



Touchstones Project

a monthly journal of Unitarian Universalism

September 2023

Beauty

Wisdom Story



beauty emerges in the design of a sanctuary, symbols like a flaming chalice, rituals like a water communion or flower communion, and liturgical elements like music, poetry, prose, and sacred literature. Without beauty, worship fails to inspire. It fails to shine.

Introduction to the Theme

The word beauty comes from a Proto-Indo-European root, meaning “to shine” or “to gleam.” Beauty is woven through the fabric of reality in countless ways. It is the stuff of philosophy and theology, science and religion, art and commerce, appearance and emotion, nature’s design and design and architecture by humans, anthropology and psychology, and much more. While our principles and sources do not explicitly enumerate beauty, there are connections. Dignity, in our first principle, fosters inner beauty. As Jay Schulkin writes, “Beauty runs through dignity with tapestries of awe-inspiring elegance.” Our first source refers to “forces that create and uphold life,” and beauty is one of those forces.

In *Philebus*, Plato acknowledged the beauty of the physical world, despite its impermanence. However, the beauty of the soul, as reflected in wisdom, virtue, and reason, was vital and enduring. Yet, for Plato, the beauty of the good was the highest form of beauty and the foundation of all other beauty.

In that same dialogue, Socrates spoke of the pleasure evoked by intrinsically beautiful objects. This view of objective beauty severely limited the range of things people could consider beautiful, a view that persisted into the Middle Ages. During the Enlightenment, beauty became a matter of preference and personal taste. Objective beauty gave way to subjective beauty. The 18th-century philosopher David Hume wrote,

Religion values beauty. In worship,

(Continued on page 6)

Beauty & the Common Good

Beauty, whether in art, nature, or human behavior, has the potential to contribute to the common good. Without beauty, we live in shades of gray; mundane, monotonous, and numbing. Beauty adds color, depth, breadth, and energy as we witness a stunning landscape, listen to beautiful music, taste a delicious meal, or encounter beauty in other ways. Beauty can prompt introspection and personal growth, leading to a more profound sense of empathy and compassion. Beauty’s emotional uplift can affect individuals and groups through enhanced well-being. As beauty’s universal language connects people across cultures and backgrounds, it can inspire them to contribute to the common good, which creates more beauty.

A Theme-Based Ministry Project

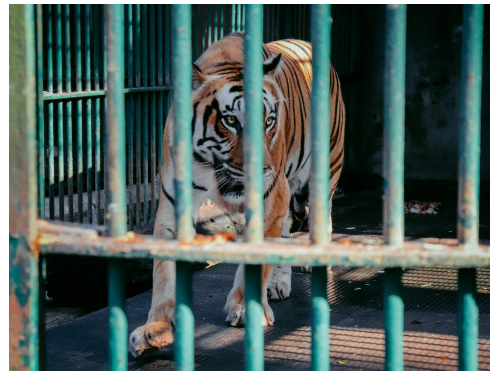
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The Beautiful Tiger

Rev. Christopher Buice

There once was a beautiful and powerful tiger.

One day she was captured by a mean and cruel man who put her into a cage. The man kept the cage in the jungle not far from his house. Every day he would bring out a bowl of water and some food for the lonely tiger.



Sometimes the tiger would see her own reflection in the bowl of water and she would say, “My, I must be a beautiful tiger.”

When the man heard her say this he would lie and tell her, “No, you are not a beautiful tiger. You’re very ugly. You’re a pitiful creature.”

Sadly, the tiger would believe the man.

Some days, after she ate her food, she would walk back and forth in her small cage and feel energy and power moving through her body, and she would say, “My, I must be a powerful tiger.”

When the man heard her say this, he would lie and tell her, “No, you are weak and puny. You’re a pitiful creature.”

Sadly, the tiger would believe the man.

(Continued on page 2)

Unlocked Cage

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**

Then one day, when the man was nowhere around, a lion happened to walk by the cage. The lion saw the tiger inside and spoke to her, "Beautiful and powerful tiger, what are you doing lying about in that cage?"



"Do not make fun of me," replied the tiger. "I know that I am neither beautiful nor powerful."

"I'm not making fun of you," said the lion. "You are surely the most beautiful and powerful tiger I have ever seen. I am only surprised to see you lying here when you are clearly strong enough to break out of that cage."

"You really think I could break out of here?" asked the tiger.

"Quite easily, I should think," replied the lion.

The tiger was not so sure at first. She had been told so many times that she was a weak and pitiful creature.

But suddenly it seemed that she could feel energy and strength moving through her body. She began to pace back and forth in her cage and then, almost without thought, she leapt against the cage door and it flew open without any resistance.

Once outside she seemed dazed. "That cage didn't even have a lock on it," she said. "I spent so much of my life stuck in there and the door wasn't even locked."

The lion looked at her with soft brown eyes and said, "Those kinds of traps don't need locks, for it is the lies we believe in that keep us in our cages ...and it is the truth that sets us free."

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/story/beautiful-tiger>

Grace & Elegance

Beauty is an Edge of Becoming

John O'Donohue

...Beauty isn't all about just niceness, loveliness. Beauty is about more rounded substantial becoming. And when we cross a new threshold worthily, what we do is we heal the patterns of repetition that were in us that had us caught somewhere. So, I think beauty in that sense is about an emerging fullness, a greater sense of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth, and also a kind of homecoming for the enriched memory of your unfolding life.

When I think of the word "beauty," some of the faces of those that I love come into my mind. When I think of beauty, I also think of beautiful land-



scapes that I know. Then I think of acts of such lovely kindness that have been done to me, by people that cared for me, in bleak unsheltered times or when I needed to be loved and minded. I also think of those unknown people who are the real heroes for me, who you never hear about, who hold out on frontiers of awful want and awful situations and manage somehow to go beyond the given impoverishments and offer gifts of possibility and imagination and seeing.

I also always when I think of beauty think of music. I love music.

I think music is just it. I love poetry as well, of course, and I think of

beauty in poetry. But music is what language would love to be if it could.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/programs/2-beauty-edge-becoming-john-odonohue/>

Non-Sense

Senseless Acts of Beauty

The phrase "practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty" was written by Anne Herbert on a placemat at a restaurant in Sausalito, California, in 1982. She and Paloma Pavel were overwhelmed by accelerating systemic violence, as illustrated by Rodney King's experience of racial violence and police brutality. They wanted to create a new vision to shatter this paradigm.

Neither violence nor cruelty needs planning. Both can emerge instantly out of the darkest regions of humanity. By contrast, acts of kindness and beauty are products of an enlightened mind, loving heart, and generous spirit.

Herbert took the phrase "random violence and senseless acts of cruelty" and created a "reversal," a strategy advocated by feminist philosopher Mary Daly. Kindness replaced violence. Somewhat obvious, but the kindness she had in mind was the demanding, tough Dalai Lama "never-give-up kindness." But how do you reverse cruelty? Her substitution of "beauty" for "cruelty" was powerful.

Over the years, random kindness has commanded more emphasis than senseless acts of beauty. Is kindness easier than beauty? Or is the word "senseless" the problem? We sense beauty through our five senses, but beauty grows in meaning as it goes through our senses to touch our thoughts and emotions. Because beauty exists outside of rational categories or logic, beauty is "nonsense" or, more accurately, non-sense.

Senseless acts of beauty refer to those spontaneous, random, and unexpected gestures that bring joy, wonder, and hope to others without a specific purpose or underlying motive.

Senseless acts of beauty can invite positive attitudes, connect strangers, foster well-being, promote empathy, break down barriers, challenge norms, encourage creativity, strengthen community, and bring joy to unexpected places.

Beauty does not need to make sense; it needs to be awe-inspiring. Transform the world by committing more senseless acts of beauty.

Source: Touchstones

Readings from the Common Bowl



Day 1: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever: its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness." John Keats

Day 2: "Do not confuse beauty with beautiful. Beautiful is a human judgment. Beauty is All." Matthew Fox

Day 3: "The beauty of the natural world lies in the details, the intricate patterns, and the hidden wonders waiting to be discovered." Rachel Carson

Day 4: "Life is full of beauty. Notice it. Notice the bumble bee, the small child, and the smiling faces. Smell the rain, and feel the wind. Live your life to the fullest potential, and fight for your dreams." Ashley Smith

Day 5: "I cannot believe that the inscrutable universe turns on an axis of suffering; surely the strange beauty of the world must somewhere rest on pure joy!" Louise Bogan

Day 6: "Beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time." Albert Camus

Day 7: "Beauty crowds me till I die. Beauty mercy have on me." Emily Dickinson

Day 8: "I said to myself—I'll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers." Georgia O'Keeffe

Day 9: "Of life's two chief prizes, beauty and truth, I found the first in a loving heart and the second in a laborer's hand." Khalil Gibran

Day 10: "The perception of beauty is a moral test." Henry David Thoreau

Day 11: "Let the beauty we love become the good we do." Rumi

Day 12: "It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness of pain.... The beauty of disappointment and never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature and everlasting beauty of monotony." Benjamin Britten

Day 13: "Personality is more important than beauty, but imagination is more important than both of them." Laurette Taylor

Day 14: "That which is striking and beautiful is not always good, but that which is good is always beautiful." Ninon de L'Enclos

Day 15: "Though beauty gives you a weird sense of entitlement, it's rather frightening and threatening to have others ascribe such importance to something you know you're just renting for a while." Candice Bergen

Day 16: "To experience sublime natural beauty is to confront the total inadequacy of language to describe what you see. Words cannot convey the scale of a view that is so stunning it is felt." Eleanor Catton

Day 17: "In a meadow full of flowers, you cannot walk through and breathe those smells and see all those colors and remain angry. We have to support the beauty, the poetry, of life." Jonas Mekas

Day 18: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science." Albert Einstein

Day 19: "There is no definition of beauty, but when you can see someone's spirit coming through, something unexplainable, that's beautiful to me." Liv Tyler

Day 20: "The more often we see the things around us—even the beautiful... the more they become invisible to us. That is why we often take for granted the beauty of this world: the flowers, the trees, the birds, the clouds—even those we love. Because we see things so often, we see them less and less." Joseph Wirthlin

Day 21: "Some people, no matter how old they get, never lose their beauty—they merely move it from their faces into their hearts." Martin Buxbaum

Day 22: "The first question I ask myself when something doesn't seem to be

beautiful is why do I think it's not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason." John Cage

Day 23: "In difficult times, carry something beautiful in your heart." Blaise Pascal

Day 24: "The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself." Henry Miller

Day 25: "At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint or even remember it. It is enough. No record of it needs to be kept and you don't need someone to share it with or tell it to. When that happens—that letting go—you let go because you can." Toni Morrison



Day 26: "The ability to see beauty is the beginning of our moral sensibility. What we believe is beautiful we will not wantonly destroy." Sean Parker Dennison

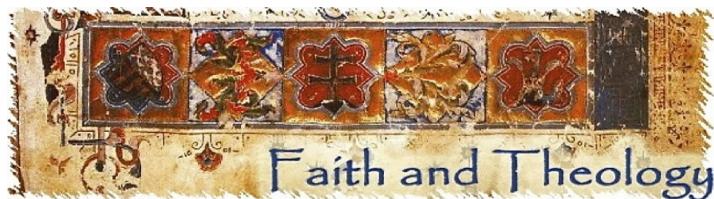
Day 27: "People often say that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder,' and I say that the most liberating thing about beauty is realizing that you are the beholder. This empowers us to find beauty in places where others have not dared to look, including inside ourselves." Salma Hayek

Day 28: "We do not want merely to see beauty.... We want something else that can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it." C.S. Lewis

Day 29: "If you look closely at a tree, you'll notice it's knots and dead branches, just like our bodies. What we learn is that beauty and imperfection go together wonderfully." Matthew Fox

Day 30: "I see beauty as the grace point between what hurts and what heals, between the shadow of tragedy and the light of joy. I find beauty in my scars." Alexandra Heather Foss

Day 31: "Sometimes, to become whole you just have to put yourself in the way of beauty." Cheryl Strayed



Blacks oppressed and marginalized by racism? Baldwin acknowledged and celebrated this beauty while invoking a

Unveil Beauty: "Where there is beauty hidden, we are to unveil it."

While we can miss beauty that is literally right in front of us, there is also beauty that is hidden and we are called to unveil it. The poet, Galway Kinnell, captured the reality of hidden beauty in his poem, *St. Francis and the Sow*. He wrote, "The bud / stands for all things, / even for those things that don't flower, / for every-thing flowers, from within, of self-blessing; / though sometimes it is necessary / to reteach a thing its loveliness, / to put a hand on its brow / of the flower / and retell it in words and in touch / it is lovely / until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing...." Beauty oppressed is beauty hidden, beauty disowned, beauty distrusted, beauty rejected, and beauty unblessed. Assume beauty and reteach loveliness until it, that is, beauty, flowers again from within of self-blessing. This is one way to unveil beauty.

Restore Beauty: *Where there is beauty defaced, we are to restore it.*"

In terms of people, beauty is sometimes defaced unintentionally: a genetic disorder, scarring and disfigurement, a mastectomy, an amputation, radiation burns, surgical procedures or body modifications gone wrong, the ravages of serious illness, and more.

A person's beauty can also be defaced intentionally. Some of this is indiscriminate because it can cast a wide net: bullying, harassment, negative reinforcement, body shaming, rejection and exclusion, gaslighting, etc. But beauty defacement often involves discrimination: racism, LGBTQ+ discrimination, including anti-trans legislation, ableism, sexism, and other oppressions.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen worked with a patient whose leg was removed at the hip because of bone cancer. She used painting and psychotherapy with him as he struggled with anger and bitterness. Eventually, they reviewed his progress. Remen handed him some early drawings. In one, he had drawn a picture of a vase with a deep black crack. Like his body, it could never be whole or beautiful. Looking at it, he said, "This one isn't finished." She gave him some crayons. Pointing to

(Continued on page 5)

moral imperative: "If we ...the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacksdo not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare."

How should we encounter and respond to beauty in the face of systemic oppression? Minister, theologian, and activist Robert McAfee Brown answered, writing, "How can beauty and oppression be understood together? For us the question is, how can they be understood separately? Concern for beauty is not a moral cop-out. It leads us firmly into the midst of all this going on in our world.

"Where beauty is apparent, we are to enjoy it. Where there is beauty hidden, we are to unveil it. Where there is beauty defaced, we are to restore it. Where there is no beauty at all, we are to create it.

"All of which places us in the arena where oppression occurs, where the oppressed congregate, and where we too are called to be."

Enjoy Beauty: "Where beauty is apparent, we are to enjoy it."

In hymn #298 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Rev. Dr. Thomas J.S. Mikleson wrote, "Wake now, my senses, and hear the earth call." Thoreau put it differently, writing, "We must learn to reawaken and

keep ourselves awake ...by an infinite expectation of the dawn." Beauty appears when we are awake to the fullness of life. But there is more. In Buddhism, this wake-fullness is mindfulness.

Annie Dillard, who prized the senses in her ongoing encounter with the beauty overflowing at Tinker Creek, captured mindfulness this way: "There is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way, I sway transfixed and emptied." Letting go of attachments, our narrow notions of beauty fall away, opening us to beauty that, though present, was previously unsensed.



A Theology of Beauty

It is essential that liberal theology concern itself with beauty, both aesthetically and as a moral imperative.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "The perception of beauty is a moral test." Like his fellow Transcendentalists, he meant that the ability to recognize and appreciate beauty is not merely an aesthetic experience but also a reflection of moral sensibility and character. When beauty becomes a moral imperative, we are called to go beyond enjoying beauty passively to acting on behalf of beauty.

Albert Camus visited his hometown, Tipasa Algeria in the 1930s. He returned in 1953, and wrote, *Return to Tipasa* in response. The essay is the source of his memorable assertion, "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer." Perhaps more important was this: "Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever the difficulties the enterprise may present, I would like never to be unfaithful either to one or the others." Camus affirmed beauty but pledged to balance that with a commitment to the oppressed, marginalized, and humiliated.

James Baldwin's 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*, contains two essays, one a letter to his 14-year-old nephew on how to survive in a loveless, racist world on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation. The second essay began with memories of growing up in Harlem. It

ends with a plea to end racism, warning, "If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*" In this final passage of the essay, he twice asked, "What will happen to all that beauty?"

What will happen to the beauty of

Family Matters

Learning to Appreciate Beauty

Edifa

For children to learn about beauty, the role of the parents is essential.

...Consider first how a child perceives the world. Some children have strong visual perception while others are more sensitive to sound. ...It is useless to try to make a child take an interest in the visual if he or she is more attuned to sound.

Where do we find beauty? Everywhere!

"There are beautiful things even in advertising," says Jean-François Kieffer. "On vacation, stopping at a pottery shop can be a good opportunity to admire different shapes and forms. Nature all around us is also fascinating. ... Photographs, movies, paintings ... there are so many fascinating things to share."

But beauty is found in more than just material things. Children can see beauty in gestures, attitudes ... Kindness, tenderness, sensitivity also shine.

How can we familiarize our children with beauty? ... [For] Flore Talamon. "Interest in beauty is transmitted on the condition that we ourselves love what we are showing."

...Loving what is beautiful is above all the result of setting the seed. At the Kieffers' home, the five children are sensitized to beauty in their everyday world. Setting a nice table for meals, presenting a dish well, making bouquets of flowers, singing or listening to music, there are many little things that ultimately leave an impression on the children. However, it is not easy, points out Aude de Kerros: "In these times dominated by ease and lack of limits, beauty is in exile, because it demands, if not an effort, at least attention."

Source: <https://aleteia.org/cp1/2020/09/30/how-can-we-help-our-children-learn-to-appreciate-beauty/>

Family Activity: *Beauty Treasure Hunt*

Encourage your children to look for beauty wherever they are: at home, in the yard, nature, at a store, a park, a zoo, a museum, etc. After having inspected an environment, have them select the thing that they think was the most beautiful, and then share why.

Fleeting Beauty

Wabi-Sabi

Wabi-Sabi is a traditional Japanese aesthetic that values the beauty of imperfection, impermanence, and the natural cycle of growth, decline, and decay. It finds beauty in objects' simplicity, modesty, and rustic nature with their flaws and unique characteristics.

The two words in *wabi-sabi* have deep roots in Japanese culture. *Wabi* originally referred to the solitude and beauty of living in nature, away from society. *Sabi* is related to the beauty that comes with the passage of time and the patina of age. The words were combined as "*wabi-sabi*" in the 16th and influenced pottery, calligraphy, and landscape design. Tea masters of the time, like Sen no Rikyū, formalized and popularized this understanding of beauty.



Wabi-sabi emphasizes a shift from the conventional notion of perfect or flawless beauty. It celebrates the subtle, the understated, and the unpretentious and invites us to find beauty in things we might initially consider ordinary or imperfect.

A *wabi-sabi* approach to beauty elevates a handcrafted, irregular, flawed ceramic bowl with unique glaze patterns over mass-produced perfection. It finds beauty in the natural world, like a weathered rock or a gnarled tree.

Wabi-sabi encourages mindfulness and an awareness of the transient nature of life, allowing us to find beauty in fleeting moments and experiences. More than an aesthetic preference, *wabi-sabi* can be seen as a way of living and perceiving the world with a profound sense of acceptance and reverence for the imperfect and fleeting nature of existence.

Source: Touchstones

A Rose in Concrete

(Continued from page 4) **Faith and Theology** the crack in the vase said, "You see, here—where it is broken—this is where the light comes through." With the yellow crayon, he drew light streaming through the crack in the vase and his body. In that broken place, he had discovered wholeness and beauty.

This is an example of restoring beauty. In other cases, we work to restore beauty by being allies in bending the universe's moral arc toward justice.

Create Beauty: "Where there is no beauty at all, we are to create it."

There are many wastelands, urban and rural where life is bleak and people live on the margins. Dwelling in despair, hope seems a foolish luxury. The human spirit flickers with the risk of going out. It is not wise to rush in with quick fixes or wallpaper over the ugliness. Instead, we are wise to companion people in creating beauty for themselves and others. Rather than creating beauty, we may want to learn how to be an ally of beauty. Consider Black rapper Tupac Shakur. He wrote this autobiographical poem when he was 19: "Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack / in the concrete / Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk / without having feet / Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams / it learned 2 breathe fresh air / Long live the rose that grew from concrete / when no one else even cared!" Against the odds, Tupac discovered his beauty, but not without allies: his mother, Afeni Shakur, a former Black Panther, and a close friend, actress Jada Pinkett, with whom he attended the Baltimore School for the Arts. Like the rose, he, too, grew from concrete.

Theologian and Unitarian Universalist minister Rebecca Anne Parker wrote, "More is asked of us than we have imagined. The blessing of life is that it will not let us go until we ourselves have offered the blessing we have to give. As Rumi said, 'Let the beauty we love be what we do.' Let us, in faith with all those who have gone before us, place ourselves among those who bless the world." May we use beauty to bless the world.

Source: Touchstones

Why do you paint? / For exactly the same reason I breathe.

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

"Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; each mind perceives a different beauty." In 1878, Margaret Wolfe Hungerford concluded, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

Philosopher Crispin Sartwell, author of *Six Names of Beauty*, writes that the 20th century "abandoned beauty as the dominant goal of the arts" as modernist and postmodernist movements placed innovation, individual expression, and social critique above traditional considerations of beauty. Interestingly, Sartwell does not view beauty exclusively as subject or object. For him, the relationship between the two and the context in which they are embedded must be considered.

Ideas and concerns about beauty continue to evolve. In the 21st century, people are challenging traditional norms of physical beauty driven by the body positivity movement, the embrace of gender-neutral beauty, the recognition of the beauty inherent in aging, and cultural aesthetics that value diversity and inclusivity in understanding human beauty. Launched in 2004, *Dove's Real Beauty* campaign (<https://www.dove.com/us/en/stories/campaigns.html>) and the *Dove Self-Esteem Project* (<https://www.dove.com/us/en/dove-self-esteem-project.html>), challenge stereotypes about beauty and support women, as well as girls who face widespread toxic beauty advice on social media (See <https://www.dove.com/us/en/stories/campaigns/detoxify.html>).

Photographers like Peter Devito, Waleed Shah, and Miss Sophie Gee have challenged harmful norms of beauty. Notable in this is Rick Guidotti, a former fashion photographer who, since 1997, has expanded notions of beauty through photography and education. (See his website at <https://positiveexposure.org/>.)

The following affirm beauty's value.

Beauty Speaks: Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "The voice of beauty speaks softly; it creeps only into the most fully awakened souls." Antoine de Saint Exupéry added, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." Beauty speaks
6 not through words but through the

awe, serenity, joy, gratitude, and longing it evokes. And we "understand" at a level below language. Annie Dillard captured this in *Seeing*, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a 1975 Pulitzer Prize winner. She "saw" lights ablaze in a cedar tree and the grass where she stood. The lights faded, but Dillard writes, "I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck." Beauty speaks.

Beauty Invites: Georgia O'Keefe began painting large flowers while living in New York City. A flower among towering skyscrapers was all but invisible. She forced people to see flowers in new ways by painting flowers on very large canvases. Like moths to the flame, people were drawn to their beauty. O'Keefe said, "When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment." Mindfulness is an important way of engaging the beauty that we encounter. It enhances our appreciation and understanding. Beauty invites.



Beauty Nourishes: We seek bread, not stones, but bread is not enough for our soul. Like some spiritual multi-vitamin, humans have a minimum daily beauty requirement. Fast-food beauty doesn't exist. Until we make time for beauty, our eyes are open, but we do not see; our ears can hear but we do not listen. Unitarian poet ee cummings captured in his poem that began, "i thank You God for most this amazing / day." He ended the poem with the lines, "(now the ears of my ears awake and / now the eyes of my eyes are opened)." Beauty nourishes if we are present to it. Cummings was prolific. He wrote 2,900 poems and created 1,600 drawings, watercolors, and oil paintings. His watercolor, *chocorua landscape*, has been paired with this poem.

(See <https://eecummingsart.com/gallery/artwork/439/>.) In a poem, he began, "Why do you paint? / For exactly the same reason I breathe." Beauty nourishes.

Beauty Comforts: There is a wildness in all things, including human beings. We want to cultivate that wildness because of the energy and power it confers, and there are also ways in which we need to soothe it. Beauty is a healing balm that evokes awe and tranquility to balance and calm negative or agitated emotions. Often the beauty in nature soothes. Wendell Berry writes, "When despair for the world grows in me / ...I go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. / I come into the peace of wild things.... / For a time / I rest in the grace of the world, and am free." Beauty comforts.

Beauty Inspires: Beauty begets beauty. *Appalachian Spring* was composed by Aaron Copland as a ballet score for Martha Graham, which she first performed at the Library of Congress in Washington on October 30, 1944. The ballet was about a couple on the frontier in Western Pennsylvania and featured Graham, Merce Cunningham, and Erick Hawkins. The score was partly inspired by the Shaker tune, 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple, but it was also inspired by Martha Graham. Copland explained, "I was putting Martha to music." (See a 1958 performance at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM5-Csl713g>.) Graham chose Copland because of his musical style, their professional relationship and shared artistic vision, and Copland's reputation as a composer of ballets. *Appalachian Spring* won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1945. Beauty inspires.

Beauty Transforms: We are transformed as we increase our capacity to sense, experience, and welcome beauty. Experiencing beauty can take us beyond life's ordinary and mundane aspects by providing a glimpse into something greater than ourselves. Through appreciation, gratitude, inner peace, harmony, or transcendence, beauty can remind us to cherish the present moment. Beauty transforms. When we walk in beauty, it is finished in beauty.

On Beauty and Being Just

Beauty does not exist in a vacuum. It has its defenders and its detractors. The critics of beauty attack it for a variety of reasons. Some oppose investing in beauty to enhance public spaces believing that we should spend that money to address social and economic inequalities. Others view beauty as a bauble of privilege and wealth. There is also the complaint that by reinforcing hierarchies and social divisions, beauty increases structural inequalities that affect marginalized groups. Many oppose the myth that a person's appearance determines their worth. Related to this are racial and cultural biases that favor lighter skin colors, including the hegemony of whiteness.

In the face of the above, Elaine Scarry, author of *On Beauty and Being Just*, argues that beauty plays a significant role in promoting justice and moral goodness. She considers justice a form of beauty expressed by acting for justice, promoting equity, and working for social harmony.

Awareness of beauty can encourage us to recognize and address the ugliness of injustice. Albert Camus expressed this dual consciousness. He wrote, "Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever the difficulties the enterprise may present, I would like never to be unfaithful either to one or the others." Beauty is not just aesthetically pleasing. It is a moral force that can inspire people to pursue justice.

Scarry contends that beauty has the potential to serve as a form of resistance against oppressive regimes and ideologies. The intersection of beauty and justice was at the forefront of the 1912 Textile strike's call for bread and roses. Consider the protest of Afghan women against the closure of all beauty salons by the Taliban, an assault on women and beauty. Many mass protests have selected color to establish identity, including the



Yellow Ribbon Movement in the Philippines, the Saffron Movement in Myanmar, the Red Brigade protests in the environmental movement in the UK, pink knitted hats in the Women's March in the US, and the Rainbow flag for LGBTQIA+ rights.

For Scarry, the political arguments against beauty ignore the transformative potential of beauty in enhancing lives and fostering justice. Beauty's transformative power can motivate individuals to oppose the injustices they witness or experience. Further, art can promote justice by bearing witness to truths that people might otherwise overlook. Art that expresses the suffering of marginalized communities can encourage empathy, understanding, and action. Notable in the history of resistance art is *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso (1937), an iconic painting protesting the horror of the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War.

The power of protest music has been significant. Sometimes overlooked were the spirituals sung by slaves expressing resistance through coded language like the biblical "O Canaan, sweet Canaan," meaning freedom in Canada. The Civil Rights Movement continued this tradition with songs like *We Shall Overcome* and *Oh Freedom*. The Black Lives Movement had protest songs like *Alright* by

Kendrick Lamar and *Freedom* by Beyoncé that featured Lamar.

Or consider the influence of Pulitzer Prize-winning dramas that address racism, like *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage (2017), *Pipeline* by Dominique Morisseau (2018), and *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury (2019).

While we must not ignore the political critiques of beauty and the injustices they reveal, we can, as Rumi advises, "Let the beauty we love be what we do."

Source: Touchstones

Weaponizing Beauty

While beauty is usually associated with positive attributes, it can also be used as a tool to hurt and marginalize people. This happens in many ways, and opposing this abuse can be challenging.

Society's obsession with beauty and the promotion of unrealistic beauty standards can lead to body image issues and low self-esteem among those who don't fit the mold. This can result in eating disorders, self-harm behaviors, and mental health struggles.

Narrow beauty norms rooted in Eurocentric standards can exclude and marginalize women from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Women who do not fit these limiting beauty standards can face discrimination and despair.

The prevalence of body shaming that criticizes women's appearances based on body size, shape, or other physical attributes can lead to feelings of shame and self-hatred.

Teenagers can be teased, bullied, or excluded from a group based on their appearance. This abuse can have severe psychological and emotional consequences for the victims, including feeling rejected and isolated.

These actions have different causes: competitive advantage, manipulation, insecurity, jealousy, domination, societal pressures, and more.

If we value beauty, we have an obligation to learn how to look with new eyes. We can begin to do this by confronting

how we have been culturally conditioned to value a very narrow concept of beauty. John Cage



captured this counter-cultural approach writing, "The first question I ask myself when something doesn't seem to be beautiful is why do I think it's not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason." We can also do this by using the eyes of others to help us see, eyes that embrace and celebrate diverse appearances beyond our experience.

Source: Touchstones

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion: Beauty

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of *Explorations* and the questions.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: “Each of us is an artist whose task it is to shape life into some semblance of the pattern we dream about. The molding is not of self alone, but of shared tomorrows and times we shall never see. So, let us be about our task. The materials are very precious and perishable.”

Arthur Graham

Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake, adapted) (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: “The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Living the Questions

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. How does beauty relate to our pursuit of meaning and purpose in life?
2. What were your experiences of beauty as a child? How did they affect you?
3. Where have you found beauty? What do those places mean to you?
4. How have you created beauty? What did those experiences mean to you?
5. What is beauty, and how do cultural, social, and personal perspectives shape our understanding of it?
6. Is there a connection between beauty and self-confidence? How can we cultivate genuine self-esteem that isn't solely reliant on physical appearance?
7. Can beauty be a source of inspiration and motivation for personal growth and development?
8. Can beauty be found in imperfection, Can embracing imperfection affect our well-being and happiness?
9. How does age influence how we see beauty? How do societal biases toward youthfulness affect the sense of beauty for individuals of different ages?
10. What are differences between inner beauty and outer beauty? How do they interact and influence each other?
11. How does beauty relate to resilience and coping in challenging times?
12. Have you known beautiful people? What made them beautiful?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice (Elizabeth Selle Jones) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words Rev. Philip R. Giles (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

Beauty of Mystery

Science & the Quest for Beauty

Noble laureate, Subrahmanyam Chandra-sekhar, lectured about the quest for beauty in science, which many have pursued.

Henri Poincaré, a theoretical physicist and philosopher of science, wrote, “The scientist does not study nature because it is useful; he studies it because he delights in it, and he delights in it because it is beautiful.” He didn't mean the surface beauty of nature but “profounder beauty ...from the harmonious order of the parts, ...which a pure intelligence can grasp.”

John Lubbock, who contributed to archaeology and biology, wrote, “Beauty is an all-pervading presence.” For him, it permeated the planet from “numberless flowers” to “hues of the shell.”

Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein concluded, “The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science.”

Physicist Murray Gell-Mann observed that “a chief criterion for the selection of a correct hypothesis... seems to be the criterion of beauty, simplicity, or elegance.”

Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson wonders, “...how much beauty lies just out of reach, hidden in plain sight, simply because we have no more than five senses to experience the world.” For Marine Biologist Rachel Carson, “Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.”

Astrophysicist Carl Sagan wrote, “The beauty of a star-filled sky is awe-inspiring. In a world torn by strife, it represents universal values—beauty, knowledge, and an intrinsic sense of awe and wonder.” May we experience that awe and wonder daily.

Source: Touchstones

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