

Hair-raising fight to the death

By Ruth Ostrow

WE all have a physical attribute that we invest time in trying to alter, change or control. As if by winning the battle with the body part, we can win dominion over the complex anxieties of life.

For many women it is their thighs, the never-ending battle of the bulge, trying to reduce cellulite, tighten muscles, redress the pull of gravity. For others it is the lines around the face, pummelled, pampered, with never-ending supplies of body lotion, creams, facial vibrations, lifts, tucks.

For men, it is often the tummies, shoulders or the bald spot. I've known many men as vain as women, pushing their hair this way and that to hide the stark reality of what's left, or shaving it all off to look trendy. One guy I dated even wore jackets with shoulder pads to increase the appearance of broad, masculine shoulders.

But usually there is one body bit. One thing. One obsession that haunts us, taunts us, defies us, and generally deteriorates with age, that we wrestle with secretly. An object of deep self-loathing. A metaphor for the things we can't accept, in ourselves, or in others, as we fight the exhausting, time-consuming, profoundly shallow battle of the body.

Mine is my hair. It is curly. I want it straight. It's wiry. I want it silky. I've invested shameful amounts of time and money trying to discipline and control my hair, as if it had a mind and life of its own and was genuinely having a go at me. Even the move to wild Byron Bay where people are naturalists didn't change my determination. Over time I abandoned make-up, stilettos and finally even shoes. But hair remained a fight to the death.

To the point that I found myself buying a huge, metal straightening wand that looked like some horrid instrument of torture, in order to cope with the humidity. "Take that!" I enthused as I applied the streaming heat to the curls and watched smoke actually rise off my head.

But then an interesting thing happened. I went away camping. No electricity, no mirrors. Within a few hours, my hair broke away in glee and for the first time in years wrapped itself up in little curls and regained its rightful place close to my scalp.

Without any weapons, I gave in. I stopped trying to change the situation, muttering that my hair better enjoy its freedom because in a few days it would be back under the ironing wand.

But as foolish as it sounds, something shifted in me during that week.

I gave in to being who I really was. I gave in to being a woman with thick, matted hair from Middle Eastern-European origins and stopped trying to have sleek, shiny Asian hair. I stepped into myself. And when I got back, I looked in the mirror and found a real peace in accepting the person who was looking back.

It was like a girlfriend of mine who finally stopped dieting and accepted that coming from an ancestry of central-European farmers, she was always going to have the genetics of a peasant - short, stocky legs, large breasts, thick bones and thighs. And that torturing herself to compete with oft-lithe Anglo-Saxon women was a futile and desperate pastime.

I stopped trying to tame my hair, and in a sense to tame myself. And in that small act alone, something was set free.

Which is really the point of the column. It was a liberation born out of that dirty, dirty word in modern society: "surrender". Surrender to self. Surrender to what is. Not immersing oneself restlessly, ceaselessly and often pointlessly in combat and conflict - whether it be about the superficialities of appearance or the complexities of soul.

In success-driven, conquest-orientated Western society, the concept of surrender has always been given bad press. It's the concept of defeat. The laying down of arms. The true humiliation of waving the white flag.

The Collins English Dictionary describes the word thus: "To relinquish to the control or possession of another under duress ...; To relinquish or forgo an office or position; to give oneself up physically, as if to an enemy ..."

And yet in surrender lies liberation, peace. A true sense of release from the suffering of wanting to change things, of needing to manipulate things, expecting things to be different whether they be related to our bodies, our relationships, our financial affairs or our situations in life.

In US-dominated culture, to surrender is the lowest, most cowardly thing to do. Yet in spiritual practice the concept of surrender is exalted - as in the letting go of trying to control things, letting go of the illusion of power.

We really have little power anyway - over our genetics, our physical flaws, our passions and true feelings. We are merely caretakers of any property we own, including our bodies. And, as history proves, to win a war is only to win until the next battle.

As for relationships, we waste much time and energy trying to make our partners and friends what we want them to be, only to end up feeling like we're pouring water into sand.

Buddhism and Hinduism remind us that everything is in a state of flux. Our futile attempts to have things be, or remain as we want them, causes suffering. Surrender gives us the freedom to accept things and people as they are, or to move on. There is great relief in owning up to the truth.

Ironically, an obsolete usage of the word surrender, as quoted in the Collins dictionary, acknowledges such a concept: To "render thanks".

During my time in India, I witnessed many Hindus accepting and surrendering to fate. In acceptance, people celebrated the half-full bottle of life, not the half-empty one.

And for many struggling souls I met, this meant more peace of mind and joy than we affluent, tortured battlers on the other side of the ocean could ever know.

Surrender to self is the first step. There can be no moving forward when we tense our muscles against our own being. When we refuse to accept our bodies, our emotions and souls.

Letting one's hair go wild may sound like a superficial antidote to suffering, but, for me, the 1960s hippie slogan of surrender - "Let Your Hair Down" - has proved a very powerful mantra.

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