A FORGOTTEN LEGACY OF BEAUTY FOR ALL

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“If anything can save the world, I’d put my money on beauty.” --Esprit founder Doug Tompkins

Few would dispute that these are ugly times in America. Our politics overflow with animosity. Racial tensions are rising. Inequality has soared. Our social media seethes with anger. Extreme weather events bring flooding and fire. In the streets of my city, scores of homeless people live amid the detritus of their lives. The mentally ill curse on corners; government spokespersons curse to reporters. Once proud cities fill with vacant houses and empty factories. Tumbleweeds blow through the deserted streets of formerly-vibrant small towns. Once beautiful mountaintops have been turned into ugly pits, poisoning rivers and streams. Too many of us die young, of opioids and suicide. Our dialogue is ugly.

In a troubled and polarized America, is there a unifier? Some shared value that might bring us back to civility and respect? Some vision that might heal the urban/rural divisions that were obvious in the 2016 election results when vast swaths of mid-America glowed deep red and many cities, especially on the coasts, were bright blue?

I believe there is. Doug Tompkins thought so too.

Tompkins was an adventurer, a climber, skier and kayaker, who founded the outdoor company, North Face, and went on to start the global clothing giant, Esprit. When he sold it, he bought two million acres of wild land in South America, hoping to preserve it for future generations. He owned more land than anyone else on earth, and used part of it to establish exemplary organic and sustainable farms and ranches. His work in environmental restoration earned him honorary membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects. Tompkins died in a kayaking accident in 2015, after which his widow, Kristine McDivitt, bequeathed most of their land to create national parks in Chile and Argentina.

Tompkins had a powerful vision, centered around his declaration that, “If anything can save the world, I’d put my money on beauty.” Which of course, he did.

BEAUTY MATTERS

His beauty was not the simple glitter of outer appearance but a sense of the interconnected harmony of life. “A thing is right,” ecologist Aldo Leopold once wrote, “when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and *beauty* of the biotic community.” True beauty is life-enhancing. It calls us to awe and stewardship, and demands that we reproduce it in art, in design. It softens us, makes us kinder and less aggressive, awakens generosity in our hearts, and even, as Harvard

philosopher Elaine Scarry argues convincingly, moves us toward justice. The word "fair" as in *beautiful* and as in *just*, come from the same root.

As Pope Francis expressed it in his 2015 Encyclical:

> If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously…the desire to create and contemplate beauty manages to overcome reductionism through a kind of salvation which occurs in beauty and in those who behold it…If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple.

Experiences of beauty from our childhoods—allowing us to see Earth in a wildflower or a butterfly—never fully disappear. The memories I have of the Sierra lakes I backpacked to in my youth are a wellspring of hope even in my saddest moments. A painting of one of them—Yosemite's Young Lake, where my father first took me when I was 12—hangs above my desk. Even a glance at it brings back the smell of lodgepole pine, the loveliness of Indian Paintbrush and Lupine in the green meadow grass, and granite cliffs reflected in clear waters, even the cold shock of a swim after a long day on the trail. The need for beauty may atrophy from too much time spent among ugliness, but it does not die; the street urchins from the slums of San Francisco begged John Muir for a flower every time he returned to the city from jaunts in the nearby hills.

Moreover, a focus on beauty can answer the question: if not more consumption growth, then what? People engaged in beautifying their surroundings—be it by gardening, art, or other activity, have less need for the addicting material products of consumer society, thus reducing their ecological impact. People may choose conviviality in public parks and squares and beautiful places shared with others instead of home entertainment systems, or addictive consumer toys and other private consumptive pleasures, for example.

There may be cultural differences in how we assess the beauty around us; Asians are thought to prefer the tamer beauty of manicured gardens, while we in the west like the wilder landscapes. But these are cosmetic differences; when the Chinese and Japanese catch sight of the gleaming cliffs and waterfalls of Yosemite, they are as awed as any westerner. When Americans walk through Japanese tea gardens, their loveliness is not lost on us. And whoever we are, when we see photos of mountaintop removal in Appalachia or the garbage in Fresh Kills or the oil-soaked beaches of the Gulf after the BP disaster, we know what beauty is not.

Beauty was once very much a part of the American dialogue and tradition. It animated the paintings of the Hudson River school, the urban parks of Frederick Law Olmsted, the Country Life vision of Liberty Hyde Bailey, the city dreams of Adams, Mumford and Jacobs, the presidential actions of Teddy Roosevelt and the passion of

John Muir. FDR carried on the torch with his national restoration programs like the CCC and the arts and building projects of the WPA. Yet somehow, beginning in the 1980s, even the environmental movement has lost sight of its appeal and the positive citizen energy it can generate. The Sierra Club, for example, which came of age in its fights for beauty, and whose outings program still introduces many local members to the joys of beauty, now focuses most of its attention on the details of alternative energy. The movement has split into silos of resistance with no real connecting theme besides opposition to an administration which seems determined to set back decades of progress and protection. But opposition cannot, in the end, inspire new progress. "Where there is no vision, the people perish," explains the Book of Proverbs.

Doug Tompkins' vision may be just what it takes to save America, if not the entire world—to bring us together again, heal our wounds, and lead us forward toward environmental stewardship, justice, compassion and respect.

Toward that end, I have begun, along with others, a national campaign called AND BEAUTY FOR ALL (temporary webpage www.scorai.org/beauty), with the hope of restoring our landscapes, revitalizing our communities and healing our political wounds.

We almost got there half a century ago. And we don't have to reinvent the wheel, just place it upright once more and start pedaling.

BEAUTY'S DECADE

I was a young man in a time much like our own, a polarized time when a young President fell to a sniper's bullet and his successor looked for a way to pick up the pieces. The 1960s were a tumultuous decade, rocked by struggles and shaped by the will and political acumen of then-President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson's legacy includes flashes of nobility—the Civil Rights Act, the War on Poverty and Medicare—and one disastrous and divisive failure, the war in Viet Nam.

Yet tucked away among these crusades, and now almost forgotten, was the dream he had hoped to be remembered for. A dream of a more beautiful America which the world would respect, not for "the quantity of its goods," but for "the quality of its goals."

Johnson wished to unify America—polarized then as now, especially by race and inequality—around stewardship of its immense beauty and its fragile environment. And he was clear: the beautiful land he dreamed of was not meant to be a luxury for the fortunate, but a birthright for *every* American. We would do well to consider what he and his administration did then and how their vision might be fulfilled in our own time.

Johnson's focus on quality of life was a part of his goal of a "Great Society," first revealed only six months into his first term in a commencement speech at the University of Michigan. I have written at length about that speech (http://grist.org/politics/that-time-lyndon-johnson-made-a-killer-case-against-unbridled-growth/) which centered on three themes:

1) We need to end the sin of segregation with a Civil Rights Act;

2) We need to reduce deprivation in America with a War on Poverty; and

3) We need to move beyond economic growth toward a different vision of progress.

As Johnson put it:

> For a century, we labored to settle and to subdue a continent. For half a century, we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all of our people. The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life and to advance the *quality* of our American civilization…
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> Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are *buried under unbridled growth* … Worst of all expansion is eroding the precious and time-honored values of community with neighbors and communion with nature. The loss of these values breeds loneliness and boredom and indifference.

Johnson's goals were furthered by a sense of national unity born in the assassination of his predecessor John F. Kennedy. He easily won re-election against the hardline conservative Barry Goldwater, and soon after, was promoting the conservation and preservation of natural beauty as key aspects of his Great Society program. In the next four years, he would move those causes forward as has no other president, before or after him.

Operating mostly behind the scenes in the campaign were Johnson's wife, Lady Bird, and his Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, a holdover from the Kennedy administration. Udall is certainly one of the unsung heroes of 20th Century American history. Raised in a Mormon ranching family in rural Arizona, but deeply influenced by environmentalists including Rachel Carson and David Brower, he authored a moving 1963 assessment of the environment, *The Quiet Crisis*. He later took on the Cold War, as an attorney for Navajos poisoned by uranium mines, and for the so-called "downwinders," settlers in the Southwest who contracted cancer after exposure to nuclear weapons testing.

I had the opportunity to meet Udall and interview him at length in 1988 for a PBS documentary about Brower, the uncompromising Sierra Club leader. What struck me most, especially for a political figure, was Udall's humility. On occasion, he had locked horns with Brower and the conflicts had changed his mind. "One of the most important things for any public servant is to be open-minded," Udall told me in his soft drawl. "David Brower changed my thinking. And for that, I'm in his debt, no question about it."

Udall didn't always agree with the more radical Brower's means, but he completely shared his conservationist ideals. Failing to move Kennedy towards a strong environmental strategy, he reached Johnson though Lady Bird, taking the First Lady on a Snake River rafting trip through the Grand Tetons in August of 1964. During the trip, he convinced her of the necessity for strong new environmental protections.

"Stewart Udall, who was an expert salesman, came to see me hoping to interest me in the field of conservation," Mrs. Johnson explained in her oral history. "I decided, that's for me." What followed came to be known as the "beautification" campaign, a term she disliked. "We struggled to find something else but not successfully," she said, "so we stayed with the word. To me, it was always just part of the whole broad tapestry of the environment—clear air, clean water, free rivers, the preservation of scenic areas…the beauties of this country had been my joy, what fueled my spirit, made me happy."

Indeed, the program *was* broad and *deep.* And though a strong and abiding sexism gave Lady Bird credit for only two aspects of it—removing billboards and planting flowers—it was far more.

It began with an effort to beautify Washington DC. Despite its iconic architecture, the nation's capital had long been an eyesore and an embarrassment when shown to foreign visitors. Lady Bird insisted that justice required that beautification begin in the poorest, most neglected areas of the city and include cleaning up the polluted Potomac and Anacostia Rivers.

"Beautification, prissy word though it may be," she later remembered, "became the business of the politician, the businessman, the newspaper editor, and not just the ladies over a cup of tea."

LAUNCHING THE CAMPAIGN

President Johnson's State of the Union message in January of 1965 was replete with admonishments that would be even more relevant today. "We do not intend to live in the midst of abundance, isolated from neighbors and nature, confined by blighted cities and bleak suburbs," he declared. "The Great Society asks not how much, but how good…not only how fast we are going but where we are headed…this kind of society will not flower spontaneously from swelling riches and surging power."

"I propose that we launch a national effort to make the American city a better and more stimulating place to live," he told the assembled senators and representatives. He also called for support for the arts and a shift of agricultural subsidies from giant farms to family farmers.

A few weeks later, on February 8, Johnson followed with a "Special Message to Congress on Conservation and Restoration of Natural Beauty." He began:

For centuries Americans have drawn strength and inspiration from the beauty of our country. It would be a neglectful generation indeed, indifferent alike to the

judgment of history and the command of principle, which failed to preserve and extend such a heritage for its descendants.

Johnson went on to talk of population growth "swallowing" natural beauty, urbanization crowding out nature, and new technologies "menacing the world" with the waste they created. The problems, he argued, required a "new conservation" based not only on protection, but on "restoration and innovation." Its concern was not only nature, but the human spirit. "Beauty," Johnson said, "must not be just a holiday treat, but a part of our daily life," and provide "equal access for rich and poor, Negro and white, city dweller and farmer."

The value of beauty, Johnson warned, did not "show up the Gross National Product," anticipating Bobby Kennedy's famous comments three years later, but "it is one of the most important components of our true national income, not to be left out because statisticians cannot calculate its worth." Access to beauty improved mental health, he claimed, an assessment now confirmed by many studies. And while we wouldn't always agree about what most beautiful, he added, we did "know what is ugly."

Johnson announced that he would convene a national conference on beauty at the White House later that year. It would address:

- *Cities.* Jefferson, Johnson reminded Congress, had written that communities "should be planned with an eye to the effect made up on the human spirit by being continually surrounded with a maximum of beauty." Every aspect of urban planning, he said, should center on beauty and community. He proposed a major investment in open space to "create small parks, squares, pedestrian malls and playgrounds.
- *The countryside*. Johnson proposed a new Land and Water Conservation Fund and the acquisition of great areas of public land for national parks and monuments. He made special mention of the need for a Redwoods National Park in California. He called for legislation to correct the "ugly scars" left by strip mining in Appalachia and elsewhere, and for the conversion of unused military land to space for outdoor recreation.
- *Highways*. He called for the "effective control of billboards, junkyards and auto graveyards along our highways."
- *Rivers*. Johnson demanded that we clean up polluted rivers and establish "a National Wild Rivers System…before growth and development make the beauty of the unspoiled waterway a memory."
- *Trails*. "We can and should have an abundance of trails for walking, cycling and horseback riding in and close to our cities." He recommended a national trails program and insisted that "we must have trails as well as highways. Nor should motor vehicles be allowed to tyrannize the more leisurely human traffic."

Air pollution could no longer be tolerated, Johnson argued, adding with dismay that "the White House itself is being dirtied with soot from polluted air." He asked for new controls on solid waste and on pesticides. He suggested burying utility lines to beautify cities, and a national tree planting program carried out at all government

levels and by private groups as well. The final goal was “an environment that is pleasing to the senses and healthy to live in”—for everybody. “Our land will be attractive tomorrow only if we organize for action and rebuild and reclaim the beauty we inherited.”

It was an ambitious program. But step by step, aspects of it became law if sometimes in watered-down form. The work was enhanced by the May 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty, led by Laurence Rockefeller and Lady Bird. Calling it the most impressive White House conference he had ever attended, LBJ let the nearly 1000 attendees know that “it is the quality of our lives that is really at stake.” “Beauty cannot be a remote and occasional pleasure,” he stressed. “Children in the midst of cities must know it as they grow. Adults in the midst of work must find it near.” “Many of you are busy people with much to do,” he acknowledged, “but there is nothing more important.”

Johnson was ebullient with hope, heightened by the new spirit of bi-partisanship in Congress after Kennedy’s death. “There is less hate, there is less prejudice, there is less jealousy, there is less partisanship in your Congress than any time that I know of in the 35 years that I have been here.”

The committees at the conference drew up an impressive report, adding meat to the bare bones of Johnson’s proposals. Nationally, they urged “the active collaboration of artist, architect, horticulturist, educator, planner, designer, labor leader, conservationist, and citizens in all fields.” They called for a wide range of state and local conferences and beauty committees, urging that “the beautification projects be undertaken particularly in blighted areas, in order to develop the spirit and the leadership which are vital to alleviating racial tension, poverty and the tragedies of dejected youth,” and “that natural beauty be further emphasized as a focal point of rural area development, of poverty programs and of urban renewal.”

We don’t need to reinvent the wheel. The spokes are still there, waiting only for new tires and new riders.

A year later, in 1966, Johnson established a cabinet level agency, the President’s Council on Recreation and Natural Beauty, to monitor the programs, though it was dismantled by Richard Nixon in 1969. In December, Johnson announced that 1967 was to be the Year of Youth for Natural Beauty and Conservation. “Those who would not live without beauty must join in a tireless effort to bring it into being,” he proclaimed. “They must help to reverse the sorry decline of cities and countryside…Young people sense this strongly. They have not grown accustomed to ugliness. They have not resigned themselves to living among the litter and clutter of a careless civilization.”

THE WAR DROWNS OUT BEAUTY

The following summer, while the newly-emerging hippie “counterculture” was celebrating love and altered states in San Francisco, a large contingent of American young people convened at the White House for a Conference on Youth for Natural

Beauty and Conservation. New programs put many of them to work in restoration activities, such as the planting of millions of trees.

That summer, I had no idea this was happening, even though I was working for Johnson's War on Poverty at the time, as a field supervisor for summer VISTA volunteers working on Indian reservations in Wisconsin and Minnesota. And I was a committed environmentalist—Udall's *Quiet Crisis*, Carson's *Silent Spring,* and cheap paperback versions of the beautiful coffee table collections of photography and prose that David Brower edited for the Sierra Club, lined my bookshelves. I'd taken Wisconsin Indian kids from the reservation to Washington DC to meet their senator, Gaylord Nelson, a champion of conservation and lead author of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Bill, the previous summer.

But I missed all these things that were happening.

There was a reason for that. The war in Viet Nam was sucking all the air out of the room.

Still a blip on the radar when Johnson was re-elected, it had escalated sharply. Like many of my generation I saw no purpose to the war, which consumed resources that might otherwise fight poverty, and resulted in the deaths of people I knew and countless more Vietnamese, who had done nothing to us. My non-working hours were given to protesting the war, any way I could. As the body counts rose and it became clear that "the light at the end of the tunnel" which Johnson had promised was only a freight train speeding toward us, the war made him increasingly unpopular, and his good work increasingly invisible.

During the 1964 elections, Johnson's slogan had been "All the Way with LBJ." But students had worn buttons reading "Part of the Way with LBJ," cheering his civil rights and poverty efforts, but pushing him to de-escalate the war. When he failed to do so, their anger rose to a fever pitch. "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" they chanted. Yet Johnson suffered the fatal flaw of hubris—he could not bring himself to acknowledge a mistake. He was looking for face-saving ways to reach a settlement, but for most of the protestors, it was way too little, way too late.

In early 1968, push came to shove. The Tet Offensive in February shocked many previously complacent or even war-supporting Americans. Senator Eugene McCarthy, and then Bobby Kennedy, entered the primaries against Johnson. And though he won a close victory over McCarthy in New Hampshire, Johnson seemed to know he was beaten. On March 31, he announced that he would not run for re-election. Hope for an end to the war filled the air, only to succumb to despair, as first Martin Luther King, and then, Bobby Kennedy, fell to assassins' bullets. By August, the Democratic convention turned into a bloody police riot, as even legitimate delegates were brutalized. In some circles, hatred for Johnson reached a fever pitch.

"In such an ugly time," wrote the folksinger Phil Ochs at that time, "the true protest is beauty." In his own way, Johnson agreed.

And his campaign for beauty would have one last hurrah.

CONSERVATION'S GRAND SLAM

It came on October 2, just a month before Nixon edged Humphrey in the Presidential election, on a day when a far more newsworthy story rocked the world press. In Mexico City's Tlatelolco plaza, army snipers opened fire on unarmed students who were protesting the upcoming Olympic games. The death toll was in the hundreds.

So once again, none of us were paying attention when Lyndon Johnson signed four bills—"Conservation's Grand Slam"—protecting America's beauty: the Redwoods National Park, North Cascades National Park, Wild and Scenic Rivers and National Scenic Trails System acts.

"In the past 50 years," Johnson said as he affixed his signature to the bills, "we have learned—all too slowly, I think—to prize and to protect, God's precious gifts."

The warrior of a thousand battles and nearly as many victories, weary and weakened then—and less than five years from his early death at age 63—took a moment to honor his wife and her mentor. He wished to pay tribute, he said, "finally, to Mrs. Johnson, who has been an ardent, enthusiastic, pertinacious advocate—long before she ever dreamed she would be in this house, but every minute that she has been in it—for the complete cause of conservation…This is really a monument to you Secretary Udall. Our children will remember your great adventures and pioneering."

Years later, I listened to an audio recording of Johnson's words that day. His voice cracked. "The redwoods will stand," he said, with little of the energy he once commanded, "because the men and women of vision and courage made their stand [against a very powerful timber lobby]—refusing to suffer any further exploitation of our national wealth, any greater damage to our environment, or any larger debasement of that quality and beauty without which life itself is quite barren."

As I think of Johnson now. I am reminded of Shakespeare's Mark Anthony, musing on Caesar: "The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones." I am still firmly convinced that Johnson was wrong about Viet Nam—not evil, but wrong. And yet that is what we most remember—not his Civil Rights Act or his quite successful efforts to fight poverty, and even less, his noble crusade to preserve the beauty that is ours.

We forget these things to our peril—beauty, especially, helped unite Americans after Kennedy's untimely death. It can again. There is an unfinished legacy here, the unfinished legacy of the baby boomers who, in Jackson Browne's words, tried "to make the journey back to nature," who filled the streets on the first Earth Day. The unfinished legacy of the unsung heroes like Udall and Lady Bird, and the environmental pioneers from Muir to Leopold to Carson and Brower. The unfinished legacy of LBJ himself.

It may be tilting at windmills, but I don't think so.

AND BEAUTY FOR ALL DAY

Join with us in the AND BEAUTY FOR ALL campaign—to restore the mountaintops of Appalachia and the wetlands of Louisiana, reawaken the deserted small towns of rural America and the bleak streets and weed-filled open spaces in our cities, turn the vacant spaces to farms and parks and let beauty flourish throughout the land. We don't need to reinvent the wheel—the beautification campaign of the Johnson years is still a blueprint for what can be if we are bold and true to our heritage.

We in the richest country on earth have the resources for "CPR"—*conservation, preservation and restoration* of our land and communities, for the jobs that enhance beauty and quality of life which the market has overlooked, for the justice and democracy that insists on beauty for ALL, not just the favored few.

While I believe we must begin to organize this effort individually even now, seeking the support of all who love our land and its communities, there is a day when we can, and should, *all* come together to proclaim our love of beauty and each other. That day is October 2 of next year, the 50th anniversary of the day when Lyndon Johnson hit "Conservation's Grand Slam." The Redwoods National Park reminds us that quality is not measured in board feet; the North Cascades remind us of how little "untrammeled" beauty remains; the Wild and Scenic Rivers remind us that water is the lifeblood of the planet and streams are its arteries; and National Scenic Trails remind us that it is not the speed of travel but the direction that counts.

On October 2 next year, a time when schools are all back in session, Fall's colors blaze brightly and it's still mild enough everywhere to get outside, let's honor what enlightened men and women saved for us.

Let's gather to celebrate our heritage and vow to resume the quest for liberty, justice *and beauty* for all.

We've got a legacy to stand on.