



BY JOHN WESLEY TAYLOR, V

“The Prodigal Son” at La Sierra University

Awakening Aesthetics

Terri and her fourth-grade class* have adopted a section of the community greenway near their school. Periodically, when the weather is good, they take an hour or so to tidy their segment of the path, picking up fallen branches and trash. Back in the classroom, they brainstorm about what they might do to make the trail more inviting. Ideas that have surfaced include bringing back native wildflowers, locating park benches beside the stream, and placing birdhouses with whimsical slogans at the edge of the woods. The class has already begun implementing some of these plans.



Robert teaches English* to 7th graders. To stimulate creative writing, he has his students listen to a selection of

*Not their real names.

instrumental music, sometimes taken from the Impressionist period. Robert explains how composers often endeavor to depict an event or a mood through music. While the students listen, he asks them to create a short story or a piece of poetry that has a “good fit” with the feel of the music.



Sandra, the principal* of a large elementary school, has become increasingly concerned about graffiti that is appearing along the corridors. In a staff meeting, Sandra asked the teachers to brainstorm about what they might do. An idea that emerged was to create murals on the hallways throughout the school. Sandra thought it would be a good idea for students to participate in the project.

First, each homeroom teacher and his or her students chose themes that they would like to see depicted, such as friendship, ecosystems, cooperation, and the idea that “everyone is special” regardless of race or ethnicity. Sandra contacted a community artist to create outlines on the walls portraying the various themes. Groups of students, with everyone having a part, applied the base colors to the murals, and the artist added finishing touches. It has now been more than a year since the murals were created, and the “graffiti problem” has not reappeared.

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What do these vignettes have in common? In each case, an educator focused intentionally on aesthetics and sought to raise students’ awareness about the aesthetic dimension of their lives. To increase students’ appreciation and understanding of aesthetic elements, it is necessary to intentionally create learning experiences that bring them into contact with beauty and call for creative thought and expression. Educators must showcase aesthetics.¹

Concepts

Recently, I was asked to help choose a boardroom table. One way to look at a table, I discovered, was to see it in purely utilitarian, economic terms—its resale value, for example, or its practicality, such as how many people it



Stained glass window, College church, Union College

Aesthetic Awareness

would seat. Another way was to take a technical, scientific approach—describing the table in terms of its height, strength, type of wood, and finish. There is a third way to view the table, however—an aesthetic response—noting the warm color tones, pleasing proportions, texture, and style. Although all are necessary, this latter perspective is the aesthetic response.

Aesthetics can be defined as a “branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and expression of beauty.”² It may further be described as a set of “psychological responses to beauty and artistic experiences.”

In essence, the aesthete, or person who is highly sensitive to art and beauty, seeks to view all elements of life appreciatively. This point of view combines emotional, intellectual, and spiritual factors—a synthesis that causes the aes-





Garden of Prayer, Southern Adventist University



Stained glass window, College church, Union College

thete to seek to better comprehend every experience or object that could be described as beautiful or creatively expressive. Consequently, embedded within the concept of aesthetics, we often find the underlying constructs of beauty and creativity.

The definition of *beauty* seems elusive—so intangible that many contemporary writers make no attempt to define

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it.³ Even Plato, who stressed ultimate meaning, failed in his attempt to delineate beauty. For the purpose of this article, at least, let's attempt an operational definition: To say that something is beautiful implies that there is a satisfying relationship between "ourselves" (with our capacities, past experience, and training) and an "object" (with its sounds, colors, textures, and shapes). Thus, beauty is found not only in the object itself, nor solely in the "eye of the beholder," but rather in the multifaceted relationship between the two, a relationship that seems to us appropriate and pleasing.

What is *creativity*? It is the ability to invent or express what has never before existed, at least not in that particular form. This creative capacity is a divine attribute, given to humans at the very beginning of time.⁴ One of Adam's first tasks, for example, was to provide unique names for the animals.⁵ It is also significant that in the only description of God given prior to the statement that human beings were formed in His

image,⁶ the Bible describes Him as Creator. Thus, whatever else it may mean, to be created in the image of God must mean to be creative.

Christ, in His teaching, emphasized that "every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."⁷ Consequently, as teachers, we are to bring out of the "treasure house" not only things well-tested by time, but also those that are new. Such freshness implies original thought and creative action;

and each creation—whether sculpture, architecture, painting, literature, drama, or music—represents a novel aesthetic work that brings with it a crisp awareness and a unique message.

Origin

I clearly remember the first time I strapped on my diving gear and slid beneath the warm waters of a tropical reef where I saw fish, coral, sea fans, and anemones, in an exotic array of color, texture, and form! All the more remarkable, because for thousands of years, few, if any, human beings had been able to see its beauty. It was evident to me that God loves creating beauty simply for the sheer joy of it.

The idea that beauty has a divine origin seems to have biblical support. Descriptions of Eden and of the New Jerusalem, each designed by God, incorporate aesthetic elements.⁸ The Bible writers, moreover, associate God with the concept of beauty. "He has made everything beautiful in its time."⁹

Aesthetic awareness also incorporates the concept of the abundant life—"I have come," Christ said, "that they may have life, and have it to the full."¹⁰ It seems significant that He attended wedding celebrations and provided additional refreshments, that He called the attention of His listeners to the loveliness of flowers, and invited His disciples to join Him in singing.¹¹ Although no sanction is given for emotional



Mural just inside Sligo Adventist School, Takoma Park, Maryland

intoxication, it appears evident that one can follow Christ and concurrently enjoy aesthetic experiences. The Scriptures, in fact, declare: “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”⁷¹²

Strategies

How does one cultivate in students creative expression, aesthetic awareness, and an appreciation of beauty? A good place to start, of course, is for the teacher to model fascination with the aesthetic dimensions of life—intentionally seeking out artistic experiences, showcasing evidences of beauty, and endeavoring to personally fashion aesthetic creations.

There are also a variety of strategies that will help to foster in students an understanding and appreciation of aesthetics—approaches that have been tested in the crucible of educational practice. In addition to the techniques mentioned in the opening scenarios, effective methods include the following:

- Establish a rich learning environment that supports creativity, spontaneity, and reflection.
- Discuss with students the elements and criteria of beauty and creativity within various subject areas, incorporating a Christian perspective.
- Teach students to practice keen observation, keep a descriptive/reflective journal, and share their insights with others.
- Encourage students to use technology to capture or create images and sounds, and creatively integrate these into unique and innovative presentations.
- Have students explore patterns, textures, color, and shapes within nature (e.g., crystals, feathers, leaves, spiders’ webs, fractals).



Andrews University Science Complex

- Ask students to describe an object, place, or experience using a multisensory approach. They could, for example, view a realistic painting and imagine what the environment sounds like; listen to music and visualize what is being depicted; read a story and describe the feeling of being there.
- Encourage students to discuss feelings, emotions, sensations, and the meanings of events in their lives.
- Explore with students how the aesthetic appeal of the medium modifies the impact of the message, perhaps in areas such as Web design, the layout of print material, product packaging, advertisements, interactive online spaces, movies, etc.
- Incorporate the best in literature, music, drama, and works of painting and sculpture within the learning environment.
- Encourage students to engage in creative movement



J. N. Andrews statue, Andrews University



Students gather for fellowship in a beautiful rock and water garden at Southern Adventist University

through mime, drama, or shadow art.

- Explore the components of aesthetic expression in a variety of cultures and subcultures, such as Japanese poetry, Gothic architecture, hip hop graffiti, Chinese art, or Native American traditional dress.
- Arrange for students to personally experience the aesthetic productions of diverse cultures and ethnic groups, such as folk art and music, ethnic literature, food, and celebrations.
- Highlight the arts (visual, auditory, literary, and dramatic) as opportunities for imaginative thought and creative self-expression.

Issues

Within education, we confront a number of issues involving aesthetics. In this article, we will examine two of these—creating an attractive learning environment, and incorporating the arts into the curriculum.

Creating an inviting learning environment. God placed Adam and Eve in a garden—a beautiful setting with “trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.”¹³ There was also a river in Eden that encircled the land of Havilah, “where there is gold, and the gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.” These first human beings were not only to enjoy their aesthetic surroundings; they were commissioned to make Eden even more beautiful. This garden was humanity’s first school.

Historically, the place of learning was set amid natural beauty. The word *academy* refers to the grove of trees planted in ancient Athens in honor of Academus. Here Plato and Socrates met with other inquisitive minds in the shade of an olive tree. Today, we refer to the academic grounds as a campus, which in Latin signifies an open landscape, perhaps with scattered trees. Unfortunately, many of our learning environ-

ments today are devoid of aesthetic beauty. Drab buildings, dingy offices, dull, utilitarian classrooms, and concrete play areas coalesce to produce a dreary learning experience.

If we wish to develop in our students an appreciation of the aesthetic, we must transform our schools into places of delight. We can start by making our campuses havens of beauty and tranquility. This, of course, cannot happen without planning and an investment of time, effort, and resources. The master plan for the school must consciously incorporate aesthetic elements—perhaps a distinctive architectural theme for the various buildings, horticultural and artistic landscape elements, courtyards, and open expanses of green, to mention a few possibilities.¹⁴

In the case of existing facilities, the academic community might embark on a program of beautification. This is particularly important for students, for not only will they engage in active learning within this environment,

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but they will also seek to preserve what they have worked to beautify. One such project, which has become a central focus of a number of schools, is to create a prayer garden—a place of meditation that blends the color and fragrance of flowering plants, the songs of birds, and the sound of running water. Similar aesthetic projects could be undertaken for classrooms, hallways, and offices, as well as for the cafeteria, library, and student center. Each represents a concerted effort to make the school an oasis of beauty.

The place of the arts in the curriculum. Politicians and, at times, even educators have questioned the role of the arts in the academic program.¹⁵ Such critics typically regard the arts as frivolous and irrelevant to serious learning. Can a convincing argument be made for the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum?

As one converses with students, teachers, and parents, it is clear that the aesthetic experiences gained through the arts yield important benefits.¹⁶ Students are encouraged to develop creativity, imagination, reflection, and self-expression. Through personal engagement with the arts, they



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Above and right: Campus beautification is an important part of a school's master plan.



observe with greater sensitivity, recapture lost spontaneity, and resist the tyranny of the technical. Breaking the constraints of routine, presupposition, and convention, they escape the familiar—hearing new frequencies, perceiving new perspectives, finding new voices, and experiencing a sudden sense of new possibilities and new beginnings.

The arts speak to the emotions, the intellect, and the spirit. They stimulate and enhance the learner's inner life. Furthermore, given the multi-faceted nature of intelligence, focusing on aesthetics will help students whose gifts lie in the arts to develop their talents.

In conclusion, the rationale for including the arts in the curriculum is educationally sound and fits well with the Christian concepts of individual freedom, creative expression, and a cultivation of the love of beauty.

Clearly, aesthetic experiences are life changing—opening up new horizons, dispelling the mists of routine and convention, and linking students in rich and meaningful ways. As educators, we must take the initiative to incorporate aesthetic dimensions in the learning experience. Perhaps in our job descriptions, and in the school's master plan, there should be an embossed line: “To promote creativity, to highlight beauty, and to awaken aesthetic delight.” ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Aesthetic appreciation* is one of the 10 goals in the “Journey to Excellence” initiative. Essential core elements of this goal are to (a) view God as the Author of beauty, both in His creation and in human expres-

sion, (b) employ biblical principles as the basis for appreciation and expression of creative and performing arts, (c) develop fine arts talents through practice, performance and presentation, and (d) use aesthetic expression as a means of communication and service. Referenced at <http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/purpose/goals/aesthetic.phtml>.

2. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.* Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000 (updated in 2009).

3. Francis Schaeffer addresses this theme in his works, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1976) and *Art and the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), as does H. B. Hannum in the book *Christian Search for Beauty* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1975). A recent essay by Jo Ann Davidson, “The Bible and Aesthetics” (2000) is available online at http://www.aiias.edu/ict/vol_26B/26Bcc_201-265.htm.

4. Insightful presentations of this concept are found in the essay by H. M. Best: “God's Creation and Human Creativity” in Harold Heie and David L. Wolfe, eds. *The Reality of Christian Learning: Strategies for Faith-Discipline Integration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 249-267; and by Arthur Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), particularly the chapter entitled “Human Creativity” (pp. 199-206). An excellent essay by Glenn Spring, “In the Image of God: The Creative Act in Teaching and Learning” (1998) may be accessed online at http://www.aiias.edu/ict/vol_21/21cc_315-333.htm.

5. Genesis 2:19-20.

6. Genesis 1:26-27.

7. Matthew 13:52.

8. Genesis 2:8-15; Revelation 21:1-22:5.

9. Ecclesiastes 3:11; see also Psalm 27:4; 48:2; 50:2; Isaiah 4:2; 28:5; 61:1-3. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in this article are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright © 1973, 1978, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

10. John 10:10.

11. John 2:1-11; Luke 12:27; Matthew 26:30.

12. Psalm 16:11.

13. Genesis 2:9-15.

14. Further campus beautification ideas may be found in the essay by Larry W. Boughman, “Campus Beautification: A Factor in the Integration of Faith and Learning.” In Humberto Rasi, ed., *Christ in the Classroom* (Silver Spring, Md.: The Institute for Christian Teaching, 1994), Vol. 14, pp. 39-58. Available online at http://www.aiias.edu/ict/vol_14/014cc_039-058.htm, with a summary at <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/jae199457023704.pdf>. See also Larry W. Boughman, “Campus Beautification,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 57:2 (December 1994/January 1995), pp. 37-40: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae199457023704.pdf>.

15. A prime example can be seen in the Goals 2000 legislation passed by the United States Congress in 1994, as well as the emphasis on high-stakes testing found in the *No Child Left Behind* act.

16. A cogent rationale is delineated in M. Greene, “Art and Imagination: Overcoming a Desperate Stasis,” in Allan C. Ornstein, and L. S. Behar-Horenstein, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Curriculum* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), pp. 45-51.