

GUEST COLUMNISTS

Opinion: The beauty of the face we've earned

By G. Scott Morris, Special to The Daily Memphian

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**SPECIAL TO THE DAILY
MEMPHIAN**

G. Scott Morris



The Rev. Dr. G. Scott Morris, M.D., is founder of Church Health. He is a regular contributor to The Daily Memphian.

I have spent most of my life looking at people's faces.

As a physician you learn to pay attention to them. A face can tell you when someone is frightened even though they say they are fine. It can reveal pain, exhaustion, loneliness, and relief. Sometimes it tells you more than the vital signs do.

After decades of practicing medicine in Memphis, I have seen faces marked by hard lives. I have cared for people who have slept outside, people who have worked two

jobs, people who have buried children, people who have survived illnesses they never thought they would survive. I have also known people blessed with comfort, good health and long lives.

Opinion: I wish the rest of America understood what I know about Memphis

Eventually, if we are fortunate, all our faces begin to tell the truth about us.

We get old.

That sounds obvious, but increasingly our culture treats aging as though it were an embarrassing failure of modern medicine.

Inject the wrinkles. Lift the eyelids. Tighten the skin. Remove the jowls. Reshape noses and chins. A rapidly growing cosmetic industry offers an extraordinary number of ways to change the faces that look back at us in the mirror.

Some of these procedures can be helpful. Reconstructive surgery can restore what illness, injury or congenital conditions took away. And some people thoughtfully choose cosmetic surgery and are pleased with the results. I have no interest in judging them.

But I do worry about the message underneath all of this: Looking old is something we ought to fix.

Medicine has become very good at changing the human body. What medicine has never been particularly good at is giving us peace with ourselves. That distinction matters.

Opinion: Local government matters, and every vote counts

A person may go to the surgeon asking for younger-looking eyes or a tighter jaw line. But the real request may be much harder to put into words.

I want to feel attractive again. I want someone to notice me. I want to feel relevant. I want to look like the person I remember being. I want to look in the mirror and feel better about my life.

There isn't an operation for any of those things.

And that is one reason cosmetic surgery can disappoint even when nothing technically goes wrong. The surgeon may accomplish exactly what was promised, while the patient discovers that the thing he or she hoped would improve remains stubbornly unchanged.

Sometimes the result itself is disappointing. Surgery is still surgery. Bodies heal unpredictably. Faces are complicated. What looks desirable on a computer screen or in a photograph may not look natural on a living moving human being.

And sometimes the pursuit of improvement becomes its own trap. One procedure makes another imperfection more noticeable. The goal moves. The face changes, but satisfaction remains just out of reach.

We ought to be able to talk about that without shaming anyone who has had plastic surgery.

The deeper question is one medicine should be asking more often: What are we trying to heal?

I have spent much of my career thinking about the difference between curing and healing.

Curing means eliminating disease when we can. Healing is something larger. Healing can happen even when we can't cure a disease. It involves becoming whole

- physically, emotionally and spiritually, even while accepting things about our bodies and our lives that we can't change.

Opinion: Don't confuse nationalism with patriotism

Aging may be one of the greatest tests of that distinction.

There is plenty about growing old that I don't intend to romanticize. Our bodies hurt. I personally have four prosthetic joints. We lose strength. We forget things. Friends die. Spouses die. The world begins moving at a speed that can make us wonder if there is still a place for us in it.

And the mirror changes.

But I have also known enough old people to recognize something our youth-obsessed culture routinely misses.

There is tremendous beauty in an old face.

“*There is nothing virtuous about having wrinkles, just as there is nothing sinful about wanting them gone. This isn't an argument against plastic surgery; this is an argument against the idea that aging*

is a disease. ”

I see it all over Memphis. I see it in church pews on Sunday morning. I see it in patients of mine who as children picked cotton. I see it in people sitting on porches and grandparents picking up children from school. I see it in men and women whose faces would never appear in an advertisement for anti-aging medicine, but whose lives radiate something no cosmetic procedure can manufacture.

Their faces have acquired a history.

The lines around their eyes may come from laughter, worry or both. Their foreheads carry decades of concentration and concern. Their skin has been exposed to Memphis summers and Memphis winters. Their expressions contain children raised, parents buried, marriages sustained or lost, disappointment endured, prayers answered and unanswered.

That isn't deterioration.

That's life.

Our faith traditions have long tried to teach us that the worth of a human being isn't determined by outward appearance. Yet we live in a culture spending enormous amounts of money trying to convince us otherwise.

Opinion: Safety isn't only the absence of danger — it's also the presence of connection

Today the pressure is even greater because we no longer compare ourselves only

with other people. We compare ourselves with filtered, altered and carefully selected images of other people. A 65-year-old can look at a photograph of another 65-year-old who has been surgically altered, photographically enhanced and digitally retouched and wonder what has gone wrong with her own face.

Nothing has gone wrong. She is 65.

I think medicine has a responsibility here.

Our calling can't simply be to provide every intervention we are technically capable of providing. One of the questions we must continue to ask is whether an intervention serves the flourishing of the person sitting in front of us.

Before someone undergoes elective cosmetic surgery, I hope there is a conversation that goes beyond risk, benefits and recovery time.

What do you believe will be different about your life afterward?

What if the procedure goes well but you still feel the same way about yourself?

Are you trying to change something about your face, or are you asking your face to change something about your life?

Opinion: 'Steve Cohen has served Memphis extraordinarily well'

Those are medical questions, but I believe they are spiritual questions too.

There is nothing virtuous about having wrinkles, just as there is nothing sinful about wanting them gone. This isn't an argument against plastic surgery; this is an argument against the idea that aging is a disease.

For all the effort human beings have devoted to extending life, it is strange that we have become so uncomfortable looking as though we have actually lived one.

If you are fortunate to have reached 70 – or 72 as I have – your face shouldn't look exactly as it did at 30.

Forty years have happened. I am sure of it.

You loved people. You lost people. You worried. You laughed. You made mistakes. You asked for forgiveness. You learned to forgive. You discovered that some things you once thought mattered enormously mattered very little, and some things you barely noticed when you were young turned out to matter most of all.

Your face was there for it all. We don't need to erase the evidence.

One of the tasks of growing older is learning to look into the mirror and recognize not what time has taken from us, but what life has given to us.

There is beauty in that face. We just must learn how to see it.

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