

LEARNING TO LOVE YOURSELF

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Creative Non-Fiction

The world is full of beauty. I have witnessed it with my own eyes.

Our car wandered down an unfamiliar winding path on the wrong side of the road. My eyes looked out the window, scanning the scenery, taking it all in. That is when I told my uncle to pull the car over. My aunt and cousin, the other two passengers in the car, seemed confused by my request. After all, we were in a foreign country in the middle of nowhere. Something told me to stop the car that day, almost as if I was beckoned by something greater. It was late September, the sky was the same gray as the abandoned stone castles we had passed on the way to our bed and breakfast. I had nowhere to be for the next two weeks except anywhere my soul led me.

I sat down to rest on a bed of emerald moss and lavender flowers that spilled over the edge of an Irish Cliffside. I stared into the vast Irish sea, feeling the sea spray my face and smelling the salt as massive waves crashed against the black polished stone below. I enjoyed watching the wind send ripples through the soft rolling hills of lush green grass. My hair billowed in the wind and I closed my eyes so all I could hear was the sound of the sea.

To be in the country where my ancestors came from and feel so connected to the land. That moment was beautiful. Through the course of my life I have come to realize that beauty is not just in the places we go but also in the people we meet.

In the 1800s being a larger woman was seen as desirable because it showed that you were well fed and therefore had a lot of money. It's funny how time changes standards.

What determines the parameters of beauty? Who has the authority to deem one thing as beautiful and another as not beautiful? The answers to these questions are not clear, yet we receive messages about beauty every day telling us what to believe. We see them in magazines, on television, on billboards. They whisper in our ears and say "skinny is beautiful." "You need to have perfect hair, perfect make-up, perfect teeth."

So many messages bombard us that this whispering becomes screaming. What they are all really saying is, “you’re not good enough.”

When I was a child, I would sit with my big sister as she put on makeup each morning before school. I would watch the careful way she smoothed her skin with foundation and powder. I always noticed how she would lean over the bathroom sink and get real close to the mirror. How she masterfully applied black eyeliner and mascara to make her blue eyes look both piercing and feminine. I remember she’d add bronzer to add definition to her cheeks and finish with pink lip gloss, her trademark. To me she was so pretty I wanted to be just like her with her honey colored hair and stylish outfits. I was only 10 years old, I still felt uncomfortable in my own skin, but I didn’t quite feel right putting make up on just yet either. To be honest, I think I was still trying to figure out exactly who I was.

In the 1920s, a short, thin, flat chested figure was the most desired. This was the era of flappers and women who rebelled against rules like the prohibition. They were considered more attractive than those who played by the rules.

Someone once told me that I light up when I talk about my passion for writing. They said when I describe what writing means to me, my story lines or characters, I come alive in a whole new way. I can describe places and people in such detail at times and with such feeling. Why is it hard to think of my own self this way? It is because I’ve forgotten how to love myself.

Dear self in the mirror,

Please don’t call me names anymore. How can you talk to me this way when you’re supposed to love me? It hurts to look at my reflection and hear you taking inventory of my flaws one by one. You rattle them off quickly because you have memorized my imperfections. I hear the insults in a continuous loop: double chin, chubby belly, love handles, fat thighs, stretch marks, fat arms, stubby legs, ugly hair, dull teeth, baby face, and it goes on and on. Can I make an observation? You wouldn’t dare saying such cruel things to your friends. Thoughts like that don’t even cross your mind about them. If you heard someone saying these things to them you’d be angry with their attacker. So why do the insults come so easily when you talk to me? Why do you look at me with such disgust? I don’t know how we got here. How did you grow to hate me so much? Why? I am a good person. I promise. I deserve and am worthy of your love. Please believe me.

By the 1950s, the more curves a woman had, the better. Women like Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor were the most attractive women on television. People were encouraged to buy products that would make their figure fuller.

I sat in the nail salon the other day and realized for the first time that I have come to love the smell of the chemicals used there. They are very potent chemicals. In fact, if you aren't used to the smell, it may give you a headache. I say I have come to love it because it hasn't always been that way.

All I know is that it has something to do with the human brain being amazingly associative. I figured out that I associate the smell of chemicals in the nail salon with feeling beautiful because I feel beautiful after getting my nails done. Just like I associate the smell of exhaust with my dad's old pickup truck and fond memories of riding in the passenger seat to get ice cream with him from time to time.

By the 1980s body ideals had once again changed dramatically. In the 80s, the best look was the super model. This look meant that woman should be tall and thin like Elle McPherson. Men wanted women who had "legs for days" and a flat stomach.

I am starting to think that conforming to what others think is perfect, is impossible. Our idea of perfect is always changing. Take me for example, I am short, ideal for the 1920s, but curvy, ideal for the 1950s. There is no way that I would have been able to conform during the 80s to the super model look. My legs are not long for days. If I would have been the age I am now during that time, I am sure I would have felt even worse about my body image than I do today.

My sister never did see herself the same way that I saw her back then. She always surprised me when she looked in the mirror after all of that work and disappointedly said, "Oh well, good enough." The funny thing is that I knew the real Christa, the Christa without makeup, and I thought she was just as beautiful without it on. I knew that my sister's beauty was always present, but convincing her of that was a whole other story. She still does that. I guess the only bully we can't stand up to is ourselves. Now today, I often look at my reflection in the mirror as an adversary instead of an ally. But I'm working on it every day.

By 2010, the ideal body image became the skinny woman with a large booty. Prime examples being Kim Kardashian, Nikki Minaj and Jennifer Lopez. A large bust, small waist, and large backside are considered attractive.

No matter what the ideal seems to be at any certain time or another, I've come to the conclusion that there is no possible way for every woman to conform to every ideal. How are women supposed to keep up with such impossible standards? Yet we still subject ourselves to this unrealistic pressure and expectation. Why?

Dear self in the mirror,

I need to tell you something. I've tried asking you nicely to stop and it hasn't worked. It's time for me to start being brutally honest instead. You wear me down sometimes. All I ever hear from you are the negative things about myself and I am drained because of it. Do you know how exhausting it is to take criticism day in and day out with no rebuttal? I need you to start contributing positive thoughts instead of only negative ones. The bullying, the self-degradation, and all of the horrible things that you say about me, has got to stop. I'm sick and tired of being told by you that I need to lose weight or be prettier or smarter or more successful. It's time to call it like it is, you're a liar. You tell me that if I don't do all of those things then no one will love me but I know it's not the truth. Because of you I spend so much time putting myself together to please other people, when the real work I should be doing is trying to please myself. I need to learn to love me first before I try to make others love me. Frankly, I'm done taking your bullshit.

The woman in the nail salon used many tools to shave down, round out, and apply more acrylic to my nails. She was careful with her instruments, like an artist: smoothing, painting, and perfecting. She worked hard for a long time to make my nails look flawless. I studied her face as she worked. Her expression reflected both concentration and pain. You could see the sadness that had settled into the deeply set lines in her brow and corners of her mouth. Her hair was pulled back into a plain braid and a strand kept untucking itself from behind her ear and fell over her face. She would readjust it like a child trying to mind their manners. She didn't wear any makeup, and I noticed that her nails were not done.

Although we come from very different places we connect somehow in silence and art. It was a beautiful moment to reflect on our differences and similarities. I looked at her and thought to myself, she is so lovely. That realization spurred another thought. Maybe there is more than one kind of beautiful.

It was about this time that I started to unravel the idea that beauty comes in millions of forms. Beauty can be the flowers in your garden or a song that touched you deeply. Doing something out of the kindness of

your heart, as well as all different shapes, sizes, and colors of people too. Maybe we are so used to our own features that we don't appreciate them as a stranger would. I wonder what would happen if we all just stopped trying to conform and instead decided to be ourselves? Would we then finally see that beauty is not about having a pretty face and more about having a pretty mind, heart, and soul? When will we learn that happy girls are the prettiest girls?

I stand in front of my mirror again today, this time determined to see myself as I really am. It is night time, I have taken all of my makeup off and am in a plain white t-shirt and sweat pants. I stare at my reflection for a long time. I don't let any negativity leak in this time. I didn't place any expectations on myself and something happened in that quiet moment in front of the mirror. The voice in the mirror went silent. Even with all of my self-proclaimed imperfections I now know I am just the way God intended me to be: petite, curvy, blonde, with freckles sprinkled across the apples on my cheeks and the bridge of my nose. I am a person with kindness rooted deeply into her morals. I am acutely reflective and an inward thinker. I am an old soul who loves black and white movies and musician like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. I am not the cookie cutter image that I've tried so hard to conform to. I am a product of love. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

I blink my Irish green eyes a few times finally seeing myself through a new lens. I feel the pressure lifting off of me. I can breathe now. I am perfect just the way I am in this vulnerable moment and a thought crosses my mind once more. The world is full of beauty. I have witnessed it with my own eyes.