

"A League of My Own"

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Hello.

I have a little secret. I'm not pretty. No, no, it's true. Oh, don't feel bad. I've known I was not pretty for a long time now.

It was the first day of seventh grade. There I was, head drooped, shoulders slouched, hair hanging over my face, when suddenly out of nowhere, someone screams, "Hey Marla, I could stick your face in some dough and make gorilla cookies."

I froze. Who was Marla and why was everyone looking at me? Intrigued, I conducted a little research and discovered that Marla Hooch is a character from the baseball movie, *A League of Their Own*. Marla is short, chubby, mousy looking, tomboyish, raised-by-her-father, hair-in-her-face, no self-confidence, constantly-passed-over because she is not pretty.

I have been likened to Marla Hooch? Believe it or not, there is a very social problem that comes from this asocial degradation. I like to call it, "The Ugly Duckling Syndrome" or UDS. You like that? UDS is simply defined as being blind-sided by appearance, rather than acknowledging abilities, qualities or talents.

That you understand why we have let vanity distort success, we will start by "hitting" the "foul" problem that causes misrepresentation of achievement, then "lineup" the causes that create this "error" of success, and finally "pitch" a solution to measure our successes by new standards.

A baseball scout watches Marla in an impressive batting practice. Afterwards, she's called over to meet him, but when she peers out from behind her hair, the scout immediately jumps back, makes a face and says, "I can't use her. You know General Omar Bradley? Too strong of a resemblance."

This attitude is the very problem with achievement. Success is measured by appearance and society rewards beauty. Role models on TV are sexy. The cast of *Friends*, newscasters, and – thanks to Cher's pioneering efforts – most stars go under the knife or the Botox to remain young and hip in the world's limelight. Cher – if that woman has one more facelift she won't be able to blink.

So, let's look at Hollywood. How many fat, ugly stars are there? Okay, Danny DeVito and Drew Carey don't count because they're funny. But, arguably, who has

been more successful, John Goodman or Ben Affleck? Denzel Washington or Mike O'Malley? Who's Mike O'Malley? Exactly!

Truth be told, I will never be a super model, movie star or even a broadcast journalist because I suffer from UDS.

Now, Marla does manage to make the team, however, she's forced to attend charm and beauty school. Her instructor urges her to play a lot of night games. Causes of this demeaning declaration lie in stereotyping and stories. As with Marla's instructor, proficient professionals are incapable of linking the two qualities of athletic talent and attractiveness in this Ugly Duckling Syndrome.

Berscheid, Walster and Dion – not Warwick – discuss the “halo” effect – not Jesus – which means when one is attractive, people assume he has other good qualities. There research indicates that attractive people are found to be more sensitive, kind, sociable, interesting, outgoing, strong, poised and intelligent than unattractive people; therefore, they are trusted more and gain higher positions in society. The implication being, I'm not only fat and poor, I'm also a criminal. Kick it!

UDS gains a new twist when we assimilate adolescence with this beautification blunder. Doctor Alvin Poussant, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, explains that children are taught to differentiate between attractive and unattractive people at an early age through storybooks and fairy tales. Pretty princesses are rescued by Prince Charmings who have slain the evil, ugly, wicked witch – that's me. These stories become indoctrinated in young, easily influenced minds.

Do you honestly think Prince Charming would have wrestled his way through one-hundred-foot thicket of briar and scaled a two-hundred story tower to save – Roseanne? She'd probably be sleeping for another hundred years, or two, or ten.

Okay, society's hangup with outside perception leads to self-esteem issues, too. In sixth century Greece, the disfigured were blamed for various evils, such as famines and plagues, and were publicly beaten and burned to death. (I really dodged a bullet there, didn't I? Phew!) But this public degradation did not waste away with the falls of the Greco-Roman empires. Are we really surprised when websites like DropDeadUgly.com, a dating service, prompts one to rate the repulsiveness of some people (“Yes, umm, that's disgusting.”), or where books like *How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less* top bestseller lists?

Throughout the course of the movie, Marla's inner qualities are gradually revealed. She is a team player, an exceptionally strong athlete, a loving friend and wife, and an intelligent woman. Although she lacks beauty, she possesses an inner attractiveness and her diligence and persistence lead to a successful life. Marla's

story concretely plants us in efforts of solution, so let's change this duckling to a swan.

Doctor Jay Strack said in the September 9, 1996 issue of *Desktop Devotions*, "Time changes things. Styles change, as do expectations, salaries, communications systems, but some things have no business changing. Character qualities are never up for grabs. Times must change, but character never."

One day in elementary school, I was patiently waiting outside for the bus. There I was – chapped lips, chubby cheeks, bad posture, wind-blown hair – and my bus pulls up, and a kid seated in the way back pulls down his window and yells, "You are the ugliest girl I have ever seen!" While it's true that throughout the course of my oratory I have made myself the butt of many jokes, I have learned to laugh at myself or at least society's perception of me, but no matter how hard I try I just can't find that one funny. You see, I went to school that morning with a new dress, new coat, new shoes – feeling pretty. What I discovered was I was pretty – ugly.

In our world, we have allowed physical attractiveness to make success a one-size-fits-all definition, forcing square pegs into round holes and completely eliminating the aspect of character. That boy on the bus didn't know me, but because he was repulsed by my physical appearance, he never took the time to know me for who I really am. But, I'm asking you to strike out these stereotypes. Let's redefine the definition pulling us off the road to revulsion, detouring us to a place where the Ugly Duckling Syndrome is only a fairy tale.

Leadership expert John Maxwell says that over a lifetime one person can influence ten thousand people. So, if three people here today change their definitions of success to include who someone is on the inside, that's thirty thousand people right there.

For the past few minutes, Marla and I have "singled" out some problems, "batted" around some causes and, finally, "scored" a solution to change the world from an ugly duckling to a beautiful swan.

Marla's not one of my nicknames any more. You know, I miss that. She taught me that success is what I make of it, who cares if I'm not Britney Spears. Ugly people can make it far. We just shouldn't wear, short, pleated, Catholic schoolgirl uniforms.

So, to all the cross-eyed, uni-browed, slack-jawed, double-chinned, hairy-backed, intelligent, caring, terrific people out there, I say U-P-U – ugly people unite!

And while I might not make it to the cover of *Vogue*, if you give me the chance, I know I can make it to the cover of your heart because I'm in a league of my own.