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A Beauty that Beckons to Us

By Kevin Lee

I grew up in Western New York, in the little village of Youngstown that sits in the corner where the Niagara River meets Lake Ontario. On the edge of the river there is an old fort that at one time guarded the border between pre-colonial French and British territories. For the children who lived nearby, the park that surrounded the fort was a playground. I remember running into the park after school on crisp late-autumn afternoons, through the reds and golden yellows of fallen leaves, across grassy fields that were already wet with evening dew. I would run to the edge of the lakeshore where, heart beating hard, muscles warm, and steam rising from my back, I could watch the sun set in hopeful colors that contrasted dramatically with the grays and blues of the lake. I was present to the moment, alive and vital, and it was beautiful.

Children innocently wonder about the beauty of the world that seems to call to us. Moments like looking at the sunset suggested the warm embrace and soothing peace that I believed was like the mysterious peace promised in the Gospel. That just seemed right to me then, but over the years since I chased after those beautiful sunsets, I have found it harder to be genuine about beauty. For me, and I imagine for many, the authentic response to beauty seems unimaginably distant and painfully absent. There is more to this than just the obvious fact that contemporary life is too fast paced or that billing by the hour (common to lawyers and other professionals) is dehumanizing.¹ We might resist this sort of perversity, and there might even be some dignity (and beauty) in fighting against it. The malady that I am describing is deeper, more of a sickness of the soul that seems to afflict lawyers with particular force (although I think it probably afflicts many people, and many more people than the number who realize they are afflicted).

Being cynical about beauty is, of course, just part of a larger problem since we are living in a

time when we seem to be cynical about almost everything. Skepticism about what we perceive, particularly what we see, has been around for as long as anyone has kept records. In *The Republic*,² Plato imagined us as creatures bound to a cave wall, with our field of vision turned so that we can see only the flickering shadows of the things passing behind us. We never see things as they truly are. It may be that the curse of our times is that, in our inventiveness and ingenuity, we have created ever more beguiling ways to hide reality in the shadows of illusion. In his recent bestselling book, *The Empire of Illusion*, Chris Hedges suggests this by chronicling different illusions that have overtaken us. Of particular relevance, he explains how the culture of celebrity uses beauty to captivate our attention and hide reality:

Human beings become a commodity in a celebrity culture. They are objects, like consumer products. They have no intrinsic value. They must look fabulous and live on fabulous sets. Those who fail to meet the ideal are belittled and mocked. Friends and allies are to be used and betrayed during the climb to power and wealth. And when they are no longer useful, they are to be discarded. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury's novel about a future dystopia, people spend most of the day watching giant television screens that show endless scenes of police chases and criminal apprehensions. Life, Bradbury understood, once it was packaged and filmed, became the most compelling form of entertainment.³

Against the background of a culture awash in celebrities and celebrity wannabes, with the nihilism and despair that accompanies it, what chance is there to appreciate beauty as a pure and unambiguous good? The good (what is truly good and not what is merely pabulum) is hidden and despised,

¹ Catherine Kaveny has written and talked about this topic. See, e.g.: <http://newsinfo.nd.edu/news/3784-how-should-time-be-lived-a-professor-sees-a-billable-hours-culture-and-religious-antidotes/>

² Plato, *The Republic* in Plato, *The Complete Works*, (John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, eds.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) pp. 971-1223.

³ Christopher Hedges, *The Empire of Illusion* (New York: Nations Book, 2009) p. 29

and it quickly vanishes from view. This is our vulgar culture, and there is no escaping it.

I use the word “vulgar” here in one of its less common meanings: “of ordinary people.”⁴ I use it hesitantly to make a point with a question. What is an “ordinary person” and how do we see ourselves with respect to being ordinary? This is a deeper question than it might seem, if we take it seriously. As a Christian and a lawyer, I cannot call myself ordinary in two senses. First, as a Christian in the secular world today, I am not “ordinary,” and that’s fine with me because I don’t want to be. To be Christian means at least this: to understand that Christ is extraordinary and that our lives are made extraordinary by reading, thinking, and living as Christians. This means being on the fringes of the mainstream, and accepting the cold shoulder of those who believe differently.

Also, as a lawyer I am not ordinary. As lawyers we have an obligation to be “learned,” and this means more than knowing the ins-and-outs of legal practice. According to the *Model Rules of Professional Conduct*, “learned” means “having knowledge of the law beyond what is needed to represent clients.”⁵ Although there is little guidance as to what that might mean, at a minimum it must mean having learning that is necessary to be “a public citizen with a special concern for justice.” Lawyers are not “ordinary” people because we have responsibilities as members of a profession that separate us from the commonplace. We need to be able to think critically, not only about the law as it relates to clients, but also to be concerned with all the matters that are relevant to citizenship in a democracy. That’s a heavier burden than we typically acknowledge. It means that while we need to be critical thinkers, we must not let ourselves become nihilistic or despairing since a part of our duty as lawyers is to be concerned with the vitality of the American democracy, and a healthy democratic polity needs hope.

⁴ *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “vulgar” as: “of, pertaining to, or constituting the ordinary people in a society: the vulgar masses.” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/vulgar>.

⁵ *The Model Rules of Professional Conduct*, Preamble, Paragraph 6 (available at: http://www.americanbar.org/groups/professional_responsibility/publications/model_rules_of_professional_conduct/model_rules_of_professional_conduct_preamble_scope.html). Although much neglected by practitioners, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching was critical of law schools for failing to teach to this goal. The report, titled *Educating Lawyers*, suggests “[law] schools need to attend more systematically to the pedagogical practices that foster the formation of integrated, responsible lawyers.” The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Educating Lawyers, Preparation for the Profession of Law* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007) p. 128.

The theological virtue of hope requires more than banal optimism (although there is a great deal of confusion about the two concepts in recent politics).⁶ Hope however requires a clear-eyed look at the challenges and potentiality of a situation with an assurance rooted in faith that, as Julian of Norwich was famous for saying, “All shall be well.”⁷ We can trust that the events that unfold in our lives have meaning and purpose, even if they seem cruelly arbitrary to our limited perspective. Democracy needs the thoughtful application of the virtue of hope because without hope there can be no trust in the moral worth of the democratic process.⁸

What I find troubling is that as a legal professional, cynicism seems to be admired, but seeking after beauty seems to be incredibly naïve and even self-indulgent. The needs and values of the legal profession, at least the way it is today, seem wholly at odds with chasing after beauty. It seems precious and of little value to the serious business of figuring out how to accomplish things in the real world. So, at best, beauty seems irrelevant. And more than likely, I find myself reacting to it with cynicism, suspicion, and maybe even anger. There are good reasons for being cynical. Any serious person knows that beauty makes false promises to reconcile and to resolve the tragic realities that press in on us. It promises some sort of final peace and moral rectitude, but its promise is false. The guards of Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags witnessed sunsets of equal beauty to the ones I remember from my childhood. Just as the sun is remote and indifferent to the affairs of human beings, the same can be said of beauty. Whatever it is, it is removed from our moral concerns and indifferent to us.

Beauty is a trick used by marketers as a weapon to twist our longings and bend our resolve. Because of its remove and power to beguile, beauty can be used to hide immoral labor practices, environmental poisoning, and obscenely excessive executive compensation. Beauty is a soulless seductress that preys on the innocent and the naïve; and lawyers are charged with protecting the innocent and the foolish even from themselves. Moreover, audacious displays of beauty are more likely to provoke disgust than awe

⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Who Are We? Critical Reflections and Hopeful Possibilities* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (March 27, 2000) p.136.

⁷ Julian of Norwich, *The Showing of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). For an introduction to her thought, see Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁸ For a discussion of hope and democracy see Elshtain, *supra*, note 7.

and wonder. Who but a self-indulgent commoner with more wealth than commonsense would spend a fortune to accumulate a tasteless collection of art, or classic automobiles, or luxurious houses?⁹ Seeing displays of grotesque wealth is like meeting a porn-queen at a State dinner—you can't help but think, "Who had the audacity to bring her here, and does he really think we're going to be impressed?" Crass, pointless, narcissistic, and self-indulgent pageants are monuments to the fate of beauty in our times. You expect the purveyors of these displays to part their comb-overs, polish a pinky ring on a ruffled shirt, and tell you that their garish spectacle proves that they have "class."

We expect lawyers to see through shams; and chasing after beauty seems like the sort of muddled thinking that a clear-minded, cold-eyed professional should reject. It conflicts with the calculated legal reasoning that makes law a profitable career, since our clients rely on us to be sober and to have tightly analyzed arguments. Lawyers are not supposed to be starry-eyed kids who chase after pretty sunsets. They are adult professionals who know better. But, if this is so, then what do we make of the Christian claim that God is Beauty? That Christ on the Cross is a beauty to be loved and pursued? Is it possible to be simultaneously a soft-hearted Christian and a hard-headed legal professional?

In order to find answers I have been reading about the history of the idea of beauty in Christian thought. There is a rich and complex intellectual history behind the idea of beauty. It has been written about continuously by the greatest thinkers and continues to provoke scholarship. Exploring this history reveals that many of our false ideas about beauty, ideas that we take for granted, are in fact the result of historical constructions and biases. These texts offer an opportunity to think beyond the constraints of the received view of beauty, and to consider anew the problems and solutions posed by great thinkers of the past. What I want to do is briefly describe some writings that seem useful to forming a more durable awareness of beauty that, I hope, can stand up to my cynicism.

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Many fifth century Christians affirmed a close connection between the beauty of the world and the divine peace of God's Kingdom. For example, Pseudo-Dionysius (a cryptic fifth century figure)

⁹ I have no one in mind with this comment. There are several thoughtful and tasteful collections held by private collectors.

listed Beauty among the names that he ascribed to God. His work, *The Divine Names*,¹⁰ was influential in the early Church and particularly for St. Augustine, St. Francis, St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. John Chrysostom. Many other important figures in the intellectual history of Christianity cite approvingly to his thought. They all accepted the belief that God is intimately related to beauty and even, sometimes, followed Pseudo-Dionysius in naming God as "Beauty."

In the massively influential writings of St. Augustine, God is sometimes referred to as "Beauty," but he was careful to separate God's beauty from earthly attraction. Here is a classic passage that captures the flavor of his thought:

I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late. You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. You were with me, but I was not with you. The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all. You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am enflamed with love of your peace.¹¹

In this passage, Augustine equates the divine with Beauty, an inward mystery and desire. He observes that creation is also lovely, and this is beguiling, but he warns that seeking after the beauty of things that are not God led him to be "disfigured;" the beauty of the world kept him apart from God. His conversion occurred when God called to him, and he was "enflamed" with God's peace. The experience of beauty is double-edged here: it can lead to divine peace or to torment and sin. The task for the Christian is to discern the beauty that is God from the desire that is not. But, like Pseudo-Dionysius, for Augustine, God is properly named Beauty.

¹⁰ Pseudo Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/roltd/dionysius.html>. A useful commentary on him and Christian mysticism is found in Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (R. S. Pine-Coffin trans.) (New York: Penguin Books, 1961) pp. 231-232. A recent study of Augustinian political thought see, Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

St. Thomas Aquinas continues to explore beauty in the Dionysian and Augustinian traditions in the late medieval period. For St. Thomas, beauty is an ontological trait or status that human beings have the power to understand. Things are beautiful because it is in their nature to be so. God is supremely beautiful because God is his own being, essence, and existence (*ipsum esse subsistens*). Created things have only their being, and thereby have beauty only by participating in God's being. He draws an analogy between splendor and light to explain the way that things participate in God's brilliance (*pulchre*) that radiates from beautiful things. Commenting on Pseudo-Dionysius, St Thomas explains,

Brilliance pertains to the consideration of beauty... Every form, by which a thing has being [*esse*], is a participation in the divine brilliance. This is why he [Pseudo-Dionysius] adds that "individual things" are "beautiful according to a character of their own," that is, in accord with a proper form. Hence it is clear that the being [*esse*] of all things is derived from the divine Beauty.¹²

In the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas gives three distinguishing characteristics of beauty: "wholeness," "proportion," and "*claritas*," which can be translated as radiance, light, or brilliance. Beauty illuminates our intellect with understanding. Through spiritual eyes we can see the transcendent beauty that is an ontological feature (to a greater or lesser degree) of all being.¹³

God's glory radiates in all things in the world. So, when I experience something correctly as truly beautiful, it is a radiation of the true beauty that is God. In its dissipated forms of earthly existence, however, I might misconstrue the beautiful, treating it as a hollow attraction that will result in discord and dissipation rather than peace and unity. This seems like a reasonable way of thinking about beauty. But, it raises many questions. One significant question is: How does a person consistently, successfully distinguish between the beauty that is divine from pseudo beauty, the 'hollow attraction' of the heart? We often seem to call something beautiful or divine because it merely makes us feel good about ourselves, a veiled egoism perhaps but nothing more.

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in Dion. De div. Nom.* 4.5-6, quoted in *The Pocket Aquinas*, (Vernon J. Bourke, trans.) (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), p. 269.

¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 39, 8. Available at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.html>. There are many commentaries on Aquinas' aesthetic theory. A clearly written and widely read introduction is Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Hugh Bredin, trans.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant's philosophy significantly changed the way philosophers viewed beauty. In general, his philosophy put an emphasis on the structure of the mind and its role in the perception of things. His book on aesthetics, *Critique of Judgment*,¹⁴ draws an important distinction between beauty and the sublime. For Kant beauty "is connected with the form of the object" having "boundaries." Kant contrasts this with the sublime, which is formless. He writes, "We call that sublime which is absolutely great" (§ 25). He distinguishes between the "remarkable differences" of the beautiful and the sublime, noting that the sublime "is to be found in a formless object," represented by "boundlessness" (§ 23). The sublime is the particular type of perception that incites the mind to think beyond what it can grasp and conceptualize. We might say that it is our awareness of something that we recognize as an unfathomable mystery.

After Kant, many philosophers and theologians stressed the dualism of beauty and the sublime. Well in to the nineteenth century, German Idealist and Romantic aesthetics continued to draw on the Platonic understanding of sublime as a transcendent reality in which metaphysics and moral philosophy can find unity. They accepted Kant's belief that beauty is the awareness of particular kinds of cognitive states that are provoked in reaction to art and natural objects. This means that beauty is in the mind, not in the thing as the medieval philosophers had thought. The concept of "beauty" refers to a form of pleasure, and so analyzing the specific pleasures and delights associated with beauty became their focus. Standard modern academic aesthetics characterizes this type of pleasure as "disinterested" in the sense that it is indifferent to truth and morality. One can, for example, find beauty in the baronial estates of the nineteenth century American industrialists without questioning the morality of the labor practices that allowed it to be built. Kant's thought reduced beauty to a feeling, but the sublime referred to a cognitive state in which the faculties of understanding were exceeded. This idea would continue to provoke and confound philosophers and theologians.

In the face of the ugliness of the concentration camps and gulags of the twentieth century, the idea of beauty took on new complexity, but it never

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008). A useful guide to reading this complex work is Fiona Hughes, *Kant's "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment": A Reader's Guide* (New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010)

faded entirely from the scene. Protestant theology was skeptical of aesthetics, particularly in the area of visual arts, for both historical and doctrinal reasons (especially in Reformed and Anabaptist traditions). Karl Barth, one of the most influential theologians of the early twentieth century, showed particular interest in beauty in his most renowned work, *Church Dogmatics*. Barth noted that Protestant theologians had disregarded beauty, even finding it to be “dangerous” in its potential to lead to idolatry. Hans urs von Balthasar (a Catholic theologian who will be discussed shortly), commented that Protestants have been more attentive to “hearing” the Word and have been skeptical of “seeing” it. The emphasis has been on reading and hearing rather than on seeing and perceiving, and this has shaped Protestant attitudes towards beauty in the direction of considering the beauty of God to an “event” rather than a property of beings accessed through perception and “intellection” (as Catholics would understand it).

More recently, however, Protestant thinkers have been more interested in the topic. Barth’s insistence that beauty is not reducible to and cannot be exhausted by power, and his desire to describe how God uses beauty to convince and enlighten have been influential in stimulating renewed interest in aesthetics. The distinctiveness of the Barthian approach to aesthetics is the priority of the Gospel and emotion over objective perception and ratiocination. So, when Barth writes of beauty he refers primarily to its ability to illicit emotive responses rather than a conceptual discussion, since “this insight depends too much on the presence of the necessary feeling...”¹⁵ God’s glory is pervasive and that is what makes it indispensable for Barth. Nicholas Wolterstorff takes a similar position as Barth. He maintains that “perceptual contemplation” is strictly subsidiary to truth. He stresses the way art emotionally engages the viewer, allowing for effective interaction with the Christian life. Art has an important, transformative, role in the Christian life, but it is secondary to truth.¹⁶

Among Roman Catholics, aesthetic theology was shaped by the Swiss theologian, Hans urs von Balthasar (who I mentioned as a commentator on Barth). His fifteen-volume trilogy, *The Glory of the Lord*,¹⁷ is considered to be one of the most impor-

tant works on Catholic theology in the twentieth century. For Balthasar theological aesthetics involves an analogy between the experience of beauty and revelation. He maintains connection with the medieval view of beauty, finding it to have a real, ontological significance—that is to say, it refers to something in the real world and not only a psychological state. Aesthetics is a way of speaking about the relationship between the created reality and God. For Balthasar, beauty communicates the form of the divine, and humans have the faculties needed to perceive it.

The twentieth century seems to have brought a reconsideration of the medieval concept of beauty, but in modern terms. For Protestants and Catholics, beauty was associated with the divine. But, after Kant there was now a separate concept of the sublime, which transgressed conceptual analysis. This aspect of consciousness seems under-appreciated in modern philosophical writings. But, at least among some theologians, the idea of the sublime indicating something beyond material being was influential. It held possibilities for considering how faith and reason might be related, since it seems to imply an immediate limit on understanding the presence of the divine in the world. And the limits of the powers of the mind suggested by Kant’s concept of the sublime hold implications for thinking about how faith and reason might be harmonized.

The late twentieth century witnessed the rise of postmodern philosophy, which began with thinkers like Nietzsche who argued that the modern point of view is not the only possible one—that, in the end, “rational” discourse is subverted by the attraction of beauty. Truth claims have no more convincing foundation than attractive rhetoric and moral “values” express artistic preference. These views are found in Nietzsche, who assumes that the desire for beauty is the ultimate expression of the “will to power.” (Note here the contrary position to Barth’s). Post-modern philosophy exalts the aesthetic over “truth.”¹⁸

The sublime plays a significant role in postmodern thought. It is quite evident in the later writing of Jean François Lyotard, who turned to Kant’s treatise on the sublime. In *Lessons on the Analytic of*

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, Volume II, Part 1, (G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrence, eds.) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1964) p. 656.

¹⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹⁷ The entire 15 volume set has been published by T & T Clark Ltd.

¹⁸ For an interpretation of Fredrick Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory, see, Julian Young, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Although for concision I have excluded reference to Martin Heidegger. For a discussion of his aesthetic theory, see Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

*the Sublime*¹⁹ and *Le Différend*,²⁰ Lyotard argued that “concepts” are abstractions that fail to express the fullness in the details of the particularity of things. What happens when we experience the sublime is a crisis where we realize the inadequacy of concepts and recognize the tension between the imagination and reason. What we are witnessing, says Lyotard, is actually the “*différend*,” the straining of the mind at the edges of self-awareness and at the edges of conceptuality.

Lyotard’s work challenged theological aesthetics to find some ultimate or fundamental unity among the aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical that would not ultimately be revealed to be the will to dominate. This suspicion of truth and the good and the beautiful run so strongly through our culture today as the presumptions of the postmodern has become ours, even as the humanities departments, that gave birth to and nourished the postmodern, have come to be viewed as otiose or forgotten altogether.²¹

John Milbank, an Anglican theologian, has developed one of the most influential responses to the postmodern challenge. He argues that Lyotard’s *différend* does not offer the promise and hope of escaping violence, but only entrenches violence more thoroughly. In his book, *Theology and Social Theory*,²² Milbank argues that the various discourses of postmodernity are variants of an “ontology of violence.” He means that the causal explanations of postmodernity are inherently and inescapably violent because they rest on the assumption that power is the only causal principle. Power can be exposed and transgressed, but only by another power. Christ, who was there from the beginning, offers an alternative account of causality founded in love—an ontology of love, or perhaps a love of beings, that is ultimately more real than violence.

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There are a few points that we can take from this all too brief encounter with vastly sophisticated

¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Analytic of the Sublime* (Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994). An introduction to Lyotard can be found in James K.A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism* (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006).

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Paris, France: *Le Édition de Minuit*, 1984).

²¹ Stanley Fish noted the disconnect between the influence of postmodernity and the fate of the humanities in a New York Times op-ed piece, available here: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/13/the-triumph-of-the-humanities/>

²² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

Christian thinkers. First, beauty is never simply a subjective matter. That “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is a truism that can never be entirely true, if we understand beauty to implicate the divine. An aesthetic judgment appears always to call for an interpretation of the meaning of the thing being judged. Although there is not a particular thing that is “beauty” (here I am not drawing a distinction between “beauty” and the “sublime”) the phenomenon takes priority over what evokes it. There is, as David Bentley Hart puts it, “an overwhelming givenness in the beautiful, and it is discovered in astonishment, in an awareness of something fortuitous, adventitious, essentially indescribable....”²³ It is this aspect of beauty that allows us to expect our judgment of beauty to be shared by others. What we talk about when we speak of beauty has this quality.

Second, beauty transcends human language and thought. And, it cannot be reduced to a symbolic representation. In this respect we might say that beauty always has a phenomenal component, which means that beauty is always a subjective experience. It is brought into being as a state of phenomenal awareness. In this sense, beauty is not “about” anything. It is simply a “personal fact” that one is experiencing. In this respect, it is unlike the facts contained in propositions that comprise the speech we have about beauty. As a subjective experience, beauty transcends conceptual analysis and propositional expression. It is fathomless in an ontological sense. It isn’t the case that knowing more about it will lessen the mystery. Indeed, to know beauty more will only deepen its mystery. For this reason, beauty itself is not able to be fully grasped, and it is certainly difficult to speak about it. Beauty in this respect challenges the more traditional names for God—Truth and the Good—which are more readily reducible to concrete concepts and demonstrable logic.

Third, beauty has authority. The experience of genuine beauty bears with it a sense of certainty. It does not come from the reductive approaches of the modern philosophies and natural sciences—approaches that seek to find essential traits or principles or, especially, forces. The certainty associated with beauty comes from the lushness, even excessiveness, of the experience: I will feel certain in my assessment of beauty because of the reliability of the experience, its depth, fullness, and embrace. Modern theology can benefit from an engagement with aesthetic theology precisely because it stands

²³ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003) p. 17.

counter to the modern tendency to reduce beings to facts and to return to it an encounter with the mystery of God's presence in creation.

Finally, although there is much more to say than can be said here, persons are beautiful. This is an essential claim of Christianity. Even the rotting leper, the tax collector, the prostitute, and the thief are persons and as such are beautiful mysteries. We are mysteries to each other and even to ourselves. Much of the promise that faith brings into our lives is the realization that we are beautiful mysteries, so precious to God that he sacrificed his son to save us.

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What then does this say to lawyers who seek beauty in their work? Perhaps it does not say much, or not as much as we would like. To explain let me return to my example of chasing sunsets. There is a dual nature to that experience in my memory—on the one hand, it was the most mundane thing, as common as going to school or quarrelling with my older brother. It was not a grand accomplishment or anything that I even tried to share with others; it was just a simple moment. But, my awareness of the lived experience of it was lush and excessive in the same sense that I have been saying genuine beauty is. In this sense, beauty was a gift that I did not earn in any particular way. It wasn't as if I went to the lake to make my life beautiful. I went there to see the sun set, and the unearned gift was an unfathomable beauty.

The immediate point is that professional life can be beautiful, but it is beautiful in the same way that the experience of the sunset is beautiful—beauty can be found most anywhere, often in the relationships closest to us. The important events in our lives involve being perceptive and able to truly care about other people and to sacrifice for them, repeatedly every day, in thousands of little ways. The beauty of our lives as lawyers may be no different from the beauty of our lives as parents and spouses and friends and neighbors and siblings. It might consist of the small acts of kindness that we choose to do everyday.

There is much more to say here because under this simple statement lies theories of law and politics that hold implications for understanding the lawyer's role as "public citizen." Mostly, I want to hold the discussion of these weightier issues for another occasion. But I would like to conclude by pointing out that, at a minimum, the law serves quiet, commonplace beauty—the splendor of children

laughing and old friends and church picnics and grandparents playing with their grandchildren. We go wildly astray when we forget this. The theologians, although they use different grammars, share in believing that Christ's death on the cross speaks to us of an unimaginable beauty that demands us to be responsive to it. Beauty beckons to us; it calls us to set aside our default-settings, which are deeply self-centered, and see that the world in its detailed ordinariness is full of promise and hope.

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Professor Lee earned a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts with honors from Colgate University, a Master of Arts from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and a Juris Doctor with honors from New York Law School. He is completing his doctoral dissertation and anticipates receiving a Doctorate in Ethics at the Divinity School of The University of Chicago in the near future. He is the author of several articles and book chapters on natural law and jurisprudence.