

THREE BEAUTIES

(or)

An Essay on the Sin of Pride, the Fervor of Religious Conviction, and that Timorous but Exalted Virtue Called Humility

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

It happened back when I was a "Teaching Assistant"—a graduate student teaching introductory courses. At this point I had my Master's degree in philosophy and was well on my way toward the Ph.D. I had always loved teaching, generally had good students, and this class I especially liked. It was "Introduction to Ethics," I had taught it before, and this group, in one respect, had an unusual make-up of students: virtually all of them were quite immersed in student-life on campus. The president of the student council was in this class, the president of the Memorial Union

student board was there (I hadn't even realized such a board existed), many were members of fraternities or sororities, others were student leaders of interest groups, and one fellow was something of a football star. I never followed the games at all, but that year the team was doing very well, and I would always know when there had been a weekend victory because on Monday mornings, when he would walk in to the room before class started, the other students would give him a round of applause. I thought this rather silly, and given the type of person I was back then (and still am?), I suspect I made sure to feel snooty about it. But in truth I didn't much care. He was a good student, he appreciated the small accolade but did not do any strutting because of it, and things would settle down as soon as class got underway.

But there was another presence in the class, this one more quiet, even serene. The women in this class, for the most part, were unusually beautiful. Yes: "beautiful." Not just attractive. Not just pretty. Truly beautiful. Three of them especially.

Of these three, two sat in the front row. Of these two, one was almost in front of where my lectern stood, one seat to my right. She was of medium height, perfectly tanned, firm and muscled in the way a young girl can be while also being thoroughly womanly, and graced with a truly perfect body. Her face was amazingly beautiful while also having a sweet and almost innocent cast to it. She was generally quiet, but did participate in class discussion, and possessed the kind of self-esteem that comes from being sure of one's beauty. Her cohort in the front row was three seats to the left of my lectern, and was a completely different kind of beauty. She was tall, slender, always well dressed but more conservatively so than the first girl, and she seemed to possess much goodness in her soul. She also was relatively quiet, but given to strong opinions in discussion when the topic moved her.

The first girl I thought more physically beautiful; the second girl I thought more highly of. The first girl, though a good student, seemed very involved in campus parties and frivolities. The second girl, although as good a student, worked harder and was

very involved in religious matters and church. In discussion, this second girl often took my atheism to task, but unlike many students over the years who were either hostile about my views or bent on converting me, she seemed to truly worry about my soul. At the end of the semester, she wrote me a very sweet and compassionate letter, but I seem to have discarded it somewhere along the way. I wish I hadn't. It was truly a small gift of genuine goodness. Of these two beauties in the front row, I would say that the one on my right was the more comely of the two by a wide margin, at least in terms of the type of woman my eyes might linger on. But the woman on my left was certainly the more attractive personality. With her tall, lean body well covered by a heavy blouse and a long skirt, I occasionally wished that more of her were visible, just so my eyes could better appraise this part of her.

As for that third beauty, I shall get to her presently, but first I must explain the oblique statement I made above. I referred to the presence of those female beauties as a "serene" presence. What do I mean by this?

Very simply, this means that while I found many of those young women in this class (not just the three supreme beauties) truly beautiful, I can honestly say that I only found them attractive; I did not actually feel attracted to any of them. I am not advancing great claims to chastity here. Certainly I had had students I felt strongly attracted to. Some of them I would even sleep with, but unlike certain of my peers, I never slept with them while they were still my students. I always waited until after the semester was over.

A strange phenomenon it is, even a kind of disjunction which at times has befuddled me: namely, to find a woman, or even many women, highly attractive and yet not feel at all attracted to even one of them. And then, in another class, in might come a girl and all semester long I would be carefully guarding myself to make sure I was grading her fairly, while at the same time gathering all the information I could about her so as to "make my move" once the semester was over. In fact, this was the case with the very first class I ever taught. I did sleep with one of the three girls I was attracted to in that class (after the semester was

finished), although not with either of the other two I was much more attracted to. This particular girl I not only slept with, I also would get "involved" with, and later would even marry her. That marriage ended disastrously. I'm sure there was a strong lesson there to be learned, but I also am sure I never quite learned it. Recounting all this is to make my claim about the situation in the particular class I have been discussing all the more convincing, namely, there were many beautiful girls, three of them amazing beauties, and yet I did not actually feel attracted to any of them. Being in this position makes for serenity in a young man whose sex drive is high and whose sex life is busy. How pleasant it is, even relaxing and aesthetically replete, to visually imbibe the beauty of so many women, all gathered in the same room, and be content to simply behold—to look but not want to touch. There is much spiritual nourishment in this benign, yet inspired, situation.

As I already stated: the beauty in the front row who possessed my preferred physiology also possessed a very strong degree of thoroughly overt self-esteem,

based on what obviously were convictions of her own beauty. The girl to my left also clearly possessed a high degree of self-esteem about her beauty, but her self-identity came from religious convictions and a deeper, one might even say more spiritual, wellspring. Still, they both knew they possessed great physical beauty, took pride in it, and this obviously was a significant part of their self-identity.

As for that third beauty, I can say much about her that I perceived on the surface, but I can say almost nothing about what I otherwise might have espied in her personality had she been sitting in the front row. This girl sat in the very back row. Although the room was wider than it was deep, there still were about eight rows of desks, and she went to the very back, seated directly in front of where my lectern was, i.e., directly in front of, but at some distance from, where I stood.

At first one might not even notice that this third girl was a great beauty. She was, one might say, a kind of hippie. She wore no make-up, her hair was barely brushed, she wore clothes that were loose and shabby.

About six feet tall, this girl would walk quickly to the back of the room, sit down at her desk, then fix her attention on everything in general and nobody in particular. Always very alert, in discussion she was uncommonly intelligent although she rarely participated. Given how she dressed, many people would never even have noticed her. However, of practiced eye, and given my vantage point standing in front of the room, I did note her beauty. This physical beauty was added to by her obvious level of self-confidence (which is somewhat different from self-esteem), and this self-confidence seemed to stem from a variety of sources. Moreover, hers was a very independent self-confidence. Unlike the other two beauties, she did not seem to care if, or how, other people perceived her physical beauty. So to the other students, hers was a quiet presence in the room. I think it safe to note that all the boys, and most of the girls, gave much visual attention to the two beauties in the front row. No one seemed to notice that supreme beauty in the back row at all. At least not at first.

I above noted that this girl seemed to not care at all about how other people perceived her, but for accuracy's sake, I should point out that this seems to have been true only for the most part. Once every two or three weeks she gave reason for being judged otherwise. I will never forget the first time this happened. She came in the door and shone iridescent! She was wearing bright red lipstick—unusual for those days, when the lipstick women wore was muted in color and often was nothing more than what is called lip gloss. Her black hair was piled high on her head, and this black hair, with the red lipstick, made one acutely aware of how white and perfectly smooth her skin was. She had a hint of rouge on her high cheekbones, a touch of eye make-up, and her clothing was just stunning. She wore the same tattered blue-jeans, but she had sewn to them small pink ruffles in concentric bands around the legs. Other decorative designs had been sewn into the jeans, and she wore a gorgeous bright red blouse with a flowery design done in white and blue needlepoint. Her tennis shoes, rather than the usual dirty and scuffed ones, were red, clean,

and new. With her usual vigor she came in quickly, walked to her seat in the back row, and sat down as if nothing were unusual at all. But I, and everyone in the room, could not but see that she was—what? Luminescent. Possessing a beauty that shone like a brilliant light. Stunning.

Luminescent. Brilliant. Stunning. All these adjectives applied, and more.

But aside from how she was dressed and made up, something else that perhaps no one but me noticed, was going on. For the first time ever, those two supreme beauties in the front row noticed her. Their eyes gave her more attention than anyone else's did. They knew, each of them, that the truce that had existed between the two of them had now become complicated. Their territory had been invaded. Here was a beauty they knew full well was their equal. But she was not of their type. She did not associate with them, or, for that matter, with anybody in the room. She was content to be quiet, if alert, there in the back row. Normally she dressed like a slovenly, anonymous hippie. But here she was, displaying a beauty that was equal to theirs. If

it was not as placid and composed as that of the religious girl's, or as carnal and enticing as that of the other girl in the front row, it was more flamboyant—it had style, a kind of aristocratic Spanish spirit, a high-blooded extroversion that made it more noticeable. Those two girls in the front row actually turned in their seats to watch this transformed hippie walk to her seat in the back row; and then, several times during the class, they turned to look back at her—even though she was completely oblivious to their attentions.

At the next class, this third beauty was back to her slovenly self, although she still received several uneasy glances from the two beauties at the front row. And then, just as she seemed to have altogether receded from their attention, she again came into the room flamboyantly dressed, with her hair done up gorgeously, and with much make-up on. Everything this time was done in a different way (which I need not here describe). Again, those two beauties turned to watch her as she made her way to the back, and again, several times

during the class they stole a quick glance back in her direction.

I don't think they were jealous. Rather, I think they were accustomed to being the alpha females, the supreme two in that room, and with the appearance of another alpha female on the scene they simply were not sure how to react. With competitiveness? With envy? With a warm welcome? They were entirely unsettled by a beauty this supreme who, the next time she would enter the classroom, would again have regressed into plainness, obscurity, anonymity.

Years later I would read about a study done by Glamour magazine in which the editors looked into exactly what the motives are in women when they dress up for the workplace. They found something surprising: Women dress up for the workplace, even selecting their high heels, not to impress men but to impress other women. They are not competing for men's attention; they are competing for women's attention.

But here I was, years before that study was done, witnessing a similar attitude. Those two front-row beauties gave that beauty in the back row more

attention than all the boys in the class put together. If the boys in the room felt a tumultuous stirring of testosterone when that back-row beauty revealed her supremacy, their arousal was nothing compared to what came to the fore in those two female beauties on the front row, although their arousal obviously involved something quite different.

So the semester proceeded. This was, if I remember correctly, late fall of 1973, although it might have been 1972. (My sense of time is not always very accurate.) The class went well. Students were eager and involved. I enjoyed the topic I was teaching. The front-row beauty to my right was truly an exquisite creature, and I wanted mightily to feel sexually attracted to her but didn't. Aesthetically I appreciated her, but sexually I felt nothing at all. She wore even more revealing clothes as the autumn turned unusually hot, but I remained unmoved. On Monday mornings, when the football player entered the room, he still got his applause. And still, about every two weeks, that hippie in the back row sent a jolt (Of

what? Insecurity? Uneasiness? Identity crisis?) through those two girls in the front row.

I admit I found this immensely amusing. Maybe I even took a small pleasure in their discomfiture. A pleasure that had more than a trace of something sadistic. I liked seeing the confusion, the erosion of self-confidence, the craning necks, in these two beauties. I admit that, ever since those high school days when my overtures were spurned by certain of those older beauties in my school, I have always taken a scarcely generous pleasure in seeing a vain woman feel her status threatened, or in seeing her come down a notch or two in the world of female competition.

Speaking of competition: One day applause broke out in the classroom, not as the football player walked in, but when the more beautiful of the two beauties in the front row walked into the room. I had no idea what this was about, and was surprised to see the other, taller beauty who already was in the room get to her feet, step over to my favored beauty, and give her a hug before they both sat down.

So the class continued without further incident, but at the end a young lad, who often came up to me after the class was over, appeared there in front of me with a question. I discussed his question briefly, and then asked him what that little display at the beginning of class was all about. I remember his first words: "Didn't you know?"

He went on to explain that those two beauties in the front row had each been nominated for Homecoming Queen, and the one on my right—my favorite—had won. She was our university's Homecoming Queen for that year.

At the beginning of the next class I looked them over more carefully. Yes; it was easy to see why they both would have been nominated. And it was easy to understand why my favorite would have been other people's favorite too. She was indeed the more beautiful of the two. Plus, she displayed her beauty with less modesty, both in how she dressed and in the way she interacted with other people. The tall religious beauty had done the right thing to hug her rival. Thus they remained amiable peers. So during that semester, I had the small distinction of having three

supreme beauties in my classroom, two of them clearly recognized by the campus populace as supreme beauties, the other beauty being relatively anonymous although just as supreme when she wanted to be. Plus there was that admired football player. Also (I hope foremost), there was opportunity for learning—and doing—philosophy.

Do I take some kind of vain pleasure in having had those three alpha beauties and that star football player in my class? No. Not at all. The three women make for nice visual memories, but I have since collected nicer ones.

What I remember most—or best—are two things: One of them is sadistic and wicked, and the other is very beautiful. My unsavory memory is made all the more unseemly since I still relish it. Even now, more than forty years later, I find myself smirking inwardly at remembering the discomfiture, the emotional turbulence, the sense of confounded self-identity in those two front-row beauties when that back-row hippie would walk in displaying herself transformed into a supreme beauty. I loved watching those two beauty queens as

they writhed with insecurity, waiting impatiently (I imagined) for a chance to study themselves in a mirror. Even after that Homecoming achievement, the two beauty queens would have several more traumatic opportunities for dealing with the abrupt appearance of that hippie's transformed beauty. The accolades they had received, one as Homecoming queen and the other as a worthy runner-up, did not at all lessen their envy or their discomfort. (I will never forget the day that third beauty came in wearing high heels and hose, with a brown tight-fitting leather skirt that came maybe half-way down to her knees, and a velvet, cream-colored, low-cut blouse. Those two front-row beauties almost suffered whiplash the way they jerked around to watch her as she walked to the back. That day they did more than glance uneasily. They gawked. Their scarcely concealed jealousy was nothing less than garish.) Thus I had further opportunities for my smug smirking, and even now, more than four decades later, though I probably should judge myself harshly for having been that way back then, I am unwilling to give up the sweet memory of that pleasure I felt, nor do I now at all

care to contemplate that scenario with anything less than glee.

Fortunately, there is another side to this experience. My beautiful memory, amidst all this, is the genuine and gentle compassion of that religious beauty, and her polite but pained concerns about the well-being of my soul. Still new at being an atheist—having occupied this status for only about five years (and occupying it ever since)—I was cynical toward theists back then, often blatantly intolerant or hostile, and even if I did not show it I tended to be quite irritated when these young theists brought their God-talk to my philosophy classes. Yet this girl's ardent caring about the state of my soul, her earnestness, her friendliness even as she strongly stated her disagreements, was so kind and genuine I could not but be warmed and sometimes even awed by the magnitude of her spiritual generosity. I admit I also felt negative emotions. Once when she spoke of attending a burial, and how it had been raining but then when the rain stopped the sun came out and there was a rainbow, and everyone could feel God's presence

in that rainbow-well, yes, I felt she was being quite shallow. I wouldn't be surprised if I also felt actual contempt for her then. Certainly I do not want to give the impression that I was entirely receptive to this young girl's point of view. But I was, to my surprise, impressed and moved by her genuine caring—her solicitous, fully compassionate, even pained concern about my spiritual well-being. So if I was, at times, irritated by her religious persona, I must admit that she was never condescending toward me, and perhaps this is what helped me avoid being overly condescending toward her. She definitely evinced genuine kindness and true charity. There was something holy in this, even if it too often kept company with that obvious sin of pride she committed regarding her physical beauty.

I very clearly remember that girl's letter, which she handed me the last day of class. I suspect I threw it away in a fit of atheistic cynicism and contempt. But I still remember certain lines in it, and I wish I had kept it. If indeed there is a God and an afterlife, and she now is dead, then I suspect she is praying for me at this very moment.

So you see? Within the labyrinthine complexities of philosophical mentation, there is ample room for guarded ponderings that are thoroughly religious even though they are entirely atheistic.

Put differently: There can persist a scarcely miniscule, in fact almost magnitudinous, degree of spiritual gratitude that, in its own way, works a kind of finite, earthly salvation which shows that the atheist's soul, however sequestered, is not entirely barren. Thus we have opportunity for discovering that within the scarcely quiescent throes of the atheist's severe creed, he sometimes, and somehow, succeeds in being generous enough to take up residence in the proximal vicinity of that which is saintly and holy. In so doing, perhaps the atheist occasionally elicits a covert, uneasy glance—maybe, too, a thoroughly discordant envy—from the most pious of saints, distracting them, even if only momentarily, from the exalted beauty of their pristine prayers.

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