I Am Not Symmetrical

by Mark Cyzyk

I am not symmetrical.

My eyes point in different directions. One ear is higher than the other, and so my glasses are always at an angle. One cheekbone is higher and more pronounced than the other. My teeth are crooked. My smile is crooked. My nose, not the most handsome, luckily anchors the whole thing in some semblance of symmetry.

Because I am all lopsided, I can't for the life of me get a decent photograph of myself. I try with selfies, but there is always an eye pointed somewhere else. That's the real me. That just is how I look.

I was born prematurely in the early 1960s. Strabismus, lazy eye, is a frequent long-term result of premature birth.

Since I don't have true stereo vision, that also means I do not experience depth perception, at least not the way others do. For the sake of survival, my brain has wired itself to deal with it. How else would I be able to step off a curb or climb a set of stairs? How else would I know to get out of the way of a speeding car? As a good friend and I joke, "If it's getting bigger, it must be getting closer!" That is how I interpret my experience of the world. That is how I've always interpreted my experience of the world.

As a kid, I was horrible at sports like baseball. But I was quick, maneuverable, and could easily see, for the sake of preservation, objects coming at me at high rates of speed. Maybe I couldn't hit them with a bat, but I sure as hell could get out of their way. I was a champ on the elementary school dodgeball court.

I'd be out and about our household grounds when I'd hear my father from down in his garden: "Hey Mark, catch this." I would look up and there, visible against the sky, was a projectile hurtling toward poor innocent me. My instinct was to either dodge it or deflect it. My father was always furious at the resulting smashed vegetable.

You might say that dodging or deflecting flying projectiles is one of my specialties. Dodge or deflect but keep moving forward. There's a life lesson in there somewhere.

My small stature remained throughout childhood. The benefit of being small, though, is that pound for pound you are strong, like an ant. I remember in tenth grade when the

newly muscled guys had to admit defeat in gym class when I handily beat them doing pullups and climbing the rope to tap the gymnasium ceiling.

A female colleague, several years ago, told me that insofar as my eyes do not point straight ahead, I therefore am not an animal predator. Rather, I am an animal of prey, like a deer in the woods, always looking in two directions, always observing, always judging. That is true. But there is more to me.

At the time, what she did not know is that behind those errant-eyes is a direct and tenacious focus, a confident resolve minus the sociopathic stare-down. Having worked with me now for some time, I'm sure she understands that I do not give up, that I solve problems no matter how long or difficult or tedious or painful. That focused tenacity, that forceful drive to a goal, is an important part of what's behind these wayward eyes. I'd like to think it's the hidden grit of the born underdog, the one who quickly, and surprisingly (for others), tapped that gymnasium ceiling. It has served me well in my studies, in my personal life, in my professional life.

And I may be like a deer in the woods, always looking in two directions, always observing, always judging, but such judgment is not just of the external world, there is an inward gaze as well. The beam of focus is frequently turned around and pointed directly back at me. The judge in the mirror is often the most perceptive, sometimes withering, of them all. Judgment of myself by myself is a constant, oftentimes not a comforting constant.

In psychological studies of perceptions of female beauty and what constitutes handsomeness in a man, symmetry inevitably rises to the top of the list of most desirable traits. It is the chief irony of my life that, of my three main romantic relationships—one for three-and-a-half years, one for seventeen, one for twenty—all three have been with extraordinarily beautiful women, each one pleasingly symmetrical, each one prettily photogenic, each one notably out of the league of this lop-sided man. (One was so stunning that every time we'd enter a room all heads would turn, male and female—and they weren't looking at crooked me.) The Japanese have an aesthetic concept, "wabi-sabi", beauty in imperfection. Maybe that's what they saw in me?

After my second wife left, I apologized for not being as handsome and accomplished as her ex-boyfriend, a prominent musician, conventionally good-looking and symmetrical, someone for whom I long suspected she secretly pined. Her reply: "Don't sell yourself short; you're plenty accomplished." (Thanks, but it's as if someone wrote a job reference for me consisting of that old saw: "His penmanship is impeccable and he is frequently punctual!")

As someone who studied philosophy in college, the Socratic admonition to not pay much attention to appearances has long resonated with my native mode of being (not that

native modes can't, and frequently should, be changed): I try not to fret about my appearance, even though I am aware of it, and realize that the appearance of others is often grossly misleading.

Years ago, I watched a wonderful documentary about Janis Joplin. It started with her high school years, describing her as homely and certainly not any kind of center of attention. I thought "homely" was harsh and inaccurate, but the documentarians got across the point, that she was not considered anything special. As the film proceeded, though, and I watched clips of her performances with that searing soulful voice, I learned just how special she was, and not only because she was a transcendent musician, but because of how she interacted with others, because of her centered, exuberant, benevolent being in the world. By the end of the documentary I found myself thinking, "Janis Joplin was one of the most beautiful women ever to have lived."

Nevertheless, I also understand that the world cares very much about appearances. Sometimes it seems like the whole world is a house of mirrors, walls of shiny appearances with nothing behind them. I am left, as are we all, to navigate this maze, a labyrinth into which we've been thrown, a world that, at least when it comes to the value of appearances, is out of joint and disorienting for someone like me.

If you look at it closely, you realize a truth about the world, something that may at first seem obvious, but now seems profound: Sometimes things are not what they seem. But you must be scrupulous and pay attention to all that you see. Luckily for me, eyes pointing in different directions see many things.

But anyway, back to my nose. It is prominent and symmetrical and points dead ahead, straight and true.

It smells many things.



Mark Cyzyk writes from Maryland, USA. He turned sixty-three in May.

Mark Cyzyk, preteen
Scrappy and Happy