

LOOK INTO THE MIRROR
UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
REV. JULIE STONEBERG
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OPENING WORDS **#504** ~ *e.e. cummings*

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Come. Let us open the ears of our ears and the eyes of our eyes.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Dog Eared* ~ *Amanda Haroey*
(In this story, after Otis is teased about his big ears, he begins to worry about how to manage them, that is, until his person tells him how much she loves his ears just as they are.)

MEDITATION *Sensory Reflection* ~ *Claudene (Deane) Oliva*

READING *Pretty* ~ *Katie Makkai*¹

MESSAGE *Look into the Mirror* ~ *Rev. Stoneberg*

Look into the mirror.

When the UU Ministers of Canada gathered last month for retreat, we spent a day with a facilitator trained by Joanna Macy, exploring Macy's project, 'The Work that Reconnects.' Her

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7TS2Z6IAI4>

work draws from deep ecology, systems theory and spiritual traditions, building a transition to a more sustainable human culture. It is deeply connected to nature...and postulates that connecting with the world of nature also connects us with our deepest beautiful natures.

One of the exercises that we did was to pair up and take one another on a walk in a park. I expect many of you have at one time or another done a similar exercise...where one person closes their eyes, and the other leads them...an exercise in trust, an exercise in experiencing the world in another way, an exercise in empathy. But we were given two unusual instructions. The first was that the sighted person was to occasionally pick something to offer to the 'blind' person...a pinecone, a stone, a tree trunk, a leaf...offering them a purely tactile experience nature. The second was, that when the sighted person wanted their partner to see something in particular, they were to position their head to be in direct line with it, and to whisper into their ear, "look into the mirror", at which point the 'blind' person could open their eyes.

When it was my turn to be the leader, I walked my partner up very close, inches away, from a shrub in bloom with tiny white blossoms, and whispered, 'look into the mirror.' She opened her eyes, and burst into tears, standing there sobbing for several minutes. I can't know the far reaches of what the tears meant or what it touched in her, but what she showed me (both in that moment and in the reciprocal experience of being led) was that when we take a completely undistracted view...with complete attention...the inherent beauty that lies in so much of what surrounds us comes into immediate and almost overwhelming focus.

And more powerfully, I caught a whiff of the reality that when we look at the beauty of nature, we are looking into a mirror...a mirror that can reflect that beauty that we also are...if only we could see it. We are a part of that beauty...part of all that is.

In the monthly theme packet on Beauty, I included a bit of the story of Narcissus from Greek mythology. The thing that most of us know about him is that the malady of narcissism is named for him...that problem being, a preoccupation and fascination with oneself that is seen as self-obsession and self-centeredness, a personal quality that is generally frowned upon.

Narcissus was a youth who became obsessed with his own beauty, and knelt daily beside a lake to contemplate his own face. He was so fascinated by himself that, one morning, he fell into the lake and drowned. And, at the spot where he fell, a flower bloomed, the Narcissus. The moral of the story: beware of the trap of vanity.

But here's a part you may not have heard before: When Narcissus died, the goddess of the forest appeared and found the lake crying; what had been fresh water, had transformed into a lake of salty tears. "Why do you weep?" the goddess asked.

"I weep for Narcissus," the lake replied, which was no surprise to the goddess, because the

lake had been the only one to be able to contemplate his beauty up close and personal.

"Was Narcissus beautiful?" the lake asked.

"Who better than you to know?" the goddess asked in wonder. "After all, it was by your banks that he knelt each day to look at himself!"

The lake was silent for some time. Finally it said:

"I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that Narcissus was beautiful. I weep because, each time he knelt beside my banks, I could see, in the depths of his eyes, my own beauty reflected."

Look into the mirror. When, how, in what ways, with whom, can you see your own beauty reflected?

During this past week, I had the privilege of officiating at a wedding, a wedding which embodied ideals not always present even in weddings...of how love and beauty are mirrors to each other, creating ever deeper reflections of that love and beauty. But which comes first?

The beauty? Or the love?

As a little girl, I loved, I mean LOVED, Rogers and Hammerstein's Cinderella, and I still find myself singing its music. During the ball, the prince and Cinderella sneak a few moments of privacy, and sing to one another, "Do I love you because you're beautiful, or are you beautiful because I love you?" Can we ever know the answer to that? Does it have to be one way or the other?

When I first conceptualized this service, I was thinking of all the myriad ways that our culture, our media, and the advertising world have created a 'beauty' industry...leading us to believe that beauty can be found in only certain styles, body types, ages, abilities, colour, weight, etc... And that unless we can attain that impossible ideal of beauty, we are to believe that we are NOT beautiful. We must look a particular way, buy expensive products, even undergo painful surgeries and procedures, in order to try to meet that beauty standard.

Research shows that seven out of ten girls don't like how they look by the time they are seventeen. And while much of the multi-billion dollar beauty industry targets women, I do not believe that women are the only victims. Not only do men get similar messages...about masculinity, strength, hair, musculature, height...I believe that across the gender spectrum, we are ALL deeply affected by externally imposed standards of beauty that affect not only our own self-esteem, but our ability to see and connect with one another in authentic ways. The beauty standard is one of the principle ways in which we sort and select who, and what, is worthy of our adoration and love.

In preparation for today, I spent some time wandering through Dove's website for their 'self-

esteem project.² Of course, I'm suspect, because, after all, this is a form of advertising, but still, I think their mission is a good one. There I found a powerful video called "The Evolution of Beauty"³ which shows in time lapse photography, the complicated, long process it takes to finally arrive at the 'face' of beauty that we see plastered on billboards. The final caption... "No wonder it seems unattainable." That image is false, painstakingly created and artificially modified, mostly, out of a desire to sell products. Who decides what beauty is?

On the one hand, I don't really care about the advertising industry. Let them do what they do. But what I do care about is the many ways in which we are, or allow ourselves to be, convinced and manipulated into seeing beauty in such narrow ways...ways that ultimately are soul-killing in that so many learn that who we are, as we are, is not beautiful, not loveable, not acceptable.

We each react to all of this in different ways. Some of you may honestly pay no attention, not needing the approval of the masses to know your own beauty. May we all achieve that self-acceptance. And, some of you may generally accept the media messages about beauty and have even had some success at meeting those standards. You aspire to look beautiful because it simply makes you feel good. And feeling good about yourself is a good thing! If you're in one of these two camps, you are probably among the three in ten who likes how you look.

But others of you, may feel tortured by ideals that you can't achieve, going through your days feeling less-than beautiful. Now, you might assume from looking at me that I don't buy into the beauty industry very much, and that's true, at least not with my money or even my time. But, I have to confess that it still have a hold on me...in my defiant reaction to it...in my resistance to all things 'girly.' I resent being objectified in any way...being told that my worth is tied to a particular way of 'looking.' But all of that...my resistance, my defiance, my objection...hasn't changed the fact that I do not, 99% of the time, believe that I am beautiful. So, you might take all of what I say today as some kind of personal vendetta...or maybe this is my version of Katie Makkai's slam poetry shown early.

Yet. Seven out of ten seventeen-year-old girls don't like how they look. Rampant bullying has contributed to much self-hatred. Teen suicide is a terrible problem. Depression. Self-destructive behaviour. In a society with so much relative bounty, our spirits are starved for love, and acceptance, and belonging. And, that starvation leads to atrophy in our heart

² <http://selfesteem.dove.ca/en/>

³ http://selfesteem.dove.ca/en/Articles/Video/Evolution_video_how_images_of_beauty_are_manipulated_by_the_media.aspx

muscle... the less we feel love, the less we are able to love.

At the wedding I mentioned earlier, Roy Croft's "To Love" was read. He writes: "I love you for the part of me that you bring out...I love you because you have [made] me good, [made] me happy. You have done [this]...by being yourself." There's a lovely and true symbiosis in these words...that when we feel loved, we are more able to love, more able to be fully who we are. That when we love, we make it more possible for others to love, and to love themselves. And within that love, that mirror to all that is, there is beauty... deep... relentless... ever-present beauty. We cannot love without also seeing beauty, and feeling beautiful.

So, I've known for a long time that when I find myself judging others, that judgment is a mirror into myself. It shows me where I am judging me...the places where I don't approve of who I am or what I'm doing or what I look like. And I've wondered how to stop that cycle... "do I judge you because you're not beautiful, or are you not beautiful because I'm judging you?" Where does judging, of self and others, start? Where does it end? Where is it possible for transformation to occur?

I've also known, heard, that when people achieve a modicum of enlightenment...touching what it is to be a bodhisattva...they see all things, all that is, as infused with light and beauty, without separation...a unity of unbelievably beautiful existence. And I've wondered how to enter into that place... "am I 'one with everything' because I am enlightened, or am I enlightened because I am 'one with everything?'" Where does enlightenment begin? Where is it thwarted? Where is it possible for transformation to happen?

I expect there is no one starting place...no specific entry point through which we all must pass on this journey...toward being able to see ourselves as inseparably immersed in love and beauty, one with all that is. Still, each of us must start somewhere, somehow, in our own way, if we are to participate in changing a culture that isn't very good at helping us to love ourselves. It occurs to me, however, that we might start by exercising our heart muscle. By practicing love.

Tell the people around you that you love them. Tell them they are beautiful. Often. Unceasingly. Even if you can't quite feel it, or see it, at least not yet, practice affirmations of love and beauty. Focus on expanding the channels that flow out from your heart...I suspect that when those channels are pink and healthy and open, then messages of love and beauty will more readily flow back into you. And with a healthy reciprocal flow, beautiful messages will become more abundant in our lives, and gush out into our world. Love begets love, and beauty begets beauty. More and more.

Look into the mirror. Wipe the fog off. Look closely. Choose love. Choose to see beauty.

Don't let a billboard or a commercial or anything else tell you what beauty is; only love can show us beauty.

I love you. You are beautiful.

Blessed be. Amen.

READING

from Writing Past Dark ~ Bonnie Friedman⁴

This short story is found in Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat's anthology, "Spiritual Literacy." It was told by Bonnie Friedman.

Outside the Cathedral holding ancient relics in Valencia, a woman kissed pigeons. She saw these birds as symbols of God. Gray and white and black as discarded shells, these were creatures I'd been taught to think of a "filthy." They seemed filthy, in fact, with their staring orange eyes and patchy feathers. But now, while I looked, they turned into doves. Of course they always were doves, or rather, of course doves always really were a type of pigeon. But I never really believed it until this woman showed me her belief. Her kiss transformed ugliness to beauty.

So it was like a fairy tale after all. It was the old story: what is loved reveals its loveliness. Here she squatted, radiant, smiling, enrobed in life, in a dozen pairs of folded wings, in a dozen pairs of pearl gray and, as I looked, yes, even lavender, even royal purple wings - a woman in an ordinary black cotton dress who smiled as if she knew she was the luckiest person on earth, swathed in blessing.

*CLOSING WORDS

To This Day ~ Shane Koyczan⁵

if you can't see anything beautiful about yourself
get a better mirror
look a little closer
stare a little longer
because there's something inside you
that made you keep trying
despite everyone who told you to quit
you built a cast around your broken heart
and signed it yourself
you signed it

⁴ *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, Ed., pp. 171

⁵ http://www.tothisdayproject.com/the_poem.html

“they were wrong”

Any message that tells you that you are not beautiful is wrong.

Go in beauty, knowing you are loved.

Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME