

## Dying to be Seen

**“If a woman walks into a room and there’s no man there to see her, does she still exist?”**

### **Male Gaze Junkies**

Girls live in a world where what they look like is paramount. The gender stereotypes, which are deeply imbedded in our society, dictate that both genders should strive for perfect bodies. Too much focus on physical appearance can be damaging for both males and females. However, the intense focus on appearance is far more pervasive for females and the effects of objectification are more potent for females. A male can get by on achievement, brains and personality whereas a woman, in order to be desirable, *must* have beauty. And to make matters worse, too much success, brains or personality can weigh in against her as she may be perceived as being threatening to the stereotypical males need for dominance and higher status. The unrelenting focus on appearance which our girls are flooded with through the media creates a gender of male-gaze junkies. It is tragic to think that a teen-age girl’s main goal in life might be, to be “hot”.

The more traditionally beautiful a woman is the higher the standard of beauty she must attain. The inherent deception is that the beauty standard that is held up for all to strive for does not exist. The fashion photos are digitally altered and retouched, height is added, weight shaved off, limbs lengthened, blemishes removed, teeth whitened. In other words, not even the women in the magazines look like the women in the magazines! The models for beauty, the "Super Models" are exactly that - in the exact same sense that "Super Man" is a mythical and unattainable standard for males and the Super Hero stereotype creates feelings of inadequacy in males in much the same way.

### **Under the Knife**

We live in a world where women go under the knife to remove or add to or change the shape and size of their bodies so they can feel beautiful. “Boob Jobs” are becoming main-stream and labia-plasty is the latest surgical “body improvement” being marketed to women. This is a cosmetic surgery advertised to correct irregular “flaps” and plump up the inner lips to make our vulvas look like what men see in porn magazines and movies. The cosmetic industry is literally “banking” on our shame. We live in a world where females starve themselves to death in order to meet a standard of beauty that doesn't exist. Eating disorders amongst women have reached epidemic proportions. In North America, 40% of all 9 year old girls have already tried dieting which is the leading cause of eating disorders. 90% of sufferers of eating disorders are female. (National Eating Disorder Center - Canada). Perhaps girls on this planet are literally, dying to be seen.

Parents and educators often compliment girls on their physical attributes with the intent of boosting their self-esteem. It is urgent that we understand that traditional compliments, which focus on appearance, are not only having the opposite effect intended they are potentially

dangerous. If we want to nurture the core-self of our daughters, we will stop telling them how beautiful they *look*. We will begin telling them how beautiful they *are*.

### **True Compliments**

How do we tell if it's a true compliment? By how we feel inside. If we feel pleased but uncomfortable, it may be harassment. If we feel a thrill but confused, it may be harassment. If we feel flattered but anxious, it may be harassment. A true compliment – be it about our body or our being - feels good. Period. It's clean. Not attached to what someone wants or needs from us. A true compliment is a comment, which speaks to or at least includes *who* a person is as opposed to what they look like or how "hot" they are. A person's physical qualities such as hair, facial structure, and height and body type are not acquired through any effort or talent. People are just born looking the way they do. To praise someone for something that they in effect had no part in creating is in and of itself, false. If we often feel uncomfortable receiving this form of praise, it may be because we sense the falseness inherent in it and we know we are being praised for something which we had no part in. If all a young woman hears is what great eyes or hair they have...they begin to hear: "Your eyes/hair are your only good feature."

### **Two Mirrors**

Girls are craving reflections of their inner qualities and strengths. We can help them see that there are two mirrors. One reflects the surface qualities, one reflects the essence of who she is. As we begin to practise reflecting a girl's essence we are cultivating that same practise inside of her. Ultimately, the goal is to nurture a girl's ability to see herself, from the inside-out. A person who sees and values *who* they are will be more likely to develop their strengths and qualities and fulfill their potential as a person regardless of gender or physical appearance.

**Essence:** *The fundamental nature of something which determines its identity.*

### **Essence Compliments**

Although the essence compliment does not have a focus on physical appearance as it pertains to stereotypical attractiveness, it could include a physical feature. For instance, to say a person has beautiful hair/clothing is focusing on the physical attribute. To say you admire the way a person does their hair/chooses their clothing is a comment about an internal quality. The quality being praised is their creativity.

- You are so beautiful *to me*.
- "I like the way you do your hair."
- "Your sense of style is so original. I really like your "look".
- "I like you so much."
- "You're a good friend."
- "I respect your clear, strong boundaries."
- "You have such a confident way of speaking."

- "I noticed you speak up when your friends were making racist comments. I was awed by your courage and integrity."
- "I've noticed you seem comfortable with a lot of silence. It's peaceful being around you."
- "I love the way you laugh."
- "You are a delightfully funny person."
- "Your whole face comes alive when you talk."
- "I'm interested in getting your opinion. You always have such a unique point of view."
- "You're so clever with your hands."
- "You are such a compassionate and caring person. "
- "I appreciate your honesty."
- "You have so many great talents."
- "Watching you run today, I felt so inspired by your determination."
- "How great that you can be in such good spirits even though your team lost today."
- "You sure know how to enjoy winning! Your excitement and pride in how well you did is awesome!"
- "I admire your fierceness when you play basketball."
- "I admire your loyalty to your friends."
- "When you smile, your happiness really shines through."
- "I trust you."
- "Your choices show integrity."
- "I love how playful you are."
- "You have a powerful singing voice."
- "You have so much character. I love how expressive your face is."
- "Your eyes are so expressive."
- "I love how you smile with your whole heart!"
- "It's great how you chose something both fashionable and practical."
- "One of the things that I like about you is how genuine you are."
- "I am impressed with how hard you are willing to work."
- "I admire the way you stood up for yourself."
- "Your strong spirit is awesome."

*"If we want to nurture the core-self of our daughters, we will stop telling them how beautiful they look. We will begin telling them how beautiful they are." - Anita Roberts*