

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION

FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of June 2, 2004

Dear Reader,

What is beauty? Can it be defined? Can it be objectively judged? What can we do to experience more of it in our lives?

Consider the Parthenon, thought to have been the finest building in Ancient Greece. Described by Vincent Scully in *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods*, its structure represents both assertiveness and receptivity most forcefully of all the columned Doric temples, and the slant and angles of its walls allow it to be seen without diminishing perspective. It is so positioned in relation to its surroundings that the eye is directed to various geographical elements in the distance yet simultaneously drawn back to the temple because of the light, glowing quality of its white marble. Each of these contradictions forms a *complex stimulus*, thus multiplying the force of its arresting appearance.

Harmony occurs when a perception, thought, feeling, or image provides an *optimal stimulus level* undisturbed by contaminating elements. The stimulus must be sufficiently complicated yet exquisitely balanced. A row of Doric columns with the alternation of mass and interval fulfills this requirement, as do many examples of architectural rhythm. So, too, do the masterworks of Rembrandt, Monet, and other great artists. Their complexity resides in their varying colors, textures, and intricacy of composition, while the arrangements of these elements create balance. In music, color and texture are provided by the various instrumental and human voices; in dance, patterns are elaborated by the body. The more complex and balanced a composition, the more we are affected by it.

Harmony can be found not only in great works of art but also in many everyday situations. Complexity and balance can occur in homes, meals, clothing, landscapes and cityscapes, work and leisure pursuits, concepts, and most intensely, in relationships. Human beings are the most complex of stimuli, and they have the potential to be superbly balanced. We are fortunate to have so many possibilities for perceiving harmony. We need not wait for a trip to Greece. The potential to experience harmony is all around us. As I drive home from work each day, there is a block that I pass in which the houses are positioned in such a way that their unfolding appearance forms a very complex yet balanced pattern. I marvel at this each time that I pass by.

Contaminating elements will destroy harmony. They may occur in the object that is being perceived: a poorly tuned violin in an orchestral performance, clutter in an otherwise well decorated home, excessive fat or, yes, protein in a presumably elegant meal. Some of these contaminants are beyond our control. We can't tune the musician's instrument or remove all the plastic shopping bags from the trees in our neighborhood. But we can keep our home tidy and prepare well-balanced meals.



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Contamination may arise from within the viewer. Any disequilibrium, whether acute or chronic, will interfere. All stimuli, past and present, that have necessitated partial or false solutions contribute to the mental static that hinders our ability to experience harmony. Some of these interferences are *ego-dystonic*; we are well aware of them. Feelings of anger, ongoing depression, intrusive or repetitive thoughts, and fatigue are all too obvious. Other hindrances are *ego-syntonic*, that is, they are taken for granted, unremarkable, assumed to be the way life is. We can recognize these characteristics in others even though we are oblivious to their existence in ourselves. Those who are excessively neat, highly critical, or chronically overcommitted tend not to realize that things could be different.

We experience beauty when we perceive a stimulus that provides a heightened sense of harmony. The more intense the perception of harmony, the greater its impact on us and the greater its beauty. Intensity can be heightened by the presence of complex stimuli. By causing a pause between the stimulus of the perception and our response to it, a complex stimulus heightens our attention and prevents closure. The presence of multiple complex stimuli, as in our perception of the Parthenon, creates a very arresting perception.

Not all harmonious perceptions contain complex stimuli. Beauty can also be appreciated in a perception that has been imbued with a positive feeling such as love. An image of a child may be pleasing because of her harmonious appearance, but to her mother, who loves her, she is beautiful.

While an Inner Guide cannot correct many of the contaminants in the world around us, its goal is to eliminate the uncomfortable disequilibrium within us. Those who do self-hypnosis regularly will discover more and more beauty in their lives.

QUESTION:

This question was not directed to me, but was posed by Verlyn Klinkenborg in a review of books about the environment in the May 30, 2004 issue of the New York Times. "What will it take to wake us up [to the danger of global warming]?"

ANSWER:

Habit patterns, once established, can be changed only when a complex stimulus occurs that allows a new solution to be locked in. The solution must then occur repeatedly in the mind until its novelty diminishes sufficiently so that it can enter awareness. Perhaps a massive disequilibrium, such as the submergence of Manhattan, would cause sufficient repetition to "wake us up." Hopefully our Inner Guides will have enough time to help us react constructively before such drastic events occur.

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

Judith M. Davis

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