

“All the Beauty to Behold”

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1 May 2022

I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling
that one of most mundane
but perplexing challenges of lock-down life,
for long stretches of the pandemic,
was figuring out how to get your hair cut.

In saying this, I don't in any way mean to make light
of the serious circumstances we faced,
or diminish the very real ordeals that taxed our front-line workers
to their understandable limits.

But, each of us blessed with hair found that, in time,
whether we liked it or not, it became *a thing* we had to contend with.

While so much else around us seemed to freeze in place,
that did not extend to our ever-extending hair.

Amid the existential uncertainty of that time,
our follicles continued to pump out hair
at the rapid pace of a centimeter or two a month.

At some point, most of us decided something simply had to be done.

For some, that meant taking scissors in hand,
and, well, taking your chances.

Others may have pressed into service
one of their nearest and dearest to take up the task.

That's what happened at our house.

Early on, Bob and I made a pact.
We would cut each other's hair.

As it turns out, this wasn't among our wedding vows.

*For richer and for poorer,
in sickness and in health,*

in good hair and in bad...

It was an exercise in trust.
And a test for our relationship, as it was, I imagine, for so many.

To hone his skills, Bob, ever the engineer,
watched a YouTube video about cutting hair,
and felt confident he'd gotten the gist of it.

I, on the other hand,
assured him I had carefully watched my barber
work his magic on my hair every three weeks, for years on end,
and that that surely qualified me to work some magic of my own.

So, out came the scissors and the razors and, every three weeks,
we fumbled our way through this regular chore.

It was something of a bonding experience.
And did I mention it was an exercise in trust?

Still, we tried to approach the ritual with humour and good-will.

But, occasionally, when one of us slipped up
and nicked the other's ear with the scissors
or accidentally shaved off a sideburn,
one or both of us would immediately launch
into that earworm of a song
from the musical *Grease*: "Beauty School Drop-out."

Clearly, if we hadn't "missed [our] mid-terms and flunked shampoo,"
we would have been better equipped to meet the challenge quite literally at hand.

That song has returned to me in recent days,
as I've thought about the meaning of beauty,
our theme for the month of May.

How many of us, I wonder,
have at some point dropped out of Beauty School?

* * *

A few years ago, during the morning rush hour,
a youngish man wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap,

strode into a subway station in the heart of Washington, D.C.¹

He positioned himself just inside a set of double-doors,
near the escalator that led down to the trains.

He opened his violin case, took out his treasured instrument,
seeded the open case with a bit of spare change,
and then began to play Johann Sebastian Bach's glorious Chaconne.

But, no one really noticed—or even seemed to care.

Commuters, on their way to work, filed past in droves,
all seemingly oblivious to the fact that this guy had any talent.

Of the 1100 people captured on video
walking past him over the next 45 minutes,
only seven paused long enough to listen to him play at all.

And only once was there more than a crowd of one nearby.

Still, even in their haste, a few people were generous,
and by the time he finished,
he had made \$42 and some change.

It seems that context is everything, sometimes.

“On that Friday morning. . .
No one knew it, but the fiddler standing against a bare wall. . .
was one of the finest classical musicians in the world,
playing some of the most elegant music ever written
on one of the most valuable violins ever made.”

What most everyone passing by had missed
was the virtuoso Joshua Bell,
with his prized Stradivarius in hand,
masterfully rendering music that would have brought down the house
in any of the world's great concert halls.

His performance had been arranged by *The Washington Post*
as “an experiment in context, perception and priorities. . .,”
a test to see whether, amid the hubbub of our daily lives,

¹ Gene Weingarten, “Pearls Before Breakfast: Can one of the nation's great musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour? Let's find out.”
The Washington Post, 8 April 2007.

beauty could possibly compete.

I hope it could have competed within me.

I hope I would have stopped, and listened,
and tried to appreciate the gift this guy was offering me,
regardless of whether I recognized him
as one of the world's greatest musicians.

But, most of all,
I hope I would have decided to invest just a few minutes of my day
to be reminded that life is good,
that beauty abounds,
and that it merits all the reverence and awe I can muster.

But chances are, that I, too,
might very well have shuffled right along,
like so many of the others,
oblivious to the gift of beauty on offer—
just there for the taking.

In other words, I, like so many of the people
who rushed off to work that morning,
without giving the music any heed,
could have easily been just another Beauty School drop-out.

What about you?

It's been said, of course, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
And that's true. Different people find different things beautiful.

But what if we're not exactly doing a lot of beholding?

What if life goes by in a blur,
and we rarely make an effort to note all the beauty that is on offer?

The nature of beauty is a long-standing question in philosophy.

In antiquity, beauty was considered one of the highest values,
up there with goodness, justice, and truth.

In our time, the debate more often centres on the question
of whether beauty exists in its own right,
or is generated by the beholder's sense of it.

While I appreciate that some find it meaningful
to debate the ins and outs of aesthetics,
I find I'm more concerned about whether we take the time
to summon the intention to be on the lookout for beauty,
wherever and however it is to be found.

When we're mired in the hard and heart-breaking aspects of our world,
beauty may feel hard to come by.
I understand that.

But I also believe that beauty is not a binary thing,
an either-or, abundantly present or plainly absent.

Beauty is weaved into the fabric of the world.

Which means beauty can be found in some surprising places.

And I'm not just talking about things that are pretty or pleasing.

I am talking about what we recognize to be beautiful,
because of how it moves us and connects us deeply to life itself.

The French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus said
that such beauty "is unbearable,
[that it] drives us to despair,
offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity
that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time."²

To me, such a sense of beauty
speaks to a deep feeling of goodness—of rightness—
about what we bear witness to in a given moment.

* * *

Another violin story. . . This one from right here in Toronto.

A few years ago, Jim Wallenberg,
a long-time member of the Toronto Symphony,
left his very valuable violin on top of a green plastic salt bin,
just outside to the streetcar station
at Queen's Quay and Spadina.³

² Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*.

³ Sarah Boesveld, "Owner to get lost violin back," *The Toronto Star*, 9 April 2008.

As he fumbled through his pockets for a subway token
and juggled the take-out food he was intent on delivering
to his wife at Mount Sinai Hospital,
where she was soon due to give birth to twins,
he put down his cherished violin.

And, when the streetcar arrived,
distracted by all that was on his mind,
off he went,
leaving behind the prized instrument
he had cherished for years,
a violin he had named “The Lady Wallenberg,”
in honour of his mother, who had taught him to play,
and who had had the violin made for him 36 years before.

As the streetcar rocked along the tracks,
he made it all the way to Union Station
before realising what he had done.

When he did come to,
he, quite understandably, panicked.

He said he was: “paralyzed, freaking out, [and] shaking inside.”

With some quick thinking,
he decided to stay on the streetcar,
as it looped back around towards Queen’s Quay,
hoping and praying his violin
would still be there when he returned.

But, of course, it was long gone.

Not knowing what else to do,
he posted notices in the newspaper,
offering a \$1000 reward
for the safe return of the prized instrument
that was, to him, like a beloved member of the family.

Just a few days later, a man named Wayne
remembered that earlier in the week,
he had been struck by the sight
of a violin case in a shopping cart
being pushed along by a homeless woman

near to where Wallenberg's had been lost.

The man set out in search for the woman and her cart,
and when he found her,
he offered her the \$35 he had in his wallet,
and when she took a shine to it,
he threw in the silver ring he was wearing to sweeten the deal.

With what he hoped was the right violin now in hand,
he called Wallenberg and made plans
to exchange the violin for the \$1000 reward.

At the end of the day, the violinist had his instrument,
the man had his reward (and promptly booked himself a trip to Vegas),
and the woman, well, the woman had \$35
and a not-so-very-new ring.

When the story hit the press,
there was much debate over the ethical implications
of how all of this shook out,
with many people feeling
the woman deserved much more than she got—
or that she should have just delivered the violin to the TTC
after she found it.

If this were a sermon on justice,
I would certainly delve into all of that further,
but this is and remains a sermon about beauty,
so I'll leave it to you to decide if justice was served,
and invite you instead
to consider what was beautiful in this story.

For me, it wasn't so much that musician and instrument were reunited,
and that they will lived happily ever after.

For me, it was more
that the woman who found the violin had treated it well—
and arguably better than our world had treated her.

And for me, it was that there was such upset and outrage
in the comments section of the story that ran in *The Toronto Star*.

People feeling this woman had been slighted;
people wondering just what her life was like;

and people taking great offence at 'The Star
for denying her inherent worth and dignity
by repeatedly referring to her only as "a bag lady."

In that, I found great beauty, and a ray of hope.

* * *

Beauty abounds in life's most common places,
and even in those corners that might make us uncomfortable.

It's always there for the taking, in predictable and unexpected ways,
if only we'll open ourselves to it.

Yet, too, often, we don't,
and many of life's great gifts go unopened.

Let us learn to live in another way.

Let us learn to pay careful, sacred attention to our lives,
that we might never lose sight
of the beauty that makes so much of life worth living.

For as Annie Dillard reminds us:

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
... So that creation need not play to an empty house.

Friends, for the miracle that is ours with every day,
it seems the least we can do
to repay our great debt of gratitude for life itself
is to pay attention to life as we live it.

So let us study hard, in this great and wonderful Beauty School
in which we live, and move, and have our being.

That our hearts may be made glad and grateful
for all that is beautiful in this life we live.

Amen.

Question: When was the last time that beauty took your breath away?