



I ALMOST CUT MY HAIR by Ressie Walker

Like most little Black girls in the early 60's, I wore my hair long and in plaits. Running around in the hot humidity of suburban Maryland, I developed a fungus on my scalp, the result of not airing out this thick, multi-textured hair on a regular basis. As a result, to my horror, my mother chopped off my hair to about an inch long so I was rocking an “afro” before that was even a word and people often mistook me for a boy. Pigtails regained their hold over my head afterwards until I was gifted with a perm at age 12. My hair was transformed into a flat, floppy mop, so much so that people now thought I was Native American. Luckily, Afros came into style around that time, so once the perm grew out, I could safely escape back to my natural curls.

But, at some point in my 20s, as I entered corporate America, my mother advised me that short hair was easier to take care of -- so I followed her advice and wore it short, straight or curly. Every now and then, I'd let it grow an inch or three, forming curls, only to endure critiques on the inability to run a comb through my hair, even from relatives who had the same hair texture. As I rose in the HR profession, I knew full well the complicated corporate reactions to natural hair. So, I stayed “short” for many years. I had a brief dance with long hair when I lived and worked in New Mexico, 2013-2015. I let my hair grow to better blend in with the majority Native American population and discovered I became significantly more sensitive to people, energies, and nature. Somehow, I “knew” when or how things would happen or what people would say—in advance. Suspicious of my perception, I then learned that when Native Americans cut their hair, they were not as good as tracking in the woods as usual. Why? Because hair is another organ of our bodies with millions of sensors that picks up and feeds information to our brains without touch or words. It is another physiological mechanism that helps us interpret the world. But, in late 2015, I returned to live on the East Coast, and slipped back into the corporate look: short hair.

In January 2020, as COVID news crept in, I hadn't had a hair cut in 6 weeks and decided I wanted to let my hair grow. On March 6, 2020, I left my job. Quarantine began the next Friday. For the first time in a long time, I did not have to conform to societal expectations about appearance, especially those in the workplace. A bigger bonus was not having to wait for my 30 minutes of attention at the hair salon watching others receiving hours of hair wizardry. My hair responded to this freedom by growing fiercely and furiously; authentic, It and I could now breathe, a particularly poignant irony at the time that George Floyd couldn't.

I'm living back in Maryland now. And just the other day, I thought about cutting my hair for the same reasons my mother did many years ago—to guard against the hot, humid weather. And—I decided no. For now, I can put up with the two minutes it takes to put my hair up when I go to the gym. And, I'm enjoying my authenticity.