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**Looking skin deep in New York City**

by Doug Detwiler  
Special to Q-Notes

Toward the end of March, I met up with an old friend for five days in New York City. I needed to feel the city's infectious energy combined with a megalopolitan infusion only a few cities truly possess. London and Paris also come to mind. My longtime friend, Brad, refers to New York as, "the center of the universe." Unheralded in many areas: architecture, art, museums, shopping, food and dining. To me, riding the subway is an urban luxury and walking about a treat. I find life without the responsibility and confines of a car freeing and refreshing. The weather was lousy. I didn't care. I had a wonderful time taking a bite out of the Big Apple. "Wish you were here," it would say on the postcard.

Whenever I travel, I do my best to leave my work at home. I looked forward to the downtime and turning off the processing. An important aspect of being a therapist is observation coupled with awareness. However, a familiar theme in gay culture emerged which my mind's eye could not ignore. Basically, I found the never ending quest of making oneself into a physical masterpiece more disturbing and disheartening than usual.

Today's image-obsessed gay men left me wondering what will happen if we continue to neglect our insides (our spirit, character, psyche) to the benefit of our outsides (the façade). I stayed in Chelsea, epicenter to the power pampering makeover. I became inundated with ads. "Get ready for a smooth summer." This teaser mantra professes laser hair removal for your back, shoulder, buttocks and full beard for around \$1300. Or this mixed message. The latest trend featured from subway ads to fashion ads are hairy guys making a comeback. Not to worry. If you have had your hair permanently removed there is a new procedure sweeping Manhattan allowing one to have hair trans-

planted anywhere you desire. This campaign is dubbed, "Dare to Bear." Shameless plug.

Here's a power pampering paragraph run-down before I move on to ways to enrich our treasured insides. Here we go. Human growth hormone promises to reverse the effects of aging, loss of fat and gain of muscle without diet or exercise. Testosterone replacement therapy has become man's secret weapon against aging. Don't miss this opportunity for "eternal" youth. Facials, face peels, botox/collagen injections, hi-tech tanning beds, hair coloring, hip fashion and chin implants to give you the look of a square-jawed quarterback. I forgot the quarterback also will need Viagra and horny goat weed to throw those hail marys. Oh, and I need to make a call on my cell phone because I have difficulty tolerating being alone in my own company. I'm talking excess here. There are certainly benefits in treating oneself to self-care. A relaxing massage to reduce stress is worth mentioning.

Maybe you have noticed increased activity at your gym where all this narcissism emerged in the go-go eighties. The pressure is on to look flawless in that bathing suit. Cardio, crunches and weights. The cosmetic pump is a bit maddening. Some questions. When are we ever going to be enough? What are we keeping at bay or avoiding?

These questions ask us to look inside ourselves. In paying close attention to our thoughts, feelings and emotions we begin to notice our real needs. That which feeds, nurtures, sustains, renews and helps us grow will vary. We're all different. Neglecting these areas in our lives only makes us more vulnerable to a wide range of issues. This might include loneliness, depression, worry, anxiety, and general unhappiness. Ineffectively coping with these problems could trigger self-medicating behaviors including the misuse and abuse of alcohol and drugs, sexual compulsion, workaholicism, codependency, angry outbursts, and spending sprees. These are some of the ways we remain unconscious in the misguided effort to distract ourselves and avoid dealing with our painful issues.

Spring is a good time to take inventory of our lives and ourselves. Find some quiet time to examine what is working and not working in your life. Make a list. Are you meeting your personal goals? Are your friendships and relationships providing the support and love you need? What might your friends and/or partner say about your support to them? Ask.

In my opinion, what helps drive the vanity mania in our culture is a desire for connection and belonging — a wish to be accepted and loved for who we truly are. The coming out process is a monumental struggle for most, leaving many exhausted. There is more work that needs to be done. We keep learning and growing by experiencing. So please pay particular attention to your insides. Take responsibility and do the necessary work. Your outsides will radiate a beauty that will last a lifetime because you are real and authentic. ▼

[Doug Detwiler, MA, is a psychotherapist in private practice. He is affiliated with Cameron Valley Psychotherapy and Counseling Associates in Charlotte, NC. Recently relocated from San Francisco, Doug brings his 10 years of experience helping individuals explore, learn, confront, change, heal, grow and transform themselves and their relationships with others.]

**If this is what your closet looks like...**



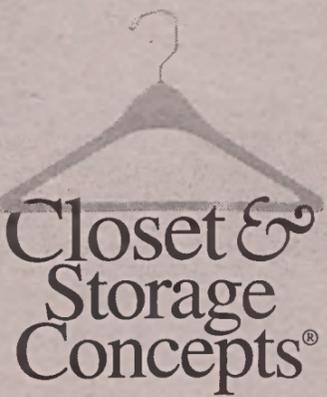
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