

Peer Review Article

Unearthing Beauty:

Towards a Leadership of Devotion

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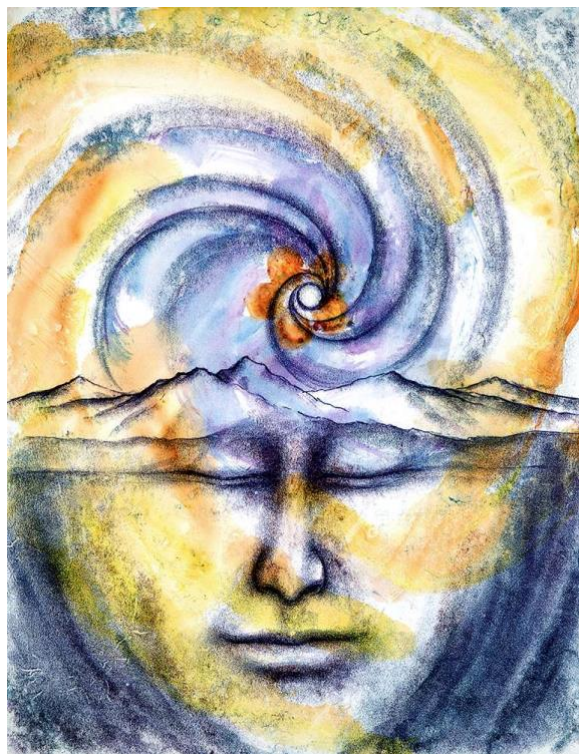
Abstract

This article explores the relationship between experiences of beauty and leadership in times of rupture. It draws from a broad trans-disciplinary literature centering beauty as an aesthetic experience that allows access to more holistic knowledge in the midst of uncertainty. Such an approach, it is argued, can offer leaders distinct pathways to cultivate greater awareness and capability as they sense into, and seek to generatively influence complex living systems. It then describes research where a group of systems leaders were offered a guided experience of beauty. Using an art-based methodology, the findings suggest beauty stimulated an increased aesthetic sensitivity to novel insights, emotions, and perspectives that fell outside of the participants' customary experience. Additional impacts included a felt-sense of connection with others, an invitation to express oneself more authentically, and a willingness to experience discomfort. Based on these findings, I argue that working with beauty, and with aesthetic processes more generally, may be a critical awareness practice that bridges the logical and the analogical mind and invites an attunement to something larger than the individual self that is at once transpersonal and ecologically grounded. Such an orientation, I argue, builds upon the principles and practices of complexity leadership to include a way of being that is both sensitive to beauty

and attempts to create more of it in the world. I call this way of being a leadership of devotion and argue its pursuit invites important inner work: the restoration of our capacity to feel, see, and act in service of a just and equitable future for all.

Keywords

beauty, aesthetics, complexity, leadership, devotion, awareness, capability, uncertainty



Soulcard by Deborah Koff-Chapin

Introduction

“Beauty is not always lovely” (Jeffers, 2012, p. 394).

The image Eli had selected was a spiraling swirl of paint, its edges light and colorful and its center a rich dark, almost black. There was a face in the image you could just make out, its expression a gaping yawn or silent scream that communicated ecstasy... or agony. It was, by Eli’s account, an image that resonated with his experience of beauty. His response echoed what was to become a common theme in this study: Beauty evoked a curious mixture of both longing and fear—an encounter with otherness that elicited a tentative yet uncomfortable trust to move into the unknown. He said, trembling, “I’m drawn [to beauty] but I don’t think it’s going to be an entirely happy encounter.”

Like many of us, I have been both blessed and burdened with a particular way I am sensitive to the world. I've come to understand it as a sensitivity towards *partiality*: the reduction of *interiority* such that an essential vitality is lost. I took refuge for decades in the cultural fringe of the performing arts where I witnessed the profound impact of highly aesthetic, emotion-laden experiences that appeared to call forth the whole-person. Working first with young performing arts leaders, and then increasingly with more varied groups, I became convinced that, though marginalized, the intelligence of the body, the heart, and the imagination—or, taken together, the *aesthetic dimension of knowing*, had something to offer contemporary leadership.

These observations informed curricular design first developed in partnership with colleagues at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity for what became a distinct suite of Systems Leadership programming. A few of us later founded the Wolf Willow Institute, a Canadian educational initiative that approaches whole-person, transformative learning as a critical systems intervention itself (Norris & Blakeman, 2021). We join a growing movement that blends social innovation and complexity theory and tools with less familiar pedagogical elements from the cultural margins. Our core premise aligns with a growing consensus (e.g., Arnold & Schön, 2021; Goodchild, 2021; Koenig et al., 2021; Senge et al., 2015; Westoby, 2021) around the need for a holistic leadership praxis that accounts for inner and outer realities, orients to possibility rather than predictability, and is embedded in relationship (e.g., Adler, 2015; see also Omer & Kramer, 2003).

A sensitivity towards the overly partial has also shaped this research, which explores the relationship between experiences of beauty and leadership in times of rupture. Drawing from *Imaginal Transformation Praxis* (ITP), a distinct approach to transformative learning and cultural leadership (Omer & Schwartz, 2021) that is in practice at Meridian University, beauty is explored here as a particular *state shift* that allows for novel insight. The findings suggest that experiences like Eli's may stimulate important, yet marginalized, ways of knowing. They convey that such encounters hold the potential to inspire what Wirt (1983) terms *ecstasis*: a state that liberates a person from the constraints of identity where more information (more feeling, more creativity, more connection, more perspective) becomes available. The psyche's nature to be affected by beauty—to be moved, touched, and stirred as appears to have been the case in this research—lends credence to the idea that a leader's engagement with beauty invites a departure from the known into a space where fresh learning might occur.

In this article I first present the research and then draw from these findings to demonstrate that working with beauty, and with aesthetic processes more generally, may be a critical awareness practice that bridges the logical and the analogical mind and invites an attunement to wholeness, authenticity, and possibility. Such an orientation, I argue, builds upon the principles and practices of complexity leadership (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2021) to include a way of being that is both sensitive to beauty and attempts to create more of it in the world. I call this way of being a *leadership of devotion*. From the Latin root *devovere* (lit: to vow), I suggest

that a commitment to beauty can temper our resistance to uncertainty and take us beyond ourselves, allowing for our creative participation and alignment with a life-enhancing coherence on the other side of complexity. Finally, I explore a few possibilities of what a leadership of devotion might look like in practice and offer some suggestions for future research.

Thresholds, Edges & the Mysterious Nature of Learning

In rapidly shifting circumstances leaders are pressed to make critical decisions, often with limited time, unknowable variables, and insufficient data.

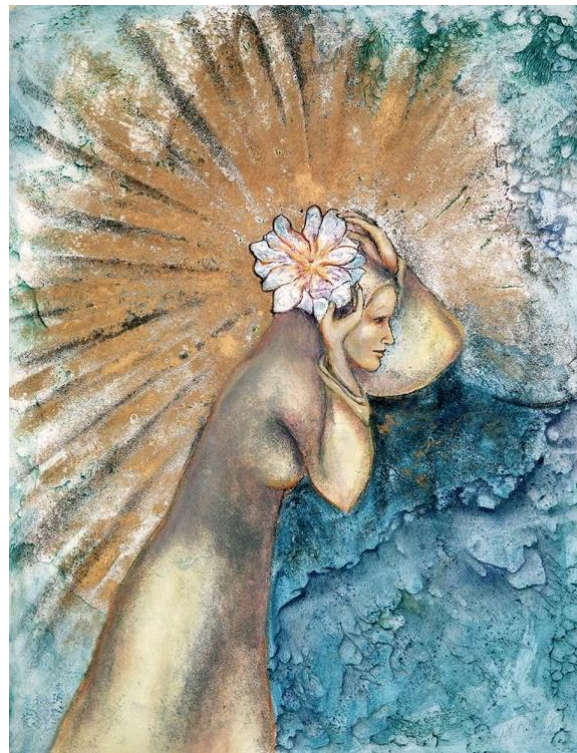
Advancements in information technology, the domination of market forces, ecological breakdown, interconnectivity, and artificial intelligence are just a few of the current trends that have launched the world into a new normal (e.g., Chima & Gutman, 2020; Stein, 2019). Given this landscape, many leaders, including this study's participants, find their experience demands something of them that customary logic cannot deliver (Theise, 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2021). These trends necessitate a shift in leadership praxis, away from management and leadership actions that apply myopic, tactical solutions in complex domains (Heifetz et al., 2009; Snowden & Boone, 2007) toward one that creates the conditions for a broader gestalt of human capabilities to emerge (e.g., Dirkx, 1997; Kegan, 2018; Norris & Blakeman, 2021; Omer, 2017).

Spanning multiple disciplines, *transformative learning theory* refers to processes that result in an expansion of our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Mezirow, 1995, 1996; see also Clark, 1993; Cranton, 1996; Omer et al., 2012). This particular kind of learning sits in contrast to *instrumental learning* where knowledge gained is assimilated into existing mental structures (Dirkx, 1997, 1998; Mezirow, 2009). In transformative learning, a learner's *identity*, or their underlying worldview is itself at risk of change (Illeris, 2017.; Omer et al., 2012; Omer & Schwartz, 2021), permanently altering not only *what* is known, but *how* a learner knows it (Berger, 2004; Kegan, 2018). While such transitions are common enough in the natural unfolding of a human life, transformative learning can be accelerated in an environment that holds a necessary balance of both support and challenge (Kegan, 2018). In such spaces, learners are encouraged to take another look at deeply entrenched ways of seeing themselves and the world, necessitating a disciplined approach to encounters with *otherness* (Omer et al., 2012) and an aptitude for inhabiting uncertainty with grace.

Orienting to transformative learning through the lens of complexity invites an ecological view. It is at the edges of the natural world, suggest Dale and Leighton (2020), "that things really happen, where habitats blend, where life and death meet regularly, where tensions hold and change each other, where unexpected growth is possible and new life flourishes" (p. 7). Similarly, developmental (or evolutionary) opportunities arise in contexts of novel recombination or when certainty is no longer possible (Berger, 2004). If engaged rather than resisted outright, such contexts can present learners with an experience of *liminality*,

where something of their previous way of being begins to die or give way for the new that is not yet formed (Berger, 2004; Omer et al., 2012; Omer & Schwartz, 2021; Turner & Abrahams, 2017). This betwixt and between space is indicative of a point of departure from a previous homeostatic state. Such shifts are often marked by disequilibrium, disorientation, and confusion. Therefore, resistance to new experience is common (Omer et al., 2012).

And yet, emotion theorists (e.g., Nathanson, 1992), developmental psychologists (Berger, 2004; Cook-Greuter, 2005; Kegan, 2018) and adult educators (Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 2009; O'Sullivan et al., 2016; Taylor, 2017) believe that such demanding experiences can catalyze important change processes that can lead to capacity development. A truly whole-person approach to transformative learning invites an embodied, curious, courageous, and compassionate *turning toward* the full range of information that emerges beyond known-reference points. Doing so centers the mysterious nature of learning, inviting the learner into aspects of themselves and the world previously unknown to the conscious self, and re-balances critical reflection (logos) with the imaginative and poetic ways of understanding the self in relationship to the world (mythos) (Dale & Leighton, 2020; Dirkx, 1997; Omer et al., 2012; Plotkin, 2010).



Soulcard by Deborah Koff-Chapin

The Art of Beautiful Thinking

The literature on aesthetics is vast and conceptually complex. Deriving from the Greek *aisthetikos* (lit: 'sense perception'), modern, Euro-centric theory most often

defines aesthetics as a philosophy of art, focused on the characteristics of a visual object in relationship to the viewer. A minority view, and one that finds some resonance with Indigenous epistemologies, upholds the aesthetic experience as an *approach to knowledge* that allows for a profound and intuitive contact with life's underlying wholeness (Goodchild, 2021; Gross, 2002; Haugen, 2019; Madjidi & Restoule, 2008). Where a western paradigm believes wisdom, creative insight, and imagination are products of the individual mind, an Indigenous worldview recognizes that knowledge belongs instead to the land and is gained and transmitted through intuitive, relational, and artful means unsevered from spirit, relationship, and context (Goodchild, 2021; Madjidi & Restoule, 2008; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006).

Such an approach stands in sharp relief against the reductive and extractive modes of Western educational models. Yet, some parallel can be drawn in eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers who placed emphasis on the subjective *experience* of beauty (Korsmeyer, 1979). Baumgarten, for example, believed an aesthetic approach brings into harmony both the rational and the sensual as inseparable faculties of mind (Gross, 2002). If approached aesthetically, which is also to say, with our whole self, experiences cannot be reduced to parts or divided into smaller entities but remain as complex living processes that invite deeper understanding. Some would agree, in an aesthetic relationship with life, we not only develop knowledge, we experience *beauty* (Gross, 2002; Madjidi & Restoule, 2008).

Though little attention has been given to the psychology of beauty by emotion theorists, Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell (2008) argue that beauty is a fundamentally *emotional* experience. They draw a useful contrast between the pretty and the beautiful. Beauty, they propose, is able “to create a psychologically novel truth out of a particularly demanding object or experience” (p. 305). *Pretty* things, on the other hand, can be defined as superficially pleasing, with simple and familiar attributes that are processed by the mind with ease, are quickly understood, and adhere to conventional rules of aesthetic judgment. They write, “pretty, fluently processed stimuli lack complexity and hence the capacity to inspire an intense aesthetic response” (p. 309). Beauty, in contrast, elicits what Immanuel Kant called a *feeling state* that draws the mind toward potential, possibility, and meaning (Coolidge, 1943). Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell (2008) continue:

Beautiful objects resist fluent processing, thwarting conceptual understanding while nevertheless offering the prospect of such understanding. Although we may not understand a beautiful object (insofar as its features do not come in a familiar bundle), we sense that perhaps we could and that such understanding would be particularly meaningful to us (p. 309).

This idea that experiences of true beauty evade immediate apprehension and move us to pursue greater meaning is aligned with other, non-western conceptions of beauty. Japanese aesthetics, for example, originated in a Taoist

understanding of the world as one of constant change and flux and life, intensified by impermanence. Expressions of beauty are humble, delicate, asymmetrical, and often contain imperfections which exhibit an aesthetic ideal of aligning with nature and embracing opportunities in each moment for self-cultivation (Prusinski, 2013). For the Diné people, on whose territory I now write, the “Beauty Way” not only invites a way of orienting to life that aspires to harmony, goodness, and blessedness (Kahn-John & Koithan, 2015), but reinforces a sense of deep respect, kinship, humility and right relationship towards all life (Emerson, 2014). Of critical distinction for complexity leaders, one thread of modern aesthetics similarly positions beauty to be neither the end result of an interaction, nor a quality a thing might possess, but rather an orientation to reality that accounts for plurality, complexity, and relationality. Because a single perspective can never fully grasp the complete whole, what Baumgarten called the *art of beautiful thinking* presses a person to reach beyond herself in a continual process of developing both capability and awareness (Gross, 2002).

The art of beautiful thinking may be a useful practice today. Complexity limits predictability and shapes the adaptive challenges to which leaders must respond. Uncertain contexts, in which we are unable to ascertain where, when, how, or why an event has occurred or will occur in the future (Allen & Boulton, 2011), may be best met with an inner and an outer gaze, at once analogical and analytical. For Adler (2015), this kind of holistic seeing partners with science and logic while simultaneously acknowledging the *unknowables* that besiege most leadership contexts. Such an approach, she says, allows us to see “reality accurately, yet differently” (p. 481), equipping leaders with the insight to create from a fresh perspective. Jones (2006) compellingly speaks to the aesthetic space that he believes leaders today must inhabit. He writes:

In times of uncertainty, we need to look to the spaces between for order and coherence—to gifts, beauty, grace, voice, and wholeness—what may be called the *commons of the imagination*. Awakening to the presence of the commons in both the person and the public imagination is our new art form. It is also the leader’s new work (p. 1).

If leadership is, in its broadest scope, about influence, beautiful thinking would turn leadership into a form of artistry, tasked with transforming what Adler (2015) describes as the 21st century’s “long experiment with ugliness” (p. 482) back into beauty (see also Klein & Diket, 2006). In thinking beautifully, we open to future possibility, the pursuit of which, we might intuit, will yield future wisdom. Where experiences of the pretty may allow for avoidance of the unknown and confirm knowledge we already have, beauty can lead us down a path toward greater knowledge. It can take us to places we have never been before.

Research Approach

To gain insight into the impact of a guided experience of beauty, this research explored the qualitative experience of a diverse group of North American leaders all of whom were explicitly bringing a systems perspective to complex challenge domains. These included urban transportation, the energy sector, Indigenous community development, the pharmaceutical industry, public health, and the philanthropic sector, for a few examples. The data collection occurred over eight weeks and included one individual meeting with each participant and two group meetings conducted using video conference software. The study drew from Omer's (2016) Imaginal Inquiry, a participatory methodology and a component of Imaginal Transformation Praxis that integrates heuristic, phenomenological, and art-based approaches, and explicitly seeks to stir creative action and catalyze transformation. It is structured into four distinct phases.

The first phase, *Evoking Experience*, took place in one-on-one video interviews. Using Deborah Koff-Chapin's *Soul Cards*, participants were invited to choose an image that resonates in the moment with their experience of beauty. Through a series of questions, participants were guided to explore how they were affected by beauty by letting the images "speak." This personification was intentional. In working with images as if they were autonomous worlds rather than symbols to be interpreted, a person can find themselves in an intersubjective dialogue with a voice that may or may not feel like their own (e.g., Bosnak, 2003; Hollis, 2002; Knill et al., 2005; McNiff, 1998).



Soulcard by Deborah Koff-Chapin

The second phase, *Expressing Experience*, included any moment in the research design where participants are invited to share or to express (verbally or nonverbally) how they had been affected by beauty. This phase culminated in a three-hour group session where participants were given five minutes to prepare and three minutes of time each to lead the group in an experience informed by beauty. Participant's leadership enactments were each unique and included contemplative, creative, and participatory invitations.

Interpreting Experience, the third phase, included intentional moments of pause to reflect on the experience. A focus for this phase of the research included identifying key moments that felt meaningful. Verbal and written sharing were encouraged as a way of inquiring into how one had been affected. As researcher, I also spent time writing how I was affected, thus situating myself inside the research.

Integrating Experience, the final phase, included elements of the research design that help participants integrate, embody, and carry forward their insights. Integrating elements included journaling, dialogue and group discussion, clear beginnings and endings, and time at the end of the research period for the group to discuss initial findings.

All data was collected through video and audio recordings and written responses. Interpretive data analysis, rooted in Imaginal Process, began with the ongoing identification of key moments as heuristic threads (Kadyschuk, 2023; Moustakas, 2015; Omer, 2016). I read and re-read the transcripts and journal entries after each session, then went through to color code themes that had begun to emerge. At the end of this process, I had a condensed synopsis of each experience in thematic form. These themes became more meaningful in iterative conversation with the research participants in the final phase and against my own subjective experience. Imaginal Transformation Praxis served as the theory-in-practice that further focalized the findings against the concepts and principles of transformative learning (Omer, 2016). Because experience has dimensionality, themes were generated not only through conversational analysis, but in observing what was expressed through affect, body language, and art (Omer, 2016). Congruent with arts-based research, this process of analysis was largely intuitive and holistic (Leavy, 2017; McNiff, 1998). Meaning was made with others and resulted in greater reflexivity, shared awareness, and insight through multiple ways of knowing (Leavy, 2017; McNiff, 1998).

Research Findings

Four core themes emerged from the study that hold relevance for leaders working in complex contexts: beauty as guide; beauty and liminality; beauty and authentic connection; beauty and discomfort. The direct quotations from participants in the findings were collected in research interviews that occurred between February and May of 2020. Informed consent was procured from each research participant in writing prior to participating in the study. Each of the

participants (Olivia, Sani, Julia, Eli, Aria, Vivienne, Mia, Sophia, and Sebastian) has been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Beauty-as-Guide

Eight of the nine participants explicitly described beauty as a form of *guidance*. Working with the images they had selected in phase one, they referred to beauty as a “lunar wisdom,” a “higher power,” an “angel,” a “guardian presence,” and a “guide to the inward journey” for a few examples. Aria named an “omniscient being in between the realms” that “pulls me forward,” while Julia spoke to the ever-present possibility of connection with the “wider cosmos.” In a tender moment, Olivia said that beauty offers “essential truth,” and a way to rediscover what is already known. Beauty said to her, “seek connection to source to navigate in complexity. You are not alone.”

Beauty’s guidance was not concrete but appeared to invite participants to encounter aspects of themselves, emotions, or perspectives that were unfamiliar. Sophia was surprised by her choice of image. She described it as “uncomfortable” and “a little disturbing” how the characters in the image appeared to have a “lack of personal identity...a mass of bodies where you can’t really tell where one ends and the other begins.” She identified beauty in the imperfections. In closing reflections, Aria named that she often felt “at the edge of her vulnerability” with “mystery guiding.” Yet, even amidst moments of tension, beauty was not questioned as a useful and powerful guide. In Meeting Three during a period of reflective dialogue on the study, Sebastian offered the metaphor of delivery. He said, “birth is so often considered a beautiful thing, and yet, it’s also incredibly painful and traumatizing to a body. There’s something about the duality of that, of the deep beauty and the deep pain that is also about bringing something forth.”

By allowing themselves to explore how they were affected by beauty, participants appeared more able to access novel insights, sensations, and emotions. Seven participants spoke to the need to pause, to deeply listen, to feel, and to proceed slowly. In this way, participants were able to experience a relationship with uncertainty by consciously inhabiting the unfamiliar without immediately reaching for quick interpretations or actionable outcomes. *Otherness* can be thought of as an encounter with an aspect of oneself (subjectivity, emotion, image, etc.) or with another that is perceived to be outside the boundaries of the known (Coelho Jr & Figueiredo, 2003; De Luca Picione & Freda, 2022; Omer et al., 2012; Waddock, 2014). This relational dialectic engendered a deeply affecting intimacy with the unfamiliar. Drawing from the participants’ expressions, such experiences demonstrated beauty’s potential to disrupt what Omer et al. (2012) describe as the “comfort zone of familiarity” (p. 378)—an experience that unsettled as much as it soothed—and was colored by discomfort and confusion as much as it was by awe and grace.

Beauty and Liminality

Beauty precipitated an experience of movement from a steady state, or singular perspective, to a more permeable, *in-between* state that one participant described as “becoming.” Many participants offered spatial metaphors (such as a “journey,” a “stretch moment,” or a “fulcrum”) to describe how they were feeling. They expressed or enacted a reaching outward; from one mindset, vantage point, or one internal subjectivity to another.

Vivienne shared the way beauty affected her. She said, “grief and rage are affects that move me and therefore have the power to shift structures and states.” These catalyzing affects live *in-between*—in the becoming space of beauty that is the “opposite of sterile.” In her beauty image, Julia was drawn to “the nature connection and the permeability, the lack of barrier between human and nature, below and above...it’s all just a kind of continuous flow.” Although she found herself uncomfortable with what was evoked for her, Sophia was prompted to think about perspective, “I think about the way we perceive things from our place, whatever that might mean.” Relating her reflection to the way she approaches her leadership, she said, “I am always trying to see [beauty] through other people’s eyes.” She titled her beauty image, “Worldviews.”

Consistent throughout the study, participants did not problematize disequilibrium but rather appeared eager to more curiously explore the various possibilities—both joyful and difficult—that the liminal space made visible. They navigated the study in a skillful sense-full-ness; listening, looking, feeling, and sensing with all modes of perception open. Participants *attended* to multiple sensations and perspectives at once, deriving from the root *ad*, meaning to move toward, and *ten*, to stretch. In liminality, one may stretch toward a multitude of latent possibilities and marginalized perspectives; a landscape that Sebastian described as a “kaleidoscope of exploration.” It was as if the participants found themselves inhabiting a *betwixt and between* place where they were rendered “permeable” to an immensity of unseen interconnections and flows of information that they were largely open to exploring.

Beauty and Authentic Connection

The navigation of relationships was a strong theme throughout this study. Meeting One invited participants to reflect on the ways their work is complex. Six of the nine leaders directly related complexity to relationships in some way. Julia said: “human beings are by nature complex, our relationships are complex...it’s the web of relationships, and how we navigate interpersonal dynamics that ultimately create whatever change we’re seeing in the world.” Sani mentioned that “cookie-cutter racism” was one element of complexity she dealt with daily in her work. The “multi-level or fractal aspect of our human experience on an individual, collective, and systems-level” was the backdrop of Sebastian’s life and work, which he described as “inherently complex.” The relationships, he said, were one of the more difficult aspects. “How to be good

humans together?” was the central question he held in his work, and a “big hurdle.”

Invariably, while all nine participants cited interpersonal or collective differences as one of the more difficult aspects of their leadership, beauty appeared to create the conditions where difference and connection could coexist. This finding was made most explicit in the leadership enactments and the reflections afterward. Sani shared that the diverse way each person led was what she would take away from the experience. She said, “it’s interesting how we can be so distinct and connected and be one.” She later reflected in a journal entry that she was “looking at each person and observing myself...I was feeling the feedback loops we were generating across, between, and amongst each other.” Mia wrote, “I feel woven into a fabric of beauty and feel the enoughness [sic] of my own offering alongside that of others.” Eli shared that “the connection to each person’s story, their place, and their own experience of beauty” resonated with him. He said it was “a sort of coming together, a feeling of solidarity and support.” Sophia, in describing what was most impactful, shared, “I like that we come from different places and experiences, but I felt a lot of commonality [sic]...and trust.” Vivienne reflected that the “experience of beauty is deeply personal and shared between us.”

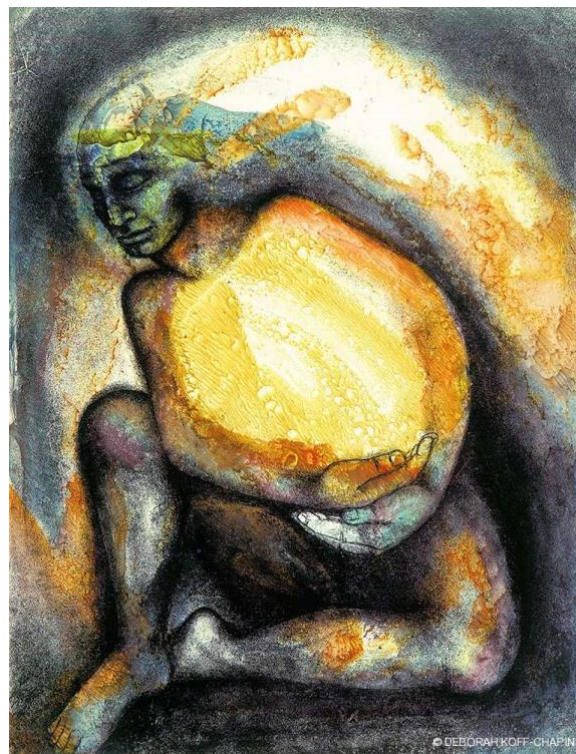
Not only did participants feel connected, but they also felt able to offer something they described as *authentic*—of their essential self. These were vulnerable moments generally thought to be beautiful to others, often punctuated by strong emotion. As a part of their integration, participants began to describe beauty as something ever-present, waiting to be uncovered. One participant said, “it’s sort of like an unearthing process...a process of uncovering something that’s already there, that’s authentic, and...we’re just unpacking whatever layers we’ve put on top of it.” Aria, speaking from her culture, reminded us of the Indigenous perspective that sees beauty as something that “comes through the land, and comes through culture and context” that “allows us to walk through in a way that’s beautiful.” She said, beauty “originates from the center in which we all belong.” Throughout the study, she likened beauty to that which can “awaken our inherent knowing.” As if in agreement, Mia referred to beauty as “a placeholder for something that’s powerful and potent and life-giving.” In journal entries, all nine participants expressed feeling inspired, connected, open, and appreciative of one another’s unique gifts. Beauty stimulated connection without removing the potency of difference.

Beauty and Discomfort

Because beauty appeared to move participants into new terrain, it also required a willingness to experience discomfort. Sophia saw amorphous figures in the image she chose that were uncomfortable. They were unidentifiable and indistinct, as if in transition or struggle. In sitting with her image, she recognized that beauty dwells in cracks of brokenness. Later in her journal entry,

she wrote that beauty may dwell in a wound, in the transmutation of horror and pain and the struggle that comes with difficult life events.

She was not alone. Beauty connected participants with strong emotions such as grief, rage, hope, and despair. Vulnerability was a constant, both in participants observations of each other, and in their own felt experience. For Mia, Vivienne, Sophia, and Aria beauty was linked to a vulnerable shattering or awakening. It could be said that such moments of intensity (such as the death of a loved one or a painful diagnosis) affected them deeply, catalyzing a kind of inner movement, a period of reflection, a time of disintegration or disorientation, a journey of difficult struggle and of pain and extreme vulnerability. In reflection, each participant spoke to (and embodied) some of the ways they have grown, gained perspective, and developed capability for having been so stretched. Sophia and Vivienne in turn invited others to sit in the discomfort and the pain, to welcome it and be changed by it. Their recommendations gesture to the trust that emerged from times in their lives that were challenging. Beauty in the eyes of many of the participants appeared as both a generative and destructive power.



Soulcard by Deborah Koff-Chapin

Discussion

Uncertainty & the *Moreness* of the World

Taken together, these four primary themes demonstrated that experiences of beauty hold the potential to catalyze a particular shift of consciousness. Beauty's

impact appeared to make visible a greater, and more inclusive set of possibilities and perspectives in the moment. Participants found themselves in territory without familiar reference points, and able to cautiously pursue what they perceived as a form of inner guidance. Like Baumgarten's *art of beautiful thinking*, beauty appeared to catalyze an opening to a source of aesthetic information. It lets something new in, initiating a process of deeper reflection and action where important learning can begin. While the limited scope of this study prevents me from making any claims for long-term transformative change, we might speculate a little on the relevance of these findings for the field of awareness-based leadership.

In a global context of growing polarization, beauty evoked a fecund edge space—a landscape of paradox where longing and fear co-exist. Such a landscape strikes me as a worthwhile place for a leader to dwell, where an intimate experience of complexity and its gift of disorientation, might press one to pause, reflect, and touch greater possibility. Yet, more often than not, this kind of learning triggers a natural immune response to the psychological discomfort of uncertainty that can result in avoidant, maladaptive strategies (Bar-Anon et al., 2009). While most agree that true change requires a transformation of both self and system, it is far from certain that even self-aware leaders will find the transformation on offer tenable. An edge space, whether sought-out or stumbled upon, is still edgy. To the part(s) of us who have found belonging, safety, and dignity-enough (Haines, 2019) in the world we know, the *edge*, though great in theory, becomes existentially risky in practice. This makes beauty's catalytic impact all the more striking. Despite the ubiquitous presence of uncertainty, participants were compelled to trust in beauty's guidance.

Perhaps this is because beauty was perceived of as something larger than the self—a transpersonal force, or form, or presence that brings us beyond ourselves into the *moreness* of the world. Participants spoke of dipping beneath the surface or “unearthing” as that which allows for the authentic (in Greek: *original, genuine, or principled*) to inform action. The concept of unearthing couples beauty to that which is of the earth, protected by the earth, beyond the concrete, or of a deeper order. These references give reality a dimensionality that counters the anthropocentric disenchantment of nature that has been the hallmark of modern rationality.

In this study, as in many wisdom traditions, beauty was experienced as something synonymous with the *sacred*; a visible representation of the holy, or a manifestation of divine interconnectedness, balance, or harmony. Linking beauty with the sacred raises existential questions—a meta-inquiry that places the human experience in what Stein (2019) describes as “its broadest possible context” (p. 264). Our conception of beauty, and relationship to it, brings us into a landscape of significance—one both able to include and transcend our wariness of the unknown. Psychologist Virginia Satir famously proposed that the strongest human instinct is to keep things familiar (Bandler, 2008, p. 7). These initial findings offer a counter-truth. Resistance to uncertainty may be an important

adaptive strategy in a fractured world, but hidden in plain sight, just beneath the surface lies an even more motivating *feeling state* that can take us to visionary, life-enhancing places. Beauty may be an unguarded doorway.

A Leadership of Devotion

“There is only one question, how to love this world” (Oliver, 1990, p. 6).

Beauty catalyzed a state-shift that seemed to allow participants access to distinct qualities such as humility, openness, trust, collaboratively, wholeness, authenticity and acceptance. They described their experience as connected, moving, inspiring, and meaningful. Beauty provoked important ontological reflections; *who am I? What’s my purpose? How do I show up in these times of change authentically?* And it encouraged non-judgmental witnessing and intimate acts of shared leadership that helped create a space of psychological safety, trust, and belonging. Because beauty appears to take us beyond ourselves, leading from beauty may be more a devotion than a discipline—a way of giving our whole being to something greater in times of rupture. A *leadership of devotion* would begin as a commitment or a stance that vows to both see, and then serve the underlying wholeness, sacredness, or expressions of life that allow for mutual thriving without erasing or denying beneficial complexity.

Alexander (2016), in describing an underlying pattern language of built structures, speaks of coherent centers in nature that “come about as a result of cooperation between the other living centers at several scales, which surround it, contain it, and appear within it” (para. 25). Architecture becomes a contribution to the world when it aligns with this pattern to promote a sense of wholeness and entirety at multiple scales. For him, this way of seeing is both soberly scientific and deeply spiritual, for it allows us to connect with the sacred in practical ways (such as the feeling quality of a building or doorway) that promote further life. A leadership of devotion would similarly root into the fecund space of *both/and*—of science and spirituality, of the human and the more-than-human (e.g. Abram, 2012), of the concrete and the subjective without negating either. Devoting oneself to beauty would, in other words, undermine partiality, allowing for a more generative relationship with complexity, which, by nature, invites us into the not-yet-known and the unknowable. What would such a devotional practice look like in real-world leadership contexts? Based on the experiences of participants, this inquiry suggests several possibilities:

1. **State Shift** – experiences of beauty can catalyze the shifts in consciousness that are critical for deeper collaborative inquiry processes, collective resonance, and skillful action. They erode partiality and ‘beautiful thinking’ seems to emerge most freely when aesthetic, somatic and land-based inquiry processes enrich purely cognitive and analytic approaches. In leadership contexts, increasing our sensitivity in this way would not only promote wiser, more informed action, but would also enable leaders, like artists, to help make visible to others latent

possibility—in themselves and in the world. After all, we cannot take action on something we cannot first see or imagine.

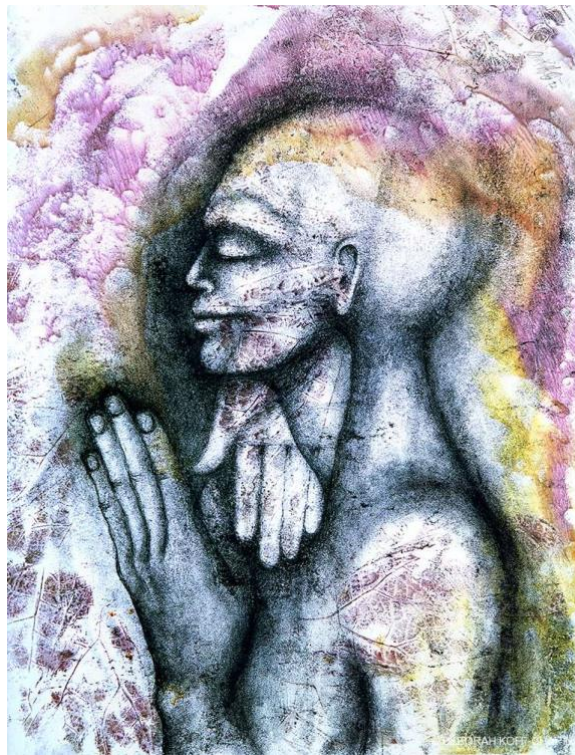
2. **Connection** – beauty de-centers anthropocentrism and the isolated persona, consciously welcoming the more-than-human, the ecological and the sacred into a wider ‘social’ field. It unsettles linear time, acknowledging the influence of the ancestral and the consideration of future generations here in the present moment. It not only makes visible but invites a *felt-sense* of connection and the responsibilities that flow from that.
3. **Wholeness & Authenticity** – beauty invites the full expression of our humanity—including those facets that are less familiar to us. Honoring our own multiplicity, our interior complexity, our full-feeling and expression is one way of recognizing the inherent dignity and beauty in all things. For Laszlo (2012), it is precisely this embodiment that enables us to move from dissociated thinking about change, to being the change, suggesting:

The expression of systems being is an integration of our full human capacities, the expression of an evolving humanity. It involves rationality with reverence to the mystery of life, listening beyond words, sensing with our whole being, and expressing our authentic self in every moment of our life. The journey from systems thinking to systems being is a transformative learning process of expansion of consciousness—from awareness to embodiment (p. 101).

4. **Harmony** – a fidelity to beauty reminds us that right relationship is the central task of all leadership. It reminds us that self and system are never separate and we cannot thrive in a system that is out of balance. A devotion to beauty requires a practice of attending to the quality of all our relationships—with ourselves, with those around us and with the living earth at multiple scales—or we are likely to simply reinforce systemic patterns of disharmony.
5. **Mystery** – beauty offers a way to embrace uncertainty as a powerful teacher. It invites a practice of open-hearted curiosity in the face of the unknown and unknowable even as we are stretched in its destabilizing presence. Centering Mystery also invites a regular practice of staying in relationship to that which we might sense at the edges, but do not yet understand—whether this be a vision for the future, a personal longing or fear, an unfamiliar or difficult life experience, or anything else we might perceive of as *other*. The intimate process of *coming to know*—be it a sensation, a strong emotion,

or a person sitting across from us, might shape, or reshape, the world.

6. **Transformative Leadership** – A guide that can be good company at the edges is not certified in a weekend but forged in the cauldron of transformative learning. Doing so at scale may require a courageous and widespread reinvention of many of the helping professions—blurring the lines between leadership education and initiation. Initiatory leadership development gestures to a different order of practice entirely—one oriented to the depths. It would invite the kind of awareness that comes not just from critical reflection and human-to-human dialogic practice, but from a wilder intimacy with the particular way we are called to participate and come to know our gifts within the world.



Soulcard by Deborah Koff-Chapin

While it would be a stretch to say this research demonstrated that experiences of beauty help to build the capabilities that support a leadership of devotion, the relevance of the findings is non-trivial. It is broadly aligned with research findings on the developmental impacts of beauty, creativity, wonder, and awe. Looking at creative expression, Salami reminds us that black feminists, a group historically denied access to education, have long looked to the poetic, intuitive, and depth-based forms of knowledge production as a way to gain insight—a reconceptualization of knowledge that, Salami writes, results in

emotional intelligence (Salami, 2020). Experiences of profound beauty, according to Cohen et al., for another example, can increase “other-focus,” and result in an increased understanding of self in the world—a finding that resonates with Diessner et al., who found beauty to evoke a felt sense of “unity-in-diversity” that may act as a developmental bridge into moral action (Cohen et al., 2010; Diessner et al., 2006). Beautiful vistas, experiences in nature, religious awakening, or impactful pieces of art that evade conceptual understanding can also stimulate *awe*, which Stellar et al. describe as an epistemological emotion that promotes the cultivation of greater humility (Stellar et al., 2018).

As the world grapples with the reality of *polycrisis* (Homer-Dixon et al., 2021), it is exactly these qualities that are required to even imagine an equitable and just future for all, let alone to begin to build one (e.g. Chima & Gutman, 2020; Waddock, 2014). Leadership that can inspire generative change in a time of social, political, and ecological fragmentation, demands not only personal transformation at beauty’s hand but an obligation to its perennial companions, *goodness* and *truth*. All too often, the actions of contemporary leaders require the denial of fundamental truths, such as the aliveness, interconnectedness, and finite nature of life on earth (Andreotti, 2021). Leading from beauty disrupts the trance of business-as-usual. If ugliness represents the fracturing or erasure of wholeness, harmony, or beneficial complexity, then much of what passes for instrumental or even “effective” leadership today is an affront to beauty. An orientation to beauty would not allow for individuals, organizations and initiatives to become better adjusted, more profitable, or increasingly competitive inside systems of indifference. Beauty demands a moral reckoning—if it’s not good for the world, it’s not beautiful.

Patterns of leadership that are rooted in such awareness require an authentic connection to the sacred, numinous, the meta-systemic, the complex, the *whole*. These initial research findings offer a promising consideration. Orienting to beauty may be an awareness practice that would take leaders and their people not only deeper into themselves, but deeper into the world. Doing so may help leaders stay oriented to how things are meant to be at some essential level—or even perhaps, to how things *could* be. In a world arguably consumed by ugliness, entranced by the artificial, tawdry, and mechanistic, and in many cases without a moral compass, perhaps it is, as Winterson (1997) believes, that neither “art nor beauty are optional in a sane society” (p. 89).

Final Thoughts

A leadership of devotion would allow us to see that a sensitivity to beauty, so long relegated to the arts, has much to offer awareness-based leadership. If we cannot feel what moves us, we are numb and can only do the kinds of things that numb people do. Perhaps beauty shows a way to begin the risky work of restoring the interior—our capacity to imagine, to sense, to feel, and to think in an integrated way so that we can more skillfully move into creative, ethical action. In doing so, the goal is not to be sentimental; it is to be *sentient*. To be fully alive,

engaged, and aware (and to see and evoke the same in others) so that we may take up the blessing and burden of leading artfully.

At a time that urgently requires the maturation of individuals, collectives, and societies in order to respond to a cascade of adaptive challenges, it would be prudent to further research connections between beauty, moral development, and generative action. Future studies might explore pedagogical approaches to leadership development that center beauty, and explore the impacts of an ongoing practice of beautiful thinking. This research emerged out of an ongoing, interdisciplinary conversation at a perilous global moment. While most of the existing literature explores the theoretical and metaphorical connections that can be made between the arts and leadership, this study sought to turn toward the direct experience of systems leaders who encounter beauty in the midst of uncertainty. What wisdom may lie in these pages is offered as clay—to be further molded in conversation and, hopefully, to be put into practice through a myriad of small experiments, both formal and informal.

Over the course of this study, I have come to understand beauty as an emergent property of intimate relationships, found on the edges of longing and fear where certainty is elusive. Perhaps, in devoting ourselves to beauty, our ways of engaging uncertainty become both adequately complex and coherent, drawing from a wiser, and more soulful visionary source. I hope this risky restoration of our interior—both individual and collective—may equip us with the blessing and burden of leading artfully. In the words of Wendell Berry (2012), “This is no paradisaal dream. Its hardship is its possibility” (p. 217).

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