

1. TAPROOT BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW REGARDING AGEISM:

"I couldn't help but think about ageism. I think about when we're young, we don't know enough, we're not trusted. In fact, sometimes we're suspicious, and guilty, and all kinds of stuff. Then there's a time where we're kind of in that safe zone. As we get older, there's more - as women experience - there's more of the ignoring, and the, 'You're not worth it, you're expendable. Maybe you're not thinking clearly'. And so, I thought about doing a little addendum about ageism. I think it is important, and one of the reasons that I've modeled and modeled for so long is to send a healthy message about aging. The body is beautiful and your body changes, everybody's different. And young or old, whatever our state is, it's part of the human condition, and I believe, in reality, that we can also be healthy and strong regardless of what our age is.

People often comment, 'How do you look so young?' and 'How do you keep in shape?' And it's funny... There's such an emphasis on youth and beauty. But basically, this is just who I am. I don't diet or exercise or anything to look like I look, this is just who I am and how my body is in the world. While I recognize we are wonderfully wired to respond to beauty, which is great, it is what we bring to the experience of modeling that makes us inspiring and interesting to draw. And it's also what we allow in; the body is an amazing vessel, and being open to our Muse as we model is of utmost importance."

"It's just one more way of how intrusive and pervasive that message is. Young, young, young; youth is the goal. My goal is, I'm 66, and I want to be 70, and 80, and 90. And I might look good, and I might not look good, but I will be fulfilled. I will be where I need to be. There's a progression, there's aging and that's natural."

FULL INTERVIEW

Age 66

Assigned Sex Female

Pronouns She/Her

Gender Identity Female

Race Caucasian

What is your gender identity? Please describe

I identify as cisgender female and express primarily as female, but not all that closely to our present-day society's blueprint.

What does femininity mean to you? Masculinity? How do you relate to these terms? How do these concepts impact the way you present yourself?

Femininity for me is feeling alive, being creative, appealing, flowing, gentle yet strong, deeply powerful, intuitive, nurturing, receptive, protective. Being feminine often is perceived as or expected to be weak, passive, objectified, sexually available for the taking, and/or lacking strength, ability, and authority.

I see masculinity as dynamic, engaging, productive, strong yet gentle, responsible, competent, comforting, sensitive, defending, powerful. Being masculine often is perceived as or expected to be tough, aggressive, insensitive, misogynist, controlling, and/or in command. In its extremes, (typically cis and white) male privilege and patriarchy today are toxic, oppressive, and wielding way too much power and influence.

I was conditioned from a young age to be quiet, passive, look pretty, and take care of others. While I've come to embrace the goodness of each of these feminine qualities in me, being defined and confined by them was to be an incomplete and vulnerable self. What helped me survive those limitations was that I was free to spend much of my time outdoors where I climbed trees, collected rocks, explored, and dreamed. Once back inside though, I was denied the joy of playing with my brother's Lincoln Logs (I now have a set of my own) and relegated to playing with dolls and serving others.

As I've moved through life with its hardships and blessings, I've experienced the blossoming of both my feminine and masculine traits. Still a gentle nurturer, I am also strong, competent, and courageous, and enjoying the fruit of an incredible sense of freedom.

What is your racial identity?

Caucasian, with Scots, English, Welsh, German, and Danish heritage.

Have there been times in your life when your race has influenced how others have treated you?

I clearly get treated better than people of color. I have benefited individually and systemically from white privilege my entire life.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by close family and/or friends?

I was expected to play the part – wear dresses, makeup, and a bra; shave my legs and grow my hair long. Friends were more supportive, rebellious like me. Sadly, my first husband considered me attractive only when I wore makeup. I no longer feel pressure to change my appearance.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by people you know only casually or by business associates?

Yes, similar to the above expectations, I was pressured especially in the workplace to wear a bra – no nipples showing! Wear dresses or business suits, stockings, high heels. I complied minimally, but never high heels! Then for decades I worked independently in the Arts where my appearance seemed completely acceptable.

Have there been times in your life where you felt insecure about your appearance?

As a teen, of course I felt insecure about how I looked. But for the most part, my natural appearance is one of the few things I have felt secure about, one way I fit into society's expectations. The focus on appearance though made me feel more objectified, when what I've wanted is for the whole of me to be seen, heard, and taken seriously. The upside is that I realized the body in all its wonder and variations is a vessel, and not the whole of a being. Now when I have moments when my aging body gives me pause, I immediately remember all it has been through and provided for me and I am well pleased.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by the media? What aspects of the media have impacted your self-perception the most? Commercial? Social? Other?

In my youth, I was influenced by television, radio, and magazines to look older, look sexy, and wear makeup. Before long, the pitch shifted to: Look younger! I soon came to dislike the messages and was outraged by some. The media present unrealistic and unattainable "ideals," and what I often see as the antithesis of beauty, health, and self-acceptance. I stopped watching television long ago, but the hype permeates all forms of media, communicating powerful messages that can do more harm than good. So again, I've learned to value the wondrous natural and diverse beauty in human beings, including me.

Do you do anything to alter your natural appearance? (tattoos, piercings, hair dyeing, makeup, etc) If so, why?

I have no tattoos, though after seeing a snowy owl truly in flight on a friend's arm the other day; I imagined a soaring blue jay on mine. Along with two of my sisters, I got my ears pierced at a doctor's office when I was twelve. Wearing earrings became a must for me; I felt more complete and interesting adorned by a piece of art. I also typically wore light makeup, but I abandoned that and jewelry for the most part at about 50. I found I like being just me, perfectly imperfect with no modifications. I had dyed my hair once from blonde to black for fun and was surprised to find that people, typically strangers, took me more seriously.

What makes you feel beautiful? What makes you feel empowered?

Fresh air, freedom, water, trees, bird song, flowers, sunshine – all make me feel beautiful. Also being seen, acknowledged, touched lovingly. Feeling rested, dancing, deep breathing. Aging.

Feeling beautiful makes me feel empowered, especially being free, rested, and seen/heard. Self-compassion, making space for myself, learning, writing, silence, gratitude, and having a passion for protecting and fostering life also empower me.

How have your family and close friends been supportive of your appearance and self-perception?

My parents were generally supportive of my appearance but not so accepting otherwise until I broke free of my own constraints, again around age 50. There was then a clear change in both of them even though they had divorced decades before and were completely estranged. They suddenly saw, accepted, and embraced me. Among my siblings, I felt like an outsider and became the family scapegoat. My dog, however, adored me, which certainly strengthened my already deep trust in non-human beings. Nature reflected back to me who I was and that not only fostered my self-acceptance, it probably saved my life. I love my parents deeply, but my home life was chaotic and terrifying. I'm thankful to have forged meaningful connections with both parents later in life. My adult children are supportive of me as are my amazing granddaughters. Close friends have been affirming my appearance and self-perception, while also challenging me to be more authentically me.

Have you had any positive experiences with casual acquaintances or business associates that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?

Very much so ... An interesting seventh grade teacher treated me like I was smart (a first!); a respectful boss trusted I knew what I was doing; two esteemed college professors highly praised my writing; a powerful child advocate ran all of her writing past me before publishing; a passionate theatre director gave me a shot at acting forty years after I'd absolutely frozen on stage in a third grade production; a brilliant integrative medical doctor listened, believed, and helped me heal when I had Lyme disease; a generous craniosacral therapist helped me survive Lyme disease; a benevolent soul who had bought art from me thought I was worth supporting while I was at my sickest; three stellar therapists patiently and respectfully midwived me into my recovering adult self; and several inspired and inspiring artists welcomed, honored, and celebrated me as a model, advocate, organizer, artist, and person.

I was shy and pretty shut down as a child, easy to ignore. I created my own prison to keep me safe. These wonderful people who could see beyond my walls have had a huge impact on me. I haven't completely abandoned my too safe haven, but every day I am a little more me, a little more free, and I love it! Additionally, modeling for artists has impacted me in a way I could not have predicted. Being seen and valued has been very healing for the forgotten little girl in me who just wanted to matter. Respect from over 20,000 artists is pretty damn powerful. I am grateful for these creatives who so positively affected my self-perception.

Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

I couldn't help but think about ageism. I think about when we're young, we don't know enough, we're not trusted. In fact, sometimes we're suspicious, and guilty, and all kinds of stuff. Then there's a time where we're kind of in that safe zone. As we get older, there's more - as women experience - there's more of the ignoring, and the, 'You're not worth it, you're expendable. Maybe you're not thinking clearly'. And so, I thought about doing a little addendum about ageism. I think it is important, and one of the reasons that I've modeled and modeled for so long is to send a healthy message about aging. The body is beautiful and your body changes, everybody's different. And young or old, whatever our state is, it's part of the human condition, and I believe, in reality, that we can also be healthy and strong regardless of what our age is.

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I don't think that people perceive me as being super fit, so I don't think that people really ask me that too often. I mean, sometimes people will comment on my weight if it seems like it's fluctuated, but I don't often have people asking me what I do to look the way that I do.

I guess part of it may be because I'm in my 60s, people - well I remember that (life drawing instructor's name), one day, he was joking with his students. He said, you know, 'here's [model name], one of our best models. And I think she's, what are you, 70?' He was sort of joking in the extreme of, 'You just seem to keep looking the same'. It was sort of an awkward thing, because this is just me, and if I'm 20, or 70, if I do a good job, that's great. If it's easier to draw someone when they look pretty or have good curves or whatever, that's great, but the focus of 'You look so young'.

It almost implies that that should be a driving motivation for you.

Yeah, exactly.

And that people around you are hyper aware of it.

It's just one more way of how intrusive and pervasive that message is. Young, young, young; youth is the goal. My goal is, I'm 66, and I want to be 70, and 80, and 90. And I might look good, and I might not look good, but I will be fulfilled. I will be where I need to be. There's a progression, there's aging and that's natural. So, I guess that's why I find I kind of don't know what to say when people ask me how I look like this.

