

Heeding Heidi: the empty gains of plastic surgery

Heidi Montag has given new meaning to the concept of one-stop shopping. The 23-year-old reality TV star – one of those who is famous for being famous – underwent 10 plastic-surgery procedures in one day, as pin pointed in People magazine and now scrutinized online.

Among the 10 procedures, a few are predictable, while others involve regions you'd never imagine a young adult would need refined: neck liposuction, chin reduction and pinning her ears back. "For the first time," Montag gushes to People, "I can wear updos, instead of hiding (my ears) behind my hair."

The twisted psychology of her extreme makeover is as easy to trace as the black marks drawn on her pre-op body. "I'm competing against the Britney Spearses of the world," she explains, lauding "the Heidi 2010 reinvention" and promising new versions in coming years.

She'll find new ammunition in her quest "to feel perfect" this month, when Sports Illustrated's annual swimsuit edition hits newsstands.

Their sandy sirens taunt average women, whose swimsuits and sundresses are tucked in top shelves, whose love handles are safely distanced from New Year's resolutions and warm weather.

I'm told Sports Illustrated's spreads are considered the classier end of swimsuit modeling, if such a thing as class is possible when you're in a string bikini. Especially troublesome is the magazine's use of body paint in lieu of swimsuits, the paint being code for nudity.

Indeed, a heap of distractions arrive in this short month, wedged between Miss America and the Academy Awards and complicated by Valentine's Day. At every turn we measure ourselves – on scales, in mirrors, across cubicles, between Facebook profiles. We swing from famine to feast, from relief to remorse. We balance tangled expectations with reality checks, roses with thorns.

It is the perfect time to enter into Lent, to look inward and upward. This month's readings guide our journey, reminding us that others "are occupied with earthly things, but our citizenship is in heaven."

St. Paul writes that Jesus "will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body." That union is how we embody true beauty - not in the removal of pimples or the loss of weight. The pursuit of perfection is not only an impossible mission, it's an undesirable one because our humanity is our lifeline to the savior. "Therefore," St. Paul concludes, "stand firm in the Lord."

His charge is not easy when so many cultural forces attempt to sway and bend us. But to continually bend is to become weaker and weaker, which appears to be the true impact of Heidi Montag's surgeries.

"I see an upgraded version of me," she says. "It's a new person, and I feel like almost all of the things I didn't want to be and who I turned into kind of got chiseled away."

The problem is Heidi is working in the wrong direction. She's seeking inner peace from outer transformation. That canvas, of course, makes for quicker change. But the heavy lifting of Christianity, of Lent, and of life, begins inside. That's where we do the real work and where we find the real joy.

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