

Anything Good about Beauty?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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Meditation

(From Closing Prayer from the "Navajo Way" Blessing Ceremony)

In beauty I walk
With beauty before me I walk
With beauty behind me I walk
With beauty above me I walk
With beauty around me I walk
It has become beauty again
It has become beauty again
It has become beauty again
It has become beauty again

Walking In Beauty (Blessing)

Today I will walk out, today everything unnecessary will leave me,
I will be as I was before, I will have a cool breeze over my body.
I will have a light body, I will be happy forever,
nothing will hinder me.
I walk with beauty before me. I walk with beauty behind me.
I walk with beauty below me. I walk with beauty above me.
I walk with beauty around me. My words will be beautiful.

In beauty all day long may I walk.
Through the returning seasons, may I walk.
On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.
With dew about my feet, may I walk.

With beauty before me may I walk.
With beauty behind me may I walk.
With beauty below me may I walk.
With beauty above me may I walk.
With beauty all around me may I walk.

In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.
My words will be beautiful.

Homily

There are recent events and feelings that gave rise to deciding that I was going to feel and talk my way toward beauty this morning. However, I think, truly, that the beginning of this sermon began nearly sixty years ago one night on Robert Avenue in Salt Lake City and with an infant boy lying in a crib. That child was me, and this is my first memory. I was alone in a quiet room illuminated from a window giving out onto a moon-filled night. The window was open and the night came in. A thin, white curtain slowly waved with the slightest breath of air. The curtain swelled and crested and subsided again in silence, and then lofted and undulated once more. Over and over it moved gently before my wondering eyes. Though alone; I wasn't afraid; though lying in the dim lit dark—in the words of the Navajo prayer from our meditation—beauty was before and behind, above, below and all around me that night long ago. The mystery in that room and beyond that curtain—its beauty—has never really left me, nor my desire, my need, my delight to walk with beauty.

Whether infant or aging adult, on the plains of Saskatchewan or the highlands of Papua New Guinea, on the streets of contemporary Vancouver or the walls of the Neolithic cave in Chauvet, France, we've wondered at and valued the beauty around us—nature's own handiwork and the beauty created by human imagination and human hands. A well-built stone wall, the fine stitchery in a quilt, the silent soaring reach of a red cedar, a sheet of water like sandpaper sparking with lights, a Horatian *Ode*, a hand thrown clay pot that rests easy in the hand, a sculpted figure from Michelangelo's chisel struggling free from a block of marble, the full-throated lyric of a lark ascending, the Grosse Fugue in a late Beethoven quartet, the quiet grandeur of a two gray hills Navajo rug, the dazzling colour and swirl of a Javanese batik, the toothless grin of an infant...a gossamer curtain undulating before the wondering eyes of a child in a moonlit room a life-time ago. Past number... across time, cultures and landscapes...beauty shows forth shining in plenitude and singularity, depth, line, mass, colour, touch and tone: evoking our wonder, breaking our hearts, consoling our grief, astonishing our senses, convoking us, setting a person uniquely apart, and sending us vividly forth—alone and together into life.

I'm not going to get into beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder thing; of course it is and can be—it is culturally determined, bewildering plural, subjectively experienced, and endlessly analyzed. I've juried and curated museum art exhibits, but this is not going to be a report from

the art world—though I’ve seen and handled paintings banally dead and mysteriously alive, and seen more than my fill of ironic, eye-on-the-market-value, made-to-order, supposedly shocking, installed pieces of conceptual “art.”

What immediately triggered this sermon was our recent celebration of the 50th anniversary of the dedication of these buildings, the time I spent lingering over the designs, the thoughts, photos and artifacts assembled for the exhibit in Hewett Hall; and the words for our litany of re-dedication in that service a couple of weeks ago. And then, there was something Bennett Mitten wrote to me describing his work refurbishing our buildings and the appreciation for them that arose slowly over time as he lingered on their design features. And here I’m going to quote him as he summed up his thoughts:

What I feel most strongly about all the buildings of UCV is a kind of willed hope, a kind of elegant, simple statement of purpose or intention which says “yes” to a vision of a better world in eminently human terms and in the graceful, open and democratically welcoming beauty of the place which could be summed up in the words of Solzhenitsyn (quoting Dostoevsky) “Beauty will save the world.” The buildings of UCV remind us in material form that it is the beauty of lives well lived that ultimately counts and redeems the realm of being.”

That’s a remarkable statement.

And then, if by chance, a strange coincidence—these things happen in life—at almost the same time Bennett was writing to me, I was reading an essay by the journalist Krista Tippett in conversation with Muslim scholar Khaled El Fadl and Rabbi Harold Schulweis. In this essay, she records these two men agreeing that a theological measuring stick, a credible litmus test for actions done in the name of religion, of whether and when they reveal the virtues and truths of their faiths, is in the answer to this question: *Is it beautiful, or is it ugly?* Does an action reveal a delight in the creation and in the image of a merciful God who could have made it? Is it reverent with the mystery of that? Beauty is in creation, they agreed, it is in the “human intellect and the human heart.” It is in their power to express balance, wholeness, relationship and knowledge. It is in the “love of living and in the ecstasy of seeing life.” (see Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith*...pp. 195-8)

One of the reasons the Czech playwright and journalist Karel Capek gave for not being able to become a Communist back in the 1920s, when that was a real option, and so many of his colleagues and friends were taking up the cause, was...well he put it like this: “The weirdest and most inhuman thing about communism is its peculiar, fierce grimness.” That could be said for a lot of isms political and religion—they fail the ugly test. Grimness on the one hand...and now—

glut on the other—our present day’s reigning ism spews forth an infinite array of things and sounds to covet and consume: perfectly lit, packaged and displayed in glossy ads all coming from some strange, remote world beyond *my* ken: perfectly manufactured people, chic home decor, wall paper music and sleek shiny things each and in sum could make us feel old, lumpy, gauche, ugly, disorderly, or poor and out of step in the race for the main chance, the golden ring, the sweet smell of excess.

Grim ideological isms and glossy glut: beauty? I don’t think so.

Freed from the grim task of educating the masses for an abstract future world, Karel Capek wrote a series of fabulous essays in working class newspapers on—among other things—icicles, toothache, plumbing, topsoil, tax returns and cats: of real things and real people marked by an affectionate touch and a heightened attentiveness to the here and now and the deep interrelationship of all things. One of my favourites is called “A Fairy Tale on a Tram.” It’s something he really witnessed: a small child sitting next to his mother on a rush hour packed tramcar begs her to tell him the fairy tale of the frog princess. “Softly, very softly the mother starts narrating the story. ‘And how big was the princess,’ asks the little one loudly... ‘and what did the prince do?’ The entire tramload has fallen silent so as not to disturb.... And the mother on the rattling tram carries on whispering the fairy tale....The whole tram begins to smile....”

Forty years after that essay was written, and after rivers of blood and untold misery had swept away Capek, the commuters on that rush hour tram in Prague, that mother and child and tens and tens of millions of others, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in the depth of the Cold War, stood before the distinguished guests at the Noble Prize award ceremony and quoted words that the gambling addicted, epileptic, alcoholic author Fyodor Dostoevsky put into the mouth of his doomed fool hero Prince Myshkin: “Beauty will save the world.” ““Beauty will save the world. What does this mean,” Solzhenitsyn asked that glittering group of dignitaries. “For a long time,” he continued, “it used to seem to me that this was a mere phrase. Just how could such a thing be possible? When has it ever happened in the course of history that beauty had saved anyone from anything? Beauty had provided embellishment certainly, given uplift—but whom had it ever saved?” Solzhenitsyn went on to claim that the claim for beauty is both essential and prophetic, however, he neatly summed up the rap sheet against beauty: a banal truism, mere decoration, a fleeting pleasure, and powerless to safeguard a single person or a population from violence, misery and want. In a lecture given in 1997, Elaine Scarry, a professor of aesthetic and

literature, asserted that “the vocabulary of beauty has been banished or driven underground [by so-called authorities] in the humanities for the last two decades.” I’d add that nearly twenty years on, not much has changed in the humanities, and that goes for the social sciences and the art world as well. (Elaine Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just,” Tanner Lecture on Human Values, March 25 and 26, 1997, p 38.

Hereafter: Scarry)

The arguments against beauty are, on the face of it, quite strong. Extolled in a hymn my family used to sing in chapels long ago, we looked at one another—parents and kids—and rolled our eyes when we sang: “there is beauty all around, when there’s love at home,” not because it couldn’t or shouldn’t be true, but because we knew the hymn was manufactured BS mandated by ecclesiastical authorities. Beauty was traduced in that hymn into a *mere phrase* utterly remote from the lived reality of our family life and the complexities of love between living, breathing human beings.

In the contemporary art and architecture world, a conventional consensus holds that the duty of the artist is to reflect the world as it is. And if the gods have been banished from the heavens and art no longer serves as a threshold to transcendence and the eternal, if beauty can’t stay the hand of banality, possessiveness and oppression—if instead, if this world is all there is and it’s full of greed, violence, disorder, the cult of celebrity and wealth, of randomness and alienation—then all those who work in the arts, letters, music and architecture feel bound to hold up a mirror to that world in creative works filled with irony, disdain, empty conceptual gesture, and fierce grimness. And if it doesn’t do anything for you: you reader, gallery and concert goer, resident and walker through built up architectural space—*you know* where the problem lies—it’s with *you*: *you’re* an outdated elite, stuck with unhip notions of craft, discipline, merit, spirituality, and delight; or you’re a provincial bumpkin, or a hopeless romantic. God help you, you may even be religious.

And it gets worse for two reasons. Beauty’s taking a beating in the worlds of arts, education and politics because, it is argued, when we stare at something beautiful, it’s actually damaging and destructive to the thing locked in our gaze, and damaging to the person who beholds it as well. Over two hundred years ago, the poet Wordsworth put it like this: “Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things—we murder to dissect.” We encounter a beautiful face, a landscape, and all-too-often, or so it’s argued, we want to possess it,

study it, consume it; we can't leave well enough alone. "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings," Wordsworth continues, "enough of science and of Art/Close up those barren leaves."

Consider the photo in the order of service of people taking pictures of the *Mona Lisa*—it is an example of this phenomenon. Floating on the museum wall, encased behind protective glass and roped off to prevent us from getting too close, that object, the unique painted work, has been drained of its aura and reduced to an item on a globe-trotting cultural tourism check list for our passive, visual consumption. Pre-digested taste is confirmed. Nothing really changes. Nothing, no one is transformed or transfigured. Stuck in a crowd pressing forward, our eyes are locked on that over-exposed *thing*—you can hardly call it a unique painting anymore of a real person painted by a distinct artist of genius—while our backs are turned away indifferently from the other works of art arrayed in the gallery.

Backs turned away—this brings me to a final item in the brief against beauty—it's essentially a political argument. Let's call it "lateral disregard." The political critique against beauty asserts that by seizing our attention, it fatally distracts us away, not only from other works of arts and culture clamoring for our attention, worse still—beauty stops us from creative maladjustment, from striving against unjust, inequitable, oppressive structures, practices, and institutions. Beauty makes us inattentive and indifferent to projects aimed at bringing truth and justice into the world. (Scarry 39)

I think both of these arguments—the destructive gaze and lateral disregard—are not the last word. In fields of human endeavor that aspire unapologetically to truth as their object—math, physics, biochemistry—in labs and seminary rooms, people often speak of problems and their resolution in terms of "beauty," and of approaches that are "elegant" and "simple." A poem, a stone wall, a red cedar, an infant's face, aren't "true"—but don't they, can't they, ignite in us a desire for truth by giving us the conviction and experience of error and a urge to reach out at set right things that have gone awry? We set our hand to true a crooked wall. We want to understand the nature of the tree and the infant's potential and needs.

Struck by the beauty of these things can and have created in us an aspiration for truth, generous attention and care. We come upon something, someone beautiful with no work of our own; and then, or so it can happen, we go from that site, that person, prepared to undergo a giant labour of our own to create, to protect, to bring more beauty, more justice and peace into the world. "When the eye sees something beautiful," wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein,

“the hand wants to draw it.” “He who has gone farther, to the very beauty of the world itself,” said Simone Weil, “does not love them [or other things] less, but much more deeply than before.”

Far from a mere meddling, barren intellect, our embodied passionate minds want to beget, create, and love more expansively and generously in the presence and the pressure that beauty places upon us. In this there is something life-giving and life-saving about it. Think of Karel Capek’s “A Fairy Tale on a Tram” again, of the mother softly answering her child’s questions while narrating the story of the “Frog Princess” to her child in 1930s Prague.

Picture the silence and smiles that spread through the tram car, taking the wearied commuters out of their daily cares on the routine journey home....and as if beauty’s own voice was speaking to them: “You are in the presence of something life-affirming. This is not an occasion for careless self-regard. This is something that deserves from you reverence and loving, protective kindness. And we, on the far side of that story from decades ago, knowing what was soon to befall that small nation in Central Europe, we want to reach out to save that child, that mother, that tram filled with end-of- work-day commuters from the war-filled, totalitarian world lying just ahead of them. To reach out to those people *then*, and to our own world *now*. Far from passive, mute, possessive, and indifferent, beauty can prepare and pressure us to walk the ways of justice, equity and peace. Or so I would believe.

Anything good about beauty? How can I say no, when its fruits, its harvest—which actually are sufficient unto themselves—is spread out before, behind, above and below, and which also calls to us in somber, ecstatic, aching entreaty to reach out and bend that moral arc of the universe toward justice?

“In beauty all day long may I walk,” says the Navajo Blessing Way.

“Through the returning seasons, may I walk.

On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.

With dew about my feet, may I walk.”

“*Is it beautiful, or is it ugly?* Does an action reveal a delight in the creation and in the image of a merciful God who could have made it? Is it reverent with the mystery of that?” ask the Muslim scholar Khaled El Fadl and Rabbi Harold Schulweiss.

When that infant, six decades ago, gazed with rapt wonder at that gossamer curtain curling in a soft wind that moonlit night, he knew nothing of what was to come, nor all this talk of aesthetics, politics and religion. There was only the *beauty* then and there, and the Mystery beyond that came to him like a welcome, a home-coming into this world.

When we come upon beautiful things—the profile of a mountain, the gesture in a face, a haunting line of music, a shaft of sunlight through the leaves of an oak tree—they open up the surface, the normal pace and appearance of the very fabric of life and pull us through to some deeper, vaster, interconnected place reaching out toward the very beauty of the world. And when this happens, we stand in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before—stilled, awed, renewed, grateful, and recommitted to a world more bounteous, more welcoming to beauty, truth and justice.