

Sign Of The Times

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The Five Man Electrical Band intoned: “And the sign said ‘long-haired freaky people need not apply’”. Remember those lyrics?

Like many other people of my generation, I started out with short hair. My mother extolled the value of the crewcut. My father and uncles, all of whom served in the military, looked the part of the 1950s short-haired American.

My hair reached its nadir, probably a malapropism for super-short, thanks to the draft board and the events that followed. Pictures that I have of myself are unrecognizable to me today.

Not long after the Vietnam War, I found myself working for a well-known law firm in New York. They sent me to one of their satellite offices on Court Street in Brooklyn. My boss was the son of a former United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York. The first thing he did was to make sure that I was sent to a proper hair salon. While I refused to let anybody there touch my nails or toes, I did get a haircut so expensive that, had my boss not paid for it, there is no way on earth that I would have been caught dead in that place. In addition, they pasted down my hair so that I looked like retro 1920s.

That night, I went home for Shabbat dinner with my parents. My mother took one look at me, pointed to the upstairs shower and said to me, “Get up there and wash that out of your hair right now.” I dutifully complied.

Then, something happened in the 1970s. The morality revolution and the disgust with how badly our elders had been running the world gave rise to the long-hair protest. A lot of us grew our hair long. I was no exception. Facial hair sprouted as well as my long, curly, bushy head of hair. My father, right-wing NRA Republican that he was, decided to grow his hair long and to grow a beard as well. I do not know if this was reverse psychology, but we all hated the way he looked. Finally, my father conceded that he just did not look great with long hair and a beard, and he did trim his hair back and cut his beard. The moustache stayed. He enjoyed his moustache so much that at one point he decided to grow a handlebar, and he even waxed it. I am not sure how my mother lived through those times, but somehow she managed.

My own hair was let loose by a woman. She said, “Just stick your fingers in your hair and move them around and you don’t need a comb.” I tried that, and hence was born my afro. Later, somewhat to my chagrin, it was referred to as a “Jew-fro”. I thought that at least two ethnic and racial groups were being insulted there, but even now I cannot say for sure.

My hair got longer, along with my age. I arrived to work for the Honorable Malcolm Muir as clerk in the federal court system in the Middle District of Pennsylvania. I noted that the senior law clerk had a ponytail, and the real tall guy, Jack Humphrey, had the shortest hair of all. I heard a story told of how a lawyer from out of town said something offensive about long-haired people in front of the Judge, not realizing that his senior law clerk, a Harvard man I might add, sprouted his ponytail as he jogged through the office. Judge Muir, much to his credit, one of the straightest-laced people I ever knew, vociferously defended his law clerk. The rights of the long-haired had found a champion in the United States District Court.

Somewhere in my closet is a picture of me standing next to Judge Muir and the Judge's other law clerk. We were all wearing hard hats as the construction began on the new federal courthouse in Williamsport. Judge Muir and Terry Light looked relatively normal. My hair grew out from under the hat like an evergreen in springtime.

Along with the times came a change in behaviors. Our hair got shorter and the work hours got longer. Suddenly, the innocence, craziness, mistakes and achievements of prior years were behind us. We all had to look like it was the 1950s again.

My shortened hair was assisted greatly by a series of three absolutely marvelous women who, over a period of the last 20 years or so, cut my hair every other week or maybe every third week. They put up with my neurotic desire to look just so, they accommodated my schedule and, one time, the stylist came to the office and cut my hair in the bathroom because I had to be in court. I did not have time to go over to her salon. Now that is loyalty!

When the current COVID-19 crisis hit, we were in Israel. Before we left Williamsport, I had a nice, short haircut that should have lasted me for 3 weeks or so. All the hairstylists were closed down in Israel too, a society which, generally speaking, favors short hair among men, a great majority of whom have served in the military.

As the days passed, without someone to give me a haircut even in Israel, I began to look more and more like my former self. My son-in-law, himself hairless (I presume as a stylistic prerogative), offered to cut my hair. No way!

Suddenly, I began to feel bereft of a haircut. How could life go on without salons and hairstylists? Who is going to cover their expenses? They are not New York Stock Exchange trading companies, and therefore they will not be able to take advantage of all the government handouts. They are small businesses, but most of them do not employ anyone else. I think about those people, and I worry about them. How are they getting along? Finally, I broke down and I called the marvelous woman who cuts my hair. She seemed to be doing fine, and I was happy to hear it.

All of a sudden, I decided I liked my long and graying hair. I felt blessed to still have it. They say that hair goes through the mother's genes somehow. My father's dad was absolutely bald, and my mother's father died at a ripe old age with a full head of hair. I

said to my wife, “You know, I think when this is all over, I am not going to cut my hair.” She looked at me as though I had finally lost it. I think she looks pretty great with long hair as well. We both look like we’re 25 again. Well, sort of; not exactly; but at least in terms of the long hair.

There is not much I will miss about the COVID-19 days, but letting my hair grow wild and free like Sampson of old somehow has given me strength to think about the future.

All the best to everyone for health, happiness and peace.

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