

“Disbanding Our Armies” -- The and How of Beauty in a Business School ¹

A talk by Diane Ragsdale

Presented at a Symposium on Aesthetics and Business,
produced by the Bolz Center at University of Wisconsin School of Business



Disbanding our Armies:
The Why & How of Beauty in a Business School.

Diane Ragsdale, Visiting Guest Artist

Good morning.

I'd like to begin by thanking Dean Ortalo-Magné, Associate Dean, Don Hausch, and Bolz Center Director, Sherry Wagner-Henry, for making it possible for me to be in residence at UW-Madison this term teaching a course on beauty in the school of business. It has been both meaningful and stimulating and I am grateful for the opportunity. Thanks are also due to Rebecca Buckman, assistant director at the Bolz Center, for line-producing this event.

Because the course I'm teaching was the impetus for pulling together this

symposium, I thought I would focus my talk primarily on the why and how of the course—that is, its justification and methods. I'll also share a bit about what the students seem to be getting from the experience. (And we have a few of them here, even – so perhaps they will pipe up later to share some thoughts on that subject.)

PART I – Why Beauty in a Business School?



So this is the expression I quite often see on people's faces when I mention that I'm teaching a class on beauty in a business school. And what quite often comes out of their mouths afterwards is something like, “Thaaat’s interesting. What does that mean? How do you think this going to help them, exactly?”

When I began getting these questions I knew intuitively that it would be rather cheeky to respond by saying something like, “Well, isn't a life with beauty better than one without it? I mean, doesn't everyone need beauty?” So I fumbled around saying things about living in an aesthetics business era and the growing importance of beauty in the design of products and services.

And people would nod and seem to buy it; but I'd get this uneasy feeling in my gut--like I was betraying beauty behind her back.

¹ Disbanding our armies is a concept from Rebecca Solnit's book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (pp. 6-7).

I mean, yes, those things are true and valid—but I knew this wasn't the reason I proposed to teach a course in beauty ... I knew it wasn't why I felt the course was important ...

I got tired of being asked why and not having an answer I felt good about so I started digging into the literature to see if others had tried to make the case for the importance of aesthetics, or beauty, for business leaders, in particular.

And I was rather delighted to find a small strand of relevant literature, and to discover that, over the past couple decades, business scholars (at least a few of them) have been penning articles and books with titles like “Leading Beautifully” and “Aesthetics as a Foundation for Business Activity,” and “The Impoverished Aesthetic of Modern Management.”

Here are a few more I came across early in my literature search.

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- Adler (2011). *Leading Beautifully: The Creative Economy and Beyond*
 - Dobson (2007). *Aesthetics as a Foundation for Business Activity*
 - Dobson (1999). *The Art of Management and the Aesthetic Manager*
 - Koehn & Elm (2014). *Aesthetics and Business Ethics*
 - March, J.G. (2013). *In Praise of Beauty*
 - Taylor (2013). *The Impoverished Aesthetic of Modern Management: Beauty and Ethics in Organizations*
 - Waddock (2014). *Wisdom and Responsible Leadership: Aesthetic Responsibility, Moral Imagination, and Systems Thinking*
 - Winston, J. (2006). *Beauty, Goodness and Education: The Arts Beyond Utility*

And I realized as I read these papers: Business types seem to want a range of things they think my tribe has—my tribe being arts people. Excellence for its own sake, courage, artistry, craft, objectivity, perspective, vision, imagination, empathy, hope, justice, truth, goodness, beauty.

In broad brush strokes—very broad—here are the various propositions or arguments for beauty and aesthetics that I found in those papers.

The world is in a state of crisis due to a range of systemic problems—hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, unemployment, chronic disease, drug addiction, war. These problems persist in spite of the application of great scientific minds and new technologies. Solving these problems requires a different way of seeing and thinking.

- We need leaders who can approach problems and systems intuitively and holistically;
- who have the courage to see reality objectively and who feel compelled to help repair the world;
- who are unconstrained by pragmatism and who have the vision to imagine radical, beautiful solutions;

- who can forego short-term gains in order to achieve long-term paradigmatic change;
- and who have the moral character to pursue excellence for its own sake rather than for the money, fame or power it sometimes produces.

As Sandra Waddock puts it in her papers, we need wiser, more responsible leaders. We need leaders with moral imagination.

(We need beauty.)

Underpinning all of these arguments for the value of beauty or aesthetics for business, sits the more essential argument that beauty is important for human cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development more generally.

In a sense, this is where the beauty course sits. We are asking ourselves the question that the novelist Iris Murdoch asked herself in her essay, *The Sovereignty of Good*. And we're following her lead in pursuing the answer.

Her question: "How can we make ourselves better?"

Her answer: While bettering the self was once the domain of religion, in a secular age, *beauty* is the "most obvious thing in our surroundings" to help us "move in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism."²

Murdoch calls this process *unselfing*.

She gives the analogy of walking down the street and being totally unaware that you are self-consumed until something beautiful—say a bird—hooks your attention and draws you out of yourself—alerting you to your self-absorption and awakening you to your surroundings generally.

English literature scholar, Elaine Scarry builds on Murdoch's work. Her term for this *unselfing* is *opiated adjacency*, which is rather esoteric way of saying that beauty knocks us into the margins—revealing that we are not the center of the universe—but that the experience of being in the margins, of being lateralized, of playing a supporting role (as Scarry puts it) is *pleasant*.

Scarry makes the case that while lots of things can knock us into the margins and lots of things can bring us pleasure—beauty is perhaps the only thing that does both.

And from this position we can better see the world—we can see without the "motivated blindness" that keeps us from noticing, for instance, systemic injuries being perpetuated, and our participation in those injuries.

(By the way, Scarry makes the case that, etymologically, the word that best captures the opposite of beauty is injury, not ugliness).

Much of the focus of this beauty course is this "better seeing."

² Murdoch, I. (1991). *The sovereignty of good*. London: Routledge. As cited in Winston 2006, p. 285.

The actual title that I proposed was *Approaching Beauty*. This proved to be a hard sell. I get it. The B-word makes us feel awkward.

After I was pretty far along in developing the course—with this working title—it was suggested that if I could get beauty out of the title and replace it with creativity it would get greater uptake from students and faculty. No doubt it would have; but I was stubborn and pushed back. It's not a class in creativity, per se.

Creativity stayed out of the title, but in the end beauty was nudged out as well. I learned that the course eventually went into the catalog as *Aesthetics and Business*. And I get that too. Aesthetics is not as awkward. It's more palatable, I gather, because it is associated with design thinking—a popular concept in business schools these days. Beauty, on the other hand, sounds both frivolous and subversive. This beauty course is not frivolous; it probably is subversive.

I interpret these proposed and actual title changes to be an effort to, in a sense, put beauty in service of business. And while this is a valid aim for a business school sponsoring a course like this, I'm endeavoring to do the opposite.

I'm trying to put business in service of beauty. I'm trying to give students a different way of seeing and relating to the world, a different way of valuing people and objects, a different way of living. I don't really care whether this class helps them get a job within three months of graduating. I care about who they will become over the next 25 years and how they will live their lives. In today's academy, I perceive such aims are subversive.

**Approaching
Beauty**

A/K/A

**Aesthetics &
Business**

Outcomes

2/10/2015

- ✓ **Knowing** – We begin to learn a different way of seeing the world (i.e., a new lens, a new basis from which to make judgments, a new way of understanding) and begin to intuit the relationship between aesthetics, economics, and ethics.
- ✓ **Doing** – We experience. We undergo. We create. We approach new experiences, internalize them, discuss them, and create portfolios to document and reflect upon what we experience over time.
- ✓ **Being** - We better understand our values, tastes, and judgments, as well as those of others, and how and why they change over time.
- ✓ **Inspiring** - We develop the courage to step into the unknown and imagine more beautiful futures for ourselves and the world, and how we might realize those futures.
- ✓ **Networking** – We develop our skills as translators who can connect the frames of business and art; we feel comfortable with a foot in both worlds and are able to relate to people and ideas in both realms.

And find myself wondering these days: Can beauty actually survive in a business school? I'm not convinced that it can. In large part because the outcomes of this course may not be felt for years, decades even.

Speaking of outcomes, I was encouraged to develop what are known here as KDBINs.

And while I believe everything I've written here, it nonetheless strikes me that there is more than a little irony (if not hypocrisy) in talking about the value of the course in terms of such outcomes—and even in talking in terms of how

beauty will help develop wiser, more responsible leaders—when at the heart of it I am trying to get the students to pursue the questions:

What is excellence? What is beauty?

And what does it mean in my life, in my work to pursue these for their own sake?

PART II: How are we approaching beauty, exactly?

Speaking of beauty for its own sake, I want to share one of my favorite early moments in the class. Each week I generally bring in a guest artist or scholar, or both.

The second week I brought in a graduate student from the art department, named Tara Austin, to do a drawing workshop with the students. The goals were to encourage closer seeing—that is, better skills of observation—and to give students the experience of letting the hand draw what the eye perceives. At the end of the drawing workshop Tara showed slides of some of her work, which is inspired by beauty in the natural world. At the moment is doing a series of abstract orchids.

Tara Austin
Orchidecece #4.
Oil and Acrylic on Panel.
2015



Tara showed slides of several of her orchids and then asked if there were any questions. The first business student to raise her hand said something to this effect:

So, you said that you are only painting orchids. And, I mean, do you think this could be a problem? I mean, maybe people don't want orchids, orchids, orchids. Maybe not that many people like orchids—maybe some like other kinds of flowers. Or something other than flowers? I mean, I just wonder, are you thinking about this?

Tara paused for a second and then replied,

Um. That's a really interesting question. No, I'm not thinking about that, actually. I'm painting orchids at the moment because they are really interesting to me and so I guess I will keep painting them until I'm ready to move on to another idea.

After the fact, as I reflected on this moment, I thought it was quite brilliant. A quite reasonable question from a business school student: *Is there sufficient demand for orchids? Do you know your market? Do you think you may need to diversify?*

And a quite reasonable answer from an arts student: *I'm interested in the idea for its own sake; right now, I'm not thinking about whether there is a market for orchids.*

And I couldn't have architected a moment to better convey the different logics or rationalities of the spheres of business and art, or what art for art's sake is really all about.

Much of the course is structured on the assumption that it is valuable simply to put business school students in the same room with artists: to experience how they approach their work, how they talk about beauty, how they see the world, how they bring shape to things, and why they do what they do.

It is neither an arts appreciation course nor a philosophy course. At its heart, it is a practical course with three basic components:

Discussions on the nature and function of beauty in today's society (led by me and a range of scholars and artists); curated and self-directed aesthetic experiences (in art, nature, and everyday life); and the documentation of these experiences in a beauty portfolio.

The beauty portfolio concept comes from Howard Gardner—from his book *Truth, Goodness and Beauty Reframed*. Gardner basically aims to rescue beauty from ignominy and make it socially acceptable again by redefining beauty as the property of *experiences* (of objects, people, events). He asserts that beauty is subjective and that “to be deemed beautiful an experience must exhibit three characteristics. It must be interesting enough to behold, it must have a form that is memorable, and it must invite revisiting.”^[1]

Gardner goes on to suggest that students need to be educated in the three virtues and that, with regard to beauty, in particular, they should be encouraged to keep a portfolio of their experiences and reflect upon the factors that have led them to consider one experience to be beautiful and another not.^[2]

One of the cornerstone ideas of the class is that art is a different language, a different way of seeing the world, or, as Jeanette Winterson puts it, a different value system. In her essay published in the Guardian, *The Secret Life of Us*, Winterson writes:

...Art leaves us with footprints of beauty. We sense there is more to life than the material world can provide, and art is a clue, an intimation, at its best, a transformation. We don't need to believe in it, but we can experience it.

The experience suggests that the monolith of corporate culture is only a partial reality. This is important information, and art provides it.

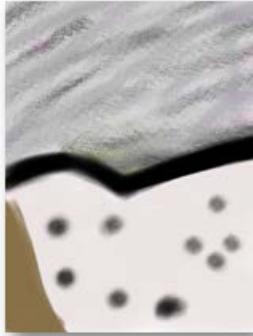
That was the first week.

From there we fully immersed ourselves in the art world and in nature and in figuring out what beauty and aesthetics are all about. It was only midway through the term that I began to shift the conversation to beauty as it relates to moral behavior in life and business.

This week, for instance, the students read the powerful Claudia Rankine poem *Citizen: An American Lyric* and we discussed the role of beauty in a democratic society.

To help the students make the connections each week I assign two portfolio assignments. So, for example, after the drawing workshop I mentioned earlier I gave them the assignment to watch a sunrise or sunset, to pay particular attention to shape and color, and to document the experience in two ways: in a Haiku and in a drawing.

Student Michelle Croak



Is that grey? Or white?
Where does the sky start and end?
Will winter end soon?

The sun surrenders
As deep purple streaks the sky
Through dark, bare trees.



Student Jacqueline Lee

Here are two of the entries.

I gave this assignment both so they would put to use the drawing workshop they just had but also to prepare them for the museum experience they would have the following week in which I knew I would ask them to spend 30 minutes with a single artwork.

I wanted to give them practice in staying present and engaged with a relatively static aesthetic experience of some duration.

Another assignment was to create something in response to the artwork they spent 30 minutes with at the museum and to write an artist's statement.

One student spent time with Narayon Mahon's piece *Dividing Wall #1*, one of a series of photographs documenting people in five countries that are currently unrecognized as a result of geo-political strife. Mahon's series is called *Lands in Limbo*. This particular piece shows a young boy whose home happened to be just on the limbo side of the dividing line.



Narayon Mahon
Dividing Wall #1
From *Lands in Limbo*
Madison Museum of
Contemporary Art exhibition

Here's the piece created by the student. It's an old fashioned fortune teller but made quite intentionally with the front page of the homeless newspaper, *street pulse*, which featured the obituary of a man who

had been incarcerated at one point in his life. What you see in this bottom corner is part of a poem written by him which spoke of redemption and loneliness being lifted.

Student Lyndsay Bloomfield's response to the work.

Fortune teller made with a page of the homeless newspaper, *Street Pulse*, featuring an obituary and poem of Tim DeDeVyne.



So she made the connection between this photograph of a boy and the state of limbo in which the homeless live in Madison, as well as the random twists of fate that can land someone in that state. But she also wanted to capture the hopeful idea that limbo need not be a permanent state and that one's fate can change for the better.

Another week I asked the students to watch a [TED Talk by the renowned conductor, Michael Tilson Thomas](#), who discusses how to listen to classical music. I then asked them to sit quietly, do nothing, and listen to a piece of music lasting at least 40 minutes and to document the experience.

A majority of students commented after their classical music listening experience that they had never done such a thing before and how soothing, clarifying, inspiring or energizing it was.



Here's how one student documented how he felt after listening to Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*.

We talk quite a bit about anxiety in the class and the pressure the students feel at school I note that there is nothing anxious in this drawing.

If anything, it seems quite transcendent. (He is an artist btw, a bit of an outlier in the class.)

Another week, inspired by Rebecca Solnit's book *A Field Guide to Getting*

Lost (which is essentially about the relationship between getting lost and the creative process) one of our guest artists, a writer named Lynette D'Amico, gave the students the assignment to get lost and to record the experience in some way. A handful of students (out of a class of 22) chose to lose their smartphones for a day. Here's the poem that one student used to record that experience.

No signal.

I lost my friend Siri yesterday. I lost my friends Chris Martin, Taylor Rice, and Kanye West whom I talk to almost everyday. I ached to hear my friend cry out "Turn left in 300 feet". But, it was quiet.

Silent.

Then I heard it. The faintest rustle of the trees. The deep bellowing of my breath. The laughs coming from an unknown place up the street.

Then I saw it. The blinding sun piercing across the vast sky. That night I saw the same sky splattered with perfectly sporadic specks.

Then I felt it. Above the ache for my simulated friends on my 5.44 x 2.64 screen, I was a present in the present. A gift of the hour. The hour, in turn, a gift to me. It was a symmetry I hadn't found before.

A peacefulness.

Around the middle of the term, when we began to shift to thinking about beauty in life and work, the students had an assignment to record incidents of the following:



- A beautiful decision you made
- A beautiful decision made by someone else
- A beautiful business decision
- A beautiful act you witnessed
- A beautiful solution to a problem
- A beautiful story in the news
- A beautiful social or cultural trend
- A beautiful response to a public wrong
- A beautiful conversation
- A beautiful person
- A beautiful business person

In reading the responses submitted by the students I was struck by how many reflected moments of struggle or selflessness or grace. Often, they reflected moments in which a person (whether self or other) did the seemingly impossible but right thing, for its own sake.

One week they listened to and reflected upon two *This American Life* episodes with Mike Daisey, the storyteller who tried to open the world's eyes to the injurious labor practices behind our beautiful Apple devices by creating a one-man show based on his experience of visiting the FoxConn factories in Shenzhen, where Apple products are made. Here's how one student responded to hearing Daisey's show.

I thought about this winter break and how I was annoyed when I ordered my new iPhone that the ship date was TBD ... Reflecting on this experience, it didn't even cross my mind that there are workers making these phones. Daisey talked about how when there's a new Apple product it's not uncommon for workers to work 18 hour days. It made me feel guilty for being annoyed that there was a wait for my new iPhone.

I realized it's people like me ... that cause [Apple's] manufacturers in China to feel pressure to work their employees overtime to meet demands like mine.

We also used the second Mike Daisey *This American Life* episode—the one in which he admits that he made up some of the direct experiences he claimed to have had in China—to discuss the difference between artistic truth and truth in journalism.

So there are just a few examples of what we're doing. I am sharing most of these portfolio exercises on my blog each week—it's called [Jumper](#)—so you can read more about them there.

The class shifts back and forth between what Steven Tepper calls ([in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education](#)) “me-experiences” and “bigger-than-me experiences”. Students undergo, reflect, document, and often create in response to what they have experienced.

And how is it going? (A question I’m asked all the time). Well, a couple weeks ago a guest artist visiting the class asked the students how they think they have changed or what they have learned from the course, thus far. Here are some of the responses.

- I do things I wouldn’t do;
- I look at things harder.
- I see other people’s points of view. I think, “There might be more going on here so I won’t jump to a conclusion.”
- I am re-evaluating relationships in my life.
- Asking whether I’ve had the emphasis on the wrong things.
- I am thinking about homework differently—how to make it creative, not anxiety-provoking. How not to approach homework with dread.
- I’m trying to focus on the process, not the product.
- I am slowing down.

Perhaps my favorite comment about this course came a few weeks back. Our guest lecturer, a dramaturg named Polly Carl (who has been quite influential in my learning and thinking about beauty and this course) introduced students to key ideas in Rebecca Solnit’s *Field Guide to Getting Lost* (which I mentioned earlier). In her terrific book Solnit writes:

The word “lost” comes from the Old Norse los, meaning the disbanding of an army, and this origin suggests soldiers falling out of formation to go home, a truce with the wide world. I worry now that many people never disband their armies, never go beyond what they know. Advertising, alarmist news, technology, incessant busyness, and the design of public and private space conspire to make it so.

After sharing this idea from Solnit, Polly Carl asked the students, “What disbands your army? What makes you go beyond what you know?” And the first student to raise her hand replied, “This beauty class disbands my army.”

And I thought, yes, this is the value. This is the why and how.

We need beauty in a business school because it is only by placing ourselves on a different path that we are likely to encounter different parts of ourselves, and different ways of being, doing, and knowing the world.

Thank you for your kind attention.