

## Nothing to Hide

by...Bill Schroer

## The Perfect Body

*“Every society has a way of torturing its women, whether by binding their feet or by sticking them into whalebone corsets. What contemporary American culture has come up with is designer jeans.”*

—Joel Yager, M.D.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century women of means had ribs removed to achieve a narrow waist...and corsets created shortness of breath and dislocated visceral organs. Today, plastic surgery, liposuction and bariatric procedures are complemented by bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. Patients are referred for treatment at ever younger ages (as young as 8). But there is no sign of slowing down:

1. Today’s model is 23% thinner than an average woman (in 1990 models were 8% thinner)
2. Eating disorders have increased 400% since the 1970s
3. Only 5% of women in the US fit the body type portrayed by the media

Men are not immune. “Thin, muscular. . .” models drive gym memberships, waxing and plastic surgery equivalents. But, this phenomenon impacts women far more than men.

A key difference is the media. Television, magazines and the Internet act as force multipliers creating a cultural imperative driving body image requirements to all time highs. And, body image and self-esteem are highly correlated. Body image affects self-esteem (and vice-versa). Self-esteem affects decisions we make about our lives and bodies. Think ambition at school or work, drug use (or not), alcohol intake (more or less), sexual activity (responsible or not), relationship development, etc.

Few women (or men) can escape this influence on their psyche delivered every day. It is true not all women (or men) are affected. . . . many have positive self-esteem and reinforcement in their upbringing to have the “armor” needed to withstand the media driven cultural imperative. But, that’s our idea of success. . . some survive unscathed?

We like to think of ourselves as better than that. When we see how women are treated in places like Saudi Arabia (a “moderate” Islamist country) women have few rights, are kept isolated much of their lives, and have little control over their lives and bodies, we like to think we are superior. Maybe not so much.

Why am I so sensitive about this? I have seen how it can be and is different. . . in a naturist environment.

Naturists live to a great extent within a subculture isolated from the rest of society. Some live nude at home (as I do), others are nude when they visit a naturist resort. The rest of society doesn't notice naturists too much as the laws regarding public nudity have so far prevented naturists from practicing their philosophy in public.

While naturists aren't immune from TV, the naturist society rules and culture are different. A key tenet of naturism is "body acceptance". The notion is simple. Rule #1 is you don't judge people by their appearance and any physical differences. The second rule is you accept your own body. And, the third rule is you accept others. No judgement, no gawking at some bodies and rolling your eyes at others, no beating yourself up for your tummy.

Isn't body acceptance difficult where no one has clothes on? It's actually pretty easy. The first thing you realize when visiting a nudist resort or community is there are no perfect bodies. And, because no one is wearing clothes there is no pretense. No trying to improve the bustline with the right bra, no tightening up the belt on the designer jeans to imitate the Brad Pitt six pack. None of that. And, men look at women in the eye. It's polite, it's the culture and it's the way it's done.

A ringing endorsement of the naturist culture endearing me to this movement is who you find as naturists. Outside of the normal mix of people from all walks of society there are, seemingly oddly, people who might be seen as different. . . obese, those with disabilities and in wheelchairs. . . and in some cases men and women with surgical scars. Why? As one woman who has had a double mastectomy explains on the film "Chasing the Sun" produced by the Naturist Society "Here is where I am accepted for who I am. . . I don't have to be ashamed of my body or my surgery here". It may seem counterintuitive that by taking off your clothes you de-stigmatize your body and liberate yourself. But there it is.

We don't all have to become naturists (although I would encourage it) to accept our own bodies, others' bodies and to teach our daughters, wives and girlfriends the pressure is off. Lead a healthy, responsible life, take care of your body and don't worry if you aren't a size zero. You are a wonderful person and deserve to be respected for who you are, with or without clothes on.