I loved my hair – a cornucopia of silver curls framing my face. It was parted along the side and fell to my chin like a 1930s bob, but with massive curls. I reveled in the paradox of combining my silver hair – a sign of maturity – with a youthful, flowing army of curls encircling my head. My hair was what people noticed first about me. It was, without a doubt, my favorite feature.

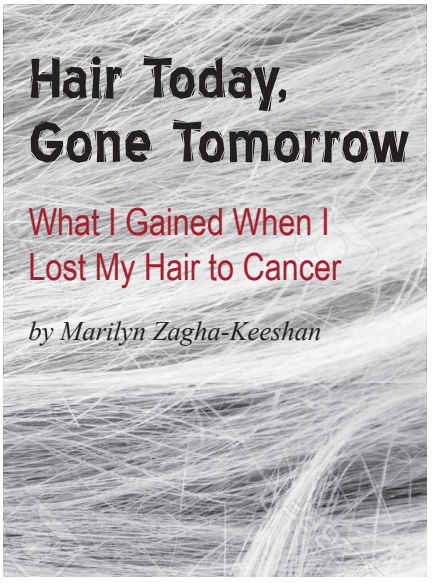
I didn't always love my curls, though. When I was a teenager, I tried everything to get long, straight hair. I ironed it, slept with huge rollers in it, and even used chemicals to straighten it. However, all that pain and effort was useless on a rainy or humid day. My defiant curls would make their presence known by coiling up like a Brillo pad on the top of my head. I'd have given anything to be able to stay home from school on those days. But then, one day, I took a swim class with a friend, and after we emerged from the water, she noticed my curls springing to life as my hair dried on its own. She raved about how beautiful they were, and from that day forward, I embraced my natural curls.

Losing It

In February 2020, when I was diagnosed with angioimmunoblastic T-cell lymphoma, I knew I would lose my hair once I began chemotherapy. I didn't want to lose my hair, but knowing I was going to lose it anyway made me impatient to get the whole "chemotherapy thing" started and done with.

Marilyn Zagha-Keeshan

Two weeks after my second treatment, my hair did in fact start to fall out. I would run my fingers through it and end up with small clumps in my hand. Even more fell out in the shower, filling me with dread as I watched my beloved curls slowly circle the drain. I couldn't stop myself from removing small clusters at a time. Like a sunburn that had begun to peel, I obsessively kept picking at it. I became transfixed with the process of my hair falling out, physical proof that my life was changing drastically. I still looked like me, but I didn't look the same.



A Revelation

Within about a week or two, most of my hair finally fell out, so I decided to cut the little that was left very short and cover my head with hats and scarves. Most of the time, however, I went around with a bare head. I would take selfies constantly, then examine what I looked like without hair. So much face! But as I studied my face with all its distinct features, I became intrigued by what I saw, as if a hidden part of me was beginning to emerge, one I hadn't taken notice of before. I realized that my hair had been a sort of camouflage. Without it, there was a whole new me. I was like a snake shedding its old skin.

I had never noticed before how my nose took up so much space – and then there are my big ears, which I had always been careful to cover up with longer hairstyles. My newly revealed face boasts an impish grin that hints to a host of emotions brewing underneath the surface. I like my newfound smile because it reveals a person who is facing this experience of cancer and chemotherapy head-on with openness, humor, dignity, and sometimes fear and sadness. Sometimes the monumental reality of all that I am going through suddenly makes me feel vulnerable and scared. The emotional upheaval is exhausting, but I have no choice but to keep moving forward, and no hair to hide my emotions in.

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Learning to Love Myself

As chemotherapy progressed, I noticed that my attitude about not having hair gradually began to change. I started to miss my hair not just for emotional reasons, but for practical ones as well. It never occurred to me before that my hair served a purpose other than to obscure my ears. Until I lost it, I never noticed how much it absorbed perspiration in the summer months or kept me warm in colder weather. And, though my bald head remained a symbol of my bravery, it was also a reminder that I was not well.

However, I don't look at my experience with cancer as a misfortune, even if it abruptly altered my body and my life. Instead, I try to see it for the lessons it has taught me.

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I haven't had hair for nine months, and now that it's beginning to grow back, people are reminding me how beautiful my hair was, and will be again. But, curiously, I'm not so attached to my hair anymore, mostly because I recognize how much I used to hide behind it.

Losing my hair was not some retribution by the universe. In fact, it led me to look inside myself with an honesty I might never have otherwise. Being able to endure cancer without judging myself makes me feel brave. The self-criticism has washed away, like strands of hair down the drain, and I am left with more self-compassion and self-love.

Marilyn Zagha-Keeshan is a New York state-certified social worker with over 30 years experience in group, individual, and family therapy, working with philanthropic agencies as well as the New York City Department of Education. Diagnosed with angioimmunoblastic T-cell lymphoma in February 2020, she completed chemotherapy that July and underwent a stem cell transplant in August. Still recuperating, with many lessons learned in the process, Marilyn writes about her experiences on her blog, MarilynMuses.com.