

## **THE SKIN YOU'RE IN**

**Steve Matthews**

**“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for February 24–28, 2014.**

### **MAKING THE CONNECTION**

“I am just back from spending forty-eight hours with 100 people on a retreat in the beautiful countryside of rural Maryland. I have been on lots of retreats, but this one was profoundly different from the others. This retreat was held in complete silence.

“Aside from the leaders’ twice-a-day instructions and devotional thoughts, no talking was allowed (including other kinds of wordy communication like journaling, note-writing, texting, or emailing).

“As an introvert, I found keeping my mouth shut fairly easy. Disconnecting from technology was more of a challenge. The hardest part was trying to quiet all of the noise in my head. My mouth may have been shut and my fingers may have been free of all the keyboards, but the talk going on in my head was nearly non-stop. There is a big difference between silence and stillness in my brain.

“The most disconcerting part was how negative my thoughts were. Most of the negativity was directed at myself. I realized how much I judged myself and how hard I could be on myself. In so many ways, I found myself rejecting or attacking my God-given belovedness.

“What does the experience say about my self-image? While I do care about how I look in the mirror and I do want to pay attention to my overall physical fitness, I may never measure up to my expectations as long as the negative messages in my head go unrecognized and unchecked.

“The psalmist reminds us that the skin we’re in is ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Psalm 139:14, NRSV). How do we come to embrace and bless the wondrous bodies we’ve been given so that we are motivated to care for them? How do we keep from falling into a loop of negativity? How do we let go of our need to measure up to expectations—both our own and our culture’s—so that we can learn to honor our abilities and our inabilities, our beauty and our quirkiness, in ways that free us to live as God’s beloved?” —Steve

## MEET THE WRITER

**Steve Matthews** was a youth minister for more than fifteen years. At present, he is living in central Virginia, on a small farm with a cat, a dog, and sixteen chickens. He loves growing his own food as well as cooking and eating it. Steve is a leadership consultant and is presently working with “missio:Engage,” an online school for church redevelopment sponsored by the Episcopal Church. He is also a spiritual director and was a writer for *The Way of Pilgrimage: An Adventure in Spiritual Formation for the Next Generation*. Learn more about Steve at <http://about.me/steve.e.matthews>.

## STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- a computer for showing videos in “Plugged In”
- a handful of magazines showing men and women involved in fashion and/or fitness
- Bibles or copies of 1 Corinthians 6:19–20
- a copy of the poem “Phizzog,” by Carl Sandburg, for each participant (<http://moxyjane.wordpress.com/2007/11/19/phizzog-by-carl-sandburg/>)
- copies of the closing prayer
- (optional) pens and paper

## PLUGGED IN

- + Many media resources relate to the issue of self-image and self-esteem. Dove has made several commercials highlighting a more healthy approach to beauty. “Dove Real Beauty Sketches” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpaOjMXyJGk>) notes our tendency to see ourselves more negatively than other people see us.
- + “Teen Truth: Body Image” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpFBKeuKf7M>) shows how body image in popular culture affects both men and women.

## CHECKING IN

Begin your time together with an opening ritual: a moment of silence, a short prayer that the group says together, or a candle lit to symbolize Christ’s presence. Invite the group to take a moment to claim this space and time as holy.

Invite group members to think about the skin they are in, saying: “*Take a minute to think about what you consider your best feature. This may be as obvious as your face, hair, or eye color. It might also be something hidden, such as your feet.*” Allow time for reflection.

After a minute or two, say: “*Now think about part of your body that is less pleasing to you. You will not be asked to share these features, but I would invite you to consider why conversations about our bodies are so difficult.*” Again, allow time for reflection.

Next, invite people to reflect on the questions below and to share their responses as they are willing. Encourage group members to listen to each other prayerfully and without comment.

**Why are body styles, shapes, and features so often the subject of jokes?**

**Who decides what we should look like?**

**What might be a healthy Christian approach to the way we think about our bodies?**

## **EXPLORING THE WORD**

**Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:19–20**

Consider showing one or both of the video clips mentioned in “Plugged In.” Invite the group’s response. You might also ask group members to look through the magazines you have provided.

Then invite discussion:

**What is the priority for the manufacturers that hire the ad agencies to produce advertisements?**

**Are they concerned about the models’ well being?**

**Are they concerned about what the images in advertisements might do to the self-esteem of youth?**

Say: *“We easily get wrapped up in the culture’s understanding and expectations about what is pretty, sexy, hot, or handsome. Before long, we have no sense of our bodies’ being adequate or enough.”* Then ask:

**Whom do we allow to decide our value? our beauty?**

Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 6:19–20. Ask another person to read the scripture again. Then invite the whole group to read aloud the passage. Invite each person to reflect on one word or image that stands out for him or her. Then encourage people to tell the group why these words or images are meaningful with regard to their body image.

In 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, Paul reminds the Corinthians that God lives in and through them, that their bodies are living temples where God resides. In Paul’s time, the temple was not only a holy place because it represented the presence of God on earth. It was also the place where people came to remember the stories of who they were as children of God.

**Who are we at our core?**

**What are the stories that remind you that you are God’s beloved?**

**How could the stories of God’s love change how we spend time, energy, and money on our bodies?**

**Rather than pursuing glamour or perfect fitness, how are we called to honor and revere the skin we’re in?**

**What does it mean to “glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20)?**

To provide a bit of levity, distribute copies of “Phizzog,” by Carl Sandburg. You might invite several young people to read it aloud. Then ask:

**What will you do with this face, this body, to honor God?**

## SHARING IN PRAYER

Invite group members to pray in unison this closing prayer:

**“Loving God, we have heard that we are made in your image. We have heard that we are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made.’ We have heard that our bodies are your temple. Help us to believe the truth of what we have heard. Help us to grant our bodies and spirits the grace of resting in this truth even when our faith in ourselves falters. Help us to practice believing that the skin we’re in and all that it encompasses is good. You have made us beautiful and complete just as we are.**

**“Help us, Lord, to reflect a sense of beauty, completeness, and possibility to everyone we meet so that they too may come to believe that they are beloved. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.”**

## TAKING IT FURTHER

Neuroscience increasingly shows that negative attitudes about ourselves can change our brain chemistry. The Hebbian Theory ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebbian\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebbian_theory)) suggests that neurons that fire together wire together. When we develop patterns of negativity about ourselves, it becomes easier and more likely that we will continue to feel bad about ourselves. We enter a downward spiral. But with God’s help, we can rewire ourselves to see that we are God’s beloved. In order to counter our own and our culture’s negativity, we need help from our Christian sisters and brothers.

Consider inviting your group to write a covenant that reflects the members’ intention to be positive with one another. They might want to call the document “A Harsh-Free Body Image Zone” or “Safe Boundaries for Boundless Belovedness.”

Invite group members to think about what it would mean to have a group of friends who not only provided them with a place where they are not judged but also intentionally honored them for who they are.