

Sunday, September 3, 2017, Beauty Is A Joy

Vasilissa the Beautiful is a Russian fairy tale, a darker version of the Cinderella story, in which a young girl is given the task of going into the woods to find Baba Yaga and ask her for fire to bring home, because Vasilissa's jealous step-mother and sisters have let the fire go out, or perhaps put it out so that Vasilissa has to undertake this perilous journey. Of course, Vasilissa is good, kind, unselfish, generous, and. . . (of course,) beautiful, while her step sisters are not. On this adventure, she carries a small doll in her pocket, a gift from her dying mother, and it has magical powers. It counsels the girl and helps perform Baba Yaga's endless and difficult work, and so helps her to survive the encounter with Baba Yaga and get the fire to warm the house and cook the food.

So many, maybe all of the fairy tale princesses fit this pattern — kind, generous, unselfish, and. . . beautiful! Or, perhaps the kindness, generosity and unselfishness are what is beautiful? These stories are thousands of years old, so old that they came with us off the veldt and out of the caves, into more so called civilized societies. They are in our social DNA. Fairy tales are entertaining, certainly, and they are also one of the oldest pedagogies — ways to teach, to impart wisdom.

Our new small group gathering format is published by Touchstones, a UU program to help churches coordinate our Sunday services and educational programs, much as “Soul Matters” did for us last year. I strongly, enthusiastically encourage you to participate in one of these newly-forming groups, to get together with friends to study and go deeper into some important social and theological themes. This month — Beauty; there is much to learn, much to test out in our own lives, much to share with one another. This Sunday is a small beginning.

I feel privileged to be able to speak my mind about beauty while standing in Jo Daviess County. Being here feels to me like that quote from John O'Donahue on your order of service, “It's strange, being here. The mystery never leaves you.” The mystery never leaves you. Northwest Illinois has more than its share of natural beauty which even our particular invasive species has not been able to completely ruin. Even people born and raised here can stand on Terrapin Ridge and gaze over the hills and valleys falling away to the north and south, with mist rising from the bottom land or in sun or moonlight and imagine themselves in Camelot, or some other version of paradise. For new-comers, it's a daily amazement and delight. And it's worrisome, too, because it does seem to me that the beauty of the earth is as much at hazard as the beautiful princesses in fairy tales who must, it seems, all endure ordeals, go through trials and trouble, face fearsome, dangerous monsters or equally fearsome and dangerous human

enemies, and persevere long past the time when ordinary courage would have failed, before a “happily ever after” is reached, or attained.

So — Vasilissa must brave the dark woods, the dark mother, hard work, and many tests of her character. Cinderella must maintain her kindness and energy and good humor. Rapunzel is cast out of her tower and must make her way in the wilderness with her two children. Snow White must earn her keep with work as she learns, slowly, to discern between kindly peddlers selling apples and her mortal enemy. Perhaps you get the idea from these examples. When we first hear or read about the princess, all is harmonious and easy for her. Then something happens — a loss, a death, an abandonment, and she must learn new skills, new ways to stay alive. So we can understand these stories as tales about adolescent initiation into the adult world, not a totally pleasant transition, but one which every human being manages with more or less success.

Psychologically, we can see that the stories also tell about the encounter with one’s dark side, or shadow. Spiritual seekers face the same sorts of tests, ordeals and encounters, which is why we are considering so frivolous a subject as fairy tales on a Sunday morning.

One day Milarepa, the great Tibetan sage, left his cave to gather firewood, and when he returned he found that his cave had been taken over by demons. His first thought upon seeing them was, “I have got to get rid of them!” He lunges toward them, chases after them, tries to force them out of his cave. But the demons are completely unfazed. In fact, the more he chases them, the more comfortable and settled-in they seem to be.

Realizing that his efforts to run them out have failed, Milarepa opts for a new approach and decides to teach them the dharma. Maybe hearing the teachings will change their minds and get them to go. So he takes his seat and begins teaching about existence and nonexistence, compassion and kindness, the nature of impermanence. After a while he looks around and realizes all the demons are still there. They simply stare at him with their huge bulging eyes; not a single one is leaving.

At this point Milarepa lets out a deep sigh of surrender, knowing now that these demons will not be manipulated into leaving and that maybe he has something to learn from them. He looks deeply into the eyes of each demon and bows, saying, “It looks like we’re going to be here together. I open myself to whatever you have to teach me.” In that moment all the demons but one disappear. One huge and especially fierce demon is still there. So Milarepa lets go even further. Stepping over to the largest demon, he offers himself completely, holding nothing back. “Eat me if you wish.” He places his head in the demon’s mouth, and the largest demon bows low and dissolves into space. Milarepa has his cave back, and he has

learned a deeper level of Dharma from his uninvited guests.

The story says that whenever a person — you, or I, or even a very practiced and adept spiritual practitioner like Milarepa, moves closer to a great power — like Beauty, Truth, Love, Enlightenment, we generate or perhaps just come up against a lot of negative energy, the dark side of the force, to you Trekkie fans. It requires mighty patience, wild courage and a willingness to change tactics and learn something new to tame it down, or, like Vasilissa, live in its house a while. It requires time to cut through all the brambles that have grown around Sleeping Beauty's castle. The brambles hide and protect the castle from all the people who might want to just lay siege to it; you know — “shock and awe.” Milarepa tried that, and the tactic just encouraged the negative forces to stay put and settle in. Then he had a go at changing them; he would teach them the wisdom, and they did calm down, but they didn't leave. Then, he gave up and bowed, “Namaste,” before this power that exceeded his own, and acknowledge that maybe he had this teaching equation backwards. Maybe he was to learn from them. Ah!

The story of Beauty and meditations upon its sovereign mystery are important for us to undertake, because I think it is abundantly clear that the demons have entered the cave, and ugliness rears up everywhere, cruelty abounds, and Beauty, you see, is a quality of the angels, so to speak, a pointer or road sign that leads to the holy grail, to the divine in this world and ourselves. Beauty restores our wounded spirits. it is an energy that heals and harmonizes and sets us to rights.

If we did not live here, so close to a rare and wondrous expression of it (beauty.) If we lived in a gray and tired city, we would have to take ourselves to a library and expose ourselves to beautiful words, or to an art museum and sit with someone else's vision of it, or if nothing else, begin to examine closely how the cracks in the cement seem to angle off in interesting ways, or how the dandelions and stubborn so-called weeds push up through layers of tar and stone. Maybe, we would become more hungry and more observant and discover new ways of seeing, wherever we might be.

Most people go through times in our lives when we feel as though we are in gray paces, colorless and drab and not worth looking at. . . let me just sleep, zzzz. But, or I should say, AND, And, the double helix of our collective wisdom tells us, “Be not afraid.” Someone or some thing is at work, sorting out the brambles, and psychologically speaking, that someone is part of ourselves at work, waking us to life again, and new life at that, which in the case of Sleeping Beauty is the fulfillment of an old wish — a longing of the

kind and queen for a child, a need to be generative, to contribute to this world. And we can all do that, not only those who bring forth children themselves, but anyone and every one who helps make this world a fit place for children and other living things, anyone who preserves natural places or restores the ruins, who makes lovely thing, prepares good food, tells a story, encourages someone somehow — all those small and large endeavors are life-giving and lovely.

No matter how high the tower, how dark the cave, how closed the castle, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Something deep in the Earth itself that moves us out of whatever imprisons the spirit, whether it is the demons of anger, fear, or greed. One glimpse, one experience, one small memory of Beauty can remind us, can change our lives. The poet, Rilke, discovered this while gazing at a fragment, a mere fragment of white marble, once a statue of the God of the Sun — Apollo, and the marble, even this small piece, still holds light, and the shining of it, the radiance is not passive. The gaze becomes reciprocal. As Rilke looks at a piece of Apollo, the god is also looking at him. Rilke stands before Apollo as Milarepa bowed before the demons; as Vasilissa worked in the house of the Earth Mother and learned her ways before she was granted the gift of fire; as we all stand before the beauty we find, and know: in Rilke’s words, “You must change your life.”

When we stand, dazzled, before the land, the creation, the beauty, we realize on some level we may not have touched in years, that we are related to that. We are of that. We are that. it is fearsomely bright, “too bright for our infirm delight,” but it is true. “Out of the stars have we come,” our small planet and everything on it, alive and radiant still, and when we catch a glimmer, a glimpse — Hallelujah, praise be, holy, holy holy.

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