It’s What’s On the Inside that Counts: Actually, It is Being Whole That Matters

We have all said it. Or at least thought it at one time. Maybe it was in response to a brand new pair of thick-rimmed glasses that suddenly adorned a face of someone we loved. Maybe it was a statement of comfort to a person who was fifty pounds overweight, or whose face was covered in pimples. Or maybe, it was just intended to make someone who the world judges as unattractive feel better about themselves. Regardless, the statement or ones like it, usually come from a good place, with admirable intentions. Especially as parents, we find ourselves desiring that we live in a world where people aren’t judged, to paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., by the color of their skin or the attractiveness of their body, but by the content of their character. The problem is, we are unknowingly sending the wrong message when only the “inside counts”, and ignoring just where we are.

In 2007, forty-two times the number of people got Botox injections than in 1997. Breast augmentations increased by 4 times during the same period, much of this occurring in the younger population all the way to the teens. In one particular study, four out of five plastic surgery patients reported that television shows influenced them to get the procedure done. Skin cancer rates, closely associated with increasing tanning, jumped 20 percent in the past decade. It is phenomenon that is spreading across people of various cultures, ages, and gender. Almost 10 times the number of men got non-invasive cosmetic procedures in 2007 than 10 years earlier (Twenge & Campbell, 2010). It is now even possible for pets to get cosmetic surgery, including liposuctions, facelifts, and believe it or not, Neuticles (false testicles). Regardless of what you think of the current trends, one thing is for sure. We have become obsessed with the way we look.

In recognizing this, the first mistake that we make in this area of discussion is to equate beauty with image, and attractiveness with lust & immodesty. In doing so, we are sending the message that beauty and attractiveness are automatically vain and evil, and not gifts and realities of our world. Regarding the topic of beauty versus image, there are few things that we must consider in discussing this subject with anyone, especially our kids. One, beauty in its pure form is one of the greatest gifts that the world has been given. Whether it is the landscape of Yosemite, the brush strokes of Michelangelo, the harmony of Beethoven, or the attractiveness of a human being, beauty is something that is provided to us as a source of harmony and joy. It is why every person in the world feels good when they experience it in its purest form. Our brains are literally hard-wired to receive it. As C.S. Lewis once said, “We do not want merely to see beauty... we want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”

But unfortunately, beauty has become misconstrued as vanity and self-promotion, as we often adopt a Hollywood view of what is frequently described as sexy or hot. As the world increasingly promotes beauty in a scandalous, sensationalistic way, something inside of us struggles to recognize that true beauty is actually harmony and wholeness rolled into one. But when we profess that it is only “what’s on the inside that counts”, we suddenly suggest that outer beauty no longer has value in our world, unless in self-serving ways.
Second, it is important we see that beauty is often the by-product of what all of us can agree is important. That includes qualities, such as will, determination, commitment, and drive, among other things. Whether it is an attempt to curb poor eating habits or limited activity, whether it results from repeated, persevering attempts to learn a piano piece, or even if it is great attention to detail in cleaning up a polluted outdoor area, beauty exists for a reason. It provides us with a compelling built-in reward to do things in a better, and more convicted way. If we remove beauty from the equation, or minimalize its importance, then we may be unknowingly removing one of the most important motivators that a person may have to improve their life. Done for the right purposes, the pursuit of beauty is often synonymous with the pursuit of health. Consider this. What if we could eat anything we want and exercise sporadically (or not at all), and our outer appearance would remain in its natural form, even if internally we were on the fast track to diabetes, stroke, or a heart attack? The way we look serves as a reminder. Much of what is occurring on the outside is reflective of what is going on within. And thankfully so, or it is safe to say that the average lifespan would start plummeting all over the world.

But there is more. Our world cultivates the idea that beauty can be owned, that we can buy expensive artwork, or a huge seaside plot, or even that another person is “ours”, such as my wife or kids. Again, when beauty is perceived in this way, it becomes distorted as if it is a commodity that can be bought or sold, not admired and awed. Beauty is not something we can have. It is an experience we share, one in which can inspire us to go far beyond our self-gratifying persona, into a transcendent world of much deeper meaning and more joyful days. When we, and our youth, come to see beauty in this way, it no longer evokes selfish desires of expectation and right, but instead gracious and praiseful exclamations that we are privileged to perceive it at all. In my own life, I am blessed to have come to know this in many ways, including in my home and far away from where humanity resides.

In returning to the original statement, though, our well-meaning attempts to reinforce character over appearance belie the fact that any single quality is part of a whole person. When the search for beauty becomes an exercise in vanity, it loses being beauty at all; but when it becomes a search for harmony, health, wholeness, and holiness, beauty simply reflects a natural law that is at play. For many, it may require just as much effort to exercise 5 times a week as it does to be nice to another human being. It might require just as much resolve to refrain from eating sweets as it does to volunteer at a local food pantry. Each can be done with motives of vanity and obligation, and/or service and self-improvement. Although one endeavor might seem less selfish than the other, we must remember that we can only give what we have; that what we give cannot be measured in simple terms of “inside or out”, but the gift of our whole selves more fully realized. There is no greater gift on this earth.

As we seek to teach the true language of beauty, there are two primary pathways that end up in a very similar place. One is an earthly approach, and much of what I described hopefully resonates with just why beauty is critical regardless where a person finds themselves. But the other is a divine perspective, the one in which we were “all created in the image and likeness of God.” Inherent in this statement is the idea that our entire being is of His image—not just the inside—but our complete being. As St. Irenaeus once said, “"The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God." I think it is safe to say that whether it comes to matters of emotionality, sociality, physicality, or spirituality, His image of us retains the highest ideals. These may or may not be the same as ours. But to suggest that
God is fine with us being slothful and gluttonous as long as we are caring and compassionate simply does not coalesce with the willful effort needed to realize His image for our whole self. In the end, it also harms us and others in the process.

If we come to fully realize all of this, then it seems that we would come to know that beauty is not just in the eye of beholder, but also through the eyes of the one who is beheld. Every once in a while, our family gets a chance to spend some time with Mary, a 6-year-old girl with Down Syndrome adopted by our long-time friends. She is a beautiful girl, whose beaming face and bright eyes just shine back at you in such a spirited, engaging way. She is quite a sight, and I pray that as she gets older, she finds the same happiness, harmony, and health that we all desire. But no doubt she emanates beauty to all those privileged to know her, just as her older counterparts who share the same condition most certainly do.

So, it is time to recognize where our world is today, and be honest with ourselves and youth about just what beauty is, and what it is not. It seems well overdue that we emphasize beauty in its infinite forms, and recognize what promises it provides, and how important it is to preserve. Because if we do not, and just continue to harp that it is “what’s on the inside that counts,” I worry that our outer world will only become uglier, and more distorted and superficial, and move further away from the truly beautiful place that it is and the beautiful people we are.

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