



PIECES ON OUR CRAFT

Things of Beauty

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Facing another semester in which my teaching load included a course on nuclear weapons, a course on genocide, and a course on the war in Iraq, more than one of my friends said, “You *really* need to teach a funny course!” So, I thought about funny and imagined ways in which I could craft a course focusing on political humor: I could engage students with Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*; Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado*; Walt Kelly’s *Pogo*; and the students would certainly be able to teach me things I did not already know about Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*. And yet the idea did not gel completely. Much political humor, I realized was caustic and caustic was not what I was after.

Serendipity helped. One afternoon as I was tending to the roses in my garden, a colleague, James Logan, walked by and asked what I was doing. “I am working so that beautiful things can happen,” I responded. That idea had legs. With James and other colleagues, I came to realize that, for me, the antidote to the horror my students and I were forced to confront in our teaching and learning was not humor, but beauty. Thus, the “Things of Beauty” assignment was born.

As I wrote to my students in the syllabus for an upper-level course on The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), in addition to standard learning objectives, such as “describe how thinking about humanitarian intervention has evolved in recent history,” we would also learn to “articulate a response to a ‘Thing of Beauty’ as an act of aesthetic engagement against horror.” I told them that there was no way around the reality that in this course we would confront horror—real horror, not the Hollywood variety. Violence witnessed, violence collectively remembered, and violence imagined were all intrinsic to the subject matter of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

I went on to say that we would focus on a small part of this violence at a time through the lens of our sheltered world at Earlham College. Still, we would have to ask: how can a living, breathing, sentient human being of good will cope with the flood of graphic violence that permeates the world that we live in?

I answered that by teaching and taking this course we were taking the position that we were not, for the moment, choosing to deny the horror around us. The offering of the course on the Responsibility to Protect in the context of a politics department demonstrated our belief that medium and long-range political solutions were required. How could we respond to horror in the present moment as we prepared to read the next chapter or write the next page?

I wrote that sometimes human beings confronted with horror too difficult to imagine have resorted to humor, as Steve Lipman portrays in his fascinating book *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (1993). Another balm that people experiencing or contemplating the horrible have turned to, historically and at present, is prayer, meditation, or some other way of linking into transcendent spirituality. Yet another choice is to consciously produce or enjoy beauty in what James Hillman in *A Terrible Love of War* (2004) calls “a fury of aesthetic engagement,” the act of creation rather than the act of destruction.

I proposed that, for us, one important element of the course would be the practice of aesthetic engagement by sharing, on a regular basis, Things of Beauty. We need this kind of engagement in our lives, I claimed, if there is any hope of responding productively and effectively to genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

In describing the assignment, I told students that the only requirement for selecting a Thing of Beauty to share was the student’s conviction that it was, indeed, a Thing of Beauty. Their Things of Beauty could be written, sung, or painted; they could be plants or ceramic objects. I was glad about the range of possibility that this opened up. I encouraged students to think about this pass/fail assignment as an opportunity to attend to Things of Beauty in the midst of other horrific things to be talked about.

In this seminar of about two dozen students, I assigned each student to a day. Before each class, the assigned student of the day sent me an image, an mp3 file, or a link to a website. In addition, students sent me a short written commentary (no more than 500 words) prior to class in which they addressed questions such as how, when, and when their Thing of Beauty was created, their assessment of whether or not other people would agree that this was a Thing of Beauty, and any other feelings evoked.

I had no idea what to expect and, indeed, the assignment felt rather risky. As it turned out, however, the students took the assignment very seriously. I was moved by the objects and entities that students elected to share with me and their peers. These included everything from a minute-long excerpt from *The Lord of the Rings* to an image of a Buddhist temple to a reproduction of a tattoo to a well-loved teddy bear. In almost every case, the students talked about the essential beauty of a relationship with another person or persons that motivated them to keep at the work that they were trying to do. It is important to note, of course, that all of the students wrote rigorous academic papers on R2P. In contrast to prior semesters, however, no one dropped because the emotional toll of dealing with atrocity was too much to bear. Most of the students mentioned the Things of Beauty in their course evaluations as an important element in the course and in their desire/ability to continue to focus on this subject matter. These were 5 minutes very well spent. The assignment will definitely return in my future courses that are otherwise wrenching.