

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
April 19, 2009

“The Rough and Homely Outside of Truth”

By Donne Hayden

“Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder,” we are told, “Beauty is only skin deep,” and as my great-grandmother always said, “Pretty is as pretty does.” In John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” an ancient Greek vase tells its admirers that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” (In contemporary society, a more accurate statement might be “Beauty is youth, youth, beauty, —that is all / We know of worth, and all we seek to know.”) If something is beautiful we *want* it to be true. But truth has more than one face, and Keats’ lovely turn of phrase ignores other realities, such as, that beauty may be shallow or deceptive, that truth often hurts, and that, as we have been reminded this past week, a plain brown wrapper may contain a pearl of great price.

I’m thinking about beauty this morning because of Susan Boyle. Earlier this week, two people sent me an email with a link to the *YouTube* video of Susan Boyle on “Britain’s Got Talent.” I was profoundly moved watching it. On Saturday, one of the questions on the NPR game show “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me” was about Susan Boyle. Saturday afternoon, I went to the corner beauty shop to get my hair trimmed. Beauticians and their clients all talked about Susan Boyle, what happened to her, how she surprised everyone.

Many of you probably know all about Susan Boyle, but in case you’ve been in a remote cave in Wyoming this past week, let me tell you who she is. She is an international phenomenon because of a *YouTube* video of her performance on a British television show called *Britain’s Got Talent*, a talent show judged by three celebrity

judges including Simon Cowell whom you may know as a judge on *American Idol*. In a show aired recently, Susan Boyle sang “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Miserables*.

When she first came on stage, we saw a frumpy, middle-aged woman with bushy eyebrows and a sort of squashed-in face who walked onstage with a stride so determined it was almost comical. In the first few minutes of banter and questions, Simon Cowell asked her name and where she was from (a “collection of villages” in Scotland). “How old are you?” he asked, and when she replied, “I’m 47,” his eyebrows rose and he rolled his eyes. “And what’s your dream?” “I want to be a professional singer,” she answered. “And why hasn’t it worked so far, Susan?” he asked. And it was clear that he expected (and the audience expected) that he would soon tell her in no uncertain terms why she could never be a professional singer. She replied, “I’ve never been given a chance before,” adding that she’d like to be a singer like Elaine Paige. This provoked hoots of laughter from the audience as the camera focused on the judges’ expressions of incredulous doubt. Throughout this brief conversation, the television camera panned the audience and the judges, catching snickers and expressions of disdain, even disgust—who did she think she was? The audience was sure this dowdy, awkward woman was a prime target for Simon Cowell’s scathing criticism. “And what are you going to sing for us, Susan.” “‘I Dreamed a Dream’ from *Les Miserables*,” she answered.

When Susan began to sing, her voice rose clear and perfect, soaring and lovely, in what one writer called “a moment of spectacular grace.”¹ From the first note, the beauty of her voice was undeniable; every note thrilling and true. It is probably the most beautiful rendition of this song I’ve ever heard, better than professional versions I’ve

¹ Rob Dreher, “Susan Boyle’s Redemption Song,” *Dallas Morning News*, Online edition, April 19, 2009. <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/viewpoints/stories/DNDreher_0419edi.State.Edition1.25ccf09.html>

heard in stage productions or on the recording. From the first note, it was apparent something extraordinary was occurring before us. The audience was on its feet, seemingly propelled by a recognition of grace that shamed them even before their amazement had time to register. The three judges sat in stunned disbelief, abashed by their pre-judgment of her, which, though unspoken, had been clearly communicated through facial expressions.

Susan Boyle was *literally* an immediate sensation. Interviewed later, she said, "I heard people say things that weren't very friendly. I knew what they were thinking," she says. "I saw people laughing and I knew they were laughing at me. But I thought, well, they'll soon shut up when they hear me sing. And they did. I've never thought my voice was outstanding but I've always known I was a good singer."²

She had had this experience before. All her life, no doubt, people have sneered at her until they heard her sing. Here are snippets of what some columnists have written about her so far:

*The 48-year-old church volunteer's performance on Britain's Got Talent has propelled her from obscurity to global stardom. Boyle's powerful voice, which silenced the cynical judges and those in the audience who sneered because she wasn't groomed or glamorous, is expected to make her wealthy beyond her modest dreams.*³

. . . a columnist on Salon.com wrote that Boyle's performance reminded people that "not all fortysomething women are sleek, Botoxed beauties . . ." ⁴

Clearly this simple woman somehow "spoke to our condition."

² Gillian Harris, "She Who Laughs Last - Songstress Susan Boyle," *The Times Online* (London), Sunday, April 19, 2009.
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article6121279.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Mary Elizabeth Williams blog, "The Triumph of Susan Boyle," April 16, 2009.
http://www.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/feature/2009/04/16/susan_boyle/.

And what is that condition? What in her story resonates so strongly with us? In trying to figure this out, I was reminded of the quotation from William Penn which we talked about in the Quaker Service and Spirituality group last week.

Now it was that a grand inquest came upon our whole life: every word, thought and deed was brought to judgment; the root examined and its tendency considered. . . Nay, it is a test upon the world. . . . If the rough and homely outside of truth stumble not their minds from the reception of it—whose beauty is within—it makes a great discovery upon them. For he who refuses a precious jewel because it is presented in a plain box, will never esteem it to its value, nor set his heart upon keeping it. Therefore I call it a test, because it shows where the hearts and affections of the people stick, after all their great pretence to more excellent things.⁵

In this passage, Penn is talking about the need to thoroughly examine our inner selves and expose those things within us that keep us from fully embracing the Light. In re-reading Penn's words, I was struck by a new understanding of them. The title, for instance: "The Testimony against Worldly Customs," at first sounds like puritanical criticism of the pleasurable things in life (and indeed, since Penn lived at the height of Puritan influence, he probably intended this to some extent.) But think more deeply. What about the "worldly custom" of judging people by their appearance; "the worldly custom" of bullying, of picking on those who are different; "the worldly custom" of underestimating or undervaluing those who are less *something*—less strong, less self-assured, less beautiful, less intelligent; "the worldly custom" of conscious cruelty we participate in to feel part of a group.

Accepting that we have these tendencies and seeking to expose them to the Light tests us, as Penn says, "If the rough and homely outside of truth stumble not [our]

⁵ William Penn, "The Testimony against Worldly Customs," *No Cross, No Crown*, 1682.

minds from the reception of it"; in other words, truth, whose "beauty is within," tests us and enlightens us if we can accept it—if we can see past its "rough and homely" exterior. If we refuse the "precious jewel" of truth "because it is presented in a plain box," we never understand the value of a particular truth, "never esteem it to its value, nor set [our] heart[s] upon keeping it. . . . [The truth] shows where the hearts and affections of the people stick, after all their great pretence to more excellent things." No matter how much we pretend to be unbiased and enlightened, our response to a simple truth shows what we really value. Susan Boyle has been a moment of truth in contemporary culture, showing us where our "hearts and affections stick." She has put the lie to Keats' famous equivalency of Truth with Beauty, or perhaps, more precisely, she has re-calibrated our understanding of the beautiful. The Truth personified in Susan Boyle exposes our disdain of inner beauty in favor of superficial glamour. The *Grace* of Susan Boyle lies in how many people responded to the jewel within her "rough and homely" exterior. This Truth, "a precious jewel," came to us in plain wrapping, and we could have refused it; the fact that so many people didn't once again gives me hope for humankind.

A woman named Lisa Schwarzbaum eloquently describes her response to watching the *YouTube* video and hearing Susan Boyle sing. I leave you with her words.

"In our pop-minded culture so slavishly obsessed with packaging—the right face, the right clothes, the right attitudes, the right Facebook posts—the unpackaged artistic power of the unstyled, un-hip, un-kissed Ms. Boyle let me feel, for the duration of one blazing showstopping

*ballad, the meaning of human grace. She pierced my defenses. She reordered the measure of beauty. And I had no idea until tears sprang how desperately I need that corrective . . .*⁶

Buried within the human psyche are feelings, yearnings, anxieties too deep for words, usually. Only sometimes do we see it in ourselves. Always it is something outside ourselves that touches us, somehow, where we feel most deeply. At such moments we remember that we are humans -- not mere living creatures, but human beings, profoundly and deeply shaped by a moral sensibility so powerful that it breaks through our inhibitions; it can burst out, explode into public view, to our own astonishment. And sometimes that objective form -- a person, an event, an object, a song -- embodies deeply felt sensibilities for a lot of us at once, so that we discover how much we share in our private worlds, worlds otherwise inaccessible to anyone one else. It becomes a social event, so we can all rejoice, and weep, together.

—Dr. Robert Carlson
“Susan Boyle and the Power of the Moral Imagination”

⁶ Lisa Schwarzbaum, quoted by Robert Canfield, Ph.D., “Susan Boyle and the Moral Imagination,” *Vital Concerns for the World* blog <<http://rcanfield.blogspot.com/2009/04/susan-boyle-and-human-moral-imagination.html>>