

Can we stop caring yet?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I chatted with a friend about inspiring women in the religious realm, and since he doesn't have any experience with the world I work in, I showed him some pictures.

He lives in Manhattan, keeps up with the fashion industry, and can spot a celebrity a mile away. He looked at the authors and pastors smiling from their airbrushed bio pics and said, "Wow. It must be nice to work in an environment where you don't have to worry about your looks."

I became a little defensive, because there are always whispers that the big names got bigger because of their youth or bodies. Matthew Sutton writes that [Aimee Semple McPherson](#) had a makeover a hundred years ago. And that trend hasn't changed much.

I once saw an email pitch to a news agency about one of my books. They mentioned what I looked like, that I would be attractive on camera, and I thought, *How did they pitch Jerry Falwell? Why do men get to look so terrible?* I got the interview that time, but I don't always have what it takes. When shopping around for an agent, it became clear that I needed a "hook" which could usually be interpreted as a "look." And so I spent time thinking... *I need to look like... what?*

We see the latest frustrated author, Jennifer Weiner, who [complained](#) about Oprah's book club pick of [Glennon Doyle Melton](#), who is "slim, blond, and traditionally attractive." Weiner aside, authors typically have very quiet conversations between close friends over one too many glasses of wine. Women grouse that men don't have to face the same scrutiny. Then, we swallow our complaints with the Merlot, get back to business, and don't speak of it again.

But, I have to say, my friend's observation seems mostly true. I am thankful to work in an environment where we aspire to be more like Mother Teresa than Kendall Jenner. We long to be role models, not models.

I met up with another friend, a successful woman with an accomplished career. She turned fifty and kept joking about the plastic surgery she plans to have. We laughed a lot, as we discussed breast enhancements and botox, but I felt empty when I got back to my hotel room. I had one looming thought, *when do we get to quit caring?*

I thought not caring was the promise of middle age for feminists. I remember reading (was it Gloria Steinem?) that there would come a day when our perceived power and position in society would shift from sexual attraction, to the strength of our character. We would be able to let go of the beauty industry standards and focus on our intellectual prowess. Our wisdom literature reminds us that “beauty is fleeting,” so why not let it swim away? Wouldn’t that be liberating? I am not, of course, suggesting that we stop taking care of ourselves. And I have amazing friends who love fashion and wear it well. What I’m talking about is the moment when we can let go of our disordered eating, when we can love our sagging flesh, and when we can stop equating beauty with value. I long for that day when we can graciously say, “This isn’t my game any longer. I can’t possibly win, so I get to quit playing.” Why are we extending the game for extra innings?

All of this came up again as I read [this article](#), which was kind of interesting until I got to the end of it. Basically, the author says that in the past, women grew physically older because they didn’t have a choice, but now wealthy feminists sneak in for skin treatments and tummy tucks. There’s a wrestling of angst and shame in it. Then, in the final paragraphs, the author talks about sharing a car with a younger woman, who says she doesn’t want to look amazing and beautiful in her older age. She doesn’t want that conformity. I could almost hear the scoff as the author dismisses her: “Come back and see me when you’re fifty.”

Maybe it’s true. I’m not fifty yet. But I’ve read enough of Margaret Atwood’s [Maddadam](#) to pause at the thought of enhancements.

Tonight, we have a debate between the first likely woman presidential candidate and a utterly unqualified man who owned the Miss America pageant. I don’t even think Atwood could have thought up a more delicious plot. Clinton has spent decades, with people talking about her pantsuits and her bangs. And Clinton, in return, has spent decades thinking about domestic policy and foreign affairs.

I’m thankful for her, and the many women who just don’t care. Not that I have any big issue with plastic surgery, I’m just glad we have a few women who are willing to walk off the field.