

## Beyond the Eye of the Beholder

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For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin

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I've been flirting with beauty all my life. When I was a typical hormonal teenager, focused on attractiveness, I had a major handicap. I never thought I was beautiful because I had acne. The only way that I made it through this often disfiguring experience was to proudly proclaim that I had a continually "changing landscape." Not everyone was so gifted with seasonal abundance!

As a young adult I resonated with the sign in the front window of my father's community development office which said: "Who can say I am Japanese, American, African, when in the next day, one [he] may be a butterfly." I carried this sentiment into my Unitarian Universalist ministry, developing a spiritual awareness of harmony, balance and creative transformation. And during the last decade I have been exploring beauty in architecture, which has included designing and constructing a geodesic dome. Others balked at the inefficient use of space. To me, I marveled at the balance of space and matter, the gradients of light and shadow and the gorgeous resonance of sound. After praying in the dome a Muslim colleague explained once that "Allah was much closer" there than in other places in which she had prayed.

The lessons of the aesthetic continue. Recently at a Unitarian Universalist conference a woman shared that 'beauty always gives something to us while ugliness takes something away from us.' I hadn't thought about beauty in those terms. We can be given wings with a soaring piano concert like we hear from Milton on Sunday, a larger heart when we see a random act of kindness or a soulful embrace when watching a spectacular sunset. And then ugliness does take something away, doesn't it? When Rev. Chip and I were on our way home from the conference and having taken a wrong turn we ended up in a seedy part of Point Richmond at night. As Chip said, "As long as we don't break down, we'll be OK." It wasn't the fear of violence that crept into my heart, but the ugliness of stark, dark streets and houses which had no organic feel of community. No one was even walking their dog. Being in that environment, I felt a part of me beginning to slip away.

Luckily we didn't break down; and moving again on the other side of Richmond Bridge, we headed toward the lights, color and activities of Marin County. But even here the trappings of style did not cover up the convenient and yet ugly forms of glass, cement and asphalt. And today I am reminded about how much of our community is being fueled by that same petroleum being spewed out of the bottom of the Gulf right now into blooms of sticky, life devastating plumes of oil still growing every minute. As our marine neighbors, the dolphins, fish, turtles, shrimp, and all the rest are dying off in the evasive sludge I wonder how much of these fingers of ugly ooze have already taken hold of our human lives.

We argue over global warming of our ocean waters but in reality the world has already passed that stage. Our waters are now literally on fire—and that is beyond ugly for all of life.

How much have we already destroyed of anything beautiful that we have, that we can pass on to our children, grandchildren? It saddens me that they have very few opportunities to experience deep beauty which can rejuvenate their souls. Nature, the rawest form of beauty for many of us, is no longer a playground for them, even here miles away from the gulf. Each day another acre of verdant lush land to run in disappears; state coastal parks remain closed, and we have almost lost the salmon runs in our Marin rivers. There aren't many places left in which our children can experience the magnificent, unchanging cycle of growth and death. How do we bring beauty back into our lives before we break down in the street of life, too far gone to recover?

The road to recovery of the aesthetic won't be easy because we tend to dismiss its value. And how can we mutually value something which is so individual—that occurs only in the eye of the beholder? What is beautiful to me, isn't necessarily beautiful to you.

And since beauty won't generally buy us a loaf of bread, we have tended to dismiss it as an extravagance. The grasp of beauty makes sense for the artist, not for us all. Artistic classes are "icing on the cake" for well endowed school systems and not for the majority of our children. Or the acquisition of beauty is for only those who can afford it. Even as members of the De Young Museum, Chip and I had to pay \$30 to see King Tut's marvelous tomb treasures. As we paid our entrance fees the ghost of Gandhi, who gave up all worldly possessions, whispered in my ear, saying once again: "Real beauty is my aim."

Real beauty? Is there a difference? In Gandhi's terms it is born, not in its outward appearances, or in issues of accessibility or affordability, but rather in how it affects the soul. We may begin with beauty being in 'the eye of the beholder.' We look at the appearance of people or objects. Sometimes we also see the invisible radiances, such as good character and compassionate actions. When we discover some meaningful and stunning presentation affecting our hearts, we call it "beautiful." Therefore real beauty, striking a deep chord in us, actually occurs beyond the eye of the beholder—in the heart of the beholder which is a portal to the rest of the universe. We feel tied or bound in an inextricable way to a deeper pulse or aesthetic of life. It draws us in to participate in a more expansive wholeness. It's as if we find ourselves in a kaleidoscope, one particle embedded in many, through which light is passed through the heart of all and we become changed, a totally new and wonderful combination of symmetrical color and form.

There is a story of a woman who was asked to teach 'poise and grooming' to girls from low-income families in London's East End. Because she found it silly to try to teach these girls who never had been outside their neighborhood and didn't know what they were supposed to be poised for, she never mentioned poise and grooming to them. Instead she took them on field trips to see the paintings at the National Gallery and a costume collection. They watched the Horse Guard change at Buckingham Palace;

smelled flowers at a famous garden and heard vespers at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields. And yes, there was one day at the Elizabeth Arden spa for a 'day of beauty.' At the end of four weeks, she said that "the visible transformation in these girls was such that I felt like Henry Higgins—only younger, female, and American. Nothing had changed in my student's lives in any concrete way, but they had had experiences that hinted at the scope and wonder of their world. Their epiphany brought one for me: beauty rubs off. You cannot stand face-to-face with a Rembrandt and walk away the same person."<sup>1</sup>

Yes, when Chip coaxes a table out of a redwood burl with a blade and sandpaper, there is a part of him that becomes transformed.

When one can perform a random act of kindness or a purposeful act of service that lets someone regain a sense that they are of worth, special, that person becomes a creator of a more comfortable, engaging, aesthetic world.

But here is the greatest challenge to beauty: We are still talking about "others." The most difficult place to find beauty is in the mirror. If I were to ask, "How many of you here believe that you are truly beautiful?" I think that few of you would raise your hands.

Even we Unitarian Universalists who highly value the worth and dignity of each person have to contend with thousands of years of Judeo-Christian religious traditions which tell us that we are "sinners"; or that we should be aspiring toward perfection; or that we have to prove ourselves before we become worthy of peace and joy. It's like generation after generation of the human race is continually learning how to be ugly: inadequate, flawed and rarely loveable, except by the grace of God.

Yet consider those beautiful people in your life. They "are not necessarily physically healthy, emotionally together, easy to get along with, or productive and successful...The whole of their being, the good and the bad, is the stuff out of which their beauty makes an appearance. A lover may see it. A parent may embrace it. A friend may struggle with it but love it."<sup>2</sup>

What would happen if someone held up the mirror for you? Would you see acne, wrinkles, grouchiness? Someone overweight, underweight, incomplete, angry, with a heavy heart? Or would you see deep beauty?

A monastery had fallen on hard times and was being served by only a few old monks with heavy hearts. The abbot went to the hut of a local Rabbi with whom he could commiserate. After they poured out their pain, quiet descended in the hut. Finally the Rabbi lifted his head and said that he would give the abbot a teaching, only to be repeated once to his group. He looked right into the eye of the abbot and said, "The Messiah is among you."

When the abbot returned and told the monks of this teaching they were startled. "What could it mean?" they asked themselves. "Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Brother Matthew or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah?"

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Moran, Lit from Within: Tending Your Soul for Lifelong Beauty.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Moore, Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way Through Life's Ordeals

The lesson was never repeated, as promised, but slowly the monks began to treat one another with a new and very special reverence. A gentle, warm-hearted, concern began to grow among them which was hard to describe, but easy to notice. They began to live with each other as people who had finally found the special something they were looking for. This was the beginning of a new a growing chapter in the life of that monastery.

For us this morning, I would ask you to replace “The Messiah is among you” with “The Beautiful is among you.” Is it Carol, is it Burr, is it Judith, is it you?

Song: “You are So Beautiful,” 1<sup>st</sup> verse sung by Tom Irvin

We will continue to destroy everything around us until we see and protect not only the beauty that is all around us, but also inside of us. In truth beauty is all of us, interconnected. Because beauty really is all about how we come to recognize that we are embedded within existence. It is a conscious and heart-felt process about how the universe can touch us with tenderness and with magnificence and let us feel a part of wonderfully elegant, dynamic source of the universe.

So let us not just appreciate beauty. Rather, become champions of beauty. Intentionally uncover those connections. Let our souls, which often hide behind the flaws of physical appearance or character, touch beauty and merge us into the wider vision. And let others know the beauty you see in them. For when we all become awakened to the spirit of the whole, the wings of our souls will unfurl, unfurl to lift us into that extraordinary “field of eternity”<sup>3</sup> as only beauty can do.

Song: “You are So Beautiful,” 2<sup>nd</sup> verse sung by Tom Irvin

Om. Peace. Shalom. Salaam. Blessed Be.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.