

It's fall, one of my favorite seasons of the year. The trees are finally turning colors and bringing out the deep reds, yellows, and oranges which signal the glorious ending of summer. Green things have had their time to be rich and lush and riotous, and now we head into the quieter seasons. Autumn and winter make space for rest, for renewing and replenishing, for a time to lie fallow until the earth rotates once more and brings the fullness of sunshine upon us again.

For me it is a time of tremendous beauty. I am caught by a dazzling red sugar maple, the delicious stand of mustard colored Hickories, the deep russet Oak outside my window. I must confess that all year I am secretly longing for these cool days, the crisp, cool sunshine, this bittersweet pause between summer and winter. All around us trees and bushes are surrendering to the tilting of the planet, but they're going in a blaze of glory.

Beauty. Today's service is all about beauty – that encounter with something which grabs us out of the ordinary; which makes us stop, pause, pay attention with our whole selves and rest into an eternal moment. Appreciating beauty is a universal aspect of being human; we seek out beauty in all places and times, and have done so in all cultures and epochs.

From the earliest cave paintings that have been uncovered to the beautiful pottery of ancient civilizations. We are drawn to beauty – indeed it seems we need it to live. Beauty serves an essential function in our lives. It creates a timeless moment to remind us that we are more than the sum of our concerns and worries.

In our reading Elaine Scarry described the universality of the experience, coming around the corner and seeing something so beautiful it takes your breath away; an expanse of scenery in the country, a tiny mauve-orange-blue bug that suddenly appears and changes everything. Beauty breaks us out of our normal consciousness, our normal perspective – and moves us out of the center of our lives.

Karen and I have friends who have recently been tossed into that horrible nightmare of cancer. It came out of the blue and is threatening to overtake their lives. While talking with my friend, she asked what I was preaching about this week and I told her beauty. She laughed and said that's perfect! In the midst of the terror and frustration and agony of having her partner diagnosed with cancer, the one thing she can turn to is her garden. She goes out there just to sit, to watch the bees climb around the late season flowers, to watch the leaves drifting slowly on the breeze; to regain that centeredness she needs be able to face the doctors' appointments & middle of the night terrors.

She told me they have a plaque there which reads "I need beauty to live." It's true now more than ever.

When we encounter beauty, in whatever form it takes, it creates that tear in the fabric of life which allows a glimpse of something deeper, richer, more compelling. Beauty offers respite; a space of stepping outside of ourselves for just a moment; for remembering there's more.

In the book "On Beauty and Being Just" Elaine Scarry posits that beauty is connected with truth and justice. Beauty comes from a place of balance and symmetry and at some deep level in our psyche we long for lives which are fair and just. She writes:

“The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate an enduring source of conviction – locate what is true.”

Beauty both draws us into it and then sends us forward to find deeper truths, more justice. It why the Catholic church built soaring cathedrals, why the druids constructed stone circles; why ornate temples dot India and Tibet and perfectly designed stone cities sit atop mountains in central America.

Beauty invites us to be the selves we hope to be. It beckons towards whole and holy lives. Beauty invites us to see that world both as it is, and as it could be.

But just as with any deep truth – Beauty is also paradoxical. The yearning for beauty, the impulse to admire, to participate in, to possess the beautiful while universal is also very particular. Humans are attracted to beautiful things and places and people but that beauty is often culturally and historically defined. We are called by beauty – but within the social constructs of our time and place.

An article on the website *Takepart* written by Lauren Wade asks “What if Famous Paintings Were Photoshopped to look like Fashion Models?” Wade talks about how our ideals of beauty have changed over the centuries when round busts and hips were considered beautiful. She presents a host of famous paintings both in their original form (Slide) and photoshopped (slide) with waif thin women in them representing today’s version of attractive womanhood.

For most of human history poor people were thin and emaciated. The rich had ample bosoms and because this was the ideal, this was beautiful. Today, at least in the US, rich and successful is equated with being thin and heavier folks are not considered attractive. The proportions have stayed the same, but how we see them has changed.

That’s what Madison Ave sells, but in our heart of hearts we know it’s not entirely true. When you truly see someone, see the deeper self that lives inside, every single person, no matter what size, has their own beauty.

What we perceive as beautiful can say a lot about who we are – and who we want to be. In the video from the film “American Beauty” two of the characters watched a film Ricky took of a bag dancing in the wind. It’s something we’ve all seen – a plastic bag on the loose in a windy sky – but until I saw that film I never, ever considered it beautiful. It was garbage, litter, something destroying the environment – and – it is still all those things.

But looking through Ricky’s eyes I saw something else. I was pulled out of my initial way of looking at the bag and saw eternity reaching through and speaking to him, telling him there is more. That life is not just the flotsam and jetsam around us but that there is something real, something to hold onto and let go of simultaneously. Jane saw it too – and kissed him for it.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder – it calls each person to a deeper relationship with the world. The whole message of that film was about seeking out real beauty. Not being content with what society says is important or truthful or real – but paying attention to those things which reach into and speak to our hearts.

What is true and real and beautiful to you? Where does your heart come alive? Where are you called deeper into the world?

For some Monet or Rembrandt or Picasso, for some a theatrical piece. For many folks it's a trip to the woods. But for a lot of folks it's music

I've been talking to a lot of people here in church to learn what happened with the music program and the former music director Chris Garafalo in the last few years. There is still hurt and some anger over the changes which happened. I've heard from folks who were passionate on both sides of the issue – and a few who saw it from the sidelines and it was part of what inspired me to talk about beauty today.

Many people found the classical music that Chris was so justifiably famous for beautiful. It opened their hearts and gave them that deeper glimpse of eternity. For them Chris was not just another piano player, he was someone who could open a window to the divine in a church that did not talk much about divinity. His music was an essential element in feeding the soul in a space which prized intellectually stimulating sermons. The former minister, Ed Searle, created a balance of the head and heart by pairing scholarly talks with incredible music.

But it didn't feed everyone in the same way. People apprehend and appreciate beauty from vastly different points of reference. Beauty is universal, but it is also very particular. What is beautiful in South Africa may not be beautiful in New England – what is prized in Spain might not fly in Paris. I doubt that Antoni Gaudi, architect of the amazing organic Sacrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona would have found patrons in London, England at the time. It would have been too much of a stretch from what was safe and comfortable for them.

Our sense of beauty grows out of that which we value. Our pilgrim and puritan ancestors devised very simple structures for their places of worship – both because the materials here in the new world were sparse, and in reaction against the opulence and lavishness of the Holy Roman Empire. White clapboard churches with plain walls lacking ornamentation became beautiful in their simplicity. Windows which let in the natural beauty of the earth were decoration enough for our early forebears.

Appreciation for different kinds of beauty came to delineate various groups. The Episcopalians went in for tasteful ornamentation, not as flashy as the Catholics but still pointing toward the direction of heaven – always with a red door for welcome. Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists each developed architectural styles which reflected their theological and political leanings.

Even this church, designed by the church's founder, William Channing Gannet has a theological perspective its design. Gannet preached for a unified understanding of the world – for a place where the divine was found not in high flung places and mighty cathedrals, but in the intimacy of house and home. This church is designed simply – with a cozy fireplace and sitting room – to reflect that theological view. The Holy is found in the near and dear – it is imminent and present – both in nature and in our very family units. Those things are beautiful which help us reach beyond our small selves and allow us to connect with the larger self that we hope to be. In this church the holy was found in community.

Beauty invites us into deeper truth, deeper understanding of our lives and our world. But what happens when beauty divides instead of bringing together? What happens when we are sure our vision of beauty is the most important or the only one?

I grew up in Lorain, Ohio – a steel and auto town that had a huge diversity of nationalities represented because people had moved there to find work. There were Italian sections, Polish sections, Hungarian sections, Puerto Rican section – and the part where I grew up – an Irish section.

For the most part the different groups tolerated each other while celebrating their own version of the good. Each year they held an International Festival where “princesses” from each nationality represented their heritage. They wore bright beautiful colored costumes and rode in a parade and then held a festival where all of the wonderful foods of the different groups was available to taste.

But it was interesting that while the colors were celebrated at the festival, the folks who strayed too far outside the ‘norm’ of white America the rest of the year were shamed and shunned. The colors of the houses in the Puerto Rican neighborhoods were regularly disdained by my peers. These were not your Williamsburg Blue or Desert tan houses – these were vibrant fuchsias and orchid, lavender and poppy. It was seen as deplorable and bad taste – when really it was just a different vision of beauty. These folks had come from color-filled homelands and wanted to bring that vibrancy and joy with them to their new homes.

If you looked at them through the eyes of settled Lorainites – who had integrated the simple and plain tastes of the early Americans into their vision of beauty – they were a little garish. But if you opened your mind and just looked at them for what they were – a splash of joy in a dreary steel town – they were quite beautiful.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder but sometimes what it reveals are the limitations of the beholder.

As Unitarian Universalists we claim that we welcome everyone, that we are open and affirming of the worth and dignity of every person. But sometimes, it is much easier to welcome people who look and sound just like our larger us. People who share our tastes and perspective of the world.

What would it look like to be radically welcoming? To offer our life-saving and amazing faith with people who see the world very different than we do? Could we share our faith with people who might paint their houses purple and play music with marimbas and djembes? Folks who might enjoy Gospel music or free swinging jazz?

Now don’t start panicking. We are not throwing out all our classical music or painting the sanctuary Fuchsia. But we are going to be thinking of how we can stretch ourselves just a bit. How we might step out of our comfy and cozy ideas of what is beautiful and see if we can appreciate the beauty of a little more color, a little more swing, a little more exuberance. Episcopalians may be known as ‘God’s Frozen People’ but they don’t have a lot on UU’s.

We don’t want to lose ourselves, just become a deeper, richer more vibrant version of who we might be. We can learn from our more vibrant neighbors even as we share what is good and beautiful and true about our own culture.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What we bring with us, our personal lenses and experiences, shape the world we see and the things we value. But beauty is also a place of opening, a place of stepping outside our usual centralized location and moving a few steps to the side. It is perceiving, appreciating, understanding with an altered tilt.

The trees outside are turning brilliant colors and going out with a blaze of glory. We are moving from one state of being to another, from one way of experiencing and understanding our environment to something completely different – and it’s okay.

The glorious colors of autumn help move us through the season, if not with joy, then at least with some appreciation of the turning of the year. Gratitude for the moments of pure breathless beauty allow space for accepting and appreciating change.

Beauty fills the world if we allow ourselves to be captured by it. It calls us beyond our own small concerns and worries, promising a life filled to the brim with wholeness, with justice, with joy. Let beauty open you, draw you in, and fill you to bursting. It is before us, behind us, above and below – every day and every way, now we walk in beauty.

Amen and blessed be.