

The Cosmic Ocean

Chapter 5: Beauty and Belonging

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The Tightrope of Beauty

Suffering is combustible, like gasoline, gunpowder, or rocket fuel. And like any combustible substance, suffering can hurt or help us. Our suffering can explode violently, harming us and those we care about. Our suffering can also choke us quietly with its smoke and toxic fumes, gradually suffocating our zest for life and making us bitter shadows of who we once were. Or we can benefit from our suffering. Similar to people who use rocket fuel to journey beyond perceived limitations, we can use our suffering to fuel our spiritual journey toward empathy, hope, and peace. To explain how I used my suffering to propel me to the transcendent spiritual realm of radical empathy, I must discuss my experiences as an Asian-looking black child in Alabama.

Although I am part black and my father taught me to think like a black man from his generation, I looked Asian as a child. Growing up mostly around white children, I was bullied because I looked Asian. In fifth grade when I was walking to class one day, a boy who often made fun of me said in front of the other students, “Paul is so ugly, I can’t imagine a woman ever wanting to marry him. Paul will never get married because he is too ugly.” I felt humiliated and did not know what to say. I was also deeply confused, because why would he say something so cruel? Was it true?

Because I was bullied for looking Asian, as a child I desperately wanted to look white, but I came to the painful realization that I could not change the shape of my eyes or the tan color of my skin. Like many people with racial features deemed unattractive, I began to hate the parts of my appearance I could not change. I cannot count the number of times I stared in the mirror as a child, hating my facial features, hating myself, wishing I looked different.

As we discussed earlier, in modern society virtually all human beings have shared this experience to some extent. How many people, especially in American society, have stared in a mirror and wished they looked different? How many have wanted to be taller, slimmer, more muscular, or younger? How many have gazed at their reflection and desired a nicer head of hair, clearer skin, less wrinkles, a flatter stomach, or the ability to change the shape and size of their facial features and body parts? How many have been tormented by the feeling that they are not pretty enough, handsome enough, or good enough?

As I explained in chapter 2, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a metaphor for our *heightened human awareness*. We are the only species on the planet, as far as we know, who looks in the mirror and thinks, “I hate my body. I hate my face. I hate myself.” No other species suffers from self-destructive eating disorders because it perceives itself as being too fat. No other species hates its body because it does not look like a supermodel, or feels so ugly that it ponders suicide.

A person might assume that Asian facial features are considered ugly only in America, but this perception also exists in Asia. According to an article from ABC News, the country with the highest proportion of plastic surgeries among its population is South Korea:

The plastic surgery industry has stormed Asia, and South Korea has the continent's biggest clientele. The *Economist* first reported that a 2009 survey by a market-research firm known as Trend Monitor found that about one in five women from Seoul have undergone some sort of plastic surgery. According to the report, more than 360,000 total procedures were performed in 2010, with the most common procedures being liposuction, nose jobs and blepharoplasty, or double eyelid surgery [to make their eyes look more European]. More than 44,000 double eyelid surgeries were performed in 2010.

"In Asia, it's very common for patients to want more Western-looking eyes," said Dr. Malcolm Roth, president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. "So that's really no surprise there."¹

In middle school one of my teachers said beauty's only function is to attract a mate, but beauty has much deeper significance. Beauty is also about belonging. So far in this book I have explained that human beings crave purpose, meaning, and explanations for why things happen. But human beings also crave belonging. In the previous chapter I described numerous motivators that compel people to fight in battle, and another motivator I can add to that list is the urge for belonging. The strong urge to belong to a community of comrades, along with the fear of being treated as an outcast if one behaves like a coward, can increase a soldier's courage in combat.

When children are labeled as "ugly," they are often bullied and treated as outcasts who do not belong. Children can also be bullied and treated as outcasts because they are different. To mention just a few examples, children in school can be bullied because of their weight, height, skin color, facial features, hair color, the way they talk, and the kinds of clothes and shoes they wear. But is it human nature to bully those who seem different from the group?

My first childhood home in Alabama was located in a poor neighborhood and had a lot of cockroaches, spiders, and crickets. I remember being three years old and seeing a cricket one evening with a missing hind leg. The cricket was all by itself. Feeling empathy for the small insect, I sat next to it, talking to it to keep it company. Of the four dogs my parents had, three had similar patterns of black and white fur, while one had brown fur that looked different from the others. My favorite dog was the brown one—the one who looked unique.

Many children's stories reveal that young boys and girls can feel empathy for those who look different, because some of the most popular children's stories are about outcasts. "The Ugly Duckling," written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1843, is just one example of a children's story that teaches empathy for outcasts. Mette Norgaard gives us a concise summary of "The Ugly Duckling":

One summer, close to the moat of a manor house, a mother duck was nesting. One by one the eggs cracked, but an uncommonly large one remained. An old duck insisted it was a turkey egg and warned the mother that turkeys were afraid of water. When it finally cracked, a large, ugly duckling tumbled out. Fearing he was indeed a turkey, the mother thought, “Into the water with him, even if I have to kick him in.”

She brought her brood down to the moat, and one after the other the ducklings plopped in and they all floated splendidly, including the ugly one. “No, that’s no turkey!” thought the mother, “He’s my own all right!”

Once in the duck yard, the others picked on the ugly one for he was so different. The ducks bit him, the hens pecked him, and even the girl who came to feed them kicked him. His sisters and brothers said they hoped the cat would take him, and eventually even the mother wished him far away. In desperation, the duckling fled over the fence and escaped to the marshland . . .

One fall evening the duckling noticed a flock of beautiful white birds with long, graceful necks: They were swans! The majestic creatures spread their wings and flew away toward warmer climates. The duckling felt strangely connected. Although they soon disappeared from sight, there was no way he could forget those stunning creatures.

Winter came and the poor little duckling had to swim about to keep the water from freezing completely. But in the end he got tired and was trapped in the ice. Fortunately a farmer saw him and rescued him.

Finally spring returned and the duckling tested his wings. They made a strong swooshing sound as they carried him to a beautiful garden. When he landed on the water, he saw the majestic birds again, but this time they were coming toward him with their feathers all puffed up. He feared they might hack him to death for being so hideous. Accepting his fate, he bowed his head toward the surface of the still water and suddenly he saw his own reflection—he was himself a swan!²

Like “The Ugly Duckling,” films such as *Dumbo* (about an elephant with large ears) and *Finding Nemo* (about a fish with a disproportionately small fin) have been very popular among children, showing that humanity has a natural capacity to feel empathy for those who do not belong. Popular comic books such as *X-Men* are also about outcasts. The premise of *X-Men* poses a hypothetical question. What if the outcasts persecuted by society had superpowers? Would they destroy or protect humanity?

In the early *X-Men* comic books, Magneto, the character with the strongest “physical” superpower (he can control magnetic fields and manipulate metal with his mind), tries to destroy humanity. Professor X, the character with the strongest “mental”

superpower (he can control people's minds), tries to protect humanity.¹ Professor X is a Christ figure who loves and is willing to die for humanity, despite being hated and persecuted by human beings.

The superheroes in *X-Men* are called "mutants." The mutants are metaphors for outcasts such as homosexuals, African Americans, and people with HIV. For example, the character Beast is blue. Like persecuted African Americans, Beast is judged by his color and seen as a subhuman animal, even though he is exceptionally smart. Rogue's mutant superpower causes her to kill people if she has intimate physical contact with them, which is a metaphor for the way Americans feared HIV patients during the 1980s.² Like many mutants, Rogue is rejected by her family and society.

When children relate to a story such as "The Ugly Duckling," *Dumbo*, *Finding Nemo*, or *X-Men*, they show a natural capacity to feel empathy for those who do not belong. Many other popular stories also have outcasts as main characters. But if children are capable of feeling so much empathy for outcasts, why is bullying so common in schools?

This is a complex question, because bullying has many causes. One cause is an abusive upbringing. I know children who became bullies because they had abusive parents. But perhaps a more common cause of bullying is the way our society conditions us to treat people. A friend told me that his Jewish father was constantly bullied by non-Jews while growing up in New York during the 1930s, because Jews in America were demonized and seen as subhuman. Part of the reason I was bullied in the 1980s was because American society had demonized people who look Asian, especially when fighting the Japanese in World War II, North Koreans and Chinese in the Korean War, and Vietnamese in the Vietnam War. Today many students of Middle Eastern descent are bullied in school because American society has demonized people in the Middle East.

It is a myth that children are bullied simply because they are unusual. If a high school boy looks like a muscular supermodel, that is certainly unusual, but he will probably not be bullied for it. Instead of being bullied for just being unusual, children are often bullied for possessing characteristics that society deems unattractive. When I was a child, boys were bullied for being short, wearing glasses, displaying "feminine" behavior, or being physically weak—characteristics that adults in our society had labeled as flaws to be rejected. When I was a child, I noticed that girls were much more likely to be teased for being smart or poor, rather than pretty and rich.

I am not saying a child cannot be bullied for being attractive, because children can also bully someone because they feel insecure and envious. However, even though the high school students considered physically imperfect by our society far outnumber those who look like supermodels, a high school student is much more likely to be bullied for being physically imperfect (by societal standards) than for looking like a supermodel. Some children attempt to diminish the anxiety they feel over their own imperfections by making fun of and emphasizing the imperfections of others.

¹ When I say that Magneto and Professor X have the strongest "physical" and "mental" superpowers respectively, I am referring only to the early comics. More powerful mutants have been introduced later in the comic series.

² Although Rogue's character debuted in the *X-Men* comic books before HIV was discovered, this metaphor is illustrated in the *X-Men* films, where Rogue is unable to have intimate contact with men without potentially killing them.

This shows that a lot of bullying occurs because adults teach children to despise certain characteristics in other human beings. When I hear adults talk about the need to stop bullying, I have never heard them take responsibility by discussing how our adult-run society labels so many characteristics as undesirable flaws that should be shunned. Nelson Mandela offered us hope, because he realized that just as children can be taught by adults to hate, they can also be taught to love. Years before recent discoveries in neuroscience revealed the power of empathy, Mandela realized empathy is a natural part of being human. He said, “People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, *for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite* [emphasis added].”³

Although I have listed some common causes of bullying, there are certainly other causes. Whatever the cause may be, however, bullying has similar effects on all people. Being bullied tends to make us feel *alienated*, and alienation is the opposite of belonging. Alienation is the feeling of not belonging to the community of human beings who receive respect and empathy. Because our early ancestors relied on cooperation and community to survive, human beings crave belonging as much as they crave purpose and meaning. And we are tormented by alienation, just as we are tormented by a meaningless life with no purpose.

A woman told me that she was trying to explain to her husband (who sees himself as a nonconformist) that human beings crave belonging, yet he insisted that he does not care about belonging. I asked her, “How would he feel if you and every single one of his friends and family members decided to never speak to him again and treated him like an outcast?” She replied, “Obviously he would be devastated.” I said, “Maybe he doesn’t care about conformity, but there are many ways to feed our craving for belonging, and a strict sense of conformity is only one of those ways. All human beings, unless they are severely mentally ill, want to belong to some group of people, or nature, or something.”

Someone might disagree by saying, “But the craving for belonging is childish. Great philosophers such as Socrates, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. overcame the silly need to belong. They were comfortable as outcasts and did not feel alienated, no matter how much their community rejected them.” But Socrates, Gandhi, and King did not lose their craving to belong. Instead, they fulfilled it in a different way, by embracing the vision that they belonged to the entire human race. Socrates said, “I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world.”⁴

Gandhi felt a strong sense of belonging not only to humanity, but also to high ideals, nature, other forms of life, and the mysterious universe I call the cosmic ocean. Gandhi’s strong sense of belonging transcended national boundaries and transformed his way of living. To him, belonging to humanity was not simply a belief, but a lifestyle. Gandhi’s deep understanding of belonging caused him to see true religion as the *lifestyle of love* that emulates the lives of Buddha, Jesus, and other spiritual icons.

Gandhi felt he belonged to humanity *because he loved humanity*. For him the highest sense of belonging occurred through love’s power to create deep connections with others. Gandhi scholar Bhikhu Parekh describes Gandhi’s views on belonging:

[According to Gandhi] all human beings are therefore sacred, inviolable, equal, and part of a single human family. The natural world too

must be approached in a spirit of reverence and cosmic piety. Since we cannot survive without making demands on it, we must ensure that these are minimum and do not disturb its inner rhythm. A religion that encourages violence against outsiders, treats them as inferior human beings, or views the natural world as mere raw material to be exploited for human greed is guilty of “sin against God.” As Gandhi puts it, “the greater the scope for compassion is a way of life, the more religion it has.”⁵

Our societal standard of beauty is very narrow, like a tightrope where few people can stand without falling off. Because the few people who fit within this narrow standard of beauty surround us on billboards and other forms of advertising, nearly everyone in our society has shared a similar painful experience: feeling insecure about a physical feature we cannot change. Those considered attractive by societal standards can also feel insecure about their appearance, because if they base their self-worth on how they look, then growing old or being around someone considered more attractive can threaten their self-worth.

Also, just because we stand on the narrow tightrope of beauty at one moment in our life does not mean we will be there forever. A supermodel who stands on the tightrope of beauty during her youth might fall off as she grows older, because society no longer considers her aging face attractive. And a man admired for his toned and muscular body will notice his flesh beginning to sag as he ages. We are mistaken if we believe that any form of plastic surgery can truly defeat nature’s most powerful force—the passage of time.

My painful childhood experiences have fueled my empathy for all human beings, regardless of whether they are deemed attractive or unattractive by societal standards, because we all share a common humanity. We all crave to belong, to not feel alienated, to possess self-worth, and to be treated with respect and empathy. Yet we hurt each other unnecessarily when we are confused, insecure, angered by our own suffering, and taught to hate. Together we must turn the tightrope of beauty into a wide road where we can all walk side by side as one human family. The survival of our fragile future depends on it.

Expand Our Perception of Beauty

The first part of this book is titled *Our Primordial Past* and the second part is titled *Our Fragile Future*, because we must understand our past to protect our future. The four chapters in *Our Primordial Past* provided new answers that can help us overcome trauma, injustice, war, and the confusion of human existence. The four chapters in *Our Fragile Future* answer more questions about the human condition and list four practical steps (each chapter describes a different step) that can help us solve a wide variety of human problems and bring our civilization to its highest potential.

When people discuss serious issues such as racism, sexism, environmental destruction, and war, they rarely discuss how these issues are symptoms of much deeper problems. Racism, sexism, environmental destruction, and war are caused by problems of understanding, perception, values, and society. We can overcome these problems by

embarking on a journey to understand human nature (which I discuss in *Will War Ever End?* and *The End of War*), strengthening the muscles of our shared humanity (which I discuss in *Peaceful Revolution*), learning how to wage peace (which I discuss in *The Art of Waging Peace*), and understanding the human condition and putting these four practical steps into action (which I discuss in *The Cosmic Ocean*).³

The first practical step for improving our world is to *expand our perception of beauty*. Is it possible to see all human races and skin colors as beautiful? Is it possible to see beauty not only in physical youth, but also in physical maturity? Can we see beauty in a greater variety of body types? Can we see beauty in Asian eyes? I first pondered this as a child watching the science-fiction television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which is about the starship *Enterprise*'s mission to explore the galaxy.

Created by Gene Roddenberry and first airing on television in 1987, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* takes place in the twenty-fourth century. To me, one of the most inspiring aspects of Roddenberry's vision of the future is that human beings of all races have inherent dignity. Furthermore, among the starship *Enterprise*'s crew are alien crewmembers who look so diverse, they make the shape of my Korean eyes and differences in human skin color look relatively insignificant. Growing up in Alabama during the 1980s, my mixed-race background caused me to feel like an abomination, an outcast, a freak of nature. But if I had been a crewmember on the starship *Enterprise*, nobody would have looked down on me for being part African American and part Asian. I would have belonged to the human race.

Star Trek: The Next Generation's acceptance of racial diversity is similar to the American dream's implication that we should be judged by our character, not by who our parents were. Roddenberry's vision of the future is also similar to Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of the future expressed in his "I Have a Dream" speech: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."⁶

In 1976 the first women were admitted to West Point, where they would be trained to serve as officers. But in 1966, the original *Star Trek* television series featured a black female officer who graduated from Starfleet Academy, Roddenberry's science fiction version of West Point.⁴ During the 1960s in the United States, black women graduating from military service academies truly was fiction, but today it has become a reality.

Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played the black female officer named Lieutenant Uhura, explains how she wanted to leave the original *Star Trek* series after the first season ended in 1967, but was convinced to stay by one of the show's fans:

³ "Human nature" and "the human condition" are both terms that describe our internal universe, but is there a difference between these two terms? Although there is some overlap between these terms, "human nature" deals more with the principles that govern human behavior, while "the human condition" deals more with the problem of human existence.

⁴ Starfleet Academy is based on military service academies such as the U.S. Naval Academy and West Point. According to www.startrek.com, Commander Uhura graduated from Starfleet Academy in 2261.

I told Gene [Roddenberry] after the end of the first season that I would not be returning to the show, that I wanted to return to my first love, which was musical theater. But I didn't know that meeting a *Star Trek* fan would change my life. [At a party] I was told that a fan wanted to meet me, and I turned and looked into the face of Dr. Martin Luther King. I was breathless.

He says, "Yes, I'm a trekker. I'm a *Star Trek* fan." And he told me that *Star Trek* was one of the only shows that his wife Coretta and he would allow their little children to stay up and watch . . .

I told him that I was leaving the show. All the smile came off his face and he said, "You can't do that." He said, "Don't you understand that for the first time we are seen as we should be seen. You don't have a black role. You have an equal role."

And I went back to work on Monday morning. I went to Gene's office and I told him what had happened over the weekend, and he says, "Welcome home. We've got a lot of work to do."⁷

Roddenberry's vision of the future included respecting not only the dignity of all races, but also the dignity of all human beings, regardless of whether they are short, tall, old, young, or even bald. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, actor Patrick Stewart played Captain Picard, the officer in charge of the starship *Enterprise*. A bald actor, he describes how during the first press conference, a reporter criticized Roddenberry for having a bald captain in the twenty-fourth century:

[My bald head] came up at the very first press conference. A reporter asked Gene Roddenberry, "Look, it doesn't make any sense, you've got a bald actor playing this part. Surely by the twenty-fourth century they will have found a cure for male-pattern baldness."

And Gene Roddenberry said, "No, by the twenty-fourth century no one will care."

It was one of the nicest things that's ever been said about men like me.⁸

History shows that societal standards of beauty are largely subjective, because physical characteristics once considered beautiful are now depicted as ugly. Hundreds of years ago, women were considered beautiful during the European Renaissance if they had some visible fat around their stomach and hips. But today, many women are so worried about having any visible fat around these areas that they suffer from dangerous eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

Having some visible fat was an acceptable standard of beauty during the European Renaissance, and this body type is still viewed as beautiful in some countries today. But in modern America and many other parts of the world, things are different. Today the epitome of beauty for American women is to be tan with no visible fat around

their bellies. And the epitome of beauty for American men is to be tan and muscular, with a small percentage of body fat so that their abdominal muscles show.

Even when men's magazines today feature a woman with a "curvy" body type, she is depicted with a flat stomach, unlike many of the women depicted in Renaissance paintings. And although a male body with muscle tone and low body fat was idealized in ancient Greece, muscle magazines and action movies in modern America idealize a male body that is a lot more muscular than the epitome of male beauty in ancient Greece. Standards of beauty can be subjective, because having some body fat was not the only standard of beauty during the Renaissance. Some Renaissance painters preferred to feature women who were thin.

Standards of beauty throughout history have been influenced by wealth. Hundreds of years ago, poor peasants were thin. Because so much of the inexpensive food in America contributes to weight gain and bad health, however, the poor in modern America are stereotyped as being overweight. Wealthier people are more likely to have the time and money necessary to eat well, stay in shape, and get a good tan. A tan and muscular body, which many American men desire today, used to be a body type common to slaves around the world. When I traveled to Uganda to teach a Peace Leadership workshop, the participants told me that a lot of men in Uganda want to have a receding hairline and a potbelly, because these features are often associated with status.

In cultures around the world, beauty is not only about belonging, but also self-worth. Because human beings deeply crave belonging and self-worth, we can prioritize beauty above our health. Excessive tanning is unhealthy for our skin, because it increases the risk of skin cancer and causes premature aging. Anorexia and bulimia also create significant health risks. Yet some people would rather damage their health than fall off the narrow tightrope of beauty.

I know many people who are proud of the hard work they have put into losing weight and getting in shape, and I admire their achievements. Obesity is certainly not good for our health, and the motivation to be healthy can encourage people to diet and exercise. But people can be very healthy without having the body of an ultra-thin supermodel, and extreme thinness can actually be unhealthy. If standards of beauty can change, as history proves, why can't we transform the narrow tightrope of beauty into a wide road where many different skin tones, facial features, and body types are considered beautiful?

Why is the tightrope of beauty in our society so narrow? One reason is because there are many ways to profit from a narrow standard of beauty. All societies have standards of beauty, but beauty standards in modern America are extremely narrow because making people believe they have physical defects can be very profitable. When people believe they have a physical defect that threatens their potential to attract a mate, ability to belong, or sense of self-worth, they will often spend a lot of money to correct that defect.

These physical defects include features that are not defects at all, such as the depiction of coarse African American hair as ugly. In comedian Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair*, he shows the multibillion-dollar industry that has risen from the depiction of African American hair as defective. He also compassionately explores the trouble people go through to straighten their hair and the large amounts of money African American women spend on weaves.

It is easier to perceive ourselves as physically defective when computers greatly modify the images we see in advertisements. Because photographs in advertisements are digitally altered to give people flawless skin and perfect bodies, an unattainable standard of beauty is created. An unattainable standard of beauty can be very profitable because it makes nearly everyone seem physically defective as they normally appear. Advertisers know a simple truth: the more dissatisfied people are with their appearance, the easier it is to sell them products that promise to make them beautiful.

Expanding our perception of beauty beyond narrow and unattainable standards should not be used as an excuse for neglecting our personal responsibility to maintain a clean and dignified appearance. Some of the poorest people during the civil rights movement, along with Christian and Buddhist monks throughout history who embraced a simple life, still maintained cleanliness and dignity in their appearance. Expanding our perception of beauty means appreciating many forms of beauty and seeing the dignity that transcends distinctions. But as Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated while struggling to attain their human rights, people are more likely to treat us with dignity when we make an effort to present ourselves in a dignified way.

Our society has narrowed the standard of beauty in a way that denies human dignity. Throughout history, elders were revered in many societies and admired for their life experience, but our society's extremely narrow standard of beauty tells us, "If you do not look young, you are defective." Because the negative attitude toward aging is getting so extreme, many people in our society are disturbed by the thought of having any wrinkles or a single gray hair. From an advertising perspective, that is a brilliant way to sell products. Other cultural influences also cause people to disrespect the elderly, and this problem will persist unless conscientious people wage peace to resolve it. Psychologist Susan Fiske tells us how widespread this disrespect is today:

Well we've done our work on [studying] stereotyping across a lot of different countries, and I'm sorry to say that the sort of default stereotype of old people is the same in three dozen countries, that they're kind of pathetic and useless but well-intentioned. Here's the one exception, is African Americans talking about [older] African Americans. So that's the one community in which we find respect for elders. One place that we thought we would find respect for elders was in East Asian cultures, and to our big surprise we did not in our own data . . . Looking at stereotypes of old people across the world, it's actually worse in East Asia. So that was not intuitive to us, but the data are what the data are. And in talking to people the explanation that we've come up with is that in East Asian cultures in particular, you respect your parents, you respect your teacher, you respect your promoter, but you don't have to respect old people in general because it's too much of a burden . . . [African American elders tend to be respected] because of the community role that they play, and that's been very important in keeping families together and keeping communities together.⁹

The standard of beauty in our society is more flexible for men than for women. To offer one example, men are under less pressure than women to look young, because a male actor can have wrinkles and gray hair, yet still be considered a sex symbol. However, men in our society face other pressures, such as the pressure to be tall and wealthy.

As Patrick Stewart mentioned earlier, men are also pressured to have hair. When he was interviewed in 2010 on *The Tavis Smiley Show*, Smiley said, “There is something serious I want to pick up on, which as you well know, this hair business for men is a billion dollar industry worldwide. Saving it, putting it back, replacing it, holding on to it, making it grow. It’s a billion dollar business. When you say you lost your hair at the age of nineteen . . . how did you navigate past that at nineteen?”¹⁰

Patrick Stewart responded, “At nineteen . . . I thought that a large part of my life had ended, certainly any romantic aspect of my life would be over. Who could possibly go for a guy who is nineteen and has no hair? The prospects were grim.”¹¹

There is evidence that our society’s standard of beauty is widening in some ways. In a reader’s poll conducted by the magazine *TV Guide*, Patrick Stewart was chosen as Sexiest Man on TV in 1992, and Most Bodacious Man on TV in 1993.¹² He would never have imagined this was possible when he was nineteen and depressed over his baldness. Nevertheless, the massive increase in plastic surgery procedures, escalating obsession with youth, and prevalence of anorexia and bulimia are just a few examples that reveal how our society’s standard of beauty is narrowing in other ways.

What I find most surprising about our society’s narrow standard of beauty is that it seems geared more toward making us feel defective and insecure about our appearance, rather than revealing what most people prefer in a mate. Advertisements directed at women can make them feel defective and insecure for not being thin enough, while advertisements directed at men can make them feel defective and insecure for not being muscular and masculine enough.

Although I have met men who are most attracted to very thin women, studies show that the majority of men do not prefer women with the ultra-thin bodies of runway models. In a similar way, I have met women who are most attracted to men with gigantic bodybuilder physiques, but the majority of women do not prefer men with the massive muscles and bulging veins of a professional bodybuilder. Anthropologist John Marshall Townsend describes how women’s desire to be thin can have more to do with belonging and self-worth than appearing desirable to men:

In the contemporary United States, women and men may disagree on how much body fat is attractive. Psychologists April Fallon and Paul Rozin found that college women generally believe that they are heavier than men prefer, and they want to be thinner than the figures they believe are most attractive to men. But men actually prefer heavier body types than what women believe they prefer—which makes women’s preference for thinness two steps removed from what men actually consider the most attractive. These results suggest that women’s standards are not simply a response to what men actually want. There are other influences at work.

First, keeping thin and controlling weight help to give some women a feeling of control over their own lives. Second, women believe that thinness is generally considered a very positive personal feature over and above its possible effect on men. One of the reasons that thinness is generally considered a positive characteristic is that in Western societies upper-class women are thinner.

In any era, the standards of the upper classes determine what is fashionable and acceptable in dress, appearance, and aesthetics. In our society, these standards are disseminated by the mass media—television, movies, fashion advertising, newspapers, and magazines—and depict what the rich and famous are doing. Whether they know it or not, the middle classes tend to emulate these standards and adopt many of them. Top fashion designers, for example, create expensive couture originals for their upper-class clientele; in time, cheaper versions of these originals will appear in department stores. The ideal of female thinness appears to have followed this same trickle-down pattern: it began in the upper classes and has now been affected by the middle classes as well.

Given the Fallon and Rozin findings, it may be likely that many women know what men prefer, but because women emphasize status more in their standards for partners than men do, they disregard to some extent what men actually prefer because they want to look like upper-class women . . . Evidently, some psychological research and the persistence of curvier women in men's magazines suggest that many men refuse to follow the dictates of high fashion.¹³

To show how flexible standards of beauty can be, Japanese men used to shave the tops of their heads in a way that mimicked male-pattern baldness. This fashion did not involve shaving their entire heads, but only enough of their hair so that it looked like they were balding. This fashion derived from the samurai—members of the upper class—who shaved the tops of their heads (while leaving their topknots intact) so that their helmets would fit more comfortably. In a society where wisdom and experience were admired and people often died young, balding could also be seen as a symbol of maturity and status.

Historian Anthony Bryant tells us: “Shaving the top of the head, something often believed to be an indicator of *samurai* status, was more widespread [in Japan] than often realized. Commoners—farmers, merchants, townsmen—all sported shaved pates and topknots. The fashion certainly originated with the *samurai*, but it caught on with the populace at large. Its origin is believed to have something to do with wearing helmets so often that a shaved head was simply more comfortable.”¹⁴

Our discussion of past standards of beauty and today's especially narrow standard of beauty reveals there are two kinds of beauty. The first kind is *commodified beauty*, which occurs when beauty is reduced so much to a commodity that we cannot see beyond the surface. This surface can consist of skin color, facial features, body type, or the clothes we wear. There is nothing wrong with people enjoying how they look in a new set of clothes, but many people in our society judge and even dehumanize those who wear cheap clothes and unfashionable shoes.

Tim Gunn, a fashion consultant who appeared on the reality television show *Project Runway*, seems like an unlikely person to support school uniforms that restrict student's fashion choices. But he explains, "I have recalibrated [my] thinking about the [school] uniform. I find it's very democratizing. You don't have to get up in the morning and think about what am I going to wear. And for girls in particular, I love a uniform, because the fashion pressures on teenagers and younger women are extraordinary. And living in New York City, I love the private schools that have a uniform, and I have to say I have something of a disdain for those that don't, because the fashion competition [in schools] is ridiculously stupid. In fact it's absurd."¹⁵

The Dr. Seuss children's book *The Sneetches and Other Stories* contains a metaphor for commodified beauty. The Sneetches are yellow creatures. A group of them, known as the Star-Belly Sneetches, have a green star on their bellies. The green star is considered a feature of beauty and elite status. The Plain-Belly Sneetches lack a green star on their bellies. Similar to racial segregation, the Star-Belly Sneetches treat the Plain-Belly Sneetches as unattractive and inferior.

One day a salesman named Sylvester McMonkey McBean tells the Plain-Belly Sneetches that he can put a green star on their bellies with his Star-On machine. This procedure costs three dollars, and the Plain-Belly Sneetches line up to give McBean their money. The original Star-Belly Sneetches become angry that they no longer look distinct and exceptional, so McBean tells them he will remove their green stars with his Star-Off machine. This procedure costs ten dollars, and the original Star-Belly Sneetches line up to give McBean their money.

The Sneetches run back and forth between the two machines, repeatedly getting their green stars removed and replaced, until all their money is gone and McBean is rich. McBean drives away laughing. The Sneetches learn from the experience, however, by expanding their perception of beauty. Realizing how trivial the green stars truly were, they learn to respect each other's dignity, regardless of whether they have green stars or not.

This story is a metaphor for commodified beauty and the trivial nature of prejudice. This story also shows how fickle fashion can be. The green stars symbolize the shallow surface features that hide our common humanity and inherent dignity. A second kind of beauty, *priceless beauty*, occurs when we see beyond the green stars.

Priceless beauty is not a commodity we can buy. It is a perception, an attitude, a vision, a way of seeing what is both visible and invisible to the eyes. When I look at human beings, animals, and nature through the *perception of priceless beauty*, I see beyond the shallow surface and a profound new world opens up to me. I feel deeply connected to human beings, animals, and nature in meaningful and fulfilling ways. When we see with the perception of priceless beauty, our suppressed human powers such as empathy, appreciation, and sublime joy burst out of us like a roaring fire, enveloping our world with love's light.

If we truly want to solve problems such as racism, sexism, environmental destruction, and war, we must develop our perception of priceless beauty by strengthening the muscles of our humanity (which I discuss in *Peaceful Revolution*). Expanding our perception of beauty is a challenging and gradual struggle, like climbing a tall mountain. But this journey is well worth the effort, because the perception of

priceless beauty allows us to live the lifestyle of love symbolized by Jesus, Buddha, and other spiritual icons.

Protecting our fragile future requires us to develop our perception of priceless beauty, because seeing beyond the shallow surface allows us to experience deep connection with others and transcend the boundaries that divide us. Any system that dehumanizes us based on how we look produces both cruelty and brutality. To combat these unjust systems, the perception of priceless beauty repels dehumanization like light casting out shadow. Because the perception of priceless beauty recognizes the dignity inherent to the mystery of life, the more we expand our perception of beauty, the more we threaten all unjust systems, including the war system. It's difficult to bomb people when we perceive them as beautiful.

A common theme in every chapter of this book is the *expansion of empathy*, especially for those we do not understand. Increasing our understanding allows us to enter the transcendent spiritual realm of radical empathy where priceless beauty is all around us. In our daily lives, we can all spread the message of priceless beauty not only by seeing deep and diverse forms of beauty, but also by speaking to each other with respect and treating each other with dignity. We can also spread the message of priceless beauty by creating art and social norms that recognize the dignity of life, and working to transform the narrow tightrope of commodified beauty into the wide road of priceless beauty.

In my early twenties I had a dream about a part of myself I once hated. In my dream I was looking at a door that led to freedom, but between me and the door was a winding path. The path was several hundred feet long, but extremely narrow—only a few inches wide. If I slipped I would fall into a dark pit below and plunge to my death. Navigating this dangerous path would be very difficult, I realized, because I was holding a heavy box, and for some strange reason I was not allowed to put it down. When I turned to my right I saw a Korean boy, shorter than me, whose Asian features were more pronounced than my own. I realized he symbolized a part of me. He looked at me without saying anything, and I stared back, also silent.

Within that silence, I acknowledged his existence, accepting him as a part of myself. When I did that, he reached out gently and took the heavy box from me. Holding it over his head, he led me down the narrow, winding, dangerous path toward the door, toward freedom. After we safely traversed the path I could not see him anymore, but I felt like we had merged into one being. I reached out my hand to open the door, and then I woke up.

Chapter 5: Beauty and Belonging Endnotes

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