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English 120

6 Oct 2017

(1,160 words)

### Eye of the Beholder

On Aug. 26, 2009, just a few miles north of La Cañada, a fire destroyed 161,000 acres over a 50-day period, burning all traces of foliage—pine trees, manzanita shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers (Cardine). When I drove through the mountains after the fire, I felt heartbroken, seeing nothing but smoke and ashes. A lush evergreen forest had been wiped away and transformed into a black, twisted wasteland. However, when I looked closer—I saw that tiny green buds had already begun pushing out from the tips of the charred branches. Grass had already begun to poke up from the ashy soil. The forest had begun to regenerate, and when I returned a few months later, I was amazed at nature’s speedy work—purple lupines were about to bloom and baby pine trees—a foot high—were swaying in the breeze. It was beautiful sight! I understood then that we can often find beauty where others have overlooked it, and *true beauty* goes beyond the superficial or the façade. Thus, the expression “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” can be understood in how we look at people, nature, and ourselves.



Fig. 1 “Amaryllis after the Belladonna Fire” (Ittner)

One of the most beautiful people I've ever met, Naveen James, would not fit some people's ideas of "beautiful." Naveen James, born blind and with a rare medical condition, lives with irregular facial features and eyes that appear cloudy and misaligned. He walks with a cane and uses a GPS system to navigate his whereabouts. In spite of his slightly unusual looks, Naveen is a handsome guy, and those who are lucky enough to meet him are instantly taken by his wit and charm. Without a doubt, he is beautiful to anyone who knows him. We must remember that the person we see on the surface may not reflect what we find underneath. In most societies, "beauty" has more to do with physical ideas or proportion and structure than substance. Beauty is always subjective and superficial and has to do more with simple aesthetics rather than means nothing unless we know what is inside. Moreover, many people who are "traditionally" handsome or beautiful may, in fact, be terrible, awful people. They might be shallow or mean or cruel, in spite of their dashing good looks. Ted Bundy, for example, the notorious serial killer, was able to lure women with his clean-cut appearance and charming personality. Ann Rule, the famous crime writer, wrote about Bundy, that "His physical attractiveness helped to make him a mythical character, an antihero who continues to intrigue readers, many of whom were not even born when he carried out his horrendous crimes" (Rule qtd. In Moyer). Often we excuse bad behavior or are drawn to certain people in spite of who they truly are. Therefore, it is important that we get to know people and judge them for the whole of their personalities rather than on superficial qualities like the proportions of their physical features.

Furthermore, besides thinking about beauty in terms of how we view other people, we should consider how we view beauty when applied to the elements of nature. For example, many people describe thunderstorms or inclement weather as "gloomy" or "depressing." They complain about gray skies and cold weather as being limiting and unpleasant. These people often talk negatively about all the activities that they *cannot* do. In their defense, some people are indeed affected more than others by weather changes such as diminished sunlight, and studies have shown that such people are prone to

depression during the rainy or winter season. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “People with SAD [Seasonal Affective Disorder] may have trouble regulating one of the key neurotransmitters involved in mood, serotonin” (“Seasonal Affective Disorder”). This means that some people’s actual brain chemistry might change in response to low levels of sunlight and these people most likely suffer more than others. Many people, however, myself included, absolutely love rain and think of a thunderstorm as very beautiful, natural phenomenon. A thunderstorm, for example, being a combination of rain, wind, electricity—flashing lightning, pounding thunder, the soothing sound of rain as it hits the roof—provides a dramatic change from my usual routine, and because I live in place where it rarely rains, I crave more dramatic weather events. Moreover, during a thunderstorm, I am forced to pay attention, not only to the weather, but to my thoughts, and to be present within my surroundings. Rain becomes my excuse to stay put and to read a good book or to go for a walk, allowing myself enjoy the sensations of the storm.

And if we can appreciate beauty in other people and in nature, why aren’t we better at seeing beauty in ourselves? We should be more generous when we look in the mirror! For most of my life, as with many people, when I looked in the mirror, all I saw were my imperfections. I was hung up on not being pretty enough, not being thin enough, that my eyes were too close together, that my hair wasn’t right. Now, rather than scrutinize each one of my “flaws,” I try to look at myself the way I might look at another person. I try to be gentler with myself and understand that how I feel affects how I look. If I am eating well and generally taking good care of myself, that is reflected in my smile and my cheerful mood. Also, I’ve learned that if we focus more of our attention on doing good deeds for other people and working hard to accomplish our goals, we will be calm, self-confident, and proud. These accomplishments not only affect how we feel, but how we look. When we are satisfied with ourselves, others are more likely to love us for who we are, not only how we look (and if some people cannot love us for who we are, then those people are not worth our time!) The psychologist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

once wrote, "People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in their true beauty is revealed only if there is light from within" (qtd. in Greenberg).

All in all, the expression "Beauty in in the eye of the beholder" encourages us to expand our definition of beauty. When possible, we should find more time to appreciate beauty in all its forms: in how we view others, how we view the world around us, and how we view ourselves. While there exists no set standard for beauty, if we look deeper beneath the surface and get past the superficial, we begin to understand that true beauty is everywhere, if we just take the time to look. Our lives will be better, in the end. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not" ("Ralph Waldo").

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