

Excerpted chapters from *On Beauty: Douglas R. Tompkins* —aesthetics and activism

This piece comprises two chapters from *On Beauty: Douglas R. Tompkins— aesthetics and activism*, which was published by the David Brower Center in conjunction with the art installation *On Beauty*, mounted in 2017 in Berkeley, CA, USA.

Universal Beauty

Tom Butler

“There is no synonym for God so perfect as Beauty.”

— John Muir

Before John Muir became the great prophet of American wilderness and champion for national parks, he took thousand-mile walks to the Gulf of Mexico, botanizing along the way, and rambled widely through California’s mountains, puzzling out the geology and glacial shaping of the landforms he traversed. The largely self-taught naturalist was a mountaineer and endurance athlete of prodigious boldness and skill. Even when carrying a plant press to save specimens, Muir typically traveled light, often with little more than a satchel containing bread, a book or two, and his journal.

One day in December of 1874, while Muir hiked alone in the northern Sierras, a storm gathered. A cautious mountaineer would have sought shelter in the low country. Muir instead went up, climbing a ridge to experience the weather’s full force. At the height of land, he noted a cluster of hundred-foot-tall Douglas fir trees whose “lithe, brushy tops were rocking and swirling in wild ecstasy.” Muir was accustomed to climbing trees for his botanical studies; he easily ascended the tallest fir and spent hours riding the storm’s currents.

“The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward,

round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves, while I clung with muscles firm braced, like a bobolink on a reed,” he later wrote. During his time aloft, Muir reveled in the “the high festival” of fragrant air, sublime light, and the “music” of windswept trees. “The sounds of the storm,” he noted, “corresponded gloriously with this wild exuberance of light and motion.”

While this recounting of “wild ecstasy” in the treetops is particularly thrilling, Muir’s prose generally tended toward the effusive, with praise of “Nature’s open, harmonious, songful, sunny, everyday beauty” a leitmotif. Later sought out by presidents and captains of industry, the then-obscure naturalist would become famous through his writings, which form a running commentary on his own rapturous relationship with nature, the “freedom and glory” he enjoyed in “God’s wilderness.”

A Scotsman by birth who emigrated to America with his family at age 11, Muir’s early years on a hardscrabble farm carved from the American wilderness were filled with toil and cruelty at the hand of his devout, evangelical father, whose strain of Calvinist-influenced Christianity was as severe as the beatings he inflicted on his son John. The younger Muir’s theological leanings would later evolve toward pantheism, but his deep familiarity with the King James Bible not only influenced the quality of his prose but also laid the foundation for his evolving worldview.

Like most people of his place and time, Muir would have been able to recite by

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Citation

Butler T and Lubarsky S (2019) Excerpted chapters from *On Beauty: Douglas R. Tompkins— aesthetics and activism*. *The Ecological Citizen* 3(Suppl A): 93–100.

Keywords

Values; worldviews

About the book

Text: **Butler T and Lubarsky S**

Photos: **Antonio Vizcaíno**

Year: **2017**

Available from:

brownercenter.org/on-beauty



heart the opening passage of Genesis, which formed the dominant creation myth of his culture:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light:" and there was light.

In that account, God goes on to separate the heavens and earth, the land from the waters, to fill the Earth with plants and animals, to create men and women, and then to give humans "dominion" over all of the Creation. It's a rich story, beautiful in its drama and poetry, albeit problematic once one gets to the granting of ownership of and divine exhortation to "subdue" the Earth.

Muir, a man of science as well as believer in the sacredness of nature, would later explicitly reject the anthropocentrism inherent in the Genesis story, writing, "No dogma taught by the present civilization seems to form so insuperable an obstacle in the way of a right understanding of the relations which culture sustains to wildness as that which regards the world as made especially for the uses of man. Every animal, plant, and crystal controverts it in the plainest terms."

In another work he asked, "Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?" In another, while railing against humanity's hubris, he noted: "I have precious little sympathy for the selfish propriety of civilized man, and if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears."

Don Worster's brilliant biography of Muir, *A Passion for Nature*, includes a scene wherein Muir comes upon a bear carcass and stops to mourn his fallen ursine neighbor. The notion that the bear was kin, a relative in the community of life, was an idea at odds with Muir's cultural heritage but of course commonplace in indigenous

cultures around the world. If Muir had been born to any of numerous native North American tribes, he would have learned stories in which bears figured prominently in the cultural mythology and would have been able to recite his tribe's creation myths as readily as the young Scotsman quoted scripture.

The Miwok Indians who thrived for millennia in the western Sierra foothills down to the Pacific Coast before a conquering civilization disrupted their culture, have a creation story featuring a female silver fox and male coyote who sing and dance the world into being. Without digressing into Muir's interactions with Native Americans (suffice it to say he was both a progressive thinker as well as a product of that colonial civilization with its racial bias), Muir's writings and those of other early thinkers in what came to be the American wilderness conservation movement reflected earlier, indigenous ways of experiencing the world.

Muir's description of nature's intrinsic "order and beauty," his familial reverence toward other forms of life, the way he believed that it was a property of humans to glow "with joy" when "exposed to the rays of mountain beauty"—these values are aligned with the sentiment encapsulated in the Navaho/Diné people's traditional prayer, "The Beauty Way":

In beauty I walk

With beauty before me I walk

With beauty behind me I walk

With beauty above me I walk

With beauty around me I walk

It has become beauty again

It has become beauty again

It has become beauty again

It has become beauty again

Along with the needs of food, shelter, and sex, there may be no more fundamental human yearning than this—to be connected, to be in harmony, to feel rooted to place and people, to walk in beauty. "Biophilia," the term coined by biologist Edward O. Wilson to describe our innate inclination to affiliate with the diversity of life, captures that longing.

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Almost certainly the mountaineer's compulsion—the drive that John Muir felt to climb the highest peaks in the Sierras, or Doug Tompkins's zeal to put up first ascents on multiple continents—was partly an expression of this beauty-seeking tendency. And even for us wilderness travelers who do not aspire to similar climbing exploits, it is that direct experience of wildness that kindles connection, the kind that Henry David Thoreau described when he said: "Talk of mysteries! —Think of our life in nature, —daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, —rocks, tree, wind on our cheeks! the solid Earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact!" (For his many virtues, we'll forgive Thoreau's excessive use of the exclamation point.)

While people naturally inclined to spiritual introspection may discuss such matters unashamedly, many of us leave such topics unexamined, or fear to say it out loud: this search for connection is inextricably tied to life's existential questions: From whence do we come? Where do we return? While sauntering through this mortal plane, are there times and places we can brush up against the eternal? (And must we climb to the top of stormswept Douglas fir to experience that primal unity?)

If the desire to be connected is indeed one of our deepest human inclinations, how ironic is it that modernity, at least in the supersized, techno-industrial-capitalistic form we see in the overdeveloped world, presents an almost perfect set of cultural conditions to thwart that desire. The economic, political, and cultural superstructure that shapes and constrains daily life in countless ways undermines life-affirming relationships and erects barriers to the formation of an integrated understanding of an individual's place in the biotic community.

The foundation of the great wall separating people from all our relations in the community of life is language and the way language presupposes and reinforces

a worldview. The way that language shapes our thinking and undergirds the dominant human-supremacist worldview is a largely unexplored topic in the popular literature of nature conservation, and, unfortunately, one can find a million examples of common language in "environmental" discourse that reinforces a resourcist worldview. The language of ownership and dominion is built on talk of "stewardship" (a word that originally referred to the "ward" of the "sty," the person who tended the domestic animals) and positively framed "working landscapes" (places where natural habitat is removed or manipulated to support resource extraction, such as logging or livestock grazing). Note in the next direct mail appeal or calendar you receive from an environmental nonprofit the ubiquitous use of the possessive "our"—as in, "we must protect our oceans" (as if the oceans belonged to us).

In its bias toward human-centeredness we can see that our reductionist, mechanistic, and increasingly cyber-metaphor-infused language is quite unlike that of earlier human cultures, where stories of communion and reciprocity between the human and other animal nations were ubiquitous. Beyond the pseudo-tribal gyrations of professional sports and the clichés of regional identity (Don't mess with Texas!), there is little common language that anchors people to place, and to other creatures in the land community.

Nearly twenty thousand years after humans painted extraordinary images of animals on the cave walls at Lascaux—and presumably participated in a sophisticated ritualized relationship with the creatures depicted—how can our present discourse on beauty and the relations between our species and others be so bereft and trivial? How much we have lost.

In our time, what passes for concern for beauty is mostly thin and cheap, oriented toward crass commercialism and celebrity worship. On the other end of the spectrum, a river of academic writing about art and aesthetics is intentionally insular,

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inscrutable to nonexperts, and powerless to shape any broadly meaningful cultural transformation.

If the idea of beauty as a potent elixir to help heal the world is to have any chance, then first we must speak of beauty in a way that is not trivial. That is not superficial. That is not corrupted by the values of a society oriented toward perpetual economic growth. If we are to be successful in gestating a new cultural conversation about beauty’s motive power to kindle ecological and social recovery, this discussion must be broadly accessible and attractive.

With a foundational orientation toward ecocentrism, that conversation might borrow from the Norwegian ecophilosophers whose writings deeply influenced Doug Tompkins to orient his life’s work toward beauty. It might also include the “sense of wonder” Rachel Carson articulated, as well as the poetry of Wordsworth and his English Lakes District contemporaries who later influenced Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, etc. Like an ecosystem whose integrity and beauty are linked to its diversity, a language of beauty for our times will include the indigenous voices not well represented in the canon of the classic nature tradition, as well as the nonhuman voices we hear around us, if we listen.

A language of beauty needs to evoke the voices of those creatures on the cave walls at Lascaux as well as the creatures with whom we share our backyards. It might invoke, to borrow Derrick Jensen’s phrase, “a language older than words.” It need not necessarily replace the creation myth of any particular culture, but can include and enhance them in a holistic narrative that gains power from its cultural diversity.

Whether our preferred creation story includes the Miwoks’ Silver Fox or Hopi people’s Grandmother Spider or the astrophysicists’ Big Bang, whether we understand the spark of life/beauty emanating from the hand of a Divine Creator or the miraculously creative unfolding of what Aldo Leopold called

the “evolutionary odyssey,” the results we see around us—life’s diversity—are astounding. If we take seriously the scientific explanation of our species’ evolutionary heritage, then we are not just metaphorical neighbors to all organisms in the community of life, we are literally related, a genetic connection we can describe through science or absorb through the stories of indigenous cosmologies. The spleenworts, sequoias, and humans have common ancestors. This is worth repeating for emphasis: all our relationships with other living creatures are, ultimately, familial.

Whether we recognize it or not, we are connected. Our sense of autonomy is an illusion, resulting from biological (our sensory apparatus) and cultural factors. Disconnection is practiced artifice, underlaid by philosophical, linguistic, and cognitive training, most of which is entirely unnoticed and unexamined. A conscious effort to practice beauty, however, can help override the cultural conditioning of disconnection.

It may not be John Muir’s transcendent moment of ecstasy in the delirious treetops, but for some of us not so bold, the unlearning comes with daily practice of greeting the neighbors. Recognizing our common origins, conjoined journey, and common fate, we echo the warm acknowledgment issued by the poet Mary Oliver to “the moss grazing upon the rock”: “I touch her tenderly, sweet cousin.”

Of a spring morning, when I rise early to spend time with arriving warblers in their springtime finery, Blackburnian with his iridescent orange breast, Canada with his decorative black necklace, Chestnut-sided with his incessant chatter that he’s pleased to meet me, I say yes, I am pleased to meet you too.

Radically mysterious, the epic of evolution’s long unfolding is a pageant of pulsing and contracting life, the universe breathing beauty. We, along with the wildflowers and wolves, cicadas and jaguars come from beauty, and like every living thing, will return to beauty. ■

The Kinship of Beauty and Life

Sandra Lubarsky

“The greatest wholeness is organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe.”

— Robinson Jeffers

Part of the deep psychosis of our time is that we measure the world in terms of our own pleasure. It’s an old riddle, whether something pleases us because it is beautiful or whether we think it is beautiful because it pleases us. For most of western civilization, almost every major thinker—Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas—resolved the riddle in favor of beauty’s presence in the world. Old-growth coastal redwoods, filtering sunlight and sheltering bundles of huckleberry, are beautiful in their structure and their relations. An encounter with these fog-catching trees yields a surge of delight in their beauty, a spontaneous primordial “wow!”

And yet, the convention of our times is to claim that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” that instead of being a fact of the world, beauty is something formulated by our minds and dependent on individual preference—and then imposed on the world. People decide for themselves whether something is beautiful or not, and that decision is usually based on pleasure. Those towering sequoias with their furrowed bark and burlled torsos shift from being beautiful in and of themselves to being beautiful because they please us. The eye of the beholder becomes a barometer of personal satisfaction—and pleasure becomes the measure of beauty rather than the result of beauty.

This human-centered approach to beauty is so fully threaded into the fabric of our modern way of thinking that we are scarcely aware of its consequences. But in turning inward to find value, we turn away from the world. In believing that value is something generated only by humans, we conform to the idea that the world lacks its

own value. And in making our pleasure the primary measure of value, we imply that all life on earth is for the purpose of serving human life. The result is a relationship with the world that is destroying the world.

The belief that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is part of the larger cultural story of human exceptionalism, with its justification of human dominion and entitlement to use the earth as we desire. We split the world between intrinsically valuable humans and everything else, valued only for their usefulness to us. But this image of a hollow-shelled world, devoid of value (except for the value imposed on it by the human species), is not supported by our lived experience. Every time we look out the kitchen window to enjoy a sunset crackling with gold or step into the night to catch a blaze of meteors in the sky we enact a rebuttal to this parsimony of value. Every time we spontaneously shift our awareness toward the orange-tipped curve of an ocotillo blazing in the desert or a sweep of purple jacaranda petals carpeting the sidewalk, we break the narrative that the human mind alone produces beauty. What was thought to be hollow is resonant with merit and our response to it is visceral and unpremeditated. In that moment, we know that the world generates its own value, that the world was beautiful before humans arrived on the scene, and that we are shaped, enchanted, and sustained by it. We know that beauty is something more than human invention and personal opinion. And we know that the pleasure we experience when we walk in the world is a pleasure given to us, the consequence of beauty arising from the living relations of the world.

When we remember this, we begin a rotation back toward the world. Spinning like dervishes, we abandon the deep loneliness of separation and realign the axis of human experience with the life that infuses our life. Our direct experiences of beauty can guide us. Begin with sunsets, meteors, ocotillos, and jacarandas, the extraordinary familiars of the world. Admit with poet Arthur Sze that “the infinite glitter of the world’s here in our arms, here or

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not at all.” Abandon the idea that beauty is a small subject, best kept within the confines of the arts or women’s fashion. Recognize that the question, “What is beauty or the beautiful?” is a metaphysical question about the make-up of the universe and that to ask it is to replace the conventional picture of the world-as-machine with the image of the world-as-alive.

In remembering, we free ourselves to admit that beauty is a quality of life that overflows individual judgment and narrow, personal pleasure. It is a matter that belongs in the open space of public discourse.

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But it isn’t easy to talk about beauty. Language systems are nested in metaphysical systems and language and culture are intertwined, producing and reproducing each other. The words and concepts we use and the way we use them are permeated by assumptions about how we understand reality. Our modern, western culture is largely dominated by the idea that the best way to describe the way things function is in terms of a machine and that, like a machine, reality is made up of dead matter that has no intrinsic value. We talk about hearts pumping blood, bodies needing fuel, and brains operating like computers. Because in some ways and to some extent, reality is machinelike, these are helpful metaphors. But the trouble is that we have tended to move from “is like” to “is,” and we have accepted these machine-based metaphors as a fully accurate description of reality. Mechanism has become an idea so deeply embedded in our culture that we are hardly aware of it. It is the primary reason why we have lost our proficiency in the language of beauty.

The lexicon of beauty includes words that have no application to machines: feeling, emotion, value, participation, inspiration, creativity, spontaneity, openness, and aliveness. These words, spoken in a mechanistic world where proper language is expected to be definite, precise, and quantifiable, sound soft and indeterminate, like a private language with no common rules. We stammer, struggling to answer

the peremptory question that demands a sound bite answer, “What is beauty?” Out of embarrassment or exasperation we censor ourselves. But a language unspoken is a language endangered and a culture impoverished. Not to speak about beauty is to contribute to the diminishment of a vital part of our experience.

Yet, after so many years of cultural indifference, it is challenging to speak about beauty as a value that deserves our attention. It is, by contrast, shamefully easy to point to the cost of silence: clear-cut forests and disfigured mountains, spoil tips and tailing heaps, strip malls and swaths of concrete parking lots. In our failure to make beauty a public concern, vast tracts of formerly healthy ecosystems have been transformed into discarded landscapes. Ecological decline always involves the loss of beauty. At the very least, for the sake of curtailing the wreckage, we had better find our tongues and relearn the language of beauty.

The most important conversation we can have today is about how to live well on our beloved Earth without destroying it. It is the conversation about sustainability. But it isn’t customary to speak of beauty as a critical dimension of sustainability. There is no place for beauty in the popular “three-E” formula for sustainability: economics, environment, and equity. Beauty plays no role in the mainstream hope that we can manipulate and manage complex ecological systems or that we can develop technological innovations that will preserve our first-world lifestyles and protect the planet’s biotic health and climatic stability. But these are notions of sustainability that are rooted in the very worldview that has steered us toward this most precarious period in human history. We are in need of a broader, deeper foundation for sustainability.

Though the word “sustainability” seems to suggest endurance as its paramount goal, in fact it bears a greater intention: a concern with flourishing. The question is not meant to be, “How can we endure endlessly on the planet?” or “How can we maintain the status quo?” At the heart of the notion of

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sustainability is an axiological question about value and what is worth sustaining. It is a question that goes beyond mere persistence, though certainly reproductive capacity is a necessary part of the answer. A far greater ethical-aesthetic vision informs the practical work of sustainability, one in which the convergence of beauty and goodness is assumed. The question we need to ask is, “How can we live in life-affirming ways?” and it is synonymous with the question, “Can we live in ways that promote beauty”? Sustainability is a practical guide for arriving at a world flourishing with the beauty of life-supporting relations.

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The most important thing to know about beauty is its kinship with life. Rather than denoting a thing in isolation, beauty signifies life-in-relationship. Most importantly, it is evidence of the cooperation of incalculable forms of life, shaping themselves into a life-supporting community. In this labor of life adjusting to life, each individual life aims both for reproduction and for an intensity and fullness of life. That intensity and fullness depends on a million delicate adjustments that simultaneously strengthen the vitality of the individual and the whole, achieved only over great stretches of time. The outcome is a world where diverse forms of life belong, in the very literal sense of the word: holding membership of place and sharing interest and concern. The outcome of belonging, of right relationship, is a place of beauty. It is where our own vitality is nursed and fortified. When we experience this beauty, we feel the quickening of our being, an intensifying of our individual lives in right relationship with the life of the whole—and the revitalization of our deepest and oldest desire to belong to the world.

This way of understanding beauty makes it clear that beauty is more than an inconsequential subject of fashion or a matter for debate among artists. It is fundamental to an ecological paradigm; beauty is the name for the value associated with aliveness. Inextricably

bound up with the morphology of individual organisms and communities of organisms, it is the way we talk about patterns and relationships that create and sustain life. In its partnership with the deep structure of life, beauty is most visible in our encounter with life-affirming experiences. Flowing water, buds and blossoms, young children—these are familiar instances of beauty in association with vitality. There are a million ways that beauty appears both with regularity and surprise, and always, like life itself, ephemerally. When they arise from a place of health, they produce a manifold of beauty. In a diminished environment, they are brief, tilting moments, undone by the absence of vigor and coordination.

Because beauty is so diverse, there is no one best or final form. There is great beauty in the high desert of the Colorado Plateau and great beauty in the lush temperate rainforests of the Chilean coast; there is great beauty in the simplicity of a Zen meditation hall and great beauty in the vibrant aesthetic of artist Frida Kahlo’s blue house. There are many manifestations of beauty and as with all experience, beauty is specific to its environmental and cultural conditions and to the experiencing subject. But the diversity of beauty, its plural forms, does not mean that beauty is simply a matter of opinion. It is a mistake to move from the diversity of beauty to the claim that beauty is completely subjective, entirely a matter of individual perspective. When we see images of mining operations on the Alberta tar sands with its tailing piles, open pits, and clear-cut Boreal forest, or images of a living body in pain or decay, perhaps a baby albatross in the process of dying from the tiny bits of ocean plastic it ingested, it is fair to say that there is widespread agreement—nearly universal agreement—that these things are ugly. This agreement helps us to understand that judgments of beauty, like those of ugliness, are not simply subjective. We may disagree on details and we may choose to ignore or repress our immediate relational rapport but we share a deep receptivity to experiences that increase or decrease life.

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To separate beauty from life and life from beauty is to do great injury to both. The same goes for undoing the bond between beauty and goodness, treating them as different kinds of value. In fact, goodness is a form of beauty, one that depends on the free and conscious actions of persons. It is nested in the broader category of beauty, the value in which all of life, conscious or not, participates. To repress the one is to distort the other. We speak of ethical actions as “beautiful” for the very reason associated with beauty: they are life-affirming. Both beauty and goodness are ways of coordinating life to life and enabling each individual life to flourish. Both evoke action directed toward increasing and intensifying value. Both are teachers of care, drawing us into relations beyond ourselves. Work on behalf of justice and fairness, efforts to alleviate poverty and suffering—all are acts of beauty, enabling all members of society to freely and fully engage with life. Years ago the Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “It takes a great deal of inner cultivation to attain real love and real compassion. It takes also a new conception about the relevance of beauty and the marvel and mystery of everything that exists.” Acts that sustain value, increase value, and heighten the enjoyment of value are part of the relevance of beauty. Our ability to create communities that are life-affirmative depends on recognizing

that aesthetics and ethics are cooperating constituents in the social order that is the confederacy of beauty.

An ecological understanding of beauty as the value related to life affirmation shifts the way we think of the natural world—from a storehouse of resources for human use to a web of relationships teeming with life, filled with intrinsic value, and directed not only toward the perpetuation of life but also toward the fullest expression of aliveness. Although in a living system neither ecological health nor beauty is guaranteed, the capacity for both exists. And it is that capacity that calls us to the practice of beauty, to cultivating ways of moving in the world that sustain and contribute to life. Because ecology and aesthetics are interrelated, the practice of beauty involves the practice of sustainability, both of which abide by the fundamental parts-whole rule of all relations: in a healthy system, the exquisite details of each singular life adds richness to the larger body of relations and is, in turn, strengthened by these relations. The practice of beauty and the practice of sustainability are one and the same, a coherent effort to value and contribute to the vividness of life. It is an effort motivated by more than our narrow desire for pleasure, though great pleasure comes in its wake. In leaning into the world, we make ourselves receptive to the world’s profuse beauty and we become exuberant, more fully alive. ■

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