

The Soul Has a Need for Beauty

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Reading from *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*

“One afternoon, a student observing chimpanzees at the Gombe reserve took a break and climbed to the top of a ridge to watch the sun set over Lake Tanganyika. As the student, Geza Teleki, watched, he noticed first one, and then a second chimpanzee climbing up toward where he was sitting. The two adult males were not together, and saw each other only when they had reached the top of the ridge. They did not see Teleki. The apes greeted each other with panting, clasping hands, and sat down together. In silence, Teleki and the chimpanzees watched the sun set and twilight fall.

These chimpanzees were not unique. The primatologist Adriaan Kortlandt recorded a wild chimpanzee gazing for a full fifteen minutes at a particularly spectacular sunset until darkness fell. Some who have observed bears in the wild speak of them sitting on their haunches at sunset, gazing at it, seemingly lost in reverie. From all appearances, it seems that the bears are enjoying the sunset, taking pleasure in the aesthetic experience.

Pet birds often appear to enjoy human music. Gerald Durrell has written of a pet pigeon that listened quietly to most music and snuggled against the gramophone. When marches were played, he would stamp back and forth cooing loudly; to waltzes, he would twist and bow, cooing softly....

Michael, a gorilla in a sign-language program, is fond of music and enjoys the singing of tenor Luciano Pavarotti so much that he has been known to refuse an opportunity to go outdoors when Pavarotti performances were on television. ...

Researchers, studying elephants in Kenya, camp in the middle of the East African bush. Sometimes at night the people sing and play guitars and the elephants draw near to listen. Perhaps they are merely curious, but perhaps they take pleasure in the music. Our own human curiosity should allow us to ask whether elephants find beauty in music, just as the human sense of beauty allows us to appreciate the image of these large beasts moving slowly through the darkness listening to the songs.”

These excerpts are only a fragment of a whole chapter that explores a multitude of evidence, or at least many strong indicators, that animals have an aesthetic sense. Noted are the intentional harmonies of howling wolves and singing whales, and the complex creations of bowerbirds that artfully display berries, colorful insect parts, flowers, candy wrappers and bright bits of cloth or paper in their elaborate nests. Also noted are certain captive apes that have a powerful drive to paint and draw and who, like Michael, the

lover of Pavarotti, will forgo more basic sustenance in order to pursue their creative endeavors.

A few years ago, an interesting Neanderthal artifact was excavated from a cave in Slovenia: a small bone flute, made from a bear femur, hollowed out, with four holes bored into it in straight alignment. This little flute could be as much as 80,000 years old, perhaps the oldest known surviving musical instrument.

We know that our long-extinct Neanderthal cousins with their protruding brows and stocky limbs were moved to paint those luminous and graceful images of animals and spirits on their cave walls, but now we also know that they expressed themselves in some sort of music. Did the flute imitate the sound of the wind? The sounds of birdcalls? Or did it give expression to their longings, fears, and joys and the spiritual wonderings of their ancient souls?

In exploring our own human need and fascination with beauty, why start with animals or with our ancient predecessors? Because this fascination is not a specifically human trait, but something we share with many other sentient creatures. It is not even a manifestation of higher intelligence, but only grows more refined as intelligence and self-awareness increases.

I love these stories of animals and prehistoric peoples because they suggest that our need to experience and create beauty is encoded into us at a primordial level. It is part of our nature because it seems to be encoded in nature itself. We are instinctively drawn to what is beautiful. We instinctively want to express ourselves through our own acts of beauty and creativity.

Could it be that beauty and creativity are actually intentions of the universe itself? There are many who would claim this: Cosmologist Brian Swimme, the apostle of “Creation Spirituality” Matthew Fox, cultural historian Thomas Berry, and Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman are among the growing number of thinkers who have arrived at this conclusion.

Physicist Brian Swimme, author of *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*, claims that “allurement” is possibly one of the fundamental forces in the universe. Allurement, attraction, operates at every level of the cosmos. To emphasize the importance of this idea, Swimme proposes a mental experiment. He writes:

Bring to mind all the allurements filling the universe, of whatever complexity or order: the allurement we call gravitation, that of electromagnetic interactions, chemical attractors, allurements in the biological, organic and human worlds. Here’s the question: If we could snap our fingers and make these allurements—which we can’t see or taste or hear anyway—disappear from the universe, what would happen?

To begin with, the galaxies would break apart. The stars of the Milky Way would fly off in all directions, since they would no longer hold each other in galactic embrace. Individual stars would disperse as well, their atoms no longer attracting each other, thus releasing core pressure and shutting down fusion reactions. The stars would go dark. The Earth would break apart as well, all the minerals and chemical compounds dissolving, mountains evaporating like huge dark clouds under the dimming sun.

But even if the physical world retained its shape, the human world would disintegrate just the same. No one would go to work in the morning. Why should they? There would be no attraction for work, no matter what it was. Activity would cease. Did scientists once find the universe interesting, staying up nights to reflect on its mysteries? No longer. Did lovers chase each other in the night, abandoning all for the adventure of romance? Never again.

All interest, enchantment, fascination, mystery, and wonder would fall away, and with their absence all human groups would lose their binding energy. Galaxies, human families, atoms, ecosystems, all disintegrating immediately as the allurement pervading the universe is shut off. Nothing left. No community of any sort. Just nothing.

This is a dramatic case for the necessity of attraction!

An interesting aside for me, as I read about Swimme's ideas of allurement, was that the Sufi mystics, hundreds of years earlier, gave a sacred word to this same idea. The Sufis call it *Ishk*, the primary force of attraction in the universe. It is a virtually identical concept (and, who knows, maybe Brian Swimme borrowed it), but Sufis believe that the attraction that holds the stars together and the attraction that draws the human heart and soul toward all that it loves are of the same essential impulse: *Ishk*, Primordial Love, Divine Longing, Allurement.

Brian Swimme goes on to explore the implications of this idea of allurement. All these forms of attraction and desire result in the creation of new forms of being, and the creation of new communities at all levels. This vast universal creative work manifests itself in beauty.

"This primal dynamism," he says,

"awakens communities of atoms, galaxies, stars, families, nations, persons, ecosystems, oceans, and stellar systems. We awaken to fascination and we strive to fascinate. We work to enchant others. We work to ignite life, to evoke presence, to enhance the unfolding of being. Through fascination we bring forth what might not otherwise exist. But this is exactly what love does. Love is the activity of evoking being, of enhancing life."

Love is our response to what we experience as beautiful, and it is also what propels us to generate new forms of beauty.

The soul's need for beauty is about being in touch with our essential nature and our essential call to life. The soul needs beauty because through the experience of it the soul becomes aware of its own existence. Our deep selves are awakened by feeling. We are able to touch something of the vastness of our being, the vastness of the universal community in which we reside.

Thomas Berry calls this...

“our response to the cosmic liturgy [We] humans become religious by joining the religion of the universe. [This is what] gives us a sense of awe. Apart from that our souls shrivel and our imagination would be dulled. *The greatest and deepest tragedy in losing the splendor of the outer world is that we will always have an inner demand for it. We are genetically coded to exist in a world of beauty. Take it away, yet our genetic coding remains oriented to it.* We will have desires that can never be satisfied. Our integral spiritual development cannot take place.”

Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble have written a book called *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*. In it they tell the story of a little girl who has lived her whole life in the barren concrete landscape of the inner city. She has fantasies, as she looks out the window of her school, that someday she will walk out of that school, out of that neighborhood, out of the city, until she finds herself surrounded by beauty. This fantasy sustains her...

“I guess I’m doing all right. I’m studying and, like the teacher says, it pays off. A lot of time, though, I wish I could walk out of that school and find myself a place where there are no whites, no black folk, no people of any kind! I mean, a place where I’d be able to sit still and get my head together; a place where I could walk and walk, and I’d be walking on grass, not cement with glass and garbage all around, a place where there’d be the sky, and the sun, then the moon and all those stars. At night, sometimes when I get to feeling real low, I climb up the stairs to the roof [she lived in a triple-decker with a flat roof] and I’ll look at the sky and say, ‘Hello there, moon, and all your baby stars!’ I’m being silly, I know, but up there I can stop and think about what’s happening to me. It’s the only place I can, the only place.”

The authors point out that these needs and the solutions she found to meet them arose naturally within her. She was not taught to love or to need nature. She could not help it. It is as necessary as food.

As Berry said: *“Take the world of beauty away, yet our genetic coding remains oriented to it. We will have desires that can never be satisfied.”*

I have also heard that human brain waves show completely different patterns when a person is gazing at a natural landscape from when he or she is gazing at an urban one. Perhaps this little girl was unknowingly but instinctively altering her own brain wave patterns, altering her consciousness, by imaging the green grass and trees or by gazing at

the night sky. Perhaps this enabled her to access a truer self than the self she felt reflected back to her in her impoverished environment.

Michelle Bentley is a UU minister who worked for a time as a chaplain with young men in prison. A few years ago I was able to attend a presentation she gave on her work. This included a slide show which revealed the urban neighborhoods, housing projects, and schools that these individuals had grown up in and which constituted their world. The decay, ugliness, and barrenness of their environments was crushing. She juxtaposed these images with the lush green grounds of prep schools and suburban affluence. By going back and forth between these two sets of images, her presentation vividly raised the question of how environments impact the folks who live in them. Through the slide images we saw another dimension of the gap between privilege and deprivation.

Like the little girl in the story above, young people need access to places of natural or cultural beauty which can give them peace or which can awaken their sense of wonder, soulfulness, and creativity. As theologian Henry Nelson Wieman expressed it, “Beauty awakens in us a yearning for the highest.” Take the world of beauty away, but the inner instinct remains oriented to it. Environments that relentlessly assault or deprive the senses also starve the soul.

And so, the human need for beauty presents a moral demand on us, as much as the human need for food presents a moral demand on us. We are called to a dual commitment to beauty and justice. In closing I offer you the words of Robert McAfee Brown, who expresses this dual commitment most clearly. He says:

How can [concern for] beauty and [concern for] oppression be understood together? For us the question is, How can they be understood separately? ... Concern for beauty is not a moral cop-out. It leads us firmly into the midst of all this is going on in our world.

Where beauty is apparent, we are to enjoy it.

Where there is beauty hidden, we are to unveil it.

Where there is beauty defaced, we are to restore it.

Where there is no beauty at all, we are to create it.

All of which places us in the arena where oppression occurs, where the oppressed congregate, and where we too are called to be.

If we cherish what is beautiful in life, if our souls and senses need to be nourished by beauty in order to feel deeply alive, then we are showing ourselves to be most human. But we are also called to recognize the one whose life is impoverished, and know that he or she also hungers for such nourishment, even if unknowingly. And so, where beauty is hidden, let us unveil it. Where it is defaced, let us work to restore it. And where there seems to be no beauty at all, let us do what we can to create it.

May it be so.