

BEAUTY RESURRECTED

How can a therapist head off a potentially violent client?

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Till change hath broken down

All things save Beauty alone.

-- Ezra Pound

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. Though nobody told me what was going on, I should have known I was dying when my aunts (my father's sisters) visited. For my aunts to be in the same room as my mother was an event; they did not often speak. In a Sicilian family, grudges go deep, so when my aunts and my mother 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 about it. But pigeons would alight on the sill, suddenly, as though out of nowhere. They would make their clucking and cooing sounds. Occasionally, one would simply sit very still for a long time. Then, just as inexplicably, fly off. Through that window I would watch the changing light of the sky, and the clouds--I had never noticed how many shades of light inhabited the sky. And sometimes a flock of pigeons would sail across my field of vision, high up and far away; I would wait for that, wish for that. Sometimes, too, 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 consciousness of beauty--that is, 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, I was in a sense utterly on my own, 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 was many years away from the concepts of contemplation and meditation, but I believe now that those were the fundamental elements, or activities, of my enthrallment, my rapt attention, as I focused upon that window. It's impossible to prove, but I believe that 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, even in the bleakest of places--like Brooklyn.

I do remember one fragment of conversation from that hospital bed. My Aunt Anna, in a way that was hardly typical of her, commented to my mother that I had "pretty hands." My mother said in response, "He has an artist's hands." This was the first time it occurred to me that anything about *me* might be beautiful. After they said this, when 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. I can still hear the soft proud way my mother spoke those words. I believe now that she somehow sensed or grasped what was going on; for it's clear to me, 40-odd years later, that in that hospital bed, my soul took its first, wondering and gloriously unselfconscious steps (steps more unselfconscious than they would ever be again) toward being an artist--for not very long after I left the hospital I began to write. By the age of 14, writing became, consciously, all that I wanted to do with my life--became, that is, my devotion, the calling to which I intended to devote my life.

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. And everything changed; or, to put it more accurately and less dramatically, many disparate and not-yet-coherent elements in me coalesced and found their focus.

Many walk into the therapist's consulting room exactly at the moment, and because of the moment, that they have been stripped to the core of their being. While not at the physical meeting-point of life and death, they are often at its emotional and spiritual equivalent. One element they seek and are desperate for, one element they usually feel they've lost, is beauty; they present a situation that's cut them off from experiencing beauty. They may not articulate it that way, but that's what's going on. Yet, beauty has not still been sufficiently recognized as both a healing balm and a necessity--something without which we may die, and through which we may live.

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 except 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." Every day these movements of beauty happen in many small ways to many people; and almost everyone, except the most severely damaged, remembers at least a few events that, whether dramatic or everyday, are startling in that they suddenly open the soul, the self, the psyche, to beauty. 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. And while suffering usually has its source in the personal life, it's reinforced by the ugliness we live amidst. Much depression is a symptom (James Hillman might call it a healthy symptom) of resistance to ugliness--a holding-back of the spirit from an aggressively ugly environment. In most urban neighborhoods, there is only an immense and slowly deteriorating sameness of brick, building after building, street after street--a relentless and unforgiving sameness, a dull labyrinth in which to struggle for the basics. The suburbs are only slightly more benign; they have become a culture of malls, the same franchises and signs and structures everywhere, and houses built without distinction, without excitement, without inspiration. Millions go from dull ugly rooms on dull ugly streets, on clogged roads, to dull ugly workplaces where they do work that has little or nothing of the saving grace of beauty. It's impossible to overestimate how Americans have come to take this extent and degree of dull ugliness for granted; but it is not surprising that, taking it for granted, we have become too dulled as a culture to ask what this ugliness does to us.

As beauty opens us, ugliness closes us. 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. That is what ugliness, or a continual lack of beauty, conditions us to do. 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, not to see anything they didn't have to deal with directly. So much shutting down, done so automatically and done by so many that it's taken for "normal," can't help but have consequences. It makes a certain dullness-of-spirit, a certain boredom-of-perception, seem commonplace and therefore "right" and "normal." So it is no surprise that when we try to address problems in our intimate lives, whether in our homes or in the consulting room, the insensitivity we've conditioned ourselves to accept and practice is an invisible but potent factor. How can people so conditioned to dullness-of-perception by the absence of beauty in their world--how can they ever really *see* each other? It is crucial to realize that this insensitivity, this reluctance to see, cannot be attributed only to a childhood or familial situation, and still less to a genetic or otherwise "natural" lack of intelligence; whatever our personal situation, for many of us, the reluctance to see, to feel, has literally been "built in" to our environment, and is reinforced every day by that dull ugliness, the attack on beauty, that *is* the environment for so many.

The result is that an assumption of dullness and ugliness has become an unconscious psychic foundation for many of our feelings, thoughts, perceptions. Only this can explain America's need for continually more sensational entertainments--ever louder music, ever cruder sexual depictions and 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 public notice unless it is extreme. The root of these phenomena is in large part 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?*

The therapist-client relationship is just about the last functioning shared space in this country where this question can be asked and, more important, *heard*. Which is why it's so crucial that therapists find a way to ask it. Directly or by implication, that question leads to others, questions that would make any of us squirm--and so they need to be asked all the more. Questions 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 is there to do about this? 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?

In an ugly world, beauty is a revolutionary idea. Which is why these questions strip us of comfortable and/or evasive language, cut through our technical professional language, and demand responses that are specific, concrete, immediate. Psychotherapy is in a unique position to ask these questions, to introduce these questions into our cultural life once more, for people seek therapy in that state of vulnerability in which the discovery of beauty is desperately needed--especially the beauty of relationship. Psychotherapy has forged a precise and immensely useful language for dealing with the negative and problematic aspects of relationship, but it has no corresponding language for the beauty of relationship. This is because problems between people are reducible; we can break them into pieces, concepts, and deal with them. But beauty between people is irreducibly itself. A rose *is* a rose is a rose. Jose Ortega y Gasset said, "Why do I love this woman? Because she is *this woman*." We can't be abstract about the beauty of one another, or that beauty flees. My wife Hannah has a marvelous laugh. When I feel and hear and see the beauty of her laughter, I experience as natural a beauty as the flash of sunlight on the wings of those birds I first noticed in that hospital, or the changing light upon the clouds that I learned to watch for in the sky. When I look into her eyes, I see a depth, a glow, a presence, to which I cannot give a name, not even hers. "I had had a vision of unearthly beauty, and that was why I was able to live at all." A psychology of beauty must somehow grope its way toward experiencing the Other as part of the beauty of the natural world--a beauty to which, in relationship, we have privileged access.

So the question, "What is beautiful in your life?" goes beyond analysis and into what was always intended as the end result of analysis: experience. Beauty doesn't matter much as an idea, it only matters, it only gains force, as an experience. A psychology of beauty is a psychology of experience, a psychology that appreciates and teaches an aesthetics of experience. For our very lives depend upon the beauty that we are capable of experiencing in each other and ourselves.

Another hospital, some 40 years after my view from that window: In my father's 81st year he was on a gurney about to be wheeled into the OR for a serious operation, a procedure that might well kill him. I held his hands, and their grip was still strong--his small, thick, deft peasant hands, that had earned his living all his life, hands that had an intelligence of their own, so precise were they in work. He looked up at me, and I was astounded by his eyes. I had never seen such eyes. So deep and calm, so full of an all-encompassing love--so unlike him! Had he been waiting all his life to muster the incredible focus of love with which he now looked at me? But not just at me. It was as though I were a representative for all of life, in that moment, in his eyes. In that moment we were all we had both been, and far more than we had ever been--the love in his eyes, for me and for life itself, was that overwhelming. It was, and remains, the most beautiful face I have ever seen. That it was my father's face is almost incidental. It was a face of humanity, looking upon the world with unalloyed adoration. You'll have to trust that I am not exaggerating--for, believe me, no one could have been more surprised than I that this man had that look in him. His beauty, and the beauty he could see, had been his best-kept secret, revealed only now at the end of his life. If this bitter, failed, enraged human being could achieve that look--then perhaps it was a gaze inherent and waiting in all of us. As they wheeled him away to what might be death, I stood in that bleak hospital hall stunned with joy. I had seen nothing less than pure human beauty--a beauty within, reaching out to bless and beautify all it saw. How can we leave beauty unaddressed, when so many long for beauty and are withering for the lack of it; and when so many keep the beauty they feel secret, and never reveal it, or reveal it only in extreme situations, perhaps at the very end?

Beauty is specific, personal, intimate--for it is *experienced*, in tiny but crucial ways. In dreams, in a child looking out a window, in hearing a lover laugh, in an old man taking what could be his last look at life. Which is precisely why beauty is in the terrain of psychotherapy--an as-yet-undiscovered country at the center of psychotherapy. "What is beautiful in your life?" is a question psychotropic drugs can't answer.

Our eyes go dead for want of a connection with beauty. And deadness, dullness, of the eyes is the very death that psychotherapy is dedicated to resurrecting.

I remember my very first therapist. I was about 13, and New York City had instituted some sort of program--through the schools? I don't remember--enabling emotionally disturbed street kids like me to receive help from "uptown" shrinks on an individual basis. His name was Dr. B.T. Lassar or Lasser. He was a portly, very dignified gent with deeply serious yet sweet eyes. His office on Central Park West was the most well-appointed, monied room I had, at that point in my life, entered--a plush room, not very well lit, full of portent and shadow, but I found the dimness appealing. The strange thing was . . . I was comfortable in that room. Lasser couldn't have been more different from the adults I'd known--for one thing, he was quiet and patient, and I hadn't seen much of that in the adults of my family. Perhaps because I was a child, he was careful to speak in words I understood, though now I remember almost nothing of what he said. What I remember most was the long subway ride from my tenement to his office--for the ride

had the quality, going and coming, of a passage into and out of another world, a world that valued what my world didn't or couldn't. And that, I know now, was the healing power of his therapy for me: he put a value on qualities in me that my world mostly didn't notice, didn't want to notice. On the subway, I journeyed to and from a space where different things were valued, cherished, nurtured--which meant that there *was* such a space to be journeyed *to*, even if it was only one dim room in which sat one attentive person, attending to what the world devalued and ignored.

The consulting room has the power to be such a space--in it, value can be placed on what one's world will not or cannot consider. And in that space, that value can grow and become strong. In that space, in addition to dealing concretely with dilemmas, it is possible to value beauty--it is possible to make that space a place where the maligned and attacked beauty of the world and of humanity is emphasized, explored and made more real to whoever seeks that space. If the question "What is beautiful in your life?" can root itself in that space, then from that space, beauty will radiate, exert itself, find itself in the only way that beauty finally matters: in the experience of a soul that is, by degrees, less and less afraid to ask that question of itself.

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