



SOUL-DEEP BEAUTY

Fighting for Our True Worth in a World Demanding Flawless

MELISSA L. JOHNSON



“This book is a wake-up call in all the right ways. Melissa shows us how ‘beauty’ has been co-opted to become the ultimate distraction for so many of us, distracting us from our true purpose and true identity. In our image-based world, Melissa’s message could not be more important. We need this reminder to reorient to true beauty, soul-deep beauty.”

Bob Goff, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Nothing is more shattered or misunderstood in our lives than beauty. We are unable on our own to recapture God’s vision for it, and every generation needs guides who can reintroduce it to us again for the first time. In Melissa Johnson, we have such a guide, and with *Soul-Deep Beauty*, she has offered us a vision and a way not only to encounter, but to practice becoming the very beauty that God has foreseen us to be. Read this book, and find your soul’s beauty emerging more truly than ever you imagined it could.”

Curt Thompson, MD, author of *The Soul of Desire* and *The Soul of Shame*

“Every single day—maybe every single hour of most days—I talk about self-worth. I talk about identity and the way we see ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As a therapist for girls and families, one of my greatest hopes for every human who walks out of my office is that they would know their worth . . . inside and out. I’m so grateful for this book by Melissa Johnson that I believe can help them discover just that. *Soul-Deep Beauty* is what we all need in a world that is captivated by image and constantly pushing us toward perfection. There is so much more . . . to us and to the way God sees us. Thank you, Melissa, for pointing us toward true worth.”

Sissy Goff, LPC, MHSP, bestselling author; speaker; and Director of Child and Adolescent Counseling at Daystar Counseling in Nashville, TN

“Melissa’s message abruptly challenges society’s tendency to make money off women’s shame. She sheds light on the many lies that wreak havoc on women’s hearts, minds, and bodies. Reading Melissa’s words will call on the ‘more’ that your soul was made for. The truths in this book will allow you the grace, strength, and courage you so desperately need to fight off the shame and lies that you have been living in. I pray your heart be ready to receive, for there are many deep God truths wrapped in these pages.”

Kathryn Shultis, Be a Blessing Co.

“This book will make you change your perspective from culture’s standards to Christ’s standards. The way Melissa captures the problem and solution to how we view beauty is absolutely necessary to understand.”

Tori Hope Petersen, bestselling author of *Fostered*

“The best-kept secret of American culture is that it runs on shame, and we buy into it. Melissa Johnson exposes this reality with honesty and vulnerability, guiding readers to redefine beauty by developing a more soulful, holistic relationship with their bodies.”

Steve Wiens, pastor and author

“With plenty of research and vulnerable storytelling, Melissa Johnson’s book has the power to loosen the chains of shame and self-hatred that have been sold to women for generations. *Soul-Deep Beauty* will reorient readers to the Source of their true worth and help them counter cultural lies with the truth that they are whole, loved, and free.”

Katelyn Beaty, editorial director of Brazos Press and author of *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits Are Hurting the Church*

“An original contribution to the literature of beauty and body image from a Christian perspective. Johnson vividly demonstrates how the quest for physical perfection, as defined by our toxic culture, leaves us spiritually impoverished. One doesn’t need to believe in God to appreciate her illuminating analysis and to applaud her recovery.”

Jean Kilbourne EdD, award-winning filmmaker of *Killing Us Softly*

“Many of us know that we are swimming in toxic waters when it comes to issues surrounding body image, eating disorders, and our overall relationship to ourselves—which is why I’m deeply grateful for the resource that Melissa Johnson has provided us in her book *Soul-Deep Beauty*. With precision and compassion, Melissa helps name not only the wounds that plague us, but the source of hope and healing available to us as well. This is a sobering and yet hopeful book that is needed for such a time as this.”

Aundi Kolber, MA, LPC, therapist and author
of *Try Softer* and *Strong like Water*

“Melissa has a passionate heart for the true gift of God’s beauty; one that frees, transforms, and heals. In this vulnerable, encouraging story, she invites her readers both to encounter that beauty and also to be defined by it rather than the false ideals of beauty so prevalent in the modern world. Her writing will be a gift to many.”

Sarah Clarkson, author of *This Beautiful Truth: How God’s Goodness Breaks Into Our Darkness*

“With both expertise and wisdom, Melissa Johnson gently guides readers through an honest examination of the distorted cultural norms we live in and ushers us into a thought-provoking consideration of true, soul-formative beauty. A timely and insightful read!”

Elizabeth Peterson, MA, CSD, spiritual director
and retreat facilitator of Commune Soul Care

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2023 by Melissa L. Johnson

Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2022055256

ISBN 978-0-7642-4165-9 (paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-4203-8 (casebound)

ISBN 978-1-4934-4247-8 (ebook)

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Cover design by Faceout Studio

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To Jared, my mom and dad, my sisters,
my grandma Doris, and my aunt Karen.
Thank you for showing me the heart of
God through your understanding, love,
care, and compassion. That is the greatest
gift anyone can receive.

PART 1

A JOURNEY OF
RECOGNITION

1 THE RACE TO NOWHERE

Maybe you've been brainwashed too. —*The New Radicals*

I was thirty-one when I entered intensive eating disorder treatment and had the startling realization that I'd been brainwashed. I'd let the cultural idol of thinness deeply affect my sense of self, self-esteem, and aesthetic expectations, and only after about three months into that treatment did I start accepting my diagnosis and recognizing the major players in how my disorder came about.

While many factors contribute to the manufacturing of an eating disorder in someone's life, I've found none so unsettling and oppressive as the popular American discourse regarding women's body image.*

To say that culture caused my eating disorder would be an overstatement. But to say it didn't significantly affect my self-worth, self-expectations, and self-acceptance would be a gross understatement. I've realized that, while it may not be shouted from the rooftops, lurking beneath the New Year's resolution diets and Fitbit craze lies a

* Throughout my story, I often refer to "American beauty," as that is my cultural context. Though the beauty messages and cultural norms I discuss are prevalent in Western culture at large, I have simply experienced them in an American context.

sinister world of manipulation, judgment, prejudice, and marginalization. Our aesthetically obsessed culture has a disturbing underbelly.

With new eyes, I noticed how the media, advertising, and diet industries perpetually sell us on the idea that if we lose just a little more weight (or have just a few less wrinkles or “tone up” our bodies), we’ll be happy. Perhaps you’ve noticed it too. And here’s the clincher: We’re buying it. *Literally*.

But what if we do lose the weight and are still no happier? Or what if because of our striving we’re even more obsessed with food and our appearance? What if what we thought would bring us freedom and happiness does the opposite, further imprisoning us to cultural expectations? Believing in and following the rabbit trail of “never enough” messages is falling into a black hole. These messages are oh so nicely packaged, but the results they promise are also incredibly elusive. And if that’s the rabbit trail we continue down, we eventually believe *we* will never be enough because what we *do* will never be enough.

Eating disorders, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, self-harm, shame, body image struggles (body contempt, even), tumultuous relationships with food, jealousy and comparison among girls and women . . . This is just a sampling of the fallout I’ve seen in the wake of West-

We’re all swimming
in the water of
“never enough”—
and it wears on us.

ern beauty culture. We’re all swimming in the water of “never enough”—and it wears on us.

In the pursuit of beauty and the elusive “beach-ready” body, women and young girls engage in all sorts of damaging, often overlooked practices, like restrictive eating, extreme or obsessive exercise, cosmetic surgery, and demeaning self-talk. These practices may be assumed or even blown off as the price to be beautiful or even to achieve wellness—a warped brand of both—but they take incredible energy of the mind

and heart as well as a great deal of time. They have a dangerous gravity and can easily become a consuming force in our lives.

So as advertisers capitalize on our strivings and insecurities, I've been burdened by what's happening to the eternal and invaluable female soul as it bathes in the onslaught of "never enough."

Following the Rabbit Trail

Recently, I joined a couple dozen college-age women at a lovely retreat center in the Northwoods of Wisconsin. Towering pines, a picturesque chapel, the landscape bursting with green. There I was, a married woman and college professor, surrounded by these "girls" who were so full of energy, so full of dreams. As I watched and talked with them, I recognized the familiar striving for perfection. I saw myself in them. Wanting to do it all well—faith, family, friends, fitness, meaningful work—all while meeting the cultural standard for beauty.

They had so much to "perfect" in what they wore, what they ate, how they exercised. It felt exhausting to me, and my heart ached with compassion for them. They were simply following the script they'd been given. The script we've all been given.

From an early age, females learn the most acceptable way to be: kind, confident, and above all else, thin. Obviously, this expectation is rarely explained to us explicitly. As intuitive creatures, however, we learn it well. From cartoons to toys to movies, we assimilate what the ideal feminine body shape is: fit and thin. After all, what exemplary character in TV world doesn't adhere to that body type? From Barbie to Hannah Montana to Disney princesses, the message is communicated loud and clear: to matter, have value, and "be a main character," you must meet certain criteria.

Then as we grow up, we slowly learn the cold reality that the linchpin of that trifecta of kindness, confidence, and thinness is the

aesthetic component. We may very well be kind and confident, but if we aren't thin, we're inconsistent with the cultural ideal. To matter, to have a voice, to be respected, we must achieve, maintain, or perfect a look. Thin, fit, and beautiful are supposedly our passport to cultural relevance.

As these same young girls grow up enduring the rigors of puberty and then young adulthood, media, advertisers, and diet culture are all glad to accompany them on that journey of maturation and development. Modern-day adolescents are rarely handed women who are, say, astronauts or aviators as cultural role models; rather, the heroes of today are celebrities whose greatest recent feat is losing ten pounds for swimsuit season. The artifacts that used to represent the path to adulthood have broadened from diaries and braces to scales and fitness apps. Such tools for self-assessment are steadily acquired, and

Thin, fit, and beautiful are supposedly our passport to cultural relevance.

the classic coming-of-age questions, *Am I smart enough?* and *Am I likable?*—in other words, *Am I good enough?*—are trumped by the paramount wondering, *Am I thin, fit, and pretty enough?*

Essentially, *Am I culturally acceptable?*

As adult women, we discover the very same rules are at play. The messages are identical as we remain inundated with diet commercials and ads for the latest exercise equipment and all sorts of creams and contraptions to alter some body part that “needs” improvement. I imagine even the most confident of women find themselves considering what’s wrong with how they are.

And just when we think we might be doing all right—in a healthy and balanced place with food, activity, and body image—some advertiser rolls out another ad about losing just a little more weight. After all, that woman looks dramatically less depressed after losing ten pounds, right?

I also started noticing how, in our culture, we marry weight loss with happiness, and we marry thinness with respect. Mentally scroll through the popular female news anchors, TV personalities, movie celebrities, and fitness and beauty influencers you know. Most are thin and fit, aren't they? And if they don't fit the cultural ideal, they're usually considered funny, and their appearance is to some extent a gimmick.

While that may not come as a huge surprise, reflect on what that communicates to us as women. Plainly stated, the females in our culture who have a voice and "matter" are largely thin. And in a media-saturated world, that reality has larger repercussions than may be assumed. With our society associating competency, respectability, self-discipline, beauty, health, and happiness with thinness, those who don't fit that cultural ideal are made to feel as though they don't measure up, they aren't good enough, they aren't as valued.

Furthermore, losing some weight, becoming more toned, or eating "cleaner" become the "obvious" conclusion for gaining any of the above—happiness, respectability, and all the rest. While some women may be immune to this cultural ideal, for many others, feeling inconsistent with the cultural norm can do severe damage to their self-esteem and, increasingly so, to their mental health.

Though all this may seem like feminist rhetoric, these realities have dire repercussions. One study showed that 97 percent of women have "at least one 'I hate my body' moment" in a day,¹ while another survey demonstrated that 75 percent of women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five reported engaging in disordered eating.² We also know that "20 million women . . . will struggle with an eating disorder at some point in their lives."³

Please consider that those statistics represent *reported* occurrence of eating disorders or disordered eating, not necessarily women who are in denial or unaware of their eating struggles, as was the case in my own experience. Furthermore, eating disorders have the second

highest mortality rate among all mental health disorders, surpassed only by opioid addiction.⁴

With teen depression, anxiety, and the occurrence of eating disorders on the rise, it's hard to believe that the prevailing thin ideal in the media isn't causing significant damage to the developing psyche, self-esteem, and soul of young women. As a therapist for adolescents, I've heard young girls despair over feeling as though they're not thin enough or pretty enough, and in intensive eating disorder treatment groups, I've heard grown women talk about how they're terrified to restore weight due to unhelpful comments people might make or, even worse, what they may say to themselves.

The truth is, we have a significant problem. We're actively equating women's worth with their appearance, and the ramifications are serious.

The question is, what are we going to do about it?

Back at the retreat, interacting with those college-age women, my compassion turned to alarm as conversations on the dock and in the

We're actively equating women's worth with their appearance, and the ramifications are serious.

chapel helped me see the depths to which the very same dangerous messages that had robbed me of so much are impacting this next generation. My mind flashed images of my youngest nieces, now only seven and five years old, and the pit in my stomach deepened.

I needed to do something. To say something. To sound the alarm.

Much like Alice in Wonderland, these beautiful young women were quickly scrambling after the elusive rabbit on that soul-sucking trail—the trail I was all too familiar with.

I wanted to warn them.

I want to warn you.

A Quest for More

This book tells the story of how I followed that rabbit trail and, as a result, seriously jacked up my life. I hope it will help you see that American beauty isn't beautiful at all; it's a race to nowhere. A race that's fracturing the minds, the relationships, and the very souls of women and girls in ways that are largely unnoticed.

The cultural water we're swimming in is toxic, but we aren't saying much about it. We've become so used to the water that we don't even notice it. Or if we do, we grossly underestimate its toxicity. For us. For our children.

Our bodies have become objects, commodities to be used for economic gain in the capitalistic rat race, leaving us broken. Our minds have become places to track calories and steps or to scrutinize our perceived flaws in allegiance to a diet, reset, or lifestyle that promises happiness. The rules and mantras of American beauty and diet culture have taken up residence in our internal scripts, impacting and infiltrating every aspect of our well-being. The broken kind of beauty we're being sold warps and fractures our souls on so many levels.

It's the ultimate deceit: as we chase after what promises to bring us acceptance and happiness, we're left only more broken. Disintegrated. Put another way, we're posting, filtering, and literally buying our own soul exploitation. Perhaps the worst part of all is that we don't realize we're being played. Advertisers and those in the beauty and diet industry are making billions off our shame—the very shame they purposely stir up.

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But don't you believe you were made for more than running after aesthetic perfection amid the shame-filled “never enough”? An empty

chasing of the wind—the elusive rabbit? Our eulogies can be a lot more meaningful than *She was so committed to eating clean*, or *She never missed a workout*, or *I think we can all learn from how flawless her body was*.

I believe we've all been created by a God of unending and unimaginable love. A God of adventure and creativity and wonder. A God of wild beauty. And I believe he has plans for your life, your heart, your mind, your activity in the world—for your true self to grow and thrive. And those plans have nothing to do with pursuing a warped brand of beauty or health. They don't last.

Are you weary of feeling like you don't meet the criteria for the “main character” aesthetic?

Are you exhausted by chasing trim and fit to prove your worth?

Do you experience an underlying anxiety about aging or keeping up (or even starting) a fitness routine?

Do you ever beat yourself up for not getting in enough steps or attaining or maintaining that New Year's resolution to lose weight?

Are you tired of the mental energy it takes to strive for attaining or maintaining perfect or clean nutrition?

Do you feel like no matter what you do, your body or your complexion or your whatever isn't flawless enough?

If so, I've got you. Take a deep breath, and please consider this an invitation to stop striving. In the pages ahead, I share so much I want you to know. You can choose something different from the shame-saturated, cultural beauty we've all been immersed in. Much more freedom is to be found. Thriving awaits you. And I believe that both individually and together we can shed the legacy of broken beauty and move into a different reality. One our souls are made for. We can choose that something different in our own lives, in our homes, in our friend groups. That's how culture changes. One person at a time.

Often what we know most acutely—the deep-in-your-bones kind of knowing—comes from well-worn and often difficult places along

our journey. Sometimes to know something deep in your bones, you must experience it yourself. For me to see the dead end, ugliness, and fracturing that all lie in chasing after popular cultural beauty narratives, I had to get to the end of myself.

On the journey ahead, I'll show you how that fracturing occurred in my own life. But I'll also show you how the undoing of American beauty's effects opened me up to an entirely different kind of beauty. Sometimes the deconstruction of one thing leaves space for something far better, more beautiful, and real than the shaky thing there before. I want to show you how that new thing touches those soul-deep, longing places American beauty promises to fill but never can—and how that shift in how I know and understand beauty has made all the difference in the world.

Will you join me?

Are You Racing Too? A Self-Awareness Inventory

Honestly and thoughtfully complete the following inventory with simple yes or no answers to consider how cultural messages around beauty and body image may be impacting your relationship with food and your body. If you respond yes to any of the items below, consider if that tendency is affecting you in any negative, unhelpful way. Also consider whether you'd like to move toward greater freedom in that area.

- I often find myself fixated on my appearance.
- I often wish my body was thinner, smaller.
- I often wish I could change some things about my appearance.
- I often tailor my food choices to try to shrink or change my body.

- I often tailor my movement/exercise choices to try to shrink or change my body.
- I often feel preoccupied with thoughts about the size or shape of my body.
- I often feel preoccupied with thoughts or anxiety about what I will eat or what I've eaten.
- I often feel preoccupied with tracking steps, calories, or macros.
- I often find myself trying to "perfect" my food choices.
- I often compare my body to other women's bodies.
- I often compare my exercise routine to other women's routines.
- I often find myself judging other women's body shapes or sizes.
- I often label foods as good or bad.
- I would likely benefit from inviting more self-compassion into my relationship with my body.

A NOTE BEFORE THE JOURNEY AHEAD

Even if they haven't been diagnosed with an eating disorder or don't meet diagnostic criteria, anyone struggling with food, body image, or exercise can experience great distress and disorder in their life. And often people with eating disorders don't think they have one because they believe they don't look like they do. But eating disorders have no look. People of all shapes and sizes can have an eating disorder. Yet that myth about a look is too often a barrier to their seeking help. And, of course, anyone can have an eating disorder regardless of their gender, age, race, or ethnicity.

As you read my story or if in general you realize that your struggles with these topics bring marked distress or dysfunction into your life, please seek help. Obtaining an assessment from a therapist who specializes in eating disorders or from an eating disorder treatment program can be a valuable tool. An online assessment can be taken at <https://www.emilyprogram.com/your-recovery/take-the-quiz/>.

It can also be helpful to consider how much of your daily thought life is devoted to food, body shape and size, and exercise (10 percent, 80 percent, more?). Would you like to free up more head and heart space? My therapist once told me, "You could be more free." Is that true for you? If so, you can find resources and support from NEDA, the National Eating Disorders Association, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>.