

Beauty and the Covid Beast

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KEY WORDS

beauty, creativity, health, internet, isolation, love, relationship, role, spontaneity, systems theory, vulnerability

... were they ... invulnerable to, untouched by, vulgarity and ugliness, glancing for a moment into ... a hidden reality: the presence at all times, in all places, of a beautiful world? (Rooney, 2021 p.250)

In this moment from 'Beautiful World Where Are You', Sally Rooney's characters experience reunification, they embrace, after separation, conflict, breakdown and heart break. Beauty blossoms in their embrace. Embracing has been something that the Covid 19 Pandemic required us to curtail. Hugging, kissing, touching, proximity, gathering, all required more awareness, more planning; often constraint. At times the number of minutes we spent out of home were closely clocked, the distance from home and what we could go out for were prescribed. Likewise who we could be with. Mandated lockdowns, curfews, border closures, quarantining, masks, covid safety plans; all new ways of living imposed to mitigate a health crisis that might otherwise push through the pre-existing cracks and bring on total social collapse. In this context our priorities were naturally reviewed. Where do we find beauty amongst the unwelcome messes, fears, sorrows, losses; the burdens that discriminate unfairly. There have also been new possibilities. Telehealth has expanded treatment options, mitigated geographic isolation; decentralisation and relocation have become easier; detail previously overlooked in our interactions and our locales was revealed. The comparative experiences of relating in person and online accentuated the value of what we actually experience by being physically together; what we don't have when we can't be. It is no great claim to say that the Covid-19 Pandemic reconfirmed the primacy of relationships and the importance of being in the moment. If we can make this more than a passing novelty Covid has shifted our consciousness for the better.

Within the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Psychodrama Association (AANZPA Inc), we place primacy on relationships and being in the moment. We have a group methodology that privileges relationships

as a critical means to not only enable healing and growth — we know that relating deeply matters to us. Relationships undergirded by trust, respect, honour create the conditions for the co-creative development of our roles and role relationships, for our sleeping genii to awaken. We endeavour to free our uniqueness while remaining connected, to be more responsive in the moment, more vital, flexible, creative, original; to be good enough. This is what it means to function as a “spontaneous actor”, a role we give the highest value to. The spontaneous actor is recognisable in the congruence between our thinking, feeling and acting; not impulsivity, nor necessarily vivaciousness; being responsive, not reactive. Those of us who have participated in the psychodrama method have experienced its transformative power. We know the dramas of profound healing, the taming of pre and post-verbal traumas, the rewriting of old narratives, the creation of new neural pathways, the diversification and strengthening of our role repertoires. We have borne our ugly and our beautiful truths with each other. We know heart blossoming sweetness for ourselves and others. We know how to embody beauty. The joy to be found in each other’s company has been accentuated by the privations of Covid and this creates opportunities for our relationships to be more exulting, more beautiful. We have to hold onto this.

To go

But what is beauty — apparently a very contentious philosophical issue. Over 8 billion references arise from a general internet search. References to the beauty industry focus on visual pleasure and choke off those that offer something more intrinsic, the exulting type of beauty. Beauty has been commodified. We live in a materialist, rationalist, post-industrial, electronic age. Perhaps the commodification of beauty is what Elvis Costello (1996) is lamenting when he sings,

*What shall we do,
What shall we do with all this useless beauty?
All this useless beauty...*

The question about what is beauty and what is its value is referenced in archetypal stories. Beauty, in the fairy tale (Villeneuve, 1740), transforms her perception of the visual ugliness of the Beast to reveal his underlying inner beauty. Captain von Trapp (played by Christopher Plummer) in the Sound of Music (Wise, 1965) is engaged to the glamorous Baroness (played by Eleanor Parker) who is the sumptuous confluence of Aryan beauty and wealth. She offers a perfectly confectioned femininity — exquisite looks, couture, hair, deportment, grace, charm — something most of us fail at before we start:

*I learned the truth at seventeen that love was meant for beauty queens
(Ian, 1975)*

But the Captain falls for the homely governess, who has inspired the love of his children, who brings singing back into their lives; they joyfully unite as a family singing troupe.

This discussion of beauty is not an appeal to asceticism or utilitarianism. Beauty may be commodified and often only skin deep but WOW Eleanor Parker makes a luscious Baroness! The number of music videos that sample Christopher Plummer's good looks and desirous gazes is also remarkable. Both offer very pleasant immersions in sensuality and create space for the exploration of desire, for our unknown selves. The excitation of the senses is not a facile indulgence; I recall the look of sheer joy on the face of a farm dog arrested by the grooming of a concert of cows with their wide long tongues. The elegant curves of art-nouveau fretwork, the emphasis on pink in this year's European summer fashions, the sleek lines of a Maserati, the exquisite arrangements of colour, perfume, texture and form in a manicured garden, in a meal, in an object, in a cinematic scene — all worthy sensual experiences that honour desire. It can take hours of love and dedication to create pleasure for the senses. New truths can emerge out of creative endeavours, beauty can help to transcend turmoil. Sensory beauty can be deeply inspiring and not necessarily vacuous even if ornamental. Sensory enjoyment can make profound moments of internal coherence accessible and bring the role of our lovers of life to the fore.

It seems impossible to write about beauty decoupled from joy, love, truth, desire, beingness, virtue, integrity, unity, wholeness, peace, meaningfulness and power. Beauty seems to be available in all these experiences as well as being better understood by experiences of ugliness and vulgarity. Joy feels beautiful, love creates beautiful moments in relationships; we long for meaningfulness, moments of being, things that stave off the threats of emptiness; we strive for beauty, we co-operate to co-create it. Love risks grief, sorrow can be exquisitely poignant and softening, sweetness can assuage ugly impulses to hurt, criticise, violate. Conflict and loss enable insights into the value of peacefulness and beingness. Beautiful actions speak a thousand words, beautiful words, beautifully timed can be an exquisite thing:

*Baby, can I hold you tonight?
Maybe if I told you the right words
Ooh, at the right time you'd be mine
You'd be mine
You'd be mine (Chapman, 1988)*

Being at peace with our unadulterated truths can enable an exulting personal power and stand us in good stead in conflicts; the unity of body, soul and spirit can be glimpsed. We feel whole, big, full of potency, effortless flow is experienced. Irrevocable integrity, irrefutable authority, statuesque dignity can be conveyed. Standing in my own truth without taking anything away from anyone else, even when standing for something that is against the wishes of another, offers a feeling of unity and wholeness that can flow forth into creativity and leadership. Yet beauty is not essentially high-minded and vulgarity also can be unifying. Recently I heard the exquisite giggles of zoologists witnessing Tasmanian devils fleeing in a flatulent panic. Laughter together, shared humour is an exquisite lift for the spirit. I have experienced shared humour that is not at anyone else's expense, more likely at mine, as unifying experiences between companions. We are elevated by moments of earthly mirth. We also all know how superficial charm can wear thin.

Is the growing importance of relationships just coinciding with the advent of Covid? Are we maturing, evolving and weary of beauty being commodified anyway, tired of competitive anxieties, traumatising insensitivities and divisive conflicts? Are we developing a more effective capacity for peacefulness, joy, power in being authoritative, connected and well differentiated? Or is this just a random over generalised subjective experience of my developmental stage and the sum total of a lifetime of healing and privilege? Has greed, materialism, rationalism, the desecration of the earth finally been maximised enough to tip over into a prioritisation of beauty that reaches into something deeper in us, something light years from consumerism? Is relating beautifully the best frontier left by the ugly, vulgar world that Rooney laments. Is there a kind of retrospective tragedy about the protracted preoccupation with the feminine form?

*Is there a time for kohl and lipstick
A time for curling hair
Is there a time for high street shopping
To find the right dress to wear
Here she comes
Heads turn around
Here she comes
...
Beauty plays the clown
Here she comes
Surreal in her crown.... (Passengers, 1995)*

The primacy of relationship, of savouring the moment has not arisen because of Covid; wars have long concentrated the collective mind. Isolated communities, societies under duress, companions, families, have all long

known the importance of connectedness. Have the limitations of the urban experience of anonymity been delineated, the scale of Metropoli found to be demoralising? Has Covid exacerbated the pre-existing cracks in our lives?

This pathway of words now turns to portraying more personal moments that inform my evolving understanding of beauty. Experiences include travels into exhilarating alpine heights and the elevation of a rustic artless scene into a beautiful form. The materialisation of a metaphor is offered; there is an attempt to articulate but not constrain bliss. The poignance of vulnerability in the venerable is savoured. More questions are asked. Are there nascent signs of teens revising the coordinates of interpersonal aesthetics/ethics? For the sake of seeing the light that there is to be found in facing ugliness and our capacity for cruelty, an explication of the genesis of a type of beastliness is risked. The latter story reminds me of how beastliness can reveal beauty, if we care to keep the hand of love, acceptance, understanding extended.

To fall, to step out

...multiplying thrills, the steady climb, a burst into oceanic wholeness...

A long time ago, in a foreign land, as a young adult, alone, I experienced an alpine heaven — eye to eye with peaks of nuggety dark chocolate massifs; snow-dusted, blue skies, green grass, fresh air. Stupendous, exhilarating, searing. A place more elevated than the opening scene of ‘The Sound of Music’ where Julie Andrews in her sackcloth and pinafore comes wheeling over a verdant crest, alight with joy, in love with the music she hears in nature. Who wouldn’t be uplifted by being in the audience of the majestic elemental beauty of alpine country? So much relief from ego in being wonderfully small and liberated from my own small orbit.

By night warm and safe under layers of dense duck down I experienced a soundscape created by the cows barned under the chalet floor. Each with individually forged bells, each a unique sound-tag that their cow herd, with his pointed hat and pointy beard, knew like a name. Though not musical it was an unforgettable score. There was so much to be charmed by but within a day I was cross-eyed with confusion about why I was so unhappy. I later understood that I had rationalised that beauty into fixing all my problems, feeding me everything that I was so starving for — the wholeness that emerges for the Von Trapp Family Singers. I was idealising. Being alone in the company of another that I didn’t share a history, a language or a cultural heritage with, the tide of loneliness rose. Idealisation crumbled; replaced by regression back into the primitive fragmented inchoate horrifying experiences of infantile abandonment. Unable to find internal peace to relate from, or to even know that that was what was so missing, this remarkable

beauty became empty. For years after I remembered the lesson — you can be in the most beautiful places in the world and still be miserable.

Since then I've made sense of and processed that torment. I know that without sufficient doubling to bring order to the inchoate experiences of the newborn, to move beyond the stage of the Matrix of all Identity, overwhelm can become the unknown normal. Additional anxieties at times could feel life-threatening. As Moreno says anxiety fills the space left by the absence of spontaneity. Chronic overwhelm is destabilising and makes responsivity, spontaneity less accessible.

Internal peace, however, is not always a prerequisite for being able to be responsive to beauty. Sometimes it is beauty that overcomes anxiety. Recently I heard a countrywoman who described herself as a “broomstick singer” for the first time in public, release an aria into the heavenly vault of a decommissioned church with brilliant acoustics. Some ugly old angst that had been skulking around, hardening my heart was liquidated. Likewise, a front row seat at the Bangarra Dance Company performance of *Unaipon* in 2004 allowed some ossified grief to be mourned. These kinds of tears are a magical transformative capacity; what a beautiful thing to be furnished with; perhaps a glimpse of the divine.

One meaningless stir crazy weekend in lockdown I discovered, through creating a collage for a friend, a place of timelessness. In search of images to mirror her, I trawled through my art gallery magazines and found a new wonder for art and artists. I became enthralled inside the images, textures, colours, painterly strokes, the choices of detail, the palette, the relationships between the protagonists, the times those images evoked. My imagination was on fire, alive and at peace. Any sense of deprivation or desire to be anywhere else, doing anything else, with anyone else, was extinguished.

The experience of my first trip to the National Gallery of Victoria, my first visit to any art gallery, as a girl from a dirty, dusty sheep farm where domestic drudgery characterised my mother's life, found me stalled on a balcony overlooking a deep internal courtyard. Transfixed by the sculpture there, recognition lead me into vivid validation. In the sculpture, I recognised something that referenced home. Intermittent jets of water spurting out of the spigot on the floor of the courtyard, water arcs jumping like the sheep who leap in excitement/fear, as they are released to rejoin their mob; maybe shaking off the agitation of their single file passage through the drafting race. The sculpture, the sculptor, gave my life a place in this cathedral of beauty. The shadow of an idea — unknown possibilities exist — was excited.

Subjectively, something about sculptures gives them their own way of offering powerful experiences. Their materiality, their substance, their three-dimensionality fleshes out an identification; maybe like being kindred masses in space, their artistic power animates them. Living and working in London six months after my ankle-twisting descent from the incredible

grandeur of the Swiss Alps I was drawn to a sculpture exhibition advertised by the image of an orderly stack of crushed cars melted together. A different massif — something soothing in its up-ended rectangular lines — yet disturbing in its critique of consumerism. Iconic cars reduced into giant stacks-on Jenga. There seemed to be a commentary about society and what is meaningful, implying something contrary to the stories told in omniscient advertising. The otherness appealed — again possibilities were suggested. Could there be other people who see the world as I do; could a thought barely known to myself also be thought by unknown others, and more, could this also be rendered artistic? Maybe the deep self within wasn't an alien, wasn't a freak; was one with many. The *pièce de résistance* — inside the gallery, around a corner, a room of pendulous roof-hung grey steel, riveted and polished into clumpy cumulus clouds. An arresting experience to be underneath. Gasping, I clicked — heavy weather. A metaphor transformed into a visceral experience. Unity between poetry and beingness.

More recently during the gestation of this paper, I noticed how moved I was when a very venerable colleague, honouring the truth of the younger other, gaze turned inward, took humility in hand and acknowledged that they were being inducted into new self-restraint. An exquisite moment of seeing vulnerability rearrange their demeanour, rearrange their role repertoire; the acceptance of again growing. Internal chaos, subtly evident in their mildly fibrillating chin muscles, evolves before my eyes into softness, a greater unconfected sweetness. Unmasked, nobility beamed out of this giant of wisdom. The respect I felt for this humility, after this moment of exertion, inspired.

I was recently with the father of a disabled, traumatised child when he relinquished his resistance to the changes wrought on him by this experience. He called it splendour. He related this through acquiescence, tears wrought of laying down resistances, giving in to utter acceptance. Dignity found, status anxiety discarded. The privilege of travelling with someone while they not only heal but transform themselves is a profound reward for the work it takes to be that companionable guide.

I have realised with my own body that out of the horrifying fires of infantile neglect, the conditions were created for an obsessive quest to plug up the gaping emptiness left by the absence of my mother. Consumerism preys on these emptinesses. What newborn doesn't think they are beholding the greatest beauty when engaged by their mother's engrossed gaze? For a long time, I searched to satiate that hunger. This is the story of Frankenstein's monster in pursuit of his maker, roaming the North Pole, starving for love. Compulsively, understandably, unreasonably I used others in inevitably doomed attempts to approximate my mother. In retrospect, I understand my preoccupation with beauty, the idealisation of it, my frustrated demands on hapless others. I was rejected, I am sorry. I developed impatience, counter-

rejected, was cruel, lonely, tormented, fragmented. What an incredible thing to belong in an organisation where these driven roles can be discovered, exposed, understood, honoured, processed, transformed between us. To know if it is possible for me means it is possible for others too — hope is a beautiful thing. What a relief to see others through eyes without expectations, entitlement, demands. To approach as the naive enquirer, to be in the moment.

Bitter roles borne of traumas are not easily transformed. They live on, often creating ugly interactions, isolation beyond distance, perverting history. Fear begotten beliefs can ossify into truisms that carve out ruts in our role systems only to re-create themselves, then claim proof of their circular validity. Rigidity touts itself as security. The fragile possibility that there may be an alternative, that some valuable evolution may germinate if only we can soften and stay open to possibilities, can seem too dangerous. So often hope is scotched for fear of further heartbreak, breakdown. This can set up that life that is lived in the valley of greyness, quiet despair, where the inner beast remains trapped unaware of the possibilities of a loving hand of self-acceptance, of a parent-like friend.

The incredibly beautiful moments I have experienced between friends, family, colleagues, trainers, mentors, teachers — despite pathogenic infantile chaos and all the subsequent mess-making — are a testament to the power, the love, the capacity for co-creation that our methodology makes possible. The hand that helps us navigate overwhelm, the acknowledgment of each other's everyday humanity and heroisms, the mirroring of each other's best motivating forces, achievements; the co-creation of progressive roles out of coping or fragmenting roles — these are exquisite moments of beauty. AANZPA provides a dynamic, healing, uplifting nursery to become in, to give from, that keeps giving. What we have in our community is incredibly precious. I see transformation despite ad nauseam repetitions, spontaneity-rich role systems, the hilarious fun enacted at our dinner dances. We are onto something really beautiful. Still, some ossified roles evade transformation, we clash and war and offend and stumble with hurt. It is an ongoing road, other methodologies are also our auxiliaries, others come after us.

I remember admiring a colleague when challenging 14-year-olds to consider the tattoo they would have chosen for themselves as a 3-year-old, 7-year-old, an 11-year-old. A simple exercise to encourage a deeper engagement with themselves beyond transitory engrossments.

Amongst teens, I wonder if I have glimpsed a struggle to step towards a future ethics of aesthetics that is beyond the e-world where all fantasies can be experienced. A future where desire, the beauty of looks, perfection or "normality" has dubious currency. I see meaningful connections enacted where disability, sexuality, gender, heritage, personal hygiene, cognitive

intelligence, neurotypicality, wit are all irrelevant. I wonder how much they perceive doom in their future or is that just a projection of an ageing facilitator grappling with my own mortality. The internet offers gluttonous escapism; an infinity of stimulation, imagery, soundscapes, information; fantastical desires and ideals can be uber-maximised. Maybe cravings for escapism are being sated. I have wondered, is a revised interpersonal ethics arising in this context? Everything else seems immaterial, gutted, consumed, destroyed, inaccessible. Is the imperative to be kind, respectful, peaceful the path to the only refuge left? What isn't unstraight, unabled, unwhite, unconventional, unbinary seems passé — we know idealised refuges lose their charm. I have wondered if this makes sense of the extraordinary anguish when the rock of friendship is shaken. What is to be made of those moments when they are with each other, when they seem silenced by the risks of not being able to edit what they say before expressing it? They don't seem to know how to disagree/differentiate so they don't. They seem to put the highest value on being peaceful with each other.

To close, and remain open

Whilst the physical world is being desecrated by greed-driven predation on our hungers, does it behove us to become more beautiful within ourselves and with each other. Do we have as much time as we had to squander on petty conflicts and half-hearted moments? Are we on notice to take greater responsibility for our feelings and not turn them into ugly decoctions of blame and criticism, judgement, reactivity, aggression, distance and coldness? Does it take courage and strength to be beautiful? The deeply rich satisfying place that being together offers has become more precious since the arrival of the Covid 19 pandemic. Our relationships with the arts, the elements, breathtaking and everyday moments, with movement, congregation, play, work, travel, these have known fallow times. Social distancing has set the scene for getting better acquainted with the beauty to be created when we deeply value what we can be when together, when with ourselves.

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