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Will I Be Pretty?

WHEN I TALK to young girls, I often ask that question so many adults ask. *What do you want to be when you grow up?* I love the vari- ety of answers. A teacher. A scientist. An astronaut. A veterinarian. A painter. The president. But no matter what type of life young girls dream of, I know there's a good chance there are two things they really want to be: thin and pretty.

Girls start thinking about their ideal body at a shockingly early age. Thirty-four percent of five-year-old girls engage in deliber- ate dietary restraint at least "sometimes." Twenty-eight percent of these girls say they want their bodies to look like the women they see in movies and on television.[1] To put this into context, impor- tant developmental milestones for five-year-olds include the suc- cessful use of a fork and spoon and the ability to count ten or more objects. These are girls who are just learning how to move their bodies around in the world, yet somehow they're already worried about how their bodies look, already seeking to take up less space.

Between ages five and nine, 40 percent of girls

say they wish they were thinner.[2] Almost one-third of third-grade girls report they are “always” afraid of becoming fat.[3] These young girls are not wor- ried about their weight because of health concerns. They’re worried

because they know that being pretty matters for girls, and that in this culture, thinness is a key component of that prettiness.

Leigh*, a bright, delightful seven-year-old girl with a curious disposition, visited my office with her mother, who had agreed to be interviewed for this book. Leigh decided she wanted to be in- terviewed as well, so I talked with her first. Leigh's mother stayed in the room, but sat slightly behind Leigh so that she would be less likely to influence her responses.

The chair in my office on which Leigh sat was too tall for her, leaving her free to swing her legs as we talked. Leigh's resting facial expression was mildly skeptical, as if she couldn't decide whether the visit was boring, like going to see a doctor, or fun, because she got to play with the toys on the table in my office. Either way, she was a good sport.

"Leigh," I asked, "can you think of what a beautiful woman looks like? Someone who's very pretty? Can you make her up in your head?"

Leigh squinted her eyes a bit and nodded. "She has long, straight hair, and she's wearing a lot of makeup. And high heels. She's thin. Her arms and legs are thin." Leigh's description sounded as though she were reading off a list of specifications for a casting call. After detailing the thinness required for various parts of this imaginary woman's body, Leigh paused. "I'm not sure how big her head is," she said, her brow wrinkled in thought.

The moment was simultaneously sad and charming. Charming because Leigh was so perplexed about how to describe the size of a woman's head. Sad because she already believed that a woman's beauty could be captured via a series of measurements.

I asked Leigh if it matters whether a girl is pretty. "You get more praise and stuff," she told me, barely taking her eyes away from the miniature Rubik's Cube she was manipulating.

Early in many girls' development, the desire to be prettier is already cluttering their thoughts. I'm sure I was no different as a young girl. I remember my grandparents taking me to Cypress Gardens in Flor- ida when I was five years old. In addition to all the lovely flowers you'd expect to see, Cypress Gardens was populated with young, attractive women who had been hired to dress as southern belles and roam the park. They carried parasols and wore frilly, poofy, pastel dresses. I have an album with several photos of young me, clad in shorts and a T-shirt, squinting into the sun, posing next to each of these women. I was too young to wonder why a woman would be hired just to walk around and look pretty, or why there was no male equivalent of the roaming southern belles. I was too young to wonder what it must have felt like to wear one of those crinoline-heavy dresses in the Florida heat, even as my own sweat-soaked hair stuck to my head. I was also too young to ask why all the women were young and white and thin.

Times have changed since that childhood trip to Florida. The cultural obsession with prettiness remains, but the standards are even higher. A relative of mine took her six-year-old daughter to Disney World recently. When the little girl saw Cinderella and Snow White, she complained, "Those aren't real princesses. They're just regular ladies dressed like princesses." She scoffed, "I can tell be- cause their faces are busted."

When I first heard this anecdote, I was confused. I thought she meant their faces literally were

broken. Turns up any young person could tell you that *busted* is just a synonym for ugly.

"Where did you learn that word?" asked the little girl's mom. "YouTube," the girl replied, with a shrug and a grin.

Girls today grow up knowing not just that prettiness is required of women, but that the standard for beauty is near perfection. Even women hired to impersonate princesses leave them thinking, "Meh. I've seen better."

Happily, despite being aware of these princess-level impossible standards, seven-year-old Leigh seems to feel just fine about how she looks. "Leigh," I said, momentarily pulling her attention away from a set of toy magnets, "what if somebody asked, 'What does Leigh look like?' What would you say?"

Leigh scrunches her face up, lets out a long *hmmm*, then answers. "Well, not exactly tall, not exactly short. I'm like the average seven- year-old size, and I have curly red hair and green eyes and today I'm wearing a dark blue dress and light blue shoes."

"That's a good description," I tell Leigh. "What would you say your body looks like?"

Leigh is warmed up now, so there's no pause. "My arms are thin and my legs are really muscly and my trunk is normal."

"Do you like your body?" I ask.

Leigh nods and gives a delightful answer. "I run laps and run around and climb a lot and jump a lot. And I swim and kicking gets my legs good."

"What do you think is more important," I ask Leigh, "if your body can do things or if your body is pretty?"

"Do things." Leigh answers with no hesitation. Leigh's mom smiles from behind her, relief in her eyes.

"Do you think you'll always feel that way?" I ask. Leigh gets a little quiet.

"I'm not sure," she responds. "I hope

so," I say.

"Me too," says Leigh, but she's looking down and her legs have stopped swinging.

I wonder what will happen to Leigh when she enters the rocky territory of adolescence. I hate thinking about the fact that there's a decent chance she will no longer feel so accepting of how she looks. The statistics aren't good. Around 90 percent of young women have no problem naming a body part with which they're unhappy. About

50 percent express what researchers call a "global negative evaluation" of their body.[4] The sense so many teen girls have of not being "good enough" is intimately tied up with the disappointment they feel when they look in the mirror.

Beauty Sick

After researching women's battles with beauty for years, I can confidently tell you that girls and women who struggle to feel at home in their own bodies are not some odd subculture of America. They are not a vanity-struck minority. They are our daughters, our sisters, our students, our friends, our partners, and our loved ones. They are our future leaders. They are sick of wondering if they will ever be beautiful enough. They are beauty sick.

Beauty sickness is what happens when women's emotional energy gets so bound up with what they see in the mirror that it becomes harder for them to see other aspects of their lives. It starts surprisingly early, as soon as young girls are taught that their primary form of currency in this world involves being pleasing to the eyes of others. Although we hear the most about beauty sickness in young women, it's a malaise that affects women of all ages. You can't simply grow out of it. You must break free with deliberate in-

tent and perseverance.

Beauty sickness is fed by a culture that focuses on women's ap- pearance over anything else they might do or say or be. It's re- inforced by the images we see and the words we use to describe ourselves and other women. Those who shame women for their ap- pearance feed beauty sickness. Those who praise girls and women only for how they look do the same.

Beauty sickness hurts. It contributes to and finds a ready home

in the depression and anxiety that plague so many women. At a practical level, beauty sickness steals women's time, energy, and money, moving us further away from the people we want to be and the lives we want to live. It keeps us facing the mirror instead of facing the world.

Beauty sickness is not a literal illness. You won't see it on an X- ray or in the results of a blood test. But like many other types of illnesses, you can see its widespread and devastating effects. Some of the effects are obvious, like eating disorders and skyrocketing rates of plastic surgery. Others are more subtle, like the distracted hours a girl spends obtaining the perfect selfie to post on social media. Beauty sickness may not be a diagnosis a physician or psy- chologist would make, but I promise you that any health care prac- titioner who works with women has seen it. We've all seen it.

If you're a woman, there's a good chance you've felt beauty sick- ness. If you've ever thought about staying home instead of attend- ing an important event because you didn't think you looked good enough, that was beauty sickness. If you've found yourself dis- tracted during a meeting because you were comparing your body with that of another woman in the room, that's beauty sickness. If you've ever decided not to go swimming with your children be- cause you couldn't imagine facing the world in a bathing suit, that's beauty sickness. If

you feel short of time and money, but still spend plenty of both trying to push yourself closer to our culture's beauty ideal, you can blame beauty sickness. If you want to stop worrying about how you look, but keep getting pulled back to the mirror, then you know what beauty sickness feels like.

The signs of beauty sickness are in our thoughts and our behav- iors, but this illness also lives in our culture. A beauty-sick cul- ture cares more about an actress's nude selfie than important world events. A beauty-sick culture always, always finds a way to comment

on a woman's appearance, no matter how irrelevant it is to the mat- ter at hand. It teaches young girls that learning to apply makeup is a more important skill than learning to do science or math. If you're struggling with beauty sickness, don't imagine it's your own fault. A sick culture makes for sick people.