used to look. My face is still me—me without hair, with dark brown blotches, with orange skin. My life is still mine. But it is a different life; I am not the same me as I was before.

A few weeks ago Matt, my husband, suggested that I call my friend Patty, who makes clothes, hats, jewelry. We visited her apartment, where we bought two flowered hats for the days I don't want to go to the grocery store bald. One of the hats is dark burgundy velvet with a moss-green silk peony pinned to the front. The effect is luscious, and I am glad to have something so beautiful and soft for my head, which has been the recipient, since the vitamin A fiasco, of so much self-inflicted harshness.

Patty serves us peach crumble with vanilla bean ice cream, and as I sit there on her blue-and-white seersucker couch tasting the tang of peach, the sweet flash of brown sugar, I realize it doesn't get any better than this: sitting on a seersucker couch in the middle of Tuesday in the middle of my life, with no desire to be anywhere or anyone else. ☉

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