

## May 22, 2022: Beauty Healing and Wholesome

### Homily: Healing Beauty

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of May is “Nurturing Beauty.” And so, we continue our discoveries today, gaining wisdom for our journey from words in the Christian Scriptures, of Indigenous American poets, of prophetic Unitarian Universalists, from the actions of social activists, and from our own experience. So, let us explore with joy and open hearts.

In *The Acts of the Apostles*, Saul of Tarsus is wicked man who hates those said to be “on the Way,” the Way being an embrace of the teachings of the recently executed Jesus, Son of Man. Saul has made it his mission to find those on the Way and to persecute and murder them. Saul is one day struck blind, for three whole days. During this time, Jesus—in spirit—visits one of his faithful, Ananias, and instructs him to seek out the wicked Saul. Ananias knows how evil Saul is and expresses some resistance. But Jesus is clear: Find him. Jesus has a job for Saul. And Ananias does find Saul, and when he does tell him about Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes to Saul. And the scales fall from Saul’s eyes, and he sees the wickedness of his ways, and he embraces the Way that is Jesus. And Saul is reborn, with a new name: Paul. And he goes off to do the work of conversion. That is, Paul’s is a conversion story. A transformation from evil to good.

My heart remains heavy in the wake of the white supremacist attack in my hometown of Buffalo, where my neighbors are terrorized and my friends and family are fearful and people I care about are traumatized. Sometimes, I am envious of those who have a firm faith in God, those who believe here is a God who will take the wicked and transform them, a God who can find a use for an evil, persecuting spirit, give him a new name, put him to good ends. I am sometimes envious for a God who can just reach in and make the world a better, less hateful place. But I don’t believe in this way. I can’t, or I surely would. What *are* we to believe, then, when the world is so painful and so very ugly? How can evil be transformed into good?

One of the apocryphal stories of Unitarian Universalism comes in the words of one of our martyrs, Francis David, who died at the stake in Transylvania for his heresy, insisting on one God rather than a Trinity. And he said: “We need not believe alike to love alike.” . . . “We need not believe alike to love alike.” We don’t really know exactly who said those words. But we say them. And what matters is that our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition is not founded upon a single shared belief. Rather, our faith tradition operates by different questions: How shall we live? What actions will guide us through life? What kind of life will we seek to create? The question of how shall we live is what brings us into a covenantal relationship with one another. Meaning that we agree to work together to create a certain kind of good life for ourselves and for the larger world. And so we must begin by believing that it is possible to make a change in the world that can be for the good, though we imagine different ways to create it.

In some aspects of Western philosophical tradition, a “good life” means a moral life. A good life can mean a life where pleasure is possible or where happiness is possible or where meaning and purpose are pursued. And while a good society might follow from people seeking to live a good life, the emphasis

in Western thinking is upon the individual. The emphasis is on how an individual might thrive by pursuing morality or pleasure or happiness or meaning and purpose. But our world offers us other possible ways of defining the “good life,” ways that might provide solace and healing in the midst of the tragedies of white supremacy and mass shootings, or any such murders demonstrating a vicious disregard of the mysterious gift of life and of human thriving.

One such way comes from Elandria Williams, a life-long Unitarian Universalist from Tennessee who died in 2020. She writes: “My church changed forever on July 27, 2008, when an armed man came into the sanctuary and killed two Unitarian Universalist leaders, one a member of TVUUC and the other a member of Westside Church.” You might remember this incident, as it frightened a good many of us who had not thought of ourselves as the targets of violence, though our values of equity and liberation certainly are not as widely held as we once believed. Williams, understandably, says: “This rocked our church to its core.”

And then she recounts her personal reaction to the events: “When I first heard about it, I didn’t know who had been killed—my mom, my friends and their parents, or others who had nurtured me my entire life.” But beyond her own wrenching experience, Williams learns something else. She says: “I realized something that day that has stayed with me ever since: No matter what issues I have with other Unitarian Universalists regarding our visions of God/Spirit, justice, race, and age—at the root of everything is community, love, and faith.” At the root of our faith tradition, in the midst of tragedy and beyond, “everything is community, love, and faith.” And in Williams’s words: “That day, something larger than our individual beliefs rose up in my mind. I thought of the principles, values, and family that are the connective tissue of our faith community and that held us weeks after the shooting.”

Maybe some God from elsewhere reached in and transformed Elandria’s mind, but this is not how she sees it. Nor how I see it. Rather, principles, values, and family are the connective tissue within the church and beyond it. Her church community was a family knit with the same principles and values that hold this congregation together as well. We share a good way, and we ourselves make it so. We make it a family. The words we use and repeat, these matters. We are a welcoming people of diverse beliefs who commit to nourish the spirit, broaden the mind, nurture the earth, and build community. Such words matter, when we really take them into our hearts and allow them to guide our hands. And that is beautiful, in more than one way.

We are what we’ve got. We in community transform ourselves so that we can transform the world. Given all that we humans are capable of, that reality scares me not a little. But it is in the capacity for the goodness of human beings that I have placed my faith, a faith that we can make the world beautiful, even when some of us seem hell-bent on making life hideous. “In such ugly times, the only true protest is beauty.” And because our values at Unitarian Universalists encourage and enjoin us to learning, we can draw on new sources, beyond Christian Scripture and beyond our observations of life’s brutality, to get to a new way, to a new community, built from and for Beauty.

Carol Lee Sanchez is member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, and she writes about, among other things, how to live a good life in a Native way. Sanchez describes a *way* of living, a mindset about our shared reality, that even non-natives can embrace and enact. According to Sanchez, “to live a good life is to walk in Beauty.” And what exactly does that mean, to walk in Beauty? First of all, to walk in Beauty means that we bring our attention to beauty, even when we are confronted by ugliness. “In such ugly times, the only true protest is beauty.” And, we have to walk in Beauty with intention. We cannot be passive observers of reality but must be instead fully intentional, open to the fact that Beauty really is present. And to Walk in Beauty means to acknowledge the harmony, the balance, that is natural to reality, the balance that is, in fact, the true reality of reality, what Sanchez calls The Great Mystery. To live a good life is to be connected to the great mystery in, among, and beyond us. To live a good life requires attention, according to Sanchez, to “a mandate for the people to strive to achieve harmony within their community and its surrounding environment, to ‘Walk in Beauty’ or ‘see Good in everything.’”

For Sanchez, maybe even for the non-Native of us, seeking to restore harmony, walking in Beauty, seeing the Good in everything, it isn’t as hard as it sounds, even when the world is ugly. Sanchez writes: “American Indians believe the universe and everything in it is ‘entitled to reverence and respect’ [simply] because it exists. Thus, the Tribal Principle of Relationship, that we are all related, is a natural extension of this belief. The Tribes teach that when we are disrespectful, irreverent, or abusive to the inhabitants of our environment, they will abandon us. They will no longer give themselves up for us if we disconnect ourselves from them.” It is our human disrespect, irreverence, and abuse that creates an environment of disharmony, of ugliness. We become out of balance and out of harmony, when we exclude Beauty from our awareness.

Sanchez is most directly writing of our human relationship with the evolved earth, peopled as it is with animals, plants, and minerals. We are all relatives. And like Elandria Williams, Sanchez reaches toward community for help in walking with Beauty, in re-discovering harmony and balance. “It’s a short step to take,” Sanchez writes, “and wouldn’t require adopting an entirely new attitude concerning relationship but merely an e-x-p-a-n-s-i-o-n of our current notions about what (or who) constitutes our personal family.” To achieve this expansion of family, this continuity of all the peoples and all that is the earth, we must learn that there is no such thing as “non-nature.” Everything, even the human-built environment, as extensions of human beings and the earth, is also nature. But there is such a thing, such activity as “anti-nature.” Anti-nature is that which would destroy balance and harmony and thus hide Beauty from our eyes. Anti-nature is what evil-doing hatred is. Anti-nature is what oppression is. Anti-nature is the pretense that evil-doing hatred and oppression don’t exist, that they never existed. I do not think that we can turn anti-nature into beauty. And we don’t have to honor it with our attention.

To walk in Beauty, to put our intention and energy to it, that is what makes for a good life, that is what may make us fully alive and human and humane. And so, even today, to renew our practice of noticing beauty and harmony, let us remember and honor the beauty and harmony of jazz music, let us anticipate the beauty and harmony of classical music, let us welcome the beauty and harmony of a hip-twitching, foot-tapping, finger-snapping pop song. “What to do with beauty?—in the midst of tragedy,

of violence, of cruelty?" "Where there is beauty, amplify it. Where beauty is hidden, reveal it. Where beauty is ruined, restore it. Where beauty is absent, create it: This will be our gift to our aching world."

**Reflection:** Wholesome Beauty

Maybe something beautiful? Surely something beautiful. The artist child gives the beauty she created to other individuals, who then magnify the beauty, intentionally bringing beauty to the awareness of many more. The beauty of art creates community, and community creates restoration and rejuvenation, making more beauty. Musical harmonies tune us to harmony, to balance, to beauty. In the words of Bruno Mars, whose song "Count on Me" Eleanor played so poignantly for the offertory, "If you ever find yourself lost in the dark and you can't see, I'll be the light to guide you. I'll be there, 'Cause that's what friends are supposed to do. You can count on me, 'cause I can count on you." Feel the commitment to the whole, to the harmony of the whole. We are all, in the words of Elandria Williams, "part of the connective tissue that holds the legacy and future of our faith. [. . .]. We are the children of freedom fighters, visionaries, and radical liberal theologians. We are the phoenix rising out of the ashes of the McCarthy era and the civil rights, women's, and queer liberation movements. We are the survivors and beneficiaries of youth-led and youth-focused beliefs and programming that encouraged us to be change makers, boundary pushers, and institutionalists at the same time."

"This is a prayer for those times when words fail and all that's left is the 'yes' and the 'no' of it all, and our ability to let the cord of the breath lead us from this moment to the next. This is a prayer for all who have been lost that in our memory, they might be found. May we be the ones to make it so." I put my faith in the beauty in what people are doing in the aftermath of devastation in Buffalo: helping each other, healing each other, restoring the balance and the beauty.

May we all find this way to walk in Beauty. May we find in each of our hearts the stirrings of compassion, the roots and the wings of community that enable us to shape lives of justice and beauty, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."

Sanchez, Carol Lee. "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: The Sacred Connection" in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred: Feminist Interactions with Other Animals and the Earth*. Ed. Carol J. Adams. Bloomsbury, 1993.

"The Acts of the Apostles" 9:1-22 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2010

Williams, Elandria. "We Are Community" in *Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood*. Ed. Kayla Parker. Skinner House Books, 2015.