# *Beauty as a Worldview: Interview with Tom Bender*

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Tom Bender is a longtime activist for the sustainable communities and environment movement with articles published in industry journals as well as in general interest publications such as Parabola and the Utne reader. A journalist and architect he is the author of two recently published volumes *Silence Shadow and Song: Our Need for the Sacred in Our Surroundings* and *Building with the Breath of Life*.

During the energy crisis of the 1970's his study titled *Living Lightly* examined the viability of reducing energy consumption in America by 80% without sacrificing "quality of life". Capturing the attention of the Governor of Oregon, Tom was brought west to work on strategies for energy conservation. Since then he has worked with Governor's offices in California and Oregon, and has given direction to the Office of Technology Assessment for the U.S. Congress.

In 1973 he received a grant from The National Endowment for the Arts to study the then little known Asian discipline of *Feng Shui*. Since that time Tom has evolved his architecture in accordance with the ancient Asian principles of placement, expanding his expertise into the understanding of "the energetics of place" as practiced in ancient and modern cultures around the Globe.

Winner of several awards in the field of sustainable architecture, he lives on the Oregon coast near the town of Manzanita, where I met and interviewed him on September 12.2000.

**J St:** Tom I read your book on "the sacred while doing research on the role of ritual and ceremony in healing, in connection to the experience of beauty. An area that I am examining right now is "beauty as a worldview". When I read your book I was taken with the idea that you would have an understanding of this area, and that we could have a conversation about this more esoteric picture of what beauty is.

**TB:** Yes

**JSt:** To begin do you have a personal definition of beauty?

**TB:** You probably noticed in the book that I have a quote from the I Ching about the limits of what aesthetics or beauty can do. I look at that from our culture. Our culture has an approach to aesthetics and beauty that is tied in with a materialist way of looking at things, which I find very unuseful - if not harmful. So I usually steer away from both terms. They are almost like red flags if somebody is focused on that, from our cultural perspective. Aesthetics is self-defining in our culture, from what our past experience, or our culture defines as beautiful, and is rarely open to just approaching something openly and discovering the beauty that *it is.* I mean after all we came - *Europeans* came - to this whole continent and had no sense of the beauty of it, or its people, or anything that was here. It was "let's just destroy it and use what is here". And so this is one reason that I try to carefully keep away from those terms.

Anything that we really become close to, working with, living with, we find beauty in, it becomes sacred to us. *That (sacredness) is there in everything that is unfamiliar to us also.* But we keep separate from it until we become familiar. To me it is important to be able to connect with things directly. Things that we are unfamiliar with, particularly at this time in the world of different cultures, different people, different forms of life, different forms of consciousness; all these things which we are coming into contact with - and finding the joy and the connection that is there.

So - what was the question? (Laughter)

**JSt:** Well, bearing in mind that you have steered away from using the term beauty, because of the way it's been defined and used in our culture, do you have a personal definition of what this experience is? A more esoteric perspective of what the experience, the phenomenon of beauty is?

**TB:** I guess I don't use the term very much... I'm trying to see where I go without those words and it is connection, meaning, joy, ecstasy, oneness, those are ... labels that I would use for pieces of what I would be experiencing, if I put that *beauty* label on it.

**JSt:** So that phenomenon, that "knowing" would include all those things?

**TB:** Yes

**JSt:** I agree with you, the value judgments, the cultural judgments that we've constructed to be "aesthetic" or a part of "the beautiful", that have meaning or value as beauty in this culture, are largely driven by materialism. And also, I believe, by the need to keep certain "haves" in power and "have-nots" out of power.. .. The "aesthetic" and "the beautiful" become inaccessible to certain levels of the population. I also think that the aesthetic values of those who are "not in power" are negated, causing them to believe that what is aesthetically true for them is not (true).

**TB:** Let me take off on that for a second. The old Balinese saying has always been really important to me " We don't have art we just do everything as well as we can" and I would extend that to beauty. There are a lot of different cultures, and I cannot speak for what experience of aesthetics or beauty exists in each of them.. .but there is a quote in the book from the 1800's dealing with Feng Shui in China that is a comparison Maurice Friedman makes between an English person and a Chinese experiencing a landscape. The English person says how beautiful it is; it is something out there separate from them that they look at. The Chinese perspective was - Oh how much at home I feel, I feel home-ness here, I feel connection, I feel a part of this - no sense of "beautiful" no sense of it being separate, they are part of it.

You go into Egyptian culture, or Mayan for example, (cultures) that are very deeply and intimately connected with the spirit world, Native American obviously as well, and the levels of connection and meaning are far different from the materialist. I don't mean that negative, but just looking at the physical world that is so dominant in our culture. I would say that the experience of beauty . . . we'll call it beauty - whatever amorphous thing we are dealing with - is very different in different cultures.

The whole thing of "*aesthetics*" comes from our culture. The whole thing of space in architecture for example, the focus on that, or the visual element of things, is totally our culture. You get into other cultures and those things are very subsidiary in importance. You get "place" rather than "space", "meaning" rather than "aesthetics". The experience is quite separate from the current materialistic global culture. I live less and less in that materialistic global culture so I am hesitant to say "our".

**JSt:** That gets down to the crux of what I am looking at which I have defined as a Beauty Worldview. If that word (beauty) doesn't work we can use another word.

**TB:** It's fine and I sense that a lot of the things that you probably have found.. .I found also and we probably agree a 100% on. And they are coming from some of these deeper things. Outside of the "beauty" word.

**JSt:** I think that the word in our culture has been so devalued and become such a -

**TB:** Advertising merchandising gimmick?

**JSt:** Right! So disconnected from what I believe the original impulse of beauty is, like when we talk about *truth*, *beauty*, and *goodness* or in a Navaho Chantway "Beauty above me, Beauty

below me". That is a totally different phenomenon than what in our culture we commercialize as beauty. And I think that there is a lot of pathology that exists in our culture because of that. Because we are so disconnected from the truth of what that (beauty) is.

**TB:** Absolutely. And even if you take the word beauty, and say that it exists in the Navaho language, the whole linguistic structure of other cultures is so totally different.. . We think we are understanding, because we have the same word, we think that we are connecting with what that experience of that "thing" is in their language and culture - and it may be very different.

**JSt:** Yet there are some levels at which there are similarities. You mentioned some of them, connection seems to show up cross culturally. And I think there are some phenomenon and experiences that are universal experiences of beauty - natural beauty, like sunsets. I think there are experiences that go beyond our sense experiences that we recognize cross culturally as being experiences of profound beauty, that are so deep so connecting, and so touch our souls that we recognize from culture to culture: "this is an experience of beauty".

I also think that the beauty experience is a vibratory and resonance experience, that happens within the body and that we don't so much learn it as we recognize **it** (then later our culture teaches us to learn it). We have this innate sense that tells when we've had an experience of beauty and we ***know*** it. I think that is a cross cultural experience, that knowing.

**TB:** Yes - and that is what resonates with you ... based on who you are in your culture as well as just what you are as protoplasm. That's another dimension, which is the whole energetic (dimension) what I call the Chi energy or Life Force energy.

I find that (Chi) to be a mechanism through which a lot of these things operate, and a very powerful perspective for perceiving and working in the world. The more we tune into the energy of people, place, situations, institutions, the more we get to their core. If somebody is asking us a question and if we are paying attention to what is coming from the heart as well as what we are hearing from the head, we are hearing different things.

More and more I find my self saying "what I am hearing you say is this -" which maybe quite different from what came from their mouth and more and more they will shake their head yes in essence (saying) "that's what's in my heart and I was afraid to ask". When we connect and work on that energetic level, because we get to real issues, real questions and real relationships, we can be a lot more effective in whatever we are doing. Whether it's connected with nature, or talking to someone in business.

**JSt:** So this idea, that there could be a world view that is informed out of beauty, if I am hearing you right, to a certain extent already exists within these other cultures that see "energetics" as a part of the way that we originate life. If we come out of this Chi energy, this understanding of the spirit, we manifest a different world than we do if we come out the idea that this is a material world and we are material beings.

**TB:** Absolutely.

**JSt:** The "sustainable community movement", has there been a change, a shift towards this larger understanding. There certainly is in the popular culture - this high interest in the idea that we are an energetic being. Do you see it changing?

**TB:** The sustainable community movement, by my perception, has been very "materialist" trying to deal with things that *had* to be dealt with. But the energy and values part of it is really coming together; these two books (*Silence, Song, and Shadow: Our Need for the Sacred in Our Surroundings* and *Building with the Breath of Life*) are just the beginnings of it coming together on that level. The interest that I am getting back on this stuff is just mushrooming. People are saying "OK - that's the thing that has been bugging me all along, why I felt something missing in the sustainable community". Also there is the whole healing architecture, healing environment

movement building up.

Looked at from an energetic level - we *are* connected with everything, we *are* in communication with everything. And once we are in connection, as that deepens with any particular thing, there is a love interchange which develops.

We begin to hold things sacred because of that and then - *bam*! - we are home. To me it (Chi energy) is something there, underlying, all we have to do really is to open our hearts. Then we have to go from that and straighten up all the physical things that we have messed up around us.

**JSt:** Do you see the economics moving that way as well, what it really takes to get things done?

**TB:** Yes. twenty-five years ago I started what is now called *factor ten economics*. Basically saying "we can get ten times the effectiveness out of however we do most anything in our culture, than what we do now".

I started in 1973 dealing with energy use. At that point people were saying we had to reduce our energy use 80% to hit what the world can sustain. I said, "Can we do this?" and looked at a home first, to see how we could reduce the energy use of a home. At that point the standard belief was not only do we need energy - but we need increasing energy - more and more for things to be "good".

What I showed was that we could reduce our energy use by 90% with no change in our material quality of life and a change for the better in our life quality. People thought I was absolutely crazy. There are a lot of demonstration houses now, which do that, and with much less change in how we live. I've since looked at that *(factor ten economics)* in forestry, and in higher education.

For example I did a study for the students at the University of Oregon where the university wanted to tear down some student housing and replace it with new. By looking at the whole system, everything that is involved (because we tend to leave a lot of pieces out) and first asking what we are really looking for - I find it's usually not material things - usually it's *feeling* good in some way. Then by asking how can we get there more directly, without all the expenditure of time and energy and resources, again and again I come up with at least ten fold efficiency savings.

That's just me, and people thought that was crazy. But at this point Paul Hawkens and Amory Lovins just published a book titled *Natural Capitalism*, and Lovins published one called *Factor Four*, in Britain. This has become big business, with governments endorsing it as the focus of economic operation. Natural Capitalism has a whole paragraph of all the mainline economics people that are buying into this approach. That is only one piece, but to see how much it has transformed in the last five years is very encouraging.

**JSt:** Do you think there will be a jump into this understanding of what energetics is all about?

**TB:** Yes. We are at the point of acknowledging that life force energy - *Chi energy*, *prahna*, whatever you want to call it - exists and has existed. Every culture virtually on the planet has based their whole culture, their healing arts, everything on it. We can experience it, it can be taught. It's even become a corporate bonding thing to do - fire walking; those types of things, many people have experienced.

Often when I am giving a talk I ask "how many know what Chi is, how many have experienced it personally?" There is a big generational difference, with older folks and academics it's 10% maybe 20%. But with a younger generation, 90% even 100%....part of that comes from

growing up in a culture that has not been trained absolutely *against* the existence of such things.

What's happening in the healing fields with energy healing is just tremendous. Things like Chi Gung that are tied together with very ancient practices for working with the energy in the body. People actually feel the Chi moving in their bodies, and these are not people going into this for an esoteric reason. They are people who are desperate medically. I find it fascinating how quickly this "stuff" is coming together.

**JSt:** Is that recognition occurring from a consciousness level or is it the connecting of consciousness to the physical level? What do you think is going on with this recognition of the Chi energy? Obviously it has always been there.

**TB:** It's "hundredth monkey" or what ever you want to call it. More and more people have experienced it. Now when you bring it up people aren't saying, "you're crazy," they are saying "Oh yeah!". When it gets to the point that you are free to talk about "it" to anyone at anytime - then things just turn over very quickly. That shift in consciousness takes very little, just a perception change, and when the culture is to that point - "it" just pops.

As more pieces of this come together, the more the knowledge is unavoidable. Energetics in healing, in martial arts and meditation; there are whole groups of people who are well aware of those areas. What has been fascinating to me working with the *energy of place* is that area really has not been together. So what these two books bring into focus is how working with these things in our own surroundings we connect with it (Chi); then a whole other piece of the puzzle is added on.

**JSt:** Do you think it is possible that the experience of beauty is an energy pattern or resonance or signature in the body.

**TB:** I am sure that there are elements of what anyone perceives as beauty, which are based in that. I know there are important energetic things that happen when anyone perceives beauty, out of what ever their basis is of physiological things, which you can talk about as embracing energy. There is an opening, a letting down of barriers emotionally inside which happens. Which allows a healing opening in connection with the energies around us.

**JSt:** Do you think beauty is a sense, like our sense of heat, or balance, or smell?

**TB:** I would say that every person has a sense of beauty, which is brought into the body through a hundred different sensing mechanism and I doubt that what is sensed by one person is the same as the other, though the responses maybe the same.

**JSt:** That's my guess, that the response is the same, and there are many doorways.

**TB:** Another piece is that anything that we perceive communicates to us the intentions that were put into its existence. Particularity things that we make. You can read psychologically or energetically what people's values were, what they were trying to do. Whether it is public housing or cigarette advertising or a sacred place or whatever, these all communicate to us exactly what people's intentions were.

That is one of the most important things that we pick up in our perceiving of, to me, what you would call beauty; the wholeness or holiness of a person's intention in making something. The intention for it to be healing, ensouling, whatever. Not only is it there from the intention, but you can read who this person was and what they were trying to do.

**JSt:** Our youth is bombarded with the idea that the consuming of goods - the material world - is where their satisfaction should lie. Can you comment on the tension that results between being literally hypnotized into believing this and something that is at the core of the human that recognizes this as false? Do you see any relationship between that and the type of response we

saw in Seattle with the WTO riots? The potential for violence?

**TB:** First off I don't feel that the response to the WTO *was* violent, I feel that it was incredibly powerful, coherent, "beauty based" if you will. The kids involved were bringing music, dance art and connection between people.. .magic and ritual. *That was not violent.* The violence was mostly coming from the other direction, and there were individuals that took advantage to smash windows, but they were not part of the organizers. Friends and children of friends were there and also our oldest son was in DC.

They are only kids most of them. I was totally amazed at how well they were going about what they were trying to achieve there. I was blown away at what they have learned and how positive - from an energetic standpoint, a beauty standpoint, a wholeness standpoint - they were in approaching things. They were trying to affirm an alternative to what they were in opposition to, what it was they were feeling was being harmful to them.

**JSt:** Can you comment on this idea that material goods will satisfy and then the recognition that they don't, the tension that such a scenario sets up and the potential for violence.

**T.B.** What I see in the kids around here is that this "thing" bombards them, which is empty to their soul. Inevitably they have had other experiences, for instance drugs, which give them access on a temporary basis to another view. Somehow this frees them from that "thing" (materialism) as the only input they know, which allows them to see that someone is *taking from them,* and giving them a world which is empty. *Taking from them* the things which should be a part of all of their existence and relationships.

A lot of kids, just because of the way our culture is opening up, have experienced the sacred, or other levels and forms of consciousness, other things in their lives. But because of the way our culture has been, they have been led to believe there is something wrong with them. Often they have no way to understand what is happening or put it into context, Our schools rarely touch on these experiences of consciousness, only Papua New Guinea, Samoa and I think New York have people that teach on the psychic in the public schools.

There is incredible tension when they become aware of the gulf that exist between what people are trying to do to them through the culture, and what they experience, through what ever means, as *life giving.* Not having tools to honor that in themselves, to help it develop and grow, find ways of working, living, connecting to people which are based on that, sure that would creates terrible tension. That does create tension in all of us. More so for kids who are just coming into their own? So the potential for violence? Our culture is based on violence. Yes there is potential for violence.

The violence comes out of our culture. Our medicine is violent, we kill bugs, our agriculture is violent, we kill pest, start there and just go anywhere you want.
But more of what I see is that the soul based, beauty based, energy based culture that is emerging, does it's damnedest to avoid that. The intention of the alternatives which are emerging, is absolutely away from violence

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