

Reaffirming Beauty: A Step Toward Sustainability

Sandra B. Lubarsky

When Alan Shepard, commander of Apollo 14, saw the earth from space -- a blue-green jewel hanging in an immense, moonlit field -- he surprised himself. He cried.

"If somebody'd said before the flight, 'Are you going to get carried away looking at the Earth from the moon?' I would have said, 'No, no way.' But yet when I first looked back at the earth, standing on the moon, I cried." Thousands, perhaps millions of people were likewise so overwhelmed by the first photographs of Earth from space that a global ecological movement arose, kindled by the sheer beauty of the planet.

Slightly over thirty years later, eleven men were thrown from an oilrig in the Gulf of Mexico by the unexpected, violent force of deep-earth oil, wildly uncapped from 5,000 feet below. In duration and effect, Deepwater Horizon is akin to Chernobyl and Bhopal, an "accident" disruptive of life systems, accompanied by uncountable loss of life. And yet, the irrepressible beauty of the Gulf Coast survives, as Terry Tempest Williams recently testified: "That's the other untold story ... the beauty, it's still there."

We know the earth is beautiful. We equate the livingness of it with beauty. When we mourn the loss of life, we also know that we mourn the loss of beauty. And we look to beauty as a marker of life, even life that has been badly mutilated.

And yet, the importance of linking beauty to sustainability has gone underappreciated. Beauty has been treated as a purely subjective value, as nothing more than personal opinion. Repeatedly, we have overridden our experience of the world as a place of beauty and denied our longing for it. But if we cannot speak of beauty except as a matter of opinion, how are we to evaluate some of the most tragic experiences of the contemporary world? What does it mean to look at a strip-mined slice of the

Appalachians and refrain from an aesthetic judgment? What are the consequences for doing so? Could it be that our inability to say publicly and confidently, "Mountain-top removal is ugly," makes us unintentionally complicit with this particular ongoing obliteration and the destruction of so much else?

Beauty is fundamental to the practice of tikkun olam, to the effort to restore and care for the world. It is only with the modern, scientific worldview that beauty became irrelevant to knowledge. The deposing of beauty went hand-in-hand with the modern construction of the natural world as a machine, deemed valueless except for its utility to human beings. And so the restoration of our relations with the natural world must include a restoration of beauty as a value belonging to life. If we remain silent on the subject of beauty, we give our unspoken support to the continuation of the worldview that has led to the demise of the untold life forms and ecosystems that embody it. Our efforts to arrive at sustainable patterns of living, to bring tikkun to the earth and its inhabitants, must include a reaffirmation of beauty.