

## Headstrong, Part IV: Braininess Re-examined

By Marian Salzman  
July 23, 2010

If you've seen my recent posts, you know I've been thinking about the brain lately. I'm coming up on the three-year anniversary of my craniotomy—for brain tumor surgery—and the milestone has made me think about the brain, how it works, how fragile it is and how digital technology has reshaped it.

We might all think about our brains differently now than we did even a decade ago—artificial intelligence is no longer just a science-fiction plot but an actual possibility, or at least an actual potential *Jeopardy!* champion—but one thing that hasn't really changed is the concept of braininess. In 20th- and 21st-century pop culture, there have been lots of people and characters whom society has defined by their brains, their intellectualism, their cerebral nature, their, well, nerdiness. In *Archie* comics, Betty was the brainy one next to Veronica. In *Scooby Doo*, it was Velma next to Daphne. *The Breakfast Club* revolved around the Athlete, the Princess, the Criminal, the Basket Case and—drum roll—the Brain. Thank God Tina Fey finally came along and made brainy sexy.

I'm a big fan of braininess. I think it's an undersung virtue and a quality more people should aspire to. But like any other stock personality trait, it can drown in superficiality. We used to say that men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses, but now men and women alike buy frames and put nonprescription lenses in them just to look smarter.

But the physical feature that's actually closest to our cerebral cortex is our hairstyle. And if you think hair doesn't matter, or that you won't be judged by it, just ask Carly Fiorina or Barbara Boxer. When it comes down to it, most of us, especially most of us women, don't want our hair to define us as brainy. (Or to be defined as brainy at all, for that matter.) When I found out three years ago that I had a brain tumor, possibly cancerous, one of my top concerns became protecting my hair. Sure, it was a defense mechanism and a distraction, something easier to think about than my mortality, but it was also a huge part of keeping myself sane and protecting who I am.

Hair is a symbol of health and fertility, youth and vitality. It can represent power and being in control—take the article in last week's *Wall Street Journal* about all the A-list women who make regular appointments for pricey blow-outs at the same Upper East Side salon. Or it can be a halo of wellness and sexiness and a billboard for fun, as it was for me. My hair color helped me define myself. I was born blond and am still blond five decades later (with the help of highlights and lowlights). It's also typically the way people describe me—"the short blonde" when I lived in Holland, land of the giants... or maybe that was just my perspective; "the quiet blonde" when I'm out of my element; "the pushy blonde" when I'm determined to move mountains or change someone's mind.

My whole routine was this: Don't *look* brainy but *be* brainy. After I got sucked into brain surgery chat rooms and became obsessed with preserving my long, blond tresses, my fear was that if the doctors shaved my head, I might end up looking brainy but no longer being it. Of course, this was an unspoken fear, for I never once consciously thought anything could go wrong...except that I might forget my PINs, which explains the yellow stickies all over my house with those passwords on them. Oh, and the recipes for dog food so any dogsitter would know just how much spinach goes into my pets' homemade chow.

Yet even while I was waging a campaign to preserve my non-brainy hair—which I ultimately won when the doctors shaved 18 mini patches of hair where they lifted my scalp instead of denuding my entire head—I was taking a methodical, cerebral approach to getting ready for my surgery. I was absolutely brilliant about the big things: I drank no alcohol for months, managed to avoid all secondhand smoke, did 100 sit-ups or crunches every morning to build core strength and ate so much fish that I ended up failing the test for mercury (this was before we figured out that tuna sushi was making us all as mad as hatters).

That analytical way of dealing with things, I think, is a typical marker of braininess. Yes, it can be cold, but that's how we stay rational. Before my surgery, I had a switch that allowed me to move over to autopilot whenever a situation became too intimate or upsetting. It was as if I could push any experience—including my brain tumor—into the fourth lane and keep directing traffic in the other three, letting work, friends and current events motor along without crashing into each other or stalling out.

My braininess gave me a real final distance that made goodbyes easy. It was a trait that served me well all those years when I was away from home more often than I was in a place I could call home. I'd spent my career on the road, living as an expat for several years, traveling endlessly, watching my interpersonal relationships being reduced to a series of see-you-soons. My friends were everywhere, and oftentimes nowhere I

was—unless you count the other side of an e-mail or text.

As it turned out, having my brain cut into and having a tiny part of it removed ended up giving me a broader definition of braininess. I learned that it doesn't have to be so analytical and removed. I didn't have to remain in constant motion, always on planes, always juggling priorities. I think my experience is one of the reasons I chose to make a career change, allowing me to stay closer to my home in Connecticut. It also let me tap into my new discovery: that braininess means listening as well as talking.

It helps that braininess has become downright cool now. Our heroes are Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Sergey Brin. Kids don't aspire to be sports stars (what, and risk brain damage?) but tech gurus. I wish we had more female rock stars of the tech world, but in the meantime, you could do worse for a role model than, yes, the singular Tina Fey.

I still have my hair, and I still want to be brainy without having "brainy" be the first word people use to describe me. (Though in the top three would be good.) I still worry about tumors but am more conscious of my lifestyle as it relates to my brain health. I'm more conscious of brain health in general, in fact, and the brain injuries we're seeing more of, and I just keep marveling at how complex that organ is. And while I'm on the subject of braininess, I think we as a society need to be smarter—about how we treat and respect our brains and those of the people around us.