

"Honest, transparent, and liberating...speaks gently to a woman's deepest heart's cry."

MICHELLE MCKINNEY HAMMOND

BEAUTY

by the

BOOK

SEEING YOURSELF *as* GOD SEES YOU



NANCY STAFFORD

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by the

BOOK

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To my family—Mom, Dad, and Tracy—
who taught me what true beauty looks like.
To my husband, Larry, who is beautiful in every way.
To women everywhere, may you come to know
how beautiful you really are.
To my Lord, “who had nothing in His appearance
that we should desire Him”—
the most beautiful of all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS



	WITH GRATITUDE	8
	A TRUE MIRROR	9
CHAPTER 1	BEAUTY MATTERS	15
CHAPTER 2	THE ULTIMATE MAKEOVER	31
CHAPTER 3	A HEALING BALM	45
CHAPTER 4	A DIVINE MASTERPIECE	57
CHAPTER 5	PAST IS PAST	71
CHAPTER 6	UNMASKED	81
CHAPTER 7	GREAT EXPECTATIONS	91
CHAPTER 8	PURSUED BY LOVE	101
CHAPTER 9	A FAMILY RESEMBLANCE	113
CHAPTER 10	HOW ARE YOU SHAPED?	125
CHAPTER 11	BEAUTY REST	135
CHAPTER 12	UNIQUELY YOU	151
CHAPTER 13	THE KINGDOM COLLECTION	169
CHAPTER 14	A PERFECT FIT	183
CHAPTER 15	BEAUTY BASICS	195
CHAPTER 16	ETERNAL PLEASURES	207
CHAPTER 17	FINISHING TOUCHES	219
	A NEW MIRROR	232
	IN THE MIRROR OF GOD'S WORD, I SEE...	236
	I INVITE YOU TO VISIT...	238
	NOTES	239



WITH GRATITUDE

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Thank you to my wonderful editor—and new friend—Judith St. Pierre, for your vision, for your heart...and for your beauty.



A TRUE MIRROR

THEY SAY TO WRITE what we know. This I know: Real beauty isn't what we see in magazines or on movie screens, and it doesn't depend on the opinions of others or the changing tastes of culture. True beauty is seeing ourselves as God sees us, reflected in the mirror of His Word.

Inner beauty—knowing who we really are—is the message closest to my heart because it's been a lifelong search and a long, hard journey to reach the point where I really *believe* and *feel* that I am worth something, that I have value, that I am beautiful.

Believe me, no one would have used the word *pretty* to describe me when I was growing up. Tallest in my class by a head and shoulders, I was a gangly, gawky, unattractive kid. I had Casper-white skin with freckles galore, buckteeth, and glasses as thick as Coke bottles. My scraggly, wispy pigtails started off in the right spot when I left for school but somehow always wound up front-to-back, cyclops-style, by the end of the day. You get the general idea.

I grew up in a wonderful, loving Christian home. I felt secure in my parents' love, and I fell in love with Christ when I was eight years

old. Even as a little girl, I would feel God's intimate, tender love for me, and my tears would flow. God gave me a sensitive heart. I've always felt things very deeply. But I didn't understand then the flip side of feeling deeply. Yes, I was receptive to His Spirit and His presence, and that was wonderful. But I was also very sensitive—too sensitive—to the attitudes and comments of the people around me.

My family tried to reassure me. "Nancy, honey, you're so beautiful on the inside. That's what counts," Mom would say.

Yeah, right.

When I was in first grade, I was painfully shy and terribly insecure, so Mom enrolled me in a ballet class. I loved it! This was where I could shine! I would rush into class every Saturday and dance with abandon—twirling, spinning, and leaping on my spindly legs, feeling absolutely beautiful and totally confident in my little pink tutu.

The mothers would gather in the back of the class to pick up their ballerinas, and one Saturday I glanced back and saw that they were all looking at me. *They must like my dancing!* I thought. Then I overheard the teacher say, "Oh yes, the girls are all doing so beautifully...except for that little Stafford girl. She's the clumsiest, most awkward child I've ever seen." They all laughed uproariously.

I was stunned. Mortified. Tears burned in my eyes, and I hid my face in my tutu and ran across the room to bury myself in my mom's big, soft, pillowy chest. I think that was the day I realized that what I had suspected about myself was true: I wasn't worth much. I wasn't valuable. And I was ugly.

No matter what my dear family said or did to try to convince me otherwise, I didn't believe them. They were my family; they had to say that. That big world out there told me something else, and I believed it instead. That day a lie lodged in my six-year-old heart: *You're ugly. You're clumsy. We don't want you.* And that day I put up my first wall of protection. Through the years other walls followed,

all to help ward off the pain, loneliness, and rejection of being different from others, not accepted, and not really understood.

“Nancy, honey, you’re so beautiful on the inside. That’s what counts,” Mom would say.

Somehow I knew that it should have been true—that inner beauty *was* more important—but as I looked around, even at age six or seven or eight, I noticed that it didn’t really count that much, at least not as far as how people treated you. The physically beautiful, the socially acceptable, and the currently fashionable were what people—even in the church—really accepted and esteemed. And that wasn’t me. Goodness and kindness and consideration, the traits my family possessed and taught me were important, didn’t seem to matter nearly as much as popularity, a sassy comeback, the right clothes, and a pretty face.

For many years I struggled to reconcile what God wanted me to be with what the world told me I should be—a struggle that continued even after I began modeling and acting.

For twenty years now I’ve enjoyed a wonderful career in television as an actress and as the host of an international fashion and beauty TV series. I’ve modeled in New York and been in the Miss America pageant. I know the tricks of the trade. But what I know most about beauty has nothing to do with my profession.

Quite the opposite.

What I know most about beauty has come from God healing my heart and showing me who I really am. He has turned the ashes of my life into beauty, the mourning into joy. He will do the same for you. He wants to love you into being!

That’s what this book is about.

It isn’t a “how-to” beauty book.

It isn’t *Five Easy Steps to a New You*.

It’s a book about freedom from the bondage of our culture’s

unattainable standards, freedom from lies of the past that have told us who we are, and, yes, even freedom from the lie that outward appearance means nothing. It's a book about the beauty our spirits are drawn to because we have been made in the very image of Beauty Himself.

Everyone has beauty, but not everyone sees it. I want you to see it.

Each piece in this book begins with a promise about who you are in Christ. Through these promises, I want you to get a picture of who you really are—of who God says you are. I want you to look into the mirror of God's Word and see yourself as He sees you. I want you to know how much He loves you and how much you have because of His Son.

When you know who you really are, you glow with an inner radiance and confidence that affects every other part of your life. And as you absorb the truth of how much God loves you and grab hold of the promises He has made you, you'll be surprised and delighted as you see yourself being transformed into the vibrant, healthy, complete, beautiful woman you were always meant to be.

Maybe this isn't the kind of beauty book you expected. Perhaps it's more of a makeover book, one that offers rebirth and rejuvenation in those areas that need a little cleansing, some refreshing, and new life. That's the kind of beauty I care about—the real beauty that comes as we become everything God created us to be.

I'm writing this book because I want you to grasp the depth of God's love for you, to discover and embrace the beauty within you, and then to delight in the unique beauty He has reserved for you alone.

I'm writing this book because I want you to see the beauty of others, so that, free of envy and comparisons, you can encourage their beauty and help them flourish.

I'm writing this book because beauty has been a big part of my life. I've experienced both its pain and its promise. As a homely young girl, it eluded me. As a model in New York, it seduced me. As an actress in Hollywood, its importance distresses me. And as a woman who loves God, the power of true beauty staggers me.

Beauty. It's seldom what we think it is. True beauty is inner beauty—beauty by the Book.

I invite you to come with me as I share my life, my reflections, and my struggles on my own path to beauty. Join me on a journey from insecurities and fear, through brokenness and doubt, all the way to fullness and truth—all the way to knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what the psalmist proclaimed: “The king is enthralled by your beauty” (Psalm 45:11).





CHAPTER ONE

BEAUTY MATTERS





THE POWER OF APPEARANCES

He does not judge me by appearances...

THE HOTEL BALLROOM was jammed. It was the biggest fundraiser of the year for the American Red Cross. Everybody who was anybody was there. Philanthropists mixed with politicians mixed with Rotary Club. I was Miss Florida. I wore a red evening gown draped with a satin and velvet sash that said so.

Ouch! With every move of my head, one of the three-inch bobby pins keeping my crown aloft jabbed into my skull and pinched my teased scalp, bringing me to near tears. I imagined a handful of hair being yanked out at the roots. Surely I must be bleeding by now. Better check. Looking for an escape route to the ladies room to recrown myself, I saw...her. As Sherlock Holmes referred to the character of Irene Adler, she was...The Woman.

Tall, regal, elegant, graceful. Golden brown body and near platinum blond hair. Her ivory crepe evening gown stood out like a lighthouse in a sea of blinding rhinestones, bright chiffon...and pageant-sashed red. Proof of her refinement and elegance. She was compassionate too, I could tell. Probably a Red Cross volunteer *and* a philanthropist. She laughed easily but had a mysterious reserve.

Royalty, maybe? Sweden or Bulgaria, I guessed. Someplace far away. And elegant. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was a vision. Did I say she was elegant? She was everything I wanted to be.

Then, unbelievably, I saw that she was looking at me. She gave a small, elegant smile. Wow. Warm feelings washed over me. This creature, this *vision* had noticed me! I felt as though she was inviting me into some inner circle. I glanced around. Nope, nobody else. Just me. Of all the hundreds of people in the whole room, she was looking at *me!* Then I felt the bobby pin jab. Oh yeah, I had a crown on my head. Who wouldn't notice?

It didn't matter; I had to meet her. I grasped the sleeve of my pageant chaperone, Donna Jean, and we slowly made our way across the room. To my amazement, The Woman had begun to walk toward me too, weaving her way through the crowd like an ivory ribbon.

We both began to speak at the same time. Laughing nervously, I deferred. After all, she was The Woman. She brushed a platinum wisp off her perfect face, smiled that elegant smile, and then, in an octave lower and a volume louder than I expected, said in a gravelly kind of rasp, "Ya know, I was Miss New Joisey once-st. Miss Casino, USA. Yeah! Woul'da gone on'ta da nationals too, but dem blankity-blanks found out about me an one-a dem judges. Ah well, dat's da breaks. I just came ta dis ting wit Joey. *Hey, Joey!* Get me anudda drink!"

I was stunned. A bucket of cold water in the face would have been less startling. Hoping that my bulging eyes and slack jaw hadn't given me away, I managed, "Well...uh...I'm not the least bit surprised! You're...beau...tiful!"

How deceived we are by appearances! We exalt some people and dismiss others, sometimes at first glance, based on how they look to us. That's what I did. I supposed some things about "Miss New Joisey" and attributed certain qualities to her based purely on her appearance. At a glance, I made her the embodiment of beauty and grace, only to find that she was a flawed mortal just like the rest of us.

That evening shook me. Yes, I've laughed about it over the years as a "funny story," but its deeper truth haunts me. How many times have I dismissed people with true elegance and inner beauty just because of their packaging? Do I still blindly deify some, yet blithely disregard others? Even in a tiny way, am I prejudiced toward the attractive, while missing the true beauty of the seemingly plain ones in front of me? Truthfully now, what do I think deep down when I look at that ratty street person, that pencil-thin and fashionable neighbor, that grossly overweight woman, or that photogenic superstar? Even when we know better, we judge. We esteem and we disparage, we elevate and we denigrate—all based on appearance.

But even though we sometimes do, God is One who does not judge by mere appearances. And how grateful I am for that fact when I'm the one He is looking at.





OUR LONGING FOR BEAUTY

I will gaze upon the beauty of the Lord forever...

THE TRUTH IS THAT WE *need* beauty in our lives. We were made in the very image of Beauty: Christ Himself. Our first home was a place unsurpassed in its natural beauty—perfect, in fact—Eden. We are born with a deep longing for and appreciation of beauty. Our spirits are drawn to it. It calls to us, nourishes us, stimulates us.

Think about how you feel when the beauty of nature surrounds you, how nourished, refreshed, whole. A shady forest trail, a sparkling sandy beach, a majestic thundering waterfall, a tiny fragrant garden—all have the power to renew us. We drink in their beauty; we savor it.

What happens to you when you see a powerful work of art or hear a stirring piece of music? Don't you feel nurtured and nourished when you walk into the elegant lobby of a great hotel or a tastefully decorated home, enjoy a deliciously magnificent meal, or meet a vibrant, confident person?

Beauty is a baby's toothless, dimpled smile that makes you grin from ear to ear. It's a fragrant bouquet and the mellow taste of a rich red wine rolling slowly in your mouth. Beauty is art that transfixes. Literature that transports. The violin cry that breaks your heart and

moves you to tears. The driving drum that bores deep in your bones and inflames your soul.

Surrounded and awakened from slumber, my senses can hardly take it. *Stop!* I cry. Then, *No! Give me more.*

At its most magnificent, though, earthly beauty is but a paltry taste, a dim foreshadow, of what awaits. C. S. Lewis reminds us that the beauty we are drawn to—nature or art or music or books—is not the ultimate, only the conduit:

It was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing.... They are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.¹

What we yearn for is the beauty of heaven. Eternity has been set in our hearts, and it burns there in our secret longing. Lewis writes:

In this universe...the longing to...bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely...the promise of glory...becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory meant good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last....

Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache.²

One day our longing and ache will end. Our hunger will be satisfied. Our great heart-cry, the one thing we ask—to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord—will be answered. The door will open. And we shall be one with Him. Until then, we long for beauty and desperately need it in our lives.





THE IMPORTANCE OF BEAUTY

He crowns me with love and compassion...

A WOMAN'S APPEARANCE is an important part of her need for beauty. A woman can be interested in both blush and the boardroom, mascara and ministry, fashion and physics, hair gel and homeschooling, or working out and working with the homeless. One doesn't cancel out the other, and wanting to look good doesn't make you a shallow person or a self-consumed sinner.

We all know that how we look influences how we feel. Be honest: Don't you feel better at the post office when your hair looks good, you have on a dab of makeup, and you're dressed nicely? Isn't it better than waiting in line hoping that nobody sees you in your sloppy clothes, with your dirty hair bundled up in a ponytail? (Okay, okay! I admit it: That was me you saw in the express mail line!)

And have you noticed that when you feel better about yourself, you're more apt to smile and talk with others? Believe me, I wear makeup so much for work that I love the days I can run around in sweats or shorts and not have to do my face or hair. And I do. (You've seen me at the post office, remember?) But I also know that I feel better and more willing to engage with others

when I'm confident about my appearance.

According to some psychologists, when you're looking after your appearance, you're also looking after your *self*—your emotional life, your self-esteem. It seems to follow that taking care of yourself automatically improves the way you see yourself. You respect yourself. And by caring for your appearance, you are telling the world that you are a person worthy of respect. The bottom line is that when you feel better about you, you're more confident, so you can forget about yourself for two seconds and focus on somebody else.

Psychologists are also becoming more aware of the link between making the effort to look good and feeling happy. They note that people who are depressed or emotionally fragile just don't think it's worth the effort to groom themselves. As one therapist told me: "When people are very depressed, their self-care is low. When we start to see grooming reemerge, we know they are improving. There's no doubt that both psychological and physical health demand that people pay attention to their needs."

I've seen firsthand the psychological and emotional benefits of improved appearance. When the beautiful actress Rhonda Fleming lost her sister to cancer, she determined to create a place of beauty, care, and compassion for women going through that nightmare. She established the Rhonda Fleming Center for Women with Cancer at UCLA Medical Center and filled it with warm colors, lovely furnishings, paintings...and love. Then she asked our mutual friend, Vera Brown, for help.

For thirty years, my dear friend Vera has been the facial, body care, and makeup maven to L.A.'s most beautiful people. But her favorite clients aren't film stars, cover girls, or socialites; they are women fresh out of chemotherapy.

Every week for many years, Vera joined Rhonda at the cancer center, giving these ladies what they needed to feel feminine and

beautiful again. She brought wigs, creams, makeup...and hope. She rolled up her sleeves, dipped her hands, and soothed away the pain, fear, and loss that cancer causes. Her creams are legendary, but it was her touch that restored.

A dozen or more women would gather in a room, some just days after surgery or hours after chemo. Unhurriedly, Vera gave each woman a facial, did their makeup, and taught them how to have beautiful eyes—no lashes or brows required. And as she did, she told them: “Nothing comes out of a jar that does as much for you as your spiritual attitude. When you have that and love yourself, you’re truly beautiful.”

Vera is proud of the business she’s built—the photo-lined walls, the magazine spreads, and the national awards—but true satisfaction lights up her beautiful face when she talks about “her girls.” These women are proof of the psychological benefits of improved appearance for the self-esteem of cancer patients. Paying attention to the way they look has a huge therapeutic impact on them. Suddenly they realize that, no matter what has happened to them, their beauty is more than just the sum of their parts. They see that they are worthy of attention, and just knowing that makes it easier for them to cope. And as they adjust, they are better able to pour out on others the love and compassion that encourages their beauty and helps them flourish too.

Several years ago, Vera had to begin to practice what she preached: She woke up one morning to find a lump in her breast. And the women she had embraced, cared for, and comforted now surrounded her with love and support and affection.





MERE APPEARANCES

He sees my heart...

I REMEMBER THE DAY I noticed my family was different. I think I was five.

I was with Mom and Dad and my older brother, Tracy. We were in a shopping mall. A young family nearby glanced our way, looked a little longer, and then began to snicker and stare. The father saw us first and elbowed his son. The two children pointed, giggled, and, to the amusement of their folks, began to imitate my parents. The boy dragged one leg in an exaggerated limp, like a monster in a cheap horror film. The girl formed her arms into a huge circle, puffed out her cheeks, and waddled with great effort. The father pretended to shush the children, but he silently laughed his encouragement. The mother cupped her hand over her mouth to hide her expression of half giggle, half disgust.

In the past I'd seen people stare or maybe look at us for longer than a polite glance, but this was different. My family didn't seem to notice or be bothered by it.

But I did. Something happened in me. I felt a sharp pain in my

heart and, as best a five-year-old could understand them, mingled feelings of righteous anger, injustice, and flat-out hurt feelings. Something like a sob erupted deep inside me. I kept the lid on it; I didn't make a sound. But I can still remember feeling my chest cave, my breath catch, my eyes burn, and my throat tighten.

What are these people doing? I asked myself. *Why are they looking at us? Why would they be imitating Mom and Dad? Why would they do that?* Perplexed and unnerved, I looked over at my family. And there for the first time I saw them—really *saw* them—as everyone else saw them.

Daddy's twisted and ungainly gait, his foot wrenched at a forty-five degree angle, his shriveled leg, which looked more like a young girl's wrist than a grown man's limb—ever-present reminders of a toddler's battle with polio.

Mom's obesity. Countless years of countless diets and five-hundred-calories-a-day monitored hospital stays, only to gain yet more weight, develop yet more arthritis in her knees, and suffer yet more debilitating pain.

My brother's towering height and battle with his weight. Through the years diabetes has taken its toll, as amputations have whittled away his mobility and left him with an artificial foot.

I felt conspicuous too, with my knobby knees, thick glasses, and ghostly white-and-freckled skin. But even at age five I realized that the way people reacted to me paled in comparison to the judgments they leveled at my mom, dad, and brother. So I watched this family I didn't know make fun of the family I knew and loved so well. And it hurt.

Yes, my family was different. But they are the most beautiful people I've ever seen. From them I learned what true beauty is.

My Daddy is gone now, but he was the strongest, kindest man I'd ever known. He set the standard for what I looked for—and found—in a husband. Dad never viewed himself as “handicapped”—he hated the word. His massive torso was evidence of his strength, the strength that built—from the ground up—the house I grew up in. Though he was often in great pain, I never heard a word of complaint. He lived with grace and died with dignity. He was honest and good and true.

Mom is in a wheelchair now, but she has more spirit and optimism and humor than anyone I know. Accomplished and creative, she casts a wide net of love and encouragement to everyone around her.

At six feet four inches tall, my brother, Tracy, has always stood head and shoulders above the crowd. Nobody who knew him was surprised when he became a city councilman, then mayor, and then spent ten years in Florida's House of Representatives. This gentle giant has a natural brilliance, a quiet courage, and a gentle kindness that belies his stature.

Through the years, if Mom and Dad and Tracy have noticed the pointing and the laughter and the snickers, you would never know it. No knee-jerk reactions. No angry retorts. Just quiet nobility. They have always responded in good nature to offense, extending grace to the ignorant, showing dignity in the face of cruelty, and meeting heartache with humor. Their spirit and intelligence and tenderness and humor have risen above the limits of their physical bodies. They have laughed and loved and given and sacrificed. My family is what beauty looks like.

Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

It thrills me to imagine what God thinks when He looks upon the hearts of my family. I can just hear Him exclaim: “You are so beautiful to Me!”





REFLECTIONS OF HIS LOVE

I just read these words by C. S. Lewis...and I never want to forget them!

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities...with awe and circumspection...that we should conduct all our dealings with one another... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.³

CHAPTER TWO

THE ULTIMATE
MAKEOVER





THE BEAUTY OF BROKENNESS

He is near me...

YOU STILL MIGHT be thinking...

A beauty book? I have more substantial things to read. This isn't spiritual enough. This isn't important enough. I'm not interested.

Let's be honest. Even if you lead two Bible studies and can recite half the New Testament, you might be feeling self-conscious about your battle with your weight or those little lines beginning to creep around your eyes.

You could be a doctor or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company but still struggle with feelings of insecurity and inadequacy.

Perhaps you're a young woman who should be embracing all the exciting possibilities that lie before you as you discover your uniqueness, but instead you're being held hostage to a media standard that drives you to secret obsessions that make you feel guilty and ashamed.

Maybe you just don't feel very beautiful. Maybe your shape is more round than lean, or maybe you're saying, "Look, I'm not twenty years old any more, and I'm more a size 2X than a 2. Why should I be interested in beauty?"

Or you could have a face like Michelle Pfeiffer, a figure that Julia Roberts would envy, and be the most popular “belle of the ball” . . . but still feel “less than.” Though the rest of the world may think you have it all, you know better. Because of the pain of your early life, ridicule, or feelings of rejection, when you look in the mirror, all you see is what’s wrong with you.

Do you feel beautiful? If not, why not?

Do you feel worthless, unaccepted, unloved, misunderstood?

Are there things in your life or from your past that cause you shame and pain?

Maybe through abuse someone you once trusted took away your innocence . . . and with it a part of yourself. Or maybe it was the abandonment you experienced when a parent left, either through divorce or neglect or death. Maybe it’s hard for you to imagine that your worth is based on who you *are* rather than on what you *do*.

Have painful experiences like these made it hard for you to believe and receive the deep truth that God loves you, accepts you, delights in you, and cherishes you?

Even as I sat down to write this book, full of enthusiasm and certain that its message would bring freedom to women, I was hit with the same ol’ stuff:

I’m a fraud. Who am I to speak to women about this? I feel about as ugly right now as I have at any time in my life—emotionally, spiritually, and physically. How dare I try to write about this subject? I look around me. Every single person seems better—more creative, more anointed, more successful, more everything. Unlike me, they’re moving forward in the things of God. I spiral downward. What have I really accomplished lately? I lack discipline, I’m blue, I’m weak, I feel stripped bare, and frankly, my response is not “Praise God!” My circumstances are lousy, and I don’t like myself right now.

Whheeww, I feel better.

They say to write what we know. I thought I knew. But I find I'm still learning.

One of the reasons I want to share my story with you is that, though I may have *done* very different things than you, I think that inside we might be a lot alike. I've had a recurring theme in my life. It's called rejection. I know that many of you have probably had far more severe and damaging wounds than I have ever experienced or could even imagine. But I also know that any wound, any hurt that keeps us from being all the Lord created us to be, is an area He wants to touch and heal.

I've already told you about my experience in ballet class when I was in the first grade. Scene change: Cut to high school. Not much improvement. Still unattractive, gawky, gangly, but at least my Coke-bottle-thick glasses were brown instead of blue.

I was shy, unpopular, and very straight—didn't go to parties, didn't drink. My nickname through high school was "Super Virgin." The girls laughed at me; the boys whispered about me. My "social circle" consisted of other rejects. The only boys who asked me for dates were guys that even I, a fellow geek, couldn't bring myself to go out with.

My mother is very gracious and altruistic, and she lives the principle of preferring others to self. So once, in an effort to improve my social life as well as teach me the value of giving sacrificially to others, she said, "Nancy, you're such a fine person. Nobody else will go to the Key Club dance with Don. If you won't go with him, he won't get to go at all. Can't you just do it for him?"

Now, I love my mother dearly, but she was asking a lot of me! Mom didn't realize that Don was *the* geek in class, an even bigger one than I was, and that instead of helping my reputation, going to the dance with him would totally annihilate whatever shred of self-esteem I had left. But I wanted to please...and I also sincerely

wanted to do the kind and generous thing. So I went to the dance with Don.

A few weeks later all the social clubs at school inducted their new members. My two equally dorky girlfriends and I—we were dubbed the “tragic trio”—had applied for the very worst club in the school, the lowest rung on the social ladder. Only a handful of people belonged to it, so we figured we’d at least have a shot at that one!

On “rush” day I got all dressed up, sat down in a chair by the dining room window, and waited, listening for the honking horns as the cars came by to pick up their lucky new members. Finally, *finally*, I heard the horns signaling their arrival. I was so excited! They picked up my friend next door. They picked up my friend across the street. Then they drove away. I sat at the window for almost another hour, thinking: *They’ve just forgotten; surely they’ll be coming back.*

The next day at my locker I was cut to the quick when I overheard one of my friends from the tragic trio say to her new club mate, “There’s no way Nancy could ever be in our club. She goes out with dorks...and she’s so ugly.”

Rejection. And it doesn’t happen just in childhood, does it? I’m still amazed that I chose a profession where I experience rejection almost on a daily basis! It happens even today. Recently I auditioned for a delightful part in a TV movie—a mom in her forties with a young teenager. It was a wonderful script and I had a great reading, which, frankly, I don’t usually say. But I knew I was right for the role, and I nailed the audition. Afterward I called my agent to tell her how excited I was and to ask her to get feedback from the director.

When she called me back, she kind of hemmed and hawed, and then she stammered, “Um...Nancy...yes, he said you did a great reading, the best they saw...but, um...um...how...how...old are you?”

“I’m forty-four,” I said, “and you submit me for roles from midthirties to midforties.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she said. “That’s what I thought. I told the director you were in your early forties, but he said, ‘You’ve got to be kidding! She looks at *least* fifty-five!’”

Well...fifty-five isn't so bad, I thought. *Just not yet!* And all the memories of rejection from first grade through high school came flooding back: “*You’re ugly. You’re clumsy. We don’t want you.*”

We’ve all had experiences of pain and rejection. The world has at times pushed us away, judging us or those we love based on our appearance or popularity or social acceptance. But God sees our hearts. He knows our need...and draws us near.





BEAUTY FOR ASHES

He heals me...

FEELINGS OF REJECTION followed me through high school, and by the time I graduated, I had pretty much given up trying to reconcile the kind of girl I thought God wanted me to be with what I saw around me. In my frustration and confusion I quit going to church, and I remained a prodigal for almost fifteen years.

In college, I began to blossom...finally. I grew into my five-foot-nine-inch frame. The years of braces began to pay off, the glasses gave way to contacts, and a long-awaited figure finally emerged. Boys began to notice, and their attention made me feel good about myself for the first time. I went full-bore into the dating scene, lapping up male approval like a hungry puppy. My insecurities and low self-image were still there; they were just hidden behind the facade of “pretty” and “popular.”

I didn't become wild or promiscuous, but I did begin to try to meet the need I had for approval and acceptance with boyfriends. I went from one relationship to the next, lining up the new boyfriend before ending the current romance. I gave myself no time to reflect

on who I was or what I really wanted—I was too insecure and afraid to be alone.

Through the years it wasn't always men that filled the void. Sometimes it was things—possessions, houses, cars, achievements, success, money, fame—or whatever I thought would fill the empty places inside me where I still felt inadequate and unworthy.

After college I became Miss Florida and competed in the Miss America Pageant. A modeling and commercial career in New York followed. I landed my first TV series on my first audition, the first of five series I've starred in over the past twenty years. As I sailed through my career, success just seemed to follow in my wake. I certainly didn't get everything I auditioned for, but I got a lot. It was heady. It was happening fast and furious. And I became much more self-sufficient, self-reliant, and even self-confident.

But at the age of twenty-five, when I was at the height of my modeling career and beginning another one in acting, my secure new world threatened to come crashing down: I was diagnosed with a severe skin cancer on my face. In the hospital a surgeon took my hands in his and said, "Now, I can't guarantee what you're going to look like after surgery, so if I were you, I'd have an alternate career in mind."

It hit me like a shot. Yes, I was terrified of the surgery, but I was even more horrified by how important my face and body had become to me. My mother's words haunted me: *Nancy, honey, you're so beautiful on the inside. That's what counts.* With my history, how could my priorities have gotten so skewed?

The very source of ridicule and rejection in my life—my physical self—had become the basis of my affirmation. Having grown up feeling insecure, self-conscious, and rejected, I now made my profession in the most insecure, rejection-prone industry on the planet. The irony didn't escape me. Maybe my bottom-line problem was

masochism! Or...maybe I had just been searching for the kind of absolute acceptance that only God could give, trying in vain to fill the emptiness that only He could fill.

I was humbled and ashamed, and that day I began to hunger for God again.

But I didn't want Christianity. I figured that there surely had to be more, and for several years I looked for it in Eastern religions and New Age philosophies. It was an eclectic search. I read the Bible every day, along with the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran, and the *Course in Miracles*, diligently searching for the truth.

Meanwhile, my career continued to flourish. For three years I had a starring role in the series *St. Elsewhere* and guest-starring roles on numerous shows. Then one day when I was on my way to the airport to shoot an episode of *Magnum P.I.* in Honolulu, I stopped by my mailbox. A book I'd ordered had arrived, so I popped it in my satchel and headed off to Hawaii. When I arrived, I discovered that someone in production scheduling had made a mistake: They'd brought me in three days early. So I had nothing to do for three full days but read the book I'd brought, *Power for Living*, a collection of Christian testimonies with a foreword by Jamie Buckingham.

God had made an appointment with me.

As I read the stories, one after another, of people's encounters with God, a pain I didn't even realize I had began welling up inside my heart. It was an actual physical pain, and it was so deep that I honestly thought I was going to die. In every story people described the very thing I so desperately needed and wanted. They had a relationship with God, and even though I had been searching for Him, I had come up empty. And it broke my heart.

I fell on my face sobbing before God. I saw myself clearly for the first time in years. I saw my emptiness and knew that my life was a

sham. Even though it may have looked as if I had it all, my deep loneliness, feelings of inferiority, and fear kept feeding my need for more—more success, more acceptance, more money, more...everything. I saw the brokenness of my life. I saw the consequences of all my bad choices and how I had tried to fill the void inside me with men and things and status. I saw my sin, and I was destitute. I needed Him!

Finally, all alone on a beach in Hawaii, I encountered the One who had been there all along. I cried out to Him from the depths of my pain, and He answered, ministering to me in such a way that, to this day, I've never experienced anything as powerful.

He showed me things about Himself and about myself.

He showed me what He thought of me, how much He loved me, how much He'd missed me. He reminded me about that little girl long ago who had known Him so well. I actually felt His broken heart for me.

Then He showed me who He is, what His real nature is—that He is not only the Creator of the universe, but also my loving Father. He showed me how far He had gone to bring me back to Himself, how He had consistently and unconditionally pursued me, even when I was running away from Him. He showed me that what He wanted more than anything else was a relationship with me.

And then, the most powerful of all, He showed me the truth of who His Son is—that Jesus isn't just a great prophet or a role model or a good man. He is the living God, and He had bought me with a price. He had given Himself for me—unworthy, unlovely me. Amazing!

For three days I lay on my face on the floor of my hotel room sobbing, first in grief and repentance, and then in absolute joy and gratitude, as the Lord flooded me with incredible peace. It was as if I had grabbed onto His sleeve and wouldn't let Him go. I was a prodigal.

gal child rushing back into her Father's arms. I was home! The most loving, tender, gentle, gracious presence I had ever encountered came over me, and I felt sweetly whole, utterly safe and secure, and completely accepted. That day, God began to heal the broken places inside me, restore my distorted self-perception, and fill my hungry heart.

Sometimes our greatest need is not at the level of awareness. It looked as if I had everything—a flourishing career, wealth, romance. But at my core my need was for God, not goods; for inner cleanness, loveliness, and wholeness, not outward beauty.

After that life-changing encounter I went back to L.A. and prayed for acting work I could be proud of...and for a husband who would love God above all else. A Disney family series, *Sidekicks*, soon followed, as did the *Matlock* series, a string of TV movies, and *Main Floor*, the fashion/beauty magazine show I've hosted for more than eight years. And finally, though I had almost given up hope that my prayer for a husband would ever be answered, when I was thirty-five, I married Larry Myers, the amazing man God had in mind for me.

God has given me the ultimate makeover, and every day He gives me beauty for ashes as He continues to heal, restore, and transform me.



REFLECTIONS OF HIS LOVE

Incredible day of prayer, tears, feeling Him all over me, actually overcoming me, my own current weakness, lack of faith, failure in my responses to Larry and my circumstances. Yet He's coming closer to me, not repelled by me. The more I cry out to Him to help me, the weaker and more frail and useless and hopeless I feel, the more I cry out in need, the closer He comes.

It's the opposite of what we expect from the world. The needier I am, the more He rushes in. He's breaking down my performance-oriented personality. And my perfectionism. With Him, it's not how well I do, how good I look on the surface, how well I pretend to know what I'm doing, or how much I look like I have it all together.

When I break, when I'm shattered, when I fail, when I can't get anything right, *when I can't stand myself*—that's when He floods me with His mercy and grace, and I feel Him standing over me, admiring me, saying, “*Now you look beautiful to Me! Now I can come to you and give you all that you desire. Now My life can flow in you—because there are empty places that I will fill with My life, My love, My strength, My righteousness, My holiness. Now there's room for Me in you. It was too crowded before.*”