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Why Do People Tan?

By Amy Garrett-Brown

This started as a simple question spurred by one of my occasional "people are so stupid" rants. I wondered who was to blame for this, who made it cool for white people to be tan? It seems completely asinine on the surface to waste money and time on a prepaid tan that will only result in prematurely leathery and wrinkled skin and a much higher risk of developing melanoma or other skin cancers. And then I looked down at my arms and noticed that I've managed to build up a decent tan this summer myself, not via light bulb technology, but the old fashioned way, by playing in the sun. Hmm ... am I a hypocrite?

I wondered about that. As I researched sunbathing and the like I came across an interesting article in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* titled "The Rural South These Days Has More Tanning Salons Than John Deeres" by Rheta Grimsley Johnson. Johnson summarizes her point with a quote from E. B. White, "I am fascinated by the anatomy of decline ... by the spectacle of people passively accepting a degenerating process which is against their own interests." She then explains, "He was writing about the red sign of the automobile longer and lower with bigger fenders. He also objected to replacing the car window crank with a lazy push-button. If he could see us now, jumping into our foreign cars and speeding down to the tanning bed and nail art salon. Lost buffed souls" (MI).

It struck me as I read the last lines of this sardonic critique of society that I don't necessarily wonder why people tan, but why they completely gyp themselves of the pleasures of the sun to be rewarded with a battle with cancer at worst and saggy skin at best. It seems like everyone wants to feel active, even if they aren't.

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In a survey conducted by *Seventeen* magazine, "2/3 of the teens say they look better with a tan and feel healthier, more sophisticated and 50% say they looked more athletic" (qtd. in "Sun Tanning"). Somehow it seems that society has missed the forest for the trees. A nice tan once meant you spent your days on the beach playing volleyball and swimming, hiking in the mountains or riding a horse, riding a bike around town or jogging in the afternoons; it was usually accompanied by fit and trim bodies and healthy smiles. Now it means you spent \$45 a month building a base tan.

But somehow the message isn't translating. People still feel healthy with a bastardized tan? So there must be something more to it all. Is the fashion industry that powerful? In her fashion column Patricia McLaughlin puts the fascination with a tan into perspective.

White people have it tough. At least the pale ones, whose skin is really a mottled, unappetizing grayish-yellowish-pinkish off-white threaded with blue veins. Once, amazing as it may seem, it was actually cool to have skin this color. Then Coco Chanel came home with a tan from a cruise on the Duke of Westminster's yacht, and ever since, white people have preferred to be a biscuit-y golden color. (2)

So maybe that's it, people just like the way it looks to be tan. I know I feel better about putting on a bathing suit if I'm not so starkly white that I worry about blinding young children. I also know that it just feels good to be in the sun. The warm rays beating down on my back and shoulders as I work outdoors or go for a hike seem therapeutic and natural

But the health industry sure doesn't like to condone it. In an article by Alexandra Greeley titled "No Tan Is a Safe Tan," she presents her case against spending time in the sun and especially tanning with facts and statistics, but I couldn't help but wonder if she ever has any fun after reading the closing lines to her article. "In the end, there really is nothing new under the

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sun, except that perhaps more people are staying out of it, heeding medical warnings such as Bergstresser's: 'Less sun is better. No sun is best of all'" (15).

I disagree. But I'm no expert, so I sought proof of my hunch that the sun is really our friend and found it. Of course, I'm not condoning the 1976 "Savage Tan" or complete ignorance of the dangers of a depleted ozone and proof that severe sunburns lead to cancers, but I think there must be some middle ground.

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Works Cited

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