

ISSUE No. 16

# DARLING

*the art of being a woman*



NONE OF THE  
WOMEN IN THIS  
MAGAZINE HAVE BEEN

**RETOUCHED**

# A REVOLUTIONARY CONVERSATION

## with Jess Weiner

INTERVIEW WITH JESS WEINER BY SARAH DUBBELDAM AND TERESA MILLER ARCHER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGELO SGAMBATI  
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JESS WEINER IS CHANGING CULTURAL MESSAGES ONE BRAND AT A TIME. FROM *Barbie's* LATEST BODY EVOLUTION TO *Dove's* MEMORABLE REAL WOMEN CAMPAIGN, THE RESULTS OF HER WORK BEHIND THE SCENES HAVE COME TO LIGHT OVER THE YEARS, MAKING SIGNIFICANT WAVES IN TERMS OF HOW WE APPROACH WOMEN, GIRLS AND CONFIDENCE. JESS IS AN ACCLAIMED WRITER, SPEAKER, AUTHOR AND ENTREPRENEUR WITH OVER TWO DECADES OF EXPERIENCE AS A THOUGHT LEADER ON SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE. RECOGNIZING THE NEED TO PARTNER WITH THOSE IN CONTROL OF CREATING THE MESSAGE, SHE FORMED *Talk to Jess*, A REPUTABLE CONSULTING AND STRATEGY FIRM. WE WERE SO GRATEFUL TO SIT DOWN WITH HER AND TALK THROUGH HER MUCH NEEDED, MEANINGFUL WORK.

**SARAH DUBBELDAM:** You had an instrumental role in consulting on the new evolution of Barbie to have three new body sizes, seven skin tones, 22 eye colors and 24 hairstyles. This is a huge feat! What motivated you to dive into such an extensive and hard-to-accomplish campaign?

**JESS WEINER:** My area of expertise is translating the trends that are impacting women and girls and we knew, when it came to Barbie, that a lot of moms and parents had concerns over the beauty implications, or that they were so focused on cultural critique of Barbie that they were missing some of the vibrant play opportunities girls have when they sit down. With all the diversity now added, Barbie looks exponentially more like the culture who plays with her and by virtue really invites girls to come and play out possibilities that perhaps they weren't playing before. Then, at a very early age, we can start to shift the way a girl can potentially see herself and see herself reflected back in her society and her culture.

**SD:** So obviously it takes a really long time for huge change to happen with big brands. How do you stay encouraged to persevere for change in the wake of challenges and slow moving processes?

**JW:** You hit the nail on the head because it's not like I have chosen a career with instant gratification. [Laughs] When you set out to change cultural perception through marketing and advertising and media, it's a long game. I run the marathon, not the sprint. I think it's a daily mantra. I have to remind myself

and my team that we are in it for the haul, and culture didn't become the way culture is overnight. There are embedded belief systems in our society about beauty and body image and female empowerment that have been taking place slowly over decades. So what we do is we focus on the ecosystem, because I believe every major kind of media body or business is an ecosystem. What I mean by that is, yes, you can work with a business or a brand on changing a message or a campaign or a product, but you also have to work with their consumer. They are partners, right? Families, individuals, parents ... you have to work on the consumers of the product, because if they don't change, if the people who are buying or supporting your message don't change, it's a lot harder to change it in a vacuum. Everybody needs to understand the why—the big why—because then you have to rally around that passion point. Then, it's the big word of the day, which is "patience." Businesses don't often have patience. Their dollar is at stake and so how do you get them to have patience in the process and to trust that building a relationship with their consumers in an authentic and deep way is going to pay off so much more in the end than doing something like a quick fix that will get somebody's attention but doesn't really mean anything?

**SD:** What set your life on this trajectory of standing up for women?

**JW:** Looking back now, I think my entire life up to this moment has been perfectly designed, but I didn't know that when I was growing up. As a kid, I



Model: Jess Weiner  
Dress: Lane Bryant, LaneBryant.com  
Jewelry: Model's Own



loved commercials and television. I was a total media junkie. I also didn't look like all of the girls that I saw on TV. I wasn't really thin, I didn't have long blonde hair. I didn't have perfectly straight teeth. I had braces and a curvy body. I was well aware at a young age that I wasn't reflected in these stories. So, I had this curiosity as a girl. How do I make a story about myself or for other girls like me? I have been following that curiosity my whole life, but I struggled with body image and eating disorders throughout my adolescent years. When I got to college, a really important turning point was being in a group therapy situation with other college students. I saw all of these girls that I would have seen on campus and thought they had the perfect lives because they looked a certain way, or drove a certain car, or had a boyfriend, but when we all sat in the circle, we shared the same story. That was a story about young women trying to find their own voice, their own path, healing from wounds in their path, and essentially becoming the version of themselves that they wanted to be. We were all hiding behind these eating behaviors to cope with body image. Here, I realized that one, I wasn't alone, and two, that there was power in telling this story publicly because it brought it out from the shadow and into the light where you can help inspire other people. That is what motivated me to write plays on body image, start my own theater company, and travel across the country performing these plays. Eventually, I moved to Hollywood to write books and work within the industry, which ultimately transitioned to my work now within the advertising and marketing space. I didn't know at the time that this was where I was heading, but when I look at it now, I am so grateful for even the hardest moments in my life—the moments where I doubted myself and my appearance the most—because it is what fueled me to understand the real pain of poor body image, but also the power in recovery, sharing your story and helping other people. I built a career out of marrying my passions and making a profit.

**SD:** There's a lot of criticism about how women are perceived or even reached out to in media, since a lot of men have dominated those fields for a long time. But as things change, what responsibilities do you think women have and how has the advertising world typically stereotyped us?

**JW:** It's not just gender alone that decides whether something is going to have fair or equal representation, it really is about the person and the access that this person has to understanding the impact of their story. Women have been typically stereotyped in over-sexualized ways, in one-dimensional ways in our marketing and advertising, but now we are seeing a big pendulum swing back in the opposite direction to explore more multi-dimensionality, more in-depth relationships that women have, [and] understanding that their roles are changing. While I'd love to say that is all great, big, social progress, the truth is, it's a smart business move to tell better stories about women. We are more than 50 percent of the population and there is tremendous buying power, emotional power, social power, but at the end of the day it is about doing what is right for culture and what is right for business, and how do you marry those two? I think that we all have responsibility, not just the big advertising companies or brands. We all sit on top of media empires every day. There are some people that have more Instagram followers than most major brands.

**SD:** True.

**JW:** So what story are we choosing to tell in our media every day? How do we talk about women? How do we represent ourselves and others? I think these are questions everybody should be asking themselves. I think there are drivers within the advertising, media and marketing industries to promote more women and to retain more women because that will be important in terms of representation both in front of and behind the camera, as well as in front and behind media.



**SD:** Where do you really see us as a society, particularly the advertising and cosmetic areas, as actually listening to the real desires of men and women?

**JW:** Well, out of all of my brand partners that I have had over the years, a relationship that I value dearly and am very proud of is my relationship with Dove and the “Real Beauty” campaign that started 10 years ago by a brand willing to listen to women and their feelings around beauty and body image. They, in their own right, created a revolution of conversation that wasn’t happening as publically as it is now, inviting women and men to better understand our relationship to beauty and discuss how we can help change the next generation so that they don’t repeat the same feelings that we currently do. Dove is best in class at starting this conversation because their campaigns aren’t just about marketing, they are creating a movement, and this movement has reached over 19 million girls via self-esteem workshops across the world. I feel it has opened so many doors for other brands, for other businesses, for other organizations to feel inspired, validated and connected to this conversation.

**SD:** You also have worked on the curriculum attached to the Dove campaign. Tell us more about that.

**JW:** One of the first key insights that we used with the Dove campaign over 10 years ago was the fact that, at that time, our research showed us that only two percent of women worldwide would consider themselves beautiful. So that meant there was 98 percent of women who didn’t even describe themselves as beautiful. We also found that six out of 10 girls will stop doing something they love based on the way they feel about how they look. So that means that 60 percent of girls stop doing something they love—you know, trying out for cheerleading, running for student council, raising their hand in class—because of appearance-related anxiety and because of feeling like they are not beautiful enough. That is sobering, because it is really about the fear that they are going to be stopping their lives due to how they feel about their appearance. How do we as a culture, as a family system, as friends, how do we help change that? The volume that we have reached at 19 million women and girls is one proof point that there has been tremendous impact. It has changed girls’ majors in college, it has changed their career trajectories, it has helped professionals widen their practice, it has helped moms heal their wounds from childhood. That is a powerful testament to a marketing campaign that had a life way beyond product.

**SD:** Is there a growing sense of corporate responsibility in companies? Or do you feel like they are shifting their approach simply because of supply and demand?

**JW:** I think that it is a little bit of both. Corporations for at least the past 10 or 15 years have been more aware of the need to be more socially responsible and to build that into their business DNA. Big corporations that have 50, 60, 100 years behind them, they are slower to evolve. I think partially it has been imperative for them to be competitive, to reexamine where they are leaving a social footprint and how they are doing that and what they are standing

for. I also think it’s indicative of this generation of consumers that wants more from the brands that they purchase and that they partner with. One of the things I warn my clients and partners about is to make sure that you don’t have what I call a “SFSN” ... Sounds Fabulous and Signifies Nothing campaign. You don’t want to throw a lot of rah-rah on a very savvy audience. You want to make sure that what you say to your consumer, to your audience, is something you can really live and that makes sense for your brand DNA. It is something you are going to be committed to for a while, because as consumers, we can smell a fraud. We can smell when a brand is being inauthentic and reaching.

**SD:** What do you see as the biggest problem right now with companies and actual change?

**JW:** I still struggle with the fact that there are still not enough women CEOs, not enough women senior leaders, and so we don’t have parity in the rooms where decisions are being made. We need to have more of that and I think that’s across many industries. Also, from a representation standpoint, by and large we still see fairly one-dimensional depictions of women. There is a lack of representation, lack of diversity and inclusivity. There is still lots of advertising that showcases the token wife or token girlfriend interested in token things that don’t really show a fully fleshed-out woman. There is still plenty of advertising for fashion, for cosmetics, for lifestyle that pulls apart a woman’s body. We still only see a billboard with a pair of legs or a set of boobs or a side of a face, but we don’t always see full women in our advertising across multiple sectors.

There is a revolution happening inside of the advertising industry looking at its own internalized sexism, its own internalized misogyny that has kind of perpetuated some of those images, but also the brands who work with these advertising agencies. I think it’s a lot about representation and making sure that we are evolving the way we see ourselves and each other because that does impact the next generation. Even if it’s a 20-second ad or most of us are trying to skip over it online or TV, there is so much power in those visual messages.

**SD:** So what’s next for you?

**JW:** I have lots of exciting projects coming up! One I’m particularly proud of is my new podcast “Talk To Jess: Conversations with Today’s Thinkers, Movers, and Shapers.” It’s fulfilling to go behind the scenes with today’s change-makers to talk about their journeys of self-discovery. I love the honest and deep conversations my guests and I have—their willingness to be open and vulnerable with me. It also shows that being successful doesn’t happen without struggles. I want to bring people together to hear inspiring stories, learn new things, and be a part of a like-minded community of people that continuously support and inspire one another. My husband and I are also working with an amazing program called Starfish One By One to help women and girls in low income, marginalized communities in Guatemala have more access to education and opportunity. We hope our support will make a difference in generations to come.