

“A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever”

*Comments Made At
Department of Orthodontics
Graduation Dinner*

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What an expansive, challenging, intriguing, (and beautiful) theme we have explored today. One clearly germane to our profession and our lives—the concept of beauty.

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”

So penned John Keats, the great British romantic poet, in 1819, as the opening lines to *Endymion* (In dem’ e on), his poetic reflection on a beautiful young man of Greek mythology.

We encounter and experience much beauty in our lives; beauty that brings us joy.

There is the beauty of things of **human creation**: paintings, sculptures, architecture, objects of art, furnishings, clothing, automobiles. There is the beauty of **nature**: of a stately tree, a colorful Spring flower, brilliant sunrise, a blazing sunset, a bluegrass paddock on a misty morning. There is the beauty of **experiences**: an intimate conversation with a close friend, visiting an historic city, viewing a classic play, or a touching movie, falling in love. There is the beauty we enjoy in viewing other **members of the animal kingdom**: an athletic thoroughbred, racing toward the finish line; a brilliant red cardinal, in flight; a best-of-the-breed canine, strutting its stuff; a doe, in the glade with its fawn; a butterfly, on a tender leaf. And, of course, the **beauty of the male and female human form**, that we have considered throughout the afternoon.

Ethologists, scientists who study animal behavior, have discovered elements of why we consider beautiful in the human animal, that which we do. And, what else would it be...but sex! (I readily acknowledge that it is quite likely that this is where Professor Bordo’s thinking and mine diverges somewhat.) While we tend to think of Darwin’s concept of human biological evolution as rooted in the concept of natural selection; a second companion and essential dimension to his theory is that of sexual selection. Animals, which include we humans, are attracted to certain qualities in the opposite sex—attributes that therefore permit the characterization of beautiful; qualities that suggest fertility and genetic strength. Our sense of physical beauty, to the extent it has evolved biologically, has much to do with the desirability of another as a partner for procreation—for reproduction.

A fascinating study in ethology asked the question, “why does the peacock grow such an expansive and beautiful tail, when such a heavy, burdensome tail is a significant liability; life threatening, in fact, when attempting to flee a predator?” Such a strategy seems inconsistent with natural selection. The answer: the size, color, and symmetry of the tail correlates with the genetic strength of the peacock’s immune system—the ability of the peacock to ward off parasites and disease, and to survive. The beautiful tale represents a very public display to the peahen of the desirability of the particular peacock as a mating partner. Such examples of beauty as reflected in symmetry and physical adornments, even handicapping ones such as the peacock’s tail, that would seem to be impractical, exist throughout the animal kingdom. In a recent Grand Rounds presentation, Judah Garfinkle, one of our orthodontics graduate students, reminded us of this principle in citing the book, The Survival of the Prettiest!

The cultural shift we have seen, as explored by Dr. Bordo, in this afternoon's provocative presentation points to our human desire--to be desired—to be seen as beautiful. The variety of physical corrections we seek at the hands of the surgeon, the prosthodontist, or orthodontist are all such as to make us appear more youthful, more fertile, more symmetrical, therefore more biologically beautiful. This appears to be the evolutionary explanation of human concepts of physical beauty.

John Keats authored an additional poetic comment on beauty. *"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."* It is found in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," written by Keats when he was lying close to death at very young age of 24.

Truth is also beautiful. Knowledge, ideas, concepts, theories are beautiful to our minds. One of my favorite aphorisms is: *"the greatest joy in life is turning the corner and discovering a new idea."*

For the past three years, Susan Nordstrom and Wade Housewright have been studying the science of orthodontics, gaining knowledge to support their future work of not only creating proper occlusions, but also of creating beautiful smiles. This evening, I suspect they can reflect on those three years as being a beautiful time of learning, and are able to characterize the integrated understandings of the science of orthodontics they have developed as being beautiful. The quest to know comprehend and understand that which is truth is a significant dimension of a beautiful life. The "life of the mind" is a beautiful life. The mathematical genius of John Nash's mind, though disturbed with psychosis, was characterized as a "beautiful mind," for it was a mind with understandings of the myriad mysteries of math.

Today we congratulate two individuals with beautiful minds; minds molded by faculty mentor to understand the truth of the science of orthodontics. Just as importantly, we honor two beautiful people, Susan and Wade--for of all the world's many beauties, which brings us great joy; nothing is quite equivalent to knowing and experiencing community with beautiful people—it is the truth of human existence. Yes—*"beauty is truth, and truth beauty; that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."*