

Chapter 3

How Do You See Yourself?

It was the week before school let out for the winter holidays, and the last time our History class would meet. Knowing that Sherri just might rise to the challenge, I asked,

"Does anyone want to sing a Christmas carol for us before we part for the break?"

There was silence in the room, and then some nervous shuffling around, a few giggles and a whisper. A slow smile came across her face.

"Sherri," I said, "would you like to sing for us?"

She didn't say a word, but just nodded her head 'yes.'

As she walked to the front of the room, the students looked almost shocked. "Sherri can sing?"

Sherri stood up, her pale skin glowing and her blonde hair dancing around her thick glasses. Her posture was straight and confident, but not haughty. She waited patiently for them to settle down.

"I can't believe that quiet Sherri has the guts to sing in front of the whole class," said Melinda admiringly. Melinda dreamed about being a singer.

The room became painfully silent. All eyes were on Sherri. She began, so softly at first. Then her gentle voice filled the room like sunshine. "Children laughing, people passing..." She sang so sweetly. She didn't even



hit all of the high notes but no one seemed to notice. "Dashing through the snow on a one-horse open sleigh..."

After two songs, she just smiled at the other students and walked back to her seat to sit down again. After a quiet pause, the class burst into a wild roar of applause.

"That was great. I wish I had the courage to do that," said Lee just before the bell rang.

"Thanks." That's all she said, but I could tell that she was proud.

Stop!



Before you go any further, stop. Take out a piece of paper and something to write with. Write down 10 good things about yourself. The items on your list can be anything that you feel is a positive part of who you are. If you are having a hard time coming up with 10 items, ask your teacher and your classmates for some help. We are sure that you can find many more than 10 things if you really think about it. Take a minute to talk to the person sitting next to you. What would you add to their list? What would they add to yours?

Self-Image

Can you imagine performing in front of one of your classes like that? What is it that is unusual about Sherri getting up in front of her whole class, unprepared, and singing for them? Although Sherri is especially shy, and known for her quietness, she has confidence. She has a good self-image. *Self-image* is the way that you see yourself. People who have a good self-image like themselves. Remember, liking yourself is not the same as being snobby, or thinking you are better than other people. When you are self-confident, you are realistic about yourself and see yourself in a positive light.

How do you see yourself? Do you have a good self-image? Many people struggle in this area. Even though they may be attractive, they look in the mirror and hate what they see. Instead of seeing a pair of beautiful brown eyes, or an enviable smile, they see every blemish on their face and their big nose, small chin, or funny-looking ears. The strange thing is that no one else noticed their nose, or their chin, or their ears. Why is it that lots of people look at themselves in a bad light? Is it possible to change your self-image if you want to? Why is self-image so important?

How Important Are Looks?

Unless you live under a rock, every day you see dozens of perfect-looking people dance across your TV screen, or stars in movies, or models smoking on the billboards and posing in magazines. It's unavoidable. Do the supermodels and movie stars represent what a normal person looks like? The average female supermodel is six feet tall and weighs a mere 110 pounds. Most of our male heroes have muscles and pearly teeth to spare. They do not look like the average person on the street. And on top of that, their photographs are painted over to make them look even more perfect than they already are.



The problem is that these people are often admired. People look at them and may think, *I wish I looked like that!* Or *If only I was thinner, taller or stronger I'd be happier.* Some people go to incredible trouble, and spend hundreds, even thousands, of dollars trying to make themselves more physically attractive.

While there is nothing wrong with wanting to be attractive, and to feel good about the way you look, you might be in trouble if it becomes the center of your life. You may start to look in the mirror and see every little flaw or imperfection. You might spend hours dreaming about how it would feel to be someone else, and to look different.

When I was a teenager my face looked like pizza. It was such a mess and to make it worse, I looked at myself in the mirror about a million times a day. I was always looking in the mirror to see how bad the damage had gotten. Lots of weekends I just stayed home by myself because I didn't want my school friends to see my face. I thought about it all the time, it just ate me up inside. It was like my bad skin became me. What a relief when it cleared up.

Yvonne, 28

We had a chance to talk to one of Yvonne's best friends from school. They are both adults now, but they remember very well what they went through in those days. The funny thing is that her friend barely remembered that Yvonne had bad skin for a few years. Her friend remembers Yvonne differently.

Yvonne was one of the best students in school, and she had a lot of friends. I remember when I first moved into the house next door to her. I

wondered if she would invite me to her birthday party or not. She had so many friends already. But she was so kind. I think she invited me at first just because she wanted to help me out. We became better and better friends until we did lots of things together. She was so much fun. I remember that sometimes she wouldn't go out to the movies or do other things. Her mom told my mom it was because of her skin. I couldn't believe it, really. She had so much going for her.

Anne, 30

It might help to realize that most of the time many people are so busy worrying about how they look that they won't notice someone else's imperfections. When it comes right down to it, looks might not be as important as they seem. Read on...

What Some Guys Said about Looks

We were surprised when we talked to a group of young men about the way they saw themselves and others. They told us that looks are not that important to them after all. The boys agreed that looks in a female are not as important as her personality. Here is what three of them said:



Personality means a lot. Everyone wants to find someone they can talk to and feel comfortable with.

Jeff, 15

I think that supermodels aren't like the real world. They are too perfect. I wouldn't want to go out with a supermodel because I would just feel like I was competing with other guys. I want to be able to talk to someone.



Nick, 14



If you know a girl who is nice to talk to and be cool around, you would much rather that than someone who was all stuck-up and snobby. I want to be around someone who likes who I am and respects me for who I am.

Russell, 15

We didn't pick these three young men. In fact, their classmates had very similar comments. According to them, being around someone who respects them, someone they can talk to and someone who is fun is more important than looks. They also said that

if they had a male friend who felt badly about his looks or how strong he was, they would try to help him to feel better about himself, but tell him not to overdo the physical training. One boy, a junior varsity football player, said:

If I had a friend who was all skinny and wanted to take steroids or something I would tell him to forget about it. I would say that you don't need to mess yourself up over that, and that you can do a lot better if you just work with what nature gave you. Even on the football team I think feeling good about yourself has a lot more to do with you than with how much you can lift.

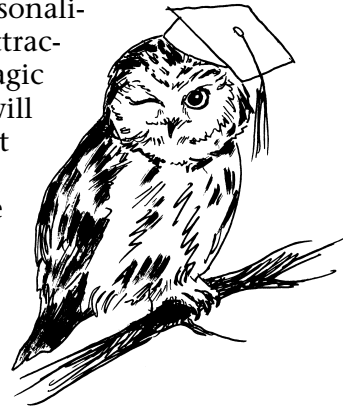
Ray, 15

Real Beauty Comes from Within

Have you ever met someone you thought was plain-looking, only to find that after talking with that person and getting to know that person that he or she looked beautiful? It happens all the time. Average-looking people, those who do not stand out in the crowd as being exquisite beauties, are often the ones who become the most attractive to us. Personality can have the power to light up anyone's face and make them look wonderful.

This is certainly not to say that people who are already physically beautiful cannot also have glowing personalities. Or that people who are not very physically attractive are always full of zest and personality. The magic can work in both directions. But sometimes you will meet someone who is beautiful, and you will want to be near that person. However, after you get close to that person you realize that they have the personality of a bullfrog—not very exciting—and then that person seems somehow less attractive to you. The point is, no matter what you look like, your personality will be the deciding factor in your relationships. The beauty which comes from within is the beauty of being brave enough to be your true self, and confident enough not to flock with every turn the crowd makes.

When a person takes the time to listen and respect others and to act in kindness, that person develops their true character. People grow their character and develop inner beauty by being honest, reaching out to others, and living a life they feel good about.



The Real Problem

Some people become so obsessed with wanting to be thin that they stop eating (anorexia nervosa), or they eat and then throw up (bulimia). Anorexia and bulimia are serious disorders. Taken to the extreme, both can be deadly. If an anorexic or bulimic person doesn't get help, serious bodily damage can be done—damage that will last for many years to come.

When someone feels terrible about themselves, they might look in the mirror but not see their true reflection. Their vision becomes distorted. Having such a wrong picture of yourself can be very damaging. If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, it is very important to get help. Eating disorders can be deadly. This is one case when you are being a true friend if you tell a trusted adult what you know. Here is what one young woman told us:

I was bulimic. I hated myself. My obsession with controlling my weight was just a replacement for not being able to control other things in my life. My best friend figured it out. I don't know how because I did everything imaginable to hide my problem. She told my mom and my house exploded. I was so mad at my friend. I hated her. But after my parents found out I got some help. My mom would just not leave me alone until I agreed to talk to a counselor. Bulimia isn't like having the flu—it doesn't just go away. You have to deal with the deeper issues. Anyhow, three years later I finally called my friend. She had been sending me letters and even birthday presents for those three years, but I ignored her. But when I called her after those three years I told her that I felt I owed my life to her. She was willing to risk losing me as a friend in order to try to help me. I think that if I had kept it up at that rate I wouldn't be here now. I want to help other people who are going through what I went through. The one thing I can say is—get help! And you're not the only one.

Liking Yourself: A Reality Check



Imagine that you are eating lunch with a group of friends. You look over at one of your friends and you say, *Did you ever notice that your ears stick out?* Your friend looks a little hurt, but just shrugs his shoulders and laughs. Then you look at the friend sitting next to him and you say, *If it weren't for that mousy hair color you would be halfway good-looking.* She frowns and looks down at

her plate. You move on to the next one, *I can't help but see what a mess your skin is. Your teeth are gray too, too bad for you.* By the time you reached friend number four, you will probably be sitting alone.


Why is it that you wouldn't even think of talking to your friends like that? You are used to encouraging your friends, helping them get back up after a fall, and seeing the good in them. You want your friends to feel good about themselves.

Did you ever think about how you see yourself? You deserve the same respect and consideration you show to your friends. When other people see that you are confident and have self-respect, they will naturally show you the same. People tend to admire people who are sure of themselves. When you accept yourself, you will find that you are much happier. Accepting yourself doesn't mean that you will stop trying to improve. It means that you will be kind and patient with yourself—as if you were your own friend. Being your own best friend is so important, in fact, that we are going to talk about it again in a few chapters.

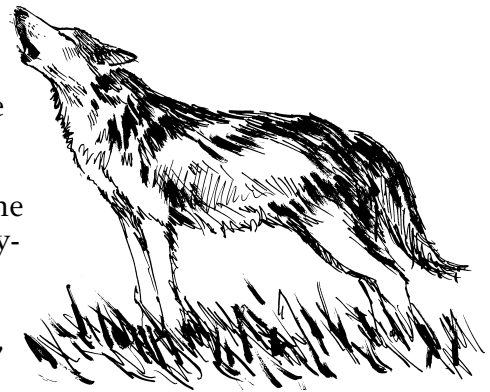
Being Brave Enough to be Your True Self

It's real hard to be yourself. If you try then other people might look at you differently. You are not being what and who they wanted you to be. Everyone expects you to be in one group or another, if you're not in any group you're considered uncool. It is definitely hard to be yourself.

David, 13

★  Do you agree with David? Why is it so hard to be yourself, and not to try to be what you think everyone else wants you to be? What a boring world we would live in if no one was willing to take the risk of being themselves! Although people do all kinds of things to try to fit into the crowd, it is the people who stand out of the crowd that we usually look up to the most.

It is often the people of the world who are thought of as the oddballs, or the ones who do not think and act like everyone else, who do incredible things with their lives. These oddballs sometimes become famous. They are actors, singers,



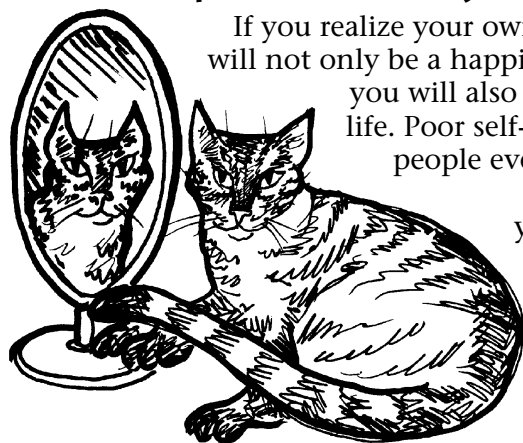
dancers, movie producers, and writers. They are also the humanitarians, social and civil leaders—just to name a few. Some of the people who have become the greatest and most loved leaders were once cast aside as being weird or different. But they were brave enough to express their own views, even though they differed from the mainstream. It is worth mentioning because so many of the people we respect and admire are people who had the courage to be their true selves.

The uniqueness of these people is what makes them so interesting that other people will pay a lot of money to see them perform, read their work or watch a movie they have produced. Only by being brave enough to be different are you going to be able to find and develop your special talent. No doubt once you cast off the mask of the false you, you will discover that life is much more interesting.

I know some people who don't necessarily care what other people think. They are fun to be around. Sometimes I'll find myself saying things around them that I normally wouldn't say. It's nice to have friends who don't really care because you can be yourself around them.

Jessi, 15

How Important is Self-Image?



If you realize your own value and inner beauty, you will not only be a happier and healthier person yourself, you will also be able to fulfill your potential in life. Poor self-image gets in the way of talented people every day.

One of the ways to begin to see yourself in a better light is to think of yourself as your own friend. Look at yourself in the mirror and think about how you would talk to yourself if you were your friend.

What would you want for yourself? How would you try to help yourself to feel better about you? You don't have to go and talk to the mirror—we just hope to show you how you are already talking to yourself (and if what you are saying is helpful or not). Once you like yourself, it is more likely that others will find you more

attractive and interesting too. There is nothing more beautiful than someone who truly loves himself!

It doesn't matter what people say about you or what people think about you. What matters is who you are.

Jonathan, 15

Journal

One of the classic love stories of our time is called *Beauty and the Beast*. This is the tale of a beautiful young woman who grows to love an ugly beast. Have you ever come to find a person to be beautiful whom you originally thought to be unattractive?



To Do

1. Imagine that your best friend has written you a letter telling you that they feel terrible about themselves. Write a letter to that friend (an imaginary friend with the same qualities of a good friend may work best here). In your letter, tell your friend what good you see in them and what other people like about them.
2. In pairs, think of a popular famous person who is different in their behavior than the average person. Why do you think people look up to this person? What would that person's life be like if he or she was too afraid to let the differences show? How do you think other people can overcome their fear of being different?
3. Sometimes other people can see good qualities in you that you may not see yourself. This next activity is best when all students are taking it seriously (in other words, no joking around). Here is what you do: Sit in a circle. Choose one student to leave the room. When the student is gone, have volunteers make positive statements about that student. Try to include information that not everyone knows (like, they help take care of their grandmother every weekend). Assign one person to write down what is said. When that person returns have that person stand in the center of the circle. Repeat the statements aloud one at a time. See if they can guess who said it. Choose another person to go outside. Those who participate must stick to positive statements!!!





Key Ideas

- ☉ A good self-image helps you to be confident and get more out of your life.
- ☉ True beauty comes from within.
- ☉ When you have a good self image you will be confident enough to be your true self, even if that means being different.

I have to live with myself, and so
I want to be fit for myself to know
I want to be able as days go by
Always to look myself straight in the eye;
I don't want to stand with the setting sun,
And hate myself for things I have done.
I don't want to keep on the closet shelf
A lot of secrets about myself,
And fool myself, as I come and go,
Into thinking that nobody else will know
The kind of man I really am;
I don't want to dress myself up in sham.
I want to go out with my head erect,
I want to deserve all men's respect;
And here in the struggle for fame and wealth,
I want to be able to like myself.
I don't want to look at myself and know
That I am a buffer, an empty show.
I can never hide myself from me:
I see what others may never see,
I know what others may never know;
I can never fool myself, and so,
Whatever happens I want to be
Self-respecting and guilt-free.