

A QUESTION OF BEAUTY

By Michael Ventura

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In Brooklyn, circa 1957 -- when doctors still smoked cigarettes while examining their patients in small, stuffy rooms -- I was in a hospital, 12 years old, dying. If I hadn't been fever-crazed I might have known I was dying, for we were poor, we lived in what was then called "slums," and what was I doing in a private room? In those days, before health insurance as we know it now, and before federal programs, my family had no possibility of paying the bill. I was a "charity case," and, with true charity, the hospital had given me a private room to die in. My diagnosis had something to do with "acute malnutrition" -- in other words, hunger -- complicated by a seemingly untreatable fever. I should have known I was dying when my aunts visited. For my aunts and my mother did not often speak. In a Sicilian family grudges go deep, so when *they* treated each other tenderly ... well, I *must* have been dying. But my family and the doctors, and even my skinny fever-wracked body, all seemed then, and in memory seem now, like figures in a dream. What was most real to me, and what remains vivid even now, was the window.

For several days and nights, too weak to lift my head, all my attention was fixed on that window. It was ... just a window. Nothing remarkable. But pigeons would alight on the sill, suddenly, as though out of nowhere, clucking and cooing. Occasionally and inexplicably one bird would simply sit very still for a long time; then, just as inexplicably, fly off. And I had never before noticed how many shades of light inhabited the sky. And a flock of pigeons would sail across my field of vision, high up and far away; I began to wait for that. Sometimes their wings would catch the sun as they banked all together at some unseen mutual signal, and that flash of many-winged light thrilled my heart.

I think I remember that window so well because it was my first independent, deeply inner meeting between the beauty of the world and my own soul. All my former contexts had been shattered, I could hardly even move, yet even in this state (or because of this state?) I was being touched directly by a sweet and transforming force, or feeling, for which I know no other word but beauty. I believe now that my enthrallment, my rapt attention, as I focused upon that window ... my intake, my inspiration (literally: my breathing in), of the elegance, the beauty, of the birds and the sky, gave me strength and saved my life. This, at least, is sure: From that time on I have been extraordinarily, gratefully susceptible to, and conscious of, the beauty of the physical world.

I do remember one fragment of conversation from that hospital bed. My Aunt Anna said I had "pretty hands." My mother responded, "He has an artist's hands." This was the first time it occurred to me that anything about *me* might be beautiful. Later, alone in that room, I often looked at my hands, and, yes, thought them beautiful -- as though, like the pigeons and sky, and unlike anything else about me or my life, they were a part of the beautiful world ... a world that really was beautiful, even in Brooklyn, if you only raised your eyes. It can't be a coincidence that not very long after I left that hospital I began to write. The illness had stripped me down to the core of my being, which, like the core of anyone's being, feels itself most intensely when at the meeting-point of life and death. And the window -- the window! -- had poured beauty into me at just that terribly vulnerable moment.

In Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, he relates a dream in which he went into the center of a darkened city -- Liverpool. It does not take an analyst of Jung's caliber to know that a dream that takes you to the center of your liver (an organ that cleanses the blood of toxins), is a journey to where your innermost self deals with the poisons you've ingested from the world. Jung's "Liverpool" was very dark but for its centermost point, where a tree glowed all on its own. "A single tree, a magnolia, in a shower of reddish blossoms. It was as though the tree stood in the sunlight and was at the same time the source of light." That tree was one of the most beautiful things Jung had ever seen. He wrote, "I had had a vision of unearthly beauty, and that was why I was able to live at all."

He had found in a dream what I had found in a window. His movement toward the sustenance of beauty was from the inner (his dream, his soul) to the outer (his life); mine was from the outer to the inner; but the result was the same: "That was why I was able to live at all."

While it is difficult to define what beauty is, because different people find so many different beauties, the *experience* of beauty is not as hard to define: One's soul and one's world are connected in an engagement of wonder. Sometimes we experience this with others -- while listening to music, perhaps, or in an intimate moment with someone we love; sometimes the experience is solitary, and can even come in a dream; but the singular quality, however fleeting, is an awakening of, and a connection to, wonder. The experience of beauty is always one of expansion, of opening, of inclusion -- a moment of connection, often mysterious, that extends the possibilities of all connection. So beauty isn't merely decorative; its primary function is to connect -- beauty connects our innermost being to the world.

It is precisely this lack of connection that afflicts so many. Most urban neighborhoods are a relentless and slowly deteriorating sameness of brick. The suburbs are only slightly more benign: a culture of malls, the same franchises and signs and structures everywhere, and houses built without distinction. Millions go from dull ugly rooms on dull streets, over clogged roads, to dull ugly workplaces where they do work that has little or nothing of the saving grace of beauty. It is not surprising that, taking this for granted, we have become too dulled as a culture to ask what such ugliness does to us.

As beauty opens, ugliness closes. We shut down. We blunt our perceptions, our sensitivities. We stop seeing, because seeing gives us no sustenance. We enclose ourselves in our own bodies, the personal circle of our own bodies, because it is unpleasant, unrewarding, to see, feel, scent, and touch, what's around us. We become resigned. I have seen, more than once, a magnificent rainbow over a city, with thick bands of brilliant color, *and no one on the crowded street was looking at it*, no one else seemed to notice it. Not because they were insensitive dolts, but because they were so accustomed to the absence of beauty that they'd conditioned themselves not to see anything but what was directly in front of them. So much shutting down, done so automatically, and done by so many that it's taken for "normal," can't help but have consequences. For many, the reluctance to see, to feel, has literally been built into our environment, and is reinforced every day by that dull ugliness, the attack on beauty, that is the environment for so many -- and this makes it more difficult to see ourselves and each other. It makes a certain dullness of spirit, a certain boredom of perception, seem commonplace and therefore "right" and "normal."

Only this can explain America's need, across every social spectrum, for continually more sensational entertainments -- ever louder music, ever cruder sexual

depictions; the loutish popularity of wrestling; shouting matches on political "discussion" programs; effusive and argumentative talk shows where people willingly give up dignity to get attention; and nothing gaining wide notice unless it is extreme. The root of these phenomena is aesthetic: an ugly dull environment in which brutish behavior becomes a positive value because it at least has the force to cut through, momentarily, our shielded, blocked ability to perceive.

All of which leaves us, each of us, facing one piercing question: *What is beautiful in your life?* And that question leads to questions that would make any of us squirm, so they need to be asked all the more, such as: Your children, your friends -- do you find them beautiful? But what, exactly, is beautiful about them, and do you contemplate it much, does it shine in your behavior? In theirs? Your wife, husband, lover, what is their beauty in your eyes? But how does it play in your life, how does it nourish or inspire or challenge you? How do you acknowledge, salute, and cherish their beauty? And if you don't, why don't you? Your home, your city, your town, are they beautiful? How do you enter and celebrate and preserve their beauty, or do you? And if your surroundings are not beautiful; or, more to the point, if you can find no beauty in them -- what to do? What is the beauty in your work? And if this question stops you in your tracks, what does that say about your work -- and about what your work gives to you and to others? And: What is *your* beauty? And does that question embarrass, frighten, annoy, or depress you? Why?

When you face these questions and take them to their conclusions, you find out something discomfiting and essential: that in an ugly world, beauty is a revolutionary idea.

A piece relating these views to psychotherapy appears in the current Family Therapy Networker.

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