

Seeing Beauty, Doing Justice

A Sermon on the Occasion of Leon Dunkely's Ordination
To the Unitarian Universalist Ministry
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Unity Unitarian
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*"There were no mirrors in my Nana's house,
no mirrors in my Nana's house.*

*And the beauty that I saw in everything
was in her eyes (like the rising of the sun).*

The world outside was a magical place.

I only knew love.

I never knew hate,

*and the beauty in everything
was in her eyes (like the rising of the sun).*

I begin with these song words from Ysaye Barnwell
of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

She sings of a grandmother whose love

Enabled a black girl child to know the beauty of the world

And her own beauty, even while growing up in material poverty

In a world that defiled and denied the child's beauty.

In a world where then and now black children,

With skittles in one hand and ice T in the other

Are hunted down by those who cannot see them.

This afternoon, as we joyfully ordain Leon Dunkely
to the Unitarian Universalist ministry,
I invite us to contemplate
the spiritual importance of beauty
and the ministerial power of the artist

Why this theme?

It is obvious, of course,

Today we ordain an artist to the ministry.

Among those who lead us,

Whose ministry shows us the way

We especially need the presence of artists...

Artists unveil life's beauty

And they disclose the ways and the places

in which beauty is defaced

Artists call us to reverence and to prophetic outrage

They testify to the sacred

And document the profane

They re-sensitive our de-sensitized minds and hearts...
And call us to a higher ethic,
One that faces into what is,
And is guided by an embodied experience of what can be.

The African theologian Augustine,
in one of his more brilliant and persuasive moves
turned at the end of his life
to the theme of beauty...
Beauty became for him the image of God...
He taught that the rhythms of music and poetry
Were echoes or analogs for the presence of
divine creativity and grace at work in the heart of all existence..
By feeling and hearing music and poetry
The soul could be drawn back into right relationship with
The holy...
Desire could be awakened by delight
And the meaning of desire was that all longing, ultimately,
Was longing for union with God.

"O beauty, too late have I loved thee...

You were with me but I was not with you...

But you cried out, and broke through my deafness.

You showered your brilliant light on me and dispelled my

blindness

Now I have tasted you ..

And I hunger and thirst for more

I burn with desire for your embraces."

This is the ministry of the artist:

To draw us to God, to the sacred in ourselves and in our world...

By awakening us to the rhythm and feel,

The melody, the harmony, the intensity, the sweetness,

The soft/hard, sweet/bitter, dissonant/dissolved jazz of life...

The beauty of God.

That music, Augustine and other great mystics and theologians
have taught...

Is always sounding...

It is always with us,

The challenge for us is to be with it.

At the end of his essay, "The Fire Next Time,"

After exposing the dynamics of racism,

The beaten down and torn apart humanity marred

By the devastating exploitations of racial injustice...

James Baldwin says,

"The question remains,

What shall we do with all this beauty..."

He evokes the persistence and resilience of beauty,

The face of the holy shining through human beings

even in the midst of all we do that defaces one another.

And finally Baldwin's prophetic call –
As is the prophetic call of so many artists –
Is not a call to outrage and pity,
Which merely demands that the privileged become the
paternalistic...

It is a call to all of us to come together
before the sacred altar of beauty
And be transformed by its gentle and fierce insistence
That that which is lovely not be defiled.

[Macrina,
a fourth century Christian woman theologian wrote:

"God creates life,
Life beholds beauty,
Beauty begets love,
Love is the life of God."

There is a circular flow in this spiritual affirmation,

It evokes movement from seeing beauty
to responding with love
to coming full circle home
to the sacred source of all life

In a Hindu text, Brahman says,
“I am the self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature,
I am the radiant sun among the light-givers;
I am the sustainer, my face is everywhere.”
Native American religion speaks of walking in beauty,
Beauty behind us, before us, beneath us, above us.
and within us.]

When I was a small child, it was my grandmother
who first taught me to sense the presence of the sacred
shining out not only from the faces of the human beings around
me,
but from all living things.

During summers on Wollochet Bay –
a little estuary on Puget Sound,
where my grandparents had a log cabin,
my grandmother took me on long walks through the woods.
In the buzzing green and gold heat of August,
while the fragrance of ripening blackberries
dripped like honey in the air,
and the red-wing black bird sang
from his perch in the reedy bank,
my grandmother would carefully kneel beside me
and teach me to observe the distinct features
of all the wayside plants and flowers.
“This is the Monkey Flower” she’d say,
showing me the fragile swaying fronds
tipped with yellow blossoms
that looked like tiny orchids;
“This is the red huckleberry
And is the Saskatoon berry,
Here is the Casscara tree, feel its smooth bark –

It is good for medicine;

Here is the Ginger Root growing in the shade of

The vine maple, and here is the wild mint.”

She’d pinch a small stem of the mint and place it in my hands.

“Taste the leaves,” she’d instruct.” Feel how the stem is square.

All the members of the mint family have square stems.

See if you can find the other mint family members here along

the stream – the purple horse nettles, the self-heal plant.”

Through my grandmother’s eyes, and touch, and words,

I came to know the woods as a place of beauty,

each thing with its own face, its own character and qualities,

all of it intertwined in the tangled bank,

along the stream’s micro habitats within the forest canopy,

dependent on the muck of the earth,

the sun and the rain, and the interpenetrating air.

I came to know myself, too,

loved and called to love.

*There were no mirrors in my Nana's house,
no mirrors in my Nana's house.
And the beauty that I saw in everything
was in her eyes....*

Seeing the beauty of the earth,
feeling the beauty of the interdependent web of existence
of which we are all a part, matters now more than ever.

In his book *The Paradise of God*,
theologian Norman Wirzba writes,
“Rates of soil erosion, water and air pollution, global warming,
garbage production, species extinction, suburban sprawl,
ozone depletion, deforestation, desertification,
as well as class envy, worker anxiety,
stress, depression and boredom—
all indicate a narrowing of our ability

to appreciate the broad natural and social contexts necessary
for a successful and healthy life....

in the past we could readily abandon the places we wasted
and find new territory to occupy.

Creation's fund, we might say, seemed inexhaustible
and infinitely forgiving of our careless lives. But no longer."

What we need in order to face and address the threats

To earth's life-giving habitats

is an upwelling of greater, more passionate, love for the earth
and for one another.

We must see the beauty, to love the beauty,

and love the beauty

To save and protect it.

Elaine Scarry in her essay "On Beauty" says,
"Beauty is life-saving....Augustine described it as
'a plank amid the waves of the sea.' Beauty quickens.
It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster.
It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living.
. . . It comes to us, with no work of our own;
then leaves us prepared to undergo a giant labor."

The labor of love for this earth and for one another
Requires us to go whatever distance is necessary
to serve the creation with responsible devotion and wise care.
And to defend one another against dehumanizing acts of
prejudice and injustice,

Recently, I watched documentary footage taken by
A current Starr King student, Suzi Spangenberg.
Suzi filmed Unitarian Universalists in Arizona two summers ago
who answered the call to gather in Arizona to protest

the implementation of SB 1070.

People of faith and conscience stay could not stay on the sidelines when children as young as six have are being detained, when sheriff's deputies are taking the law into their own hands and conducting illegal raids, when families are being broken up in round-ups, and when people with economic interests in the privatization of prisons and ties to white supremacist groups are behind legislative efforts in states all across this nation that aim to imprison undocumented workers, and turn them into slave labor.

Katarina Sinclair, a UU from Tuscon, Arizona was among those who along with UUA President Peter Morales were jailed for protesting.

While detained, Katarina was in a cell

close to a group of undocumented Latina women who were scheduled to be deported back to Mexico or sent to prison.

The night in jail was long. The detainees had no water.

The air conditioning was turned down to 50 degrees.

There were no blankets.

No place to lie down except the cement floor.

The lights were kept on all the time.

Guards banged the steel doors to keep everyone awake.

Across the distance between the cells,

Katarina and others in their yellow

“Standing on the Side of Love” T shirts

signaled their support for the detainees.

Making eye contact with one of the Latina women,

Katarina gestured

“I see you,”

The woman nodded.

"I love you," Katrina continued to gesture.

The woman's eyes filled with tears.

"Si' se puede" – she mouthed,

Cesar Chavez' motto, "Yes, we can."

When morning came,

the Standing on the Side of Love protestors were released.

They were relieved to be free

of the traumatizing prison conditions,

But their hearts were torn by their knowledge

that the undocumented immigrants had little chance of release.

As Katrina was led away from the cell,

she walked backwards to keep eye contact with the

women still jailed.

The woman she'd connected with the night before

Pressed her face to the bars.

As the distance between the two women grew...

She gestured to Katarina,

"I see you."

"I love you."

"Si' se puede."

There were no mirrors in my Nana's house,

no mirrors in my Nana's house.

And the beauty that I saw in everything

was in her eyes (like the rising of the sun).

This is our calling today:

To see life's beauty and one another's beauty

And respond with acts of love and courage.

That we might keep the circle whole.

Leon,

As we ordain you today,

I give thanks for your gifts as an artist

And I rejoice that the ministry you bring to us

Is the ministry of the artist.

Show us our beauty

Show us life's beauty

Connect us.

Teach us to respond with ethical action,

With justice making,

And with holy delight.

Bring us home to God.

AMEN.

PS

In another passage, Marcina wrote:

“The soul should know herself accurately
and should behold the Original Beauty
reflected in the mirror and figure of her own beauty.”

In that Original Beauty, Marcina believed,
the soul bore the imprint of the imago dei, the image of God,
which each human being was called to manifest in a beautiful life –
a life of love, justice and compassion.

This is our first principle as Unitarian Universalists:

We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all persons,

We reverence each person as a sacred being.

The spiritual roots of this principal

go deep into ancient religious traditions

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

share the Genesis story in which humanity’s sacred worth

is given at Creation,

we are made from this earth and infused with the breath of God.

This is our primordial beauty,

the sacred blessing of every human being.

Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well,
regard beauty as the manifestation of the Great Soul,
the Brahman, or the Buddha nature, present in all things.