

Giles Fraser

A false ideal that erodes self-worth

WHY did she do it? Claudia Aderotimi, aged 20, from Hackney, flew to Philadelphia for a bargain-basement operation to enhance her bottom. She was an aspiring hip-hop dancer, and wanted to look curvier, like the singer Beyoncé. The procedure was carried out in a hotel near the airport. A few hours afterwards, she died.

Why did she do it? Unfortunately, the answer is all around us. We live in a culture saturated with distorted ideals of body image. Ms Aderotimi's death dramatises a feature of modern life that has become ubiquitous: that we can reshape our bodies according to whatever ideal we are being sold by the fashion and diet industries. The photos of models in magazines are digitally enhanced to make them fit with an ideal that even they cannot achieve with excessive dieting and daily trips to the gym.

Over the next few days, up the road from me at Somerset House, pencil-thin girls, balancing on surrealist constructions formerly known as shoes, will convey a message to my intrigued daughters that this is what attractive looks like. Today is the start of London Fashion Week.

Yet the outward glitz conceals inner anguish. At a recent event at the National Portrait Gallery, the supermodel Erin O'Connor described herself as feeling like a "commodity". "Fashion", she said "is built on perpetuating fantasy. There is a sense of uniformity. We have forgotten how to be individuals."

An all-party Parliamentary group on body image is being launched next month, but it will have its work cut out to resist the power of the media. Lorraine Candy, editor-in-chief of *Elle*, hit back at suggestions that tampering with images of models in glamorous magazines ought to be regulated in some way. "We're producing what women want. If they didn't want it, they wouldn't buy it," she insisted.

Yet this is disingenuous. They want it because they are constantly told that they want it. Again and again, they are told that this is what beautiful looks like by people such as her. Capitalism's dark genius is that it creates the very demand that it satisfies, while being indifferent to the psychological collateral damage.

Anyone who doubts the significance of all this ought to read the psychoanalyst Susie Orbach's *Bodies* (Profile Books, 2009), where she charts the depth of suffering and mental disorder that is created by the distorted images of bodies promoted by the fashion and diet industries.

I like the look of beautiful women. But this is different. This false ideal generates a deep sense of shame for those who do not have airbrushed-up anorexic figures. It is eroding our children's sense of self-worth. It needs external regulation.

It is time to speak against the cuts

Budget-slashing is hitting the most needy: Christians must act, says *Al Aynsley-Green*

SIXTEEN-year-old Louise was so overwhelmed by bullying that she was on the point of killing herself a few months ago; Mandy and Mike's family was at the point of collapse, after an appalling attack on their 14-year-old daughter; Peter, aged 24, whose family had disowned him at 16 for being gay, had spiralled into loneliness, alcohol- and drug-misuse — all of these people were rescued by expert help from the Waves project in Weymouth, the town that is hosting the Olympic sailing events next year.

For 16 years, an outstanding emergency drop-in centre for troubled youngsters, an outreach parenting programme, and a service for family mediation have quietly helped many hundreds here to overcome their difficulties, using money from the Children's Society, and funding of £80,000 a year from Dorset County Council.

The project, as well as giving an immediate point of assistance for distressed children and young people, also accepts referrals from local authorities, children's services, and voluntary organisations, often helping those whom nobody else wants to know.

This kind of intervention is highly cost-effective in preventing long-term problems, because a child taken into care costs the taxpayer £20-30,000 a year, and a child in a young-offenders' institution between £74,000 and £200,000, depending on the type of regime.

ANNE FAULCONER, aged 82, and Pat Reeves and Evelyn Fuggle, both 76, personify the real Big Society. With a group of dedicated and passionate older people, they have run sponsored sports events, coffee mornings, and community activities to raise money for the Children's Society to support the Waves project. At a time when there is so much disconnection between old and young, youngsters really matter to them.

Now all this hard work and success is to be destroyed by the decision by Dorset County Council to axe the project's contract, in order to meet the Government's savage spending cuts.

RICHARD BUDD



Taking note: Sir Al Aynsley-Green at the Waves project, with one of its clients

The £80,000 is not a huge sum, especially in the same town that is spending millions on new roads and flowerbeds for the Olympic sailing next year. Children and young people here say that this spending frenzy is not improving their lives. Where is there any meaningful legacy for them?

THE devastating effects of the cuts on the voluntary services supporting our most troubled young people are being seen in other projects in Dorset, where Dave Thompson, the director of the Dorset Youth Association, says that his organisation's income of more than £600,000 is likely to shrivel to only £80,000 next year.

Nationwide, and not just in the inner cities that we hear so much about, projects run by the Children's Society and other voluntary organisations are stretched to breaking point. Surely this cannot be right, fair, or morally acceptable?

Yes, the doughty volunteers will try to carry on against huge difficulties to raise money for the Waves project — that is their passion and commitment. Its manager and staff will look at how to provide a minimum but inferior service. And, yes, the Children's Society will try its best to continue some financial support, at a time when its commitments throughout the country are acutely overstretched.

But the "Compassionate Conservatism" of the Tory partner in the Coalition Government seems to have disappeared from view, along with the fine words of social justice from the Liberal Democrats. The rhetoric of David Cameron and Nick Clegg on the Big Society rings hollow, and the emollient speeches of the minister Francis Maude, and the promise of the Big Society Bank, offer no comfort to those already served with redundancy notices.

Yes, we have to face our economic challenges, but the betrayal of children and families set against the 16-year record of success in Weymouth is a microcosm that exposes the real-life impact of spending cuts to sharp national scrutiny.

COMPASSIONATE people, no matter what their party-political persuasion, must stand up, be counted, and say that this cannot be right. We have to find another way to safeguard the precious services that are the lifeline for those in despair. Do we, as Christians committed to the care of the most vulnerable, stand silent, or are we prepared to speak?

Individuals should look and see what is happening, and be prepared to be outraged. We can join others in being determined to:

- monitor and document the impact of the cuts;
- write to our MPs, local council leaders, directors of council children's services, and children's portfolio holders, with facts, especially the experiences of children and families;
- write to local and national newspapers, and lobby broadcast media;
- harness volunteers in our parishes and communities to raise funds for the Children's Society.

Nationally, I want to call on clergy and lay people to speak out, and refuse to be silent. We should collate centrally what is being said by whom, and with what effect. We must invest in credible research capacity to document the effects of the cuts on services, and listen to what children, young people, and families are saying.

Above all, we must become effective political advocates for the best interests of these children, young people, and families, especially for the most vulnerable and voiceless. Children are the living messages to a time we will not see. We cannot afford to fail them.

Sir Al Aynsley-Green is Professor Emeritus at University College, London, and chairman of the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education. He was the first Children's Commissioner for England from 2005 to 2010.

Should gay weddings be in church?



Paul Vallely disentangles the various different arguments

THE most recent civil wedding I attended took place in a stately home. The couple told me afterwards that they had wanted a candle and some flowers on the table where the register was signed. The flowers were fine, they were told by the presiding official, but not the candle. It was a religious symbol.

The idea that religion has a monopoly on light is an interesting one. "*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*" Certainly that seems to be the view of the state, as well as the Church, when it comes to civil weddings — and civil partnerships, too. I was invited last year to the civil-partnership ceremony of two women in a town hall. But they also had a restriction imposed: their registrar said they could not read out a poem because it mentioned God.

To all of this, the Government is threatening to add yet more confusion. We have church weddings with God; state weddings without God; same-sex civil partnerships without God — to which may soon be added same-sex civil partnerships with God; and perhaps more.

The Coalition is launching a consultation process, and plans to legislate by 2015. Among its proposals are that same-sex civil-partnership ceremonies should be allowed to take place in religious buildings. Faith groups are split, as Unitarians, Quakers, and Liberal Jews are keen, while the Church of England and Roman Catholics are opposed.

But that is not all. At the same time, eight British couples have submitted a case to the European Court of Human Rights: four gay couples who want to get married; four heterosexual couples who want to enter civil partnerships (News, 5 November). Their present inability to do these things, they say, is sexual apartheid.

How are we to pick our way through this minefield of religious and political correctness? To reconcile issues of justice and freedom here, it is probably best to resort to the principle that any changes should be permissive, not compulsory.

The vocabulary may be the easy part. Some gender and sexuality campaigners reject the label of marriage as patriarchal and oppressive; others insist that the term "gay marriage" is necessary for ideological equity. Religious people are also divided in a complex way. The Pope describes gay marriage as "insidious", and insists that marriage must involve a man and a woman, while the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement hails the new moves as "a positive step towards full marriage equality". But many partnered gay Christians reject gay "marriage" as theologically besides socially inaccurate.

A permissive approach suggests that we should just let people call it what they want. But it would also suggest that both straight and gay couples should be allowed to use the Bible, hymns, and prayers in their civil ceremonies. The word of God is not copyright. People should be encouraged to use it, and see where the Spirit leads. Vague faith is better than no faith. It is the start of a journey.

Should same-sex ceremonies be allowed in church? Certainly, where the presiding cleric and congregation are happy with that. But the Government should not impose the requirement on those who don't want it.

Opponents fear that once permissive legislation is passed, gay activists will mischievously target conservative clerics, and then take them to the European Court. Expert lawyers suggest that such an appeal would be likely to fail, because of the way the Human Rights Convention is framed, and because it gives specific exclusions on religious matters.

Yet it seems fairly likely that campaigners would make such an appeal, hoping that the political noise generated would work in their favour, even if the law did not. That is the crucial issue that the Government needs to address, if its proposals are to find wider support within the Church.