The what and the how

When I was a child, I did not care about *how* I looked to others. I would not mind a stained T-shirt, messy hair, or a chaotic room. To my mother’s despair, I simply was like that. And it would be foolish to say that this belief is completely gone. The belief came from watching *Beauty and the Beast* countless times. As a consequence, ‘beauty is found within’ resonated with me and my distaste for spotless appearances was born. Because I watched the movie so many times, by sheer exposure, its message became an unalterable truth to me. But this is no longer. As the years went by, it became clear not only that appearances are important but that the *how* is as relevant as the *what*. Or even more.

It is undeniable that *what* we are, matters. Maybe kind, or faithful, or an space exploration enthusiast. It matters. *How* we present ourselves to the world, however, does matter as well. For example, we would pay attention to a lab-coated physicist talking about life possibilities in Mars. But we would not listen to a tin-foil hatted lunatic claiming that Martians are coming for him. In that situation, the willingness to listen is substituted by the urge to run, isn’t it? Both are talking about life forms on Mars, but the context has drastically changed. The *how* has drastically changed.

Why, maybe the tin-foil hatted man is telling the truth! Because it is difficult to have a perfect assessment of something, millions of years of natural selection have casted a curse on us: judgements. Judgements, even if biased, must be done to ensure survival. And this is what we do: survive and judge. Judging was in our ancestors, it is in ourselves and it will be in our descendance. The beauty in this apparently inescapable curse is that it can be used to our advantage. How? The answer lies in rationality. All prejudices vanish and judgements become a helpful tool through rationality. A tool that we may use to discern whether the lunatic is, indeed, a lunatic.

The *how*, of course, is not restricted to external appearances only. What we say and what we do are of importance, but how we say it and how we do it is even more important. To illustrate this point, a citation from an episode of the podcast “The Anthropocene Reviewed” will be useful. In this podcast, John Green reviews a facet of the human era on a five-star scale. In this case, sunsets -which are the *what*- are being reviewed using a deep and meaningful *how*.

“And then he would do something absolutely extraordinary (*referring to his one year old puppy*)—he would roll over onto his back, and present his soft belly. I always marvelled at the courage of that, his ability to be so absolutely vulnerable to us, to offer us the place that ribs don’t protect, and trust that we weren’t going to bite or stab him. It’s hard to trust the world like that, to show it your belly. […] maybe I’m just scared that if I show the world my belly, it will devour me. And so I wear the armor of cynicism, and hide behind the great walls of irony, and only glimpse beauty with my back turned to it, through the Claude Glass. […] And so I try to turn toward that scattered light, belly out, and I tell myself: This doesn’t look like a picture. And it doesn’t look like a God. It is a sunset, and it is wildly beautiful, and this whole thing you’ve been doing where almost nothing gets five stars because almost nothing is perfect? That’s b.s. So much is perfect. Starting with this.”

A simple *what*, the sunset, is elevated to a whole new level by means of a beautiful *how*. One could describe the sunset and its colours, one could explain all the phenomena that simultaneously go on, one could look at the sun and just open the mouth in awe. However, John Green talks about his dog. He masterfully turns the loyal animal into a mirror that reflects human vulnerability, and the heavy burden that we must carry when protecting it. Protection that is no longer necessary while experiencing the sunset. An ideal instant, perfection. Five stars.

In short, special attention must be put in the *how*. It affects the *what* in an impactful manner, sometimes wholly turning around situations. This can be applied in appearances, but also in the language used or the actions taken. No matter how bright the *what* is, the *how* should never be eclipsed by it. I can now understand my poor mother trying to brush the hair of a hopeless child. Because yes, beauty is found within. But one should never forget to look outside.