

CHAPTER 15

Beauty Will Save the World

"Beauty will save the world."

Perhaps you have heard this pronouncement of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's. What do you think the writer meant by it?

When speaking about beauty, perhaps most of us would immediately remember some example of the arts — music, literature, or a painting. Why do we value art so highly? Why is it that the pictures by Renaissance artists never seem to age, but on the contrary seem more and more beautiful? Millions of tourists who visit Paris go to the Louvre to see the "Mona Lisa" by Leonardo da Vinci, and the inexplicable beauty of the church on the Nerli River magically attracts anybody who loves Russia. What is the mystery behind the power of beauty?

In China 2,000 years ago Confucius said that the purpose of art is to "guide people's hearts toward righteousness." This understanding of the role of the arts in the harmony of society is one of the basic teachings of Confucianism, a philosophy that influenced the development of a whole civilization.

Perhaps this will help us to think more deeply about beauty and the role of art — its place not only in our own lives but the way it is able to play a part in the transformation of the world.



Everything desires beauty

Toward what are our senses directed? What do our eyes long to see, our ears to hear, our noses to smell, and our fingers to touch?

Would you prefer listening to the musicians of the Bolshoi Theatre tune their instruments or perform the music of Bach? When you are studying, do you like calm music or the sound of road construction outside your window?

Would you like to live in a room where the walls are gray with dirty streaks (the remaining traces of the flood caused by the neighbor upstairs), with your only window facing the city dump? Or would you prefer a well-lit room with a large window opening onto a garden?

Which kind of smells would you prefer — meat kept for a couple of weeks out of the refrigerator in summer, or a cake just baked by your mother?

There is hardly any disagreement over these questions. Have you ever wondered why people always desire beauty, be it in music, good cooking or their surroundings? Of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and so people's ideas of beauty vary, but the desire for beauty is constant. For example, elderly people may like Romantic music whereas young people prefer rock. But both will argue that their music is beautiful.

What is beauty?

Before getting into more complicated questions, let us try to think what beauty is. Why do we see some people, things, and events as beautiful and others as ugly?

Many philosophers have tried to answer this question, and often their answers are hard to grasp. Try, for example, to understand Immanuel Kant's definition: "To feel beauty means to evaluate the subjective purpose of an object by means of emotions of pleasure and displeasure."

The definition of Vladimir Soloviev may tell us more: "Goodness, truth and beauty are nothing but different images of love." Beauty is one of the faces of love. What does that mean?

Let us think about this together. Do we always see a particular object — a house, a tree, an animal, a person — in the same way, as beautiful or as ugly? Imagine you come across in the street a lean, dirty dog which tries to bite everyone it sees. You will hardly consider it beautiful. And now imagine you have picked up such a dog, brought it home and raised it. You take it to the vet, cure it of diseases, walk with it, and feed it. You end up loving it, and what was before a plain dog has



become your best friend. Now how will you react if someone tries to call your dog ugly?

This simple example illustrates a very important principle. Beauty is not an objective quality; it manifests itself in relationships. Whether you give somebody your heart or just look positively at the surrounding world, you will notice how beautiful everything is. Love returns to us as beauty.

In the same way, if you bump into a stranger on a bus, his appearance may seem unattractive to you. But if you get acquainted and become attached to each other, the same features will look different. You will see a special beauty and charm in them that you had not noticed at first.

On the other hand, hate and anger distort even the most beautiful face. That is why the notion of a "beautiful person" means much more than just a pretty face. Have you noticed that a person with ideally regular features may be not only unattractive, but even repellent if he is cold, haughty, or has some other unpleasant trait? In the same way, a person possessing no external beauty may be the heart of any company, radiating an inner charm that no one can resist. People sometimes confuse beauty and its empty twin, prettiness. But, as the Russian connoisseur Konstantin Stanislavsky once said, "The difference between beauty and prettiness is the same as between real and paper flowers."

Even an ugly thing seems beautiful to a loving heart.

— Theocritus
ancient Greek poet

No outer beauty can be complete if it is not illuminated by inner beauty.

— Victor Hugo
19th century French writer

The ingredients of beauty

Why does love awaken beauty in the beloved? One of the answers is that love makes the inner potential of the *uniqueness* of all things manifest itself.

You have probably heard of the flower called edelweiss. Songs and poems praising the beauty of edelweiss have been written. What do you imagine it is like? In fact, it is a small, obscure

flower resembling a primrose, and bears no resemblance to a rose or tulip. Why do people speak about its beauty? The answer is simple. Edelweiss grows high in the mountains where there are no other flowers. Its uniqueness makes it appear beautiful.

The same is true of people. Our beauty is rooted in our uniqueness. However, it is not necessary to be the only person within ten miles for your beauty to be noticeable. Unlike flowers, each of us possesses a personality that is unique even in a crowd of many thousands. Through love, our uniqueness is revealed as amazing beauty.

Another ingredient of beauty is inner harmony. Imagine the starry sky on a clear night. No one will deny its awe-inspiring beauty. Or the rising of the sun. Why do we find such scenes beautiful? In them we feel inner harmony, an affirmation of positive meaning of the world about us. For stars are not just pieces of matter scattered randomly about the universe; they are part of a single system that exists according to majestic laws. The infinite variety of colors during a sunset is not accidental, either. Subconsciously we experience this order and harmony as a manifestation of beauty.

From a letter of Ludwig van Beethoven:

Surrounded by nature's beauty, often I sit for hours, while my senses feast upon the spectacles of nature. Here the majestic sun is not concealed ... here the blue sky is my sublime roof. When in the evening I contemplate in wonder the sky and the host of luminous bodies continually revolving within their orbits, suns or earths by name, then my spirit rises beyond these constellations so many millions of miles away.

In order to appreciate beauty, we must be in a state of inner harmony ourselves. Imagine you have come across something extremely unpleasant, and you are feeling fear, anger, hate or disgust. Do you think that in such a state you will be able to appreciate a beautiful picture or the song of a nightingale? It is hardly likely. Most probably you will have only one strong desire — to run away or to express your feelings to someone. Only after having calmed down will you be able to appreciate beauty again. Thus, not only is beauty a visible expression of certain universal laws, but to perceive it we ourselves must be in a state of inner harmony.

When we talk about the connection between “harmony” and “beauty,” we need to remember that this inner, deeper harmony manifests itself in different ways, including those that may seem unattractive. For example, which is more beautiful — a black, hairy caterpillar or a big, bright butterfly; a field covered with thick snow or a meadow filled with colorful flowers?

If we don't know the meaning of the changes taking place in nature, a caterpillar may look ugly, and a snow-covered field may seem cold and lifeless. But when we feel the grandeur and exquisiteness of the whole scheme, we will understand every manifestation of it as beautiful. Spring, summer, autumn, winter — each has its own special beauty. Part of this beauty is in the interconnectedness of everything. If there were no “nasty” caterpillar, there would be no gorgeous butterfly.

In this sense, nature can teach us many things. Every moment of our lives also possesses a unique beauty, but we often don't notice, seeing no meaning in what is happening to us. Nevertheless, we have the potential to look at our lives in a new way, from the standpoint of love, and then beauty will be visible even where earlier we could have seen nothing but darkness and despair.

How does beauty begin?

Let us try once more to understand how beauty appears. We have already noted that the perception of deep beauty results from relationships based on the impulse of love. This can be understood in case of creating something new, such as a work of art, but also in looking at what already exists.

For instance, to feel the deepest beauty of a flower, we can first choose to look at it with loving eyes — or at least with an inner peace, which means an unconscious

radiating of the same quality of emotion. The flower seems to be more beautiful. But if we look at the same flower with disdain, it will appear in quite a different way. We will notice that some of its petals have already faded, and we may shudder at the presence of a busy insect in its center.

The perception and experience of beauty are rooted in the emotions. If we choose to look with love, our perception of beauty will be sharper. Everyone knows that when a person is in love, he sees everything “through rose-colored glasses.” The whole world seems beautiful. Everyone seems to be good and kind, the sun shines



brighter than usual, and the birds sing especially sweetly.

Skeptics may ask: What is the point of it? Such a perception of reality is nothing but an illusion, as insubstantial as a soap bubble. But there is a wise saying: The world exists because of loving people. In choosing to notice and focus on the beautiful dimension of life, we are not deceiving ourselves. Rather we are helping the world to look at itself in a different way and notice what value lies in life’s smallest details. Once we see this dimension, we will have no wish to return to the limited ugly world we used to perceive.

Why does humanity strive for beauty?

For whom do flowers bloom in their beauty, which is most often invisible to human eyes? For what did the birds decorate themselves with bright colors like living flowers? For whom did the lark and the nightingale make their songs? Why are the tiger and the leopard so beautiful in their dangerous grace, and the lion in its majesty? For what does the maidens’ beauty bloom?

In the beauty of nature, as well as in works of art, there is a partial or a preliminary transformation of the world, and this beauty lifts man to the world of eternal images or ideas, the palpitating horses elevate the true driver to the life-giving sun.

— S.N. Bulgakov
20th century Russian religious philosopher

Before answering the question of why humanity strives for beauty, let us perform a simple experiment. You will need two evenings for it. On the first go to see a beautiful movie, one in which the way conflicts are resolved inspires the viewer's "perception of deep beauty." As happens in real life, ordinary people as well as heroes face problems, but the question is how they overcome their problems — by harming or

killing enemies or by clever and wise means? After the film is finished, observe yourself. How do you feel? What did you dream of that night? What kind of mood are you in?

Next evening go to see another movie — a horror film. Faces distorted by hate and anger, a nauseating feeling of fear and disgust aroused by the characters, floods of blood and the suffering of innocent victims. Again try to observe yourself. What feelings has the film aroused in you? Do you feel calm and at peace, or do you feel the need to discharge the accumulated excitement and stress?

Even such a simple experiment will demonstrate why people tend to strive for beauty and not for ugliness. If we saw only ugliness around us, we would become the embodiment of that ugliness ourselves, and this would lead to hate, alienation and pain. We would lose our inner peace.

What does beauty mean to our life? First of all, pursuing a beautiful path of life can be likened to pursuing the best way of

expressing ourselves. Following the truth of the beautiful should lead us to find the purest aspects of our personality and harmony in our soul. This, in turn, is a step toward experiencing mutual understanding with others and oneness with the world. We can feel a part of the eternal, beautiful scheme by overcoming the darkness of solitude in which our soul suffers. All of us strive for love, and love and beauty are inseparable.

Man as the creator of beauty

We are part of the harmony of the universe. Through creative efforts we multiply beauty, especially if we are guided by love. Unfortunately, we know examples of people guided by nothing but a desire to change the world. Some of these people became not the creators but the destroyers of beauty. Take, for instance, the immense project of re-routing the Siberian rivers or the attempt to destroy all of Russia's religious architecture, replacing it with modern buildings. Probably there is not a single

city on the territory of the former USSR that has not suffered from such projects.

But a person guided by love becomes a real creator of beauty. Painting, poetry, sculpture, music — all the kinds of art are finally directed at one aim — creating beauty. Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, Michelangelo's sculptures, Mozart's music and Shakespeare's poetry can touch the heart of any person, regardless of his

We look to perceive and to create beauty because our heart is stirred to love that which is beautiful. It struck me that my fascination with art was its beauty and thus its ability to bring joy and consolation to a world filled with suffering. Now I realized that I had to make my life beautiful through truly ethical action, and thus be a joy and comfort to others.

— Norman Vincent Peale
*American Christian minister and author,
The Power of Positive Thinking*



nationality or the time in which he lives. The reason is that art can reflect the eternal values contained in the human heart.

Although nature resembles us, there is a quality of human creativity that is not reflected in nature. Even if you search the whole universe, you will not find another being with the ability to make something totally distinct, new, unique, with eternal value. When a beaver makes a dam or a bird a nest, it does it in the same way that its ancestors have done for thousands of years. It repeats the same actions as all its fellow beavers or birds. However, human creativity is constantly reaching new levels of expression and complexity.



A spontaneous movement of the soul engenders art. The artist wants to create his own world and cultivate it in his soul, uniting his inner feeling and vision with the reality of the world outside him.

The way a person sees himself, eternity and nature influences how he constructs his home, temple, pictures, and even utensils.

Painters and artists of other genres:
You bring the treasure of your hearts
to people, you share with them. Your
aim is the spiritual unification of
people, love between people.

As long as we breathe, we must
create! And your creative work may
be manifold; the main thing here is
the creation of one's spirit. It is the
eternal creative work. The things you
paint on the canvas, veneer, board,
are nothing but a sign of what has
happened in your soul.

— Alexander Men
Russian priest, Faith and Creative Work