

## Selected BJTWYA Blog Posts

### Motor Oil and Women Don't Mix

December 6, 2009

My car has a ravenous appetite for oil. I forget to check the dipstick, and soon enough, it's dry. So I stopped at the automotive supply store last week. Just inside the entrance I lifted a case of oil and carried it to the back of the store, approaching a man absorbed with his cash register. He looked up and said, "Whoa! Do you need any help with that?" He quickly finished up what he was doing, then prepared to serve his next customer, me. "Let's see what discount we can give you for this," he tells me. Another male clerk interrupts him from behind, confusing him while he's trying to find my item in the system. He's flustered and blurts, "Oh fuck!" and IMMEDIATELY expresses shock and embarrassment at what slipped out, while his colleague is both bug-eyed and laughing. I express mock shock and then laugh also. He quickly says to me, "OH, I'm sorry! Now I'll really have to give you a discount! I'm sorry," to the chuckles of the other two men pretending to be busy. He gives me a 50% discount. I pay for the oil. He says, "Thank you, do you need any help carrying that to your car?" I say, "Nope, I can get it, thank you." As I'm putting my money away, he says, "Are you sure you don't need any help with that?" "No, I'm fine, my car's right outside, thanks." "Are you sure you don't want someone to carry this for you?" "I got it," I repeat. "There are handles here on the side, just punch in the cardboard like this", he demonstrates. I again say thanks and lift the case as I did before and carry it away.

Three hours later I realized I had missed an opportunity to change the script for this familiar scene. I had agreed to be the lady for a moment, too delicate for swear words. His shock was genuine. My shock was not. I took the discount. The discount was compensation for exposing my feminine sensibility to masculine crudeness. In this belief system, swearing in front of a woman is worse than swearing in front of a man, because women are not capable of handling such harshness; we're supposed to be delicate. Women do not need the paternalistic protection of men. Yet I went along. I was happy to pay less for the oil. If I had been able to think more quickly, I would have paid full price for the satisfaction of one refusal of sexism. Sometimes it's so easy to collude with the status quo, because we all learned from the same book.

At least I didn't have him carry my oil. In fact, in my uneven assertion of my autonomy from male protection, I didn't even want to use the built-in handles, a reasonable suggestion. I'm sure he would have said he was just being nice, and wasn't he?



## **The Trouble with the Word**

December 28, 2009

Someone wrote to me raising a good point about using the word “beautiful” for the project title:

*“One thought about your site is that I still think the message is about looks because it uses a word typically used to describe attractive qualities--beautiful face, sunset, artwork. What if I don't want to be or to care about being beautiful by my own judgment or anyone else's? I have suffered too much and worked too hard to even consider beauty as reliable. I'd rather be amazing just the way I am, powerful just the way I am, or thoughtful, intelligent, creative, or funny just the way I am. Beauty is too loaded...”*

“Beautiful just the way you are” is a very commonly used phrase. I think when people use it they use it to say that the person doesn't need to fuss or think about their appearance because they are beautiful without doing anything about their appearance. This is the message that everyone has beauty, and when we can see people that way, the tyranny of some socially constructed standard of beauty becomes disempowered, because beauty is no longer defined by measuring a person's physical attributes against some checklist. I think that is the spirit in which most people think of the phrase, “Beautiful just the way you are.” However, I agree with the writer. Just using the word is loaded with all the cultural baggage that the word carries in our culture and continuing to use it in association with women's appearance perpetuates the imbalance. We can't use this word applied to women or girls and not have that background, so I appreciate the point - using the word still carries the cultural context.



## **The Trouble with the Word, Again**

December 28, 2009

A friend of mine has a seven-year-old daughter. He told me with frustration that people are always telling her she's pretty. He and his wife are trying to teach her the importance of “beauty on the inside”. But his daughter keeps receiving praise and singular comments about her appearance, and from that, what does she learn? At a birthday party of his daughter's friend there are several Chinese girls, and a multitude of remarks are made by the adults about how

cute these girls are. From this, what do those girls learn?

There is a dinner party around my table of adults and kids. A friend remarks, “Your daughter is gorgeous, don’t you think?” I don’t know what to say. I know I’m supposed to say, “thank you,” but that makes me feel like my daughter is an object I made or picked out at the store – the way I would say “thank you” if someone complimented my kitchen, implying praise for my design skills or taste. And then what does that compliment, addressed to my daughter, say about the girl sitting next to her? Both girls hear this comment, in fact the whole table hears this comment, intended to bestow approval on the appearance of one of them. What does that make the other girl – not beautiful? Not so gorgeous? Not worthy of any remark on her appearance?

This has happened numerous times, and one can hear it in conversations everywhere. Sometimes my son has been the object. When he was a toddler, many people thought he was a girl. When I casually mentioned he was a boy, they would say, “Oh, I thought he was a girl because he’s so pretty.” What was going on here? Why did their opinion of his appearance only work if he’s a girl?

Whether or not we are the recipients of such pronouncements, we hear them around us. Through their frequency, we learn that appearance is important, especially so for girls, and we learn which body parts matter most - precisely which attributes are equated with “attractive” or “pretty” or “handsome”. We are taught in turn how to use the measures to assess ourselves as well as others. Recognition for girls and women so often is given or denied based on their conformity to these measures. Does it not seem painfully telling that musicians audition for orchestras behind a screen, no high heels to give away gender by sound, no visual cues by which to judge appearances?

In our current era, beauty for women is defined by two options that meld into one: the anorexic shape of a fashion model, or the larger-breasted, narrow-waisted, and hyper-sexualized presentation worthy of prostitution and stripping. The mainstreaming of pornography has dictated fashion, music, and media, all of which is filled with a singular definition of “desirable”. We are fed thousands of images daily that declare this notion of female beauty. We cannot help but get the message of what defines the “perfect” body and the “perfect” presentation.

I think of this as the pancake/guinea pig effect. In the United States, when we think of breakfast, we think of pancakes, eggs, toast, or cereal, maybe waffles – those items define what breakfast is. They are the breakfast foods of choice in the Kindergarten play kitchen. They are the items in the picture showing “breakfast” in the English language books. In China breakfast could just as easily be rice and chicken feet. In Peru it might be guinea pig or whole fish. Every era in every country creates a dominant notion of how women’s bodies should look, and women suffer to conform. My female ancestors had their feet bound throughout childhood to fit the 4-inch-long shoe, and Chinese pornography detailed elaborate choreography centered around this mangled foot. If we hear comments on hair all the time, we learn hair is important for

desirability. If we were to hear comments about ears or feet, we would learn that those body parts were important. No matter what body part is being judged, the truth that we are not desirable unless we match that standard never changes. When people keep telling the little girl she's pretty, they're teaching her what their standards are. They're teaching her, and those within earshot, that she, and by extension all girls, will receive approval and attention when she meets those standards.

Ariel Levy, the writer, has said that one of the great gifts she received from her father was that he never commented on her physical appearance. The gift in this is a freedom that all humans deserve – freedom from the mandate that we must look beautiful or pretty or sexy or desirable or handsome for someone else, according to some socially constructed measuring stick, and be always available for evaluation. Why can't we all, women and men, give ourselves, and each other, the gift of this freedom?



### **Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me**

(A double-header from a 20-year-old male college student)

Friday, February 5, 2010

Recently I took a road trip with my girlfriend down the West Coast from Portland, Oregon to L.A. Our last day in Portland was a crazy whirl of errands, Christmas shopping and packing. First stop was the Jiffy Lube to get the car's oil changed for our long drive. The Jetta is my girlfriend's car. She was the one driving it into the garage, she asked all the questions, and the registration was under her name. We're quietly waiting in the lobby when the mechanic comes out to introduce himself. He reaches out to shake my hand and say his name, and I reciprocate the gesture. Immediately I regret it, as he then turns around to go out to the car without shaking my girlfriend's hand. Yet I say nothing. The trend continues as he begins to explain the work they did on the car. Every sentence he punctuates by looking at me for approval, although I know nothing about the car, and my name isn't the one on the computer screen in front of him. Even though I am uncomfortable I remain silent in my own knowledge of the situation's inequity. I'll never know whether he consciously made these choices, or whether he had just never been told otherwise. Either way, I missed a great opportunity to speak my mind, and have been kicking myself for weeks since for choosing inaction over action.

My day wasn't improved much when I found much of the same gender restrictions downtown. My goal was to price out bundt pans for my mom's Christmas present at Sur la Table, a kitchen supply store. Generally a store I love, one woman's comment ruined it for me that day. I found some insulated and expensive bundt pans as soon as I walked in and then approached an employee to ask if they had any cheaper ones. I asked her where all their bundt pans were, and

she looked at me with a smile and asked condescendingly, "Do you know what that is?" Now, I don't know if she assumed I was a complete culinary idiot because I am a 20-year-old male, or if it was some tone I had in my question that screamed "I don't know what I'm talking about," but I resolved on the spot not to buy anything there, even if they had the greatest bundt pan I'd ever seen. Thankfully, the insulated ones were the only pans they stocked, and I wasn't going to get those. Once again however, my shock was kept to myself. I am not a quiet person, and in fact love arguing, yet I held my tongue twice in one day.



### **A Companion Project Plus More**

March 30, 2010

There's a cool project called Operation Beautiful that's worth passing on - pass it on!  
<http://operationbeautiful.com/>

Also, check out the blog of Diane Levin, professor of education at Wheelock College, who, with Jean Kilbourne, recently wrote the book "So Sexy So Soon" about the hypersexualization of girls in our culture. [www.sosexysosoon.com/blog](http://www.sosexysosoon.com/blog)

And while you're at it, Jean Kilbourne has updated her website: <http://jeankilbourne.com/>. Check her schedule, and if she ever gives a talk near you, go hear her.

And speaking of speakers, there are some men who are doing great advocacy work for women. I give links on my website to a number of them: Jackson Katz, Robert Jensen, Michael Kimmel, Byron Hurt, Thomas Keith, among others.

And of course, Gail Dines needs to be mentioned while I'm suggesting people to read and hear. Find her lecture on Youtube or vodpod given at the anti-pornography conference in 2007 at Wheelock College, and see the website [www.stoppornculture.org](http://www.stoppornculture.org).

The Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood, (<http://www.commercialexploitation.org/>) is in Boston holding a summit on "Market Values, Human Values, and the Lives of Children". This is a great and important organization!

Annie Leonard, in receiving their annual Fred Rogers Integrity Award and showing her film "The Story of Stuff" (<http://www.storyofstuff.com/>), said something we all need to say frequently to ourselves and others: "We need to speak up MORE OFTEN and LOUDER!"

So next time you hear people referring to Tiger Woods's behavior as a "personal issue" or a "personal failing", remind them that the use of women as sexual commodities is a public health issue, a human justice issue, a violence-against-women issue.

### *Voice Male Magazine*

There's an article in the Spring 2010 issue of *Voice Male Magazine* about BJTWYA. See pp. 18-19: <http://voicemalemagazine.org/>. *Voice Male* is doing important work. I encourage everyone to support it by subscribing and spreading the word!



### **More Chicken**

April 7, 2010

How do you mix objectification of women and a heavy dose of contempt with the breeding mix for baked chicken dinner, "Shake 'n Bake"? There is an ad, seen on a large poster in the Prudential Mall in Boston, that says only: "You look smashing. But your chicken breasts could use a lift". There is a small logo in the corner. That's it, and what more do we need? I remember "Shake 'n Bake" from the 1970's, when it was just a cooking convenience. This is how far women have come. For more chicken, see post from November 25, 2009.



### **News that's not news**

April 12, 2010

Alternet has an article worth reading about the effects of objectification on cognitive function:

[http://www.alternet.org/reproductivejustice/146396/new\\_discoveries\\_suggest\\_that\\_sexual\\_objectification\\_is\\_more\\_damaging\\_to\\_women\\_than\\_you\\_might\\_think](http://www.alternet.org/reproductivejustice/146396/new_discoveries_suggest_that_sexual_objectification_is_more_damaging_to_women_than_you_might_think)

Just a look at the pervasive problem of objectification in our society would tell us this – how could this NOT affect our thinking, even if for the simple reason that it takes away our humanity, demeans us, and takes energy away from more creative thinking.

The article also offers another example where an aspect of sexism is described and then the solution proposed is to get women to change their behavior: "...researchers propose a campaign

of awareness and education regarding this phenomenon, which could help women 'begin to gain control over, or at least buffer themselves against' its negative cognitive impact." If you haven't noticed already, start watching for this habit of leaving out men in the advise to change behavior, and ask others, why doesn't the voice pop up telling MEN to change their behavior?? As Jackson Katz has pointed out, why do campus police always tell women to use a list of practices to protect themselves against sexual assault? Why don't they tell all the men to change their behavior and in turn tell other men to change? Jackson Katz asks, quite to the point, why aren't all the men escorted across campuses so that women can walk freely?? !



### **Mobile Invasion Device**

April 21, 2010

Observed recently on a subway ride in Boston: The subway cars were crowded. A seventeen-year-old girl was standing facing the window, with a couple seats between her and the window. A young woman was sitting in one of the seats, and a man in the other. None of these individuals seemed to know each other. The young woman prepared to get off the subway as it pulled into a station, standing up and holding onto the pole. The 17-year-old girl saw the man slip his open cell phone between the legs of the young woman, under her short skirt and below her crotch, and take a picture, without her awareness. The young woman walked off the car. The girl was incredulous and started staring at the man, who was looking into his phone. When he looked up, seeing the girl staring at him, he shuffled the phone into his pocket.

We are often too startled, amazed, or incredulous in situations like this to act. Often we just keep walking. We need to stop shrugging these experiences off. How do men and women experience the honking of a car differently when they're walking? How many of us know the state of hyper-vigilance necessary to be ready for street harassment, and yet why should anyone be "ready" for it? There's an initiative in various cities called Hollaback that encourages women (and men) to use our voices and use our cellphones to (1)holler back to street harassers, and (2)use our cellphones to document street harassers and send in the photos and the reports.



### **Meryl Streep on Pretending**

May 22, 2010

Elsewhere I have cited Meryl Streep's speech as a character in "Devil Wears Prada". It is worth noting her recent speech to the 2010 graduating class of Barnard College. Her speech is

perceptive, wise, personal, and strong. You can hear it on Youtube:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-a8QXUAe2g>

She speaks well about women's need and skills at pretending, how girls and women are viewed in the eyes of men and boys, the ways in which the culture has changed or not changed, and how we navigate through all of this gender-loaded experience. She ends with an important statement about our obligation to have vision and make change.

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### **What is a "Fitch"??**

June 6, 2010

There was a teenage girl at my house the other day who was wearing a tight-fitting "wife-beater" tank top, now just called "beaters" for short (that's another topic). I knew the shirt was from the store Abercrombie and Fitch, because across the chest, in large letters, was the word "FITCH", and I know she frequents that store. I had to wonder - does this 14-year-old understand what she is advertising - the "beater" shirt; the hyper-sexualizing of the A&F mission; the implicit labeling of herself "bitch"; the misogyny; the act of serving Abercrombie and Fitch by giving them free advertisement on one's body, not only for their product but for their social message to be a sexual object. Who is teaching girls and boys the violence of media messages? If this girl comprehended the meanings of her choice, would she act otherwise? Like the chicken remark at the dinner party, when does one SAY SOMETHING? If it is our responsibility to intervene on everyday misogyny, objectification, and violence against women, then this was an opportunity.

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