



Volume 8
Issue 2 Spring 2000

Article 7

5-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Suzanne (2000) "Break the Mold," *The Promethean*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol8/iss2/7>

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Break the Mold

by Suzanne Smith

"Myth." Defined in Webster's dictionary as "an unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution." Hmm. Recently, a male friend stated in effect, "I hope God doesn't make me marry an ugly woman; I want a beautiful wife." Notwithstanding the bad theology such a statement implies, I valued his honesty but puzzled over what he meant—beautiful for whom? And what defines "beautiful?" Cute? Altogether lovely? Drop-dead gorgeous? Does he want someone whom he thinks is beautiful, or someone whom everyone else thinks is beautiful? Either way, God and I rolled our eyes.

Of course, people are attracted in differing ways by endless variations of the human shape: facial features, height, weight, skin-eye-hair color, voice. Whatever our tastes, we're all wired the same way; we are meant to enjoy one another's physicality. So he wants a beautiful wife? Perfectly understandable—if he means that he wants to feel physically attracted to her. No one expects to be repulsed by their lover. But why would they be? As if someone would say to their intended spouse, "Wow!! You're everything I've ever wanted—intelligent, kind, funny, honest, creative...physically you're a major disappointment, but that doesn't matter; I think God wants me to marry you." After doing penance for progressing that far in such a schizophrenic relationship, any smart person would turn around and run.

I hope the point is obvious. Real love grows out of an integrated wholeness, consisting of mutual attraction on countless levels. Enjoyment of physical attractiveness is not divorced from this committed love; it is a necessary ingredient, but never can survive as the foundation or defining criterion. Unless it is all you're looking for, in which case, one's "house of love" will require perpetual repair...cosmetic surgery to be exact. Consider a rose severed from a flourishing root system, leaves, branches; it can only please temporarily and then it dies. What about the rosebush's ability to nourish itself through a harsh winter, or to stretch its roots down deep "into good soil," or to climb in a marvelous tangle of directions? There is more to the bush than its blooms.

And there is more to you and me than our outward blossom, or perceived lack thereof.

Four years ago, I read a delightful fairytale called *Love and Be Wise* by Ann Carter, a modern retelling of Perrault's *Riquet of the Quiff*. This story defies stereotypical solutions—no frogs transform into handsome princes...no down-trodden scullery maids use magic clothing to dazzle rich men. In fact, a rather hideous-looking prince remains so but wins the heart of an exceptionally beautiful woman. His wisdom woos her, and in the end, his love gives her the power to see him as the most attractive man in the world. Bravo! What an unusual example for women and men! My sincere but culture-stained friend would probably look at me cross-eyed if I suggested he allow a woman's wisdom to woo *him*.

You've heard of "the beauty myth"? That insidious motivator in men and women to conform to Barbie or Ken proportions, weight and plastic expression? Of course you have. You live in the 21st century. Every TV commercial and glossy magazine ad invades our approval-starved psyches with one hammering message: "IMAGE IS EVERYTHING. IF YOU LOOK RIGHT, YOU'LL BE A SUCCESS." And every day we clamor to curl, diet, pluck, dye and squeeze ourselves into the mold. NEWS FLASH: this ideal is a lie; designed to drain our money and uniqueness. Certain segments of our culture present this image of so-called perfection to make a profit and take advantage of your desire for significance. The lie will probably never go away, but at least we can call a spade a spade.

More often than I care to admit, I abandon what I know to be true and buy into the "beauty" myth. Invariably, it begins with the temptation to compare my body with others'. I have been programmed to think of "attractiveness" on a graded scale, which has become the rubric I use to scrutinize my body in relation to its distance from the ever-illusory ideal. I think, "If I only had a flatter stomach, bigger breasts, smaller pores, straighter teeth, higher cheekbones, and a more fashionable wardrobe, I would be more desirable." I know I am not alone in this obsessive comparing, but because we are all shaped differently, there are as many "if only" lists as there are individuals.



Now don't get me wrong; there is an undeniable brightening of one's self-perception when the pursuit of wellness yields improved looks. Even wearing a complimentary style, color or fragrance can help us feel better about ourselves. Pursuing enhanced appearance is a good thing. But to condemn myself as ugly if I don't measure up to other people's "beauty" is to live in a downward spiral of discontent.

In his superb *Devil on the Cross*, Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o offers a painfully intimate glimpse into one character who exists in this web of miserable insecurity:

But she could never appreciate the sheer splendor of her body. She yearned to change herself in covetous pursuit of the beauty of other selves. Often she failed to dress in harmony with her body. She rushed to copy the ways in which other women dressed. Fashion, whether or not it flattered the shade of her skin or the shape of her figure, was what governed her choice of clothes. Sometimes Wariinga distorted the way in which she held herself by trying to imitate another girl's stride. Insistent self-doubt and crushing self-pity formed the burden that Wariinga was carrying...(11-12 Ngugi).

How this attitude resonates in my spirit! It is as though others' perceived attractiveness cancels out mine. Makes me into a zero.

And in candid moments I would have to admit that the spirit of Snow White's evil step-mother possesses me as well: "Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" My need to feel desired decays into an obsession to be the best. Do I really want others to feel inferior to me? Uh...well I must say with a cringe...Yes! Need I remind you or myself to scour the recesses of memory and find an instance when we consciously congratulated ourselves for looking better than someone else? We felt more powerful, in control, more significant in arousing jealousy. SICK!! Hopefully, this selfish attitude stems from healthier recognition—it is impossible for me to be a cookie-cutter model. A model of what? Why aren't they called unique masterpieces? It is only possible for me to be the best I can be.

The pressure to be considered worthy solely on the basis of looks is an overwhelming burden. Whose psyche, intricately woven in fragility and strength, can possibly shoulder such a stupid load? Who relishes the thought of being continuously reduced to an objectified surface? Don't we all want the kind of acceptance that embraces the totality of who we are—spiritual, intellectual and physical? An acceptance that is not repelled by our inevitable external flaws?

How sad that our culture rarely offers anything more than a shallow, limp definition of beauty. In contrast to the spouted cliché, beauty is not only skin deep. It is a capacity for living that is being increasingly deepened and filled, unobstructed by whatever we come wrapped in. That is desirability.

And let not your adornment be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart... (1 Peter 3:3 New American Standard Version).

