Losing My Hair, But Not My Control

Testicular cancer took my left testicle, and now it was after my hair.

December 19, 2016 By Justin Birckbichler

I moved the Chia Pet of Uncle Si from Duck Dynasty off the edge of the tub so I had a place to sit. I had been neglecting watering it in the the past few years, and now it appeared that all of the plant growth that made up his beard and hair had died.

“You and me both,” I murmured to the terracotta structure (and then immediately thought how ridiculous I was talking to to a small statue).

It was Saturday morning, and I was preparing to shave my head due to the effects of chemotherapy from my testicular cancer treatments.

My hair had been thinning since the end of the first week of chemo, but I hadn’t been ready to shave it yet. I wanted to wait until it was coming out in chunks and was noticeably thinning.

That day happened on Wednesday of this past week. I woke up and went to the bathroom to apply deodorant. As I pulled away the Right Guard, I noticed the top was covered in armpit hair. I immediately put a hand to my head and brought it down. It had finally happened. Seemingly overnight, my hair was coming out faster than bullets from John McClain’s gun.

It was definitely a surreal experience. This sudden exodus of my hair from my follicles was paired with finding out that my white blood cell counts were now low at a doctor’s appointment later that day. This meant my immune system was compromised. When I think of cancer, I think of bald people with low white counts. It was the first time I considered myself a “real” cancer patient (as if the removal of a cancerous testicle, two doctors telling me, along with the seven days of chemo weren’t enough).

Hair loss from chemotherapy has an emotional effect on male cancer patients, too.

Oftentimes, we hear of female cancer patients mourning the loss of their hair but don’t often hear the perspective of men. I suppose this is due to the fact that men are “allowed” to have a bald hairstyle, and many men eventually do go bald. I mercilessly tease my bald grandfather and my balding father about their lack of hair. (Looks like I was about to beat my dad to the punch.) However, even as a male, watching my hair fall out brought back a flood of memories about the impact my hair has had throughout my life. Just because I am a guy doesn’t mean my hair isn’t important to me.

At the end of high school and during the first year of college, I had what could best be defined as a “skater” haircut. This had nothing to do with my skateboard prowess (there was none) and more to do with the fact that I had really low self esteem. I simply didn’t care what I looked like, because I did not like myself very much. After a nasty breakup towards the end of my freshman year of college, I decided to cut the long style and go with a shorter style. I decided on a faux hawk.

The physical change helped my personality change drastically. I felt more confident and began to like myself more. As my self-esteem grew, my social circles expanded, and I made more friends. The haircut played a role in helping me define myself and accept myself. I finally liked myself. Looking back, it seems silly that this was a catalyst for change, but changing my hair helped me discover the best me.

This style stayed with me for the next six or so years, up to present day. My confidence (or cockiness as some would say) is not based on my hairstyle anymore, but I don’t feel like my full self on days I don’t gel it up. And now part of my identity was being taken from me against my will.

I decided I wouldn’t let cancer completely control my hair loss and would shave it off myself.

I planned to do it on Saturday for no particular reason. By this point in chemo, every day was a weekend day. I did want to do it before my next five day week of chemo started, because I wasn’t sure I’d have the strength to do it myself.

It was important to me that I did it myself — not Mallory, not my mom, not a barber. Perhaps it was a symbolic way of proving to high school Justin that I am more than my haircut. Perhaps it was me wanting to show that I am still in control of my life. Maybe it was also just the curiosity of shaving my own head.

On the days leading up to the haircut, I had a tendency to pull out my own hair. I’m not entirely sure why. I think it was a weird fascination. Just by running my hand through my hair, I’d come away with a handful of my own hair. I’d wake up each morning to a light dusting of hair on my pillow. Showering was even worse. By the end of two showers, it looked like a dead rat was on the floor — and that was only the hair that didn’t get washed down the drain.

After breakfast on Saturday, Mal and I marched upstairs to our bathroom for the main event. I assembled my tools — hair clippers, my beard trimmer, my electric razor, a face razor, and a head razor that looked like a racecar. I was practically a modern-day Sweeney Todd.

The actual shaving took about 90 minutes from start to finish.

I used an attachment and buzzed my hair down to an eighth of an inch with the clippers and then removed the attachment to get down to the skin. I took off my beard with the trimmer and then went over my whole head with the electric razor. Doing the back of my head was ridiculously difficult and had to use an elaborate system of mirrors to see it. I took a shower to get remaining hair and then covered my whole head with shaving cream. Having white “hair and a beard” seemed appropriate for the Christmas season.

I removed any remnants of beard hair with the razor and moved onto my head. Using the racecar razor, I went over in it all with careful, but deliberate strokes. Finally, I rinsed the razors and took one final shower. I was now part of the Bald Brethren™.

Testicular cancer was showing me many lessons, and this was one of them.

What were my first thoughts on seeing myself newly shaven? “Wow, it’s really cold in here.” This was quickly followed by, “Geez, I look like I’m twelve.”

To be quite honest, I don’t feel any different, nor do I look too significantly different (in my mind at least, feel free to disagree). I know without facial hair, I look younger, but I wear a beanie through most winters anyways, so it’s hard to even tell I’m bald now. Emotionally, it sucks that I had to shave my hair. I don’t mind it too much, and I’m sure it’ll grow on me (bazinga). It is a lot less emotionally painful than I thought it would be. I would still prefer to have hair, but I’m not devastated. This surprised me, because I was honestly expecting to cry after doing it. I know I am still processing it, but it doesn’t seem to have as big of an impact as I was anticipating.

I’m chalking this up to a win against both cancer and my old fragile sense of self-esteem. This exemplifies to me how far I have come in the confidence department. 19-year-old Justin would have probably broken apart seeing my hair lining the bottom of our tub, but 25-year-old Justin is stronger. I no longer need a physical sign to know who I am or to build me up.

I am Justin and this is just one bump in the road on the way to beating this cancer.

I’m currently undergoing chemotherapy to cure my cancer. Each Monday, I’ll post my thoughts on this experience. These may be reflections on my prior week’s treatments, musings about my newly-altered life, or anything else that comes into my “chemo brain.” Follow along with all of my posts here.

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