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Cutting Edge

Wearing My Tuesday Glasses

For one young woman, Tuesday will never be the same again.

What's Beauty

BY JENNIFER JILL SCHWIRZER

CINDY JACKSON, CALLED “THE HUMAN Barbie Doll,” is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* under the heading “Body Transformation.” The book claims she has spent nearly \$100,000 to get her look. This “high priestess of plastic surgery” proudly details on her Web site the cosmetic procedures she has undergone: eye lifts, nose job, cheek implants, lip enhancement, cosmetic dentistry, chin reduction, jaw reshaped, face-lifts, breast implants in, breast implants out, dermabrasion, chemical peels, fat transfers, liposuction, filler injections, laser treatments, and much more.¹

Fantasy Versus Reality

It's not just Cindy who is pumping dollars into the plastic surgery industry in America. It's also millions of other women, who in 2003 had 87 percent of the total 8.3 million cosmetic procedures—nearly a 300 percent increase since 1997. Americans—especially American women—are in hot pursuit of perfection. But at what cost? In dollars and cents, \$9.4 billion in 2003.² In regards to health, sometimes incalculable. In fact, plastic surgery deaths are all too common, as fast-buck-seeking surgeons cut corners by doing in their offices what should be done in a hospital.

Another business that cashes in upon our worldwide obsession with physical perfection is the dieting industry. It's true that America needs to go on a diet—approximately 129 million U.S. adults are overweight or obese, which costs this nation anywhere from \$69 billion to \$117 billion per year.³ But rather than approach our obesity problem from the standpoint of health, corporate greed again cashes in and appeals to vanity. Millions are poured into dieting products and programs in hopes of trimming the fat off our billowing figures. In 2005 an estimated 55 million Americans went on a diet, spending an estimated \$40 billion in dieting products.⁴

A further analysis of the “figures” of women reveals an interesting phenomenon. As real women have gotten heavier, the ideal woman has gotten thinner. For instance, the average weight of Miss America winners has decreased for the past 50 years, even as the average weight of American women has increased.

This discrepancy between fantasy and reality has moti-

vated some women to resort to desperate attempts to attain their fantasy form: anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Anorexia involves limiting food intake to the point of severe underweight. Bulimia involves food bingeing and purging using vomiting, laxatives, and diuretics. Both of these conditions are considered psychological disorders, and are listed in the *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* put out by the American Psychiatric Association. Both conditions are physically dangerous; anorexia has the highest fatality rate of any psychological illness.⁵

A Distortion of Beauty

“Looksism,” as it might be called, is the primary culprit in eating disorders, as well as some of our other desperate attempts at physical perfection. Looksism prioritizes physical beauty above all else. On a spiritual level, it is worshipping and serving “the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 1:25).^{*} Looksism is patently shallow, and concerned with carnal versus spiritual things. God's gifts are exalted above the Giver. The postmodern premise that there is no absolute truth pushes the looksism trend by making human beings into their own little creators. Empowered to summon up our own reality, and therefore our own selves, we become engrossed with the image we project out to the world.

Looksism often inculcates a distorted ideal of beauty. Many women's fashions effectively distort their bodies. High heels make it impossible to run, and twist the feet into an unnatural position. Evening gowns cut fabric away from the shoulders, arms, and chest, exposing women to chilling. Heavy makeup smothers the skin. Cumbersome hairstyles consume time and expose women to many chemicals, the effect of which may not be known. And while most men cruise around comfortably in flat shoes, warm suits, and simple hair styles, they are not immune to this distortion, as revealed by the increase in men's beauty products and procedures offered.

American culture isn't alone in manipulating women into a “beautiful” shape. Consider foot-binding, which is now illegal but was once practiced in Asian cultures. Young women's feet were broken and bound to produce tiny, hooflike feet and a mincing gait. The neck rings on Burmese women are

Anyway?

Exploring the effects of “looksism” to our lives

designed to elongate the neck but would cause death if the rings were removed, because the women could no longer support the weight of their heads. Plates inserted into the lips of women of African tribal societies stretch their lower lips into the size of small dinner plates. While some of these customs are practiced upon men, it seems that women are often the scapegoats in these death-defying beauty rituals. We are pulled, pushed, poked, cut, squeezed, stitched, and stuffed in order to reach that elusive goal of physical beauty.

And why? What do we get out of it? Perhaps the greatest tragedy of looksism is the fact that women are the great enablers of a fashion system that destroys them. There's something that drives us to seek approval. Perhaps it stems back to our garden shame, when God said, “your desire shall be for your husband” (Gen. 3:16). Kept within the confines of a godly marriage, the desire for male approval is a curse-turned-blessing. But as women transfer their search for appreciation into a more and more public sphere, they are forced to vie with one another for the attention of the masses. It is then that they begin to engage an effort, sometimes involving physically perilous means, to mold themselves into objects of desire.

Didn't God create us with a desire to be beautiful? Yes. While most little boys were in the backyard cavorting in the dirt, most little girls were in the attic preening in dress-up clothes. Then those little girls became young women, and naturally dreamed of attracting a

man they could love forever. But our young desire for physical beauty was meant to blossom into a mature desire for beauty of character. The greatest tragedy of the culture of looksism isn't the striving for outer beauty so much as the complete neglect of inner beauty. When was the last time you saw a character makeover television show? If there were one, who would watch it? Yet

practical Christianity is all about character makeover: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). The mechanics of character development are simple: Look at Jesus and become like Him. Once the beauty of Jesus is seen and assim-

lated, mere physical beauty pales in comparison.

Makeovers Made to Last

In Jesus, the homely are transformed. Mother Teresa has never adorned the cover of *Vogue*, but there is something strangely beautiful about her. How many elderly left to starve on the streets of Calcutta received morsels from her hand? How many loathed lepers felt cherished by her? How many children read their first words upon her knee? How many death-bound souls were consoled in one of her AIDS hospices? How many of the “poorest of the poor” found a hot meal in one of her 450 centers around the world? In all of God’s suffering children she saw Jesus “in His distressing disguise.” “Speak tenderly to them,” she said. “Let there be kindness in your face, in your eyes, in your smile, in the warmth of your greeting. Always have a cheerful smile. Don’t only give your care, but give your heart as well.”⁶

Seventh-day Adventists have their own character-beauty queen. Ellen White’s damaged nose marred her otherwise attractive face for life. Finding herself rejected by peers and embroiled in a quagmire of broken health and deep depression, she flung herself upon the mercy of heaven. From that sacred place, the One she termed “the lovely Jesus” filled her with hope and courage, and she went on to live a life so saturated with His Spirit that others could not help noticing. The *New York Independent* published the following at the time of Ellen White’s death in 1915: “She showed no spiritual pride and she sought no filthy lucre. She lived the life and did the work of a worthy prophetess.”⁷ Friend and coworker A. G. Daniells said, “Mrs. White’s life far transcends the life of anyone I have ever known or with whom I have been associated.”⁸

What is beauty, anyway? Is it conformity to a physical ideal? Or is it love in motion? I prefer the latter definition. And I see it in Jesus, who was at His most beautiful when He was the most physically devastated. Put on trial and abused, forced to endure without sleep or food or water through the tedious hours of the night, He stood before

Pilate. The paparazzi of that day were snapping away, gathering material for the next morning’s headlines. But little did they know that God inhabited the Humiliated, and His beauty and perfection was shining forth to those who could see it. “There stood the Son of God, wearing the robe of mockery and the crown of thorns. Stripped to the waist, His back showed the long, cruel stripes, from which the blood flowed freely. His face was stained with blood, . . . *but never had it appeared more beautiful than now.*”⁹

Never had Jesus’ face appeared more beautiful than when it was ripped, torn, stained, and assaulted by hate. And He was ripped and torn so that we could be whole. In the cross we see the true ideal of beauty, a tragic beauty that emanates through the marring of sin and the ravages of misfortune. Anyone can reflect this beauty because Jesus will live in any willing heart. Is Jesus beautiful to you? He’s beautiful to me. Don’t you want to be like Him?

*Bible texts are from the New King James Version.

¹Cindy Jackson Web page, retrieved Sept. 29, 2005, from www.cindyjackson.com/my_cosmetic_surgery2.php.

²Plastic Surgery Research Web page, retrieved Sept. 29, 2005, from www.cosmeticplasticsurgerystatistics.com/statistics.html.

³U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report for 2003.

⁴David Kiley, “My Dinner With Nutri-System,” *Business Week*, Sept. 19, 2005, p. 84.

⁵M. Pipher, Ph.D., *Reviving Ophelia*, p. 174.

⁶Mother Teresa of Calcutta Web page, downloaded on Oct. 19, 2005, from www.ewtn.com/motherteresa/words.htm.

⁷The *New York Independent*, Aug. 23, 1915, quoted in *The Later Elmshaven Years*, by Arthur L. White, p. 444.

⁸A. G. Daniells, *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy*, p. 368.

⁹Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 735.

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