

Leonard Cohen: Songs of Longing for “Social Beauty”?

By [Dr. Robert Rennebohm](#)

Global Research, September 30, 2019

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [History](#)

I recently watched Marianne and Leonard, a documentary film about Leonard Cohen, the great Canadian poet and musician. The film, directed by Nick Broomfield, focuses on Leonard’s relationship with Marianne Ihlen, but also dwells extensively on Cohen’s depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and other life struggles.

While watching the movie, I got the impression that Leonard, throughout his life, knew that something profoundly important and necessary was missing, not only in his own life, but in the lives of many, if not most.

Leonard did not seem to understand, though, what, exactly, was missing; what was wrong; what was making him feel so profoundly sad, for himself and for society as a whole; what the source of his profound sense of yearning was. He searched for answers, but failed to discover the cause or remedy for the individual and collective sickness of the soul that he deeply sensed.

Through his poetry and music, however he succeeded marvelously in expressing his deep sense of unresolved longing. At the same time, in the same songs, he also expressed a sense of hope, even jubilation, that great goodness might be possible. As one listens to “Anthem,”² for example, one notes this mixture of two opposites: on the one hand, it seems to express a profound sadness for suffering souls who are desperately longing for meaningfulness; on the other hand it expresses an exhilarating hope for imagined goodness. Both are expressed, simultaneously, which is an interesting and unusual accomplishment.

Both Leonard and his admiring audiences and fans have always seemed to sense that he was beautifully and movingly expressing something profound and important. Leonard deserves great credit for caring to express, and being able to so beautifully and humbly express, both his deep despair and his great hope, simultaneously, in the same song.

What was it that Leonard yearned for, desperately searched for, and seemed to never fully understand or find? I would suggest that, perhaps, it was Social Beauty for which he so deeply longed. (Please see an explanation of Social Beauty at the end of this essay.) I don’t think he ever recognized that a paucity of Social Beauty might have been a major cause of his sadness and disappointment. Neither he, nor those around him (nor the director of this movie, for that matter) seemed to understand that the root cause of their sickened souls may well have been a paucity of Social Beauty in their lives, and the lives of most.

In his desperate attempts to deal with his longing, Leonard delved into all kinds of unsuccessful “searching” experiences and behaviors: LSD and other drugs, “free love,”

“loving everyone,” trying Buddhism, relying on the adulation of adoring fans and the exhilaration of concert performances. None of these searchings worked, probably because they missed the point. They did not address the probable root cause of the profound emptiness and disappointment he appeared to feel. Instead, his searchings (except for his Buddhist experience, perhaps) proved to be destructive substitutes that served only to partially and superficially assuage his pain.

As much as he loved and appreciated Marianne, she, by herself, could not satisfy his yearning for Social Beauty. No single person can. She could have helped him much more, if she had understood what, exactly, he was missing—but she, too, did not realize that a paucity of Social Beauty was a likely source of most people’s sickened souls.

So, the movie depicts a tragic story of a complex man who, to his great credit, was deeply aware that something was missing, something was wrong, not only in his life but in the lives of most people, and who cared to beautifully share that concern through his gifted musicianship; but who did not understand what, exactly, was missing. As a result, he succumbed to one failed search after another, never figured out the root cause of his (and society’s) sadness, never received help in doing so, and never found what he was missing. Nor did his friends, including Marianne. Unfortunately, the director of the movie also missed this point.

Returning to Leonard’s marvelous music, perhaps the reason it is so much appreciated is that it powerfully expresses a profound, though vague, yearning for Social Beauty—a yearning that so many of us share. While listening to his song “Hallelujah,” for example, consider the possibility that it is profoundly expressing both a sad longing for Social Beauty and the exhilaration we might feel if we could experience more Social Beauty. Especially in K.D. Lang’s singing of this song, some of the “hallelujahs” sound like cries of deep anguish; while other “hallelujahs” sound like cheers of sheer joy. Some of her “hallelujahs” sound cold and broken; others feel warm and hopeful. As you listen to the song “Democracy is coming to the USA,³” think of it as a wishful expression of hope that Social Beauty might soon be coming to the USA.

I think Leonard’s music appealed because he so movingly tapped into people’s (largely unrecognized) longing for Social Beauty, while simultaneously providing an exhilarating glimpse of how Social Beauty could feel. Leonard, Marianne, their talented but confused friends, and the director of the movie, probably did not fully understand this.

In short, Leonard seemed to be suffering, more than anything else, from a deep unfulfilled yearning for Social Beauty—unfulfilled because Western culture is so short on Social Beauty and so long on its powerful opposite. In other words (since Big Pharma likes to make up new diagnostic labels and give them abbreviations), we could say that Leonard was suffering from Social Beauty Deficit Disorder (SBDD), not to mention the PTSD that current western culture also creates. Big Pharma would prefer to treat SBDD with some sort of mind-altering pill; but the better treatment would be to publicly discuss how we could democratically create more Social Beauty and democratically decrease its opposite.

Whether he realized it, or not (probably not), maybe that is what Leonard’s songs (subconsciously, on his part) were asking us to do.

Poor Leonard. He knew something was profoundly wrong; but he could not clearly identify cause or solution, and, sadly, no one effectively helped him. He cared deeply. Despite his

SBDD, or probably because of it, he at least created wonderful music that expressed both the current dearth of Social Beauty and the exhilarating potential for future creation of more of it.

But, Leonard's angst is not the most important story here. His is one cautionary tale that introduces us to a much bigger, more important story—which is that most people in the USA (and elsewhere in Western cultures) appear to be suffering from SBDD to one extent or another, mostly to a huge extent. SBDD appears to be epidemic—much more epidemic than even the enormous opioid crisis, which is most likely just an extreme manifestation of SBDD. Pathological societies—ones that produce so little Social Beauty and create so much of its opposite—breed pathological individual and collective behaviors. For the sake of all who suffer from SBDD, perhaps we should democratically create new social arrangements that generate Social Beauty (for example, create vast Public Activity, comprehensive Public Economies, and uplifting Public Cultures), while we democratically disassemble the old mean social arrangements that have been generating the opposite of Social Beauty. That would be a far better tribute to the late Leonard Cohen than is the movie *Marianne and Leonard*. (Leonard died in November, 2016.)

Social Beauty[1]

Social Beauty refers to social arrangements, and the effects generated by those arrangements, that increase expression and practice of the best capacities of our human nature—e.g., our capacities for kindness, empathy, compassion, altruism, creativity, and the arts. Such social arrangements generate high levels of individual and collective Human Spirit, high feelings of gratitude for Life, Nature, and each other, including gratitude for opportunities to contribute to the well-being of others. These arrangements are reflections of a deep love and respect for Humanity and the Earth; and these arrangements beget even deeper and more practiced love and respect. These arrangements and the social activities and effects associated with them, are things of Social Beauty, and they increasingly generate further Social Beauty. They encourage, support, create, and give practice to escalating levels of individual and collective kindness, dignity, grace, calmness, confidence, and competence.

These social arrangements, the social activities associated with them, and the effects generated by them, move our hearts and minds via the senses and emotions, as well as intellectually. Like great music, great visual art, and Nature's beauty, they deeply touch and stir our humanity. They inspire, motivate, deepen, heal, awaken, empower, and liberate; they up-regulate feelings of gratitude, caring, and love. They increase consciousness, address profound social longings, enhance the meaningfulness of life, provide clarity, enliven imagination and conscience, and give us confidence in ourselves and Humanity. These arrangements and activities teach us what it means to be human; they transform people, individually and collectively, as all increasingly participate in the creation of ever-more Social Beauty.

The Opposite of Social Beauty

The opposite of Social Beauty are the social arrangements, social activities, and the effects generated by them, that increase expression and practice of the worst capacities of our human nature—e.g., our capacities to be selfish, mean, callous, ungrateful, uncaring, untrusting, and spiteful. The opposite of Social Beauty are mean social arrangements that degrade us, individually and collectively, suppress us, seduce us, exploit us, depress us,

discourage us, and crush our souls. These “mean arrangements of man” (as Victor Hugo would call them), and the activities and effects associated with them, represent the opposite of Social Beauty. They are reflections of a lack of deep love and respect for Humanity and the Earth, or at least inadequately practiced love and respect; and they increasingly beget further lack of love and respect. These mean social arrangements are extraordinarily powerful; they have the characteristics of malignancy, and as such, they are difficult to disassemble.

Excerpts from Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem”[2]

Ring the bell that still can ring,

Forget your perfect offering,

There is a crack, a crack in everything,

That’s how the light gets in.

Excerpts from Leonard Cohen’s “Democracy is Coming to the USA” (but substituting Social Beauty for Democracy)”[3]

It’s coming through a hole in the air,
From those nights in Tiananmen Square,
It’s coming from the feel that this ain’t exactly real,
Or, its real, but it ain’t exactly there.

From the war against disorder,
From the sirens night and day,
From the fires of the homeless,
From the ashes of the Gay,

Social Beauty is coming...to the USA.

Its coming from the sorrow in the street,
The holy places where the races meet,
From the homicidal bitchin’
That goes down in every kitchen,
To determine who will serve and who will eat,

From the wells of disappointment
Where the women kneel to pray,
For the grace of God in the desert here,
And the desert far away,

Social Beauty is coming... to the USA.

It’s here the family’s broken,
And its here the lonely say,
That the heart, it’s got to open,
In a fundamental way,

Social Beauty is coming... to the USA.

Sail on, Sail on,
O mighty ship of state,
To the shores of need,
Past the reefs of greed,

Through the squalls of hate,

Sail on, Sail on, Sail on....

I'm sentimental, if you know what I mean,
I love the country, but I can't stand the scene,
And I'm neither left or right,
I'm just staying home tonight,
Getting lost in that hopeless little screen,

But I'm stubborn as those garbage bags,
That time cannot decay,
I'm junk but I'm still holding up,
This little wild bouquet.

Social Beauty is coming...to the USA...to the USA....

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Featured image is from flickr

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Dr. Robert Rennebohm](#), Global Research, 2019

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Dr. Robert Rennebohm](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca