

## Happily Ever After

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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*Oh, how the mighty fall. All it took was one boy who, while whizzing past her on the playground, yelled, “Girls don’t like trains!” and Thomas [the Tank Engine] was shoved to the bottom of the toy chest. Within a month, Daisy threw a tantrum when I tried to wrestle her into pants. As if by osmosis she had learned the names and gown colors of every Disney Princess... She gazed longingly into the tulle-draped windows of local toy stores and for her third birthday begged for a “real princess dress” with matching plastic high heels. Meanwhile, one of her classmates, the one with Two Mommies, showed up in school every single day dressed in a Cinderella gown. With a bridal veil.*

*What was going on here? My fellow mothers, women who once swore they would never be dependent on a man, smiled indulgently at daughters who warbled “So This Is Love” or insisted on being addressed as Snow White. The supermarket checkout clerk invariably greeted Daisy with, “Hi, Princess.” The waitress at our local breakfast joint, a hipster with a pierced tongue and a skull tattooed on her neck, called Daisy’s “funny face pancakes” her “princess meal”; the nice lady at Longs Drugs offered us a free balloon, then said, “I bet I know your favorite color!” and handed Daisy a pink one rather than letting her choose for herself. Then shortly after Daisy’s third birthday, our high-priced pediatric dentist... pointed to the exam chair and asked, “Would you like to sit in my special princess throne so I can sparkle your teeth?”*

*“Oh, for God’s sake,” I snapped. “Do you have a princess drill, too?”*

*She looked at me as if I were the wicked stepmother.*

*But honestly: since when did every little girl become a princess?... As my little girl made her daily beeline for the dress-up corner of the preschool classroom, I fretted over what playing Little Mermaid, a character who actually gives up her voice to get a man, was teaching her.*

These words come from the opening chapter of the book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Peggy Orenstein’s exploration of the culture that has recast the pursuit of physical perfection as the one and only, single source of feminine empowerment.

Like Orenstein, I was born “back in the days when feminism was a mere twinkle in our mothers’ eyes.” The year I turned 4 women earned 60 cents for every dollar earned by men in equivalent positions. I was 6 when Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, 11 when the first Women’s Liberation conference was held. My freshman year in college there were 10 men to every woman at the school I attended, and I was one of 2 women in a department with one female professor.

So although I came of age during the women's movement, my upbringing was under a model that saw my primary role in society as a wife, mother and homemaker.

My mother-in-law still speaks with no little horror in her voice of being expected in the 50s and 60s to keep a perfect house, throw perfect cocktail parties and raise perfect children, all while wearing high heels and chiffon. I am being rather flip about how I describe it, but the toll it took on her self-image when she could not reach perfection was not amusing.

I know the expectations placed on me and the options open to me one generation later were much different. And if I had been able to think this far ahead when I was an undergraduate, I would have said that expectations and opportunities would have been far different and far better for Lydia today. And I would have been only partially right.

I think what girls of Lydia's generation face is different in that more opportunities are open to them, but I would also say that it is not so different in that they do not have significantly more role models of women in positions of power in our society. While accessibility to power may have changed, the visibility of female role models has not.

So I would have been partially right about things being different, but where I would have been really wrong was about "better." I think girls of Lydia's generation actually have a much tougher time in terms of the expectations that are placed on them. First they are expected to achieve in every way: scholastically, professionally, at sports and childcare, artistically and intellectually. Because, after all, the barriers have been removed. Right? There's Title Nine, and no more glass ceiling to hold them back. And yet, the reality is that women still earn only 77 cents to a man's dollar.

But in addition to misunderstood constructions of opportunity, Lydia's generation has to contend with enormous pressure generated by advertising and the media around body image. It started back in that archaic thinking that our only role as women is childbearing, but has morphed into a culture where the attainment of beauty is all consuming. It is no longer enough to be smart and strong and accomplished. All girls now have to be princesses, they have to be beautiful and pink, too. The ideal is beauty and the goal is approval in the eyes of men. *The ideal image of beauty is more extreme and impossible than ever before and girls are measured against it at younger and younger ages.*<sup>1</sup>

In your order of service is a handout of statistics. I'm not going to quote them at you, but the point here is that the media has distorted women's literal and figurative images almost to the point of unrecognizability. The beautiful women who model for cosmetic and clothing ads are not beautiful enough, and so they are made up and coiffed and then, still not worthy of our acclaim, they are digitally altered to be ever thinner, to have fuller lips and bigger eyes, to not be, in fact, the image of a real woman, any woman.

The ramifications of this are not simply distorted images. Ultimately this path destroys girls' self-worth when they cannot measure up. It makes girls easy targets for exploitation and abuse, for depression, addiction, eating disorders, self-injury and suicide attempts. It lowers their

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<sup>1</sup> *Miss Representation*, Girls Club film, 2011

scholastic achievements and does not present them with models of achievement and service to the world. We are breeding a generation of women who feel they have no voice, no agency in politics, in leadership. As Peggy Orenstein writes, “The innocence that pink signaled during the Princess years, which seemed so benign, even protective, has receded, leaving behind narcissism and materialism as the hallmarks of feminine identity.”<sup>2</sup>

As the quotes read earlier point out, this does not just affect girls. Boys are also handed skewed images of who girls are and who they can become. It diminishes the possibilities for their own lives as boys and as men. It’s a lot to take from people in order to sell products.

But although Lydia faces social expectations that I did not at her age we share one thing that has made the difference for both of us – we were born to parents who had expectations of us other than a narrowly defined societal attitude, parents who could see our real strengths and encouraged us to excel in all the ways we chose. This is our great hope. That we can all of us be a community of difference for young people.

Yes, we can and should vote with our pocketbooks, as well as with our political votes, to make a change, but perhaps the most important and certainly the most immediate thing we can do is to be in conversation with young people: to ask the questions about how things are and how they should be; to invite them into leadership and applaud their achievements rather than how they looked doing it; to support who our youth *are* rather than who they are told to be. *This* is the real happily ever after.

Namaste.  
Por lo tanto puede ser.

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To Learn More:

*Miss Representation*, The Representation Project, 2011, <http://film.missrepresentation.org/>  
*Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Peggy Orenstein, Harper Collins, NY, 2011

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<sup>2</sup> Orenstein, Peggy. *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, p49