

THE CALL OF BEAUTY
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *Come Into this Room* ~ Susan Maginn

Come into this room, weigh into this chair, breathe into this body, the very body that will be you, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part. Come into this day, raise your gaze into this light, this one steadfast sun who watches over all growing beings, even you, even now.

Come into this heart and break into the boundlessness of wild beauty, no beginning or ending in you, but flowing through like whitewater, reaching toward all that ever was and ever shall be.

Come into this place. Let us breathe, and worship, together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Miss Rumphius* ~ Barbara Cooney

A young girl learns from her grandfather that she must do three things: travel to faraway places, live by the sea, and make the world a more beautiful place. How?

READING *Found While Lost* ~ Erik W. Martínez Resly

"The beauty of the world is the mouth of a labyrinth," writes Simone Weil. We would be foolish not to follow its call. And so we enter the labyrinth, lured by the whiff of a dream still in the making: the possibility of a new relationship, the promise of a new career, the potential for a new beginning.

We can never be sure what we will find once inside. But this much is certain: there will be times when the beauty of the world, and with it the entrance to the labyrinth, unexpectedly disappear. Some relationships will disintegrate, some careers will dissatisfy, some beginnings will disappoint. Unable to find the labyrinth's opening, we often find ourselves in frantic search of an escape, fumbling for the next step, tiring ourselves out in the process. Disheartened, dispirited, we feel disoriented. We get lost.

The question is not whether we will get lost in life, but rather how we will move through it in faith. Will we dwell on everything that we have lost? Or will we focus instead on everything that we have yet to find?

As it happens, there is much that awaits us in our lostness. Much to be excavated examined, even exalted. In not yet knowing what will be, we are afforded the opportunity to appreciate what already is. The things hiding in plain sight. A frayed relationship, for example, may reveal our deeper needs. An unfulfilling career may motivate us to seek out a mentor. A misstart, or a misstep, may remind us of our own fragile humanity. It may claw open our hearts and sensitize us to the suffering of others.

When lost, perhaps the greatest question our faith asks of us is this: How will we be found? Once the time is ripe, the stars align, and the way begins to open, will we be ready to embrace the mystery anew? Will we choose to trust anew, to risk anew, to

hope anew? Will we allow ourselves to yet again be drawn in, swept up, taken over by that magic that makes life worth living?

In the words of Simone Weil: "For if [we do] not lose courage, if [we go] on walking, it is absolutely certain that [we] will finally arrive at the center of the labyrinth. And there God is waiting...."

MESSAGE *The Call of Beauty*

"Beauty, as a philosophical concept, is rather mysterious — a slippery elf, hard to catch hold of, impossible to define. But let me try anyway: Beauty is that which glistens on the edges of our yearnings and lures us into the depths of things" ...so writes Patricia Adams Farmer.¹ Beauty is that which glistens on the edges of our yearnings and lures us into the depths of things. I'd like to start our service today with a theology lesson... I hope you'd like to start that way as well.

There are many kinds of theology...Natural Theology, which holds that any knowledge of the divine is primarily derived from nature...Historical Theology, which studies the development of ideas about the divine over time...Biblical Theology, which turns to a sacred text for the answers about God...Systematic Theology, which attempts to build an organized understanding of God based on a variety of sources and ideas...Practical Theology, which emphasizes how to live out one's beliefs... There are many ways to 'do' theology.

Now me, I'm a student of Process Theology...which is quite a different animal than you might think, if one can think of theology as some kind of critter. If you can, then process theology is rather like a caterpillar... like those you see on the inserts in your order of service...take a look. Those colourful, crazy images will lead us, trust me, to today's topic, the Call of Beauty.

Process thought is based on the metaphysical philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead in which 'reality is not made up of material substances that endure through time, but of serially-ordered events which are experiential in nature.' Serially ordered events...the circles that make up the green caterpillar in the first image. An entity, for Whitehead, is made up not only of one moment, not one circle in a succession, but rather is the whole history of successive moments. A primary aspect of process thought, is that just as one moment comes into being, it simultaneously passes away, and another moment becomes, only to immediately be gone, etcetera, etcetera. Nothing is ever static long enough to exist unchanged, or to 'become' ...rather, everything is always in a state of 'becoming.'

But nothing becomes all by itself. In the process of becoming, we are influenced by three things. The first, and perhaps the most powerful, is, as I've already said, the past. What I am right now is greatly determined by what I was a moment ago. This moment to moment becoming is what forms the caterpillar.

The second influence on our becoming is all which surrounds us (see image #2 where our green caterpillar is surrounded by other entities, other colours.) We live in community, in a context, and are constantly interacting with things outside ourselves. In each successive moment of becoming, we are influenced, not only by our past, but also by all our contemporaries in that passing moment. This is represented in image #3 where all the

¹ <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/view/5811>

different coloured circles around our little critter are actually changing its colour...actually making a difference in its becoming.

Still, we do have some choice in how we become. Whitehead said that we have to 'positivelyprehend' or actively take into our becoming, that which will change us. Now, this is rarely as drastic as the printed colors would indicate...change is generally more subtle than this...but the change in colors illustrates the fact that we are influenced by outside forces and beings.

One thing I love about process thought is the how clearly it resonates with our seventh principle, the interdependent web of all of existence. So it is important, I think, to note that in process thought, just as other things are influencing our becoming, we are also influencing the becoming of others. Take a look at the 4th image. It is this give-and-take, this touching and being touched, that resonates with me and so directly addresses the incredible importance of paying attention to our interconnected web. It matters what we do. It matters who we come into contact with, and it matters how we interact with all things and beings.

So far, I hope, this is generally comprehensible to you... that we are influenced by our past and by that with which we come into contact, and that we also have influence on what surrounds us. But perhaps you're wondering why this is called process theology rather than simply process thought.

See, a third factor in our becoming (illustrated in the 5th image) is what Whitehead called the "lure of God." Whitehead alternatively described God as 'creativity' and 'beauty' and 'harmony.' He believed that we are all given a sort of vision or longing for this beauty/creativity/harmony, and that this vision or longing is what lures us forward in process. You can see how our little caterpillar is actually being drawn out of itself, toward something.

Tada! There you have it. The Call of Beauty. The Lure of Beauty. Beauty calls us forward. (Now, of course, the notion of the call of beauty is not dependent on process philosophy; it's just a way of seeing it that makes sense for me.)

Not only does it make sense, but I find the idea of the call of beauty both meaningful and compelling. There is something in me that recognizes it as true. While I'm not convinced that such a call comes from an entity outside of, or separate from, us, I do believe that there is something in each of us that calls us toward the beautiful, toward the good, toward the creative. I believe that our purpose, what makes it meaningful to live, is to be co-creative in service of that beauty, that harmony, that good.

As I wrote in my 'wonderings' in this month's theme packet on Beauty, I think of myself as practical... utilitarian, efficient...as not having a particular skill in creating the beautiful, or for that matter, for giving aesthetics the time they rightfully deserve. Oh, I love a beautiful presentation, a pretty room, a wondrous garden...but I usually choose to go about my day doing things in the fastest way rather than the most creative way. While I suppose some would say that there is beauty to be found in my utilitarianism, there are moments...even with my head down, and my mind on the task...when a powerful beauty pulls me up short and makes me stop in my tracks.

Haven't you, at some time, been pulled toward the beautiful so strongly that you had to stop and notice? Beauty is around us, near us, within us, constantly, and yet, there are these intense and fleeting experiences of beauty that make us gasp or pause or stop to wonder. Perhaps it is simply in arranging a vase of flowers and the placing it carefully in just the right spot. Maybe you polish a mirror or a fender and for just a second are lured into a particular quality of the light and reflection that results. Or you stare into someone's eyes, and suddenly feel yourself immersed in an expansive pool of pure, primordial beauty. Or some moment of unexpected kindness catches you completely unawares and you have to gasp for breath. Close your eyes, and see if you can recall such a moment. Consider it. Even right now, with your eyes closed, can you feel how beauty calls to you? Calls to you, as for Whitman, like "the delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring?" Or as in John O'Donohue's telling of a moment, "suddenly...the lake surface split and a huge cormorant flew from inside the water and struck up into the air. Its ragged black wings and large awkward shape were like an eruption from the underworld."² Have you had moments like these?

Can you touch a memory of that pull, that lure? (You can open your eyes.) The Greek word for the beautiful is *to kalon*, which is related to the word *kalein*, which includes the notion of 'call.'³ So, there is something about beauty, wherever we find it, that tugs at us, pulls at us, drawing us into the divine, as in Simone Weil's image of beauty being the mouth of the labyrinth.

Archbishop Tutu likened this tug to heliotropism in plants, where plants turn towards the sun throughout the day in order to get maximum light for their growth. Tutu said, "At our best we are theotropic" ...that something in the human soul turns towards the divine wherever possible, like a plant turning towards the sun, or like a thirsty deer looking for a refreshing stream.⁴ (Psalm 42:1)

Rabbi Michael Lerner put it this way: "Human beings are theotropic — they turn toward the sacred — and that dimension in us cannot be fully extinguished. People feel a near-desperate desire to reconnect to the sacred, to find some way to unite their lives with a higher meaning and purpose and in particular to that aspect of the sacred that is built upon the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe that I describe as the 'Left Hand of God.' "⁵

Theotropic. I don't know who made up that word...some say it was Desmond Tutu, some say Irving Kristol...but wherever it originated, it describes a feeling, a yearning, to connect with something greater. To turn, to orient ourselves, toward the light.

Of course, we don't have to call that something 'god,' or even the 'left hand of god', which Lerner likens to loving, kind and generous energy in the universe. We might, as Whitehead did, simply call it beauty, or creativity, or harmony. Whatever it is, it is the call, the lure, to live well...to live with beauty – with harmony – an impulse to seek the good, to be open to what is true, and to celebrate what is beautiful.⁶

² O'Donohue, John, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (Harper Perennial: Great Britain, 2003) p. 11

³ *Beauty*, p. 13

⁴ <http://www.transfig-sm.org/JourneysLentEaster2013w.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/michael-lerner/the-left-hand-of-god-3/>

⁶ *Handbook of Process Theology*, edited by Donna Bowman, Jay McDaniel p. 237-8

Do you believe we are drawn to such a thing? What is it that makes us follow the impulse to create the beautiful? What is it that inspires someone to pick up a musical instrument and learn to play? What is it that seeps into our hearts when we gaze at a stained glass window, or that washes over us when we hear a hauntingly beautiful male chorus from Estonia? Does beauty have a greater purpose than to pleasure our senses? Might it also call us toward a higher/better way of living?

We don't have to think of that call, or that yearning, as something outside ourselves. The non-fiction book club has just begun to read the late poet John O'Donohue's book, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. In it, he says that beauty is our deepest nature...that we are created in order to participate in the creative. Beauty, and the desire for its creation, are simply, innately, a part of who we are. So, it may be that the call is really our deepest authentic voice calling to us.

And what if our participation in the creation of beauty is necessary for beauty to exist in the fullest and most alluring way possible? O'Donohue says that we are made to be in a co-creating relationship almost as if we each are given only one-half of the language. We need each other...co-creative partners and relationships... in order to understand and be understood. When Sue Prentice was our Congregational Engagement Coordinator, she used to invite you into shared ministry with the 'lure' of an opportunity to share 'in the ongoing evolution and co-creation of this community.' The co-creation of beauty in the form of beloved community.

So, what if beauty were our primary purpose? Can you imagine? O'Donohue poses a similar question about politics. If our government, at all levels, was concerned the creation of beauty, and with ensuring an environment in which beauty could flourish, well...can you imagine? It would mean that nature would be preserved rather than consumed, that music and art would be more important than the military. It might mean that schools would ensure each child was told they are beautiful...every day. Politics, not just in the service of peace, order and good government...but peace, order, good government, and beauty. If beauty were our guiding light, I expect this country, our world, would be a different place.

Mystics are those who have had a unique and personal experience of god and who then spend their lives trying to get as much of that god-connection as possible. Sunflowers turn their golden heads toward the sun, yearning to drink in the energy that makes them grow and shine. Theotropics, apparently, are people who turn toward the divine, in search of becoming more of who they already are. So when attending to beauty, we open ourselves to all such urges, all such calls and longings...which call us to be open to the beautiful mystery.

Let's go back to that little green caterpillar...you...me. In this one moment, as we hover on the threshold, on the edge of becoming into the next moment, consider the call of beauty. Might we adopt an attitude of reverence and reception that opens us to that call? Might we turn our hearts toward the light and choose to 'positivelyprehend' the beautiful? For to pay attention to beauty will affect our becoming, and the becoming of all around us, and will draw us toward the good, toward the harmonious...toward creativity.

Beauty, said O'Donohue, is a huge lantern shining at the heart of all life. May we allow ourselves to be drawn in, swept up, taken over by beauty.

Amen.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Rumi

Today, like every other day,
we wake up empty
and frightened.

Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and
kiss the ground.

Go in beauty. Go in peace. Amen.