

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Skunk

By Carol Murphy

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In the Disney movie *Frozen*, Anna, one of the main female characters, has a white streak in her hair. My granddaughter points this out frequently as she holds up her Anna doll and then points to my hair. “You have one too, and so does Mommy.” I love hearing her say this because I always worried about how this mark would impact my offspring. My granddaughter thinks it’s great. “It’s just like mine, Mimi!” she adds laughing, touching her own white streak.

Sometimes time gives us a perspective we couldn’t get any other way. Once, when my daughter was 5, a grocery store clerk stopped pulling items out of my cart, looked at my hair, then looked at my daughter’s hair. “So”, she asked, “How did you get her to sit still that long while her hair was being colored?”

This woman really believed that I had dyed a kindergartener’s hair. “It’s a family birthmark,” I mumbled.

“Oh,” she said, clearly unconvinced, staring at my hair a few minutes before ringing up the rest of my items.

I have piebaldism. A strange word, it’s been difficult to explain to people I’ve chosen to share the name with. Most start out thinking I might turn bald any minute or that I’m wearing a wig because I am already bald, perhaps losing my hair to cancer. Others think the *pie* part of the word is really *pi*, as in the math formula. When I explain

it is actually related to albinism, folks usually just become quiet. After all, I am rather fair, but I am not totally white.

Piebaldism is from a dominant gene causing mutations of skin and hair color. Patches of white appear on various parts of the body with a white forelock or streak somewhere in the hair, just like Anna in *Frozen*.

Many adults would not think of this streak as disabling. In fact, today I receive compliments, but I am older and wiser. Being a child with a white forelock and white body patches is very disabling, mostly mental.

When I was a kid, no one understood what I had, even though my dad had it too. My mother told me the story of when she went to the gynecologist a week after I was born because she was bleeding too much. The doctor thought she had questions about my skin, saying, "That's nothing. Some children are born without limbs." My mother hadn't noticed it until that moment and promptly fainted. That was the way she explained it to me, so I guess I made a big impression right from the beginning.

Later in school, I was bullied, particularly in junior high where things can get very nasty. Because of the white streak in my hair, the worst name was "Skunk". It didn't help that I was smart and fat. No one likes the smart kid and a kid being fat 50 years ago was uncommon. All in all, it was a miserable existence and to this day I look back on that time as a period of shame, guilt and unhappiness.

Piebaldism is a problem with skin coloring in that it is a dominant gene, meaning it shows up about half the time in offspring. My daughter has it and so does her daughter. My son does not. It is manifested by white patches on the skin and white hair

streaks that can show up anywhere. The darker a person's regular coloring is, the more the patches show. In my family, we are fair so it is not readily noticeable, except for the white streak in the hair, unless we are outside a lot and tan.

When I was a teen, being outside and near water was particularly traumatic. The Beach Boys with "California Girls" and all their other surfing songs, created a teen tanning mania beach culture. We didn't know then the dangers of too much sun, so everyone sat outside practically naked as long as they could to get darker. Girls wore bikinis at the beach and pools. The mentality of being fat, even though by that time I had lost weight, and having these white marks literally made my life hell. As I look back I realize now my negative thinking was mostly self-imposed. Teenagers think about themselves.

I read somewhere back in my twenties that a disability can turn into an asset. I think that is about the time I got married and was thinking about having children. Certainly my husband didn't care. When I told him, he said, "What? I never noticed." Maybe he was blind with love but now I think it was really my own mental attitude. I was the one who thought about it. I was the one who was afraid to go near a pool or the beach. I was the one who tried all kinds of cover up creams. He'd never said a word. Even when I explained our children might have the same defect, he just said, "Oh."

I've had years now to work on my mental attitude and believe me, it needed help. Self-absorption is never relationship building. During those years, piebaldism in my daughter and granddaughter made me watch how my own daughter managed. I had been accepting with my daughter, but the acceptance was work. My own mother, who

did not have the problem, was all about helping me to cover it up. My daughter was totally opposite, even buying my granddaughter pairs of shorts for the summer, a normal thing to do, but abnormal for me.

The other day we had dinner with my son's in-laws. The mother-in-law asked me what I did to get the lovely white streak and was it expensive. In my 40's I'd made some progress with that type of question, but then I'd launch into an explanation of piebaldism that would leave the listener bewildered. I'm in my 60's now. All I said was that it was a birthmark.

And that's all it is, a birthmark. It's not good or bad. It just is.