

JUSTICE ON PURPOSE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
March 14, 2010

Two days ago, my wife Holly and I attended a memorial service in Boston for Dr. Leon Eisenberg, who had served for more than forty years on the faculty of Harvard Medical School as Chief of Psychiatry at Mass General. Leon's wife, Dr. Carola Eisenberg—also a Harvard psychiatrist—was a co-founder of Physicians for Human Rights. Carola and Holly have worked closely together at PHR for more than 15 years, especially during Holly's tenure as board president. Leon and Carola had become good friends of ours as well.

The tributes to Leon emphasized his prodigious intellect (even by Harvard standards), his unexpected kindness (especially by Harvard standards), and his moral courage. A passionate advocate for children with disabilities, Leon was a pioneer in the study of autism and attention deficit disorder. His commitment to the needy and oppressed knew no bounds: Leon founded the department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard.

He also loved to tell jokes. Here is one of his favorites, recounted at the memorial service by Leon's stepson—also a psychiatrist.

The head of the United Way in a medium-sized Midwestern town realizes they had never received a donation from the town's most successful lawyer. A volunteer calls upon the lawyer to solicit his donation.

The volunteer begins, "Our research shows that your annual income is over \$2 million dollars, yet you've given nothing to charity! Wouldn't you like to give back to your community through The United Way?"

The lawyer thinks for a moment and responds, "Did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long, painful illness and has huge medical bills far beyond her ability to pay?"

Embarrassed, the United Way rep mumbles, "Uh, no."

"And did your research show that my brother, a disabled veteran, is confined to a wheelchair and is unable to support his wife and six children?"

The stricken United Way rep begins to stammer an apology but is cut off.

"Also, did it show that my sister's husband died in a dreadful traffic accident, leaving her penniless with a mortgage and three children, one of whom is blind and another who has learning disabilities?"

The humiliated United Way volunteer, completely beaten, says simply, "I had no idea."

The lawyer continues, "And if I don't give any money to them, why should I give any to you?"

Everyone who spent time with Leon came away knowing two things: he loved to laugh, and he care deeply about people who suffered misfortune and injustice, especially children.

In my sermon two weeks ago, titled "Justice in Process," I described justice as a procedure whereby we try to ensure political liberty and economic opportunity for

everyone. Justice guarantees our basic political freedoms, and it also insists that our public policy take the least-well-off among us into consideration first, since well-off and well-positioned people are better able to fend for themselves. As Aristotle noted, justice is a neutral standard: it tries to level the playing field.

Does this mean that if anyone makes \$2 million per year, everyone should? No. Justice doesn't guarantee outcomes; it only ensures that the rules of the game are fair for everyone. Justice insists upon political, economic, and educational fairness—especially for people who are born poor, or become disabled, or find themselves disadvantaged in some other way. Justice requires that poor people who want to improve their lot have a reasonable chance of doing so.

But justice is more than a procedure for leveling the playing field. Justice also has a purpose, a goal: there's a point to the game. This is where we shift from politics to religion. The political voice of justice safeguards our freedom to pursue whatever purpose we choose in life (with everyone else having equal freedom), while the religious voice of justice calls us to commit to a purpose. As both a procedure to follow and a goal to pursue, justice is a virtue, one of seven in my catalog of virtues. Its presence indicates that we have fulfilled at least part of our potential as human beings.

What is the purpose of justice? If the world were completely just and truly fair, what would it look like? There are a lot of things you wouldn't see in a just world. You wouldn't see women cringing because they had been raped or flinching because they had been beaten. You wouldn't see illiterate children or disfigured veterans. You wouldn't see polluted skies or bomb-blasted villages. You wouldn't see bodies needlessly ravaged by disease or withered by hunger. You wouldn't see anything that caused you to wonder about the source of human wickedness.

Instead, you would see children, and women, and men living up to their potential. They would be mostly healthy, and contented, and wise. They would take care of themselves and each other. They would take care of the earth that sustained them and the plants and animals that nourished them. If the world were completely just and fully fair, it would be a beautiful place. Justice is a way of living that creates a world of fairness, and symmetry, and beauty.

I've mentioned before the writings of Elaine Scarry, a professor of aesthetics at Harvard, especially her short but challenging book titled *On Beauty and Being Just*. In the book, she wonders why human beings are attracted to beauty. What do we hope to accomplish when we open ourselves to experiences of beauty, or actively pursue beautiful things?

If we ask the same question about other human aspirations—goodness or truth, for example—the answer seems straightforward. When we pursue goodness, we hope in so doing to become good, or at least better than we are. When we pursue the truth, we do so in order to make ourselves more knowledgeable.

With beauty, this calculus is more complex. It's unlikely, for example, that listening to an oratorio by Bach will improve the timbre of my voice, even though Bach is the acknowledged master of the genre. It's equally unlikely that looking at one of Rembrandt's self-portraits will improve my appearance, even if I look at it for a very long time. But something happens to us in our encounter with beauty.

Part of what we feel is pure astonishment: how could anything be this beautiful? Imagine an exquisite sunset, for example. Looking at its colors and contours, we feel a

rush of awe and wonder. The sunset seems incomparable and unprecedented—because it is.

It's as if beauty has been placed here and there throughout the world as a wake-up call. Through its beauty, the world continually challenges us to pay attention. Even if we don't search out beauty on our own, the flowers and faces, the silhouettes and the skies, the music and the masterpieces will find us. They will astonish us and fill us with wonder. We'll know that we've been graced with a rare and precious gift.

But we still haven't described beauty itself. What precisely is it that can elicit such a deep response in us? In other words, what is the essence of beauty?

Scarry, looking back over centuries past, contends that the attribute most consistently singled out to define beauty has been symmetry: a sense of balance and proportion. She points out that we hear those qualities in great music, and we see them in beautiful paintings and beautiful buildings, as well as in beautiful faces and figures.

The point is this: once in a while, in the midst of the chaos and clamor of our lives, we experience something that points us toward a standard or an ideal. It sets a benchmark by which we can measure our conduct and our lives. The experience of beauty gives us a hint of what is possible.

As Scarry puts it, beauty has built-in consequences. The consequences are best captured in our language by a single word, fairness, which refers both to the loveliness of a face and to the ethical requirement to be fair, play fair, or distribute fairly. Beauty is a call to symmetry and equality—not just in music and art, but also in our relations with each other and with our world. Beauty is a call to be just.

If this is true, however, we must ask why beauty has been so profoundly oppressive to women. Maybe it's our double standard. Most men have relatively low standards when it comes to their own beauty or lack thereof. Yet most men expect women to strive for the ideal of a perfect face and a perfect figure.

But at the level of meaning, a beautiful face has almost nothing in common with a beautiful painting. A painting is essentially what the paint looks like, but a woman is not essentially what her face looks like. Even so, men often react to women based not on who they are essentially, but on what they look like superficially. This is how women come to be treated like objects: when men react only to a face or a figure—to what a woman looks like, rather than to who she is.

That said, I still think our experience of beauty is the best intimation we have of life at its best. And the experience does have consequences. A glimpse of the ideal should make us dissatisfied with our world as it is. At its best, beauty calls attention to what is absent from our world: symmetry, proportion, balance, equality, justice.

Henri Matisse said repeatedly throughout his life that he wanted his paintings to be so beautiful that when one came upon them, all problems would subside. That's it: the experience of beauty makes problems go away, in two senses. At its most powerful, beauty both transfixes and transforms us.

To be swept away by the aspiration of a Green Day anthem is to become tirelessly impatient with a world where so many children have so little hope. To be stopped short by the simple calm of a Courbet landscape is to recognize that violence has no place in human relations. To be captivated by the elegant symmetry of a Georgian sanctuary is to know the obscene calamity that hunger and poverty represent. To be riveted by the sight of an exuberantly colored butterfly is to know that we must stand strong against those who would ravage the planet that sustains and nourishes us.

The world we inhabit is full of ugliness and tragedy. It is a vale of sorrows and acquainted with grief. But once in a while, we catch sight of a loftier standard, a higher purpose. Avail yourself of this aspiration: seek the beauty that surrounds you. Breathe in the magical scent of early spring in the park. Admire the ducks on the pond. Feast your eyes on magnificent art. Listen to music that gives you courage and hope. Look for symmetry and fairness everywhere: in faces and in voices, in smiles and in laughter.

Then heed the call of beauty. Challenge injustice and confound it. Confront ugliness and transform it. Become a student of symmetry, a disciple of fairness. Teach people how to laugh and where to find hope. Commit yourself to doing justice on purpose.