

Can Beauty Save the World?

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



Writing a book review – or even a book *preview* – of a book I haven't read is probably a bad idea. So let's not call this either of those things.

The other day, while I was browsing in cyberspace, the title of a new book by Gregory Wolfe caught my eye: *Beauty Will Save the World*. Catchy, huh? A bold pronouncement. A firm handshake of a title.

(I later learned that it's a quote from Dostoevsky. Figures. That guy was always saying good stuff.)

While the title stopped my restless, web-weary eye, it was the subtitle that drew me in to read the review, which I found at Catholic World Report: *Recovering the Human in an Ideological Age*.

To recap: The book's full title is *Beauty Will Save the World: Recovering the Human in an Ideological Age*.

Apparently, the author – this Mr. Wolfe – left behind a “youthful infatuation with politics” to devote his life (and career) to the reintegration of the aesthetic and religious realms. During his 25-year quest to get these estranged (but not strange) bedfellows – art and religion – back together again, Wolfe has struggled with one of the most frustrating characteristics of our age:

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“the tendency of the modern consciousness to reduce all forms of cultural expression to the status of propaganda, leaving those who would strive for the spiritual redemption of our culture with few strategies other than political action.”

As a young man during the Reagan years, Wolfe aligned himself with conservatives, thinking they offered the best hope for “preserving the cultural and religious traditions that the progressive left seemed bent on replacing with a secular materialist worldview.” But to his dismay, the conservative movement was so focused on economics, politics and diplomacy, its leaders all but ignored the culture – except to disparage modern art and literature for their “weirdness.” Feeling alienated from modern culture, conservatives basically ceded it to progressives... then set themselves up in opposition to it. If you pay attention to such things, you’ve probably noticed that this dynamic is still in place today. As someone who finds much to admire about conservative political philosophy, I’ve found this active, semi-hostile disengagement from the culture to be a deal breaker for me. I’m no longer certain what it is that conservatives are trying to conserve.

(It may sound paradoxical, but the only way to conserve a culture is to *cultivate* it. The words even have the same root, for crying out loud!)

But since I’m over my own “youthful infatuation” with politics (okay, *juvenile* infatuation, in my case), I’ll not dwell on this aspect of Wolfe’s book. I have been accused, on occasion, of being a bit... esoteric. I think this is a very kind way of saying “pedantic, boring and fixated on things nobody cares about.” I’m trying to kick that habit. So onward and upward!

From what I gather, *Beauty Will Save the World* traces its author’s evolution from a young culture warrior bent on attacking the modern world to a writer/critic/teacher devoted to nurturing the creation of culture through contemporary literature and art. Instead of mourning the lost glories of the Western tradition, Wolfe now seeks to renew that tradition in our own time. No longer engaging in the vulgar, hyper-partisan shouting match that is our political discourse today, he wants to enrich the language of our conversation, drawing from the deepest sources of our common culture – art and religious faith. And, according to him, there are many artists and writers out there engaged in this same work. My hat is off to them all, and I fully intend to read this book about them.

But, since I’m already way past deadline, for now I must content myself with simply reflecting on this awesome title! If I were writing a book called “Beauty Will Save the World,” how would I

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do it? What would I say? How to chip away at the rigid ideological walls that seem to be isolating so many of us in tight little tribal enclaves, where misunderstanding, resentment and even hatred fester? If beauty can, indeed, break down those walls, appealing to our common humanity and bringing us together... what kind of beauty are we talking about? And where do we find it?

I'm pretty sure Gregory Wolfe has limited his exploration to the field of fine art and serious literature. And that's a great field. But – and I may be going out on a limb here – I don't think we have to be quite so highbrow. I believe beauty – the kind that transforms and transcends – is all around us, all the time. We just have to look with our hearts. I know that sounds corny, but I swear it's true.

I wonder how many of you were out in your yards a few nights ago, gazing up at the biggest full moon of the year? We were, and it was a lovely interlude. My daughter declared, once again, that she can't see a man's face in the moon. What she sees – what she's always seen – is a rabbit. Once again, I tried to point out the features of the face, which are so clear to me, with no luck. It was a fun discussion, elevated to something more – something magical – by the beauty of the night: the late spring breeze ruffling the Spanish moss, and the smell of flowering jasmine, and, of course, that astonishing silver-white orb in the sky.

I imagined families and friends all over town – all over the country – out in their backyards, having the same discussion. And I'll bet none of them mentioned politics, not even once. After all, the man-in-the-moon's an independent.

I guess it kind of goes without saying that the natural world is our most obvious source of redemptive beauty, and we Lowcountry dwellers have no real excuse for not drawing on it. Here, natural beauty practically grabs you by the shoulders and shakes you every day. The trick, in a place like this, is to not stop noticing... to not let yourself take it for granted. That's where actively seeing with your heart comes in. For me, that means seeing like a child. Every time my family and I go to Hunting Island – and in spring and summer, that's almost every weekend – I remember what it was like when I was a girl, growing up in north central Alabama, and a trip to the beach was this spectacular treat that happened only once a year, if that. All I have to do is tap into that memory – that feeling of wonder – to see Hunting Island the way it deserves to be seen... as an unfailing source of awe, mental clarity and spiritual restoration... a place where all the petty, squabbling voices of our age are silenced and I can finally hear God's voice again.

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But it doesn't have to be so dramatic. You can see with your heart almost anywhere, any time. And when you do, you see essential beauty... and you redeem the world. It might be the spring dance recital – all those bright young faces and hopeful leaps and clumsy pirouettes. Or, your child emerging from school with her shirttail out and her messy hair and her great smile. Maybe it's the cat who thinks he's a dog and runs to greet you when you pull up in the driveway. Or, your husband mowing the yard, just for you, because you asked. Or, an unexpected check in the mail from your mom, just because she loves you. Or an old southern folk hymn (*What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul?*) sung imperfectly by imperfect people, with deep devotion. Or a fantastic popcorn movie ("The Avengers") that makes you laugh and cry and even think... and no, it's not "fine art," but, by God, it's beautiful!

Politics will always be with us. And I fear it will always divide us. But even the most partisan politicians know – in their quiet, truthful moments – that politics is not the final word about us. We are more than our politics. We are lovers of beauty. All of us.

Can beauty save the world? I believe it can. But first we have to see it. I promise it's out there. In fact, it's everywhere. Are you looking with all your heart?

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