Isabel Freedman

April 17th, 2014

Rough Draft

 Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis is the process of transformation from an immature form to an adult form, in two or more distinct stages. Humans are all part of nature. We start as a seed, we grow, we age and we die. Humans are just like the trees. All living things go through a transformation, because we are all living organisms, we thrive and we fall. What makes this process so beautiful is the fact that it is natural; we are not meant to tamper with it or control it. In our society, we are constantly interfering with this process, to our detriment. Human beings seem to have a built-in, constant desire to have more – more possessions, a better body, a nicer home. We constantly try to change ourselves, and the environment that we live in, into something artificial. We are meant to follow a natural cycle, but we twist it unnecessarily. Some of the things that we do to ourselves and to our nature are terrifying.We may not realize now, but if they continue to happen, they may threaten our coexistence with nature and our unique individuality. In William Shakespeare’s tragedy King Lear, at one point the old king tells his daughter that they will together “laugh at gilded butterflies.” (Shakespeare, 2001) It is humorous (though also sad) that people try to “beautify” what is already beautiful.  In doing that they destroy the essence of what made the thing beautiful by interfering with what it was meant to be.  To “gild” something, by definition is to cover thinly with gold. In the literal case of a gilded butterfly, putting gold upon its wings would weigh it down and prevent it from doing what it was intended to do - fly.  We are a comical species because we are fighting our innate beauty, as well as our natural ability to live in harmony, sustainably, on the planet.  Of course, metamorphosis, or change, is inevitable, and humans could not exist without it. However, there is good change, and there is bad change. As people go through personal growth, they should reveal to themselves their unique identities, rather than to change (gild the butterfly) based on what they think they are expected to look like or how they are expected to behave to conform to societal norms. Similarly, as people interact with and change nature, we should figure out how to do that harmoniously and sustainably, in a way that does not destroy it. Ultimately, as we transform as people in a world that is rapidly changing around us, the consequences of “gilding the butterfly” pose a threat to the natural qualities of ourselves and to our planet. Metamorphosis is the good, natural change all humans, and living creatures go through; gilding the butterfly represents an artificial process, an unnatural process of taking what is good and destroying it in the process of trying to make it better.

Human beings go through metamorphosis in a very similar way to that of a butterfly. We go through stages of development such as youth, adolescence and adulthood. However, through the process of metamorphosis, butterflies develop wings. As humans, our identities are our wings. Every wing of a butterfly is different, just like our unique selves. Today’s societal norms, which are reinforced by the always-present media, threaten our innate ability to discover our own identities. If we do not allow ourselves to embrace our natural beauty, and instead change it into something artificial, we lose our uniqueness. King Lear’s remark about butterflies relates to how we change our image and personality to conform to what society expects. Why are we constantly dissatisfied with our looks and care so deeply about what people think of us that we are willing to morph ourselves into something we are not? This dissatisfaction and desire to change, can occur on the outside, with physical appearance, and on the inside, as people change their behaviors, morals and values. People throughout the world, from many different cultures, wish to change something about their appearance and the image of themselves that they present to the world.Many people mask over who they are, or gild who they are on the inside, because of what society is telling them.Part of growing up is trying out different identities until we feel confident enough with ourselves to know who we really are. Hopefully, at some point we discover our morals, beliefs and priorities. Hopefully we will discover our favorite place in the world, our sense of style, or our taste of music. Hopefully we will learn that we are each unique and special, and that we should love ourselves for who we are. Of course it is hard to be fully satisfied with yourself, but if you know who you are, you have fully gone through metamorphosis. You have reached your own set of unique wings. Sadly, some people never reach this point. Some of us gild our wings with an artificial gold that we think is more beautiful than ourselves. The change that benefits us is the change that allows self-expression, uniqueness and individuality. The gilded change occurs when we lose our innate sense of individuality in order to feel temporarily satisfied. How have we constructed and defined beauty? Why do we change our innate natural selves in order to be societies definition of beauty?

 The desire to physically change one’s appearance is controversial. In every society throughout human history, there has always been a standard of physical beauty that people have tried to attain. This standard has changed over time, and has varied based on the culture and part of the world. According to an article in “Art Education”, the image of beauty has been embedded in our minds from a very young age. (Blair, 2005) The article uses Ariel from The Little Mermaid as an example. Ariel is the hero in the Little Mermaid, and in contrast, Ursula is the evil, ugly villain. Ariel’s appearance is closely related to that of a Barbie doll, with delicate skinny features, big blue eyes and long hair. Similar to many other Disney movies, the “Disney princess” ends up happily ever after with her prince. As young children grow up watching Disney movies, and playing with Barbie dolls, an image of “beauty” and desire is embedded in their minds.

The image of a Barbie doll has created a worldwide phenomenon, and controversy. The bleach blonde, ultra thin, white skinned doll has become the “ideal” version of what society believes to be beautiful. For people who are not blonde, white or super thin, this type of image may lead them to believe they are “less worthy” or “less beautiful” than others. (Blair, 2005) This embedded image is dangerous, because it gilds over natural beauty, and replaces it with an image that is impossible to obtain.

Today, the media has a huge impact on how we view physical beauty, and horrific consequences sometimes result from media-imposed ideas of how we should look. One of the most drastic physical changes that people undertake is plastic surgery. We are constantly notified of rich and famous celebrities who have been so unhappy with their looks that they are willing to physically change themselves. Plastic surgery is a prime example of “gilding the butterfly,” because artificial features are literally substituted for a body’s natural features. The technology is available today to form ourselves into replicas of Barbie dolls. Another, perhaps less drastic example of a person who is addicted to plastic surgery is The Hills star, Heidi Montag, who has gone through several surgeries to alter her natural looks.

Not only is plastic surgery extremely apparent in Hollywood, but within certain racial groups as well. According to Eugenia Kaw, author of the article “Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery,” Asian American women “mutilate their bodies to conform to an ethnocentric norm.” (Kaw, 1993) A popular surgery for Asian American women is the “double-eyelid” surgery which creates a more “wide eyed” look. (Kaw, 1993) It is sad that even different racial groups wish to conform to the typical “American” ideal of beauty.

There are types of physical beauty that we look up too merely because of the media’s distortion of reality. The media’s standards have created an image of a “perfect” person that has caused many young people in our generation to become unhappy with their own image. Magazines, modeling agencies and commercial ads have put their ideas of physical beauty on a pedestal for others in society to look up to. However, the models of those images are not as perfect as they look. Technology such as Photoshop, and other editing devices are able to tweak and perfect an image, to a point where the person looks completely different. The mask that the media puts over these model’s faces is the mask that we are told to look like. For example, a Dove commercial in September of 2006 was exposed to show how much goes on behind the scenes of a photo shoot, and how much people are able to perfect the image with technology. (Dove) Another ad that Dove came out with, called “Real Beauty” quickly became a sensation. This three minute video has been viewed over 7.5 million times, and has caught the eye of many people around the world. (Vega, 2013) During this video, a forensic artist sketches a woman based on what she describes herself as, and then as someone else describes her as. The two sketches compared to one another are very different, and shows how women do not perceive themselves as beautiful. According to a Dove, the campaign resulted from “company research that showed only 4 percent of women consider themselves beautiful.” (Vega, 2013) This type of advertising is a nice comparison to the Victoria’s Secret ad’s that promote a type of beauty that is much more unrealistic.

The consequences of this fakery in the media are incredibly harsh, especially for people in their young teens. If girls or boys are brainwashed by these images of perfect people, they are less likely to be satisfied with their own physical qualities.

Unfortunately, the consequences to gilding over our physical appearances can sometimes be dangerous and deadly. According to Elayne Saltzberg, a clinical psychologist at Yale University, “ The value of beauty depends in part on the high costs of achieving it. Such costs may be physical, temporal, economic, or psychological.”(Saltzberg, 1995)Saltzberg has studied the psychological and physical impacts of what the word “beauty” has done to women in different periods of time and in different parts of the world. Some of the physical consequences of beauty-related issues can result in eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating. (Saltzberg, 1995) Unfortunately, in a recent study, there were at least one million Americans with anorexia nervosa, and 95 percent of them were women, and “between sixty thousand and 150,000 of them will die as a result of their obsession.” (Schwartz, 1986). Psychological effects of attaining “beauty” and a perfect image can be dangerous as well. Unhappiness with looks can result in depression, confusion, insecurity and misery. (Saltzberg, 1995) This is dangerous to society, because people get into a cycle of shame towards themselves, when they should be appreciating their natural beauty.

If people truly believe that they need to physically change themselves in order to be happy, we are doing something wrong. In metamorphosis, we develop into our full set of wings. If we mask over them, we will not be able to fly. If we are deeply unsatisfied with what we do have, we threaten our innate and natural beauty that we give to the world.

A short story called “The Birthmark,” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is a perfect analogy to depict how our desire for physical perfection can destroy our natural qualities. The story begins as Aylmer, a brilliant scientist and philosopher, marries his beautiful wife, Georgiana. His wife is absolutely stunning, inside and out. However, there is one thing about her that Alymer just cannot stand. Georgiana has a birth mark on the side of her cheek. She has been told all through her life that this mark makes her charming and unique. However, Alymer hates it. He despises it so much that he wants her to remove it. Out of her love and desire to make Alymer happy, she drinks a potion to make her mark disappear. Magically, every day Georgiana drinks the potion, her mark starts to fade, little by little. However, as her mark fades, Georgiana becomes more and more sick. The more the mark fades, the sicker she becomes. The moment that the mark entirely vanishes from her face, Georgiana dies. (Hawthorne, 2006)

This tragic story may be analogized to the dangers of our own desire for perfection and physical change. In many ways, Alymer represents society, and the expectations of perfection and beauty. Georgiana’s birth mark was part of who she was. It made her beautiful. The moral of the story is that deadly consequences can come from changing our physical nature. Our imperfections are what make us beautiful, without them, we lose our unique self.

 Of course, metamorphosis *requires* physical change. Every day of our lives we grow and we change, naturally. Although many physical changes to ourselves can be dangerous and sometimes deadly, there are some exceptions. Many people use their appearance as a form of self-expression and helps them form their identities. For example, fashion is part of our physical appearance. Fashion trends such as shoes, hairstyles and even nail color are all constantly changing. All of these things are self-expression, and we use these things to help express who we are.

 Other physical changes such as tattoos, hair dye or nail art are all commonly seen in our society. There is a fine line between what types of physical changes are good, and the physical changes that are bad. Therefore this can be a very controversial topic, and many people will have different opinions on what they consider to be good and bad change. Some people believe that they should be able to do whatever they want to their body, no matter what the cost, because in the end they will be happier. However, this may pose a threat to addition, and constant dissatisfaction.

 Throughout the process of metamorphosis, the butterfly goes through distinct physical transitions. We are able to see these changes, and we cannot hide them. However, the changes that go on within ourselves, the changes that we cannot always see, are equally, if not more important. These are personality changes – the development of our understanding of who we are and how we want to interact with the world. Just as there are both good and bad ways to change physically, there are also good and bad ways to mature personally and socially. In order to stay true to ourselves, we must have a good sense of who we are. If we let others control us, or unduly influence our decisions, we risk losing ourselves along the way. The gilded change that goes on within us, happens more often than we think. The consequences to gilding over our individuality and inner beauty, can result in unhappiness, loneliness and confusion in life.

 Unfortunately, a common place to see the wrong way to go about this process of development is in Hollywood. One of Hollywood’s most famous icons is Marilyn Monroe. The world sees Monroe as a sex symbol, a blonde bombshell actress and idol to look up to. However, these are all qualities that Hollywood created for her. In fact, Monroe’s real name was Norma Jean Mortenson**.** She was a troubled young woman who got swept up into the Hollywood lifestyle and became trapped. Elton John summarized her unfortunate situation in his famous song “Candle in the Wind,” which includes these lines: “Hollywood created a superstar and they made you change your name.” (John, 1973) When people allow others to change them, they lose their sense of identity and may be destroyed.

This phenomenon is not restricted to Hollywood; young people all over the world struggle every day with this type of pressure to change themselves.

We are all born with unique qualities that make us who we are. However, if we mask over our true identities in order to follow social norms, or out of fear of what society may think of us, we will miss out on opportunities and experience. Furthermore, we may miss opportunities to find people who are similar to us. Shel Silverstein’s poem “Masks” is a perfect example:

She had blue skin,

And so did he.

He kept it hid

And so did she.

They searched for blue

Their whole life through,

Then passed right by-

And never knew. (Shel Silverstein)

This poem is a very simple way of saying that if people pretend to be someone whom they are not, or if they mask their true selves their whole lives, they may miss the people with whom they are meant to be. This is closely related to the gilded butterfly, for people often wear a gilded mask, out of fear that they cannot reveal their real selves.

There are, of course, people who have not allowed societal expectations to control them. Many people speak out and show their individuality and uniqueness.

Growing up – our human metamorphosis - is about finding out who we are, and trying on different identities. This is the reason why we look back on our lives, at the people we used to be, as if they were separate and distinct individuals from the people we are today. However, the questions is, how much do we allow ourselves to change without losing who we are? For what circumstances or reasons should we change? There is a difference between finding our true selves and being something that others want us to be. There is a difference between being acting and being. Our identities will change, and that is okay, as long as we know who we are at the end of the day. Ralph Emerson once said, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Just as it is wise to try not to “gild the butterfly” when we think about our own personal development, we should also be mindful of that phrase when we think about our interactions with nature, our habitat. Nature’s processes require being left alone as much as possible, so that metamorphosis can take place without interference. Ecosystems change from bare rock to huge old growth forests.  That is an awe-inspiring process.  But we do not treat nature with the respect it deserves, and we often forget about it entirely. We live in a bubble made up of our everyday lives, which absorbs our attention and confines us. We rarely think about our coexistence with the ecosystems that are vitally important to our well-being and ultimate survival. Often, when we are involved with nature, it is to change it. We bulldoze forests and meadows, and abuse nature to replace it with artificial surroundings. Why do we want to take a beautiful piece of land, that is home to complex ecosystems, and place a golf course on top of it? We are always searching for the new and exciting things in life, and often do not take the time to stop and look around. We do not think about the repercussions to our environment from our actions.

Metamorphosis in nature is the growth, death and rebirth of organisms that live and interact together in ecosystems. If we continue to interfere with these natural processes, we threaten the extinction of huge numbers of plant and animal species, as well as ourselves - butterflies themselves are going extinct because of our doing. Just like with our perceptions of our individual selves, if we constantly change what is natural in the environment, we lose the purity and natural beauty that is so important in our world.

Of course, people have to interact with nature and there is no way to avoid human interference with natural metamorphosis.  Instead of changing nature all together, we should respect nature and work with it, to avoid, to the extent possible, gilding the butterfly that is nature.

We have to change nature to build our homes, businesses, etc. but we should respect the natural ecosystems and natural processes as much as possible – we should build green buildings that fit naturally into the landscape, green infrastructure that mimics nature and uses renewable energy, gardens that use native plants, smart growth that builds densely in cities and leaves surrounding land for conservation.

There are so many ways that we gild over nature’s beauty, and the damages are dangerous. We have managed to change the face of the earth, and the changes that we have made are not necessarily good. Often times, we do not appreciate nature, and we do not realize the natural beauty that it brings to our world. No wonder the most breath taking and world famous places in the world are the places that we have preserved, the places that are unharmed by mankind. There is a reason why we appreciate this natural beauty, it has not been gilded and tampered with. The most beautiful things are.

Humans, have a tendency to always want more. The more that we have changed the nature around us, the more we want to do so. An example of this would be the story written by Dr. Seuss, “The Lorax.” A young man discovers the Truffle trees, and discovers that he can profit from them. Eventually, he cuts down every last tree, and turns them into a profit.

In real life, people tend to try and beautify what is already beautiful. Just like ourselves, we gild over natural beauty. In the book, “Bringing Nature Home” written by Douglas W. Tallamy, the author mentions that many people oversimplify their yards, to make them look more beautiful. However, in doing so, they are replacing natural beauty with pesticides, chemicals, and removing other eco-systems homes that we are meant to co-exist with. (Tallamy, 2009) We are constantly trying to get rid of “imperfections” and in doing so, we are gilding over, the earth’s natural beauty.

Instead of gilding nature, we should be able to co-exist with it. Humans must find a way to live in harmony with our environment, without destroying it in the process. In Big Sur California, an architect named Anne Fougeron claims that “placing form on wilderness is a radical act.  It is not about creating harmony.  Nature's tensions are too dynamic to be balanced and too sprawling to be tamed by human artifact." (Raskin, 2014) She has designed a home called “Fall House” that is located on the side of a cliff in Big Sur California. This home is designed to co-exist with nature, and the placement and design of the house looks as though it were meant to be there in the first place. Unfortunately, many homes that we see nowadays are suburban mansions that are just plopped next to one another in neat rows.

The environment and the people that live within its walls are not defined by one specific thing. We are in a never-ending cycle of metamorphosis. The world around us is constantly changing, and we are constantly changing too. This is what makes the natural process of metamorphosis so beautiful. Think of nature and all of its living things.

In our world today, there is a constant battle that we are fighting with nature. We do not know how much to take, how much to give. We do not know how much to change, without destroying it. There needs to be a balance.

We all grow, we live and we die. But what we do from point a to point b is the most important part of all. The people we become, and the way that we treat our home while we are on this planet, is critical for our future. We have the power to make the right change, and the power to restrain from the wrong. It all comes down to the natural law. We are constantly fighting nature, and we are constantly fighting ourselves. We must strive to live in harmony with nature, and find harmony within ourselves. Otherwise, we fight a constant battle that in the end, will destroy us and our surroundings. Otherwise, the butterfly will remain gilded and frozen under the sheath of thin gold, masking over its wings, restraining it from flight.

The question is, what is our role? How do we change without destruction? There may be many answers to this question. Everything must change, but in order to do so without destruction, one must stay true to themselves, and live in harmony with nature. If we gild ourselves physically and socially, and gild the environment, we lose sight of what is underneath. The raw and fundamental natural beauty is complicated. We are complicated. Our world is complicated. We are not a world of black and white, we are a world of color. Hopefully, your wings will look just like this:

“My skin is kind of sort of brownish pinkish yellowish white. My eyes are greyish blueish green, but I'm told they look orange in the night. My hair is reddish blondish brown, but its silver when its wet, and all the colors I am inside have not been invented yet.” (Silverstein,1996)

If we change our nature to a point of destruction, the consequences will be catastrophic. As people, especially young people like us, we have the resources and ability to apply ourselves. We have the ability to stay true to ourselves in a world that is constantly trying to change us. We have the ability to give back and be aware of our home, our planet that is constantly changing around us. And we all have the ability to change for the good, without destroying the nature of ourselves and our environment. If we can co-exist with ourselves and our natural beauty, and co-exist with the natural beauty of our planet, we will prevent disasters and benefit from the raw, nature that we have been born with.

 **Works Cited**

Blair, Lorrie and Maya Shalmon.  “Cosmetic Surgery and the Cultural Construction of

Beauty.” *Art Education* 58, No. 3 (May, 2005): 14-18.

Kaw, Eugenia. “Medicalization of Racial Features:  Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* New Series 7, No 1 (March, 1993) 74-89.

Trowbridge, Roger. Ón the Aesthetics of Sustainability:  Moral Struggles in Suburbia.” *Australian Quarterly* 81, No. 1 (January-February, 2009) 17-19.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, from “The Birthmark” (1846). (2006). In G. Albrecht (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of disability.* (Vol. 5, pp. v234-v235).

Vega, Tanzina. “Ad About Women’s Self-Image Creates a Sensation.” New York Times Company. April 13th, 2013.

Chrisler, C. Joan and Saltzberg, A. Elayne. “Beauty is the Beast: Psychological Effects of the Pursuit of the Perfect Female Body.” *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, Vol. 5. (1995) 306-315.

Tallamy, W. Douglas. “Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants.”

Raskin, Laura. “Cliff Hanger: A volumetric copper and glass form sidles up to the edge of a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.” Architectural Record. April, 2014.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of King Lear.* Vol. XLVI, Part 3. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001.

Silverstein, Shel. “Masks”. *Falling Up : Poems and Drawings*. New York HarperCollins Publishers - 1996 - ISBN: 0-06-024802-5

John, Elton. “Candle In the Wind*.” Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. Dick James Music Limited. 1973