

“If It’s Not About the Hair, What IS the Hair About?”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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In your darkness, you are in the belly of the whale with nothing to do but be carried along. In tales of the fish-womb, the hero, swallowed by a great sea monster, loses his hair in the inner heat, a sign of profound transformation, akin to the monk who shaves his head to mark the change from ordinary life to a life of holiness. Monk and infant, bald, precursors of every man and woman who returns to a state before birth in certain dark nights of the soul. Thomas Moore

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April 24, 2012. An email to my family friends:

I'm still trying to wrap my brain around what exactly all of this means. But to two doctors, and likely a third, it means 6 rounds of chemotherapy.

I'm thinking a blonde wig. What the hell, right? And, well, I guess we learn how vain we really are when we're facing down the prospect of losing our hair. (Or maybe I'm more vain than any of you!) Onward!

Onward indeed. My new self looks upon the “me” I was then with great affection. Such a “bright sider.” My mother’s daughter.

By that time, there had already been – as it is called – “the mother of all surgeries”. There had been complications from that surgery. There had been the recovery. I thought that the hardest part was behind me.

Dear, sweet me.

“Your hair will begin falling out between your second and third treatment.” Says the doctor. Says the nurse. “Cut it short.” They say. “You’ll hold onto it longer.” Jessica is my beloved, no nonsense hair stylist. In one determined swoop, she grabs the length, unceremoniously cuts it off and dashes it onto the floor with a solid “thwack!” that says, “It’s just hair.” When all is more done than said, we delight in my new ‘do. She says she prefers my hair short thereby contradicting months of telling me that she prefers my hair long. I sense that she hopes I don’t remember. For her sake, I go along.

She doesn’t accept any payment when we say good bye for what we know will be many months.

I have my sassy ‘do for two weeks before my hair begins to shed. I decide to take control. My partner Kate and I take matters into our own hands. By that I mean I rush

closer to the dreaded inevitable: I would be bald. The day after my second treatment, Kate buzzes off my hair. The busy bee sound of the buzzer as well as the task at hand seems to soften the harsh reality: I have cancer and Kate is shearing my head.

*I was in the belly of the whale with nothing to do but be carried along. I was swimming away from ordinary life on the brink of profound transformation.*

In the first days and weeks, there are few people who witness my baldness. I see in the eyes of the few who do an ever-so-fleeting veil of fear pass over. But perhaps the fear I recognize was merely a reflection of my own.

To my parents I say, "You haven't seen me like this in 51 years!" There is no fear in their eyes. Instead: steely resolve and so, I am comfortable in their company with an uncovered head.

The parade of hats and headdresses begins. Hats by the box full arrive from my childhood friend Jeanne, a milliner. Inevitably, at events that both Jeanne and I attend there are two women donning hats: she and I. She loves that I love hats. And although she doesn't love that I have cancer, there is a certain poignant joy that springs from the boxes as I open them. The hats are so beautiful. As well, Gwen Fate sews yards of fabric for me to wind and twist into headdresses of rich color and design. I amass a great collection of costume earrings. "Costume." It's not lost on me: I move toward the dramatic because there I find my place in the theater that is cancer, chemotherapy, and ultimately, swimming for my life and toward a radical transformation.

A routine emerges: headdresses for all things church: worship, rites of passage, the work we share. Hats for around town, running errands and special occasions. At home, there is a favored cap and hoods pulled up. Or nothing at all. Just bald. I move past the mirrors with furtive glances. It's all too sad.

My bare head is an ever present reminder to which the inevitable question rises: Really? *This*, on top of everything else?

I read two cancer memoirs. One woman names her total hair loss as a betrayal. I don't feel betrayed but I appreciate her honesty. Another titles her memoir *It's Not About the Hair and Other Certainties of Life and Cancer*. I order it thinking that this writer will surely spoon feed me the insights I crave. When the book arrives there is a bewildering cover photo of the author all glammed up and tossing her full head of hair. (*What??*)

On page 68 she makes her case:

"No, it's not about the hair but people want to make it about the hair because it's so hard to listen to someone talk about fear & pain & grief. ... [I]f you go bald, you are marked. It shoves death in their faces."

Okay. I buy that to a certain extent. *To a certain extent.* The memoir continues on to this unbelievable revelation found two thirds through the story, on page 151, in fact. The author did not lose her hair. We learn this in passing, in a list of things for which she expresses gratitude. She writes: I'm grateful for so many ... things: the great care I received ..., my mensch of a husband, *the fact that although I lost some hair, I still have most of it.*" (Preacher's emphasis.)

I will spare you the snarky tirade. Let's just say, through her experience she may have gleaned a few certainties about life and cancer but she's in a pretty weak position to declare - through her book's title no less - that it's not about the hair.

It looks like I'll have to figure it out for myself after all. What *is* the hair about?

I follow the bread crumbs of a memory back to me at 15 years of age. I am at a marching band competition because, yes, it's true: I play the trumpet in the marching band. The uniform is completely ridiculous especially the hat under which I have tucked my very long hair. The marching band passes a group of kids who I perceive as cool. Although I am a nerd at heart, I'm a nerd with a modicum of fashion sense. All I want to do as I pass by the cool kids is yank the nerdy hat off my head so that my hair will come tumbling down signaling .... *what?* Some hidden superpower channeled ... *through my hair?*

"Your hair's your thing!" says a friend, sad that I've lost it. What has been lost? My identity? My beauty? My hidden superpower?

Really?

Months go by. The hats, headdresses and hoods are fun. Really. And then they are just fine. And then, I am worn down. More specifically, I am done. Here's the thing: I still miss my hair but now I don't care about my bald head because my bald head no longer looks like cancer to me. I've been bald for four months and after all this time, it just looks like me to me. This is who I have become through this dark night of my soul: accepting. I have become accepting. I don't know if I have returned "to a state before birth" as Thomas Moore describes. (I am not even sure what that means.) I'm sure that my hair doesn't mean any more to me beyond what I know hair means to everyone. But what I do know is that I have integrated this loss and all it represents into who I am now. Further, I'm sick of covering my bald head. Now, months later, I'm worn down.

One summer many years ago, I did a children's theater tour of Rumpelstiltskin. The company traveled in a scrappy van and stayed in scrappy places. Living this scrappy lifestyle, we learned to make do. By the end of the summer, we could lay our heads down anywhere and be at rest. I don't remember why another company member and I were at a small upstate NY airport, but there we were. It was hot and humid. We were beyond exhausted. It was going to be awhile before we could get from that airport to the next place. We were like the Lion, the Scarecrow and Dorothy in the poppy field.

We laid our bundles and burdens down on a little patch of grass right in the middle of the parking lot and we went to sleep. We didn't care.

In a way, this choice of uncovering my head feels the same – I just don't care anymore. For a week I have "gone commando" as a friend of mine calls it. I smile at every one I pass hoping to telegraph hope and ease and not embarrassment. Every passer-by recognizes my illness. As I said once before, nothing says "CANCER" like the effects of chemotherapy. Every passer-by sees my mortality and, and this is the thing, they – YOU – see your own. I know that that may be hard but whatever part of me that felt that I needed to cover my head for everyone else's comfort is now gone.

To be clear, this choice isn't for everyone, just as hats, headdresses, big earrings, or wigs aren't for everyone. This story is my own, after all.

SO, where are we?

If it's not about the hair, what IS the hair about? Maybe the question is upside down. Instead of wondering what the hair is about, I begin to wonder what the "It" is. As in "IT'S not about the hair." But somehow the hair becomes a metaphor for all "IT" is and frankly, I'm just looking forward to having my hair back and being less of a walking metaphor.

SO, here's what I think "IT'S" about as reflected in this hairy mess:

"It" is the battle.

"It" is all that used to be and is no longer.

"It" is the reality that as we all live so shall we all die.

"It" is the pain & shock that is part and parcel of the brave new world inhabited by anyone who has or has had cancer ... or any life threatening illness.

"It" is allowing oneself to be carried along in the belly of the whale.

"It" is losing one's hair in the inner heat.

"It" is a sign of profound transformation.

"It" is the movement from ordinary life to a life in which holiness is the hoped for destination.

It – all of It – is life. And, yes, sometimes IT is a big hairy mess. And sometimes, even in the dark nights of the soul, sometimes *because* of those dark nights, we are transformed by our suffering and our loss.

And we begin again.

Onward!

Amen.