HEALTH PREMIUM REPORTS

Your Brain Craves Beauty, Here's Why

What pleases your eyes can also heal your heart, mind, and body.

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VIRTUE MEDICINE • PART 11

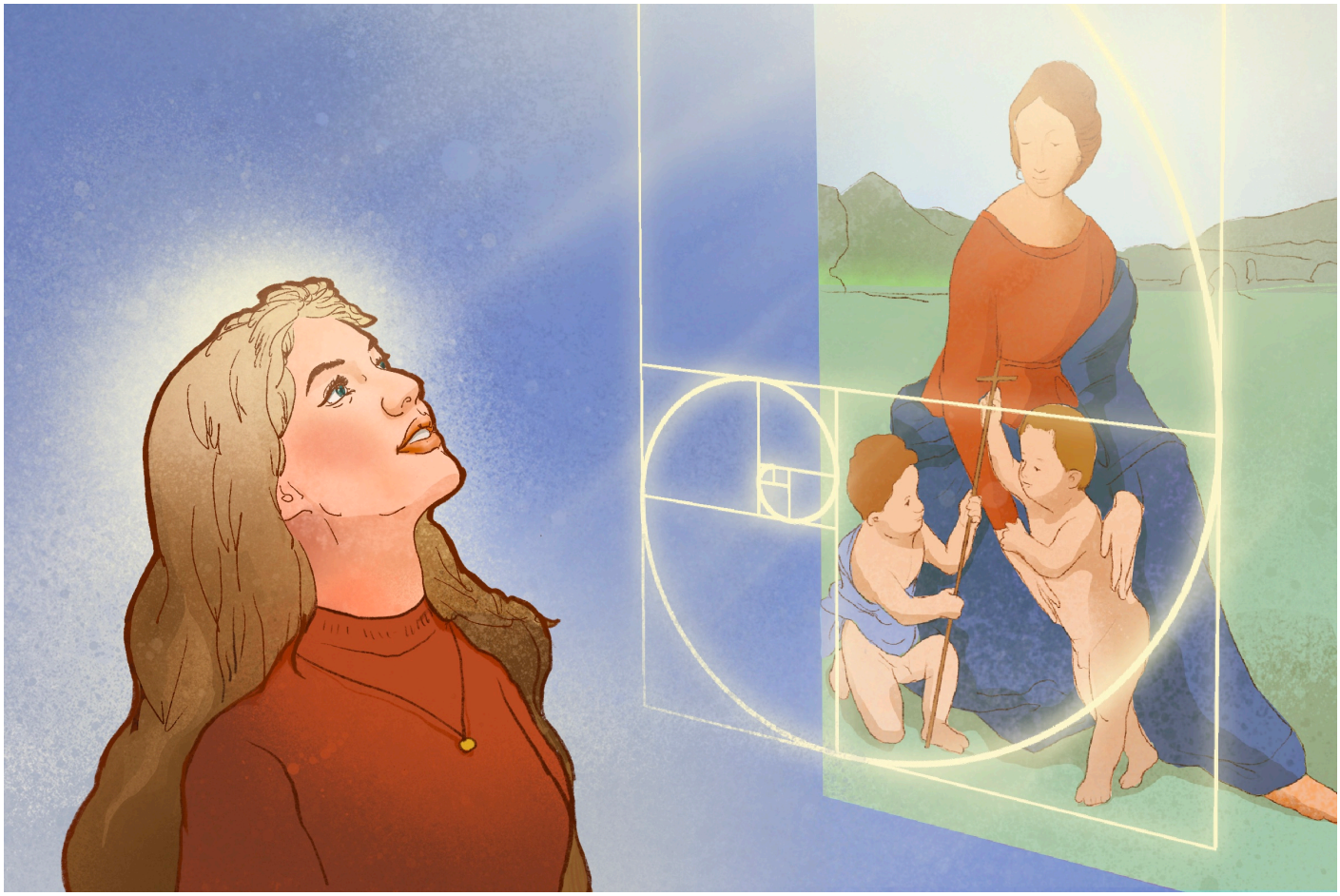


Illustration by The Epoch Times

By **Makai Allbert** | May 03, 2025 Updated: May 14, 2025

This is part 11 in "Virtue Medicine"

What medicine is safe, effective, free, and requires only a subtle shift in perspective? We welcome you to explore the neglected link between virtue and health—'Virtue Medicine.'

Beneath the Sistine Chapel's soaring ceilings, strangers from across the world stand transfixed, their faces tilted upward in unified wonder. Some weep openly, while others gaze in silent reverence. In this sacred space, cellphones are forbidden, and beauty permeates every corner. As spectators look up, their brains activate vibrantly while their bodies slip into serenity, a phenomenon that continues to fascinate neuroscientists and physicians alike.

In a landmark 2004 experiment, researchers placed participants in brain scanners and showed them beautiful paintings. A specific brain region—the orbitofrontal cortex—lit up instantly. This dedicated neural real estate, sometimes dubbed "the beauty center," implies that beauty appreciation is hardwired into our cognitive architecture. Moreover, our brains recognize beauty in milliseconds, long before conscious thought has time to form. This instantaneous recognition hints that we simply know beauty when we see it.

Although everyone has personal aesthetic preferences, there is one kind of beauty that human beings universally appreciate—one that resonates with the brain and influences our health.

The Equation of Beauty

At the core of many beautiful things—natural and man-made—is a common theme: 1.618. Known as the "golden ratio," this irrational number has been called the "divine proportion" for centuries.

The ratio is omnipresent in nature, seen in spiraling shells, sunflower seeds, galaxies, and the proportions of the human face. Traditional artists, particularly during the Renaissance, often incorporated the golden ratio into their work.

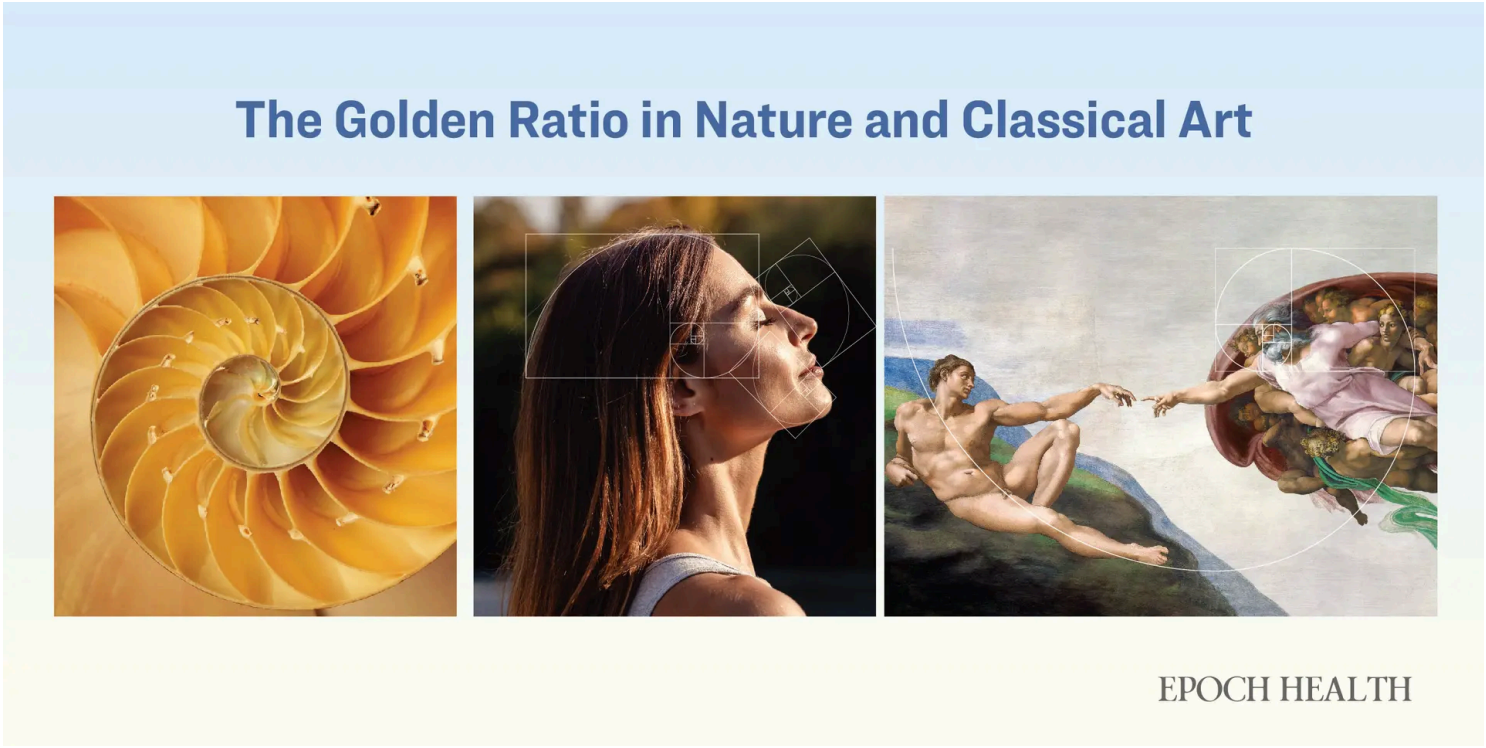


Illustration by The Epoch Times, Shutterstock

Enzo Grossi, scientific director at Villa Santa Maria Foundation and advocate of using beauty in clinical settings, said that if there is any universality to beauty, it's to be found in the golden ratio.

"[It's] an underlying pattern that contributes to the beauty and complexity of the natural world," Grossi told The Epoch Times. Our eyes and brains inherently love forms that follow this ratio.

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"This could be due to the sequence's prevalence in nature, making it a familiar and comforting pattern for our brains," Grossi said.

More than cultural, golden ratios are mathematical and cognitively based. Neuroscientific research shows that the brain processes golden ratio-based shapes more smoothly and efficiently than other proportions. The sequence is predictable and balanced, symmetrical and asymmetrical, giving a sense of harmony and making it easier for the visual system to interpret. This fluency, in turn, increases our sense of pleasure.



[The golden ratio is] an underlying pattern that contributes to the beauty and complexity of the natural world.

Enzo Grossi, medical scientist and researcher

Our fondness for natural beauty is coupled with a good reason.

"In nature, stems and trees, leaves and flowers all grow symmetrically, whereas a deformed ear of corn may not be safe to eat," Grossi said. He suggests that beautiful things are appealing because they may help us survive.

Yet beauty doesn't begin or end with utility. David Rothenberg, professor of philosophy and music at New Jersey Institute of Technology and author of "Survival of the Beautiful," points out that nature sometimes produces unexpected appeal. A peacock's massive, iridescent tail offers no functional advantage—in fact, it makes flying more difficult. But female peacocks prefer it.

"Animals have a natural aesthetic sense, and they appreciate beauty for its own sake," Rothenberg told The Epoch Times, noting that beauty is a mysterious part of how life develops.

Beyond aesthetics, beauty profoundly affects our health.

Beauty and the Body

In 1984, Roger Ulrich conducted a pioneering experiment at a suburban Pennsylvania hospital. The study, according to Grossi, is strong evidence of how natural beauty can heal.

In the experiment, Ulrich studied the recovery of 46 patients who had undergone the same gallbladder surgery. The patients were identical in most factors—age, weight, health status, and even hospital floor. The only major difference was that as they recovered, half faced a grove of trees outside their windows, while the other half faced a brown brick wall.

Patients with a view of nature recovered faster, spending nearly one day less in the hospital on average. They needed significantly fewer doses of pain medication, had fewer minor complications such as headaches or nausea, and had fewer negative comments in their nursing notes.

The study opened the door to decades of research linking natural beauty with health benefits. Meta-analyses now show that exposure to nature—even something as simple as a leafy view or a 20-minute walk in a park—can lower stress and improve immune function, Type 2 diabetes, and heart disease.

Yet nature is far from being the only source of therapeutic beauty. Great works of art can yield similar effects, some more than others.

Eric Bess, an artist who holds a doctorate in fine arts, told The Epoch Times that while artists often seek to express an aspect of universal beauty, classical artists do it best.

When people see classical paintings, they experience a two-stage response: an immediate emotional reaction followed by a deeper, more enduring reflection bound to personal memories and cultural associations.

Why does classical art strike such a chord? One answer lies in predictability—with a twist. The brain is drawn to patterns it can process easily—such as the golden ratio—but also craves a degree of novelty to stay engaged. Classical works' harmony of structure and color, plus unique expression, satisfy both desires. Meanwhile, art that strays too far from familiar structures can leave viewers cold or confused, Bess said.

To test the physiological difference between classical and modern art stimulation, researchers in a 2018 study published in Arts & Health randomly assigned 77 undergraduate students to visit one of three areas within the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rome:

1. **Figurative Art Galleries:** Landscapes, portraits, and realistic scenes
2. **Modern Art Galleries:** Abstract, expressionist, and contemporary installations
3. **Museum Offices:** Control condition

Before and after the visit, the researchers measured participants' blood pressure and heart rate.

The results were telling. More than half of those in the figurative art group experienced a significant drop in systolic blood pressure. The people who saw the modern art or the office space showed no statistically significant change.

Interestingly, participants rated both figurative and abstract art styles equally positively, while the office visit was rated significantly lower in satisfaction. This rating indicates that the soothing effect of figurative art wasn't simply due to greater enjoyment. There appears to be something unique about representational art that affects our physiology even if we're not consciously aware of it.

The researchers noted that figurative art might be particularly calming because of its greater comprehensibility and tendency to stimulate positive emotions, compared with the more challenging and sometimes provocative nature of modern art. They even suggested that museum visits could complement medical therapies for stress-related health conditions, such as heart disease.

Moreover, appreciation of beauty is not confined to the eyes.

Beautiful music also heals, lowering cortisol levels and increasing immunity. While classical music consistently calms anxiety and stress, other music, such as heavy metal, increases tension and hostility. Much of the harmony of

Western music—found in, for instance, Mozart's piano sonatas—is founded on the golden ratio proportions.

Even sorrowful beauty—from melancholic music to tragic art—can trigger positive effects. These experiences engage the brain's empathy circuits and support emotional regulation, offering catharsis—the release of emotion through art.

Bess reflected on this while watching Shen Yun Performing Art's classical Chinese dance performances. Of scenes depicting Falun Dafa practitioners being persecuted because of their faith, he said, "You feel sorrowful for what's happening to a human being, but you also develop compassion for their endurance."

Beauty, in this sense, is not always about pleasure—sometimes, it's about meaning.

The Ultimate Manifestation of Beauty

"Beauty is somehow ineffable," Rothenberg said.

Ineffability may be why beauty often evokes awe—a feeling of being in the presence of something vast, sublime, and beyond comprehension.

People commonly describe awe in response to natural wonders or art masterpieces. Yet when psychologist Dacher Keltner and his colleagues asked people across the globe what most often inspires awe, the leading answer wasn't nature or art—it was moral beauty.

Out of thousands of responses, the most commonly cited source of awe was witnessing exceptional virtue—courage, kindness, resilience, and selflessness.



Beauty is somehow ineffable.

David Rothenberg, musician and professor of philosophy

James H. Smith, designer and professor of architecture at Fei Tian College, said there is an inherent connection between moral goodness and beauty.

"The essence of beauty is virtue," he told The Epoch Times. "When one's character tends towards selflessness, kindness, and tolerance, this is the purity of a person."

Philosophers have contemplated this for millennia. Referencing Plotinus, the father of Neoplatonism, Bess said, "Beauty is the mask that goodness wears."

As an artist, philosophy professor, and fine arts contributing columnist for The Epoch Times, Bess draws on the idea that "beauty is something divine, and it's something that's given to human beings by a divine source." He said that to perceive and embody true beauty in one's art and daily life, one must first purify the soul.

Although this view is philosophical in nature, it's now supported by contemporary neuroscience.

One experiment published in the journal Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience had participants look at two types of images: pictures of beautiful faces and pictures of moral acts, such as a child protecting an injured pigeon with his own coat.

The researchers then measured brain activity via functional magnetic resonance imaging.

Both groups showed activation of the orbitofrontal cortex, the brain's "beauty center." While physical beauty triggered basic reward pathways, moral beauty activated a broader network of regions involved in social understanding and empathy. In other words, Grossi said, "this form of beauty—goodness with no payback—exerts the same effects on our brain," but on a deeper, more expansive level.

Permeating Your DNA

A 2024 paper proposed that interaction with beauty might even affect the body at the molecular level.

The authors hypothesized that exposure to beautiful things, such as art or music, could alter DNA methylation, a biochemical process that helps regulate gene activity.

While the idea remains speculative, on some level, beauty and DNA are close siblings. A full cycle of DNA's double helix measures 34 angstroms long by 21 angstroms wide. These numbers, 34 and 21, comprise the Fibonacci sequence, the same numerical pattern of the golden ratio. When plotted, the ratio of DNA's dimensions—1.619—comes strikingly close to 1.618, the golden ratio.

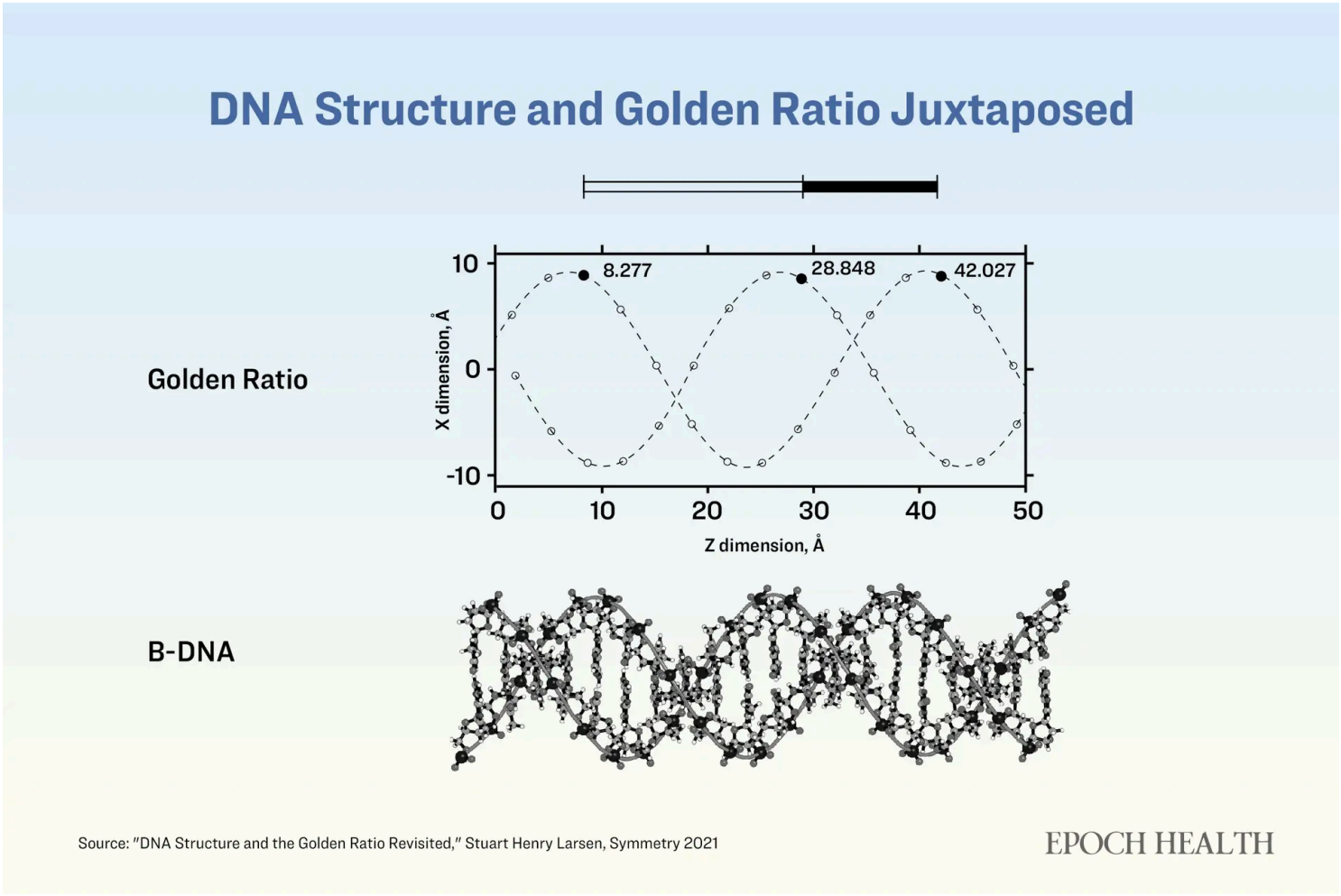


Illustration by The Epoch Times, Courtesy of Stuart Henry Larsen

Coincidence or not, it's a poetic reminder that beauty, symmetry, and proportion may be woven into life itself—even into the molecule that makes us who we are.

Discover the Beautiful

The Sistine Chapel is but one form of beauty universally admired, with millions of visitors finding themselves looking up to the tall ceilings in awe every year. Reflecting on his own experience in the chapel, Bess said, "That grandeur is just overwhelming for people."



Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and 'The Last Judgment' fresco painting. Michele Falzone/Getty Images

These types of awe-inspiring encounters can be rare and may require effort to find, according to Anjan Chatterjee, director of the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics. He noted that everyday beauty is often hidden in plain sight—but to find it, one needs to slow down and quiet the busyness of the mind. We

need to "shift from a transactional mode of being to one that allows us to be present in the moment," he told The Epoch Times.

If something draws you in—flowers, colors, patterns, or sounds—pause and stay with it. Beauty often doesn't shout—it's more sophisticated, often revealing itself quietly.

Be intentional when seeking the beautiful. A study published in The Journal of Environmental Psychology found that for people who consciously appreciate their surroundings, time in nature can boost life satisfaction by up to 25 percent. For people who don't—those who walk without wonder—the benefits are virtually negligible.

Nonetheless, beauty's manifestation—the natural or the artistic, the grand or the quiet—can lift people's innermost being, reminding them of something higher.

Plato, Grossi said, conveyed the role of beauty in his "Phaedrus" more than 2,000 years ago. Plato wrote that when we see beauty down here—in nature or human creation—it reminds us of something beyond and orients our gaze upward. In those moments, Grossi said, "We feel as if putting on wings to fly higher."

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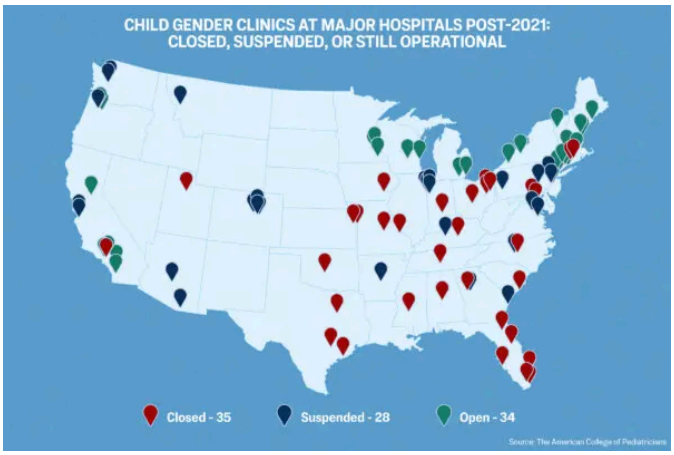
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