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The Beauty of Imperfection

Remember during the presidential campaign, how the political ducks quacked nostalgic about the American Family, all those overcooked images from the apple-cheeked icons of Norman Rockwell? Well, sure—it's the business of politicians to manufacture togetherness, stir a big happy pot of ideological taffy out of the culture and its diverse ingredients. On the other hand, isn't it the business of the citizenry—real families and individuals, not media fictions—to survive and strive to transcend this pretense, the inspirational but altogether superficial and much exploited ideals of any society: the perfect bond of blood; the perfect way to live; the perfect mate; the perfect look; the perfect accompaniments to perfect success.

Rhetorical plums, all of them, and more and more the recipe for a nasty neo-puritanical prune stew that I'm being told to eat for my own good.

Last summer, during an animated argument about whether or not folks should be allowed to consume any amount of alcohol whatsoever before they operate a vehicle (no wine with dinner at your favorite restaurant!), I was stunned by a friend's chilly scolding for "liking to make trouble to prove that I'm different than everybody else." I pulled her over at the end of the evening to say, if you're my friend feel free to tell me I'm behaving like a jackass, but don't impugn my motives. No one in the night's gathering of academics, however, would support the cause I was battling for—the freedom to be myself which in this case meant taking a drink, but not being a drunk driver; arguing loudly, but without malice.

The following day I felt darkly comforted by an unlikely ally, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, one of the few honest leaders we have known in the eighties. Koop was quoted warning that the American people were "traveling the road of retribution" here at the end of the decade, rallying against Utopia's deadbeats: smokers, drunk drivers, teenagers who become pregnant, drug addicts, wife beaters, all the inveterate ne'er-do-wells, and he expressed profound concern for the social fate

of those infected with AIDS, that the tragic (Koop's word) national intolerance he observed on the rise was spreading to our most helpless caste of victim—unforgivably imperfect people, dying from a wicked disease.

I clipped the article bearing Koop's bleak prognosis out of the newspaper and, tacked above my desk, let it serve as a daily reminder why lately I have been losing friends left and right. I see myself as a regular fellow, a reluctant iconoclast at best but committed to the autonomy of the good-willed individual. It's true though that I smoke cigarettes, drink booze on weekends, have neither regrets nor recommendations from my younger drug-doing days, permit myself a mild curiosity about pornography, and for the past thirteen years have lived without nuptial contract to a remarkable, intelligent woman who, as a sophomore in high school, was out of it enough to get unwittingly pregnant and be declared mentally unfit to give birth in order to have a legal abortion. My dear girl! So, in the eyes of the pure, I suppose our relationship fattens the list of my shortcomings on at least two counts. Given such an unsavory litany of personal faults, I know this: I am close to being the scourge of the contemporary universe. Only viral-free blood and the fact that I've never smacked my lover or anybody else shields me, it sometimes seems, from tar and feathers.

Whether my erstwhile friends were "good" friends is not at issue; I liked them, for various reasons, and I wish they were still around, though I don't miss their admonitions, their simple well-intentioned (but not best-intentioned) advice on how to grow up. Frankly, these days of aggressive enlightenment are not for me. More and more I feel the awkward compulsion to ask new acquaintances to tell me of something they consider imperfectly beautiful. I don't know really what I'm trying to do with these barometric readings on the weather of their personalities, except the impossible—attempt to forecast the rain or sunshine of friendships.

Everyone has a unique answer. Navajo rugs, purposefully woven with a hole in them. Japanese pottery, the imperfect asymmetrical forms of the Zen tea ceremony, which express the respect we accord natural beauty, and especially *raku*, with its accidental markings and drips, the pot thrown in contact with flame and water, both uncontrollable elements. The voice of the opera singer Joan Sutherland, its singularities saving her from the anonymity of the chorale, which is where perfect voices belong, herded together. The gap-toothed smile of Lauren Hutton; the ambiguous mouth of Mona Lisa. The paintings of Picasso, the

Baroque poem; Jay Gatsby; for that matter, all of literature.

Intriguing answers, but I wondered why no one was answering, *Laughter, Sadness*, for there is no comedy, just as there is no tragedy, in a world of perfection. What about the awesome beauty of a wild beast eating its kill? A volcanic eruption? Or the disaster of the space shuttle *Challenger*, with its teacher/passenger, Christa McAuliffe? McAuliffe was sent into space to educate children; how painfully successful was her final lesson, that life is full of risks we must be prepared to take, that imperfection is not so much a mistake as it is a property of existence. That her mission ended in death, the white contrails forking into devastating silence, does not make the image or the impact of the event less beautiful, only much less pleasant and secure, like the beauty of a storm. And what about quantum physics, which painted a beauty mark—the uncertainty principle—on the smooth face of Einstein's universe?

My desire for fraternal response to the beauty of imperfection was a yearning for an integrated appreciation of the Big Picture, and I suppose I'll have to pose the question differently if I expect the answers to build a bridge between esthetics and ethics, to admit the beauty in the imperfect arts of living. How otherwise shall we admire democracy, the messiest premise of social organization; how else shall we approach love, except with an esthetic passion for its dizzying complexity? "What should I do about love?" a student asked Carl Jung, many years ago in his Zurich classroom. "I cannot tell you what to do," the psychologist answered honestly. "That must be left to the person who always knows what is best for other people."

The ultimate beauty of imperfection is evolution itself, which is the process of mutation, whether we *elect* it consciously for our own benefit, as we do when we stop smoking, or, as with disease, it *selects* us for its own caprice. Yet since natural law glorifies singularity, how did the tyranny of perfection become so ingrained in us, where did it set down its chokehold roots? Easy question. Of course we want to grow as people, be better tomorrow than we were yesterday, but *perfect*? Try this clue, a yeasty aphorism in the dough of western culture:

"The badness of men is better than the goodness of women."

Know your Bible? It's not possible to talk about beauty and imperfection without talking about truth and goodness, two horses that always turn back to the barn of religion. The line above comes from the Old Testament, *Ecclesiastes*, a bullet of wisdom from King Solomon. It took women a paltry few thousand years to recover from the old King's potshots. Might we ask ourselves how much longer before we show a

little gratitude for Eve's stupidly maligned decision, how many more millenia before we are at peace with Eve's choice? Which is the real con job—the weaker sex betraying mankind to the devil, beguiled by a phallic serpent; or the myth of Paradise Lost itself?

Eve, created human, made the infinitely sane decision to embrace her condition, human nature, and so entered the house of the world, which already had a rental sign staked in the front yard anyway. *Wanted: Tenants, long term lease available.* Imagine Eve's accomplishment this way: If as beings we were to be fish, she coaxed us from the perfect illusion of the aquarium and led us to the imperfect but greater freedoms—and of course dangers—of the sea. Were it not for Adam's nostalgia, we would have had no alternative but to exculpate Eve; we would never have climbed on her back and spurred her across the centuries like a pretty mule.

Eden's echo, the memory of perfection in Adam's ears, was a dissatisfaction useful only insofar as it resisted becoming an obsession, or a weapon against children. Eve, however, brought to the new neighborhood what was most appropriate, the truth of knowledge, a homemaker's philosophy, that beauty was a reflection of reality; that while not all reality was beautiful, all beauty, including the illusory beauty of Paradise, was imperfect; that beauty, regardless how well it mimicked Adam's memory, must be judged by the temper of its flaws, and valued for the character of its failures in the face of the endless challenge to know God's mind.

Ah, how I would love to see the creation myth turned topsy-turvy to suit the evidence of life; perfectionism rotated into the slot of our consciousness that has harbored the stain of original sin. It would serve perfectionists right, to be shamed for inextricably linking beauty and truth to goodness in our psyches, not at all a bad idea, really, until Adam's disciples suggested that perfect beauty equaled perfect goodness. What a trap that has been for all of us! The more beautiful a thing or person, the higher we were prepared to assume its moral content. Thus we had a formula for breeding fools.

Take feminine beauty, for instance. Throughout mankind's existence it has roamed the scales as well as the anatomy, loving fat, loving bone, swelling the breasts to coconuts and then shrinking them to the size of gumdrops, one era favoring birchpole hips, another era caressing bovine backsides. Beauty's eclectic tastes were, in their whimsy, harmless enough, but in the hands of perfectionists—the courtly knights of the Middle Ages, Romantic poets of the eighteenth century, sentimental

Hollywood directors—feminine beauty was raised upon a pedestal; in order to see how exquisitely formed a woman was on the inside, only examine how perfect she appeared on the outside. But, let's face it, a pedestal is the wrong place for a female unless the idea is to look up her skirts.

You know as well as I do this business of perfection and beauty has gotten wrapped up in the economics of modern life. Place a perfect butt, a perfect face, a perfect family alongside any product and the conclusion is inescapable: Buy one and purchase the means to a better, happier, more fulfilled, more perfect self. Buy one, if you believe in heaven on earth. Buy the Elephant Man's toothpaste and you'll be brushing your teeth in hell. Don't get me wrong: Free enterprise strikes me as a proper response to human nature, but materialism entwined with beauty becomes a moral imperative, and progress—the development of new products and new markets—is made to seem convincingly like headway on the arduous march back to the Garden. Restrain beauty from hyping the illusion of perfection, and materialism relaxes into a more harmonious relationship with need. Suppress beauty altogether and you have something that looks like the Iron Curtain. Institutionalize it, and welcome to Orwell's *1984*. Nationalize it and you're in Nazi Germany.

Perfection has always had an off and on war with the world, mostly on; it's on again here in America, and what's got me vexed is I see too many familiar faces along the line of crusaders. These aren't my traditional conservative foes—as enemies, I trust conservatives and their black and white vision. No, the right hasn't budged an inch in relation to a transgressor such as myself, and it's not blue-collar Reagan-era Democrats I feel breathing down my back. The ones I'm worried about are former colleagues from the counterculture, the untrustworthy but swell-intentioned left who, having stopped a war and clobbered social injustice during the civil rights movement, now seemed ordained to challenge human imperfection—indeed, life's imperfection—to three rounds in a New Age Coliseum of Righteousness.

In a different century, right about now is when I'd head for the frontier, trade with the aborigines until the perfectionists came along and swallowed them. I sometimes tell myself that it's beyond me why such an unusual amount of folks are making it their business not just to keep everybody in a straight line, but to encourage someone like me, by legislative force if necessary, to be a perfect angel. But I know better—it's not beyond me to understand.

I remember in parochial school, the nuns badgered us kids to say

the rosary, because, they promised, if *everybody* in the world for just *one* day all said the rosary together, there would never be another war. I thought, back then in third grade, Well gosh, let's do it, and my hands circled the beads with vigorous prayer. I knew in spirit the nuns were right, and though I stopped saying the rosary long ago, I still think they're right today, and so are their secular counterparts. I know man's potential is magnificent, just as I know the faster we're bullied toward perfection, the slower the journey will be.

As long as we remain under the umbrella of reality, the most meaningful art, as well as the most virtuous lives, will carry the signature of imperfection, the growth rings of our failures; and retribution against weakness, vice, or unorthodoxy will always play out as hatred of the diversity of human nature. Religion is a proper response to the notion of God, but brutalizing women who feel they must terminate a pregnancy isn't. Marriage is a proper response to love, but as an institution it is neither better nor worse than other arrangements, and certainly its "perfect state" is a most harmful delusion. MADD and SADD are appropriate responses to grief, to cynical promotion, to drunks behind steering wheels, but not appropriate responses to the existence of alcohol and many people's taste for it. Just saying no to drugs is appropriate propaganda for children; adults, however, are responsible for their own actions until proven otherwise. Wanting to be beautiful in the eyes and hearts of those we care about is a beautiful desire, but, to paraphrase the art critic Eric Gill, if we cultivate a respect for truth—the reality of the imperfection of life—and prove ourselves loyal to goodness, which is the spirit of empathy and compassion, then beauty will take care of itself.