

Why Beauty Matters. Not Just to Artists but to Everyone, Even Politicians

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Beauty Will Save the World.

In a downtown talk on “Why Beauty Matters,” Poet Dana Gioia echoes Dostoevsky.

“The experience of the beautiful is powerful and universal. People are transfixed by beauty. In the presence of beauty, they feel a deep human hunger being satisfied”, said Dana Gioia, award-winning poet and former chair of the National Endowment of the Arts, arguing for “Why Beauty Matters”, and stressing the need to recover an appreciation of beauty in a culture that has lost sight of its meaning and value.

Beauty is “commonly cheapened”, Gioia said to an evidence of over 230 gathered on October 17th at the University Club in downtown Chicago, at a cultural forum luncheon talk sponsored by the Lumen Christi Institute. It is often a synonym for “pretty”, and associated with beauty salons and beauty pageants.

On the other hand, thinkers today can’t define the perception of the beautiful as an objective experience, Gioia claimed. For them, it is a social construction, an illusion in the eye of the beholder. Beauty is all surface, its deeper meaning created by society. Some would call beauty “pleasure technology”, a consumer product reduced to a political or social power strategy.

But this cannot explain, Gioia argued, why we thrill at things that threaten or marginalize us. When we stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon, we feel the tremendous power of the beautiful, yet at the same time we have a strong sense of our individual insignificance.

Gioia gave further examples that astonish and transfix us. “The beautiful isn’t necessarily even pretty”, he said. It is understandable to be awed by the beauty of a sunset or the towering redwood forest, but what about the swirling of a tornado, or the swooping of a hawk?

The beautiful has an “odd or singular effect on us”. When we experience the beautiful, there is “an arresting of attention, a moment of stillness”. While saturating ourselves in the phenomenon, it causes us to stop, to pause amidst the busyness of our lives. In that arresting of attention, “we get the thrill of pleasure”, Gioia said. The beautiful allows us to transcend ourselves. We don’t want to possess a bird, a clump of flowers, children at play; we simply want to be in their presence, he explained.

“What beauty gives us”, he said, “is a mysterious joy, beyond the power to possess”. It gives us also a heightened perception of the shape or meaning of

things. The vision may be disturbing, as in a hawk swooping down on its prey, but it is connected to a sense of the truth.

Our perception of the beautiful “creates a sense of unity in its variety, a vision of redemptive order in the fallen world”, Gioia claimed.

But then there is the moment it vanishes, and from our joyful elevation we return to commonplace existence. “We cannot hold onto it”, he said.

As a poet, Gioia is deeply sensitive to the beautiful – to its tremendous power to touch the human spirit, to open the soul to transcendence, to disappear once again into the sublime and mysterious vastness of reality of which it offers only a glimpse.

But Gioia is also aware of his indebtedness to the past, and much of his reflections hearkened to what classical and Christian thinkers have meant when they spoke of beauty. In fact, he built his meditation upon five quotations, from King David in the Old Testament who cried “worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness” to John Keats who said that “truth is beauty and beauty truth” to Plato and Hume who claimed that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, to the death-bed Catholic Oscar Wilde who said, “Man is hungry for beauty; there is a void”.

Finally, Gioia ended his gripping meditation with Dostoevsky’s claim that – “beauty will save the world”.

“Dostoevsky wasn’t issuing a social formula; he wasn’t an aesthete”, Gioia said. “He was uttering a prophesy.” For Gioia, this prophesy should awaken our country – with its tens of thousands of ugly buildings and spaces – our Church – with its uninspired liturgies – to something it has forgotten. Without beauty, there is no practical way to change the world.

Reflecting more deeply on the transformative power of beauty, Gioia made the case that it awakens us to the miracle of our lives; it allows us to feel the truth. Without it, there is no practical way to communicate and allow people to fall in love with the good and the true. “It’s not an abstract or invisible grandeur... We feel it. ‘Oh taste and see the Lord is good’. We are by our very natures drawn to this grandeur, this glory, this beauty. We ignore it at the risk of misunderstanding ourselves, misunderstanding the world, misunderstanding creation. Beauty will change the world. ‘So give unto the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness’”, he closed.

Ursula Pawlowski
u.pawlowski@gmail.com