

To Beard or Not to Beard

I saw an unusual man on the subway recently. By the standard of the subway he was fairly well dressed, wearing a tie and slightly wrinkled suit, several business-type bags slung over his shoulder. But he was distinguished from the other riders by one feature: an unkempt beard. While this beard had not quite reached Rasputin levels of shagginess, it still made its wearer look like a lumberjack who had suddenly decided to pursue his love of accounting in the big city. It also made him look crazy. I tried to resist judging this man by his appearance, but gave up when he started talking to himself.

Beards can make a man look crazy. But beards can also make a man look educated. Is it possible to imagine Sigmund Freud without picturing him stroking his groomed white facial hair? Michelangelo's God atop the Sistine Chapel would seem less impressive if he wasn't framed by his flowing beard and hair at the moment of creation. There's something less manly about Clint Eastwood wandering around Sergio Leone's bleak spaghetti-western landscape with smooth cheeks. And would Castro seem as subversive if he didn't have a scraggly beard surrounding his cigar-chomping mouth?

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I must confess something: I have a beard. I have not always had this beard, and may not have it the moment you read this. But I've come to consider the natural state of my face to be bearded. I don't know the exact moment my beard became a part me, but I think it was during college. Some people leave college with a career path or life partner; I left a little hairier and slightly itchy.

I think of myself as a practical person, and wish I had a practical reason for being bearded. Some people wear beards for health reasons, usually because shaving is painful. Sometimes beards are grown out of necessity. British soldiers, lacking the yet-to-be-invented safety razor, returned from the mid-eighteenth-

century Crimean War with facial hair, and set off a Victorian beard resurgence.¹ But, while shaving can leave me nicked up, I have little excuse for avoiding it.

Dr. Freud would explain my furry face by pointing to my childhood, and he would be right. My father has a beard, and has had one my entire life. He inherited my Polish grandmother's double-chin gene, and my mother suggested he grow a beard to compensate. I don't need the good doctor to tell me that I associate beards with safety and authority. Children can't perceive the true markers of maturity: knowledge, experience, articulateness, self-reliance. As a child tugging at my father's beard with clumsy fingers, I knew his face felt different than mine, and that marked him as an adult.

My fascination with my own facial hair began early. I remember being a child sitting in my bathtub, using the bubbles to shape a beard, and then shaving it off with an extended index finger. My early whiskers, like those of most teenagers, were pitiful, but still exciting. Standing in the bathroom before school, still wet from my shower and pressed for time, I would look into the magnified side of our small vanity mirror, trying to see little dark spots in new places on my face. Every fresh follicle portended better things to come.

While today seen as a fashion statement, beards historically have had much more cultural meaning. Jewish biblical tradition forbids shaving, and "Jews used the beard to distinguish themselves from their enemies."² Sixteenth-century Catholic clergy were usually clean-shaven, and early Protestants grew beards as an act of protest against the church.³ In order to fit in with the rest of a rapidly modernizing Europe, Russian Tsar Peter the Great ordered his followers to shave, but, following a public outcry, allowed those who paid an one-hundred ruble fine to keep their facial hair.⁴ As a mark of their status and otherness,

¹ Richard Brookhiser, "By the hair of your chinny chin chin." *Forbes* 158, no. 12 (November 19, 1996) *Academic Search Premier*.

² Allan Peterkin, *One Thousand Beards: A Cultural History of Facial Hair* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 90.

³ Peterkin, 93-94

⁴ Brookhiser.

servants and slaves were often forced to adopt whatever hairstyle was out of fashion.⁵

In high school I had my first follicle triumph: sideburns. I would like to claim some particular reason for choosing to grow sideburns. I could say they were an homage to the former governor of my home state of Rhode Island, Civil War general Ambrose Burnside, who lent his name to the facial hair he wore so prominently.⁶ In truth, I grew sideburns because that was all I could grow. I grew them because they were a way to stand out; less obtrusive than the other things that made me stand out: my pale complexion, my occasional stutter, and my status as a brainy virgin trumpet player. I also grew sideburns because I wanted to show that I was maturing, and was just like everyone else.

Men have often viewed a beard as a mask. In the second century, Roman emperor Hadrian grew a beard to “hide facial scars and warts,” which led the usually clean-shaven Romans to follow his example.⁷ Some Victorian Britons believed a beard could serve as a literal mask, filtering “bad air and disease.”⁸ Others of this era saw the beard as a mask to hide physical displays of emotion that might be considered unseemly.⁹ In 1987, the *British Medical Journal* wrote about the case of an Indian man who shaved off his long beard prior to surgery, revealing a large goiter. When this man saw his beardless self, the shock was so great he suffered a heart attack and died.¹⁰

In college, my full beard finally reached the point where I wasn't embarrassed to wear it in public, and by senior year I was bearded more often than not. Still, I wondered if my facial hair was a phase: would my children someday look at old photos of daddy and laugh at his fuzzy face? The college beard is a common phenomenon (judging from old pictures of my relatives), and often attributed to experimentation, laziness, or overwork. But my beard wasn't

⁵ Peterkin, 22.

⁶ Peterkin, 166.

⁷ Peterkin, 21.

⁸ Christopher Oldstone-Moore, "The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 1 (Fall 2005) *Academic Search Premier*, 21.

⁹ Oldstone-Moore, 24.

¹⁰ Peterkin, 80.

the result of cramming for exams or partying until sunrise – it wasn't an accident or afterthought. I maintained my beard, which, if you ask any beard aficionado, actually takes more work than a full shave. It requires shampooing, careful shaving, and trimming. Not to mention cleaning up all that hair which – even if it's your own – is kind of gross.

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I tell myself I wear a beard because I look better with it. I'm not the only one with this opinion: my mother agrees, as have several girlfriends. My male friends also express appreciation, although I think they're just trying to mask their own beard-envy. I like how my beard adds color to my pale complexion. While I didn't inherit the double-chin gene, my jawline isn't going to win me any auditions. The beard sharpens my soft edges. Scientists, when attempting to explain why mostly-hairless human males retain facial hair, noted that beards give "the appearance of a larger jaw and highlight the teeth as potential weapons."¹¹ This helps scare rivals and attract mates. A 1989 study of male and female students found that bearded men appear "masculine, aggressive, strong, and dominant," but also seem less desirable as mates.¹²

I feel confident saying this about my beard: it makes me look older. Beards have always been a sign of maturity, because of the fact that only men who have reached puberty can grow them. As the bearded Bard himself wrote: "He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man."¹³ Roman boys would let their facial hair grow until the age of majority, when they would then ritually shave and consecrate these shavings to the gods.¹⁴

Occasionally I will shave, often out of boredom, or sometimes to remind myself of what I look like underneath. I enjoy being able to alter my appearance with a few strokes of the razor. My current driver's-license and passport photos

¹¹ Peterkin, 114.

¹² Peterkin, 121.

¹³ Peterkin, 25.

¹⁴ Peterkin, 22.

show me with a beard, which means, should I ever find myself on the lam, I could shave my beard to quickly alter my appearance. This advantage, however, is probably negated by the numerous photos of me in various states of beardedness that can be found easily on the Internet. Besides, many of my friends fail to notice when I shave, which has always amazed me. They'll comment that something about me seems different, did I get a haircut? Maybe my beard doesn't change my appearance as much as I like to think.

When I do shave, I usually regret it. I do like being made instantly younger. And I enjoy feeling the fabric of my pillow against my smooth face. But I find myself dissatisfied with the new image reflected in the mirror. The smooth, pale face that stares back at me reminds me of my younger self. My youthful flaws come back to the surface: the lack of confidence, the shyness, the inarticulateness. I'm reminded that these things are still a part of me. My beard is just a diversion, obscuring my insecurities from my own superficial glance.

I used to view a beard as a token of adulthood. It was something to be collected, like a first kiss, driver's license, loss of virginity, college diploma, or first apartment. As a sleepy child sitting at the kitchen table, eating breakfast before the bus came, I saw my father dash out the door to catch the commuter train to Boston each morning. I believed if I could obtain all the things he had – tie, briefcase, car, job, beard – I would be an adult. But a decade later, as I commuted to my new job on that same train to Boston, with my own tie and briefcase, and my own beard, I didn't feel very different from that boy eating his breakfast.

A seventeenth-century proverb says: "If the beard were all, the goat might preach."¹⁵ I might amend that to read: "Shave the beard of a crazy man, and he is still crazy." Beards have been so many different things throughout history, it's tempting to say they are actually meaningless. At most a social trend or fashion accessory. But I can't forget how deep my teenage desire for a beard was. Nor can I forget how little being bearded has changed me. Do I feel like an adult yet? Not

¹⁵ Peterkin, 82.

really. Maybe that comes with kids, or a mortgage, or a corner office. As I pass out of young adulthood to actual adulthood, and start the long march toward middle age, nothing seems settled – a thought that is both daunting and liberating. It means I can shave it all off and begin anew.