

Spring 2011

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

WOMEN'S JOURNEYS: PROGRESS AND PERIL



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Skin Deep

By Kat Banakis

I am in seventh grade at a party, leaning against a wall with two friends, a girl and a boy. In elementary school, the boy used to wear Metallica t-shirts because his (absentee) father was a fan of the band. It is a hanging out party – the kind where parents put out chips and salsa, go into their room with a video and allow the youth social jungle to happen as it will. We are bored.

I look over to a couple teasing one another on the couch across the living room and ask the boy I'm sitting with, "How come guys don't like me?" Poor kid. He's on the spot. He can't win in this situation.

How could it be that I was created in the image of an indescribably incredible God and yet perceived myself as really rather dumpy?

He thinks for a moment and says earnestly, "Guys don't look past your outside to see that you're really nice underneath."

His words embed in me and become their own sort of truth: I'm not attractive on the outside. I'll be lucky if some guy is ever duped into seeing past my frumpy, dragon exterior.

Once I decided that I wasn't attractive, any compliment about my looks obviously had to have a different explanation. My parents regularly told me that I was beautiful. I thanked them but thought, *You have to say that. I'm your daughter.* After taking a college psych class my internal monologue matured: *The cognitive dissonance would be too great if the self didn't think I was wonderful when it was investing all available resources in me.*

I dated, I had boyfriends, but that never really altered my self-perception. Thus I attributed any compliment from a boyfriend to be part of what he had to do in his role, not as a legitimate statement from an objective third party.

My self-perceived plainness became a point of pride. Physical beauty was shallow, fleeting, and almost always synthetic. Focusing on physical beauty led to a middle-aged catastrophe – the prospect of being helplessly without savings, property, marketable skills, or even a driver's license because your husband has decided to leave you for a younger model.

This pride was complicated by my faith. Real Christian women, I thought, were comfortable with themselves and didn't adorn. I took satisfaction in being counter-cultural, foregoing things like fashion, make-up, and all forms of enhancements.

Still, I felt pretty crummy.

Blessed Assurance

I could blame society, I suppose, as if popular culture's ideal of female perfection were crafted by an evil society machine. Or I could say that this creation of the unattainable female ideal is the result of collective human sin, a byproduct of what happens when humanity yields to impulses that demean and exploit and do violence to people. But I'm not convinced that blaming anonymous outside forces or regarding media, advertising, or the visual arts as code for collective evil is all too helpful. I need practical ways to face the day with my real face, and cultural theodicy can quickly become a vortex of blame.

What I wanted was to feel good about myself within this world and its communities, not in spite of or in opposition to this world. I particularly want-

ed to feel better about myself because I was experiencing some serious cognitive dissonance when I tried to read the beginning of Genesis, where God creates humanity in God’s own image.

How could it be that I was created in the image of an indescribably incredible God and yet perceived myself as really rather dumpy? How could the image of God (me) be so different than what I believed God to be like?

My (Christian) counselor asked me what it would be like to covenant with myself not to allow the long-ago comments in seventh grade to dictate my self-perception now?

A novel concept. “Nice?” I ventured. That’s like asking what it would feel like to be a Parisian rock star: I don’t know.

So I spent a week looking at attractive people at work and on the street and in traffic and in church and in the locker room at the gym. What made them physically beautiful? What was the common factor in people that drew others to them? What made me want to watch them?

By the end of the week, I could draw a few conclusions: Some were big, others small. Some had obvious confidence, others held back. But what the beautiful people have in common is, as it turns out, what they have in common with the rest of us: they, we, live. We have breath. We are the quick, not the dead. We are alive.

The Quick and the Dead

I have never seen a beautiful corpse. Sometimes people who are sleeping can be beautiful in a vulnerable way. But not corpses. My grandmother’s body lying in the casket was a good-looking mannequin with a great make-up job and wardrobe team. That’s part of why I appreciate open casket ceremonies – to confirm that the person we knew is really gone. The summer I trained as an ER chaplain, a young boy drowned in Long Island Sound. I held the metal table steady while his mother climbed on top of the child on all fours and tried to pull the mortuary plugs out of his nostrils and throat. Acrid salt water gurgled back out. She shook his small body, as if she could shock him back to breathing. Still straddling him she glared at me and demanded, “Where is he?” Gone (to where we speak only in prayer with the saints).

I cannot grasp what it would be like to feel pretty all the time. But I do know what it’s like to feel so very alive that I forget to think about how I look at all – neither good nor bad, just alive. I am alive when I’m problem-solving with colleagues in a strategy session and we’re all on deadline. I can get lost in



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will enter the San Francisco marathon.

Gifts and Callings

While I understand the “stained-glass ceiling,” the limits that women face in church leadership, I don’t identify myself as a “woman priest.” I’m just a priest. I don’t perceive my gender as a special gift or calling, because I’ve never known a church without female leadership. I grew up with the gift of a family and a church that opened to me a limitless world. I didn’t know until college that the Episcopal Church didn’t always have women priests! I recognize I’m able to follow this vocation because of the incredibly powerful work that women did before me, women who had to wage nasty battles just to prove themselves as human beings. I am deeply grateful for their work and grateful that because of that work, it is not necessary for me to prove myself as worthy despite my gender.

The Hands of Christ

Serving the Eucharist, it’s a privilege to me to put the body of Christ in people’s hands. I love that moment. And over the years I’ve gotten to know people’s hands – bejeweled hands, or arthritic hands, or scarred. I think about how people after communion leave the church and become the hands of Christ in the world. I wanted to explore that more fully. So, with my family, I’ll visit Episcopal parishes across the Southeast, take pictures, hear people’s stories, learn what they do with the “hands of Christ” in their daily lives.

Terrifying, Wonderful

I love to preach. I love the practice of crafting a sermon, of discovering my own theology as I write. The wordsmithing that comes along with writing a palatable sermon is a delicious challenge. The words I’ve wrestled with on the page take on an even greater weight when they leave my mouth. It is terrifying and wonderful every time.

Self-care

The church is a holy, sustaining, and life-giving place, but for clergy it can also be exhausting and frustrating even amidst the blessings. Having children has really driven home my seminary-acquired lessons about self-care. If I do not take care of myself, no one else will; I need to be well not only for my parish, but for my family. Since becoming a mother, I have found it even more important to identify my boundaries and know when they are fluid and when they are impermeable.

a piece of music and or in friends' woes and joys. Alive is running in an aerobic trance so deep that only later do I realize where I've been and what my muscles just did.

I used to think that moments of forgetting my insecurities were mere escape, but I'm beginning to think that these moments are actually true and accurate in the face of the absolute beauty of being made in the image of God.

A few weeks ago, I heard Matthew 5 again, as if for the first time, the part where Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world." There's no contingency, no conditions or technicalities, no if-then for what we have to do to be God's enriching and enlightening force in the world. All we must do is live. And I remembered good old Karl Barth's contention that the essence of God is live action and St. Irenaeus of Lyon's statement that the glory of God is the human person fully alive.

That I can do. If that's imitatio Dei, that I can be. I can live. Life – the gift, the pulse – is the root and image and engine of beauty, everyone's beauty, and that's what marks the image of God upon us.

I'm not sure that I can envision breaking out into "I Feel Pretty" with a Broadway Puerto Rican backup

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chorus for the rest of my days, but I can envision a future of hunting for fireflies with the smell of Queen Anne's Lace hanging in the humidity, and drinking cups and cups of tea when life falls apart a bit, and protesting the sins that plague our world, and singing even when I'm too old to control the warble in my vocal chords.

I can live into that divine image. It's beautiful, really.

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"SCIENTISTS FIND UNIVERSE AWASH IN TINY DIAMONDS"*

By Mayne Ellis

But haven't we always known?
the shimmer of trees, the shaking of flames
every cloud lined with something
clean water sings
right to the belly
scouring us with its purity
it too is awash with diamonds

"so small that trillions could rest
on the head of a pin"

It is not unwise then to say
that the air is hung close with diamonds
that we breathe diamond
our lungs hoarding, exchanging
our blood sowing them rich and thick
along every course it takes
Does this explain
why some of us are so hard
why some of us shine
why we are all precious

that we are awash in creation
spumed with diamonds
shot through with beauty
that survived the death of stars

* quotation found in a newspaper clipping on the subject



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