



## Fat Eyes

I will never forget the day, after losing about fifteen pounds, I twirled around for my Dad, and pointedly asked, “Am I thin enough?”

After giving me the once-over, he announced without a smile or a hint of encouragement, “You look good.” Not great. Merely good. Having worked so hard to achieve my goal, his bland response devastated me. I never asked again. Thus began a lifetime of eating disordered thinking. Never a full-blown eating disorder, but enough for self-disgust whenever I gained weight. I labeled my disorder, “fat eyes,” meaning, although for most of my life I have been slender, self-acceptance has been fleeting. I stopped weighing myself years ago, when my daily weight determined my mood. Ultimately, after decades of scraping off the layers of my neurosis, I realized that my perception was distorted. The fat I saw wasn’t there. I still see it. The only difference is now I realize that what I see isn’t real. I’m looking in a fun house mirror.

With a glance and few words, my father unabashedly expressed his unwavering belief that, for a woman, being thin and beautiful was paramount. Everything else paled in comparison, that is, except marrying well. Being attractive was supposed to be a Disneyland E-ticket that guaranteed happily ever after. Three divorces and considerable therapy later, it finally sank in. My father’s prescription was more like Chinese food, initially satisfying, but not particularly long-lasting. Buying into it set me up to be disappointed time and again. I came to know love and acceptance solely for the outer self. Without a loving place within myself to call home, nourishing, loving, and knowing myself through any lens other than appearance was impossible and left me bereft of self-acceptance. Building self-worth from the inside out was a slow and arduous undertaking. Ultimately, it healed me.

Men are acceptable and lovable in all shapes and sizes, with hair and bald, with 6-pack abs or paunchy and out of shape. The Silver Fox is sexy, and while some silver-haired women are considered beautiful or striking, a majority of women spend hours tending to their gray roots.

We use “craggy” “rugged,” and “weathered” to describe men as they get older. Age adds character to a man’s face. Even at eighty-three, Clint Eastwood is considered sexy. James Gandolfini was a sexy teddy bear.

No so women. Rubenesque and less than model perfect women are frequently judged and found wanting. Far too many women struggle to conform to the standards media set echoed all day long in Hollywood, magazines and beauty pageants. Conditioned addicts, we women make ourselves sick in body and mind pummeling ourselves into *shape* and cutting our faces to maintain the illusion of youth.



Exceptional women do exist, somehow unaffected by the kool-aid. They wear their lines, wrinkles, and the ravages of time as a badge of honor. Each line celebrates wisdom gained and confidence earned from successfully navigating life's bitch-slaps. The wrinkles and scars of life's road maps on their bodies are exultant reminders of beating life-threatening disease or other hard-won triumphs over adversity. Thriving post-surviving has transformed their priorities.

These wise women believe in themselves, screw their programming, and embrace themselves unconditionally. Role models to less evolved and less confident ones, they are to be praised and emulated. Their belief in themselves as intrinsically acceptable and loveable radiates from their core. You can spot them in a heartbeat. It's not that they forgive themselves for aging, more that they accept themselves and the curve balls life has thrown at them. Their identity is multifaceted, not exclusively linked to exterior superficialities. Regardless of how they arrived there, these women have no need to pull and prod and fight against aging.

For several years in my twenties, my body rebelled. If I ate more than three hundred calories, I gained weight. Except for Saturday nights when my husband and I went out, my daily diet consisted of a carton of yogurt or two. Horribly unhealthy, but an easy choice. I was willing to physically abuse my body to avoid a disapproving look from my father, and by this time I didn't even live with my parents. I was married.

Each night I prayed I would awaken and be able to eat normally. Unlike many women, I got my wish, miraculously, after my first divorce.

My mother wasn't as fortunate. She was slender, but never model thin, and for most of her life, she easily maintained her beautiful figure. A hysterectomy in her forties changed that. My disciplined father had no empathy for the symptoms of hormone imbalance. Many a night when my mother and I snacked on cookies while watching television in our family room, a stricken look froze her face when she heard my father padding down the hall toward us. Hurriedly, she shoved the box of cookies under the sofa, or risked hearing the judgment and disapproval in my father's voice when he rebuked her, "Mignon, do you really need those?"

Utter shame. Not good enough. Feeling unlovable. Self-loathing that never disappears. Rarely is it as black and white as, "If you wanted to be thin, you would be." No amount of deprivation can diet some bodies into submission. Anorexia and bulimia kills.

Let me be clear. This is not a diatribe against men. Women, too, have internalized these standards. I am as guilty as any man in perpetuating these unhealthy, damaging messages. Like a computer virus, they infected my psyche, and unthinkingly I contaminated my daughters with them. I have caused them great heartache and pain. It is one of my deepest regrets, one I have yet to forgive myself for.



Mark Nepo writes, “. . . when we see something true and beautiful in someone, it is *not* the work of love to change them or force their growth in our direction. It *is* the work of love to create conditions by which what is true and beautiful in all we behold can grow and blossom, bringing forth its deepest nature.”

When we, men and women, focus and judge the packaging, what is innocent, true and beautiful on the inside begins to shrivel up and die, leaving emptiness and wounds in its stead.

Make no mistake. It is emotional RAPE. This kind of Judgment violates a woman and robs her of the joy and innocence of self-acceptance, self-confidence, and of seeing herself as a whole person. When we convey in word or deed that she needs to lose weight, as I did to my daughters, you might as well be screaming, “I disapprove of the way you look. You’re unacceptable the way you are.” In all likelihood, the emphasis you place on this one facet of her totality will put an end to her feeling good about herself and leave her feeling ashamed and self-conscious for life.

While you may think you are doing women a favor, you are actually inflicting irreparable harm. It is YOU who needs to change, not them. It is YOU who needs to learn to recognize that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes. See beyond the packaging.

As long as they are healthy, find a way to accept your loved ones the way they are, or they never will. Love them unconditionally. Only then will they be able to blossom into all they can become and not fear rejection and disapproval with the inevitability of aging or the possibility of gaining weight.

Like many of you out there, I didn’t realize the magnitude of the harm I was wreaking on my daughters. I do now. I can’t undo what I did, but I can help others learn from my egregious behavior.

Pass this along to your loved ones—fathers, husbands, sons, daughters, friends—those who might not be aware of the impact of their glares and remarks. Let this blog open an honest discussion about how their withering scrutiny and *constructive criticism* make you feel. Get this elephant out of the room.