

**Rhona Knight** assesses the modern-day obsession with the quest for physical perfection

# MIRROR, MIRROR

## key points

- Our society rushes to make judgments of people based on appearance.
- People's quest for physical perfection, however culturally defined, seems to have soared in the last two decades.
- Jesus' Great Commandment highlights the need to remember that we are holistic beings, who are to love God not only with bodies, but with heart, soul and mind too.

We are aware that in the world we live in, appearance makes a difference.

*'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in the land is fairest of all?'*

**M**irrors are not a new invention. From the polished metal mirrors of 600 BC to the mirrors we have in our homes today, surfaces that reflect, that mirror, enable us to gaze at our own appearance. 'Mirrors' now include: phone screens or 'selfies', shop windows and reflective sunglasses.

It has been estimated that a man spends 45 days of his life shaving. Women, on average, are said to look at their reflection eight times a day<sup>1</sup> and spend 55 minutes a day (or two weeks a year) on their appearance.<sup>2</sup>

### What are we looking for?

When we look in the mirror, what are we looking at? What are we looking for? For many it is about ensuring that we are presentable. That we don't have toothpaste round our mouth or something stuck between our teeth. For some it will be plucking stray eyebrow hair or trimming facial hair. But we also look in the full length mirror. Does the suit fit properly? Do the shirt and tie match? Does my bum look big in this? How big is the bald patch?

We are aware that in the world we live in, appearance makes a difference. People make judgments based on our appearance,<sup>3</sup> to the extent that it seems good appearance results in higher income and better jobs.<sup>4</sup> There is the recurrent question of what doctors should wear to work: does appearance have an impact on patient care?<sup>5</sup>

Yet, for healthcare professionals and patients alike, appearance can become an idol, a fixation. It can become a key factor in determining a person's perception of their worthiness to be loved.

While mirrors reflect images clearly, they can also encourage something more insidious: dissatisfaction. People bemoan body shape, facial blemishes and age-appropriate wrinkles. Mild dental asymmetry and slightly yellowed teeth take on disproportionate importance. A British Social Attitudes Survey noted the public's concern about body confidence and its contribution to compromised well being.<sup>6</sup> It also explored the issue of self-objectification, where people find their self-worth in how other people judge their appearance. Dissatisfaction with appearance has a huge impact on men, women and, increasingly, children. Headlines include stories of school photographers offering to photoshop primary school children's school photographs.<sup>7</sup> The Girl Guides annual survey regularly identifies the perceived importance of looks and pressures to conform.<sup>8</sup> In the 2016 survey, 47% of girls indicated that the way they looked held them back most of the time.<sup>9</sup>

### Nothing new under the sun

The aspiration towards physical perfection is not new. Aristotle was quoted in a British Museum Exhibition, *Defining beauty: the body in ancient Greek art*,<sup>10</sup> as seeing the chief forms of beauty as 'order, symmetry and clear delineation'. In ancient Greece, citizens would have been exposed to society's view of the perfect body in marble statues. Lucian of Samosata wrote in the second century: 'The young men have a tanned complexion from the sun,

manly faces; they reveal spirit, fire, manliness... They maintain their bodies vigorously'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet while the quest for perfection, however culturally defined, may not be new, it does seem to have soared in the last two decades. The UK cosmetics market was worth £9,379 million in 2016.<sup>12</sup> That said, cosmetic surgery procedures fell 40% in 2016 with more people opting for non-surgical 'enhancing' such as Botox and teeth whitening.<sup>13</sup> Cosmetic dentistry has shown an exponential growth in the last 10–15 years.<sup>14</sup>

The quest for the perfect face and body appears to be fuelled by several factors.<sup>15</sup> Print and film media, including pornography, portray the culturally defined 'perfect' human body. This can create a sense of inadequacy for healthcare professionals and patients alike as unrealistic expectations are placed upon people that can't match the tweaked and airbrushed images that our society idealises. In the current culture of perfectionism it is easy for people to live under the tyranny of believing that perfection is possible.<sup>16</sup> In perceiving the 'perfect' to be available, the image of 'perfection' becomes more desirable, serving to magnify the feelings of discontentment.

Cosmetic surgery advertising and television programmes have been shown to have a negative impact on women and girls' body image.<sup>17</sup> Social media is also playing an increasingly prominent part. A recent report, *#StatusOfMind*, examined the positive and negative effects of social media on young people's health, with one of the issues being body image. Instagram and Snapchat were found to be the most negative, as the Chief Executive of the Royal Society for Public Health commented: 'It's interesting to see Instagram and Snapchat ranking as the worst for mental health and wellbeing – both platforms are very image-focused and it appears they may be driving feelings of inadequacy and anxiety in young people'.<sup>18</sup> The prevailing belief that 'improvement' of appearance can boost self-esteem may also perversely encourage discontentment and unhelpful comparison to others.

### Because I am not worth it?

Glynn Harrison explores the slippery concept of self-esteem in his book *The Big Ego Trip*. Along with the growth of the self-esteem movement, we have also seen a growth in individualism and narcissism, as scored by personality assessment tools.<sup>19</sup> Self-esteem is well defined by Alister and Joanna McGrath as 'a global evaluation or judgment about personal acceptability and worthiness to be loved... strongly related to the perceived views of the person by important others in his or her life'.<sup>20</sup> In a society which values appearance it partly determines how people view their self-worth.

Technology is added into this mix. There is scope not just to restore what has been damaged or to treat something which compromises health and wellbeing but the option to shape, mould or 'enhance' appearance. Anabolic steroids, Botox, dermal fillers and cosmetic surgery promise this.

A milieu has emerged which encourages people's dissatisfaction with their normal, reflected appearance. At a time when the 'because you're worth it'<sup>21</sup> attitude is growing, the cosmetic and enhancing markets seems to be booming precisely because people do not really believe the strapline – they do not think they're worth it.

### Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect

The Old Testament describes the *societal* importance of physical beauty, as the book of Esther bears witness, describing the intense period of preparation of each aspiring bride before her night with the king. Whilst acknowledging the value put by society on external beauty, the Bible also indicates the true nature of beauty: 'for the Lord does not see as mortals see... the Lord looks on the heart'.<sup>22</sup> Clearly internal beauty matters more to God than external.

Yet, as Richard Winter points out, 'it is not wrong to enjoy high standards... It is not wrong to strive for excellence in life and not all perfectionism is wrong'.<sup>23</sup> Jesus exhorts his listeners to be perfect as their Heavenly Father is perfect,<sup>24</sup> he is seen as the author and perfecter of faith.<sup>25</sup> Paul exhorts his readers to run the race in order to win the prize.<sup>26</sup> However the perfection talked about here is rather different from the perfection sought in the mirror. The Greek word used for perfect in Matthew and Hebrews, *teleios*, is more about completeness and fulfilled purpose. It echoes the Old Testament concept of *shalom* and emphasises holistic flourishing. The greatest commandment highlights the need to remember that humans are holistic beings, who are to love God not only with bodies, but with heart, soul and mind as well. In focusing exclusively on the physical, the dignity of humanity is undermined.

### We are a temple of the Holy Spirit

Above the mirror on the wall of a house I visited recently was written the word 'saint'. A helpful reminder that human beings, made in the image of God and possessing intrinsic dignity, need to avoid idolising the human body and treating it as a consumer product to be fashioned and moulded in our own desired image. Yet as saints, Christians are still works in progress, needing to resist being swept away by the flow of the zeitgeist striving for perfect appearance. More positively, there is the necessity to recollect the true nature of the body, a temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup> Instead of being imprisoned by society's view of beauty we need to remember that where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom, and that all of us 'with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another'.<sup>28</sup>

*Having been a GP educator and academic for 25 years, Rhona Knight is now serving as an assistant curate in the parish of Sleaford. Her Grove booklet The Quest for Perfection was published in July 2016.*

## references

1. Goodenough T. Vain or just paranoid? Women check their reflection EIGHT TIMES a day. *Daily Mail* 11 May 2012 [dailymail.ai/2r8EdrG](http://dailymail.ai/2r8EdrG)
2. White Sidell M. How long did you spend in front of the mirror this morning? Women dedicate 55 minutes a day to their appearance - the equivalent of two weeks a year! *Daily Mail* 24 February 2014 [dailymail.ai/2sGdf2K](http://dailymail.ai/2sGdf2K)
3. Judge T, Cable D. The Effect of Physical Height on Workplace Success and Income: Preliminary Test of a Theoretical Model. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 2004;89(3):428-441  
Johnston DW. Physical appearance and wages: Do blondes have more fun? *Economics Letters* 2010;108(1):10-12 [cmf.li/2eMh4JO](http://cmf.li/2eMh4JO)
4. Ibid
5. British Medical Association. Dress code at work. *BMA* 9 August 2016 [cmf.li/2f9pk2y](http://cmf.li/2f9pk2y)
6. Government Equalities Office. Body confidence: findings from the British Social Attitudes Survey - October 2014. *Government Equalities Office* 13 October 2014 [cmf.li/2f9oS4t](http://cmf.li/2f9oS4t)
7. Warburton D. Mum's fury as photographer offers to AIRBRUSH school picture of daughter aged 8. *Mirror* 28 October 2015 [cmf.li/2f4DCTR](http://cmf.li/2f4DCTR)
8. Girl Guiding. Girls' Attitudes Survey 2016 [cmf.li/2f0FPS6](http://cmf.li/2f0FPS6)
9. Ibid
10. The British Museum. Exhibition - Defining beauty: the ancient body in Greek art. 26 March - 5 July 2015 [cmf.li/2f9szHI](http://cmf.li/2f9szHI)
11. Goldhill S. *Love, Sex & Tragedy: How the Ancient World shapes our lives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004
12. CTPA. Key facts about the cosmetic industry [cmf.li/2f5f5S1](http://cmf.li/2f5f5S1)
13. Grierson J. Number of cosmetic surgery procedures in UK fell 40% in 2016. *Guardian* 13 February 2017 [bit.ly/2rYCMjr](http://bit.ly/2rYCMjr)
14. Donnelly L. Rise in cosmetic dentistry spending makes dentists smile. *Telegraph* 29 March 2015 [cmf.li/2f4XvtX](http://cmf.li/2f4XvtX)
15. Knight R. *The quest for perfection: seeking to be better than well*. London: Grove Ethics, 2016
16. Winter R. Perfectionism: The Road to Heaven - or Hell? *L'Abri Papers* 1998 [cmf.li/2e5sLX7](http://cmf.li/2e5sLX7)
17. Ashikali E. *The impact of cosmetic surgery media portrayals on body image and attitudes*. Doctoral thesis (PhD), University of Sussex, 2014 [cmf.li/2e5t5VY](http://cmf.li/2e5t5VY)
18. RSPH. Instagram ranked worst for young people's mental health. *RSPH* 19 May 2017 [bit.ly/2rPanu1](http://bit.ly/2rPanu1)
19. Harrison G. *The Big Ego Trip*. Nottingham: IVP, 2013
20. McGrath A, McGrath J. *Self-Esteem*. Leicester: IVP, 2001
21. L'Oréal Paris. *Because You're Worth it* [cmf.li/2f1wZ8TS](http://cmf.li/2f1wZ8TS)
22. 1 Samuel 16:7
23. Winter R. Perfectionism: The Road to Heaven - or Hell? *L'Abri Papers* 1998 [cmf.li/2e5sLX7](http://cmf.li/2e5sLX7)
24. Matthew 5:48
25. Hebrews 12:2
26. 1 Corinthians 4:22
27. 1 Corinthians 6:19
28. 2 Corinthians 3:18