

To Walk in Beauty
The Art of Living
By
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Since I'm unable to display pictures of our Universe today, I've decided to talk about pictures instead, about looking at the big picture, or, more importantly, about painting the big picture. So the title of today's message is, "To Walk in Beauty." I've subtitled it, "The Art of Life," because I believe everyone is an artist, a co-creator of the Universe with the capacity for making the world a more beautiful place, including those artists who dare take on the grotesque, profane, unspeakable, subjects many of us prefer to ignore.

Pablo Picasso once said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once [one] grows up."¹ When I was a child, for instance, my untrained hand could copy anything with near perfection, especially the characters in comic books that I enjoyed recreating with my pencil. But I've long since lost this skill because I didn't keep it up. As we mature we are taught that life is too serious and too important and there is too much to do to squander countless hours creating pointless images. It may not be explicit, but in our culture the arts are often for kids and those who don't grow out of it are likely to remain unappreciated, struggling, or just amateur artists the rest of their lives. As theologian Matthew Fox says, "Recent Western history has denigrated the artist and created myths of alienation and isolation, myths about the 'beatnik' artist, the alcoholic artist, the 'madman' artist."² The point being, we learn not to take the arts or ourselves as artists too seriously, not if we want to make a living.

What I'm saying is that living itself is an art, that life is an opus, a composition, a process of making the world more beautiful. Sometimes I look at each one of us, at every creature, as a unique dash of color on the palette of life, and, as such, every creature helps co-create the Universe by simply existing. As Meister Eckhart said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God." Yet, in relegating our actual artists to the outskirts of significance and success, and our inner artists to the kindergartens of our childish pasts, we forget our beauty and its demand we make the world more beautiful with our presence. We forget in the hubbub of all the serious, important, grown up stuff we must do that the most important thing is beauty. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," John Keats said, "that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know."

If this is so, if beauty is all there is and all we need, how many of us have considered it enough to even grasp what beauty is or what it means? Can it be qualified, is it a universal, or is it something that's purely in the eye of the beholder? What is the

¹ humanitiesweb.org/human.php?s=g&p=c&a=q&ID=113

² Fox, Matthew, *Creation Spirituality*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 1991, p. 34.

underlying nature of beauty that makes everything we consider beautiful, beautiful? What is it we inexplicitly recognize when we're taken by the beauty of a colorful painting, moved by the sound of music, made tranquil by the noise of a babbling brook, captured by the intricacy of a rosebud, overwhelmed by a breathtaking vista, or see loveliness in the face of another? Whatever it is, beauty isn't something we need to be taught before we grasp it. Beauty is an instinct, as natural to us as it is for a bird to make a nest or a squirrel to bury acorns. Beauty is a sense we have in light of certain kinds of experiences, not an idea to comprehend. And *beautiful* is what we say when there's no better word to describe this feeling.

Perhaps I'm not the best person to tackle the subjects of art and beauty, however, not only because I've forgotten how to draw but because one of my great disappointments in life is having made only a "B" in Art 101. As a required part of my Liberal Arts education, it was a class meant to expose students to a range of artistic mediums, including sketching, painting (oil, acrylic and pastel), and sculpting. I remember carrying a sketchbook with me everywhere I went that semester in order to stay on top of the numerous drawings the course required. I made A's on all my tests and pop-quizzes, and worked hard to complete two major paintings—a pastel of a collie standing majestically on the ocean shore, and an acrylic painting of the pipe I'd purchased to accentuate the persona I felt I needed as a philosophy major. In addition to being quite proud of my creative work, even if I wasn't an Art major, I was working hard to bring my Grade Point Average up and was counting on an "easy A." So you might imagine my surprise and disappointment when I ended up with only a B.

I became certain it must have been because the instructor simply didn't like philosophy majors and had, therefore, discriminated against me. It was even possible, I thought, that my work was so surprisingly good that she gave me the lesser grade because her ego couldn't admit that I didn't need the benefit of her expertise. The more I obsessed about the insult, the more unfairly I realized I'd been treated. So I went to the Dean of Students to demand her unjust decision be overturned. When my philosophy professor found out about it, he argued it would be more unjust for the University to violate academic freedom by telling professors how to grade. "Principles" are nice I responded, "but the art teacher laid out a 'social contract' at the beginning of the course by outlining what was expected to earn an A, and I fulfilled my end of the agreement in good faith!" But in the end, although I was granted a hearing, the Art professor told me that even though I'd done well on all my tests and quizzes, and had completed all my work, there was nothing spectacular about my drawings or paintings and my grade would have to stand.

In sharing this little anecdote, I wish to point out the, perhaps unexpected, relationship between beauty and justice. For who would have guessed an art class could lead to so many issues of justice? There were accusations of discrimination and unfairness, questions about an educator's academic freedom, conversations about social contracts, and even an official hearing by the authorities. It sounds more like Watergate than watercolor!

Today, I'm pretty sure my art teacher wasn't discriminating against me just because I wasn't one of her art majors (although, as a philosophy major, I still maintain my doubts). And as a philosopher, all kidding aside, I have looked more deeply into the nature of beauty in order to have some reasonable grasp of what it is and what it means. The definition I've come up with that works best for me is that beauty is a form of justice. So art is a kind of justice making. Justice is art.

Ironically, I didn't begin making this association between beauty and justice, which for me are almost synonymous, by studying philosophy directly. It began, rather, in Art 101, even if my performance was only slightly above average. Beauty may not be my rendition of a collie on the beach or of a pipe I never learned to smoke, but it was during that class that I learned about the elements that are supposed to go into a composition, whether in a painting, a sketch, a sculpting, a photograph, or a in a frame of video. Space, shape, line, light, shadow, hue and tone are the usual elements that must be included, or excluded with intent, in any form of art, all of which are brought together with some sense of balance or harmony.

In my art class I learned that if a lot of red appears on one corner of a canvas, for example, then a dash of the same color ought to appear near the opposite corner, if only as the artist's signature, to balance things out. The colors don't have to be evenly distributed to create balance, but their needs to be an internal harmony that makes it all work together. Likewise, just making sounds on a musical instrument, isn't the same as playing music. Nobody applauds the discordant sounds all the musicians make while tuning their various instruments before the symphony begins. The various sounds of an orchestra must be brought together in some sort of harmony before there's music. Sometimes artists may use a sense of disharmony in their work, like Picasso did in his paintings, or the asymmetry in Japanese architecture, or by adding dissonant notes to music, but even these are orchestrated in balance with all the other elements in a painting, structure, or musical score.

Beauty, furthermore, isn't limited to these and other traditional forms of art. Art, more often, imitates life, by trying to recreate or, even, re-imagine beauty in order to share it with others. "If I had a song that I could sing for you," John Denver sang, "I'd sing a song to make you feel this way." Lord Byron, likewise, used poetry to express the beauty of his cousin, Ann Wilmot:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes

—Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Although some philosophers, apparently, aren't the best artists, there actually is a branch of philosophy devoted to the study of beauty. It's called *aesthetics*, from the Greek word for beauty, *αισθητικη*, meaning, "that which appeals to the senses," like

when you're on the beech looking at a magnificent sunset, or on a mountaintop overlooking a vast expanse, or listening to Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's version of *Over the Rainbow*, and all you can say, "Beautiful." Beauty is an emotional response to a physical sensation. And what I am suggesting now is that the basic experience of beauty, that which is universal in all beautiful experiences, is the sensation of justice.

Keep in mind the word *balance*, which is a fundamental element of composition in all art, comes from the Latin word, *bilanx* that literally means, "having two pans." So *balance* is another word for, "justice," which is why the Greek goddess of Justice holds two pans in her hand. Thus, the balance the artist seeks between the various elements of composition can also be called *justice*, and the sense of beauty art gives us is an intuitive recognition of this balance. Beauty is a sense of balance, and balance is justice. Therefore, beauty is what we feel when we experience justice.

This is why so many religionists and moralists have concluded the secret to life is finding harmony and balance between our two pans, just like Lady Justice. Aristotle suggested the secret to a good life is doing all things in moderation, or, conversely, doing nothing in excess. Aristotle, like young Buddha, began a life of overindulgence, which led them to try the opposite, renouncing all pleasure through asceticism, until they both learned the value of moderation and the Middle Way, of finding balance between these two pans.

Psychology also tells us the key to mental wellbeing is a sense of balance, or equilibrium, or homeostasis, which are other words for *justice*. When we feel threatened, for example, our blood pressure increases, our muscles tense, our adrenal glands go into overload, our breathing becomes shallow, and we prepare for fight or flight. Once the sense of threat is over, however, our bodies should quickly regulate back to normal. We are at peace when our heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and other vital signs are balanced. Those with anger issues, on the other hand, remain out of balance because their sympathetic nervous systems have trouble self-regulating, causing them to remain in heightened states of anxiety.

It's the same with disease, sickness, or injury. These occur when something in us isn't working in harmony and our bodies are struggling to regain balance. This is why, in defining injustice and justice, Socrates said, "they are like disease and health; being in the soul just what disease and health are in the body."³ Our health is also the reason medical experts encourage us to eat balanced diets.

And, of course, social prophets like the great Dr. Martin Luther King, apply the principles of art to the social canvas, realizing something just isn't right when there's too much color on one side and not enough on the other. In this case such balance is called *equality*, and any society without is incomplete and grotesque.

³ Plato, *The Five Great Dialogues*, Walter J. Black, Roslyn, NY, 1942, p. 329.

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These are the reasons I define beauty as justice, and why I believe everyone is an artist, because all of life is about creating balance, about the way we harmonize all our experiences into a great opus. We are all artists because, in seeking harmony, homeostasis, equilibrium, balance, sustainability, equality, justice, or whatever word we use, we are striving, as the poet says, *to walk in beauty*. And we walk in beauty by creating justice in all we do.

We walk in beauty when there is harmony between peoples and nations. We walk in beauty when all people are treated fairly and there is enough for everyone. We walk in beauty when there is a just distribution of wealth. We walk in beauty when punishment is meted out proportionately between people of all colors. We walk in beauty when working women earn as much as working men. We walk in beauty when everyone's vote counts the same. We walk in beauty when children everywhere have the same opportunities for education, healthcare, and nutrition. We walk in beauty when we harvest the Earth's resources at a sustainable rate. We walk in beauty when there's as much winter as there is summer. We walk in beauty when the number of people being born everyday is in proportion to the number of people passing away. When we envision this picture of our world, and better still, work to create such a world, we get that feeling that causes us to say, "beautiful."

Conversely, when we see a burned forest, or polluted water, or brown skies, or mountaintops laid waste by strip mining, we don't have this feeling, this sense of awe and wonder we feel when we see green woodlands, clear running streams, a blue sky on a cloudless day, or hoarfrost decorating trees on our snowcapped hills. This is so because we recognize the disharmony that exists when the environment is injured. When our forests are burned, our air and water are poisoned, and our mountains are torn down, the balance in these delicate ecosystems is gone. Nature no longer works in harmony. These places have become ugly ruins because there is no longer any justice in them. They no longer appeal to our senses because they lack balance, and because they lack balance, they lack beauty.

Yet, I believe it is because we have repressed the artist in us, and alienated to many of the artists among us, that we have come to tolerate all the ugliness in the world, taking it for granted as it were a natural and necessary part of the landscape. The opposite of *aesthetics*, after all, is *anesthetics*, those structures and compounds that dull our senses and cause us to fall asleep. When we are anesthetized we don't recognize beauty because beauty is a sensual pleasure. Likewise, repression of the artist within, that begins when we are all young, dulls us to the feeling of beauty we were born to seek and create.

This is why I am compelled today to talk about the relationship between art and beauty and justice, because too many have been anesthetized to the ugliness around us and have come to accept this as all there is, and that injustice and inequality, war and violence, pollution and poverty are the natural state of things. But these things are not natural or normal. They exist because something is out of whack, because some have mistaken the warm-up as the concert, the blotches on the palette as the

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finished painting, the wood shavings as the sculpture. They have forgotten that art requires us to create harmony, form, beauty out of all life has to offer. There is ugliness and injustice in the world because too many are stuck in heightened states of fear and rage, throwing everything else out of balance.

So we must awaken the artist within each of us to help create the balance and beauty needed to make our world healthy and whole. Whether you're a painter or a prophet, a dancer or a demonstrator, a musician or a marcher, a poet or a protestor, you are an artist born to make the world a more beautiful and just place. As the great sculptor Auguste Rodin once said, "The main thing is to be moved, to love, to hope, to tremble, to live." Or, as Georgia O'Keeffe said, "To create one's own world takes courage." May you have the courage to walk in beauty.