

“Beauty and Bread”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading

“The Word” from *Sweet Ruin* by Tony Hoagland © 1992. Published by the University of Wisconsin Press.¹

Sermon

I invite you for a moment to bring to mind something of beauty that you observed or experienced in the last 24 hours.

Just the other day, I was picking up sticks off the lawn and doing some raking when I noticed a small shrub beneath the towering pine trees. Everything around it was brown and dried out, but its leafless branches held delicate, bright pink flowers. The shrub appeared a few years ago amid the undergrowth of the tree canopy and has come back each spring since. A voluntary, as they’re called - not planted by us but sprouting up through nature’s own ways.

We also have some voluntary daffodils around our property. Their bright yellow flowers announce spring and give me hope when hope is hard to find. This beauty is grace. In this case, it appears without any effort of my own. A gift for the soul.

The naturalist John Muir writes, “Everyone needs beauty as well as bread...” Beauty is as fundamental to our surviving and thriving as the bread we feed to our bellies.

Bread itself can be beautiful. Each week my family gets a loaf of bread from Rise Up Bakery in Barre, baked next to the Old Labor Hall by Jim and Larissa Haas, who have deep ties to both

¹ The poem can be found here: <https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2011%252F09%252F10.html>

Vermont and Ukraine. This bread is beautiful by any measure - the look of it, the feel of it, the smell of it, the taste of it.

We need beauty and bread. Bread, and all forms of nutritious food, to sustain our bodies. Beauty to sustain our souls.

This is the same sentiment behind the famous labor movement slogan, “Bread and roses.”

The term was first spoken by the women’s suffragist, Helen Todd, in 1910, when she said, “Not at once; but woman is the mothering element in the world and her vote will go toward helping forward the time when life's Bread, which is home, shelter and security, and the Roses of life, music, education, nature and books, shall be the heritage of every child that is born in the country, in the government of which she has a voice.”

The phrase was picked up by James Oppenheim in his poem, “Bread and Roses,” published the next year. The first stanza reads:

*As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!*

In 1912, immigrant women workers in a garment factory in Lawrence, Massachusetts went on strike. They, as well as the children who worked alongside them, were underpaid and would often get sick, and even die, from the dust created by their work processing textiles. With support from the Industrial Workers of the World, they organized and went on strike for several months until their pay and working conditions improved. It has been reported that one of the strikers carried a sign that read, “We Want Bread, but Roses, too!” And now, this famous strike is known as the “Bread and Roses Strike.”

The demand that there be more to life than just the basic necessities earned through the toils of labor resonated with many. The labor organizer Rose Schneiderman continued to carry this sentiment into the reform movements of the time. In a speech in Cleveland in support of the Ohio women’s campaign for equal suffrage she said, “What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist – the right to life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun and

music and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too.”

The fight for greater pay and leisure time and right to vote was a fight to have space for beauty - to make art, to enjoy life, to engage in activities that are for pleasure and not for output or production.

The poet and philosopher John O’Donohue writes, “When we lose sight of beauty, our struggle becomes tired and functional.” When we lose sight of beauty, our struggle becomes tired and functional.

Have any of you been feeling a bit tired and over-functional? I have certainly had my moments. Life can begin to feel overwhelmed by our to-do lists, by our efforts to meet our obligations, by our efforts to simply make it when nothing seems to be going our way.

There is a particular scene in the 1994 movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, that speaks to the relationship between struggle and beauty, and the power of beauty to put us in touch with something within us and beyond us that transcends that struggle.

It is the 1950s, and Andy Dufresne, played by Tim Robbins, has been serving a double life sentence at Shawshank, a maximum security prison, for the murder of his wife and her lover - a murder he didn’t commit. He has dealt with the brutalities of prison life and somehow maintained a quiet dignity.

He becomes interested in improving their prison library and after years of petitioning the state for some funds to buy new books, a small check arrives along with a box of old books and records. Andy, a former banker, has started doing some financial work for a few of the prison guards as well as the warden. Andy is in the warden’s office when the box arrives and he begins flipping through the records. There’s one that catches his attention, a recording of the opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*. The guard that was watching over Andy is in the bathroom, and Andy uses the opportunity to put the record on the phonograph that is in the office. The melodious sounds of a soprano voice singing in Italian begins to fill the air.

The guard calls to Andy as he’s perched on the toilet, “Andy, do you hear that?” Andy goes over and locks the bathroom door. He locks the door to the warden’s office, too, and then he turns the

microphone of the prison PA system to the horn of the phonograph. The music is piped into every corner of the prison - the laundry room, the metal shop where prisoners are working, the mess hall, outside in the prison yard. All activity stops as the men are held captive by the music filling the air.

Red, another prisoner and good friend of Andy's, played by Morgan Freeman, provides commentary on the moment. He says: "I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't wanna know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can't be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free."

Beauty has the power to lift us, even for a moment, out of the imprisonment of our despair and our heartache, and to connect us to another truth of human existence, another place of possibility. As much as it is human to struggle for and towards progress, for and towards justice, for and towards our own betterment, it is also human to seek beauty. To yearn for the spiritual freedom that is found in the enlivening of the spirit by word, by song, by the blessedness of the unbidden experience of utter delight.

We, humans, need the grace of beauty. Beauty awakens and energizes. Beauty enlivens. And, it is there, often as a gift in waiting, like the early spring blossoms of a shrub you did not plant, or a piece of music that takes you by surprise, or sunlight that you have the wisdom to go out and seek on a beautiful spring day.

As we engage with the theme of Nurturing Beauty this month, I invite you into a practice of giving and receiving gifts of beauty. Each week, and maybe even each day, find a way to offer someone a gift of beauty. Maybe it's a small bouquet of daffodils you can offer a friend. Maybe it's a haiku that meditates on spring's arrival. Maybe it's a homemade meal arranged just-so on the plate. As part of the practice, you might also take note and give thanks for the gifts of beauty you have received each week or even each day. I invite you to record these gifts of beauty in some way - write it down or take a picture - so that we can share these with one another as part of our worship services later on this month.

And right now, I invite you to call out or type in the chat - Where have you noticed beauty? What gifts of beauty have you recently given or received?

In the days to come, may you all find space among your list of to-dos for sunlight, for song, for art, for beauty and delight that brightens the heart and lifts the spirit.