

What's Under a Comb Over?
by Lynn H. Cunningham, PhD LICSW

Man is an ingenious creature,
making much social capital of
small physical features.
-Raymond Firth

Recently, in the midst of chatting with a friend, I found myself tripping over the words: cover up, cover over, comb over. In a culture such as ours, which is overly preoccupied with physical appearance and a reverence for youth, hair or its absence is an important part of body-image. We manipulate our hair not only to express our personality but also to alter or nuance that expression whenever we wish. It's fascinating how hair carries this symbolic currency as an erotic, aesthetic object of separation and loss, mostly without our *knowing* it. Despite an urge to create ourselves as distinct and without relation to our ancient predecessors, we remain intimately and stubbornly connected to our vanished past through this stable conduit – the symbolic use of hair to mourn separation and loss.

In contrast to other body parts, we can only speculate why hair emerged as a social instrument with the ability to transform an existing emotional state, alter status, and regulate social process. Admittedly, hair is an unusual body part: it's partially internal and partially external to the body; it can be changed without disrupting life too much; and, while already dead, it has the potential for re-growth. If we look closely, the social significance we attribute to hair symbolism classifies the fundamental oppositions found in nature such as: nature/culture, male/female, beauty/ugliness, health/disease, power/impotency, and life/death. Certainly in his work, Sigmund Freud thought it remarkable that the dreamer made use of cultural symbols without consciously knowing about symbolism. This kind of knowledge, he concluded, belongs to unconscious mental life and is independent of conscious thought and social convention.

Historically, when hair is absent, it has been seen in terms of a person's failure to meet social norms, a visible sign of deterioration, a by-product of decline and, even, a reproductive bad bet. For example, in the first century, the hirsute male was considered not only beautiful and virile, but also thought to possess a healthy mind. The satirist Juvenal espoused this common view in *Satires II* when he said, "Thy rough limbs indeed, and stiff bristles on thy arms, seem to promise a vigorous mind within." (Juvenal, trans. Lewis Evans, 1901) Although Juvenal is being facetious here, he nonetheless presented the generally accepted attitude – an observable, concrete attribute suggests the presence of one that is not visible. Male hairiness implies robust cognitive and physical faculties that associate to male identity. By contrast, the loss or lack of hair by cutting, shaving, tearing, illness or age insinuated a reduced status resembling the infantile state. The notion of the head as a locus of control and power over others gives it the preeminent place in the human body. Because hair loss traditionally symbolized diminution, many illnesses or handicaps are more socially acceptable than baldness and, so, the fear of losing hair may be based in the reality of consequences.¹

¹ Thompson and Shapiro. 9. Even people who have lost a finger say they would prefer this loss to losing their hair. In some instances, cancer patients refuse chemotherapy rather than risk hair loss, even knowing their hair will grow back after treatment.

The most common form of hair loss is male pattern baldness or androgenetic alopecia. This condition affects nearly half the male population between the ages of eighteen and forty, and increases with age. Thus, some degree of baldness is considered normal. Despite this high rate of prevalence, men still report that the negative social and psychological consequences of hair loss significantly impact the quality of their life. Baldness, especially in younger men, lowers self-esteem, increases feelings of unattractiveness, self-consciousness, anxiety, and depression. At an age when a man's self-image and self-identity have stabilized, the discovery of thinning hair forces him to modify his self-concept. Even in our supposedly more tolerant culture, men fear being teased when hair loss becomes visible. Fortunately, current attitudes are a little more lenient than when Marcus Valerius Martialis was writing his satirical epigrams at the turn of the first century. A translation of Epigram LVII demonstrates his harsh wit. He writes to Phœbus:

You manufacture, with the aid of unguents, a false head of hair, and your bald and dirty skull is covered with dyed locks. There is no need to have a hairdresser for your head. A sponge, Phœbus, would do the business better. (M. V. Martialis, A.D. 43-104 C.E.)

In this humorous poem, Martialis uses sarcasm, underlain with hostility, to characterize Phœbus' baldness as an obvious contravention of the masculine norm. In those days, the male who attempted to disguise hair loss risked serious belittling.

Although we don't like to admit it, ancient stereotypes still influence our perception of physical attractiveness today. Since outward appearance is so important for expressing individuality, attracting a mate, and attaining jobs and promotions, it's not surprising that men attempt to conform to social standards by various means.² Currently, there are four ways to manage male baldness: pharmacotherapy, hair transplants and weaves, scalp reduction, and camouflage. No treatment fully succeeds in restoring the former self-image. While some men purchase various artificial prostheses to wear alone or in conjunction with other treatments, they are inclined to do so secretly because our society continues to associate an appetite for disguise with the female character. Such artifice imposes a burden of being false and having to decide the appropriateness of what is hidden or revealed.

By contrast, some men such as the former basketball star Michael Jordan, proclaim manliness in a contradictory manner by rejecting the "powerful and popular symbol of life and youth" in favor of an "equally powerful symbol of age and death" (A. Synnott, 1993). Unless baldness is chosen voluntarily in a demonstration of personal autonomy, men still tend to hold some fear and distaste for this uninvited condition. Today, the male who deliberately shaves his head hopes to negate the diminution usually associated with hair loss by submitting this style to a different set of social judges. Indeed, only time determines if symbolic attributes associated with masculinity evolve entirely to accommodate a seemingly incongruous behavior.

As human beings, we're drawn naturally to notice and classify difference; this is how the mind discerns order and makes things knowable. It's impossible to ignore the fact that vision activates our imaginative powers and the mind processes defects and flaws. At some level, those of us

² Daneshkhu, D. and Whipp, L. 10. Sales in 2014 of men's grooming products have risen to \$35.4 bn, an 8% rise over five years.

who *look* fear the horror of being *them*. From a very early age, our internalized social conditioning equips every one of us to be exquisitely aware of our perceived failings, especially unwanted diminishment that damages our self-image. In his essay appropriately titled “The Look,” Jean-Paul Sartre formulates the process of how the Other incites shame in the object.

A judgment is the transcendental act of a free being. Thus being seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves as “slaves” in so far as we appear to the Other... This danger is not an accident but the permanent structure of my being-for-others (J-P Sartre, 1956).

In looking, freedom is withdrawn from the object, while the Other preserves the liberty of unpredictability. This state of defenselessness resembles a form of slavery in which appraisals – a flood of boundless, unrestrained, and undisciplined associations – are made entirely independent of the object. This defenselessness is the normal state of being in the presence of others.

The loss of hair permanently separates a man from his previous place in the world. Regardless of how hair loss occurs – suddenly or slow patchy hair loss or slow diffuse hair loss – a person looks and feels different. The nuances of personal meaning are complex, even though meaning in this sense may be shared by others and by society as a whole. Given the same two words, *hair loss*, a person holds, simultaneously, a cognitive meaning, an affective or emotional meaning, a bodily meaning and a transcendent or social meaning. Taken together, these meanings express a relationship to the self: self-esteem, self-approval, self-love (and the opposites). For males, hair symbolizes masculinity, sexuality and identity, exposing him to the universal human need for intimacy, for lovability despite the visible alteration. The significance of hair loss is uniquely personal and, while the human being does not have the capacity to grow another body part, the mind can evolve. Resiliency is an inner force that can be redirected toward new and different dimensions.

Hair loss is an unusual form of separation and loss as it leaves a man powerless to symbolize the former self through a socially sanctioned mourning ritual. At some level, we *know* a carefully contrived comb over is a mode of communication, another sort of language, one not needing to be learned, but is mutually understood. For some males, this peculiar hair ritual is an attempt to ease the tensions between the way things ought to be and the way things are that a forced reordering of reality engenders. Hair continues as one of the most intriguing symbol systems to retain social valence today. It is the pivotal detail that refuses erasure.

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