

# WHY DOES BEAUTY MATTER?

by Gracy Olmstead, *The American Conservative*

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Our lives are often happier when they are surrounded by beautiful things, according to a Friday article<sup>1</sup> by Cody C. Delistraty in *The Atlantic*. He references to a paper<sup>2</sup> written by Abraham Goldberg, professor at the University of South Carolina Upstate, in which Goldberg analyzed the tendencies and environments which tend to foster happiness:

The usual markers of happiness are colloquially known as the “Big Seven”: wealth (especially compared to those around you), family relationships, career, friends, health, freedom, and personal values, as outlined by London School of Economics professor Richard Layard in *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*.<sup>3</sup> According to the Goldberg study, however, what makes people happiest isn’t even in the Big Seven. Instead, happiness is most easily attained by living in an aesthetically beautiful city. The things people were constantly surrounded by—lovely architecture, history, green spaces, cobblestone streets—had the greatest effect on their happiness. The cumulative positive effects of daily beauty worked subtly but strongly.

In an attempt to measure this daily happiness, George MacKerron, now a lecturer at the University of Sussex, created an iPhone application called Mappiness<sup>4</sup> when he was a graduate student at the London School of Economics. More than 45,000 people now use it, and the concept is

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simple: The app beeps twice a day and asks a series of questions, such as: How happy are you feeling? How awake do you feel? How relaxed are you? Then it asks another set of questions to contextualize your situation: Who are you with? Are you inside or outside? As you're answering these questions, the app tags your location via GPS, and the whole process only takes about 20 seconds. Deceptively simple, the answers to these questions<sup>5</sup> provide a lot of information on happiness. The times that people recorded the highest levels of happiness and life satisfaction were during sexually intimate moments (on a date, kissing, or having sex) and during exercise (when endorphins are being released).

But the next three types of moments where people recorded the highest levels of happiness were all related to beauty: when at the theater, ballet, or a concert; at a museum or an art exhibit; and while doing an artistic activity (e.g. painting, fiction writing, sewing).

The results of these studies present a few different, interesting components worth considering. First, they continue to affirm what New Urbanists have been saying (both here at TAC,<sup>6</sup> and elsewhere): that the places in which we live matter, and that the cultivation of beautiful spaces has a very immediate impact on the happiness and flourishing of human beings. All the beautiful, place-related things listed in Goldberg's study—"lovely architecture, history, green spaces, cobblestone streets"—are things that New Urbanists emphasize. Sadly, these sorts of spaces are currently limited to small portions of America. We have some cities that cultivate such an ethos—but living in these beautiful spaces is often egregiously expensive (Alexandria, Virginia, is perhaps one of the best examples of this: it is a "super zip" city, according to the definition presented by Charles Murray in his book *Coming Apart*).<sup>7</sup> The very environment that

contributes most to the peace and happiness of human beings is only available to those who already have at least two other common attributes of happiness: wealth and career. And those who are not so well-established are often cut off, resigned to an ugliness that infiltrates and undermines their overall happiness.

It's true, however, that there are other more important components to happiness—as noted by MacKerron, romantic and healthful components of life also have something to do with overall happiness. Interestingly, though, both things can be seen as part of cultivating a "beautiful" life. They fit with Roger Scruton's definition of natural beauty, which he says is an item of intrinsic interest or value—something we can appreciate for its own sake. Cobblestone streets, for interest, are of little utilitarian value. They slow down and impede traffic, they're less efficient and expedient. Yet, for some reason, we enjoy them. They have a value that transcends the immediate and pragmatic: they're beautiful.

Similarly, romantic and healthful pursuits, though they often involve selfish motivations, are also usually sought and maintained for a greater good, out of a combined reverence and love that transcend the self. In his book on beauty,<sup>8</sup> Scruton argues that pornography represents the "profanation" of the sexual bond, as it removes it entirely from the realm of intrinsic values, thus turning something inherently good into something inherently self-serving. But sexuality and romance that are sought as goods in and of themselves, to be cultivated and maintained with respect and reverence, can be seen as beautiful objects.

Thirdly, these findings on beauty's connection to human happiness interestingly parallel modern literature, specifically the study's emphasis on artistic pursuits. Two of the most popular books published in the past couple years, *The Goldfinch*<sup>9</sup> and *The Fault in Our Stars*,<sup>10</sup> revolve around this premise. Donna Tartt's *Goldfinch* tells the story of Theodore Decker, a boy whose mother dies in a terrorist bombing at a New

York City museum. Theo survives the catastrophe, but carries emotional and psychological scars away from the ruins—as well as a small, priceless painting. The rest of Theo's life, in all of its twists and turns, centers around this secret: that he carries a museum masterpiece with him wherever he goes, burdened yet blessed by it. As I wrote for *Acculturated*,<sup>11</sup> the book is about beauty, despair, and our desperate search for meaning amidst the chaos of life. Tartt suggests that the only things that last are “beautiful things,” pulled from the wreckage and the fire of life. *The Fault in Our Stars* presents a similar dark nihilism and obsession with art (though in *TFiOS*'s case, the artistic object is a book). Both point to art as our key to happiness in an ugly world.

It's an interesting concept, especially in a world that so often feels frayed and grotesque. But while beauty may be a necessary part of happiness, it is not sufficient for it. Though one of the first and most important ingredients in human flourishing, other important values must follow in its footsteps—namely, goodness and truth.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn explained this in his 1970 Nobel lecture.<sup>12</sup> In his youth, he read Dostoevsky's words, “Beauty will save the world,” and was skeptical. But with time, he realized that beauty plays an essential role in cultivating our understanding of goodness and truth:

There is, however, a certain peculiarity in the essence of beauty, a peculiarity in the status of art: namely, the convincingness of a true work of art is completely irrefutable and it forces even an opposing heart to surrender. It is possible to compose an outwardly smooth and elegant political speech, a headstrong article, a social program, or a philosophical system on the basis of both a mistake and a lie. What is hidden, what distorted, will not immediately become obvious.

Then a contradictory speech, article, program,

a differently constructed philosophy rallies in opposition – and all just as elegant and smooth, and once again it works. Which is why such things are both trusted and mistrusted.

In vain to reiterate what does not reach the heart.

But a work of art bears within itself its own verification: conceptions which are devised or stretched do not stand being portrayed in images, they all come crashing down, appear sickly and pale, convince no one. But those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force – they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them.

So perhaps that ancient trinity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty is not simply an empty, faded formula as we thought in the days of our self-confident, materialistic youth? If the tops of these three trees converge, as the scholars maintained, but the too blatant, too direct stems of Truth and Goodness are crushed, cut down, not allowed through – then perhaps the fantastic, unpredictable, unexpected stems of Beauty will push through and soar TO THAT VERY SAME PLACE, and in so doing will fulfill the work of all three?

In Solzhenitsyn's conception, ideas that are not true or good will be ugly when we try to represent them artistically—and thus, their real force shines through. We see this very practically in our towns and cities, our art museums, our plays and films: there are many ugly, incongruent ideas in today's culture. Their effect on the human person is not one of flourishing, but one of decay.

Solzhenitsyn believed our yearning for beauty is more than a mere aesthetic itch: it's a siren call of the true and good, the other two trees we have decimated and ignored in modern society. Beauty is

pointing us to them, and beckoning us onward. Our desire for New Urbanist cities, with their beauty and community, are part of a larger desire for the goods of community, love, fellowship, rootedness. Our desire for romantic and sexual love reflects a deeper yearning for companionship, camaraderie, unity, love, belonging. Our love of art reflects a deeper attraction to order, loveliness, and—as Delistraty puts it in his article, “surprisingly, hope.” Hope is what emerges out of art: which is why Donna Tartt and John Green (the author of *The Fault in Our Stars*) vest so much in it.

Beauty is a multi-faceted, mysterious thing that somehow brings happiness to humanity. Yet if we merely absorb its aesthetic pleasures without considering why we enjoy it, we only receive bestial satiation from its presence. A deeper, more fulfilling realm of inquiry awaits us. We must plunge deeper into our understanding of the beautiful: to ask why it is necessary to human happiness, yet not sufficient. We must consider why beauty calls us “further up, and further in.”

## NOTES:

Article reprinted from The American Conservative: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com>.

URL to article: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/why-does-beauty-matter/>.

URLs in this post:

1. according to a Friday article: [http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/the-beautyhappiness-connection/375678/?single\\_page=true](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/the-beautyhappiness-connection/375678/?single_page=true)

2. paper: <http://www.icevirtuallibrary.com/content/article/10.1680/udap.11.00031>

3. *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*: <http://www.amazon.com/Happiness-Lessons-Science-Richard-Layard/dp/0143037013>

4. Mappiness: <http://www.mappiness.org.uk/>

5. answers to these questions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvMYhjuFtt0&feature=youtu.be&hd=1>

[com/watch?v=dvMYhjuFtt0&feature=youtu.be&hd=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvMYhjuFtt0&feature=youtu.be&hd=1)

6. here at TAC: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/urbs/>

7. *Coming Apart*: [https://www.amazon.com/Coming-Apart-State-America-1960-2010/dp/030745343X/ref=as\\_sl\\_pc\\_ss\\_til?tag=theamericonse-20&linkCode=w01&linkId=T27UVWJW45DNBN7S&creativeASIN=030745343X](https://www.amazon.com/Coming-Apart-State-America-1960-2010/dp/030745343X/ref=as_sl_pc_ss_til?tag=theamericonse-20&linkCode=w01&linkId=T27UVWJW45DNBN7S&creativeASIN=030745343X)

8. book on beauty: <http://books.google.com/books?id=wQu97TuXVlAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=roger+scruton+beauty&hl=en&sa=X&ei=FE7uU4P8DqnmsASdiIGgDw&ved=0CBwQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=sexual%20bond&f=false>

9. The Goldfinch: [https://www.amazon.com/The-Goldfinch-Pulitzer-National-Finalists/dp/0316055433/ref=as\\_sl\\_pc\\_ss\\_til?tag=theamericonse-20&linkCode=w01&linkId=MWVZ26VNZPPM5X3M&creativeASIN=0316055433](https://www.amazon.com/The-Goldfinch-Pulitzer-National-Finalists/dp/0316055433/ref=as_sl_pc_ss_til?tag=theamericonse-20&linkCode=w01&linkId=MWVZ26VNZPPM5X3M&creativeASIN=0316055433)

10. *The Fault in Our Stars*: [https://www.amazon.com/The-Fault-Stars-John-Green/dp/014242417X/ref=as\\_sl\\_pc\\_ss\\_til?tag=theamericonse-20&linkCode=w01&linkId=O64I7ALVNRQVDKXZ&creativeASIN=014242417X](https://www.amazon.com/The-Fault-Stars-John-Green/dp/014242417X/ref=as_sl_pc_ss_til?tag=theamericonse-20&linkCode=w01&linkId=O64I7ALVNRQVDKXZ&creativeASIN=014242417X)

11. wrote for Acculturated: <http://acculturated.com/why-does-everyone-love-the-goldfinch/>

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13. <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/beauty-siren-or-savior/>

14. <http://documentaryaddict.com/Why+Beauty+Matters-542-doc.html>

15. <http://www.onlinechristiansongs.com/2011/10/my-hope-rebecca-st-james.html>