

Grace In The Gray Areas

BY KAREN KULLGREN

I have been preoccupied in recent years with the challenges of living an authentic life. I've come to realize it requires co-existing with the gray areas not only of our hair but of our humanity—about living with, even embracing, all its glorious, frustrating ambiguity. 'Tis the (swimsuit) season for baring it all, and in that spirit I thought this month I'd revisit a topic that screams ambiguity—women and their bodies.

C.S. Lewis said, "You don't have a Soul. You are a Soul. You have a body." If we look at our bodies as temples, then is it surprising we decorate with such abandon and worry when some of the roof tiles become discolored or hinges rusty?

As smart modern women who know that real beauty comes from within, should we castigate ourselves when we want to "look nice," for ourselves, for others? Why do I feel guilty when I open up my overpriced jar of age-defying moisturizer or feel furtive when I sidle up to the makeup counter and catch myself experiencing what society calls vanity? Anne Lamott comfortably lives in this gray area. In her most recent (and as always) luminous book, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, she decides, "It's only when you think you need to be concealed, because you're unacceptable, that makeup causes harm."

Through my loving eyes, my friends are beauties—every one of them, all ages, shapes, sizes and colors. We all deal with conflicted body image "stuff" in different ways. One of my friends diets, though I

don't think she needs it, and that's okay. Another will spend hundreds of dollars buying what she calls "hope in a bottle" to hide the demon dark circles beneath her eyes, and that's okay too. One is saving up as though for college for a series of hair removal treatments. Another is heavily into the all-natural lifestyle, but still shaves her armpits and legs—a hairy dilemma!

As far as my own body, ladies, the news is not good. Gravity continues its southerly pull. The little age spot formerly hidden under the arm of my eyeglasses is now big enough to require its own zip code. My natural hair color now includes swaths of solid white around my face, like an old dog. The deadline I had given myself to stop coloring my hair has come and gone. I've pushed it back another decade.

My greatest obsession has become my hands. Genetics gave me a propensity to moles, age spots and hand crinkles. Looking at just my face, you might peg me for 40 (no sneering, please), but if you were to see me hand-modeling, you might guess 70. The most recent horror was when a friend glanced down at my hands, then exclaimed in distress, "Karen, they're so crepey, you need to put some lotion on!" and I already had. As I have always said, the sting is not that it's not okay to have signs of aging at "the appropriate age," but that having those signs *now*, which is *never* the appropriate age, is NOT okay in my book.

In some ways, thank goodness, I've become less self-conscious about my body

as I've become older and wiser. But it's really a case of two steps forward and one step back. It helps if you can laugh, like at the commercials for Nivea anti-cellulite lotion targeting what appear to be women in their 20s. Twenties! Honey, they don't know from cellulite!

Going to the gym surrounded by mirrors is a nightmare—whose bright idea is that? ("Yeah, that'll bring the overweight and sedentary folks in for sure, a chance to look at themselves grunting in unflattering positions reflected all over the room!") They're even in the women-only gyms, where you'd think they would know better. Yet we've always been surrounded by mirrors, haven't we? Mirrors of our own self-judgment, mirrors of celebrities sporting heroin-chic gauntness and stylist-assisted perfection, the mirror of others' eyes, whether a mother or a lover.

An inspiring woman I met recently put a new twist on the Ugly Duckling metaphor, as she told of her lifelong struggle with weight and how she finally came to love herself as the swan she is. She radiates self-confidence. "Now," she says loudly and sassily, "you see me as a swan because I tell you I'm a swan!"

Maybe it really is true what Anne Lamott says: "Joy is the best makeup. Joy, and good lighting."

Have a comment? Have your own "gray areas" story to share? Email Karen@washingtonwoman.net