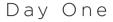


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Seven-Day Devotional

Elisa Morgan





THE HISS

So God created human beings in his image.

-Genesis 1:27 NCV

God looked at everything he had made, and it was very good.

-Genesis 1:31 NCV

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

-Matthew 3:16-17 NIV

God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life.

-John 3:16 NCV

Do you know that 96 percent of women would *never* use the word *beautiful* to describe themselves? Yep, that's right: only 4 percent of women *around the world* consider themselves beautiful.¹

^{1. &}quot;Dove Real Beauty Sketches," Dove, http://realbeautysketches.dove.us.

That's a *stunning* number! And this stat is up from the 2 percent reported a few years prior.²

I get it. While most days I can wrestle my body into a decent outer presentation, I still see myself as "ugly," because I still see what's inside. Lousy attitude. Impatient heart. Grouchy mood. Ugly. The words *beauty* and *full* sit locked in a box high on a shelf in my closet, completely out of reach.

It's an age-old dilemma. In Genesis 1:27 we're told that God created us in his image. Wow! Then in Genesis 1:31 God looked over everything he made and announced that it *all* was *very* good. Nice! Until Genesis 3, when the stinky serpent hissed a giant lie into Eve's ear: that God must not love her, because he wouldn't let her eat of every fruit in the garden. As a result, she sinned. She chose to believe the lie of the Hiss rather than the love of her God. So did Adam. And humankind was doomed. For the rest of our days we're white-noised by the Hiss. *God does not love you!*

But here's the thing. God didn't leave us in our "ugly." When Jesus dipped down into the Jordan and came up, baptized, God pronounced from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16–17). God sees us—you and me—through his Son. If God sees his Son as pleasing, then he sees us as pleasing, too, because he sees us through Jesus. That's what Easter was all about: God silencing the Hiss once and for all with the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. "God

Dove, "Only Two Percent of Women Describe Themselves as Beautiful," news release, September 29, 2004, http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/onlytwo-percent-of-women- describe-themselves-as-beautiful-73980552.html.

loved the world so much that he *gave* his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life." (John 3:16, emphasis added)

Rather than abandoning me to act sinful, God invites me into acting saved. Rather than leaving me indentured as a slave to shame, God releases me to unfettered freedom. Rather than only rescuing me from how I've been wounded, God heals me whole, as if the evil never occurred.

God loves me. And God loves you. And God sees us through Jesus, just as he first made us: good. Even *beauty full*. Can we believe him so that he can fulfill this pre-Fall and post-Resurrection promise in our lives?

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who pushes away God's pronouncement of personal value. Likely you do too. Likely you embrace the ugly and discard the beauty in yourself. And likely you feel incredibly inadequate, stuck, and even alone. A long list of "not me" objections tacked on your mirror details the zillion reasons why God could not possibly love you or see you as beauty full.

Hisssssl

Want out? Want more? Want to see yourself the way God sees you?

The choice is ours as we decide whose words we will trust: the great lie of the Hiss or our Great God.

Oh God, I do believe that when you created me, you saw me as "good." While I know I mess up, I also truly believe that you gave Jesus to cover my failures. You see me through

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him and his work on the cross for me. Help me to recognize the hisses in my days and to turn my ears toward what you say about me so that I may learn to see myself as you see me: beauty full.



YOUR BEAUTY FULL VOICE

Hear my voice in accordance with your love.

—Psalm 119:149 NIV

Look at the birds in the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

-Matthew 6:26 NIV

We women vary when it comes to being comfortable knowing—and using—our voices. For some, voice is a clear element of identity and selfhood. Convinced of who we are and what we have to offer, we open our mouths with a trill of contribution. Others find voice confusing: What to say? When to say it? We "But...but..." our way through interactions, unsure of whether we're even making a contribution.

How healthy is your voice? How convinced are you of the uniqueness and significance of your identity and personhood in your world?

Just as the whorls of a fingerprint are unique to each human digit, so are the timbres of voice. No two human voices are alike. The size and shape of our vocal chords, along with the size and shape of the rest of our bodies, together offer a sound that is wholly and completely unique to the person uttering it. Soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and all the derivations in between.

Similarly, personality is unique to every person. In addition to containing our spiritual beings, our voices express the everdeveloping essences of our personal beings: our personalities and identities.

Take me: I'll never sing a solo. I won't run for political office. I won't cut and style hair. I probably won't do child care, other than for my own grandchildren. Instead, I clank away at a keyboard. I climb steps to a podium and fiddle with a mic. I plop down in neighborhood family rooms and open the Bible with others who wonder just who Jesus is and where he is in our lives today. I risk posing a question on a controversial topic in a setting when doing so might be a bit dicey, but I sense it still needs to be asked. I tease my grandson with preposterous riddles. I stay in relationships with no-matter-what love.

There is something so freeing about identifying and then using our voices with confidence. To *be* and then to *do*; to *do* out of our *be*. The psalmist wrote, "Hear my voice in accordance with your love" (Psalm 119:149 NIV). And I know that God does. He hears *my* voice in accordance with *his* love. And he hears *your* voice—your *beauty full* voice—in accordance with his love as well.

National Center for Voice and Speech, "Voice Qualities," http://www.ncvs.org/ ncvs/tutorials/voiceprod/tutorial/quality.html.

YOUR BEAUTY FULL VOICE

Next to my keyboard my Bible lies open. "Look at the birds in the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (Matthew 6:26). I note the possessive—your—placed before heavenly Father. He's my heavenly Father. He is not the father of birds. He created them, sure. But he's my dad. And he says I'm more valuable than the birds that he takes care of. Valuable. Worthy. I think of a plaque I saw in a bookstore: "Your value doesn't decrease based on someone's inability to see your worth." Even if it's my own inability to see my worth.

Voice is our spiritual and personal human *being* that expresses itself in our human *doing*. Our creator God formed our voices—our spiritual and personal beings—and he invites us to discover and embrace our voices and then use our voices in our doings.

Can you and I embrace our human being (who we are) in our human doing (what we do) through our *beauty full* voices?

Dear God, You are the One to whom I belong and whom I serve. Erase my tendencies to "fake it" and to function as someone I'm not. Instead, help me to know my true voice, the place where I "do" out of my "be."



YOUR BEAUTY FULL VESSEL

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

-John 1:14 NIV

Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord.

-Psalm 45:11 NIV

On my bathroom counter sits an array of vessels, each designed to contain a substance so that it can be accessed, used, and enjoyed to its optimum potential. Perfume spritzes from a glass atomizer. Toothpaste oozes from a tube as I spread it across a brush in a neat line. Kleenex tissues pop up one at a time from a slit, square box. A variety of containers that contain a variety of essences used for a variety of purposes.

A vessel is also that which holds—contains—God's image on this planet. We're talking "physical body" here. Ours. Yours and mine.

God created our vessels so that he could inhabit them with

us. All aspects of our being. Flesh. Curve. Brain. Muscle. God himself lives within our vessels when they're the size of figs in our mothers' wombs and when they've been stretched to sagging simply by living the life we've been given.

Such a thing leaves me still somehow "naked and ashamed." God, with me, in my vessel? I come unhinged at the thought. In my puny understanding, it's as if the supernatural and the natural just can't coexist. Cannot. At least not in *my* ugly natural.

But this really is what God did, and still does. Unashamedly. John wrote, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14 NIV). God put himself in a vessel. The Word—Jesus, God's very best expression of himself to us—became *flesh*. That's the term for a physical body made up of flesh, curve, brain, and muscle. And God made his dwelling among us, meaning he took up residence in our world in a vessel just like ours.

I turn the pages of the Bible back from John 1 to Psalm 45:11: "Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord." This Psalm is interpreted as a wedding hymn—perhaps used in the marriage of a man and woman—but because of the exalted language, the words are more often seen as messianic. As such, this verse depicts the marriage of the body of Christ, and individual believers within the church, to Jesus, Us!

Read these words again: "Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord."

That's how God, the king, sees us: *beauty full*. He is *enthralled* by our beauty, and we are to let him be enthralled for our lifetimes. From the beginning of our days as dependent children on

YOUR BEAUTY FULL VESSEL

through our robust youth and into our declining health, God invites us to wed our view of our bodies to his enthralled view.

God wants us to remember, even if we haven't ever stood with another human at an altar of commitment. Even if the vow was broken. Even if we have so flushed the hope of cherishing our bodies that to resurrect it is beyond our comprehension. Even if we've neglected to care for our bodies.

God invites each of us, as his bride, to make "vessel vows" to see our bodies the way he sees them. Flesh, curve, brain, muscle—each is beauty full because he sees each as a container perfectly designed to hold his essence. He wants us to embrace what he embraced when "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." How about it? Let's roll out our mats, open our doors, and welcome God home!

Dear God, In so many areas, I find it incomprehensible that you could love—much less inhabit—my vessel. Please help me see my vessel the way you see it: beauty full, a worthy container for your presence in this world, your choice of residence on this planet. I receive your vow to me and make my own to you. Amen.



YOUR BEAUTY FULL WOMB

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!

—Luke 1:45 NIV

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

-Luke 2:19 NIV

While at times painful to those of us who have not born babies, there is something undeniably *female* about fertility. As little girls, we cart around our dollies, play house, and serve imaginary tea—all while gluing our gazes on the Mommy Prize. Our wombs seem central to our offering as women.

Think back over some of the most historic wombs in the Bible. Eve (whose name means "full of life") conceived and bore the first babies ever made—Cain and then Abel. Sarah's wrinkly placenta sustained the line of Abraham. Tamar (who posed as a prostitute to trick her father-in-law to sleep with her), Hannah (whose infertile womb first defined her as lacking and

then finally, with her son Samuel, as adequate), Rahab (harlot spy and mother of Boaz), Ruth (foreigner), Bathsheba (adulteress with King David)—all kinds of wombs wind through the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1. John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for the Messiah, leaped within—and then from—an old woman's womb. And God incarnated himself in the virginal womb of a young teenage girl.

A woman's worth—honorable and dishonorable—has been expressed through her womb for millennia. While it's undeniable, it's also elusive and sometimes troubling.

As one who is female without being fertile, I know. I've never had a baby. I've never been pregnant. My children were born in my heart through adoption, and while I know that *totally* counts, my physical womb yawns barren.

But hey—I know *lots* of women who are childless, and they seem perfectly happy to me! One accompanies her husband around the globe and supports his platformed ministry. Another heads up a large business. Another quietly administrates her family's entrepreneurial efforts and gives gobs of money to amazing kingdom causes. We are no more women if we give birth and no less women if we don't. No more female if we adopt and become mothers and no less if we remain childless.

Women are womb-defined. And womb stuff is messy.

What if we expand our understanding of the concept of womb? What if we come to know that while the potential to birth is central to our vocation, calling, and contribution as women, this one expression does not—cannot—contain our complete offering? What if we see in the hollow within not just a space

for creating physical life but also a mysterious interior source of creating contributions of all kinds? What if we see a womb as a place of *purposed creation*, even vocation?

Yes, women are divinely designed to be mothers, and when we do mother, we spend about one-fourth of our lives in active mothering. But women who are mothers are more than mothers. And children are not the only offering women are capable of creating.

God designed women to be mothers—and more. God designed women to make babies—and to make more. The womb is a space of creation—of others and of ourselves.

Take Mary, the mother of Jesus. Surely it is her physical womb that expressed her vocation: to bear the Messiah. Yet her physical womb extended her calling beyond what was formed within her to a spiritual womb that conceived and gave birth to how she herself externally followed him as Lord. Her relative, Elizabeth, six months pregnant with John the Baptist, proclaimed, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (Luke 1:45). Elizabeth spoke of the miraculous conception of Jesus in Mary's womb, but surely her words also prophesied all that God would do through Mary's obedience in her lifetime to come. Beyond the physical birth of the Messiah, Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" over the years (Luke 2:19).

When we grasp that a woman's womb can create both physical *and* spiritual contributions in our world, suddenly *all* women are included! A woman's physical womb is a cocreational place where she is called to participate with God in the birthing of

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baby people. And a woman's soul womb is a cocreational space where she is called to participate in the rebirthing of people to become children of God.

For some women, our vocations will include birthing or adopting children. For some they won't. But for all of us, our womb expression will play out in our participation with God in his creative purposes in our world.

Dear God, Thank you for all you have called me to create. Help me to see every contribution you bring forth from me as a cocreational womb work. Sacred. Set apart. Unique. Amen.



YOUR BEAUTY FULL SCAR

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

-2 Corinthians 4:7 NIV

Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.

-John 20:27 NIV

When I was about four years old, I was in my backyard playing. A gorgeous butterfly flitted through the panda-faced pansies and landed. Right then and there I decided: I had to have that butterfly as my very own.

I raced from our backyard, through the garage, and into our kitchen, hollering for my mom. No matter—I decided I would catch it myself! I pulled open the bottom drawer and scoured the various containers for a suitable trap. There! A mason jar, with a lid that actually matched! Perfect! Grabbing its shiny offering in my pudgy hands, I raced back out the door, through the garage,

toward the backyard flower bed where I'd last seen my prey. At the last second, though, I missed the raised step from garage to backyard and tripped, sending myself sprawling on the concrete patio. Beneath me, the jar smashed to glass bits under my right wrist, and an ugly slash of flesh spurted blood. I was terrified.

Today I still stare at the scar, crawling diagonally like a hairy albino caterpillar across my wrist, and remember.

Scars are like that. They tell stories that help us remember. Stories of wounds. Stories of failures. Stories of imperfection. Stories of things we need to integrate into our present, of past pain that shapes us and makes us who we are.

Scars tell stories of pain—and redemption. Our brokenness provides a pedestal for the display of God's beauty. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." When we see our scars the way God sees them, we see beauty in our broken.

I have to think that scars and their stories are important to God. Really important. For when Jesus appeared to the disciples after his death, he brought his scars for show-and-tell. John reported Thomas wanting to see "the nail marks in his [Jesus'] hands" in John 20:25, and Jesus inviting Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side" (John 20:27). Jesus' scars were the real deal. The Greek word for hand really included both the wrist and the forearm.¹ Jesus had hung from the cross, fastened with metal spikes through

D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 656.

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his wrists and his feet. In order to demonstrate he was the same Jesus, he rose from the dead with the scars of his suffering still visible.

Scars proved Jesus to be the Savior. The scars of Jesus tell the story of our salvation.

There is beauty in our broken and painful stories. Seeing ourselves the way God sees us—through the cracks of our brokenness—changes everything. Suddenly I'm not the only one, and neither are you! And somehow there's more to enjoy, more to celebrate, more to discover, and more to *offer* because of the true beauty of our scars. Both visible and invisible.

Trace your finger along your beauty full scar and see how Jesus reveals himself, even there.

Dear God, It seems odd to thank you for my scars. And even more of a stretch to see these wounds as beauty full. But when I look at them through your eyes, I see that you inhabit even the brokenness in my life. Help me look for you in my painful story and learn to see the beauty that results when my scars are entrusted to you. Amen.



YOUR BEAUTY FULL SWAY

After this, while Jesus was traveling through some cities and small towns, he preached and told the Good News about God's kingdom. The twelve apostles were with him, and also some women who had been healed of sicknesses and evil spirits: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; Joanna, the wife of Cuza (the manager of Herod's house); Susanna; and many others. These women used their own money to help Jesus and his apostles.

-Luke 8:1-3 NCV

Sway. Influence. From the innermost concentric circles of our lives, as we care for pets, hold babies, manage homes, drive carpools, gather girlfriends, teach classes, volunteer for field days, run departments, and cast our votes, we women naturally and intrinsically influence. We sway.

The evangelical universe seems a bit squeamish about the

topics of women and influence twined together in the same sentence. Throats lump, palms sweat, and everyone checks their phones. Not gonna go there.

You might assume such hesitations come from men. Not always. In my experience women also bump on the concept of seeing themselves as people with sway.

In both the church and the parachurch, in both blue-collar and professional workplaces, Woman peers at the platform, down the halls, over cubicle walls, and around the shaping of the mission and work, and she sees very little in the way of female role models. She scours the perimeters for an entrance into circles of influence and finds doors shut, locked, and sometimes even double-bolted. Edging back from the lack of examples, Woman concludes what she has feared: she does not, after all, possess influence. No woman does. Surely, if she did, God would have opened a door and brought her through.

Look at what was happening with women early on in Jesus' ministry in Luke 8:1–3, after a woman anointed Jesus at the home of Simon, the Pharisee: "After this, while Jesus was traveling through some cities and small towns, he preached and told the Good News about God's kingdom. The twelve apostles were with him, and also some women who had been healed of sicknesses and evil spirits: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; Joanna, the wife of Cuza (the manager of Herod's house); Susanna; and many others. These women used their own money to help Jesus and his apostles."

While the twelve disciples were decidedly male, they were not the only disciples. Jesus modeled the necessity of both

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genders in the fulfillment of his purposes. Further, his inclusion of women in his teaching, in his traveling, in his support, and in his ministry was radical for his day. It's still radical today.

Wherever you are on the pathway to leadership—whether you suspect you might have gifts that aren't being used or you know you have influence but need a push to live it out—there's a doorway in front of you. Every one of us has influence that God intends for us to invest for his kingdom purposes. Yes, *every single one* of us.

God is opening doors for women everywhere—you and me, our mothers and our daughters, our neighbors and coworkers and fellow pew-sitters—to invest who we are and how he has gifted us as women in the world around us in order to accomplish his desires. He is calling us to recognize, utilize, maximize, and mobilize all he has placed in us to take his purposes further and farther. Whatever you call it—leadership, influence, <code>sway!</code>—it's time to move through the open doors to discover our own influence and then to prop them open for the next <code>beauty full</code> women coming behind us.

Dear God, I struggle with my sway. My gender, my adequacy, my season—these elements challenge me deeply. Help me see my influence the way you see it: as a quality of beauty that you have uniquely given to me to give to my world. Amen.



TO THE BRIM!

I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.

—John 10:10 NIV

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.

-John 10:10 NIV

So why do we settle for empty when Jesus came to give us life to the full?

We've been wounded. We've been left and abandoned. We've been overlooked and shunned. We get how disappointing relationships can empty us. And this is where Jesus comes offering a new way. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the *full*," Jesus told his disciples in John 10:10. Lasting fullness that drenches our emptiness comes when we discover a relationship that doesn't run out. Seems simple, doesn't it? Trust Jesus. Let him love you. See yourself as God sees you through Jesus: beauty *full*. Right?

But there's more. Look at the sentence that comes just before this promise—right there, in the very same verse: "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy*; I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. I never noticed! There it is again: *Hisssssss*. If we want life to the full, a life Jesus came to give, we surely need to let Jesus love us and fill us and change us—*and* we need to deal with the thief.

The hissssssy thief. The one I overlook every day in my everyday. How is the thief still emptying the life Jesus came to give me to the full?

I look back over my life, from my little girl voice, to my prepubescent vessel, to my ever-emerging womb, to my scar story, to my grown-woman sway, and I hear the *Hisssssss* that empties in each of these places. Like a helium balloon popped and whizzing air out across the room to collapse on the carpet. Like a cracked vase oozing water to the floor, leaving the flowers to wilt in dryness. Like a zero balance in a checking account well before the month's end.

The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy the very fullness that Jesus came to give.

And you? Where has a thief stolen your fullness? Where has a thief poked holes in your relationship with Jesus, leaking out all he longs to offer you? Where has a thief killed your hope, destroyed your day? We need to put in a security system against such a crook!

Here's the good news: we have the *best* security system possible. We have access to Jesus at every moment of every day

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and night. Jesus fills us with himself as we open our Bibles and read—and then he fills us again as he reminds us of what we've read, bringing a verse back to our minds later in the day or week. Journaling reminds us of how he has answered prayers when we tend to forget. Gathering with believers in the community of church and listening as others share about God's actions in their lives gives evidence of his work in our world.

How does God fill you? Deal with the thief. Respond to Jesus' offer. Why settle for empty when Jesus came to give life to the full, to the *beauty full*?

Dear God, I want to be full! I don't want to settle for anything less than what you have promised to provide for me. Help me hear—and then silence—the hissssss of the thief who comes to steal and destroy the fullness you offer. Help me open myself up to all you want to do in and through me. Help me see myself the way you see me through Jesus: beauty full. Fully! Amen.