

Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow

By Melinda Sherry

Just before my 65th birthday, I was in the hospital getting my first chemotherapy treatment. After two months of living with pain and finally being diagnosed with B cell lymphoma there I was getting infused with a “CHOP cocktail.” I had a rather large tumor in my lower left pelvic area which was invading my kidney, renal artery, and spine. After the first treatment the pain went away. I was to have a total of six chemotherapy treatments and 29 radiation treatments.

Because I could not see my cancer and because I was in no pain, I didn't feel too “sick.” Oh, I was tired and losing energy, and didn't like the taste of food (except eggs). But I couldn't see that I was sick.

Then in about 10 weeks my hair started falling out. I was expecting it but not so dramatically. I was blessed with a full head of hair. I usually kept it short, but hadn't cut it in awhile and it needed trimming. I was beginning to feel that I needed to cut it, so my sweet husband said he would do it for me. He got out the hair cutting kit, which I had used on him many times and after about 30 minutes he had done a very remarkable job of cutting it short.

The next day while shampooing my hair in the shower great gobs of hair started coming off in my hands. I started crying; I was beginning to get sick. So rather than wait for more hair to fall out and stop up the plumbing, my husband again got out the clippers and shaved my hair, but not completely down to the scalp. I cried some more.

The following day washing my head again produced more stubble on the tile walls of the shower. Again, out came the clippers and my husband buzzed me down to my scalp; and fairly soon there was not a hair to be seen. I still had my eyebrows, eyelashes and some body hair elsewhere, but eventually this would disappear as well. I was naked and bald as a newborn baby. Even balder. Looking in the mirror I looked like that picture “The Scream” by Edvard Munch. This was when I realized I was really sick. I cried a lot about my lost hair. I dreamed about my hair growing back and it was red like “Opie's” on the Andy Griffith Show. My husband thought it was sexy. Go figure that one!

My dear daughters bought me a burgundy red wig, which itched. And though it was cute, it didn't fit right. I bought some stretch caps in different colors, which shrunk when I washed them. I slept in them and used a towel on my pillow because though my head was cold, I would sweat buckets during the night. My caring friends gave me hats and scarves that were seldom worn. Finally, because I live in the mountains and winter was coming, I bought some chenille ski caps that I could pull over my ears, were soft enough and kept my head warm. When I was alone, I usually wouldn't wear anything. My grandchildren got used to seeing me bald. At first I think they were a little afraid of grandma looking so different and scary.

One day in the winter, when the snow was on the ground and piled high around our home, two of our male friends came over. It was not quite dinner time, so we got some wine, cheese and crackers and were sitting around the table talking. I had on my lightweight stretch cap and they had on baseball caps. My friend Jack said, “You know, Melinda, you can take your hat off if you want to.” And with that he took off his cap showing his bald head with a fringe of hair. Then I took off my cap showing my bald head (no fringe of hair) and we sat around talking and laughing, drinking wine and eating.

While enjoying these friends I realized how very lucky I was because of their friendship, and I knew my hair would grow back. I had real sympathy for my friends, realizing how hard it was to lose your hair. How cold your head could get, or how sunburned.

When my hair eventually started to grow back, I proudly pointed this out to my 10 year old granddaughter Emily. She said, with a very serious expression, “Oh grandma, I was just getting use to a bald-headed grandma!”

So my short, straight hair grew back—only it grew back curly and it wasn’t red, but the same color it had always been and a little bit more gray. And all the other hair I was supposed to have grew back also. Not too bad after all.

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Edvard Munch's
"The Scream"