

## **Celebration of The Committee on Beautiful Ideas**

*Judith Summerfield*

Congratulations to this year's COBI award winners; your projects were inspired. I am very pleased to be here today, to share in your celebration and your accomplishments. I want to thank the Committee for including me in this remarkable event and to thank Provost Daisy Cocco De Filippis for her vision, strength, and daring. Thanks to Professors Kim Sanabria, Robert Cohen and Amanda Bernal-Carlo for their inspired contributions and commitment to our University-wide projects, particularly the reform of General Education. It is Amanda's community garden that got me thinking of general education as that abandoned lot that needs to be transformed into a commons where faculty can work together to effect institutional change, as you are doing here at Hostos.

This is my second celebration of the Committee on Beautiful Ideas (COBI) with you. And I remember last year that I brought you a poem—William Carlos Williams' "A Sort of a Song," with that remarkable line: "No ideas but in things."

### **A SORT OF A SONG**

Let the snake wait under  
his weed  
and the writing  
be of words, slow and quick, sharp  
to strike, quiet to wait,  
sleepless.  
—through metaphor to reconcile  
the people and the stones.  
Compose. (No ideas  
but in things) Invent!  
Saxifrage is my flower that splits  
the rocks.

And that extraordinary image of small purple and white and pink flowers having the power to split granite.

As I was thinking about today's celebration of the work of the Committee on Beautiful Ideas, I felt again moved to poetry, and I stopped to wonder why. That's what I want to talk about today—why your work evokes poetry—art, music, celebration, and hope.

I take this project seriously, this COBI. It is, for me, the most unconventional, sound, and forceful project at CUNY. The project is unconventional: it flies in the face of prevailing winds that make us to attend to depersonalized gerunds and reified nouns: teaching, learning assessment; to outcomes, summations, totals that signal failures, deficiencies; to inabilities that signal impossibilities. Failure rates, killer courses, remediation, that can level the faint at heart.

COBI challenges this view of the world: and for me, it gets to the heart of other more powerful belief systems that I want to explore a bit—for and with you, and for myself, as well.

Because I'm a fan of COBI, I publicize your efforts: at Hunter College last week, I spoke about COBI with a group of faculty involved in Gen Ed reform; in Colorado last month, I talked with faculty and administrators from our Carnegie leadership group on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. I told them how you marketed the idea over months through postcards, art, mystery, how the whole college became involved, and I spoke of the spirit of the project, the sense of possibility.

For me, it's a site where teaching and learning make sense: where faculty and students create new courses that cross boundaries between college and the community, where students get to know spiders and new technologies, probe urban and global landscapes, face critical local health issues; where students explore leadership, power, gender issues, and where faculty probe new ways of teaching, of knowing science through new perspectives, and pedagogies that challenge students to "know as you go." This is the meta-cognitive turn that is the mark of sound pedagogy.

COBI is a force—of energy, of power, of an idea—that is so bold and simple, lucid, and elegant: and it reminds me of Guy Davenport's book of essays, *Every Force Evolves a Form*. And within the form—this poem—the rules emerge: inspired leadership to give faculty the room, the resources, recognition to do the work of teaching, of opening the doors for students.

But Beauty? In thinking about today, I was looking for another poem to give you, to add to this history you are making. And I found just what I needed. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*. Scarry is a professor of English at Harvard, who has written on the body in pain, on dreaming, and on global values. In *On Beauty*, she insists that beauty presses us towards a greater concern for justice:

What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even to require the act of replication. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful the hand wants to draw it. Beauty brings copies of itself into being.

Beauty makes us stop and think about meaning and significance. It makes us think of that which opposes beauty. Not death, but life. Not Thanatos, but Eros.

Beauty, says Scarry, always place in particulars. "No ideas but in things." Beauty has forward momentum.

Beauty, she writes, calls for a:

“... willingness continually to reise one’s own location in order to place oneself in the path of beauty [and this] is the basic impulse underlying education. One submits oneself to other minds [teachers] in order to increase the chance that one will be looking in the right direction when a comet makes its sweep through a certain patch of sky.”

And “by perpetuating beauty, institutions of education help incite the will toward continual creation.”

My father, to whom I inevitably return when I think about what matters, was a refugee from the Russian Civil War. He faced untold calamity, came to this country alone when he was seventeen; it took him a year and a week to get here, and he wandered for the next twenty years, and then found my dear mother, who at thirty-four was considered a spinster. I was born two years later, my father nearing forty, my mother thirty-six. My sister was born when my mother was forty-two. He called my sister and me, his two children, “Beauty.”

“Hello, Beauty,” he would say. And every day, when he opened the door to step outside, he said, “Oh, what a beautiful day.” The world, he was saying in spite of all the odds against it being so, is full of possibility.

Your beautiful ideas, here, today, in this room, get to the very heart of this embrace of hope.

That is COBI—it is that generative creativity where you make the world new.

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