

Beauty has gotten a bad rap. We need only think of the fashion industry, the cosmetic industry, the "beautiful" photo-shopped people we see on the covers of magazines in the checkout line at the grocery store. Is this beauty? Our culture tells us it is.

The Greeks, think Plato and Socrates, thought that beauty was intrinsic to an object. Something had beauty, or not, irrespective of the observer. This idea, which persisted into the Middle Ages, could be self-serving and limiting. The Enlightenment trashed this idea. Beauty came to be understood as subjective, purely in the "eye of the beholder." Philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) wrote "Beauty is no quality in things themselves...each mind perceives a different beauty."<sup>1</sup> By degrees, this led to the marginalization of beauty in the arts in the 20th century. Beauty was only skin deep. Some recent philosophers argue to rehabilitate beauty. Crispin Sartwell "attributes beauty neither exclusively to the subject nor to the object, but the relation between them, and even more widely also to the situation or environment in which they are both embedded."

What has this to do with justice? Again, a bit of history, this time our own. One must read between the lines in our principles and our sources to discern that beauty is important. We speak of inherent worth and dignity. One might hear beauty embedded in these words. We speak of justice, equity and compassion in the same breath. Justice and equity derive naturally from compassion, and I've never seen compassion that didn't look beautiful. In our sources, we speak of the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. Again, we couldn't quite bring ourselves to say beauty, but the idea is certainly there.

So we find beauty present in what guides us as UU's. We "Stand on the side of Love." Love, simply another way of saying compassion.

But we have children in our midst today and what I've said so far is boring. Right?

Let me tell a story. This is a story of a garbage dump in Paraguay, a small country in South America. The people in Paraguay speak Spanish, which is only a little bit important in this story. This garbage dump and this story could have been almost anywhere in the world. This is not a "once upon a time" story. This story is still happening.

Senor Chavez is a musician. He is also an environmental engineer, who was working on a recycling program at the dump. The people who live near the dump in the slum of Cateura are very poor, and many make money to feed their families by finding things in the dump that they can sell. Can you imagine walking through 3 million pounds of fresh garbage and trash, looking for things that you can sell for a few dollars? Three million pounds. That's the amount of garbage that comes into this dump every day. How much is 3 million pounds of trash? It's about 4 football fields covered one foot deep. Imagine walking through 4 football fields of garbage.

I said Senor Chavez is a musician. In 2006 he began to give music lessons to the children who lived near the dump. He had a problem, though. He didn't have enough instruments for all the children who wanted to make music, who wanted to make something beautiful in the ugliness and injustice in which they lived. Senor Chavez went to Don "Cola," a *gancho*, or recycler. Don Cola was also a carpenter who was resourceful and creative. Don Cola was able to make musical instruments from what he found in the dump. He made a cello. He made a violin. He made many other instruments, and soon many children were playing these instruments and the "Recycled Orchestra of Cateura" was born. In 2011, Senor

Chavez quit his job as an engineer to devote all of his time to music lessons and the orchestra. Something beautiful had been created.

Ada Maribel Rios Bogado is one of these children, and she plays the violin. Her story is featured in the children's book *Ada's Violin: The Story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay*, written by Susan Hood and illustrated by Sally Wern Comport. "Hood writes, 'With her violin, Ada could close her eyes and imagine a different life. She could soar on the high, bright, bittersweet notes to a place far away. She could be who she was meant to be.'"<sup>ii</sup>

And by creating music, beautiful music, these children began to experience justice. Their lives began to be changed. They have played for politicians, monarchs and Pope Francis. They have backed up artists like Stevie Wonder, Metallica and Megadeth.<sup>iii</sup> They are featured in Lindsey Stirling's music video *Transcendence (Orchestral)*.<sup>iv</sup> You can find it on You Tube.

The children have gotten to travel far and wide from their slum next to the landfill. With the money raised through their touring, they have been able to improve the lives of their families. The community has a new pride, in their children and in themselves. Children are no longer pulled from school to gather trash in the landfill. Their education and their music are considered important. Young children want to become musicians and to join the orchestra.<sup>v</sup> Says one of the children, Tania Vera, "My life would be worthless without music."

The story of the Recycled Orchestra is ongoing, a story that began when one man wished to bring the beauty of music into the lives of children who had nothing. Says South African writer and professor John de Gruchy: "The beautiful serves transformation...for art does not simply mirror reality but challenges it's

destructive and alienating tendencies, making up what is lacking and anticipating future possibilities."<sup>vi</sup>

May we treasure the beautiful in our lives and know that beauty enhances justice.

Amen and Blessed Be

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<sup>i</sup> Touchstones, 9/2017, p1

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p5

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. p5

<sup>iv</sup> Accessed 9/8/2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHdkRvEzW84>

<sup>v</sup> Accessed 9/9/2017. <http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2016/09/14/493794763/from-trash-to-triumph-the-recycled-orchestra>

<sup>vi</sup> Touchstones, 9/2017, p5