From My Point of View:

WOMEN, SOCIETY AND SELF-ESTEEM

Linda Van Grinsven

Self-esteem is often very simply defined as "feeling good about yourself." In reality, self-esteem is much more complicated than that. To understand self-esteem we must first start with another term, self-concept.

My self-concept contains a wide variety of images and beliefs. Some of these images and beliefs refer to facts, such as "I am a woman," "I am Caucasian" or "I am a mother." Others refer to my less tangible aspects and their accuracy is not so easily verified. These include items such as "I am smart," "I am organized" or "I am overweight." I must next decide which of these items are most important to me. If the most important items are positive ones like, "I am smart" and "I am organized," then I will have a high level of self-esteem. If the items that are most important to me are negative ones such as "I am overweight," then I will have a low level of self-esteem.1

Do you feel good about yourself? Unfortunately, a majority of American women today do not. A recent survey found that American women have more negative feelings about themselves physically than women in any other culture studied.2 How can this be, when American women as a group have more education, money, power, legal and political recognition than women in any other country? Yet, in terms of how we American women feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our grandmothers!3 As one author put it, "I have yet to meet a woman who couldn't tell me, in detail, what was wrong with her body." We all know what we don't like about ourselves physically.

Why does physical appearance so profoundly affect the self-esteem of American women today? What elements of our society cause this to be so? We can begin by looking at the images that surround us every day. Whether we read a magazine, watch TV or go to a movie, the images of beautiful women surround us. We may laugh at the idealized image of the gorgeous fashion models and even find this image irritating, but it does surround us and affect us.

When we examine the feminine ideal that the media bombards us with, we can come to some conclusions about what is expected of women today: In order to achieve a high level of self-esteem, always look beautiful, always be thin and never, ever grow old.

Beauty

Contemporary American society requires that women be beautiful at all times. We can achieve this by making a trip to the beauty salon or by visiting a cosmetic surgeon. Now there's nothing wrong with looking one's best. I think most women enjoy getting ready for a special occasion, wearing a new dress, or finding a new makeup that they feel makes them look better. The danger comes when our image of ourselves becomes based solely on how good we think we look.

In a recent survey done by Glamour magazine, when readers were asked if there was too much pressure put on women to improve their appearance, 83% answered yes.4 This pressure comes from many different sources. We feel it every time we turn on the TV or open a women's magazine. Every image we see is one of a beautiful woman, and when we look in the mirror we ask ourselves "Why don't I look like that?". The fact is that the images of women presented to us by the media do not represent reality. One of my least favorite examples is the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue. I once saw a TV reporter stopping people on the street and asking them what they thought about the Swimsuit Issue. He stopped one woman who looked up and said, "I hate it, guys look at that magazine and think that all women should look like the women in there and we don't. No one looks like the women in there!" The Swimsuit Issue is painting a false picture for both men and women. The average woman doesn't look anything like the women pictured there.

The pressure to be beautiful is strongly reinforced by the beauty industry. It is the advertising dollars of the cosmetics industry that surrounds us with images of beautiful women. The beauty of the fashion model is unattainable for a majority of us, yet we spend lots of money trying to imitate her. The cosmetics industry is worth $20 billion worldwide5 and the cosmetic surgery industry in America grosses $300 billion a year.6 These industries couldn't survive if women where content with the way they looked. Cosmetic advertising tells women that to make it in this world you have to be noticed, and we all know that beautiful women get noticed. The Revlon advertisement urges customers to be "The most unforgettable women in the world."

A woman from Washington DC responded to a Glamour magazine survey about beauty by saying, "I don't feel that technically I am attractive. But I do believe that to those who know and love me, I am beautiful. People's looks change as

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you get to know them. And there are countless variations of beauty."

Beauty is more than just how you look, your hair, your face, your clothing. It is really an inner trait or quality. We all know women that society wouldn't rate as beautiful, but to us they are.

**Thinness**

The second requirement placed on American women today is that we must be thin. The dress size of the average model is a 6 and that must be our goal. We are told that we can all achieve this goal. We only need to join the right diet program or eat the right diet foods.

The importance of weight is greatly overemphasized in our society and it is producing disastrous consequences. American women, and girls in particular, are obsessed with thinness or with achieving a body shape that only a tiny percentage of women come by naturally. Many people are now comparing the effects of weight obsession in the 90's to the effects of drug use in the 70's.

The National Institute of Compulsive Eaters indicates that 80 percent of 10 year old girls claim they are on a diet. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that 70 percent of normal weight women want to be thinner, while 23 percent of women who are already underweight want to be thinner than they are. The fact is that weight is a major problem in our society and one that is largely being ignored.

Twenty-five years ago none of this was true. Twenty-five years ago the average model weighed only 8 percent less than the average woman, but today the average model or actress weighs 23 percent less than the average American woman. In 1960 the average Miss America Pageant contestant weighed 9 percent less than the average American woman of her height, by 1978 she weighed 16 percent less. And every year since 1970 the Miss America winners have been as thin as or thinner than all the other contestants.

For many women, weight is their number one complaint. I so often hear "If I could only lose 5, 10 or 15 pounds," or "If I could only make my stomach flatter or my thighs or my hips smaller, then I could be happy with myself." Too often we view our physical size as being far more important than it should be and this, of course, lowers our level of self-esteem. Being thin, rather than being intelligent or industrious or generous or even healthy, is the quality most prized by women today.

We have a whole industry whose goal it is to make women long for a thinner body and it is one of the fastest growing industries in America today. Eight million Americans dish out nearly $3 billion on weight-loss programs. The diet industry uses advertising slogans like, "For a thinner, happier you" and "Nothing feels as good as feeling good about yourself." They place one person after another in front of the camera to tell you that they now feel good about themselves because they've lost weight. These advertisers' first goal is to make you unhappy with yourself, and then they convince you that in order to become happy all you need to do is shed pounds.

Linking thinness with self-esteem is especially dangerous among girls, as the number of young girls with eating disorders is reaching epidemic levels all over this country. Talk to almost any teenage girl and she can tell you about at least one girl she knows in school who is anorexic or bulimic. We also know that smoking is on the rise among teenage girls and one of the main reasons is that they've discovered that it's easier to lose weight and keep it off if they smoke. Young girls today believe that dieting is what real women do. They see the magnitude of dieting commercials on TV, they see their mothers or their friends dieting and they think that this must be part of what it means to be a woman.

The effects of chronic dieting and unchecked weight obsession are devastating. They lead to irritability, poor concentration, anxiety, depression, apathy, emotionalism, fatigue, disturbed sleep, and the list goes on. Think of the effects that these items would have on a girl's ability to perform at school. Some experts have gone so far as to say that we are losing a generation of girls to the effects of weight obsession. Yet we hear very little about it in the press and it is largely ignored in the schools. We need to stand up as a society and say: "This is intolerable. This is unacceptable. We don't starve women here. We value women."

Why are women today so obsessed with their weight? Why are we as a society ignoring this problem? Bulimia and chronic dieting take away women's energy and motivation; anorexia is killing too many women. Why is this happening? I believe that girls today are growing up in a changing culture. Women have made great strides in the past thirty years to be accepted in what used to be a man's world in education and in business. Girls growing up today are told that they can do anything and more pressure is put on them to achieve than ever before. At the same time they are growing up in a culture that gives them few role models in these areas. The primary role models they see every day are fashion models and movie stars, all very thin and all very beautiful. So now we tell young girls that they must act like real men and make it in a man's world, but at the same time they must look like models.

We all need to take another look at ourselves. Each of us needs to say to ourselves, "My body is OK. How much I weigh or the exact proportions of my body are not important. My first priority is to be healthy, not hungry. In the gospels Jesus shows us repeatedly that women are valuable to him, so I am valuable to him." As one teenage girl said, "Think about what could be done if all my friends and I put the energy we spend obsessing about our bodies into something else."

**Youth**

The third path to self-esteem as defined by our society is youth at all cost. One must do whatever it takes to always...
look young. The image of the older woman has practically vanished from our society. Pick up any women's magazine and count the number of pictures you find of women over forty. It's never more than a handful and not only do they rarely show women over forty but, when they do, the pictures are almost always touched up to remove any sign of wrinkles or age.

One example of this that sticks in my mind is a picture I saw of Audrey Hepburn in a popular women's magazine a few years before her death. Audrey Hepburn was a beautiful woman, even in the last years of her life; although her face had many wrinkles, she still looked radiant. Yet the pictures of her in this magazine were completely touched up to the point of not even showing a single wrinkle. I thought to myself, "This is fake, this is not how she looks; why can't we picture her as she really is, why do we have to paint this false image?" But magazines continue to project the image that looking one's age is bad because so much of their ad revenue comes from people who would go out of business if the visible signs of aging were esteemed in our society.

I have noticed a large increase in the number of products that call themselves anti-aging. This trend started with skin cremen that promise to "reduce the visible signs of aging" and now it is promoting items like makeup which promises to "give you a younger look, even up close." I picked up a women's magazine the other day and of the first eight advertisements I found four of them were for anti-aging products.

Do you remember the ad that showed a beautiful woman in her mid-30's staring into the camera and stating "I don't intend to grow old gracefully, I intend to fight it every step of the way"? That's the attitude that our society wants women to have: We must fight age because we support billions of dollars for cosmetic companies and for cosmetic surgery!

Americans spend $300 billion per year on cosmetic surgery and a large portion of this is for surgery to reverse the signs of aging. Eighty-five percent of all cosmetic surgery patients are women. I remember listening to Ivana Trump give an interview several years before she divorced Donald. The interviewer said to her, "I've heard that Donald never wants you to grow old." Ivana replied "Yes, he told me that I should do whatever it takes to always look young. I told him that I would do that but it was going to cost him!" Shortly after that interview she had her first facelift.

It's sad that our society can't respect the aging process in women. We all know that aging is looked at very differently for men than for women. As a man grows old we say he looks more distinguished and he is more highly respected. As women grow old they become ignored and replaced. The number of older men on TV and in movies far outweighs the number of older women.

Yet in many other societies around the world women look forward to old age. It is a time in their lives when they are able to do more because they no longer have the burdens of family. In these societies older women are more highly respected. They are looked to for advice and help by the younger women around them. As a society we need to stop this emphasis on youth at all costs and start looking forward to old age. We need to respect older women in the same way that we respect older men and we need to say "no" to the attitude that looking one's age is bad. There is true beauty in the aging process.

Christ-Centered Self-Esteem

It is nearly impossible for women to achieve a high level of self-esteem based on what our society requires. We can never be beautiful enough, thin enough or look young enough. So where can we go to find our own self-esteem?

I have found that there is only one person who can make me "feel good about myself," only one person who completely loves me exactly as I am, who always forgives my mistakes and who continues to work in my life to make me the best person I can be. That person is Jesus Christ. Proof of this can be found when we look at how Jesus interacted with the many women he met while on earth.

Jesus restored the self-esteem of the Samaritan woman at the well, and the woman who cried upon his feet. In the story of Mary and Martha we see that he treated women as intelligent, valuable human beings. He also accepted women as part of his team and allowed them to follow and support him. Jesus empathized with the pain that women experience, healed the woman who was bleeding, and made the crippled woman's back straight. At the same time he stood up for equal treatment for women when he was presented with the woman caught in adultery. And even as he was dying on the cross, he showed his love for women by making sure that his own mother would be cared for.

We will never achieve a high level of self-esteem when we pursue the false path that society directs us to. In contrast, Jesus Christ has told and shown each one of us that we are worth everything to him. It is because Jesus cares and loves me so, that I can truly "feel good about myself."

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"A WILD GOOSE CHASE"

or,

ELLA SHEPPARD & THE JUBILEE SINGERS

Jo Ellen Heil

"The slave songs represented things to be forgotten... We finally grew willing to sing them privately. We practiced softly... But the demand of the public changed this. Soon the land rang with our slave songs."

Ella Sheppard, 1871

Seven women. Four men. They called themselves The Jubilee Singers. One of America's most astonishing successes, their music once rang out across the land. They changed the fabric of our culture by introducing spirituals to the American public for the first time. Yet their stories have been hushed.

Founded in 1866 for African-Americans, Nashville's Fisk University seemed doomed for closure by 1871. Student Ella Sheppard recalled, "There was no money even for food. A special prayer was offered for the next meal."

Led by their music instructor, students like Sheppard, Maggie Porter and America Robinson decided to risk it all. On October 6, 1871, the small choir set out to "sing the money out of the hearts and pockets" of Northern audiences. Scoffers called it "a wild goose chase." Eight months later the Singers paid off Fisk's debts.

The choir then took Europe by storm. Performing before royalty and general audiences alike, they paved the way for many African-Americans who followed, artists like Sissieretta Jones and Marian Anderson. Their confidence grew. Sheppard had once slipped into her music teacher's home after dark, "so that no one would see the black pupil." In Berlin she wrote, "After the concert many came up to congratulate us."

After raising over $150,000 The Jubilee Singers disbanded in 1878. They had brought the cause of African-American education to millions. Sheppard returned home, becoming a teacher and community leader. Robinson remained abroad to study languages and music. Seeking new challenges in an era that offered painfully few options to African-American women, they continued to touch the world.

Let us applaud them.

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