

Beauty Comes From "Within" But It's Okay To Loathe Your Aging Body

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WeHeartIt

I love the flavors of life — I just don't like how they look on me.

Sometimes I look in the mirror and wonder whose body is reflecting back. I know it well, and I know it's mine, but this midlife anatomy isn't something I've quite come to terms with.

In my teens and 20s, I could eat anything I wanted and never gain a pound.

I wore bikinis, bleached and straightened my hair, and I was none the worse for it. My head sprouted thick, long masses of brown curls, and a college roommate once commented — when we were sunbathing on our driveway — "You've got a *goyish* butt." Meaning, it was the small enviable tight ass all us Jewish girls yearned for.

I rode that high for a long time. Of course, it wasn't all carelessness and indulgence; I played a mean tennis game, jumped through back-to-back aerobics classes, walked clear across campus as a daily routine, and danced my best friends under, or on top of, the table.

But I'm 44 now, and my body looks it.

Inside, I don't feel a day out of my 20s. And yet, the stomach behind which three babies grew into perfect form is a mass of jiggly pale skin with marks where it stretched to accommodate new life.

My curls are brown-tinged with rapidly advancing gray. My hair, by virtue of its tight spiral curls, looks thick, but in certain places it's incredibly thin, an illusion of what used to be.

Hair in other places is fleeting, too. Pubic, leg, underarm — all the copious hair that used to grow in these corners is now spare and sparse, which I don't much mind ... except that it's yet another symbol of this dance with age.

My breasts, once small and perky, are swollen and pendulous, tilting south more than holding their own against gravity.

Here, too, I nourished three babies, and I'm proud of the wear on my body that resulted. But growing up in a society that prizes perfection makes it hard for me to fully accept these marks and nicks of time passing.

Gravity and time make for odd bedfellows. Climbing through the years leads to drooping and fading, thinning and graying. On some, the process of aging becomes debonair, refined. On me, I fear it simply becomes old.

Were I born in a culture where women covered for modesty and accepted the test of time on their supple, soft skin, I might not bemoan my fate. It'd just be an accepted dash into yonder, where the good times of respect, reverence and wisdom reside.

Am I glad to have the confidence of a woman in her 40s? Absolutely. I have neither time nor patience for the pettiness of youth, the silliness of the superficial.

But I live in a society where models and mannequins sport hand-width waists, legs that don't kiss at the upper thigh, shirts that don't tent over cleavage.

I live amongst women who pull the meat from the inside of a bagel so they don't ingest too many carbs, take one forkful of cake just to *ooh* and *ahh* over the chocolate velvety taste. God Forbid an entire piece be swallowed in quick, scrumptious bites!

I made a promise to myself some years back to enjoy my life. To live hard and fully, to exercise in ways that I enjoy and taste the delicacies of a life well-lived: aged wines, fine cheeses, raw oysters, velvety cake with buttercream frosting.

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You might laugh and point, insisting, well you know what to do! Diet! Exercise! It's all within reach. Push Paleo or Atkins, Weight Watchers or some other fad diet and promise me that before too long, I'll look like the women in magazines.

The photographer for my son's bar mitzvah last spring said he stopped doing magazine shoots because the women he was photographing didn't even look like their photoshopped selves. It was dishonesty, he said, and he wouldn't be a party to it.

Attraction, love, and profound connection don't depend on the physical. While I'm incredibly

attracted to my [husband](#), even six years into our relationship, what turns me on isn't the physical.

Yes, I love his strong fingers, his broad sculpted shoulders, the way he smiles with his whole face. But his body isn't perfect and it still gets me going. *He* gets me going. And that's the lesson.

I try to turn the tables on myself, assuring that what makes me beautiful is the light that shines from within: my generous smile, my passion and zest for life; the way I notice the gorgeous clouds, no matter the weather, and how the sunrise captivates me every [single](#) day.

My beauty comes from the way I can linger over words, craft sentences, share a story that captivates crowds. I know this, but that doesn't mean I feel it.

Whoever sold modern women the bill of goods that we must look differently than we do was a charlatan indeed. Some masked intruder whose goal it was to ramp up the economy, boosting sales of corset-like undergarments, makeup, hair accessories and products, the plastic surgery industry, and a whole host of other products and processes that benefit from my insecurities.

Years ago, I spent a summer weekend with a friend and her [family](#) on a northern Michigan lake. The older women of the group wore Land's End bikinis — covering, but not covering — their cellulite and stretch marks bared for all to see.

They were comfortable, lounging on the pontoon, eyes turned skyward, sipping cocktails in plastic cups. Their leisurely stance said, you can look or not; I don't really care. Here I am, in all my glory.

I think of those women often, hoping, yearning, striving for the day when I can inhabit the space of self-love, rather than self-loathing, the reflection in the mirror a perfect acceptance of where I am right now — and all the places I've gloriously been.