

Daughters of Feminists

The Passages of Beauty

BY EVELYN DRESCHER

L'auteure s'en prend aux notions souvent contradictoires de féminité, de beauté et de féminisme et réfléchit sur l'influence de ce dialogue sur l'éducation de sa fille.

It could have been a commercial. Take one. In a backyard garden. A "cute as a button" little girl skips up to her mother with her hair shining in the sun and eyes twinkling. She announces to her mother (who is nonchalantly cutting roses). "Mummy, the _____ shampoo has made me beautiful." Mother smiles and touching her daughter's hair says....

Take two. What does the feminist mother (who is in fact weeding the organic carrots) really say to her daughter?

Smothering a groan through my smile, I said to my four-year old. "Let me look at you. Well ... your hair is shiny and smells like apricots, but *you* are the one that is beautiful. The shampoo only made your hair clean." "No" came the reply which broaches no contradiction, "_____ makes me beautiful! And, I'm going to show my

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brother now." Turning to the weeds more vigorously, I then wondered, do all daughters of feminists like sweet-smelling shampoos, dresses, dance classes, Barbie dolls (shudder), and make-up? Or was I somehow failing to model appropriate alternative behaviour? Were the kids watching too much TV? Why did I buy that shampoo anyway?

I remember when I first knew I would be having a daughter. I hollered in the ear of some poor lab technician who had phoned to tell me the results of my amniocentesis. There were tears of joy in my eyes by the time my feet hit the floor. And I confess, shades of pink and purple flashed through my mind. I was delighted.

When pregnant with my first-born, I admitted to a male friend (who considers himself a feminist—a coupling I have some reservations about however much I love the man) that I had a basic fear about having a son—a male. I told him that I didn't understand men, now how was I supposed to raise one? I had particular concerns that I would be distant from my son—that he would be "the other" and that he would pass all too quickly into that strange masculine world which mystified, attracted, and abhorred me. First-time mothers talk like that until they hold their babes and then the only thing that matters is the beating of their hearts next to yours.

I thought that with a daughter it would be different; that because of our "sameness," I would know what to do. I thought that I could pass on with mother's milk all the lessons life had taught me—lessons of strength and of survival. She would be a feminist, of course. But I guess I forgot

that I would also pass on all the ambiguities and contradictions of being a woman in our society.

Now I could point to many high-minded examples concerning our ongoing struggle for equality, but let's take, for example, an "everyday episode" from the life of a woman—the removal of hair from our bodies, one of the rituals of beauty.

A dear friend of mine (who lives more as a feminist than admits to being one) recently introduced her and her daughter's friends (between the ages of 10 and 13) to the ancient Egyptian art of depilation using honey. She herself had learned this art from a European friend. Her enthusiasm has enticed some of her other friends to try the method. Once a month for the past several years, a group of more or less hairy-legged women gather to chat, drink tea, and remove the hair from their bodies according to preference—i.e. legs, underarms, and (ouch!) "bikini line." This thoroughly feminine ritual intrigued the daughters of these women and their entreaties to join their mothers were realized once school was out in June. I have an image of this gathering.

My friend stirs the honey on the stove until it is the right consistency. The tea kettle is on; the lemonade has been poured: no fathers or brothers are to be seen. Occasionally, one of the girls peers at the thickening honey, balancing an expression between adolescent cool and trepidation. The room is filled with talk, laughter, and anticipation. Everything is hushed momentarily when the announcement comes that the concoction is ready. One of the girls bravely places her leg on the kitchen stool. However kindly her mother applies it, the

pastly white honey hurts as it rips the hair from its virgin follicles. Unbidden tears well up and all collectively hold their breath.

Is this a positive affirming ritual bonding between mothers with daughters and between a group of young women as they enter one of the hallmarks of womanhood? Or is this a torturous lesson in delusion satisfying a patriarchal standard of beauty that has distorted our understanding of our femininity for centuries? I remember my own furtive efforts at shaving my legs at the age of 14. Having purchased my first plastic razor along with a package of gum and a worldly *Seventeen* magazine at the drugstore, I closeted myself in the bathroom. Thus alone and undirected, I wondered if I was only supposed to do "it" to the knee, above the knee, or higher? And, how did anyone manage that awkward place in the back of the ankle? I emerged (I thought) one step closer to being a woman from that first encounter. My legs were smooth and beautiful (except for the bandage).

Unfortunately no one else recognized my transformation.

With children, one lives both for the moment and in anticipation of what will come. Who are they now, and who will they become? Will my daughter face similar passages into cultural womanhood alone as I did? Or is an ownership and affirmation of femininity as part of our heritage of being women something to be delivered as shared gifts to our daughters in such a way as my friend did? How can I teach her to balance her sense of the beauty within her with a sense of pride in the beauty of her body? Finally, how can I help her to tread cautiously in the mire of cultural contradictions (mine, yours, and that of crass patriarchal commercialism) about femininity and beauty?

Admitting that "enormous pleasure can be extracted from feminine pursuits as a creative outlet or purely as relaxation; indeed, indulgence for the sake of fun" (15), Susan Brownmiller also wrote in her book, *Femininity*:

The great paradox of femininity, as I see it, is that a judicious concession here and there has been known to work wonders as protective colouration in a man's world and as a means of survival, but total surrender has stopped women pointblank from major forms of achievement. (235)

What's a good feminist mother supposed to do?

There is ambiguity in our understanding of beauty that is more or less honestly come by. We are a culture that praises "perfect" physical beauty (real or manufactured) at the same time that we say we honour the beautiful soul. There is the counterpoint between beautiful and smart and the sense that as feminists we should emphasize ability and intelligence equally with (and some say above) beauty. The truth is that we still have our own work to do on the meanings of beauty

In this dialogue on beauty with my daughter, I recently, and ever so caus-

ally, asked her a leading question as she revelled in the smell of citrus soap while in the bathtub. "Do you think you are more beautiful ... or do you think you are more smart?" I asked. She paused and slipped the soap from her hands shooting it up in the air. "I'm more beautiful *and* more smart" she answered easily. I smiled and quietly said, "Yes, you are."

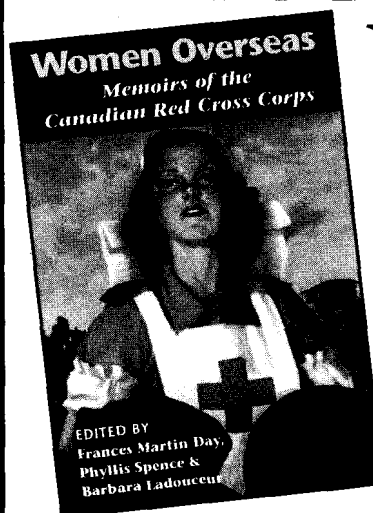
You go, grll!!

Evelyn Drescher is a single mother and a social activist on the issue of women's unpaid work. In the summer her legs are smooth and still, on occasion, bandaged. In the winter her hairy legs help keep her warm. Her daughter wears a cap announcing "Girls Can Be Anything" to both her dance lessons and baseball games and doesn't particularly worry about the hair on her legs ... yet.

References

Brownmill, Susan. *Femininity*. New York: Linden Press/Simon and Shuster, 1984.

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