

An Eye for Beauty

In our long search for knowledge, our partnership with science, and our love for the rational, we sometimes lose the awe and wonder surrounding us.

BY MILTON S. KLEIN, M.D.

The Wonder of It All

In a world that places emphasis on answers, we are left with little time for awe. Mysteries, we are taught, are things to be solved, conundrums to be unraveled rather than embraced. Reflecting on some of the things missing in our lives, we come to recognize that too often we see only with our eyes, informed by just five senses.

In our long search for knowledge, our partnership with science, and our love for the rational, we sometimes lose the awe and wonder surrounding us. We are caught up in the busyness of working hard, even doing good deeds. We must accept the fact that a *mitzvah* and a mystery are not the same.

Young children seem to have little need for instruction on how to bathe in the pool of wonderment. That is not to imply they don't ask constant questions to

ascertain how the world works. Yet even after answers are provided, children still bask in the afterglow of awe. They are, as the song title suggests, our little dreamers.

For the few whose activities have blazed trails, and changed the course of destiny, perhaps the origins of their driving forces may be revealed to them. Certainly, something more than a quest for gratitude and praise impels their handiwork. Instead, the wonder, the mystery of the "why," energizes that inexplicable part of their souls. There may be no absolute answers, but the magnetism of awe, drawing us into itself, is a thing of profound beauty.

The Ritual versus the Spiritual

Prophetic emphasis on morality and leading the good life have become central to the mandate of religion. In

Emphasizing the splendor of nature and the awe it should inspire in us, the scriptures remind us of the beautiful characteristics of trees. Who, after all, does not love a tree?

so doing, they have made it possible for modern man to know God on terms that are still in accord with science and philosophy, and have dusted off some vital moral requirements that have been neglected in favor of form and ritual.

Truth and goodness may have become the mantra of modern religion, but lost somewhere in the haystack was the needle of our hunger for the experience of beauty in the presence of the Divine. By its very success, science branded itself as the New Deity; what could not be measured in a laboratory must not be real. The realms of music, art, poetry, and religion lost their romance and existed outside the bounds of truth about life. They became superfluous to our system of education and alien to our way of thinking.

Yet, the world of Beethoven, Brahms, and Mahler is, in each measure, as real, true, and worthy as that of Newton, Bohr, and Einstein, and indeed perhaps more enduring. Great prose and odes to beauty seem to persevere long after the essays of biologists, physicists, and chemists have been updated, or supplanted. What has been sadly disregarded is that the real essence of life is closer to the arts than the sciences. We have ambushed the primitive instincts we relied upon to experience beauty and faith and, in many cases, we have lost the art of living. Childhood education will surely fail in its hope to provide students with their full measure of life if it ignores three disciplines: the search for truth, the revelation of the good, and the awakening of the beautiful.

Emphasizing the splendor of nature and the awe it should inspire in us, the scriptures remind us of the beautiful characteristics of trees. Who, after all, does not love a tree? And yet, have we begun to lose track of the historical importance and manifold values the scriptures saw in them? The first Biblical couple exchanged words of love, committed the first sin, spoke the first lie, and wept the first tears under a tree. Abraham received the angel-visitors under a tree that provided a pleasant aroma and restful sanctuary. The prophet Ezekiel shook the trees with a sobbing wind and a thunder-raked heaven. The psalmist sang his song in the soft sigh of a breeze passing through the branches of trees.

Trees are democratic; they speak to all, give themselves to all, nod their universal invitation, hold back nothing. They may represent a spectrum of species, different shapes, varying sizes, and a riot of colors, yet somehow, they manage to blend and dwell together in the same peaceful forest. Yes, everyone loves a tree, because everyone understands a tree. But somehow, we do not always learn from them as we might.

Though an ardent traditionalist, my father, a rabbi, voiced a surprising core belief in the bedrock relationship between beauty and religion in a sermon given in 1979. Much as a Cubist prefers to paint an image using its most basic forms, my father suggested a definition for religion that first stripped bare the flourishes of ritual and then equated the beauty of Creation with the beauty of the Creator:

“Religion is not, in essence, a matter of belief, since there are people who believe with their minds but never experience the reality of God. Religion is not defined by morality, although the good life is integral to it. The moral code can exist outside the frame of religion and often does just that. Theology and ethics are central to religion, but they do not exhaust religious life. In fact, without the experience of the presence of the Divine, both have little or no significance as factors in religious life. Religion is basically an art; it is found more in the realm of feeling than of thought. Without the sense of wonder, awe, reverence, beauty, and holiness, we may have ideas about God that are true, principles of morality that are good, but we do not have religion.

“The major task of modern religion is to reawaken the feeling of worship and to stimulate the art forms of man’s tradition so that he may complete a worship service and know that he has been in the presence of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Indeed, the experience of worship should be a supreme expression of man’s highest art, for religion is by nature the art of all arts. Upon leaving a church or mosque, temple or synagogue, a worshipper who has participated in such a deep, reverential connection ought to know before whom he stood.

“I wonder how long we can sustain a deep and honest commitment to any religion that does not

allow us to treasure what should be the birthright of every human being—the warmth of experience of being loved and looked after by God. Being loved and looked after is a feeling most of us can recall, perhaps during our childhood, perhaps as adults in the face of enormous loss.

“I worry that we dare to argue about the individuation of the God experience. We sometimes deem one sect’s interpretation to be more valid than another’s. What should worry us more is that it may be possible to live one’s entire life in a religious world having never heard uttered the validating sentence, “God loves and cares for you.” Is the feeling of being cherished merely because we exist not a true experience of God, and does it not stimulate awe and wonder?”

In one of the Hand of the Aged craft workshops run by the elderly in Jerusalem, an assembly line was responsible for making dolls. A debilitated man whose stroke had left him paralyzed except for the use of one finger participated in the doll’s construction in the following way: his co-worker would cut out a small ball of clay and place it in front of him, and then, with his one working finger, this beautiful old man would flatten the clay, which was then used as a button for the doll’s sweater. In this way, one finger was as essential to the creation of the doll as the contribution of all the other hands at work.

“Blessed art Thou, oh God, who varies the creatures and gives purpose to the seemingly purposeless.” Sometimes it is as difficult to define what is beautiful as it is to know what a human being is worth.

And so it seems that beauty in the *mind* of the beholder may reach consensus when it applies to concepts that run deeper than skin and are thus less prone to the astigmatism of individual fancy. Amber waves, purple mountains, and photos of one’s grandchildren are objects of beauty with near universal appeal, more for their penetrating emotional attachment to family and country than for their surface characteristics.

Achieving pristine communication and living a moral life, nurturing love and sensing awe and wonder, appreciating the sanctity of all humanity—all are perceived as beautiful because they are themes rather than objects to admire and experience. Exposure to them prompts us to examine who we are and upgrade what we strive to become. Touched by conceptual beauty, we can be transformed by a universal vision of the perfect moment. And with this bold insight, in the blink of an eye, we are led to believe that we can cement our relationships, correct our errors, archive our best experiences, and begin to repair the world. 🌸

© 2018 by Milton S. Klein, M.D. from his book, *Learned by Heart: Dialogues with My Father*, published by Bright Sky Press, Houston. Available through the website: learnedbyheartbook.com.

