

Changed People II

"I learned the truth at 17 that love was meant for beauty queens..." played from our car radio in 1975. As a scrawny 12-year-old, **I believed that if I was beautiful, my life would be perfect.**

Fast forward four years - at 16, I was chosen from more than 200 girls to go to Paris and become a fashion model. My agent told me, "Your rail-thin body, shiny blond hair and sky blue eyes will be your passport to success." TEEN Magazine wrote an article about my life, "Model Success Story - It's like something that happens in the movies!"

My glamorous, exciting life was filled with dancing, drinking, dating and parties. Life was a thrill a minute. **It never occurred to me that my excessive eating and drinking could affect how I looked.** At the modeling agency I was told, "You look puffy and tired!"

One morning I went to a photo shoot. The hairstylist painstakingly arranged my hair in an elegant up-sweep. I put on a gown that the dresser had waiting for me. The assistants set the lighting and I got into place. The photographer scrutinized me up and down, and said, "No. No good. You can go home." **The first taste of rejection as a model was devastating** - I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. On the way home I bought a huge chocolate bar and overindulged.

I wasn't accepted because of my weight.

Six months later, I was living on my own, in an apartment in New York. One evening, my mom called, "Your agent, Valerie, phoned us and said you've gained a lot of weight and that you're fat. Tonya, are you fat?"

"Yes," I cried. "And I look horrible."

I weighed 10 pounds more than I did in the fabulous pictures that filled my modeling portfolio. In the super- thin world of modeling, 10 pounds is a lot. The extra weight made my face look puffy was keeping me from my dream of becoming a supermodel.

When I stood on the scale it was torture. By any normal person's standards, I would have been considered thin, but not by the fashion industry's standards and certainly NOT by my New York agent Eileen Ford's. One day, after a desperate week-long fast, I walked into the agency and said, "Eileen, look, I've lost weight." I was 118 pounds. She looked me over and bluntly said, "You're still fat - lose five more pounds."

My eating was out of hand. The more I tried to lose weight, the more I ate. **I bought Haagen Dazs ice cream and consoled myself with it.** I would eat a whole box of Frosted Flakes and a gallon of ice cream followed by a handful of laxatives. I sat with my head over the toilet trying to make myself vomit. I took diet pills to help me lose weight and speed up my system, and diuretics to rid myself of unwanted water. I wanted to look perfect, but my eating was out of control and so was my life. I could only be as happy as I was thin.

I was consumed with the way I looked and I was obsessed with food. When I scrutinized my appearance, it was like looking in a fun house mirror. My view was distorted - what was real was not what I saw. When I looked in the mirror I no longer saw a resemblance to Cheryl Ladd, but to Miss Piggy. Somewhere along the way, I had lost sight of what was true. My value, both to my agents and myself, was measured by the way I looked and **since I could not look perfect, I felt worthless.**

Searching for answers

During the next two years, I traveled 75,000 miles as a fashion model. I used food, alcohol, drugs and men to try to fill an empty place in my life. The glamour and excitement of my life had worn off long ago. I explored various churches and New Age philosophies, read self-help books and consulted my horoscope daily - searching for answers. But I did not find any. My weight roller-coastered from high to low, as did my emotions. At the ripe old age of 18 - when most young girls have just graduated from high school and are beginning their lives - I concluded that suicide was my only option. **I flew home from Switzerland to say goodbye to my family before I killed myself.**

A few weeks after I got home, a friend of mine called and invited me to church. The night before we went, she told me about Jesus.

"First, I need to get my life cleaned up, and then I'll accept the Lord," I told her.

"Accept the Lord first," she encouraged me. "He'll help you clean up your life."

The next morning the pastor asked, "Do you have a void in your life? Have you tried everything and still feel empty? God loves you and sent his son to die for your sins, so that you can live forever with him in heaven. Do you want everlasting life? Would you like your empty life to be full of meaning?"

I felt that he was speaking directly to me. **No matter what I had accomplished or acquired, I was constantly searching for that missing part of my life.** I wondered, "How did he know so much about me?" I had never heard anyone explain the truth and how to find peace so simply. He talked about how I could receive Christ into my life - and that's exactly what I wanted to do, so that He would help me clean up my life.

A New Person

Until then, I only knew about Jesus' death in a historical sense. I didn't think that it had anything to do with me personally. That night I realized that He died for me. I ran forward, knelt down and prayed a prayer to let God take control of my life. From then on my journey took a new direction. God healed me physically and emotionally. When I stopped dieting and abusing my body with drugs and alcohol, I actually became healthy.

Eight years ago, I began writing about a life I hadn't talked about in years. As a mother, I wondered, how could I teach my children to see themselves through God's eyes? I didn't want them to compare themselves with the media's impossible standards of beauty that were on commercials, billboards and magazine covers.

Would they realize that their worth to God is not measured by their weight or contingent upon having chiseled cheekbones? I reminded my children that they must take care of the unique and wonderful bodies God create for them. God looks at your heart and not your appearance.

Over the years, I encouraged my children to be beautiful - on the inside. My grown daughters are now attending Bible college. They've been to Europe too - but as missionaries, not fashion models. My two sons are growing taller by the day.

Recently, I awoke during the night unable to sleep. It was cold outside, but I was warm in my cozy bed as I lay next to my husband. With his arm draped across my body, he was so close I could feel his heartbeat and his warm breath upon my face. I was filled with peace and contentment. **If I had taken my life in that lonely hotel room 22 years ago - I would have missed all this.** Today, the painful memories that used to overwhelm me - the feelings of hurt, anger and bitterness - do not have the hold over me that they once did.

I still struggle sometimes with wanting to look younger and thinner. I wish my stomach did not lie next to me when I sleep on my side. Fortunately, I know that physical beauty is only skin deep and temporary, but that true beauty is soul deep. I rest in the fact that God does not accept me because of my jean size, the condition of my skin or my reflection in the mirror, but because He loves me so much that He sent His only Son to die for me. I am, indeed, valuable to Him.

Valuable in God's sight

You are valuable to God. You are His artwork - a unique, one-of-a-kind masterpiece. Famous fashion designers label all their creations. Even Barbie has "Mattel" stamped on her back. God created us, and we each wear His label, "Fashioned by God, a designer original."

Credit – Tanya Ruiz