

February 15, 1987 (vol. 2, no. 14)

Dear Colleague:

My sister sends me a calendar from Taiwan every year. Each year has a theme: flowers, wild life, gardens, geology have appeared in the past. The colored photographs are nothing special, but pleasant enough to look at. When I listen to music I may flip through the pages of a calendar as background art. This year the theme of the calendar is children. Good enough. But I no longer find the pictures relaxing. Why? Because of the passion (Buddhists will know what I mean) behind the faces and also because some of the children are plain, and a few are even ugly. Ugliness is what I would like to talk about in this letter. Begin with the rare disease progeria. One out of eight million children in this country is afflicted by it. The sufferer ages so rapidly that by the time the child is six he looks sixty--an aged dwarf of dry wrinkled skin, hairless and toothless. The child can easily look three times older than his mother. What is it like to be such a child? Is parental love, which after all has a basis in the cuddly shape of the young, up to the challenge? If not, who can blame her?

Ugliness is at the surface; underneath is beauty. This is a common theme in Western thought. Think of Socrates, a thorn on the side of the Athenians because, they argued, how could anyone so ugly be wise? Think of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein--that kindly monster who could only inspire fear. Think of the frog who is really a handsome prince. Think of Christ. In Western art, following the Greek and Leonardo tradition, he is usually presented as a handsome man. Still, no matter how handsome, his outward appearance is as rags compared to who he really is. Is this a popular theme in non-Western civilizations too? What about nonliterate cultures?

We are much less tolerant of physical deformity and ugliness today than we were in the past. "In Renaissance Italy, the Lords of Ferrara and the Popes of Rome kept their houses full of absurd and sometimes very repulsive specimens of humanity" (Enid Welsford, The Fool, p. 28). Can you even imagine the Kennedys and the Rockefellers doing that? No, they want to be surrounded by the brightest and the best. They are Beautiful People with little use for the plain, much less the ugly. But middle-class Americans are no different. At the International Pancake House, we who comb our hair keep our distance from the few stragglers from the world of the unwashed.

What about ET? I am mystified by that phenomenon. ET's popularity is reason for hope. By no stretch of the imagination do I see him as a clean-cut blue-eyed American, yet he is welcome in the best families.

Best wishes,

*Y-Z*