



CHANGE ^{IS}/_{IN} THE

HAIR

BY CHELSEA TRABER BURNS

**A fresh start
doesn't have to
mean a big move
or a new job.
It could be as
simple as
updating your
mane look.**





LAUREN

Strongin started taking ballet lessons when she was 3 years old and had long hair ever since. While the length was mostly for practical purposes—to accommodate the hairstyles needed for the stage, like French twists or buns—she says she always liked that “ballerina long-hair look.” Then, after 32 years (18 of which were spent dancing professionally for the Houston Ballet and then the San Francisco Ballet), she decided to retire as a ballerina and pursue her other, very different ambition—becoming a doctor.

Another thing she'd retire: the length of her hair. “I was starting a new path as a pre-med student, and cutting my hair was part of that,” says Strongin. She booked an appointment with hairstylist Michael Forrey, former creative director of Sassoon NYC and stylist at Striilke salon in Beverly Hills, who chopped off more than 12 inches and transformed her previously long mane into a pixie cut (she donated the hair to Locks of Love). Yet she wasn't apprehensive at all. “It was helpful to physically manifest how I was feeling internally,” she says. “Ready to move on from a career that had defined my life up to that point and explore the person I am without ballet. It was also empowering to see myself differently and to like what I saw; it helped me transition to this new stage.”

Maybe you're not making the leap (no pun intended) from professional ballerina to doctor, but there's something about fresh hair that sets a tone unlike anything else. “Our appearance is a part of our identity, and our hair is at the forefront of our appearance; it's what frames our face,” says clinical psychologist Jenny Yip, executive director of Renewed Freedom Center in Los Angeles. “It's a representation of who we are and our personality.” Been itching for something new? Maybe you just want to switch it up, or maybe it's the start of a larger transformation for you. Either way, change can mean many different things. Here's what you should know.



Read Between the Hairs

The feeling of a good hair day? Magical. Which is weird, because your hair isn't feeling anything at all—the visible part that sticks out of your head is actually not even alive. Yep, the strands on your head are mostly dead. (Before it dies and gets pushed out of your skin, hair starts as living cells that are nourished by blood vessels and nerves.) Yet we still have so many emotions tied up in our locks.

If you've ever tried to grow your hair (hi, last year's bangs decision), you might have an extra strong connection to it because you know just how painstakingly long that process can take. On average, hair typically grows about six inches a year. A lot can happen in a year, so odds are you went through some stuff as your hair (slowly) grew. “People hold on to their hair for so many reasons,” says Forrey. “It's this thing that grows out of our head and has so much to do with our identity, which is both powerful and stifling at times.” Sure, your hair will grow back, but you're still physically losing something that was a part of you and a part of your identity. And that right there is likely what's been so difficult (or easy!) to let go of.

QUICK CHANGE

"If you want to modify your appearance, it's often through diet, exercise, or a cosmetic procedure, which takes time," says Dr. Yip. "Whereas with your hair, it's quick and can be just as dramatic." Ta-da!



Dig Into the Bond

So, yes, there's a link between your feels and your strands, but what is it about switching up our hair that messes with us so much mentally? "It's about your personal metamorphosis," says behavioral scientist Clarissa Silva, a relationship coach and the creator of Your Happiness Hypothesis Method, a coaching program. "It often marks the loss of a loved one, a former life, or a past relationship and ultimately emerges as a rebirth of yourself. It facilitates healing and recovery because it can be the physical manifestation that a person has experienced a mental shift." Which is likely why, on the flip side of this, if you like where you're at, you might not want a drastic alteration. "If we're satisfied with ourselves, then change brings uncertainty, and that uncertainty can be nerve-racking," says Dr. Yip.

Then there are those who switch up their look on the reg for no reason other than purely wanting to avoid monotony. *WH* features director Kristin Canning changes her hair monthly. "I feel like my hair is just another accessory to my overall look, so I get bored if it stays the same for too long," she says. Rather than waiting for a big life change to initiate her hair choices, Canning does the opposite: "It feels like a way to usher in a new month or new season and draw other changes into my life."

Set Strands Free

A different sort of shift that started trending during the pandemic was embracing your natural hair color or texture. That may not seem like a huge metamorphosis to some, but for others, it can be life-changing—particularly in regard to that important identity bit.

This was the case for Erynne Hundley, who decided to stop straightening her naturally curly hair after 18 years. A choice she made out of convenience—she'd recently moved to Seattle and found the humid, rainy weather too difficult to battle—became an emotional journey. "I started straightening my hair in fifth grade," says Hundley. "Growing up, there weren't many other Black or biracial kids in my school, and I spent a solid portion of my childhood being made fun of for my curls; there were even competitions to see how many things kids could put in my hair before I noticed. I never saw people who looked like me, and that gave me a warped sense of self-worth when it came to my appearance, in particular my hair."

The switch to natural was not an overnight success. Figuring out how to style and wear her curls (and getting them back to a healthy state after years of heat) took about a year and became such a big



SLEEP ON IT

The age-old advice still stands: You can cut more off, but you can't put it back on. So if Forrey knows a client needs more time, he tells them to go home and think about it a bit before moving forward. Zzzz...

part of her life that, to inspire others, she started a YouTube channel to showcase the methods she uses. "I've never felt more wholly myself than when I realized I didn't need to straighten my hair to be pretty," says Hundley. "My hair turns out different every time I style it, but whether that's good, bad, or somewhere in between, my hair is mine, and I'm never going to let someone take that from me again."

Bridgette Hill, a trichologist and colorist in Palm Beach, Florida, went through a similar reawakening when she decided to shave off her hair after years of relaxing it. "For so long, beauty has been Eurocentric, so to shed that is a very deep, soulful, healing process for women of African descent or for any oppressed person," says Hill. "To see yourself through the lens of beauty is a fight you have to go through, because it's never really been reflected back at you."

Know When to Leap

No matter your reasons for exploring a hair switch-up, you might be pretty set in your feelings for a surprising reason: We've spent a lot more time staring at not only our faces on screens (you're on mute, Susan), but also our hair. And while you can hide sweatpants below the camera or even swipe on a filter for a more glowing complexion, there's not much you can do to fake your hair. Forrey has found that this time has led people to solid conclusions. "After sitting at home for months, there is no apprehension: People are ready to change their hair, and they're firm in their decision."

But there's another avenue to consider: color. "Even though a cut is more final, changing your hair color is still a huge re-birth," says celebrity colorist Rita Hazan, owner of her eponymous NYC salon and product line. "You can safely and gently add some red tones, or go a bit darker, and then let it fade out in four to six weeks, which is probably shorter than the time it will take to grow out new curtain bangs," says celebrity hairstylist Kristin Ess. "You could also go lighter, then cover it up if you decide you don't love it for the long term. In my opinion, changing your color is actually the easier route because there's more flexibility if you feel differently a few weeks later."

The point being: You've got options. And in the end, as Canning says, "It's always a little bit risky, but it's a learning experience, and I feel as if each time I make a change, I get closer to figuring out what I really like and what feels best for me. I would never know if I didn't experiment." There you go—life lesson for the day/month/year.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

A list, from minor to major, on how you can level up your locks

LAYERS

"If you have long hair, just layering it and making it more shaggy gives you a completely different vibe and takes the weight off in a way similar to a major chop," says Forrey.

MONEY PIECE

This is a bit of color applied only around the hairline to brighten up your complexion and make the rest of your hair color pop without too much work or upkeep.

BANGS

"Fringe is an easy way to totally change the shape, but you can still keep the rest of your hair the same length so it's not a complete commitment," says Forrey.

BOB

This can change the face completely. "A triangular bob elongates the face, while a square bob makes features appear stronger," says Forrey. "I think of bobs like a contour—drawing lines on the face to point out and accentuate certain features."

PIXIE

A classic that lets your natural look shine: "I love the way it opens up the face," says Forrey.

Color Theory As the saying goes, blondes have more fun, but experts say otherwise. "There is no way to tell anything about anyone who chooses a particular hair color," says Ess. "Over the years, I've heard it all—lighter highlights make them feel happier; darker, richer colors make them feel more powerful; warmer tones make them feel sexier....And I've heard the complete opposite—people tell me they never knew their authentic self until they had pink hair, because seeing themselves that way was a catalyst for an internal shift." Bottom line: Be you! Try new things, have fun, and you'll learn in the process what feels right.