

## Coming Home to *Myself*



by Rachel Allen

While wearing a bright yellow Kmart swimsuit, I tossed my head, laughed, and tried to be casual. On my eleven-year-old body, the suit was too small in the crotch and big everywhere else. And despite my efforts, my reflection exposed my uneven smile and the gap between my front teeth.

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In late elementary school, I became aware that most females aspired to a certain standard of beauty. I noticed that despite diverse shades, shapes, and ethnicities, the standard remained specific.

White. Thin. Blonde. Smiling. In the 1970s, Farrah Fawcett.

She rose to fame in the popular detective show Charlie's Angels that featured glamour girls, solving mysteries and crimes, led by the never seen, but adored, Charlie.

In most episodes, Farrah lured an unsuspecting male criminal into a trap set by the Angels. The Angel's skill set and camaraderie helped them to solve mysteries and crimes while miraculously wearing stilettos and bathing suits.

In 1976, the iconic poster of Farrah covered the walls of many heterosexual teen boys' bedrooms.

Farrah sat casually in a red bathing suit with her perfect hair, skin, teeth and perfect everything, her head tossed back, laughing.

Although white and thin, I looked nothing like this poster, but I attempted to.

I thought if I could look like Farrah, life would be easy and I would be happy, and popular.

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My bright yellow bathing suit reflecting brightly in my mirror, I moved my head around and thought if I caught myself at a better angle something resembling a Farrah-like beauty would appear. Disappointment slowly welled up into my eyes and I curled into a ball.

With renewed dismay, I observed my thick glasses and wavy hair, unruly in the opposite way of Farrah's. My hair that rebelled against the home haircuts of my mother, who, with no cosmetology training, cut my hair where it curled and hoped for the best. It didn't help that I also stress-cut my bangs.

My body now bled regularly, grew hair in new places that stuck out of my bathing suit, and

sprouted breasts in late elementary school. I didn't know how to exist in my own skin.

I saw other girls who seemed, with their own personal angst unknown, to be at ease in their bodies with the right kind of hair and clothes and who were always smiling like Farrah.

Johnstown, Pa. our small blue collar steel mill town in the late 1970s and early 1980s lacked the range of self-expression found in urban areas or college towns.

In my school, Farrah-like girls walked the halls in clumps, smiling, clearly enamored with one another. Or they walked with a football or basketball player's hand around their shoulders.

On my face, there was a distinct line of pimples under my chin during marching band season, mostly known as football season, due to the thick white strap of my fake fur band hat with decades of dirt and adolescent sweat. I viewed the Farrah girls with envy, especially during these school events. My pimples lasted beyond the marching band season.

For some unknown reason, as I had no reference or peer in my hometown that shared such tastes, I became drawn to counterculture and exotic clothing, like embroidered, peasant style shirts and anything paisley

My sisters and I spent summers in Rochester, New York with my Dad which exposed us to a broader sense of culture. This of course, goes without saying that Rochester is no Milan, London, New York, or Los Angeles.

But it also wasn't Johnstown.

There we visited museums and my favorite store, Pier 1 Imports.

My family also lacked our own ethnic or cultural identity around food, music and culture so Pier 1 to me, existed as a place where I could buy the external appearances of culture I didn't have of my own. As a teen of the 80s, I had yet to understand this as appropriation.

All year, I saved money to buy school clothes at Pier 1 during the summers with my dad.

The summer before my last year of middle school, I entered into the magical realm of Pier 1.

Here, I discovered a purple paisley dress, an embroidered blouse, wrap around silk and linen skirts, and a pair of linen pants.

Typically, I wore hand me downs or worse yet, hand sewn red, white and blue matching outfits with my sisters. Linen and paisley seemed like a gateway to a better life.

The first day of school, I woke up and my eyes immediately spotted my colorful outfit, laid out the night before--this outfit that would invite new friendships, easy smiles and effortless conversation without sweating.

I entered the halls of my school in my new Pier 1 clothes feeling unique and open to the possibility of popularity and actually liking myself.

From my new locker in the main hall, I observed the Farrah girls approaching. I situated my body so as to appear casual as they passed by.

But, the Farrah girls never gave me a nod or acknowledgement, though some of them giggled as they walked by.

A couple of band kids that listened to Genesis when Peter Gabriel fronted the band saw me and nodded at me with interest but didn't stop to talk or even say hello.

Despair washed over me.

I really believed that Farrah-hair and smiles could not measure up to my exotic clothes.

Yet, I failed to recognize that I still had bottle cap glasses and my mother as a hairstylist. I also lacked ease in my socializing.

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As a young woman, I looked to what was in front of me, the dominant cultural standard of beauty. Everywhere I looked, I saw standards of beauty that didn't include awkwardness, kitchen table haircuts, red, white and blue matching outfits with siblings and thick glasses.

For years, I thought there was something lacking in me that I wasn't the right kind of girl.

I believed the problem was me.

Maybe it was grace that compelled me to move beyond superficial outer wrappings in myself and others. I found myself drawn to people who relished absurdity, yet could turn a conversation on a dime to serious shit without claiming to know it all.

Ideas around beauty for me gradually became the measure of one's character.

I worked once with a woman who had all the boxes checked: blond, thin, tall and big blue eyes.

She also never smiled, was decidedly unfriendly, and seemed to be annoyed by everyone. This person, beautiful on the outside, likely had her own inner struggles and challenges that impacted her ability to soften and open.

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Most days now, I log onto Zoom to teach yoga class, one of six I classes I teach virtually each week.

My high definition camera allows participants to see my features and form clearly.

This also allows me to observe myself. My almost 55 years old body reflects strength in places, softness in others--curvy and muscular.

I carry this with confidence, grace and an embrace of the awkwardness that is part of who I am.

Participants enter the Zoom room and I greet them. I am happy to welcome people here in this space.

Smiles light up my face when I welcome folks.

It is interesting to notice and observe oneself here.

Instruction begins and I guide participants to feel the solid points of contact our bodies have with the floor or chair.

Notice the parts of your body that have contact with the floor, chair or any props or supports you may be using. Allow yourself to settle here and be supported. Invite yourself to lengthen your spine from this place of support, bringing your shoulders up and back and lengthening the crown of the head up to the sky.

Instructions for breath-work arise from the space of settling and grounding.

Invite yourself to notice the breath, the rise and fall of your own breath in your body, your indicator of being alive. Invite the breath to deepen slowly on the inhale and release gradually on the exhale.

We begin moving.

Some participants turn off their cameras. I see others in small squares matching their movement and breath, all moving at their own pace and flow, paying attention to their own bodies.

I smile.

At home in my own body, I invite my students to find a home in theirs.

As we finish the practice, we gather in our Zoom squares to share our experiences of the practice.

There is levity, there is deep sharing, there is community where everyone belongs.

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Finding myself now, more concerned with comfort and ease, I go without makeup, except for Burt's Bee Tinted Balm. The lines around my eyes and my mouth speak of heartfelt laughter as well as deep sadness--a life fully and well lived.

My body is my refuge, complete with C- section scars, my sense of feeling sensual and beautiful not bestowed on me from culture but from my own lived experience.

In that iconic poster of Farrah, I saw her public ease when I was an eleven-year-old yearning for my own ease. What I didn't see was the childhood scar that she purposefully hid with that red one-piece.

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I bring a picture of my young self into my mind's eye and see the futility of my young self striving to look like Farrah. I meet this striving with compassion and understanding.

Smiling from my heart, I embrace all the awkwardness wholeheartedly and see beauty and humanity here.

All of these experiences are accepted and integrated into the whole of me.

The girl in the too small yellow bathing suit with giant glasses, uneven teeth and uncooperative hair. The girl in the band hat with pimples on her chin. The girl experimenting with style and clothing.

The woman who carried, nurtured, nourished and raised two humans. The woman who no longer bleeds. The woman with gray hair, curves, softness and strength. The woman at peace.

Me.

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