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FORSAKING VANITY

Mirror, mirror

Living reporter Erin Kobayashi made the commitment to go a full week without looking at her reflection and found the benefits far outweighed the problems

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LIVING REPORTER



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

Every morning, I see the same face looking at me. It is a face I have seen laugh, cry, with and without makeup. A face that, over the years, has become fuzzier as my vision weakens. It is the one face in my life that will always be there for me. *My face.*

Toronto Star reporter Erin Kobayashi made the commitment to go a full week without looking at her reflection and found the benefits far outweighed the problems.

But, for one week, I will not see my face because I have vowed to not look in a single mirror. A challenge, considering we live in a civilization that constantly reflects who we are.

To avoid my reflection, I must boycott specific seats on the subway, ban myself from restaurants, and sidestep entire blocks of a financial district that is dominated by towering skyscrapers constructed of mirrored glass. I can no longer window shop, use the mirrored elevator or public washrooms, watch television or casually glance out the window to check the weather.

After taking one long, hard look at myself, I bid my face farewell and cover the last mirror in my apartment. My reflection is lost and, in a sense, so am I.

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"The mirror is just a surface," says Mark Pendergrast, author of *Mirror, Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*. "It's what we see in the surface that is important. And what we see is always an illusion of sorts."

We begin to recognize our mirror image when we're somewhere between 20 and 24 months. From then on, mirrors are ever-present – for some, even in death. Jewish custom requires that mirrors are cloaked during the seven-day mourning period of shiva.

For as long I can remember, mirrors have existed everywhere I have turned, even when I turned on the television as a child and watched *Romper Room*. Mirrors have always played important roles in culture through film (*Snow White*), children's literature (*Through the Looking-Glass*), art (self-portraits by Velasquez, Rembrandt, Kahlo), architecture (the Royal Ontario Museum's Michael Lee-Chin Crystal) and even superstition (Bloody Mary).

Perhaps this is why it is difficult for me to live life without a mirror, because I have never had to imagine life without one. Mirrors have only enhanced my experiences and stretched my imagination.

At the beginning of my mirrorless week, I use friends as mirrors. After all, aren't friends reflections of ourselves? I badger those closest to me with the three questions: "How do I look?" "Do I have something stuck in my teeth?" "Why are you looking at me that way?"

The pressure of living in a culture that marvels at youth and beauty makes me self-conscious about my appearance. I become obsessed with how awful I must look because I am unable to apply makeup precisely and style my hair properly. Without a mirror to confirm or deny this image, my insecurities run rampant for the first few days.

In John Berger's 1972 book, *Ways of Seeing*, the author argues that, in art and pop culture, men look at women while women watch themselves being looked at. Without a mirror, I cannot see myself, thus I am missing a crucial element in Berger's theory. However, I recognize I am being looked at by colleagues – male, female, gay and straight – who note I am wearing my hair differently and make unflattering remarks.

During my mirrorless week, I work out at Spynga, a mirrorless spin and yoga studio. "Mirrors are distracting," says co-owner and instructor Sari Nisker. "The space was designed without mirrors to help clients concentrate on their workout, not focus on the way they look." Sweaty and exhausted, I'm happy to avoid my reflection.

In fact, a study at McMaster University found that women who exercised in front of a mirror for 20 minutes felt less energized, less relaxed and less positive than women who performed their workout without a mirror.

If exercising without a mirror is a more positive experience, I test to see if shopping for a bathing suit is also more pleasurable. At Melmira Bra and Swimwear, I follow Holly Heenan to the mirrorless change room that I have requested. Although Pendergrast mentions an urban legend, that clothing stores are rumoured to use mirrors that flatter and slim the physique, a mirrorless change room already feels less intimidating.

After sizing me up with her eyes and hands, Heenan returns with various swimsuits and leaves me to try them on. I slip a black retro halter on and wait for Heenan to return and scrutinize the fit.

When Heenan comes back, I cringe under her gaze. She is, after all, looking at my body critically. Front, back, side – unlike a single mirror, Heenan can view me from every angle. For an hour, I try on swimsuits and slowly grow more confident. I realize how much better off I am using Heenan as my mirror. She moves me along and I never get stuck in the mirror, fixating on my flaws.

"I wish all women bought swimsuits without mirrors," Heenan says. "It's usually the women who are the smallest sizes that are the most critical of themselves."

Mirrors can be dangerous. It was a mirrored shield that killed Medusa. The most dangerous (and vainest) of the seven deadly sins is pride. Beyond mythology and theology, mirrors are seen as dangerous and intimidating for those who suffer from eating disorders and those who have negative body images.

"There is a school of thought that people with anorexia nervosa deny their thinness when they look at themselves in the mirror because they might be too scared to acknowledge their thinness and how unhealthy they really are," says Meryll Bear, director of the National Eating Disorder Information Centre.

Bear says eating disorders have nothing to do with vanity; they are about control and self-esteem.

"A reflection is merely a representation of the self, but we create the self with feelings and beliefs that we internalize," Bear explains. "A reflection is neutral. It is only when we colour it with our internal responses that it takes on meaning."

As my week without a mirror comes to an end, I wonder what the world would be like without *any* mirrors.

"In some ways, I think we might be better off!" says Pendergrast of the thought. "We wouldn't have laser guns, and we wouldn't spend so much time worrying over our appearance."

True, at the end of the week, I have cut the time I take to get ready in the morning in half.

"But," Pendergrast says, "we would be the same people with the same tendencies toward aggression and conceit as well as the ability to use imagination, science, empathy, and poetry, which are all associated with our ability to recognize ourselves in mirrors."

When I look in the mirror for the first time in a week, I see that, physically, I haven't changed at all. Yet I have a new perspective. I can see that mirrors distort, reveal and shock, and what we view in the mirror is based on our own feelings and views.

I decide to ask the mirror a question.

"Who am I?"

The mirror does not answer. It throws the question back, asking me to search within myself.

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