

Toward a politics of beauty

John de Graaf

Thank you. I'm so honored to be here with all of you at this beautiful place. I want to thank Jennifer Henning for suggesting me as a speaker, and Chip Vincent for inviting me to be here. I think you know I'm not a planner. I'm a television producer and some of what I want to address today is about messaging, about framing.

My bio is pretty simple and goes like this:

John de Graaf regrets that, to the eternal disappointment of his mother, he left college before graduation to become a community organizer. In penance, he vowed to live simply, a decision reinforced by his profession as a documentary filmmaker.

That's probably all you need to know.

I'm going to be a bit provocative today. And I'm going to just speak with you instead of using slides. I do have a power point, which I'm happy to share with you but I just want to be a bit more traditional today. I hope you will indulge me

My friend Conrad Schmidt in Vancouver, Canada once told me that "power corrupts and Power Point corrupts absolutely," so that is my excuse.

I grew up feeling secure in an America only a third as wealthy as today. It was a country with problems and inequities without question, but an optimistic one where the vast majority of Americans felt hopeful for the future regardless of their status.

I am nostalgic for that feeling. I suspect you are too if you experienced it.

In many ways, we are a better country today, especially for those that have been most marginalized in our past. But I don't think I need to tell you that in spite of its great wealth, and its growing economy, America is unhappy, angry, and polarized to a degree I cannot remember in my entire 75 years on this planet.

I suspect that some of that polarization has even reached this idyllic corner of our country. I know that it has. Some of it comes with the air quality here in the wake of all the fires climate change has brought our way.

Only a sense of shared values will change that polarization—and I want to speak to one such value today. Today, I want to talk to you about beauty and its power to bring us together in America and improve all our of lives.

You know just as well as I do, beauty's appeal. You know that liberals love their gardens just as much as conservatives do, and conservatives love to visit our national parks, just as liberals do.

I know you will agree that this is a beautiful place, a place that, unlike the urban centers so close to it, draws its sustenance from the land. That land is a sacred trust and its beauty alone, a harmony of nature's gifts—or what we call more bureaucratically "ecosystem services"—and human care, should provide enough inspiration for the most careful of stewardship.

I want to make the case that by seeking to protect and restore natural beauty, create lovely urban design, bring art into our communities and support local sustainable agriculture and healthy fish and wildlife populations, we can also build community and reduce polarization.

I've found that beauty matters to both liberals and conservatives, to both sides of the political divide. I'm sure you know that liberals like their gardens just as much as conservatives do, and conservatives enjoy our national parks as much as liberals do.

Beauty unites us.

Beauty. *For all*. I see those words as another way of saying Environmental Justice. As we work toward resilience and protection of the biosphere, as we seek to retreat from the terrifying precipice of climate change with its constant and expanding fires and floods and temperature records, we may need different language to widen our appeal.

Words like environmentalism, and green, and even sustainability, often stop our conversations before they start. Yet an old word, *beauty*, a term we rarely use these days, rarely hear in political speeches, can get the conversation going again.

Or as the folksinger Phil Ochs put it in 1968, a time much like our own: “In such an ugly time, the true protest is beauty.”

I think we need a new politics of beauty to change our values and set us on the road to what the Navajo call *hozho*, a term that means beauty, but also health and balance and right livelihood. This idea has become clearer to me as I’ve been working on a television biography of one of the most unique and amazing public officials America has ever known.

Stewart Udall was the Secretary of the Interior under presidents Kennedy and Johnson. The Department of the Interior Building in Washington DC is named for him, honoring the dozens of parks, monuments, wilderness areas and wildlife refuges he added to our national system, and the many environmental protection laws we now take for granted for which he led the fight.

One of them, as you may know, is North Cascades National Park, on the other end of this wonderful Lake Chelan. Udall’s aide Sharon Francis, who will appear in my film, worked for the park when she was a Seattle high schooler in 1957, sharing with many others the moving film *THE WILDERNESS ALPS OF STEHEKIN*, which David Brower produced to introduce Congress to these, our American Alps.

It took until 1968 to win park status, and as is typical, most local residents bitterly opposed National Park status, a status from which so many benefit today. Udall worked across the aisle, with Republicans like Pennsylvania congressman John Saylor and Democratic senator Scoop Jackson to create the park.

But Udall, who grew up in a place not unlike this, the son of a Mormon rancher in a one-horse town on the Arizona desert was about much more than saving parks and fighting pollution. He was a civil rights, social justice and world peace advocate, a champion of the arts and above all, a leader who believed that America’s demand for ever-increasing economic growth threatened the future well-being of our country. He put it this way in 1968:

“An increasing Gross National Product has become the Holy Grail, and most of the economists who are its keepers have no concern for the economics of beauty.”

A man who lived so simply he didn’t need luggage when he traveled, carrying his extra clothes in his briefcase, he warned that our quest for growth would lead to the very environmental tragedies we witness today.

He was the first American public official to warn of global warming, predicting in the mid-1960s that our patterns of sprawl and our growing use of fossil fuels would melt the polar ice caps and flood our coastal cities.

Udall believed that a new commitment to beauty, a “politics of beauty” if you will—to the beauty of the land, of our urban architecture, our “cathedrals of human living,” of our commitments to our communities and to each other, even to the grace of our language—could bring America back from the brink.

My own experiences tell me he was right.

When I was in high school, and Udall was Interior Secretary, I spent several weeks *each summer* rambling throughout the Sierra Nevada of California with a couple of my friends. My dad had taught us how, and our parents trusted us to backpack on our own from the age of 14.

I want to honor my dad today, September 8, 2021, on what would have been his one-hundredth birthday were he still living. I thank him for the values I learned.

My friends and I walked from trailhead to trailhead, then hitchhiked to small towns to resupply our food, carrying all we needed on our backs.

I learned most of the lessons that have shaped who I am from those experiences. I call what I learned *THE BACKPACKING THEORY OF LIFE*.

When you backpack, you find out what’s essential to carry, and what isn’t. You find the *balance* between the pain caused by too little food or water or protection from the elements, *and* the extra weight on your back that can make you miserable.

You learn that you don’t need a lot to be happy: friendship, healthy exercise, fresh air, leisure time, freedom of movement, and above all, beautiful surroundings.

My friends and I walked in beauty, as the Navajo say.

Beauty above us in the wide crystal sky.

Beauty below in the fields of colorful wildflowers.

Beauty before us in mountains, lakes, and waterfalls, in the grand thunderheads and cleansing rain.

Beauty in the deer that wandered by at dawn and dusk, in the flash of the trout on still water, in the dew on the morning meadows, and in the ever-present song of the white-crowned sparrow.

I no longer backpack, beset with leg problems that make too much walking painful. But now, my own son has grown up to love hiking and backpacking, even more perhaps than I did. We are on our way from here to Glacier National Park for a vacation with hiking thrown in.

I want to extend this metaphor a bit.

Over the years, I've come to think of America as a backpacker who didn't learn its lessons. Our national backpack lacks some essential things, especially for the poor. As one Western Washington University student put it to me, we've got a defective first aid kit, for example.

Many Americans truly need more as our income and wealth gaps widen.

But as a country, we are weighed down by stuff, like a backpacker with too big a load who has fallen over backwards and struggles, like an upside-down beetle or turtle, to get right-side up.

How many of you have seen the movie, *WILD*? Do you remember when Reese Witherspoon puts on her enormous pack for the first time and falls over backwards? She had to get rid of things so she could even walk with the pack on.

Our packs, our *lives* are overloaded with stuff, with expectations driven by advertising, with tight schedules, overwork, hurry and worry and stress—all driven by our belief that the good life is the goods life, and the more goods the better.

But the straps are cutting into our shoulders and we are angry, dammit. And we are blaming everything—women, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, gays, minorities, regulations, taxes—instead of the misguided values and priorities that have left us where we are.

And we are sacrificing both the beauty of the world and our own happiness in our constant drive for economic growth.

In fact, the latest *United Nations World Happiness Report* shows that even before Covid, American satisfaction with life has actually *fallen* since 2010, when we were still in the Great Recession.

Each year, we drop a notch in the list of the world's happiest nations. We were 11th in 2012. Now we are 20th.

About a decade ago, with my friend Laura Musikanski, then the director of Sustainable Seattle, I started a campaign called the Happiness Alliance, to promote the lessons discovered by happiness researchers around the world.

We created a survey for communities to take to find out how well we are doing. Hundreds of cities and towns around the world have used it. You can find it at the website www.happycounts.org. You might find it useful in your community and I can help you use it effectively.

It measures how well you're doing in ten domains of life identified by the tiny county of Bhutan as being important to wellbeing and happiness and central to its public theme: Gross National Happiness.

The domains include: health, mental health, social connection, community vitality, time balance, education, access to culture, environmental quality, participatory government and yes, enough income to meet basic needs.

But I've since discovered that we were missing one domain that may be among the most important of all: beauty.

New studies by Gallup, the Knight Foundation and the University of South Carolina have found that access to beauty, *especially nature and open space*, is one of the three most likely predictors both of people's love for the communities they live in *and* of the likelihood that they are satisfied with their lives.

In place after place, they found that such beauty was an even more valued amenity than good schools, high-paying jobs or public safety. In every single city of 26 Gallup studied—ranging in size from Philadelphia to Aberdeen, South Dakota—three things were cited by the happiest people—

affordable social and cultural offerings that brought people together in community; openness and acceptance of diverse newcomers; ...*and finally, the beauty of their surroundings, with good access to nature, parks and green space.*

You may be aware of that study, called SOUL OF THE COMMUNITY. If not, check it out and think about those findings as you plan the *future*. *I suspect that many of you moved to where you live because of the beauty of the place.* Am I right? I know it's what brought me to Seattle.

Beauty is not simply in the eye of the beholder. It seems more a universal, an evolutionary disposition to like settings that are life enhancing and to see ugliness—an oil spill, a strip mine, a clearcut—subconsciously as wounds to our own bodies.

When you visit our national parks you see what I mean about beauty's universality—people of every race and nationality flood into them because they all perceive them as beautiful.

We know—and I know *you* know—from *so many* studies, that nature and open space improve our health and our happiness in dozens of ways. What we may *not* know is that living, working and playing amidst beauty also makes us kinder, more tolerant and more generous. Harvard philosopher Elaine Scarry makes this case in her book ON BEAUTY AND BEING JUST.

My good friend, Bob Sampayan, the former mayor of Vallejo, California and the first Filipino-American mayor of a major American city, knows this from first-hand experience. Bob grew up in a family of former farmworkers in Salinas and was using a short-handled hoe in the lettuce fields by the age of 12. He worked his way through college and became a police officer—a job he held for 34 years. He was an urban homicide detective—a tough cop.

He's not the first person I'd expect to be a committed environmentalist. But he is. I call him a "tree hugger" and he seems happy delighted to be called that.

When I interviewed him some time ago, I found we had something special in common—a childhood love of nature, and especially of Yosemite National Park. We had both gone there as children with our families, and those experiences were formative.

Along with Bob's trips to Fremont Peak State Park, near his home in Salinas, they awakened a deep appreciation for the natural world, and the necessity of restoring it to cities like Vallejo, so that it can work its marvelous magic on all of us and our children.

Bob told me that when he was barely out of high school, he and his brother would often drive up to Yosemite and camp for the weekend.

Still teenagers, they loved to play their music loudly in the campground. Bob put it to me this way: "We were stupid kids."

But one day a man came over from a neighboring campsite and asked them to turn down the volume. He didn't shout at them. He just calmly asked them why they came to Yosemite and they told him of their love for the beauty of the place. He agreed and asked them to understand that, for his family, part of the beauty was the quiet and the birdsongs and other sounds of nature.

They turned the music off. That conversation brought them together and Bob and his brother became good friends with that family.

Beauty can also increase sustainability, as my friend Hermann Knoflacher, the lead designer of Vienna, Austria's remarkable transportation system, explained to me.

When Vienna added tree-lined paths beside its busy thoroughfares, people were willing to walk three or four times as far without getting into their cars.

Beautifying its metro stations with art doubled ridership and turned the stations into engaged centers of community.

Simple changes in beautifying transport resulted in big reductions of auto use and carbon emissions.

Vienna also asked citizens to rate their happiness on a ladder from one to ten. Those in areas with green space, small winding streets and older more varied architecture consistently rated themselves happier than those on busy streets filled with big box office towers and nearly absent of trees.

The city also measured those people's cortisol levels and their finding confirmed that calming and mood-enhancing power of beauty.

As we think about beauty, it's also time to ask: what is the price of progress?

When I was growing up in South San Francisco, California in the late 1950s, I only got to the Sierra Nevada for my backpacking trips a couple of times a year. But in those days, we had lots of open space right on the edge of the suburb where I lived.

We were as free to wander through the grassy hills as the cattle were to graze there. We found rocks to climb, and ponds full of frogs and salamanders. We could hike all the way to the Pacific Ocean to wade in the tide pools, excited by all the marine life they contained.

But by the time I graduated from high school in 1964, all that open space was completely covered with suburban homes—the “Little Boxes on the Hillside” that Malvina Reynolds and Pete Seeger sang about.

As our population grows, all the open space that remains will be coveted for development. What we save now is all we will *ever* save—for *all time*--so that our children and theirs may discover some of the joys of nature that I took for granted.

We need to re-wild our cities and even our rural communities like this one, and encourage our digitally enslaved children, especially, to experience trees and flowers and animals and open space on a *regular* basis. We need to be sure that our most disadvantaged children have access to nature and parks.

A new movement called Parks Rx is showing what even a little exposure to nature can do for the physical and mental health of poor inner-city children. New movements like Outdoor Afro and Latino Outdoors are working to encourage minority children to get out to our parks. That's happening...and it's great.

But we need many more national parks and wilderness areas to cope with growing demand. You can see that need at our Cascade and Olympic trailheads where parking lots fill before 8 a.m. At many of our national parks, reservations and long delays are needed for visitation.

But we also need to plan for much more green and open space in our cities and towns. Frederick Law Olmsted dreamed that every American would have a park within a ten or fifteen minute walk.

So as we wisely increase urban density to reduce sprawl, we must be careful not to eliminate more of our urban forest canopy and we must be sure that we include more green space in our denser cities.

We can do this. I think of towns and cities in the Netherlands, the world's second most densely populated nation. It doesn't *feel* as crowded there as it does here because their non-sprawling dense communities also include abundant trees and parks and are surrounded by verdant farms. Dense, but not huge.

We can do that too.

To do it, we need a new politics of beauty.

Dostoevsky, in *THE IDIOT* said that “beauty will save the world.” So did Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel lecture.

John Muir understood that a rising material standard of living wasn't enough. “Everyone needs *beauty* as well as bread,” he proclaimed.

The need for beauty may atrophy without access to it, but it never dies. In the late 1800s, Muir marveled that San Francisco's street urchins, living in squalor, asked him for flowers on his return from hikes on Mt. Tamalpais or the Berkeley hills.

“As soon as they caught sight of my wild bouquet, they quit their pitiful attempts at amusement in the miserable dirty streets and ran after me begging a flower. ‘Please Mister, give me a flower, Mister,’ in a humble, begging tone as if expecting to be refused. “And when I stopped and distributed the treasures...the dirty faces fairly glowed with enthusiasm while they gazed at them and fondled them reverently as if looking into the faces of angels from heaven.”

Or as the words to that powerful song written for the striking immigrant textile workers of New York and Lawrence, Massachusetts, put it: Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but roses too.

Beauty as well as bread. And perhaps you know what the great ecologist Aldo Leopold said: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and *beauty* of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

The Russian poet Yevtushenko said he agreed that beauty could save the world. “Ah, but who will save beauty?” he asked.

I think most of us have personal heroes and mine was the late, great environmentalist David Brower, who built the Sierra Club and was the leading American voice for conservation in the second half of the 20th Century. He also started Earth Island Institute on whose board I currently serve. And he led the fight for the North Cascades National Park.

I knew Dave for the last 28 years of his life and visited him at Alta Bates Hospital in Berkeley, where he lived, only a few days before he died in 2000. He'd given his life to saving beauty.

It was clear that the end was near, but when I left, I told him, "The next time I see you I hope you'll be back out there healthy again and fighting the good fight."

Dave looked me right in the eye and said, "John, I don't think that's in the cards, but it's been a great 88 years."

I think that's what we all want to be able to say when our time is up, however much or little time we have. We want to know that our lives have counted for something, that we made a difference, not just a killing.

We can't *grow* on as we have. We will not find what we need by worshipping economic growth and material progress. In fact, we just might drive ourselves to extinction.

We will need to live more lightly on the earth, more slowly, appreciating simpler things, natural things. We will only do this if our children live with nature around them and come to appreciate the wonder of all living things. If they become gardeners of the good earth, artists of the urban landscape.

Perhaps we cannot imagine that now because we have lost so much of the beauty of the world. But we know too, from the research, that gloom and doom like I just offered you, is more likely to inspire passivity than action.

We will have to convince our fellow citizens that learning to live responsibly and in balance with nature really can mean a better, *happier* life. And we need to convey that message with language and examples that touch the heart and soul as well as the head—*good news*, if you will.

Our children are demanding these changes. They are asking us to leave them a *tolerable* planet to live on, as Thoreau once put it.

I don't know whether or not beauty will save the world, but I do know it can make us both happier and healthier, and I know it will be *up to us* to save it—and create it.

That's what nature can do. That's what beauty can do. And that is what America needs above all.

Before he died, Stewart Udall wrote a letter to his grandchildren. His final words should inspire us:

"Cherish sunsets, wild creatures and wild places. Have a love affair with the wonder and beauty of the earth."

Will you save beauty?

I hope so. Thank you.

I may be reached at jodq@comcast.net. I'd love to hear from you.