

Ashley Judd and the war on women's self-worth

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If beauty didn't matter, no one would have noticed Ashley Judd's puffy face.

They certainly would not have sniped about it in such vicious ways that the actress felt compelled to defend both herself and all women in "the assault on our body image."

Judd fought back and declared war - war against "this abnormal obsession with women's faces and bodies."

When she appeared on TV recently to do publicity for a new project, her face and body appeared a tad fuller.

That's because of weight gain and sinus medication, she said. No, she did not have plastic surgery or fillers injected into her cheeks.

And, no, all the cattiness she endured via social media and cable commentary is really not about her, she says.

"I was just a surrogate for this particular series of unbelievably sexist and nasty criticisms highlighting what we all go through," she told one interviewer a couple weeks ago.

Her "puffy face" story blew up right around the same time as two others: One written by a British woman who griped about being too gorgeous and getting too much unwanted attention from men. And one about brides-to-be getting feeding tubes strung through their

noses to lose 10 pounds before their weddings.

Abnormal obsession with body image? Sounds like it.

But this war and Ashley Judd's eloquent stance is really not about looks. It's about something far deeper: Self-worth. And what a hard time women have believing they deserve it.

We torture ourselves with weights and measurements: Too fat, too old, too plastic, too plain.

We spend something like \$200 billion worldwide on anti-aging potions.

Studies have proven that attractive people get hired more often and get paid more, and even teachers deem attractive children to be smarter due to something called the "halo effect."

It's not right, but it's true - the genetically gifted can depend on a certain amount of attention for a certain number of years.

If that's your only currency, however, you're sure to be near-bankrupt by 44, Ashley Judd's age.

That's when you better be able to detach your self-worth from your appearance.

And you better believe: Real beauty is on the inside.

Tara Shannon has seen plenty of women who freak out when the thing they've valued most about themselves - their looks - starts fading.

In the '80s, she was one of the world's top models, paid handsomely for her external beauty.

Today, the West Palm Beach counselor holds weekly sessions to help people embrace

their internal and unique loveliness.

Last week, she and a bunch of her fellow models - Kim Alexis, Kelly Emberg, Dianne DeWitt, Joan Severance and others - gathered for a fundraiser in Houston.

These women are all in their 50s and still gorgeous - but what struck Shannon was how their definitions of beauty had evolved.

"We are no longer defined as 'models' - with a standard of beauty we had to fit ourselves into," she says. "Now we have settled into the definition of who we really are - with our individuality, our imperfections, our quirkiness - and it's so much better."

When Shannon sees women panicking about losing their looks, she recognizes this as "a sign of their unhappiness."

They have needs they are not listening to and a calling they are not paying attention to, she says, and this translates into feelings of inadequacy.

"You can never get another person to value you if you can't experience your own value," says Shannon, who holds workshops on Wednesday evenings at Gyrotonic Satram in West Palm Beach. "You can't meet an internal need with an external diversion."

Connie Ingram, a psychologist in Royal Palm Beach, also sees women in their 50s struggling with the loss of their looks, which they perceive to be their only source of power.

If they had a parent who told them all their lives that "all you have is your looks," it's hard to rewind that tape - but it must be done for true self-worth.

"The women who come through my doors who are self-critical tend to view their lives as meaningless and joyless because they are losing the beauty they once had," Ingram says. "The power that these women have thought they had via their looks was fantasy. The true power of a woman is her inner beauty, which comes from the character qualities she has developed over her lifetime through varied experiences the good and the bad. Power is

internal!"

If a person's self-worth is based on looks, evidence shows they actually may be less apt to have successful long-term relationships.

"In reality, there is almost no connection between being physically beautiful and actually being a beautiful person," psychologist John Buri wrote in Psychology Today last year.

"And it is being a beautiful person (beyond the mere beauty found on the surface of the skin) that is essential to leading a reliable, trusting, enjoyable and successful life as a fond and loyal lifelong lover or as a devoted and affectionate husband or wife or as a loving and unfaltering father or mother."

Shout out to Beyoncé, People magazine's World's Most Beautiful Woman 2012: If you want to be an unfaltering mom to baby Blue Ivy, it would be best not to get a big head over the "most beautiful" nod.

"I feel more beautiful than I've ever felt because I've given birth," the singer tells the magazine, out this week. "I have never felt so connected, never felt like I had such a purpose on this Earth."

Purpose is a good thing to concentrate on, Beyoncé.

After all, it's just a matter of time before some ugly critic says your face is puffy.