

Beauty, Wonder and Awe as Resources for Justice

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Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is a legacy of wonder. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to take things for granted. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel (1955, p. 43)

Many mainline Protestant traditions take strong positions on issues of justice but pay little attention to the power of beauty, wonder and awe to shape just attitudes and actions. In my experience, a “hermeneutics of suspicion” approach is most often taken in analyzing and prescribing antidotes to oppression. In this paper I want to explore an alternate, more positive approach to fighting injustice—the way of beauty, wonder and awe.

I will explore this alternate approach by offering three examples of wondering at beauty, and then use Elaine Scarry’s work *On Beauty and Being Just*, Abraham Joshua Heschel’s writings, and Kathleen O’Connor’s study of the divine speeches in Job to illuminate how those cases can contribute to just attitudes and actions.

Laura and the Crab Apple

Two year old Laura and I were out for our usual morning walk. We were nearing the edge of the town park, when Laura spied a crab apple tree in front of us. With an exclamation of delight, she hurried over to it, delighted by the array of tiny apples strewn on the ground beneath the tree’s outstretched branches. Rooting around a little, she picked one up and came running back to me, eager to share her find.

I always looked forward to these little adventures of discovery, and so I waited with anticipation to see what she had found. But when she opened her fist to show me her prize, my immediate reaction to the apple she held out to me was one of repulsion, for she had singled out a deformed, wrinkled, spotty crab apple. My first impulse was to want to knock it out of her hand and refocus her attention on the “good” crab apples. But, thankfully, my own suppressed (and at that time, very dim) sense of wonder rose to the surface as I stooped and looked at *that* little shriveled crab apple through the eyes of a two year old.

It had a peculiar beauty of its own...we counted four different colors on that one apple, noticed that it had a slight odor (others did not), enjoyed the unevenness of its surface and generally rejoiced in its uniqueness. We had found a beautiful crab apple! Her wonder opened my eyes to more of “crab apple-ness” than I had seen with eyes conditioned to acknowledge only the perfect round red shiny ones as acceptable prototypes. And so a tiny, multicolored, wrinkled, spotty crab apple became a source of wonder that gladdened the day for both of us.

Later, as I thought about the experience of wonder at Laura’s crab apple, I was grateful that there was enough of the sense of wonder left in me to see with a two year old’s perception. It scared me to think what I almost did, I foresaw would likely be done to Laura over the next twenty years or so of her life, through socialization, education (both secular and religious), and exposure to the media. I thought, she will learn, like me, to identify only the red crab apples as the good and acceptable ones (after all, they are the only ones good for making crab apple jelly). In our utilitarian culture, she will likely come to see the one we discovered that day as the bad, ugly, repulsive one that is unacceptable. Perhaps she will even be embarrassed to admit that she had ever seen it any other way.

My thoughts became even more gloomy: “She will learn to do the same with people. The media image of ‘beautiful people’ will become her norm, and the people who are a little bit spotty or wrinkled or misshapen will be labeled as undesirable. She will learn to conform to society’s and school’s expectations for her, and if she doesn’t, people will push her back into the mold.” I named my greatest fear for Laura: her trust in her own perceptions, experience, and sense of wonder will dim. And with it, one of the doorways into ethical valuing will close, for seeing the sacred and the beautiful in every part of God’s creation is a powerful basis for ethics.

“Conkers”

Many years after my encounter with Laura and the crab apple, I was invited to teach a class session on wonder at a British University. In preparation for the class I had asked the students to meditate on some questions. When the session began, I asked them to share aloud some of their responses. “What evokes awe in you?” I asked, expecting responses I often get at such gatherings, like, “sunsets” or “the stars” or “the birth of a baby.”

There was a silence. Then one of the students responded. “Conkers,” she said. I looked at her. “Conkers?” I asked in a bewildered tone. “Yes, conkers,” she replied, “you know, horse chestnuts in their cases.” “Oh, I see,” I said, mentally translating American “buckeyes” into British “conkers.” I agreed with her that one could indeed be in awe of this beautiful example of God’s handiwork.

Then the professor who regularly taught the class chimed in. “I don’t think you can be in awe of conkers!” Awe, he explained, is reserved for really big things like God or the universe. The student and I disagreed with him. I cited Thomas Green who says that “the wonder that is ceaseless, that can never be exhausted, has always to do with what is usual and close at hand; for the marvel of a thing has less to do with its frequency than with its contingency.” (1971, p. 196) The professor looked skeptical, but decided to let the point drop.

The next weekend, while worshiping in Salisbury Cathedral (a place that even the professor would agree evokes awe), I ran across this account in the cathedral’s Eucharistic Service booklet, attributed to Julian of Norwich:

He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind’s eye and I thought, ‘What can this be?’ And answer came, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled that it could last, for I thought it might have crumbled to nothing, it was so small. And the answer came into my mind, ‘It lasts and ever shall because God loves it.’ And all things have their being through the love of God.

As the service went on around me, I had to stop myself from laughing out loud, because it seemed like God’s answer to our little disagreement in class the previous week. Surely a conker can be sign that “all things have their being through the love of God,” and what could be a greater wonder than that?

The contingency of that little thing, juxtaposed with this affirmation of the dependability of God’s love nevertheless to sustain it, creates the conditions for wonder to emerge from the encounter. Whether it is a conker, a hazelnut, or even a crab apple, it is always possible for wonder and awe to be evoked because *every* thing, large or small, “lasts and ever shall because God loves it.”

The conker incident illustrates multiple dimensions of theological significance that wonder has for us. First, it highlights wonder’s role in preventing us from taking things for granted, whether it is taking something as large as the deity for granted, or something as small as a conker. Second, when coupled with Julian of Norwich’s vision, it illustrates the role of a religious tradition in shaping our vision of the world and, therefore, how we experience and interpret the wonder of it. Of course something as small as a hazelnut or a conker can be a sign of God’s love—if one is schooled in a religious tradition that teaches of a Creator God who sustains the world with her or his loving and redeeming presence and activity. Third, the professor’s caution about awe being reserved for really big things *is* worthy of our attention, especially in a commercialized world where the statement, “Awesome!” is bandied about to indicate approval of a particular candy bar or new toy being hawked on television.

Don’t Munch in the Presence of Mystery

In an essay entitled “The Fear of God: Don’t Munch in the Presence of Mystery,” writer John Alexander recounts his experience at an outdoor concert at which pianist Van Cliburn was playing a Tchaikovsky concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Eugene Ormandy. Alexander says it was “that kind of wonderful sound you get to hear live only a few times in one lifetime.” (1989, p. 47) He was struck by the casual attitude of a group of teens sitting in the row in front of him, eating popcorn: “They might as well have been listening to a player piano,” he comments. He goes on to say that this event has become for him “a metaphor of how we live in God’s

universe. With little wonder . Little respect.” (1989, p. 47)

Alexander laments the way we live in such a take-it-for-granted way in the world, oblivious to “the everyday wonders around us—the sunsets, the full moons, the people, the flowers.” (1989, p. 47) It is as though “we eat popcorn while One greater than Eugene Ormandy conducts.” He continues:

We treat everything as tame. We throw beer cans into the Grand Canyon and discuss its prospects for commercial development. We suspect people of idolatry if they kneel before the cross as they leave church. We have nearly lost the ability to revere things, to sit in silent wonder, to have deep respect, to recognize majesty. (1989, p. 47)

He suggests several possible reasons for this situation. It may well be related to our democratic training. “What we suspect of being great we tend to belittle till we have hacked it down to our size.” (1989, p. 47) Partly, it is the way we “rush around.” “After all,” he points out, “you don’t earn any money contemplating mountains.” (1989, p. 47) (Or, I might add, spending time with conkers or spotty crab apples!) Alexander suggests that another reason for our inability to revere things is likely “the leftovers from an old debunking, secular approach to science,” characterized by the kind of reductionist, utilitarian thinking that kept me viewing crab apples as only good for making jelly. These same values keep us in the daily grind, so that “we get caught up in that work and do not take time to feel the things that make living worthwhile.” (1989, p. 48)

Alexander calls for a recovery of the sense of wonder as a key ingredient in our religious and moral life because “the inability to revere things cuts us off from so much depth and grandeur and majesty.” (1989, p. 48) He continues: “We could be rich, but instead we choose poverty. Emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, moral, spiritual poverty.” (1989, p. 47)

We need wonder in order to “get the scales off our eyes” because “people with a sense of wonder, those who see the grandeur of the universe, those who feel the terrible majesty of God—such people will not participate in oppression.” (1989, p. 48) Why not? Alexander returns to his example of the teens at the concert to explain:

Without a sense of wonder, we also have a diminished sense of horror. Those teenagers at the Van Cliburn concert may have realized they were breaking a rule (like don’t make noise when the principal speaks in assembly). But they probably didn’t realize they were doing something almost sacrilegious.... Without a sense of wonder that a human being is, we will have little sense of the horror of racism. We will just think a rule is being broken. (1989, p. 48)

We can extend this thinking to the horrors of war, genocide, economic oppression, sexual abuse, and environmental degradation. The list could go on and on. But the point is made.

When Julian of Norwich envisions holding that tiny ball in her hand, when the student in my class proclaims her awe at the sight of a conker, when Laura and I commune with a crab apple, we are enriching our lives and engaging in behavior that strengthens our moral fiber. To revere these small parts of creation is to bind oneself not only to the created order which spawned them (and us), but also to the Creator whose love sustains us.

On Beauty and Being Just

After reading Elaine Scarry’s book *On Beauty and Being Just*, I was struck by the connections between her argument that beauty assists us in the work of addressing injustice and the three vignettes presented above. Scarry suggests that the structure of perceiving beauty appears to have “a two-part scaffolding.” First, she says, “one’s attention is involuntarily given to the beautiful person or thing; then, this quality of heightened attention is voluntarily extended out to other persons or things.” (1999, p. 81) She continues: “It is as though beautiful things have been placed here and there throughout the world to serve as small wake-up calls to perception, spurring lapsed alertness back to its most acute level. Through its beauty, the world continually recommits us to a rigorous standard of perceptual care: if we do not search it out, it comes and finds us.” (1999, p. 81)

But how does it assist us in the work of addressing injustice?

Scarry proposes that beauty does this in two ways. First, it “requires of us *constant perceptual acuity*—high dives of seeing, hearing, touching.” (1999, p. 62) Secondly, beauty addresses injustice by “*the concern demanded* by the perfect vase or god or poem which introduces me to a standard of care that *I then began to extend to more ordinary objects* (perhaps I began to notice and worry, for the first time, about my neglect of the ordinary object and, inspecting it more closely, may now even discover that it is not ordinary).” (1999, pp. 66-67)

As I looked closely at the particular crab apple Laura had selected, my heightened sense of wonder led me to see the beauty of that “ordinary” crab apple in a way I had not before. Sharing the beauty of that small crab apple with Laura was indeed a “small wake-up call to perception,” which spurred my “lapsed alertness back to its most acute level.” This “alertness” I have called wonder.

Beauty is “life-affirming, life-giving; and therefore,” says Scarry, “if, through your careless approach you become cut off from it, you will feel its removal as a retraction of life. (1999, p. 27) Laura’s gift to me was to awaken my sense of wonder to the beauty I had been missing around me...a beauty that ranges from conkers and crab apples to sublime symphonies and magnificent mountains.

Scarry observes that beauty is “a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (person or thing) and the perceiver. As the beautiful thing confers on the perceiver the gift of life, so the perceiver confers on the beautiful being the gift of life.”(p. 90) There is a kind of circularity here: it was Laura’s sense of wonder that led me to see the beauty in that crab apple. At the same time, once I saw that beauty, it elicited more wonder which, in turn, has led me to extend my perception of beauty to so-called “ordinary” objects to which I otherwise might not have attended.

When the student in my class at the British university suggested that conkers were a source of awe for her, she was not belittling or downplaying awe, but, rather, extrapolating from that very ordinary thing—a conker—the awe invoked by the beauty of its design. “Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation.” (Scarry, p. 29) Heschel expresses it this way: “There is a transcendent preciousness that surpasses our power of appreciation, and of which our highest values are but a faint indication. The world is resplendent with such preciousness; we sense it wherever we go, with our hearts too feeble or unworthy to fathom it.” (1951, p. 29)

Scarry uses the term “aliveness” to denote this sense of preciousness: “Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness or (in the case of objects) quasi-aliveness of our world, and for entering into its protection.” (1999, p. 90) Both the notion of “aliveness” and the requirement to extend “protection” are key concepts in Scarry’s argument that beauty assists us in addressing injustice.

Scarry reminds us that ‘a single word, ‘fairness,’ is used *both* in referring to loveliness of countenance *and* in referring to the ethical requirement for ‘being fair,’ ‘playing fair’ and ‘fair distribution,’” showing how all of the roots and cognates of ‘fair’ “originally express the aesthetic use of ‘fair’ to mean ‘beautiful’ or ‘fit’—fit both in the sense of ‘pleasing to the eye’ and in the sense of ‘firmly placed,’ as when something matches or exists in accord with another thing’s shape or size.” (1999, pp. 91-92)

She builds her case using John Rawls’ widely accepted definition of fairness as a ‘symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other,’(1999, p. 93) “Beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of ‘a symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another.” (1999, p. 95)

But Scarry is not content to simply point out the analogy between the symmetry of beauty and the symmetry of justice, but instead, she makes the still more radical argument that “it is the very symmetry of beauty which leads us to, or somehow assists us in, discovering the symmetry that eventually comes into place in the realm of justice.” (1999, p. 97)

Her rationale for this claim lies in her observation that “in periods when a human community is too young to have yet had time to create justice, as well as in periods when justice has been taken away, beautiful things (which

do not rely on us to create them but come on their own and have never been absent from a human community) hold steadily visible the manifest good of equality and balance.” (1999, p. 97)

This argument highlights the importance of John Alexander’s observation that “without a sense of wonder *that a human being is*, we will have little sense of the horror of racism. We will just think a rule is being broken.” (1989, p. 48) The “sense of wonder that a human being is” as an antidote to participating in the injustices of racism is an argument for the power of beauty. It is an appeal to *the beauty of human being itself*, rather than an appeal to a rule growing out of the institution of laws as the source of justice.

Taking the route of beauty toward justice has import because, as Scarry points out, “even in a community that has both fair skies and fair legal arrangements, the sky still assists us. For the symmetry, equality, and self-sameness of the sky are present to *the senses*, whereas the symmetry, equality, and self-sameness of the just social arrangements are not. (1999, p.101)

Thus, she continues, “ the equality of beauty, its pressure toward distribution, resides not just in its interior feature of symmetry but in *its generously being present, widely present, to almost all people at almost all times*—in the mates that they choose to love, their children, the birds that fly through their garden, the songs they sing—a distributional availability that comes from its being external, present (‘prae-sens’), standing before the senses. (1999, pp. 108-109)

My experience with Laura and the crab apple illustrates this. Laura’s wonder showed me the beauty of “crab apple-ness” even in a less-than-perfect specimen. For her, the beauty of the crab apple was in its *simply being itself*, and, in my awakened state of wonder, I, too, saw this beauty-- the “aliveness,” of which Scarry speaks. Then, just as the sense of wonder Alexander cites--that a human being *is*—is necessary for experiencing the horror of racism, so seeing the beauty in a spotty crab apple led me to reflect on the horrors of ageism, (wherein “people who are a little bit spotty or wrinkled or misshapen will be labeled as undesirable”).

The trajectory of that thought (from crab apple to combating ageism) illustrates another very important point Scarry makes regarding the role of beauty in assisting us to combat injustice: “*At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering.*” Beauty requires us “to give up our imaginary position as the center....” (1999, p. 111)

Scarry utilizes the work of Simone Weil to assist her in making this case. She reports that Weil’s account is deeply somatic: What happens, happens to our bodies. When we come upon beautiful things—a crabapple or a conker, a mountain or a Mozart sonata--they “act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space, or they form ‘ladders reaching toward the beauty of the world,’ (Weil, 1951, p. 159) or they lift us,...letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.” (1999, pp. 111-112)

Scarry puts it succinctly: “It is as though one has ceased to be the hero or heroine in one’s own story and has become what in a folktale is called ‘the lateral figure’ or ‘donor figure.’” (1999, p.113) The amazing thing about this “decentering,” or “unselfing” is that it is experienced not as a demotion, but as pleasure. “Beauty,” says Scarry, “appears to be one of the few phenomena in the world that...permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience extreme pleasure, thereby creating the sense that it is our own adjacency that is pleasure-bearing. This seems a gift in its own right, and a gift as a prelude to or precondition of enjoying fair relations with others. (1999, p.114)

Abraham Joshua Heschel also talks about the decentering that sublime beauty evokes: “Obviously we can never sneer at the stars, mock the dawn or scoff at the totality of being. Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe. Away from the immense, cloistered in our own concepts, we may scorn and revile everything. But standing between earth and sky, we are silenced by the sight...” (1955, p. 25)

Wonder thus helps to put our place in the world into perspective. It reminds us that we are finite, that we are a part of something much greater than our ability to comprehend it. Those who have such a sense of wonder,

who are “rich in spirit,” (as Heschel puts it), “sense that the things which they comprehend are outbursts of inconceivable significance.” (1951, p. 31). This is because “to be implies to stand for, because every being is representative of something that is more than itself; because the seen, the known, stands for the unseen, the unknown.” (1951, p. 31)

The response of “aliveness” which beauty engenders is then taken as an allusion to God, and a sign of God’s loving presence and activity. My student experienced awe in the presence of a conker because she saw its beauty as “representative of something that is more than itself,” an insight which, when coupled with Julian of Norwich’s vision, illustrates the role of a religious tradition in shaping our vision of the world and, therefore, how we experience and interpret the wonder of it. Of course something as small as a hazelnut or a conker (or even a crabapple) can be a sign of God’s love—if one is schooled in a religious tradition that teaches of a Creator God who sustains the world with her or his loving and redeeming presence and activity.

“Because God loves it”—this is the “legacy of wonder” which a religious tradition holds in store for us, of which Heschel speaks in the quote at the beginning of this paper. We would do well to heed Heschel’s warning that “the surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to take things for granted.” (1955, p. 43)

“But Now My Eyes See You”

Kathleen O’Connor is a biblical scholar whose work takes seriously Heschel’s contention that not taking things for granted is essential for understanding the meaning of God. In a paper entitled “Wild Raging Creativity: The Scene in the Whirlwind,” she reframes common interpretations of the intent of the divine speeches in the book of Job, proposing that “the questions [God asks] are not a mode of intimidation but a ‘Socratic’ pedagogical device.” (2000, p. 2)

This “Socratic pedagogical device” is to ask rhetorical questions--Who shut in the sea when it burst out of the womb? [38:8] Have you comprehended the span of the earth? Where is the dwelling place of light? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion?--that reveal the meaning of God and God’s creation as “wild, beautiful, free and deeply unsettling,” never to be taken for granted again. (2000, p. 3)

Now, it is not hard to see why commentators have tended to read the speeches of God as “intimidating” or “bullying;” for, as O’Connor herself says, “Divine questions about creation *do* reveal that God’s power and knowledge is superior to Job’s. ‘Surely you know for you were born then’ [38:21]. But,” she continues, “what if we shift the hermeneutical emphasis of the questions from their interrogative aspects—‘who? where? do you know? have you?’ alleged to be intimidating—to the *content* of the questions, the subject about which Job is ignorant? Such a shift results in a picture of what Diane Bergant calls ‘the mind-boggling creativity’ of God, and the overflowing beauty of the cosmos and its inhabitants.” (2000, p. 3)

But, one might rightly ask, “what significance can an experience of beauty have for Job? Is emphasis on beauty in the speeches not simply another abstraction that ignores Job and his immense suffering?” (2000, p. 8)

On the contrary, says O’Connor (using Scarry’s theory to shed light on the text), the beauty described in the divine speeches “brings about a transformation at the very roots of the beholder’s sensibility. It affirms one’s being and becomes an occasion for ‘unselfing,’ freeing one to be in the service of something else.” She continues: “In this light, rather than ignoring Job, the divine speeches greet, affirm him, bless him... The divine speeches not only expand Job’s ethical frame ‘beyond family and village’ to include the cosmos; the heart-stopping beauty revealed in the storm transforms him.” (2000, p. 8)

The texts “point toward a Job changed by beauty. There is the language of sight ‘But now my eyes see you,’ [42:5]; there is Job’s unselfing, ‘I put my hand over my mouth, I am of small account,’ ‘I repent of, in, or concerning dust and ashes’ [42:6] (2000, p. 9). O’Connor suggests that “there is evidence that his focus turns outward as he repairs injuries, interceding for his friends and extending extraordinary care to his daughters.” (2000, p. 9)

She closes with this thought, echoing the concerns of John Alexander raised in his essay: “Job has received

a life-affirming greeting from another world and however we deal with the lingering puzzles of this book, its beauty calls to readers were we, in our flattened, technological, consumerist world, but open to it.” (2000, p. 9)

Tasks for Religious Education

Here is an important clue to an educational strategy for utilizing beauty, wonder and awe in the work of justice that concerns the church. We need to open books like Job and other wisdom texts little dealt with in our salvation-history, prophet-oriented use of the Bible. The de-centering power of beauty found in wisdom and Psalm texts can move us toward the justice that comes with beauty’s call to ‘unselfing,’ freeing one to be in the service of something else.

A second educational strategy is suggested by all of the cases cited--the crab apple, the conker, the symphony, the divine speeches in Job-- that is, that as educators, we need to see as part of our task the work of *paying attention*. There is so much in our world we do not see and hear because we are not paying attention. But attention to crabapples and conkers, mountains and majestic creatures that inhabit them, can be a curriculum that contributes to helping people gain a perspective on their proper place in the world and their connection to a cosmos that reflects the love and majesty of God.

This leads to a third implication for education--as people of a particular religious tradition, we teach the traditions of faith in order to shape and enhance the natural wonder and awe that are part of the human condition. This is how we come to see a crabapple or a conker as “representative of something that is more than itself,” as a sign of God’s love and care. And it is how wonder becomes a call to us to participate in creating a just order as an expression of God’s love and care for the cosmos..

I began this paper by suggesting that many mainline Protestant traditions take strong positions on issues of justice, but pay little attention to the power of beauty, wonder and awe to shape just attitudes and actions. Heschel’s and Elaine Scarry’s arguments for the important role of beauty in shaping our moral selves are worth heeding. For, as Alexander says, “We need wonder in order to “get the scales off our eyes” because “people with a sense of wonder, those who see the grandeur of the universe, those who feel the terrible majesty of God--such people will not participate in oppression.” (1989, p. 48)

Resources

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