

Necessary Beauty
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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*“Beauty is before me, beauty behind me, above me and below me hovers the beautiful.
I am surrounded by it, I am immersed in it. In my youth, I am aware of it, and, in old age,
I shall walk quietly the beautiful trail. It beauty it is begun, it beauty it is ended.”*
- from the Navajo Way Blessing Ceremony

Readings

from “The Sovereignty of Good” by Iris Murdoch

Beauty is the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and change of consciousness. I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care.

Psalm 98, translated/interpreted by Stephen Mitchell

Sing to the Lord a new song,
for his miracles renew us each day.
His justice is beyond comprehension,
his beauty beyond all praise.
He opens the mind of the doubter
and touches the fearful with his love.
Light is sown for the righteous
and joy for the pure of heart.
Shout to the Lord, all creatures;
burst forth in songs of thanksgiving.
Sing out with violins and harps;
praise him with a chorus of voices;
with trumpets and the sound of the ram’s horn
make joyful music to the Lord.
Let the heavens and the earth rejoice,
let the waves of the ocean roar,
let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains rumble with joy,
let the meadows sing out together,
let the trees of the forest exult –
in acknowledgement of the Lord,
whose justice is always present,
whose truth hides beneath the surface,
shining from the depths of the world,
whose law pulses in the atom
and extends to the outermost star.

Sermon

The Psalm I shared a few moments ago might suggest that actually everything in the world is just fine, beautiful, even perfect!

Yet we know that everything in the world is not just fine. Certainly doesn't feel that way. But here's the thing: the Psalmist knew this about the world too, knew well about suffering and injustice, knew everything was not beautiful. After all, many of the Psalms are calls to God for help in the midst of suffering, yearnings of the heart for enemies to be vanquished, for all wounds to be healed, for wrongs to be made right.

Then? In the same collection, other Psalms, like the one we've heard, are Psalms of praise. How does this make sense?

Well, after all, as one of the verses of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" has it, "sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down."

There's realism for you. For both moods are part of the human experience. Sometimes driven by circumstance – illness or other life challenge, abuse, injustice, oppression. Sometimes just the changing moods that come with being human.

For some, of course, "changing mood" is far too weak a phrase, and seeking professional assistance, perhaps including medication, is in order. But for most of us most of the time we can call on less extreme measures to help us along the way, to help us toward the light from a dark moment or time, or at least to be a companion on the road.

One of those measures, the subject of my message today, is to immerse ourselves in the sort of beauty that evoked the song of the Psalmist or even just to glimpse something beautiful in the moment – the "hovering kestrel" outside Iris Murdoch's window for example. Don't we all have such moments? Might not be a kestrel, might be glancing up at the bright colors of the maple outside our window, or turning on the radio and hearing a piece of beautiful music that transports us away from whatever was troubling us.

And you know what? We of course don't have to *wait* for something beautiful, whether kestrel or sunset, Bach or Beatles, to just come along. We can seek it out. Seek out beauty in our time of distress or sadness – or any time. Beauty *necessary* to our health and spiritual well-being, to our wholeness as human beings.

I was twelve when President Kennedy was assassinated. As many of us remember well, it was a Friday afternoon that the news came through the radio or television, or, as it was for me, through the loudspeakers during my 8th period English class.

A little later that inestimably sad afternoon I returned home to find my mother in tears.

In the next day or two the television was on for much of the time. We were immersed in the unspeakable news.

Then, on Saturday afternoon, or it might have been Sunday, my parents decided we should drive out to Long Island's Jones Beach (we lived about twenty minutes away). The beach was close to deserted on this late November day, but it was beautiful – and we

immersed ourselves, instead of in the news, in bright blue sky, dark blue ocean, white sand.

We walked along the edge of the sea, waves crashing, that never-ending peaceful roar. Then we drove home.

Our visit to the beach, held by the beauty of sand and sky and sea, did not of course change the terrible event, nor did it take away our sadness. Nor was it the only element at play that afternoon – the company and sympathy of my parents, the sense of safety that came from simply being together, also had their part to play. But the simple beauty in which we immersed ourselves was just as essential and was healing, helping us just a little to endure the sadness.

About a decade later a dear young friend of our family died. My father again suggested heading to the beach. By then we were both runners, so we ran along the edge of the waves on yet another beautiful day. And, again, neither the loss or the sadness went away – and the companionship and the running had their part to play – but we were better able to hold both loss and sadness in the presence of beauty and the expanse of sky and sea.

These memories remind me of Mary Oliver’s poem, “I Go Down to the Shore”:

I go down to the shore in the morning
and depending on the hour the waves
are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall –
what should I do? And the sea says
in its lovely voice:
Excuse me, I have work to do.

I love this poem. I return to it in my mind often, recall her lines when I go down to the sea for peace or solace, or just imagine going down to the sea. And it seems to me that the poem echoes the reading we heard from Iris Murdoch, which ends with the thought that in giving ourselves over to something beautiful in nature we are able to “clear our minds of selfish care.”

Elsewhere Murdoch named this “unselfing.” But whatever we call it, we have shifted from our sometimes narrowed experience of what’s going on to a more expansive view – of what’s going on and of who we are. And beauty has done this, lifted us out of ourselves.

Emerson put it this way in a lecture on beauty: “The question of beauty takes us out of surfaces, to thinking of the foundations of things.”

(For the Iris Murdoch reading and the Emerson quote I’m indebted to Maria Popova’s web site “brainpickings.”)

It is of course not only beauty in nature that has healing power, that can take us out of ourselves and our selfishness. All forms of beauty can have this effect, all the arts

to begin with. Today here in our Meeting House we are aware particularly of the power of music to do this, as we welcome Christopher as our new music director.

And I suspect it is as true for you as for me that the music, whether here, in a concert hall, or from a CD or even out of our cell phone, enhances our lives, sometimes just helps us through a day.

Another story from long ago. One summer during my years as a camp councilor up in the Adirondacks, I was feeling pretty low – can't remember why, but I was eighteen or nineteen years old, so it could have been any one of a number of things. My night off came along, and I tagged along with my older brother Jim and some other councilors who were going to a concert in Saratoga – The Band was playing. Not just any band, but The Band. The music – great music! - took me out of myself; I returned to camp changed, no longer so low, seeing the world with fresh eyes. “Unselfed” a bit.

These days? I don't know about you, but sometimes I've had more than enough news of the day. Yet even knowing this, too easily when I get in the car to go to a meeting or make a visit or do errands or just head home I turn on one of the news stations, GBH or BUR – and soon may feel that it is just too much, weighs me down. So I switch to music: CRB for classical, UMB for folk – or I pop in a CD – lately I've been revisiting Sgt. Pepper's, and there's always a bluegrass CD close at hand or Pete Seeger or Mozart.

Then... it only takes a few measures, and I can breathe again.

As I often say (and have to remind myself), yes, I need enough news to help me be a good citizen – and more news doesn't necessarily help more. But I need beauty to heal my soul. Which in the end also helps me to be a better citizen, better activist, better person. Because being weighed down and depressed by the news does not lead to better citizenship or activism, and it certainly doesn't make you better company!

The point here is not to anesthetize myself to the bad news – whether personal or political, including in relation to oppression and injustice in the world, to suffering in the world. Not at all. If anything quite the contrary. For to become too immersed in pondering the world's suffering – or your own suffering for that matter – can immobilize you. Further: the world, as someone once said, does not need people who are disheartened and depressed by events; no, the world needs people who are alive and awake to everything.

To put this another way, as I wrote in the newsletter: In challenging times we may be in danger of neglecting the healing and inspiring power of beauty in our lives – whether the beauty of music, art, or poetry, or the beauty of the autumnal woods, or the beauty of one another's faces. But to neglect to enrich our lives with beauty, perhaps viewing beauty as a “frill” when there are “more important” matters to tend to... is to do harm to our souls.... as well as to our ability to tend to those important matters.

I invite you to pause now for a moment... and bring to mind, if you haven't already, your own healing or enriching experience of beauty at some time of your life.

Let me conclude with a few philosophical reflections on the ancient triumvirate of beauty, truth, and goodness.

I expect we would all easily agree that the virtue of truth is necessary to well-functioning lives and families and nations. Likewise the virtue of goodness.

But have we thoughtlessly considered beauty to be somehow less important... yes a pleasant extra, but unnecessary as compared with truth and goodness?

If so... we were wrong. For just as we are nourished in our lives by truth and goodness, so are we nourished by beauty – all three virtues essential, necessary to our health and wholeness.

Further, these three qualities or virtues are intimately related.

I've read that for scientists, the elegance or beauty of a theory suggests the likelihood of its truth.

And isn't speaking the truth – whether in our personal relationships or in the midst of politicized conversations – both a good, moral thing, and also beautiful to behold? Think, for example, of those dignified public servants we've been seeing in the hearing rooms of Congress lately. Yes, truth, goodness, and beauty joined together.

Indeed, isn't any moral or ethical act, a good act, a beautiful thing to observe or in which to participate? As simple a gesture as taking the arm to help an unsteady neighbor across the street or over rough ground – isn't this a beautiful thing? Goodness and beauty joined.

Finally I would affirm that it is no accident that we have evolved (whether by the natural selection of evolution or by the design of a creative power) to respond to beauty, to seek beauty, to create beauty – whether in a work of art, a piece of music, speaking the truth, helping a neighbor, or working for justice (After all, just as the Parthenon or this Meeting House owes much of its beauty to elegant and proportionate construction of the various elements, whether of stone or wood, isn't justice about right proportion and balance, beauty, in human relations?)

Well, whatever else you leave with today, I invite you to leave with the reminder from the Navaho blessing printed in your order of worship, to notice and appreciate beauty before us, behind us, all around us, in our youth, in our old age... the reminder to walk quietly the beautiful trail... for in beauty it began, in beauty it is ended.

All, with the Psalmist, even in a world with its share of sorrow and suffering, as the heavens and the earth rejoice, the waves of the ocean roar, the rivers clap their hands, the mountains rumble with joy, the meadows sing out together, the trees of the forest exult.

Praise be. May it ever be so.