

Note to Self: Ditch the Designers

by Heidi Norman

I've been wondering lately what it means to me, to my friends, and to our children that at this time in our culture we regard ultra-skinny and extremely young girls to be the paragons of beauty? Staring age 39 in the face and having struggled for the better part of a year to lose 25 pounds has me thinking seriously about the messages we are sending society as a whole regarding both age and weight. What is beauty? Who is beautiful? What happens to our value in society as we age?

Personal reflection. If I feel beautiful but do not fit the images I see in magazines and on T.V. does that say I have great confidence or am I merely being obtuse? Oddly, I find myself looking forward to making the leap into my 40's next year. I've certainly enjoyed my 30's, but somehow I have this feeling that the next decade is going to be a winner — so what does that say about me when our society is obsessed with 14-year-old girls in thongs and micro mini-skirts? I worked so very hard to lose weight and I feel terrific. Celebrating my incremental weight loss has involved becoming almost tearful over regaining a normal BMI, running in 5K races, and having the strength and flexibility to teach my sons how to ice skate. I have never been worried about being *skinny*, nor am I terribly concerned about fitting into a size 6 (which incidentally hasn't happened since I was in sixth grade). On the other hand, I am oh-so-proud to take my skirts to the tailor to have them taken in so that they are no longer falling off my hips! I am giddy to the point of foolishness when I slip on a pair of non-stretch jeans in a smaller size! Is this vanity? Well, perhaps. I've never claimed to have a deficit in the vanity arena, however I also have no interest in, nor ambition to look like I have an eating disorder.

Young girls. I gaze at my nieces – ages 12, 6, and 3 – and wonder how they perceive their place in our culture as females. To what extremes will they go to fit in; to be told that they are beautiful? After the women's liberation movement of my youth, the ERA amendment, and Betty Friedan feminists are we still teaching our youngsters that girls are supposed to be “pleasers” first and foremost and that their worth in our society will be measured primarily by their sexual desirability? My nieces are all so different and yet their beauty makes my heart ache just to think about it. The oldest with her amazing green eyes and long, elegant legs is on the cusp of high school and all that that transition entails. The first-grader whose transformation from rough-and-tumble tomboy to blonde, blue-eyed all American girl has been like watching a butterfly emerge from its chrysalis. And the youngest, whose luminous tawny complexion and glossy, honey-brown ringlets make me melt when I stroke her cheeks or catch a curl of her hair on my finger. But these are merely the physical appearances of three whip-smart, funny, and loving girls. So what will happen to their self-confidence as they approach adolescence? Will they hide their intelligence in school in order to appear less clever than they really are? Will they go on odd diets that threaten their health in order to fit into the latest slinky-transparent-string-like confection created by the fashion industry for pre-pubescent females? Will they beg their parents for some kind of plastic surgery before they've applied to college? It makes my stomach clench to even consider these possibilities.

And how about my two sons? Our male children certainly aren't left out of this equation. My boys love to play Internet games on the computer, which seems to be fairly normal given that all of their friends do the same. I recently found my 8-year-old playing such a game and in the left-hand margin were numerous photographs of young women in their underwear posing in sexually suggestive ways. I was horrified and ended up ripping the electrical plug out of the socket to turn off the computer as fast as possible. My son was confused and said that he didn't even see the pictures, which I believe because his ability to ignore anything and anyone who isn't of immediate interest is acute. And yet I did a double-take. My second-grader just passed off photos of women stripping as an unnoticeable act -- is this because he sees such things so often that it is considered normal? He actually rolled his eyes at me like I was blowing things out of proportion! Now, I have been known to overreact, have a fairly secure reputation for expressing strong opinions, and certainly have embellished a few stories to make them more interesting, but am I so far removed from the norms of our culture that this type of thing is actually considered okay? I don't think so. As a mother of boys, how do I protect *them* from accepting the degrading messages so prevalent about females in our society? How do I ensure that they never act in ways that demean or humiliate their girlfriends, their female cousins or any of the girls in their school or neighborhood? I am no longer sure.

Back to me. It was pointed out to me by my loving and feminist husband that I have a subscription to a monthly fashion magazine that features many of the 14-year-old heroin-addicted anorexics that I am in a tizzy over. And I seem to have no problem whatsoever with adult women deciding to get a nip/tuck here or there as long as they don't end up looking (or acting) like Anna Nicole Smith. I have also been known to get so excited over a heavily discounted designer dress that I actually have a Depends moment in the store. But, <<said in a slightly whiny voice>> I really *love* looking at fashion magazines, totally groove on going to the spa for a treatment or two, and truly believe in the benefits of excellent retail therapy on occasion... So, do I eschew all things fashion-related in an effort to get the industry to change their paragon of beauty back to the curvier ladies of yesteryear? Or would that have not one iota of effect *and* leave me miserable to boot? Oh for the love of Oprah, what's a grown woman to do?

So here's my plan. Let me teach the children in my family, both sons and daughters, to be forever grateful for what they are -- which is beautiful, talented, and so very, very loved. I will also recognize how gifted and gorgeous each person is, beginning with myself. I will be grateful for my strong body, my loving family, my amazing friends, and my truly fantastic life. I will think hard about how my individual choices in reading material, clothing purchases, and time/attention/energy affect my collective community. And I will speak out and use the power of my purse to bring about change in the marketplace, and then invite my friends and family to do the same. I will save this memorandum to myself so that I can continue think about these issues; and I offer it to you for the same purpose. Maybe if we all take decisive action and pass on our message, some fashion bigwig somewhere will eventually get the point and make the change we wish to see.