

The Eye of the Beholder

-a search for the beauty inside

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If we were to poll the visitors at an art gallery about the most beautiful painting they have ever seen, one might describe the heavenly glory of van Gogh's *Starry Night* while another might be equally impressed with Monet's serene *Water Lilies*. How is it that both the van Gogh lover and the Monet aficionado can have different points of view, yet both be right? Because art is subjective, a work of art's beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Art in its many forms is a representation of the emotions, ideas, and life of the artist. It is only natural that a viewer identifies with the works and artists most like his or her own experiences and values.

Yet for all his brilliance, da Vinci never knew the secret to Mona Lisa's beauty was written in her genes. Long strands of DNA, which contain the genes that are the blueprints for our development, reside in all the cells of our bodies. In da Vinci's time they realized children tend to look like their parents, but not until relatively recently have we learned DNA is at the root of many of these similarities. Of course, the environments in which we live also play a part in developing our perceptions of beauty.

From time to time an expectant couple will ask me, "Can we find out whether our baby will have blue eyes?" or "Will he be tall enough to play in the NBA?" I usually chuckle and reply that while it may be interesting to know before birth whether a baby has inherited her mom's good looks, the focus of prenatal care is to evaluate a baby's health and development. Indeed, a healthy baby is the primary goal of every couple I see for prenatal genetic counseling. Couples routinely say things like, "We want to know if it's a boy or a girl but the most important thing is that our baby has ten fingers, ten toes, and no medical problems." While every expectant couple wants a baby free of birth defects, such as an extra finger or a cleft lip, experience has taught me that what many of us consider a "defect" can actually be a large part of what it is that makes a person beautiful. You may ask, "How is it possible for a birth defect to be beautiful?" It sounds like a contradiction but I see evidence of this truth every day.

For example, the most beautiful person I've met is a woman I'll call "Brooke." She was born with a birth "defect," though it seems rather inappropriate to use this term to describe her. When you first meet Brooke, one is immediately aware of her stunning good looks and grace. She drives a stick-shift car, is an aspiring painter, and, for the most part, does about everything anyone else does. It wasn't until many months after we'd met that I noticed Brooke has only one hand. When I asked Brooke what things can't she do, she giggled and replied, "Well, archery is pretty much out, but that's about it."

Brooke is just one example of the many individuals born with what most would call a "defect" who has not only learned to compensate for the short-coming she was born with, her condition has actually helped her develop into a more beautiful person. Individuals who are physically "handicapped" often have a humility and sincerity many of us lack. Living with the challenges of a missing hand (or other congenital condition) often allows a person to grow in many ways that others do not experience. I am fortunate enough to meet more of these individuals than most, and the nobility they show in the face of adversity is, by anyone's definition, beautiful.

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