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The Art Way of Seeing and the Pride We Are Looking For: The Life and Work of Edward Weston

In this article I discuss the life and work of the American photographer, Edward Weston, as well as my own life, to show what the philosophy Aesthetic Realism explains: the way of seeing that makes for art, and the pride we are looking for, comes from the desire to be fair to reality itself, and this desire is the same as true humility.

The grand and the ordinary, the proud and the humble, are opposites that mingle in the content, form, and technique of Weston's work, and this has meaning for our lives. "All beauty is a making one of opposites," Eli Siegel, founder of Aesthetic Realism stated, "and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." In showing that the purpose of life and art are the same, this principle brings new understanding and dignity to humanity, and possibilities of pride that are endless.

Keywords:

Edward Weston, Photography, Ethics, Art, Biography, Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel, Family, Love, Marriage.

Художественный взгляд и великолепие, которые мы ищем: жизнь и творчество Эдварда Уэстона

В этой статье я расскажу о жизни и творчестве американского фотографа Эдварда Уэстона, а также о моей собственной жизни, чтобы показать, что философия эстетического реализма объясняет: способ видения искусства и оценка,которую мы ищем, исходят из стремления быть справедливым по отношению к реальности как таковой, и это стремление близко истинному смирению.

Великое и обыкновенное, великолепное и скромное – эти противоположности соединяются в содержании, форме и технике работы Уэстона, что важно для нашей жизни. «Всякая красота – это создание одной из противоположностей, – утверждал Эли Сигел, основатель эстетического реализма, – а создание одной из противоположностей – это то, что мы ищем в самих себе». Показывая, что цель жизни и искусства одна и та же, данный принцип приносит человечеству новое понимание и знание, а возможности великолепия безграничны.

Ключевые слова:

Эдвард Уэстон, фотография, этика, искусство, биография, эстетический реализм, Эли Сигел, семья, любовь, брак.

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As I write about the life and work of the American photographer, Edward Weston, and my own life, I will show what Aesthetic Realism explains: the way of seeing that makes for art, and the pride we are looking for, comes from the desire to be fair to nothing less than reality itself, and this desire is the same as true humility. In his essay, "Art As, Yes, Humility," Eli Siegel writes: "Humility is the willingness to see things other than oneself as having meaning for oneself. This humility makes for pride; for pride in the long run, comes from the comprehensive and accurate way one is affected by reality, the universe that is under one's nose and is far away" [7, col. 2–6].

I think that people looking at a Weston photograph of a cabbage leaf (Photo 1), sand dunes (Photo 2), a landscape (Photo 3), or clouds (Photo 4), have been taken by the strange and sometimes wondrous forms he found in them, "the universe that is under one's nose and is far away" [Ibid.].

Photo 1. Cabbage Leaf

Photo 2. Sand Dunes

Photo 3. Landscape

Photo 4. Clouds

The grand and the ordinary, the proud and the humble, are opposites that often mingle in Weston's work, and this has meaning for our lives. "All beauty is a making one of opposites," Eli Siegel stated, "and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves" [10, p. viii]. In showing that the purpose of life and art are the same, this principle brings new understanding and dignity to humanity, and possibilities of pride that are endless.

In Edward Weston's journals, published as *The Daybooks*, he has this entry: "I am an adventurer on a voyage of discovery ready to receive fresh impressions, eager for fresh horizons, not in the spirit of a militant conqueror to impose myself or my ideas, but to identify myself in, and unify with, whatever I am able to recognize as significantly part of me: the 'me' of universal rhythms" [4, p. 206].

Weston's purpose, to see reality freshly, and to give visual form to his relation with things, was the source of his proudest self-expression. He also hints at another purpose — to conquer — which he writes about frequently, and with unusual candor throughout his *Daybooks*. Years later, looking back on his writing, he was disturbed by what it revealed about himself, writing in a letter to photo-historian Nancy Newhall, that he found in his *Daybooks* "a record of a not so nice person" [11, p. xi]. But he let most of it stand for the public to see.

Photo 5. Edward Weston with camera

I think he wanted to be known — at his worst and his best — in the hopes that he would, one day, be understood.

I. An attitude to the world begins early

Weston lived from 1886 to 1958, and no history of the medium is considered complete without some presentation of his work. He could revel in the meaning of an ordinary cabbage leaf (Photo 1), and see in it a oneness of assertive luminosity and recessive shadows, a graceful rise and fall, like waves breaking on a shore.He saw grandeur in this simple vegetable, a proud assertiveness in its form at one with ragged imperfections along its edges, and a tear marring its surface.

But Weston did not know that the art he loved held the answer to the terrible rift in him between boastful arrogance and the shame and depression he suffered. And, so, photography became for him not only self-expression, but a refuge — happy only when he was "lost behind my camera or locked in my darkroom" [3, p. 105]. Trying to understand what went on within this important photographer can be a means of understanding the fight in ourselves between true and false pride. This fight is the fight between respect and contempt.

Aesthetic Realism describes contempt as "the addition to self through the lessening of something else" [8, col. 4], and one way it shows itself daily, is acting like people and things are not worthy of our attention or interest. Growing up, I remember how I found it difficult to concentrate for very long on any one thing, including my subjects in school — and although I acted like I didn't care, I felt ashamed of this. In my first Aesthetic Realism consultation[1] with the teaching trio, The Kindest Art, my consultants asked me: "What do you have most against yourself?" I spoke about my difficulty with learning, and mentioned something that had always troubled me, the agitation I felt listening to people talk. I described how I would wait impatiently for the other person to pause so I could jump in and take over the conversation

— and if something came up that I didn't know the answer to, I would make something up. The Kindest Art asked, "Do you feel you humiliate yourself when you want to learn something from others?" I said yes, I did. "And do you make up for it later by asserting yourself intensely? We would like you to see that learning itself is an assertive situation." I felt things in me I'd never put into words were being described, and I was relieved and very grateful. My problems weren't just my own secret torment; they had to do with the structure of reality itself — the opposites that every person is trying to make sense of.

As I studied this, something new occurred: I began to enjoy listening to other people, and learning from them. Being affected by people wasn't a humiliation, it was a means of my own self-expression.

Edward Weston was born in Highland Park, Illinois. His mother, Alice, died when he was only five, and his father, Edward, Sr., soon remarried. Edward and his sister, Mary, nine years older, were given the top floor of the house to live in, where she devoted herself to raising her brother. Mary would be one of the first to see the value of his photographs, and encouraged him to visit the great photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, in New York City, whose criticism inspired him. Meanwhile, she also encouraged him in the feeling he already had — that the Weston family was more refined than others, who were beneath him in intellect and sensitivity. For example, writing to him on August 1, 1905, after she had married and was living in California: "Darling brother… Hold your horses and wait till the right girl comes along. Then I shall meet her with open arms if she isn't common, and I know you would never care for anyone who wasn't nice and refined" [2, p. 31].

Growing up, I felt my mother, Helen Bernstein, had, as I saw it, a very important job — to praise me. And when she didn't I felt hurt. Once, when she was critical of how much time I spent alone in my room, and encouraged me to go out and meet people, I felt outraged and said in disbelief, "What do you expect me to do, just go up to someone and introduce myself?!" Regretfully, it was not until years later that I saw that with this criticism she was trying to have a good effect on me. And when my mother did praise me for something, I saw it as my due and used it to be conceited, feeling I was better than the unappreciative rabble I kept at a distance. This, clearly, is contempt, and the easy thrill it gave me made being interested in other people and seeing their value, seem like too much work. This is how, I believe, Edward Weston used the praise his sister lavished on him. Describing himself as uncomfortable around people, Edward recollects in his *Daybooks* how, as a boy, he preferred "walking miles in bitter winter weather" [4, p. 245]. rather than ride the cable car, to avoid being in the midst of people. And, years later, living in Los Angeles, he writes: "I walked the streets… and found myself a stranger… who were all these drab grey people!? — not my kind!" [2, p. 59].

A person can go back and forth between this false pride, feeling his separation from others is his distinction, and having honest feeling about people and what they deserve. Weston was socially conscious, and spoke out publicly against the shameful forced internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. He was also very much against fascism. This is to be admired and respected very much. Yet, he was aware that something in him hated people, writing: "I would probably be a first-class Fascist, *if* I would let my (contempt) for the Masses get the upper hand" [Ibid., p. 17]. While his statement can seem shocking and far removed from ourselves, I learned that fascism begins with the ordinary desire for contempt that is in the self of every person, and that is why the Aesthetic Realism study of contempt and how to criticize it is urgent.

II.The pride of seeing the world aesthetically

By the time he was in his twenties, and living in California, Weston was internationally known as a photographer, with a growing commercial portrait business. But he was

dissatisfied with the artificially arranged portraits he felt he had to create to satisfy his clientele, and was also coming to feel that the soft focus approach of Pictorialism, the prevailing style of the time, no longer represented him. And, so, he gave up a lucrative practice he felt was hurting his ability to be fair to the possibilities of photography and his own self-expression.

In the history of photography, the softness of Pictorialism and the sharpness of the later *f* 64 school — of which Weston was a cofounder — have been at odds with each other, with photographers on both sides of this divide often denigrating each other's work. However, whether a photograph is blazingly sharp or mistily soft, I learned, it needs these opposites working together to be beautiful — and Weston's best work is evidence for this. Eli Siegel explained in a photography lecture of 1950:

"There is both suggestion and sharpness in painting; and in music we have the effect of Stravinsky and the effect of Debussy. These two things, the suggestive and the clear, the sharp and the misty, are in photography all over the place; and we have photographers going purposely after a misty effect, and we have of course photographers going after resounding clarity, clarity that is almost dazzling."

"This means a great deal, because in art a clear thing is made suggestive, and also a suggestive thing is made clear. Suggestion is an aspect of relation, and clearness is an aspect of individuality or a thing's being by itself" [5, p. 11].

Opposites central to photography — clarity and suggestion, hardness and softness, individuality and relation — are made one in Weston's "Armco Steel, 1922."

We see vertical smokestacks crossed by two horizontal pipes: they are sharply defined in the foreground and become progressively softer as they recede into the background. Through Weston's choice of camera position, he made these lofty stacks close, overlapping, joining what is near to us and distant. He shows hard industrial pipe yielding — see how the dark vertical pipe on the left curves to become horizontal, while the upper pipe has marvelous texture and undulating form.

Photo 6. Armco Steel, 1922

In his book *Self and World* [10, p. 118], Eli Siegel described the vertical line as standing for the self alone and the horizontal line, as it spreads out, as standing for relation. An iconic image in the history of photography, "Armco Steel" — with its joining of vertical and horizontal, separation and junction — is the resolution of the conflict the artist was hoping for in his life.Weston would go to all-night parties, socialize, and then want nothing to do with people, whom he called "the drag of personalities" [2, p. 14]. He writes in his *Daybooks* with a mingling of boastfulness and uncertainty: "It is the time before dawn — a time I love — for aught I know I may be the only living person — for the moment this thought pleases me…yet some human contact is necessary — Anyhow at this hour I seem lord over my dominion and preside in mighty isolation" [3, p. 119].

Yet in his work, Weston often showed that grandeur and lordliness did not have to fight with the seeming modesty of relation, as in this 1923 photograph, "The Great White Cloud of Mazatlan."

Photo 7. The Great White Cloud of Mazatlan

He writes of seeing this "sunlit cloud which rose from the bay to become a towering white column" [1, p. 7]. It is a striking oneness of low and high, vertical structure rising from a base that mirrors the horizon line where water meets sky. This cloud also seems to me both hard and soft at once, maintaining its billowy outline, at the same time it becomes diffuse at the edges and mingles with the surrounding sky. A oneness of opposites, it does not "preside in mighty isolation" [3, p. 119].

III. Conquering in love vs. proud need

Aesthetic Realism describes love, the real thing, as "proud need" [9, col. 1]. And it explains that the feeling we need another person to be more ourselves is a victory for ourselves. Our egos, however, take it as an insult, which explains so much of men's suffering and cruelty in love.

By the time I was twenty I'd had enough failed relationships to feel hopeless about ever finding lasting love with anyone. Sometimes, after being close with a woman I was seeing, I felt driven to find "flaws" in her, which I would coldly tell her about, effectively ending the relationship. Other times, I would put a woman on a pedestal, and become resentful if she showed interest in any one or thing besides me. How fortunate I feel that years later I began to learn from Aesthetic Realism that my mind was made not to conquer, but to be exact about reality, and that to give every person and thing its true value is the height of intellect, kindness, and romance, which is what I feel in my marriage to Harriet Bernstein, my friend, colleague, and important critic of art and literature.

At 23, Weston married his sister's best friend, Flora Chandler, but soon after, began openly to have numerous affairs. Yet, even as he bragged of his conquests, he was haunted by the feeling that he couldn't care deeply for or sustain interest in any one person. He wrote: "Will any one place give me lasting interest, a home? Or any woman? [4, p. 261] ... I am a poor lover, in that I have no...desire for sustained interest... I make a grand beginning, then lose out through indifference" [Ibid., p. 88].

A woman who had a profound effect on Weston's life was Tina Modotti, a model and actress when they first met in 1921 and whom Harriet Bernstein has written of definitively. She became the subject of many of his photographs, and they soon began living together.

Photo 8. Tina Modotti I

Photo 9. Tina Modotti II

Moved by Weston's work, and his passion for photography, she came to feel that it could be a means of her own self-expression. She became his student, hoping to use the camera to show the beauty and dignity of the Mexican people and their land she cared for very much. Together, they traveled to Mexico in 1923, where Tina enabled him to meet many of the important men and women of the Mexican social revolution, whom he photographed. This is the painter Diego Rivera (Photo 10) and Frida Kahlo (Photo 11) and the dancer Rosa Covarrubias (Photo 12).

Photo 10. Diego Rivera

Photo 11. Frida Kahlo

Photo 12. Rosa Covarrubias

But shortly after arriving in Mexico, Weston writes of his relationship with Tina: "Something has gone from between us. Curiosity, the excitement of conquest and adventure is missing" [3, p. 20]. The "excitement of conquest" [Ibid.] is equated with love when, in fact, it was responsible for the pain they caused each other. But Weston also felt something was wrong and writes self-critically, "Certain it is I blush with shame,

growing unutterably miserable when I remember or reread opinions I have indulged in regarding Tina" [Ibid., p. 50].

Artists in every century have felt that the pride they experienced in their field of self-expression was missing from their lives as a whole. In the professional classes I attend taught by Ellen Reiss, the Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education,[2] the arts and sciences are seen as the means of understanding and integrating every aspect of a person's life. In one class discussion on the relation of art and love, Ms. Reiss asked me: "Do you think a good photograph has love? Do you think there is such a thing as an emotion toward a human being that's related to an art emotion — a feeling that 'The whole world is there, and it's closer to me'?"

These questions would have met Edward Weston's deepest hope, as they did mine. When I first met Harriet, I was stirred by her loveliness, and her calm, thoughtful manner. But as we studied Aesthetic Realism, I fell more deeply in love with how she saw the world, her desire to understand people, world events, and art. This, along with her criticism to have me be a better person and photographer, made me want to be close to her always. When I hold her close, and look into her eyes, I feel I am close to a person who wants me to see more meaning in everything — and I love her.

IV. Art and the meaning we are looking for

While in Mexico, Weston took many fine images of landscapes and objects, including plants and vegetables. But while he initially saw some of the portraits of people he took in Mexico as his finest, he later expressed criticism of them, calling them, with some derision, "heroic heads", my "faces and postures period, my heroics of social significance" [1, p. 39]. As I said about myself earlier, when we separate ourselves from the feelings of others, we will either make them better than they are, or worse, as a substitute for knowing them. Weston, like most of us, was uncertain about how to see people, and it did affect many of his portraits. They often strive for dramatic effect, seeming to glorify the subject, while not showing their depths.

"How do I see the person I am looking at?" is an ethical question a portrait photographer is always in the midst of. We need to ask ourselves, as we look through the ground glass of our camera, "Do I hope to have respectful feeling about this person and what they represent, to show what can be respected about them? Or do I want to present some distorted, even grotesque picture of them?"

This portrait is of Lupe Marín, a Mexican model and novelist, who was the second wife of Diego Rivera. Weston once described her as "tall, proud of bearing, almost haughty…" [3, p. 26].

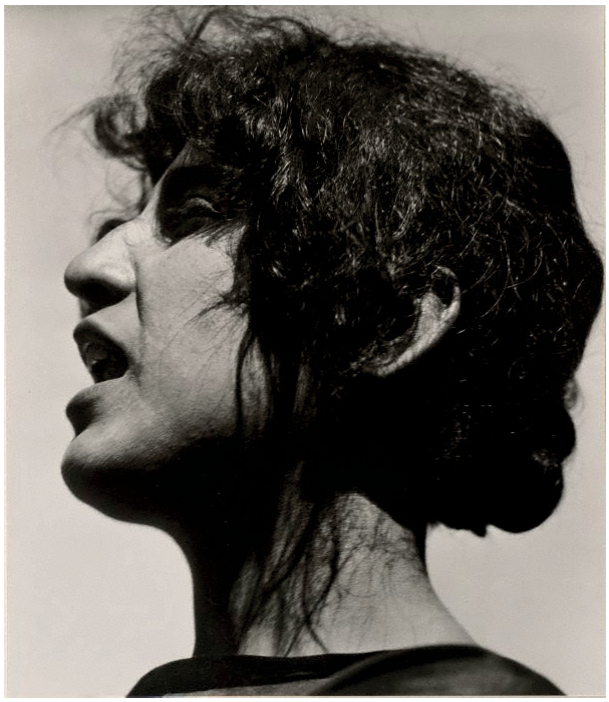

Photo 13. Lupe Marín

A person may be haughty at times, but, I've learned, they are always a oneness of reality's opposites — a mingling of assertion and yielding, light and dark, surface and depth, which this portrait does not capture.

Weston pointed his camera up at Lupe, seeming to glorify her. However, we do not get a sense of who she really is or what she feels. Her eyes are lost in a darkness that merges with her black hair, and the shadows

on her neck. The photographer often gave such loving care to his still lifes and landscapes; he luxuriated in their form and subtle range of dark and light. As a result, you felt more respect and wonder for the subject. But here, there is no subtlety or brilliance of tone, no rapturous form. Rather, there is a heavy, stuck quality, when what the photographer most deeply hoped to honor was a self in motion, in relation to the world.

This next portrait by Weston is, I think, beautiful and reveals dynamic character and purpose in the Mexican Senator Manuel Hernandez Galvan.

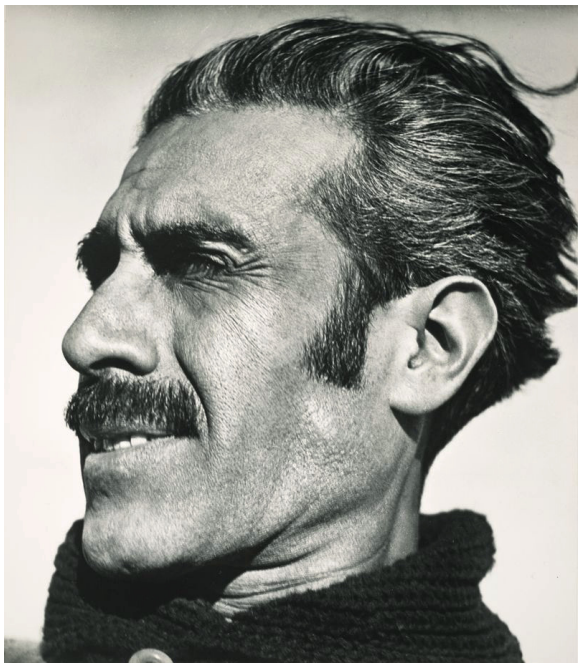

Photo 14. Manuel Hernandez Galvan

He is ruggedly handsome, and the relation of straight line and curve in his profile gives the effect of not only strength, but grace. His eyes are partially in darkness, but unlike the portrait of Lupe, his eyes are intense focal points of energy within the radiant brightness and rich texture of his face. His gaze is intense; he is clearly looking at something, and there is a quality of thoughtfulness and accuracy. The image is closely cropped, but that somewhat humorous stray curve of hair exiting the picture frame at the upper right, the energetic diagonal of his jaw line, and his far reaching gaze, give a sense of expansiveness beyond the picture frame. I believe Weston was proud of this portrait, which in later years, was on display in his home at Wildcat Hill in California.

It is in many of Edward Weston's landscapes and still-lifes of ordinary objects that we see a more consistent and genuine affection and respect for reality. This lovely photograph of a toadstool, made in 1931, is both lowly and exalted, at once.

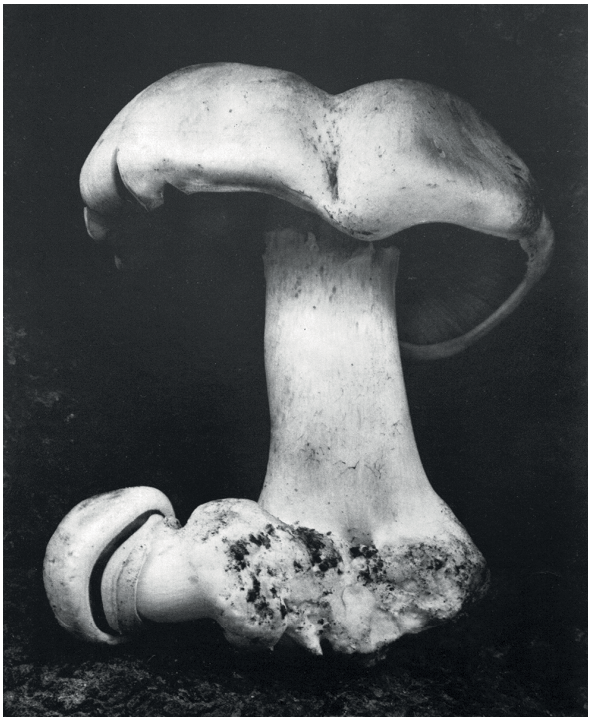

Photo 15. Toadstool

We look up at its dark underside and see its crown spreading out like a luminous sombrero. A small, misshapen toadstool lies on its side. Fallen, it has both dignity and pathos, as it retains its connection to the strong base of its neighbor. Here, Weston's humility in honoring a humble instance of life is gracefully joined with the pride he feels in the object and in himself.

Then, there is his 1927 photograph, "Two Shells." We see one shell placed above, and carefully fitted into the one below. Weston chose to arrange them so that the one that swells proudly is in the lower, more humble position. The shell in the superior position has a slender neck that appears to bend sweetly in submission, even as it boldly shows its inside to us.

Photo 16. Two Shells

Weston wanted to know why a photograph, an impression of reality captured on a flat piece of paper "should affect one emotionally," asking, "what prompted me to record it…and who is there to tell me?" [3, p. 91].

In his 1967 talk, "Afternoon Regard for Photography," Eli Siegel mentions Edward Weston, and explains how he was trying to put opposites together in his work. Of his photographs taken along the California coastline, Mr. Siegel said "… with the things he found on the beaches…Weston was trying to make a triumph out of debris" [6, p. 12]. This is pride and humility, victory and lowliness, opposites Weston gave form to in "Wrecked Car, Crescent Beach, 1939".

We see the skeletal remains of a car planted in the soft sand of a misty beach, strewn with debris. The muted light joins with the form of this discarded wreck: lively geometric shapes that rise and fall. Weston chose a point-of-view that gives the wreck an upward diagonal — which culminates in a vertical, misshapen tree stump in the distance, in the upper right. Through the photographer, this tangled mass of wreckage seems to proclaim, "I still have meaning!"

Photo 17. Wrecked Car, Crescent Beach, 1939

In this 1938 photograph, "Boat and Abalone Shells," we see an old, discarded boat thrusting its way on an upward diagonal into the picture frame.

Photo 18. Boat and Abalone Shells

With all its assertive quality, it seems to nestle in the midst of that multitude of shells. Three boulders at the top and right side of the frame anchor the motion of boat and shells and seem to nudge them closer together in a friendly manner.

Was the photographer here trying to find and show a beautiful structure in reality and at the same time answer a deep question of his own? Weston could see himself as apart from the "Masses" [2, p. 17]. Yet, here the

boat pushes its way forward into what I see as the loving embrace of this mass of abalone shells, seeking greater meaning through relation to them.

Edward Weston was looking for the oneness of opposites as a criterion for understanding himself as a person, and the art that was, I believe, a life-line for him to the world. Every person wants to be truly proud of how they see the world, art, and themselves. Through the study of Aesthetic Realism, we can. It is a study new in history, beautiful and emergent for people to know.

NOTES

[1] In consultations, a person's individual life questions are understood and explained, through the principles of Aesthetic Realism. People find that the matters which confuse them most are made sense of at last, with cultural width, immediacy, and satisfying logic. Consultations may be had in person at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City or via telephone throughout America and abroad." From *Aesthetic Realism Foundation Mission Statement & Description.*

[2] Professional classes taught by Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss take place at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, a not-for-profit cultural and educational foundation in New York City.

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