



# Yes, I'm Bald. No, I Don't Have Cancer

After a decade dealing with—and trying to hide—hair loss, writer Penny Musco decided to stop fighting it.



By Penny Musco. Feb 20, 2022



The first time I showed off my bald head in public, I took a trip to the grocery store. As I walked down aisles filled with premade cookies and cakes, and jams and jellies, I expected that my fellow shoppers might do double-takes and stare less subtly—which, sure enough, they did. I even anticipated that some strangers, especially those agonizing over their own thinning hair, might ask me outright about my baldness—which, again, they did.

What I wasn't prepared for? The number of people who assume that because I'm bald, I must have cancer. The first time that happened was at the gym. An older man came up to me and said, "I think it's great you're working out."

I didn't know how to respond. So I thanked him, praying that he'd leave it at that and go away.

No such luck, though. "Are you undergoing chemo?"

It was time for the truth: "No, I actually have severe hair loss."

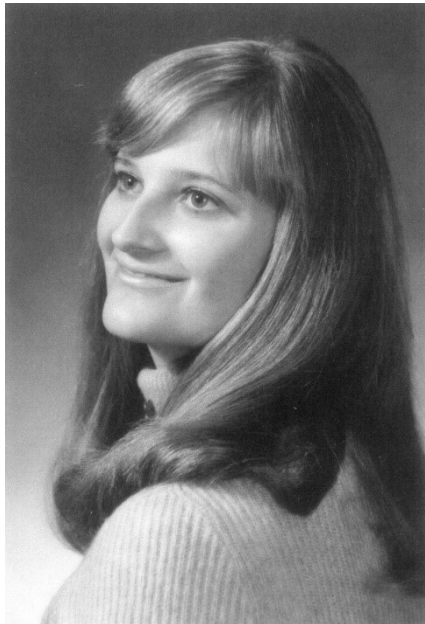
"Oh," he said, and took a moment to recover, then added, "Well, I think you're very brave to walk around like that."

*Wait a minute*, I thought, *was he inadvertently saying that I looked awful? And, more importantly, what's this about being brave?* That notion had never crossed my mind.

"Not really," I replied. "I'm just...fed up."

By that point, I'd been losing my hair for well over a decade. In 2009, I noticed that my forehead seemed to be growing larger and larger, so I made an appointment with a doctor, who confirmed that my hairline was receding—and, to my surprise, had been for quite some time. That kicked off a years-long quest, involving more doctors, lots of tests, many so-called treatments, and finally, a diagnosis. As it turns out, I have not one but two kinds of cicatricial (scarring) alopecia: The first attacks hair all over my head and body, the other specifically targets my front hairline—

and both destroy the hair follicles, resulting in scarring and permanent hair loss. The bottom line? It wasn't that my hair follicles weren't "working right," as I had been told previously; they were dying and would not be coming back. An autoimmune disease, doctors concluded. Not life-threatening, merely devastating.



Musco in 1972  
PENNY MUSCO

Up until I started losing my hair, I was never overly obsessed with it—in part because I had taken its existence for granted. During my younger years, my blonde hair was long, lush, and super straight. In fact, there were at least a few cuts where the stylist used trimming shears to remove some of the excess bulk, which now is pretty ironic. As I got older, I experimented with shorter styles, as well as high- and low-lights, before landing on a sleek, chin-length bob.

But now, with a hairless head on the horizon, I was desperate to hold onto each and every strand. I downed prescription medications and over-the-counter supplements. I tried all sorts of creams, lotions, and potions. I endured steroid shots in my scalp—which, yes, are as painful as they sound. I even contemplated a transplant in which healthy strands from the then-adequate supply at the base of my scalp would be harvested and relocated to thinner and more barren spots. But the cost was steep (anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000), especially given that it was as likely not to work as it was.

As my hair continued its slow exodus, my strategy shifted from styling tricks and techniques (think: root touch-up sprays, an incredibly flattering cut) to wearing lots of hats, and eventually, wigs. When I could no longer hide my increasingly sparse

eyebrows, I investigated stick-on brows made from human hair (too fake-looking), considered microblading (\$500 annually? I wish), and auditioned a wide variety of pencils. Finally, I got to a point where, for the most part, I stopped crying over my disappearing hair and accepted my wig-filled fate.

That is, until a few years ago when a walk on the beach changed everything. As my husband and I strolled along the shore, he pointed out a woman with a blonde buzz cut. Whether her closely cropped cut was a choice or a solution to her own hair loss, I don't know. But she seemed unapologetic about her style, which was something I hadn't felt for years. It was the first time I imagined a life without hair—and it didn't wig me out.

I asked my husband, “You think I should get that?”

“You'd look great,” he replied immediately.

So when he took off on a long bike ride the next day, I grabbed my purse and drove to the nearest salon.

“I want a buzz cut,” I said as soon as I plopped down in the stylist's chair.

“You sure?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered firmly.

“What length?”

As if I'd ever done this in my 60-plus years here on Earth. “I don't know...short?”

“Do you plan to wear a wig?”

“On occasion. I also have hats, but I was thinking I'd just...”

She smiled broadly. “Rock it?”

With that, she picked up her clippers and got to work, cutting my remaining hair super short, and in doing so, revealing all the bare patches I'd spent so much time and energy trying to hide. I wouldn't end up looking exactly like the woman at the beach, but it didn't matter. I had crossed a threshold; I was done hiding.

And it felt terrific.

As the hairdresser handed me a mirror so I could inspect the back, she made a prediction: "I'm guessing that the next time you're here, you'll want to take it *all* off."

She was right—though it happened much sooner than she had expected. A few days later, I asked my husband, "Do you think I should get rid of it altogether?"

"If you want."

I had to ask, no matter how ridiculous it seemed. "You'd still love me with no hair?"

He shot me a look that said, "Seriously? After all these years, you think my love depends on *your hair*?" Then he went into research mode, comparing all the reviews and ratings to find the best pair of clippers on the market. When it arrived, we crowded in front of our bathroom mirror and did it ourselves.

And I loved it.

The same could not be said of my 94-year-old mother. "What have you done to your hair?" she asked when she first saw my new look. "It looks terrible!"

But her blunt words didn't bother me. Most of my friends and family have responded to my shining bald glory with a shrug—and even some playful teasing. "The Bible says God numbers the hairs on our heads," one quipped. "You've just made it easier for him." When my husband texted a photo to our daughter, she

wrote back, in true millennial fashion: “Good for her. She’s not afraid to try something new.”

While that’s true, I’d be lying if I said that encounters like that one at the gym didn’t bother me—particularly when the well wishes and words of encouragement come from women who’ve been through chemo. When I explain I have alopecia, they’re almost always taken aback and embarrassed to have gotten it wrong. Yet, they’re the ones with a serious illness! All I have is hair loss. I’ll take some sympathy, but not that much.

Now, don’t get me wrong: I know my encouragers are well-intentioned. But in those early days, I couldn’t help but wonder if I had brought this on myself, especially given that baldness is a common side effect of cancer treatment. I thought, *Is this what I get for defying society’s norms and expectations?* Pretty soon, though, I stopped asking myself these questions—because the truth is I’m not in charge of people’s mistaken impressions.

In fact, years ago, I came across this saying in an advice column: At 20, you care what everyone thinks of you; at 40, you don’t care what anyone thinks of you; and at 60, you realize they haven’t been thinking about you at all. There’s a lot of truth in that—except for the fact that bald-headed females (no matter how we got that way) are rare, and hairless women my age are even scarcer. So I’m pretty confident that they *have* been thinking about us, after all.

But in my seventh decade, I’ve finally learned what I should have two decades earlier: They can think what they like, but this is who I am now. And I’m just fine with that.