

## **Power in Hair** **by James Goldberg**

The first time I tried to grow a beard, I was in the third grade. Obviously, I didn't have a clear understanding of the hormonal chemistry involved. Somehow I got the idea that if I let my sideburns grow out, hair would just start to grow in underneath and, with a little persistence, I'd get a beard as long as Bachittar uncle's or Bapuji's. Down at the stylists' school where my mom would take us to get our hair cut at a discount, the students used to worry I'd make them look bad when I'd cup my hands on the sides of my face to shield my sideburns. But their supervisor learned to just laugh and say I must be going for an Elvis look.

I wasn't going for Elvis. I was trying to look like Guru Gobind Singh—or one of the Five Beloved Ones who had answered his call.

The story thrilled me every time my mom told it. Hundreds of years ago, she'd say, the Mughal emperor had tried to ban gatherings of Sikhs, but the Guru told everyone to come together on the spring harvest festival of Vaisakhi anyway. My mom was a great storyteller. She'd look around almost like we were there, like she could see people streaming in from different villages to listen at the Guru's feet. Like she could see the Guru rising to ask who was ready to give his life for his Guru and his people.

Like she could see the sun glinting off his sword as he unsheathed it.

Her eyes would get big as she'd imitate the first of the Five, breaking the silence that had fallen over the crowd to say yes, he was ready. And I'd feel the suspense every time she'd explain how Guru Gobind Singh led him back to a tent, and how everyone heard the sword come down, and the Guru returned with his sword dripping blood.

But even though the Guru returned alone, that first man's courage had opened a door. Another man volunteered and another after him until five had been led back into that tent and the assembly had heard the Guru's sword come down five times. Some Sikhs were leaving, my mom said, and some were looking for the Guru's mother, trying to get her to stop this madness—until the Guru emerged from the tent with the Five behind him, dressed like he was in majestic turbans. Then the Guru mixed sugar into water and asked them all to drink it together (a sacrament, a baptism for their insides) as they made the promises that bind together the Khalsa, the order of initiated Sikhs. And on that day, they swore not to cut their hair as one of five symbols of how they'd give their lives for God and to defend the oppressed.

Not everyone tells the story just that way, but it's how I remember it from my mother's lips. It's the way the story was planted in my heart and mind to grow. When I wanted a beard so badly as a kid, it wasn't just because I happened to have very handsome bearded uncles (though I'm sure that played a role). It's because something stirred deep inside of me every time I heard about the Guru's call.

My trick with the sideburns didn't work. They grew all right, grew to an almost Hasidic length, until Elvis jokes gave way to comparisons to Spock. Eventually, though, I realized nothing more was going to happen. The next time my hair got shaggy enough to make my mom self-conscious, I let the stylist cut my sideburns off. Watched the long black hairs fall down to the beauty school floor.

Puberty hit me just a few years later. By the end of elementary school, kids were teasing me about the goat-like patch of hair under my chin. In middle school, it was the thin mustache they'd comment on, and the animal of choice to reference was a camel. My freshman year of high school I was finally able to grow a full beard.

I got called a terrorist sometimes after that: animals, not so much. Come to think of it, I don't remember anyone making fun of my facial hair anymore. Was I occasionally harassed? Sure. Mocked? No. A beard looked right on my face. Like it belonged—whether I did or not.

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There's no grand unifying theory of hair to explain what it's signaled across cultures and over time. In different settings, specific grooming choices might suggest piety, power, discipline, affluence, or ideology but without any consistent pattern as to which virtues should be suggested by keeping hair long or short. Buddhist monks are as committed to shaven faces and heads for faith's sake as Sikhs in the Khalsa are to leaving their hair uncut.

Millennia of meanings can be tough to track. In ancient Egypt, male hairlessness was preferred, though a succession of pharaohs also wore false beards as symbols of authority. Go figure. In Biblical Israel, on the other hand, beards were so valued that in 2 Samuel 10, when some of David's messengers are abused by having their faces half-shaven, David gives them permission to lie low, waiting to return to Jerusalem to give their full report until their beards have grown back. In their classical eras, Persians and Greeks similarly tended to favor beards, whereas Romans tended to avoid them. Such preferences can have long echoes: to this day, Roman Catholic priests typically shave while Greek Orthodox priests and Shiite Muslim imams do not.

Male British colonists in the Americas carried norms passed down from Roman times with them, their short haircuts contrasting sharply with the long styles preferred by most of the continent's Native nations. American styles, though, have witnessed substantial change. In the middle of the nineteenth century, beards came into fashion as a symbol of soldiers marching off to fight in the civil war. Facial hair stayed in fashion roughly until the first World War, when gas masks made facial hair for soldiers impractical. No American president before Lincoln grew a beard; in the next fifty years, only one was clean-shaven. After that interlude, they all were clean-shaven again. Latter-day Saint prophets' overlapping facial hair period lasted twice as long. Starting with Brigham Young's decision in the 1850s to grow out the hair on his chin and cheeks, no Church president was clean-shaven until the 1950s, when David O. McKay (who had given up a longtime mustache) succeeded the goateed George Albert Smith.

In some cases, sudden shifts in attitudes about facial hair reveal deeper tensions. At various points in European history, for example, beards have become associated with Asia and used as symbols in a tug-of-war between East and West. Peter the Great of Russia famously taxed seventeenth century Russian nobles who kept beards as he tried to orient his country's culture away from older Mongolian influences and toward western Europe. In the twentieth century, Atatürk mandated shaving as he tried to carve out a post-Ottoman identity for Turkey. His razor left a long and complicated politics over mustaches, beards, and sideburns in its wake. "When you put rules on people's bodies, they try and challenge you," sociology professor

Mustafa Gurbuz observed while trying to explain what different styles have come to mean in Turkey since. “How you dress, how you shave, they become politicized.”<sup>1</sup>

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“Are you sure the school is okay with it? That you’re not going to get in trouble?” my mom asked me when I grew my beard. She liked the look, she’d taught me the meaning, but she wasn’t sure what the current politics were. She’d started high school in Utah just a few years after the Beatles came back from a trip to India and adopted uncut looks. The association between long hair and the counterculture had meant that beards were forbidden in her school. She wasn’t sure how much things had changed.

Her question confused me. I knew missionaries couldn’t have beards and that the army was strict on the subject, but those felt like extreme cases. BYU was the only school I’d ever heard of that still didn’t allow beards, and that struck me as an idiosyncrasy of BYU rather than evidence of a continuing debate in 1990s American culture. Why would a high school want to get a person like me in trouble just for leaving the hair that grew naturally on my face? I understood that there was still plenty of prejudice in my country based on looks, but there’s a difference between prejudice and punishment. Discriminating based on looks felt like the sort of thing people were supposed to do illicitly, denying that appearance had anything to do with their actions, not the sort of thing a public institution would still make blatantly culturally biased rules about. The days when you had to worry about getting in trouble for speaking the wrong language in school or having the wrong haircut felt like the past: my grandmother’s days, my mother’s days. Not mine.

I had the freedom to choose difference. My Latter-day Saint faith required as much when it came to alcohol, to norms for dating and sex, even (as I understood it) to the R-rated movies I declined to watch in class or with friends. Why not keep a Sikh symbol of the same independence from the demands of the world? I chose God over prevailing norms. When the time came, I would go to a temple and begin to wear God beneath my clothes, against my skin. Already I wore God on my face. Some people might look at me askance, sure, but they wouldn’t deny me the treasure of that choice. Not in 1990s America.

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In a February 3, 2021 piece for *USA Today*, Ibram X. Kendi wrote about an experience he had while on tour discussing his book *Stamped from the Beginning*, a history of racist ideas in American thought.<sup>2</sup> At a historically black college, a student walked up in the Q&A to ask a question. “Have you ever thought about cutting your hair?” she said.

Kendi, who wears his hair in locs that hang beautiful down his back, knew she was asking about more than his aesthetic preferences. What she wanted to know, he felt, was how much Kendi worried what white people think of him. How much he remained a prisoner of a white gaze that twists minority traditions and projects other meanings onto them. How much he

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<sup>1</sup> See Nichole Sobecki, “Turkey: The Politics of Facial Hair,” May 19, 2011, *pri.org*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, “This is the Black Renaissance.”

worried about whether people might dismiss him as unprofessional or stereotype him as rebellious because he kept his hair in an openly black style.

He immediately told her no. He wanted the whole room to feel his love for his hair the way it was, in all its black glory. The student who had asked the question smiled. “She was glad I had escaped,” he wrote.

It may seem a small thing to escape from a prison whose bars are unseen. But do not think for a moment that they are not tangible. The cost of the white gaze is not only in the billions of dollars people have felt compelled to spend on treatments designed to wrestle black hair into line with white expectations: chemical relaxers, straighteners, hot combs, extensions, weaves. The cost isn’t only in the millions of hours spent getting hair ready to be seen outside. The cost of the white gaze (as generations of scholars, poets, and ordinary people have witnessed) comes in confidence. It is hard to be told and told that you could be good enough if you would just conform a little better. It’s hard to compete within the unwritten rules of another people’s game—especially when you know full well they don’t allow outsiders many strikes. It’s heavy to hold those expectations in your mind like a constant, nagging weight.

Of course it feels good to escape.

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My own escape from the white gaze has been less complete. I have never been ashamed of my hair: not when kids called me a goat, not when they called me a camel, not when an actor I performed alongside brought up Carlos the Jackal. Not on my first day of college in 2001, when an attack on the World Trade Center made a man who I happen to physically resemble into my country’s number one enemy. Not later that week when a self-proclaimed American patriot murdered an American Sikh, or the next month when my home teaching companion noticed some Afghani-looking students we drove past and wondered out loud about what they might be planning—without stopping to wonder whether someone driving past me might be asking the very same things.

I have always been proud of my mixed-race features: my Semitic nose, my deep-set Punjabi eyes. I am comfortable with the olive cast to my skin, whether it’s an office pale or an outdoor bronze. When I think about the thick hair on my chest, my shoulders, my back, it only serves to remind me that I, too, am a Singh—a lion—built to stand out and stand up in a broken world. You’d be hard-pressed to find a white person in this white-majority country as happy with their body as I am with mine.

But I can’t say, with Ibram Kendi, that I’ve never really thought about cutting my hair. I’ve more than thought about it. I’ve shaved my beard more than once because that’s what the Church or Church institutions required me to do.

That was my choice. I’ve made peace with my choices. I love the Church deeply, fiercely. I love the fire I feel in the scriptures, the way Joseph Smith’s teachings open up the cosmos for me. I love the stories of Saints crossing oceans and plains and digging ditches as they built cities together, and the stories of people keeping the faith on their own in different corners of the earth. I love the Columbus, Ohio, ward that took my family in when I was twelve and our U-Haul was

stolen: who clothed and housed us until we got settled and helped raised me after that. I am not afraid to sacrifice time, talents, or opportunities for my people.

So I've made peace with the choices I made, even as I continue to wonder about the choices I was given. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there's not a theological or symbolic reason for a clean-cut appearance. There's no divine message to help give the rules meaning. Our ideas about hair have mostly been drawn from concerns about what we might call the Gentile gaze: how do we look when we present ourselves to the world outside our community? In the late 1800s, many missionaries were required to grow beards to project an image of maturity and experience. In the late 1960s, some leaders in the Church came to see a clean-cut appearance as the best way to project respectability and draw a contrast with a rising counterculture. Having bet our reputation on those borrowed norms of white respectability, Latter-day Saints quickly absorbed them deeply into our own self-image. As a multicultural member of the Church, I just happened to be caught in the long tail of consequences from somebody else's fight.

History gets tangled. Not much I can do about that: I just live here.

My uncle Paul did a good job preparing me to shave my beard for a mission. There's a family photo of him, bearded, wearing both his newly purchased missionary suit and a sky-blue turban, just before he shaved, put away the turban cloth, and reported to the MTC. For the next two years, he told me, he kept his kara—a steel bracelet Sikhs wear—in his pocket. It was his way of holding on to his identity, keeping it close, even as he sacrificed to meet the cultural expectations in the Church.

I was lucky to have Paul. To have a person to teach me how to face the kind of quiet challenge most of our fellow Saints won't see. Almost everyone knows an issue or two where they feel like that. There are probably a few people in the Church whose home cultures are so close to the ones that have shaped Church messaging and policy that they're able to sail through all the expectations smoothly, but most of our worlds look different in one way or another from the faith's dominant assumptions. Those differences create friction we have to manage somehow. Discipleship requires more than commitment: it takes a certain creativity. And it's good not to be alone with our private puzzles. It helps to have people who can pass on the stories, the skills, the secrets that help us navigate the space between where we live and what we've been given.

The story I tell my long-haired sons now is this: I put my hair aside for my mission—but had a beard for both my farewell and homecoming talks. Not many returned missionaries can say that! First, I grew my beard back between the time I sent in a photo to get a mission call and the time I left home. Then, on my last day in the mission field, I told the assistants to the mission president I wouldn't be needing a razor anymore and left mine lying next to their bathroom sink. My homecoming talk happened to fall three weeks later, which was time enough. I got to make my formal report, like David's messengers in the Bible, after my beard had grown back in.

I laugh when I tell them this story. I tell them the story, and I laugh a holy laugh, so they know that it's okay to accept a white convention without believing in it. They need to know that, because no man can serve two masters. If they got the idea that everyone needs to look the same way to represent God, that could tear them in half.

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At age fourteen, when I first grew a beard, I kept it trimmed fairly short. As far as my hair, I stuck to our family habit of economy: we paid less per year for haircuts by letting it get months' worth of shaggy and then getting it cropped close to buy more time before the next cut.

Toward the end of high school, though, I decided to grow both hair and beard long. I stopped trimming or shaping at all, just let them flow out uncut into dark curls. I remember going out to visit my grandpa in Utah during that first long-haired summer. He'd given up his turban in 1955 or so when it got stuck in the branches of the peach trees he picked fruit from to pay his way through college after coming to the US. He'd cut his hair and shaved around that same time, and his career from the 1960s on was as a mathematics professor at BYU, so they stayed cut.

But when he saw my hair, he still reached out and touched it. "When I was your age," he said, "I had hair just like that."

Another summer, we were driving across the country together. I can't remember anymore which errand we were on or which relative we were visiting. What I remember is that the best conversations with my grandpa take place on long, quiet stretches of open road. He was telling me about how he grew up, about the sweetened water he drank like an ordinance and the new name he was given. He told me why the Sikh gurus, who he still sees as prophets, gave uncut hair as a symbol to their disciples.

"There is power in hair," he said. Spiritual power that builds up when you let your hair grow. That's why Sikh saints, Hindu sadhus, and Muslim pirs grow long hair and beards. That's why Jesus is painted with it. That's where Samson found his strength.

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White norms about hair have a cultural component. In the United States, short hair and smooth faces layer Kennedy's charm over Eisenhower's martial dignity over Julius Caesar's imperial cut. Guru Gobind Singh doesn't register. Almost no one has heard of the Five Beloved Ones. The friction those norms create, though, is not only cultural. For some people, white norms are also a physical mismatch.

In my case, the physical absurdities are pretty minor. Since the hair on my neck flows straight into the hair on my back, the rule that hair shouldn't touch your collar ends up sort of silly. Buzzing my neck clean means an awkward conversation with a barber about where exactly to leave a dramatic line. When I'm done, my hair may not touch my collar, but it doesn't take much of a tug or shift for my collar to touch my hair.

That's a small thing, but it shows that whoever set that standard did not have my body in mind. Whoever decided that shaved skin looks more neat and orderly than a beard wasn't thinking about my genes either. My beard is made up of black hairs so thick that there's a grey cast to my face even right after the shaving cream comes off. I get five o'clock shadow in time for brunch. Shaving is an excellent way for me to look slightly unshaven.

For men with African hair textures, the rules can feel weirder. Tekulve Jackson-Vann remembered reviewing missionary guidelines requiring that hair be brushed back or parted to the side. "My hair doesn't do that," he told his mission president. Since experience with black hair is not a requirement for mission leadership, his mission president's answer was just, "Do the best

you can.”<sup>3</sup> While not terribly helpful, that advice at least provided some room for variation. I remember another friend telling me that his mission president asked him to shave a part into his hair to comply with the rules.

We can be surprisingly inventive in the ways we cling to the letter of the law.

In some ways, living under mission grooming rules that weren’t made for your body is a minor inconvenience. How big of a deal is it really to be asked to shave a part in your hair or shave your face twice a day in a fruitless attempt to look like an imagined typical missionary? It’s not like it takes that much time and energy. There’s something a little unsettling about having your own hands go through a ritual reminder that your religion’s rules weren’t made with you in mind, but it’s nothing most people can’t handle for two years.

What do we as a community get out of asking some members to pay that small price? It’s hard to say. I want to take seriously, though, the idea that it might be worth it.

As a communication strategy, there are clear advantages to having an identity that’s visually recognizable—whether that’s saffron robes and shaved heads, uncut beards and turbans, matching fedoras, or white shirts under dark suits with a Mitt Romney haircut. If we want people to know who our missionaries are at a glance, why not making a certain haircut part of that look?

From the perspective of heaven, it might not matter what the unified look is at all, so long as people can recognize missionaries. In the second half of the twentieth century, though, it’s easy to see advantages to choosing an appearance that allowed us to meet the world on the well-established ground of white respectability. Yes, the appeal of the Western-style suit arguably rests on a history of plunder and conquest and exploitation and colonization, but it’s here now. As someone who places orders through Amazon, which hardly has a flawless current record, I am hardly in a position to cast stones at choices of convenience. I’m especially sympathetic to a missionary department tasked with sending young men and women out to knock on doors. I am well-aware that many people in the United States do not respond well to a bearded, vaguely Middle Eastern looking man walking down the streets where they live. The camouflage of suit and tie and midcentury haircut might very well make a person like me more palatable here.

That’s hardly a universal truth, though. How could any symbol be? Symbols are like the strings in a game of cat’s cradle, easily enough turned and inverted by human actions. A suit and short haircut can easily read as sinister—as any missionary mistaken for a CIA agent in a country once destabilized by the CIA can tell you. Serving in Germany in 2003, I remember many people’s perceptions of us changing rapidly because of the American invasion of Iraq. All at once, we lost a standing service commitment because the manager of the place where we volunteered thought we should go back and preach a gospel of peace in the United States instead. Around the same time, a woman who read my face as Arab stopped me and the Austrian elder I was with to tell us how inspiring she found it to see an Iraqi and an American working together. A look can be a bit like a Rorschach blot, taking on new shapes depending on who’s taking it in.

There are places where dark suits and white hair cuts impress. And there are places where (and people with whom) a bearded face buys a trust that white respectability never can. My grandfather shaved around 1955. That bought him a certain credibility in this country. Fifty years later, spending time back in Punjab to do family history, he ended up deciding to grow a beard

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<sup>3</sup> Sean P. Means, “Dreadlocks get a man barred from—and accepted back to—LDS temple work in Payson.” *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 2, 2019.

again and wear kurta pajama. He wanted officials in the villages to trust him, and people had learned to be wary of a person who looked like a Western businessman.

On my mission, I once asked a casual investigator about priesthood authority. In response, she started riffing about how much more spiritual and trustworthy Orthodox priests looked to her than their clean-shaven Protestant and Catholic counterparts. For her, beards suggested experience and wisdom. Long beards specifically suggested a certain distance from a corporate or political worldliness. Yes, she concluded, Eastern Orthodox priests definitely projected authority.

That was not, of course, the type of conversation about authority that a Latter-day Saint missionary like me was expecting. Since I'd been cuing up a talk about angels breaking time and ordinances that harmonize heaven and earth, her answer seemed so superficial. Like she'd totally missed the mark. We told her about a God who looks only on the heart, about authority passed through the miracle of human touch and in the divine power that rides on soft words. We explained priesthood authority—but I'm not convinced we really taught it. Looking back, maybe our matching suits and haircuts got a little in our message's way.

Sometimes uniformity itself can become an obstacle. I shaved as a missionary. I left the razor with the assistants to the president before I left, told them I didn't need it anymore. There was one Sunday, maybe two months later, when I wanted to dress up extra nice. I took out a red turban cloth for the first time in more than two years and tied myself a crown. By pure coincidence, I sat on the pew right in front of my ward's missionaries the next week. They thanked me later: the investigator sitting beside them on that pew had just let them know she liked what they were teaching, but that their church wasn't diverse enough for her comfort. You could say that's shallow, but maybe it's a legitimate theological concern: shouldn't a universal gospel resonate with all kinds of people? It seems like it should, so long as the messengers don't get too much in the way. Without seeing enough of that particular fruit in our faith, this investigator was about ready to stop the discussions and say goodbye. But when I sat down right in front of her, she turned to those missionaries and said, "I take it back!"

I served as the sign she needed.

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Let me be clear: I don't want to tell the Church what it should do about hair rules and expectations. I only know what I know, I only see how I see. How could my perspective, however compelling, ever be complete? I believe insight emerges through counsel. That means accepting that other interests than mine should shape any outcome.

I don't want to say what the Church *should* do. All I want to do is help us imagine together what we *could* do. So often, the force of momentum makes us settle for a solution that's less than the best. It's so easy to go on doing what we've done before, so easy to stop looking for other possibilities. Sometimes options hide in plain sight in our own history and we're too caught up in the moment to catch them.

Let me tell you another story. As an apostle, Spencer W. Kimball felt driven by the Book of Mormon promises, reiterated in the Doctrine and Covenants, that the native peoples of the Americas would blossom as the rose. That God had not forgotten his covenant with them. As



Kimball pushed to open up missionary work in different countries along the Andes, he encouraged missionaries again and again to reach out to the Lamanites. To the Aymara and the Uru and Quechua.

In Otavalo in Ecuador, Kichwa people started joining the church. The men kept their hair long, in accordance with a tradition they had fought long and hard to preserve. When Otavalan men began to be called as missionaries, Kimball told them not to cut their braids, or set aside the memory those braids carried. He asked them to keep wearing their striking blue ponchos instead of swapping them out for the grey of a Western-style suit.

The Church has flourished in Otavalo. Where else might it flourish if we stopped getting in the way?

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Two thousand years ago, a certain missionary had a problem. He'd seen people change their lives because of the stories he told about a poor preacher who had secretly been a promised prince. Who had begged and bled and died for us and then commanded even the grave to open. This missionary had seen people who had never even heard that a Messiah had been promised in the first place begin to hunger for his Kingdom. Everywhere a ship had carried him, he'd found ears among the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Paul had seen so many Gentiles change their lives. But should he ask the men to change their bodies?

They could have. Circumcision is a simple procedure, and the healing is quick. Hardly a dramatic demand in a faith that calls for the whole mind and heart, the willingness to sacrifice all earthly things. It might have created complications for sons whose fathers hadn't embraced the faith and found the tradition barbaric and strange, but surely many of the converts themselves would have been willing.

And yet, Paul couldn't bring himself to tell them it should matter. Couldn't bring himself to preach that the sign was as eternal as the covenant it stood for. There were troubles enough already between Jews who spoke Greek and those who used Hebrew. What the Kingdom needed was not more norms—but more grace. More space to gather in brothers and sisters from all the nations of the earth. If families that circumcised still circumcised, good. But people could bring their own bodies with them as they were.

Why is it still so hard for us to follow that model?

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My mission turned out not to be the last time I lived under a requirement to shave.

The private college I'd attended in Ohio got more expensive while I was on my mission. The way their scholarships worked, the initial dollar amounts I'd been given stayed the same even as tuition rose. The scale of the difference surprised me.

I petitioned for help and pointed out new scholarships I would have qualified for that year if I'd been an incoming freshman, but the administrator my case was referred up to wasn't willing to consider me for any. The theatre department offered to increase my talent award from

their budget instead, but he vetoed that, too. He accused me of wanting to go to college for free. Said I should be grateful for what I had and could take out more than enough loans to cover the difference.

Whether a request can be granted or not may depend solely on the giver's circumstances. Whether it comes across as reasonable or uppity, however, also depends on their attitudes about the person doing the asking. Would it have helped if I'd come in clean-shaven and in my mission suit to ask? Would it have helped, for that matter, if my face were less foreign? I don't know. Research has shown, though, that there are tangible consequences to having built a whole culture around white respectability.

My department chair knew I'd just come back from a mission. Hoping to hold onto me, he asked if my church offered any scholarships. I sighed. So far as I knew, I told him, they only subsidized their own campuses.

I had fond memories of visiting BYU's Provo campus with my grandparents as a little kid. My mom and dad met there. They were both products of the school in more ways than one: Grandpa Art, the only Jew on campus at the time, had met Grandma Judy there not long before my Gill grandparents met. If the world is BYU's campus, then in our family it was also the world's matchmaker.

I had never considered going to BYU, though, because of its rule against beards. Not until my department chair's suggestion wormed its way into my head. Not until I began to wonder if the Lord had hardened the administrator's heart expressly to drive me west. I ended up dropping out of school to work for a while, and then I swallowed my pride and transferred.

Once again, I put shaving off until the last possible moment. Before then, as it happened, I was recruited to appear in new Bible videos that were being made for seminary. I could keep my beard, it turned out, so long as it was recognized as being useful to the Church. If I could also get permission to take a few extra classes, I realized, I could finish my degree two weeks before shooting would finish.

I laughed. I figured God had delivered me.

But God doesn't deliver everyone. The extra class I decided to take to cram in enough credits for a quick exit was Hindi. My teacher, Akash, was a Sikh student from India. At first, I assumed from his clean-shaven face that he wasn't that observant in his religion. I found out halfway through the semester that he'd never cut his hair or beard until he arrived in the US and realized BYU wouldn't let him keep it. In the 1990s, when a bearded Karan Singh became BYU's valedictorian and wrote about his love for how the university strengthened him as a disciple-scholar, BYU had a religious exemption. Around 2015, they restored it. In the early 2000s, though, they made a Sikh student shave because, when push came to shove, we valued white respectability more than religious freedom.

When I heard Akash's story, I couldn't quite believe that yet. I assumed it was a matter of ignorance. I went first to the Honor Code office, then to Student Life, hoping to share the story my mother had taught me, to help them see what they'd done so they could fix it. Maybe it would have helped if I'd come in clean-shaven and in my mission suit. Maybe it would have helped if my face were less foreign. I don't know. All I know is that they didn't want to hear about Sikhism at all. Instead, they told me having a beard waiver was a privilege and mine could

be taken away. Later, when I returned to campus as a grad student, a Church casting director would tell me that a beard waiver request for me was the first one she ever had denied.

Just after I finished my undergrad, I was working with a student club producing new plays. A picture of my bearded face ended up in the student paper, and Student Life told the theater department I shouldn't be allowed to contribute any more. "Is this what you want representing BYU?" they asked the department chair, Rodger Sorensen.

Though he suspected (correctly) that they'd overrule him, Rodger replied "yes" and sent them a copy of one of my religious plays. I still get choked up at the memory of hearing how he saw me. I held on to it when an elderly home teacher lectured me about how Jesus must have been clean-shaven because that inspires trust. I clung to it after graduation, when it turned out that a local elementary school couldn't hire me for the math tutoring job I'd successfully interviewed for because the principal said a long beard would frighten children.

It stings to be a *this*. Having your heart seen instead is balm to those wounds.

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It hit me recently that the day will come when my sons won't come to me anymore to brush and braid their hair. When that little slice of time we spend close to each other will slip away. I want them to be independent, but I'll miss the ritual. For all the fear of bearded men I've heard about, for me hair feels like love. Those moments of closeness, of touch. A simple sacred, like hands on the head.

Madison Beckstrand is a family friend so close we call her goddaughter. She's black; her mom, Kristi, and her dad are white. Some people like to say they don't see color, but Latter-day Saints should know better than that. We believe that we came to earth to learn from the bodies God gave us. When Madi was a newly adopted baby, Kristi bought a bunch of DVDs and studied like crazy to make sure she understood her daughter's hair. Without any family tradition or know-how to draw on, she just put her shoulder to the wheel to learn. That's love. That's what I want the world to look like.

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We are careless. We cut.

Rafael Tabango was a pioneer in Otavalo, the first patriarch of its stake. His sons served missions and attended Church schools with their braids. In 2018, his grandson Michael panicked when BYU refused to offer him the same permission, ignoring letters from the Kichwa nation and Ecuadorian embassy explaining the history. In desperation, he finally spoke to the media. "Our ancestors had pressures to cut their hair. When the Spanish first came it was usually a choice of life or death. I think we owe it to them to preserve that," he said.<sup>4</sup> It still took behind-the-scenes intervention from credible white insiders to help the relevant school authorities change their minds. We haven't learned yet to listen to the people we call *brother* and *sister* on the basis of those family relationships alone.

It's not just a BYU problem. In 2019, Tekulve Jackson-Vann was abruptly released from his calling at the Payson temple when he switched from a more typically white hairstyle to

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Martin, "BYU student petitioning Honor Code to preserve his native identity," August 30, 2018, [abc4.com](http://abc4.com)

tasteful locs. I'm not saying the temple president needs to go out and get some hair care DVDs like a new mother when a situation like that arises, but it wouldn't hurt if he did. Instead, the story had to play out and social and traditional media coverage before he took time to listen and reconsider.

In the end, though, the temple president did take time to listen. And when he did, his heart softened. I'll bet there's rejoicing in heaven whenever we let a blind spot, no matter how small, get washed away. There was certainly some rejoicing here on earth. In an interview with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jackson-Vann described the process of being released over his locs and then brought back to serve in the temple with his hair intact as having been ultimately faith-affirming. "This was a moment to open up a conversation," he said.<sup>5</sup> He was willing to give people room to learn as they took time to listen, and to think through how to interpret church guidelines across cultures.

As a people, we have not always been the best at doing so. We're still not. But there's room to grow. Hair doesn't need to be fear; hair can be love. As long as the earth stands, there's still time for even simple gestures of acceptance and embrace to matter.

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I was talking once with a friend about life and the gospel, and he brought up his experience with pornography. For years, he said, he stewed with regrets over the time in early adolescence when he'd accidentally run across his first pornographic VHS tape from a friend's house. *If only I hadn't ever picked it up*, he thought to himself. *If only I'd never looked, my life would have been worthy. I'd have saved myself this struggle.*

He finally reached a point, though, where he realized he had no need for regret. It wasn't the presence of pornography in his life's story that was the problem. What mattered was what he'd done with that. The long process of repentance and change had refined him, sanctified him. If his life was holy, who was he to regret the path that had brought him there?

I don't know if you'd call it sin when a black man is told in 2019 that he's not worthy to work in the temple because he wears his hair in a black style. I don't know if you'd call it sin when the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints told black missionaries in the 1800s that they could only preach to other black people, or if you'd call it a sin that from the 1850s up until 1978, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refused to let black people serve missions or receive the temple endowment and sealing ordinances at all. I don't know just which of the things church members and leaders have said and done to Christ's brethren that will count as sin in your eyes—or God's.

If you did call any of our inequity a sin, I don't know if you'd want to name that sin racism or pride or fear of man and trust in the arm of flesh. There are other terms some people use now when they look close at the way the world works, but the old ones do just fine too. There is no sin we've faced in this last dispensation that isn't, at its root, common to man. No church member or leader is immune to the human condition. We sin. We fall short of the glory of God, and we let down each other.

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<sup>5</sup> Sean P. Means, "Dreadlocks get a man barred from—and accepted back to—LDS temple work in Payson." *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 2, 2019.

What I want to say is: if we change, *as* we change, the wound and shame of all those things can fade together. I believe that. I believe that in Christ, the high will be made low and the low will be exalted, and that all things can be made as one.

In 1958, my maternal grandparents drove down to Mesa, Arizona. They planned to kneel down at an altar in a temple there, planned to forge an eternal link between past and future generations, but they got caught up in the courthouse first. Back then, Arizona had a law that prohibited marriage between a white woman and an Indian man. “Why don’t you go to Las Vegas?” a lawyer they consulted advised. Under Nevada law, they’d have no trouble getting married.

Las Vegas wouldn’t do, my grandparents explained. They needed to marry in a temple. The lawyer could see they meant it, so he worked with them instead to find a legal loophole and petition the judge and fill out the affidavits the judge demanded until they finally got the same marriage license a teenager had picked up in minutes that morning while my grandma and grandpa sat in the courthouse waiting room under the clerk’s disapproving glare.

They stayed and they fought not just for the temple, but because they really believed in its promises. In weaving a tapestry across time. In choosing the shape of their eternity. They got married, against the laws of Arizona (and, for that matter, Utah) because they believed that a holy spirit of promise could bind their cultures together as surely as their hearts.

I’ve watched it happen for them. I’ve felt it in me: swelling in my soul, growing in my hair. I believe that day of promise is coming for the whole human family. And that before its heat, all obstacles will melt away.