

A.P.O.V. *

*Alumni Point of View

Pursuing a Crown of Perfection

A Journey from Atlantic City to Vanderbilt University Divinity School

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I ALWAYS AM UNCERTAIN HOW TO respond when someone who discovers I competed in pageants offers, “Really? You don’t seem the type.” Usually I enjoy engaging the other person, and together we discover our own stereotypes and ambiguous pasts. But there are those days when I am in no mood to discuss the subject, and I retort, “Well, I guess I am the type.”

Unless I am willing to ridicule my own experience, I usually refrain from disclosing my pageant past. I keep the lessons learned from those experiences locked away in the dark along with my Miss Indiana crown. Occasionally, and with people I trust, I bring out the crown, brush off the dust and hold the crown and the experience up to the light for closer examinations. Talking openly about the good, the bad and the in-between is like reuniting with an old friend. My pageant past is multilayered and peculiar—complete with big hair and, oddly enough, a significant amount of gratitude.

I stumbled into pageantry at the close of my senior year of high school when I participated in a small Youth for Christ choir called Skywatch. We were asked to sing during the Miss Northeast Pageant, a preliminary pageant to the Miss Indiana title. As contestants changed from swimsuits into evening

gowns, we sang songs about Jesus and the glory of God and how we all need the Lord and the grandeur of heaven’s streets of gold. Such peculiarity did not register with me immediately.

Following the pageant, one of the judges approached me and suggested I enter a local pageant. She offered the name and telephone number of the person to contact. I called the director of the pageant, and two weeks later I participated in and won the Miss Limberlost title, which qualified me to compete in the Miss Indiana pageant. Over the next seven years, I competed for the crown of Miss Indiana three times. The first trip resulted in my finishing 26th in the top 26 places. During the second time around, I finished in second place. Finally, in 1992 I won the crown of Miss Indiana and competed in the Miss America pageant.

Long, Long; Short, Short

The days leading up to my departure to Atlantic City are among my most cherished memories. In my hometown of Shipshewana, Ind.,

the 500 citizens, predominately Amish and Mennonite, exercised no restraint in celebrating my being crowned Miss Indiana. Welcome-home parades, community gatherings, exquisitely handcrafted gifts, horse-and-buggy rides, endless phone calls, and mountains of homemade breads, cookies, pies and Amish

peanut butter were aplenty. An outpouring of love and support encircled my family; our home resounded from the constant activity. Neighborhood children, family, friends and curious strangers were welcomed guests. I met for the first time my second, third and fourth cousins—once removed.

Suddenly, life became a celebration, day after day after day. The crown became more than a stack of sterling silver embedded with rows of sparkling rhinestone. We shared laughs together as men and women, young and old, Amish and English, tried on that stack of sparkling silver and paraded around like royalty, imitating the stylized Miss America wave—long, long; short, short. The experience was so novel and out-of-the-ordinary, but those days were sacred. Together with my community, a positive experience of Miss America was shared.

Impressionistic Violence

What cannot be ignored or denied is the objectification imbedded in the phenomenon of Miss America, a reflection of the broader culture. This certainly is not news for veteran feminists. But for a novice, who also happens to be a past Miss Indiana, the misogyny is more difficult to name, more painful and shameful. I am not merely reflecting critically on an abstract phenomenon; I am scrutinizing personal experience and acknowledging how unpleasant life becomes when we look inward.

Reflecting on my experiences of pageants is like trying to look at an impressionist paint-



ing with my nose against the wall. Gaining distance from the wall, from the painting, from pageants, I begin making out images of an unusual violence against women. Maybe the violence is not physical, but the message sent to women of all ages, especially the young, leaves an unusual kind of scar. As we compete against each other to become the ideal woman, as we struggle to alter our own body shape to achieve a culturally defined image of beauty, as we volunteer within our community not necessarily for our community's sake but to win favor from our peers, a violation of the soul occurs.

Perhaps these scars are not visible to the eye; nevertheless, they are etched into the surface of the heart. This objectification of women scars not only women but all creation. It is a violation that keeps us disconnected from each other and imprisoned in harsh and critical self-judgment.

The inherent danger in this violation is that it is couched in terms of women's liberation. Great efforts to change the image of Miss America from a beauty pageant to a scholarship program have taken place over the past decade. Miss America is now marketed as the world's leading provider of scholarships for women, but

Miss America's relationship with education creates mixed messages of women's liberation and sexual objectification. As long as women are able to name and claim the conditions, the misogyny is no longer labeled as objectification but earns the dangerous label of women's liberation via empowerment. But I ask: Whose definition of the ideal woman are we embracing?

Just as our bodies are manipulated in pageantry, so is the message regarding violence against women; this violation against women is subtle but contributes to our society's objectified gaze upon women. Height, weight, hair color, skin tone, intelligence, talent, sense of style, posture, composure, wit

and personality—women are walking checklists based on a male model of perfection. From my experience, the 21st-century Miss America ideal is a “liberated” woman complete with an education and a career; she is smart, talented, heterosexual, and remains on display for the male gaze.



NATALIE COX

The Prescription According to Matthew

If being a novice feminist who also is a past beauty queen is not enough to raise eyebrows, being a Mennonite and a beauty queen certainly will. Either of the seeming contradictions can provoke eyebrow raising on its own, but combine the two paradoxes and entire faces begin to contort. Discovering my feminist voice would come years later, but I was a Mennonite when I entered pageantry, and at this interval of my life, the pageant ideal and my religious sensibility seemed compatible: Abide by a list of rules and morals; dress according to strict guidelines; and by adhering to these codes, salvation—or in this case success—was sure to follow. There was

no gray ambiguity. For me, religion and pageants seemed more similar than different. Legalism stood firm. Religion and Miss America seemed to embody the pursuit of perfection. To become Miss America was to become America's ideal, God's ideal, or so I thought. The possibility of achieving perfection arrested

me and seemed to clarify the Gospel of Matthew's prescription, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The Miss America image of perfection challenged the guessing game in life. I was addicted to the control I thought I had in pageants. Competing, achieving and winning gave me a sense of self-worth, a self-worth defined externally and not internally; “knowing thyself” was not a priority. I used the Miss America program to define who and what I was and would become. Instead of learning the skill of critical thinking, I only had to imagine: WWMAD? What would Miss America do?

This mythical, superheroic figure put God first, followed the Ten Commandments, committed no acts of misconduct, smiled and looked attractive, and performed good deeds for her neighbor. Follow such a list, and

behold—an excursion down the runway of gold was certain. Such a pursuit of perfection served strictly as an external checks-and-balances system. Never mind about listening within for the voice of God. God was the checklist of America's ideal. Become Miss America, and God's favor would be bestowed upon me.

Virtue, Check

When my dream of becoming Miss America ended, I was left with a big, gaping hole of emptiness. The checklist of perfection, which so narrowly defined how I should and should not be, failed to produce a sense of fulfill-

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in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom came back to a happy environment. Many relationships don't make it through deployment. Many spouses can't handle the stress and responsibility associated with it. Many troops can't readjust to their normal pre-deployment routine after being in and around combat for several months.

With Heather (BA'98), there was never any doubt. She was so strong throughout my deployment that it surprised even me. She worked full time, took care of the house and all the animals, and maintained a strong front to keep my mind at ease. She is a remarkable woman, and I'm very lucky to have her in my life.

Although Heather and I picked up as though I'd only been gone for a few days, not everything has been so easy to resume. Much to my surprise, it's been difficult readjusting to routine things. My first few days back, I found myself reaching to check the safety of my weapon, which for the past 89 days had been literally attached to my hip 24/7. I felt a little uncomfortable without it.

Returning to work at the battalion aid station has been hard. I am finding that I have less patience for things than I did before, less

tolerance for whiners and complainers. I guess part of me is bothered by the lack of toughness in some of the non-deployed Marines, when I was so impressed with the Marines whom I treated and heard about in Kuwait and Iraq. I don't know how long some of these Marines would have lasted in the desert.

Eating all those things I missed while deployed has been a challenge, too. Despite knowing better, I've found out the hard way that you can't just load up on ice cream and dairy products when you haven't really eaten them in three months. My system is slowly returning to normal, but it hasn't been a pretty five days.

I have also noticed that I've lost more weight than I first realized. Yesterday, for the first time in three months, I put on civilian clothes, and my pants kept falling down. I left for Kuwait weighing an already lean 165 pounds, but I weighed myself this morning and was shocked to find that I had lost 11 pounds. Now I have to deal with my wife *and* my mother trying to fatten me up. Oh, well, there are worse fates to face.

Most important, despite my attempted resistance, I'm slowly finding out that this deployment has changed me mentally. I can't place a finger on what exactly has changed,

or what caused the change for that matter. I just don't feel the same.

I have found it hard to talk about the things I saw or experienced over there, even with my wife and closest family, despite the fact that I was never involved in direct combat. Maybe it is the realization of how fragile life can be, or how easily it could have been me staring down death in An Nasiriyah or Al Kut. I think the question of "Why not me?" will be one I struggle with for some time. I'm hoping that these feelings are only temporary and, as I get settled back in here, that everything will return to normal. I imagine one time will tell.

I ate dinner last night with my wife and our friend Jimmy, the Marine lieutenant injured in the fighting at An Nasiriyah. He is doing remarkably well and is expected to make a full recovery, allowing him to stay in the Marine Corps. It was great to see him, and I am looking forward to sitting down with him sometime and hearing all about his unique experiences. I just don't think that either of us is ready yet. ▼

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ment or spiritual transformation. What was God if not perfection or power? Even more perverse, what was God if not male or American? The emptiness left me searching. I would like to say I was searching for a way to confront and begin living into the emptiness I felt inside; however, I searched for a replacement checklist, a new inventory of "dos and don'ts" to define who and what I should be.

I still longed to be the ideal, virtuous woman. I got married. Check. I got religious. Check. I started graduate school. Check. I decorated my house for every national and religious holiday. Check. I bought shoes to match every individual outfit. Check. After all, a virtuous woman has all her boxes checked off, for only then is she "far more precious than jewels" (Proverbs 31:10). Check. For the ideal woman, perfection is not just the destination; it is her way of travel.

While fulfilling the criteria of the checklist, I was "getting religious" and at the same time working toward my first master's degree in the field of counseling. During my studies I discovered a book by Murray Bodo titled *Clare: A Light in the Garden*. Neither biographical nor a spiritual meditation on the life of Saint Clare of Assisi, the story tells of Clare's relationship with Francis of Assisi.

Reading the book proved to be a transformative experience. I was not comforted by the story; I was angered. I became furious. I questioned. In the middle of my anger and questions, my idolatrous belief system and fettered spirit were exposed. Just as Clare's life was defined and understood through her relationship with a man, I realized this pattern was how I valued and understood my own life—through a male definition of perfection. In the middle of my questions and through my relationship with another woman's

story, 700 years removed, I experienced the holy. In a rush of emotion from anger to feelings of solidarity with a woman such as Clare, I questioned "destination perfection."

Clare's commitment to peace, her ability to recognize the Beloved in all creation, her understanding of the connectedness in the world, her contemplative heart, her courage to walk away from wealth and 12th-century expectations of the virtuous woman, inspired me to begin delving beneath the surface of my own reality. What or whom would I find beneath the mask of Shelli Yoder, second runner-up to Miss America? Where would my questions lead?

The path of seeking is more circular than linear. I began noticing the endless shades of green found in creation; the unique shape of each individual eye, mouth and nose; the different ways children laugh and the many ways we experience silence; my bare feet touching

the earth; and the overwhelming presence of homelessness in a country of affluence and resources. I noticed how little I knew about the beautiful gift of my sexuality—how fear and ignorance kept me from exploration instead of inviting me to a greater awareness—and how the Divine Spirit dwelt within one. I began paying attention.

Ten years have passed since I was Miss Indiana and second runner-up to Miss America. During the decade my thoughts have fluctuated from “What was I thinking?” to offering up a whispered “Thank you.” I am grateful for the unique perspective this experience provided, and I am thankful for the kind and generous people my chosen path encountered.

People whom I met during my reign as Miss Indiana continue to correspond with me. Their words are encouraging. There are many others from whom I have never heard. I am sure meeting a beauty queen in a St. John knit ensemble, wearing a glitzy

crown, and talking about accepting and believing in yourself regardless of the circumstances were bound to foster questions as well as create distance. The decked-out beauty queen talking about self-acceptance is a rather hypocritical image, an image of my past I live with daily.

I have been told I am only responsible for actions I deliberately perform, that it is the intent of the heart that really matters, and because I did not intend to do harm, I am not responsible.

I disagree.

If I embrace the theological tenet of the connectedness of all life, and I do, I am responsible, or rather accountable, to my neighbor and not just the ones defined as human. We are connected and accountable to the hermit crab, the missal thrush, the wood sorrel, the air we breathe, the ocelot, the prairie, and the weeping willow. We stand accountable to the 12-year-old girl dying to be thin, the man

on death row awaiting execution, and the Afghan refugee without a home. My choices have consequences. Such privilege demands critical reflection, just responses, and an unfettered spirit embodying the love of God.

With a list of “dos and don’ts,” we can convince ourselves we are granted a special dispensation from life’s asymmetry. Perhaps that’s the lure of such a phenomenon as Miss America. The pageant sweeps the messiness of life under the train of an ermine-trimmed robe and projects a contrived image of perfection. It helps tie up the loose ends. But what is reality if not loose ends? Life is scarred and flawless, broken yet whole. Perhaps in opening ourselves up to the questions, embracing unconditional compassion, and standing accountable to our neighbor, we are as close as we possibly can be to what it means to be perfect. ▼