

What, To You, is a Skunk?

Reading: "Valentine for Ernest Mann" written by Naomi Shihab Nye

You can't order a poem like you order a taco.
Walk up to the counter, say, "I'll take two"
and expect it to be handed back to you
on a shiny plate.
Still, I like your spirit.
Anyone who says, "Here's my address,
write me a poem," deserves something in reply.
So I'll tell a secret instead:
poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,
they are sleeping. They are the shadows
drifting across our ceilings the moment
before we wake up. What we have to do
is live in a way that lets us find them.
Once I knew a man who gave his wife
two skunks for a valentine.
He couldn't understand why she was crying.
"I thought they had such beautiful eyes."
And he was serious. He was a serious man
who lived in a serious way. Nothing was ugly
just because the world said so. He really
liked those skunks. So, he re-invented them
as valentines and they became beautiful.
At least, to him. And the poems that had been hiding
in the eyes of skunks for centuries
crawled out and curled up at his feet.
Maybe if we re-invent whatever our lives give us
we find poems. Check your garage, the odd sock
in your drawer, the person you almost like, but not quite.
And let me know.

Reading: Luke 7.36-50

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus^[i] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he

would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.”⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “speak.”⁴¹ “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii,^[k] and the other fifty.⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?”⁴³ Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus^[l] said to him, “You have judged rightly.”⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”⁴⁸ Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The story begins with Jesus entering the house of a Pharisee, where he sat down to dinner. Upon entering the house, a woman, known to be a sinner, wept, bathing Jesus's feet in tears and drying these tears on his feet with her hair. She kissed his feet, she anointed him with oil. The Pharisee, in seeing this this interaction, proclaimed, "if he were a savior, he would know this woman was a sinner." If Jesus were a savior, he would be disgusted with this woman; would not have acknowledged her. Jesus, in turn, asked the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman?" No. The Pharisee had not seen that woman. He saw, not a human, not a woman, but a sinner. But Jesus, Jesus saw the woman. He saw a woman who had bathed his feet, who had kissed his feet, who had anointed his head. Jesus saw this woman, and he forgave her sins because she was a woman who loved. Jesus says to this woman, "your faith has saved you. Go in peace." He saw this woman, appreciate this woman, all she had to offer, and she was saved.

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes reflects on this passage- reflects on what the true power of Jesus is. In response to the question posed by Jesus, "do you see this woman?" Reverend Garnaas-Holmes replies, No. No we do not see. Rev. Garnaas-Holmes writes, "we see our prejudices and stereotypes. We see our fears and projections. We don't see this woman; we see what we think of her." We see what we think of her. So what is different about Jesus? The story of Jesus tells the power of what happens when a person is truly seen – when we see strength and gratitude instead of sin. Rev. Garnaas-Holmes writes, "Jesus really saw people. He saw who they were and knew their story, not because he had ESP but because he paid attention.. and seeing the grace was like sunlight on plants: It made people heal and grow and bear fruit." To me, this is the true power of Jesus. Not magical miracles- but miracles of simply seeing without judgement, without expectations

We move through this world with expectations, often without realize it, navigating this earth by perceiving what we expect to encounter – not what is. Like the Pharisee seeing a sinner and not a woman, our expectations may cloud our perceptions; inadvertently tainting the way we interact with our world. There is a powerful quote of Talmic origins: “we don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”

This is true with those who society deems sinners. This is true of those who are marginalized.

This is true, also, of skunks.

How do we find a poem in a skunk? To see, not simply that striped tail and anticipate that powerful smell that you inevitably know it can produce, but to see the eyes. To see the eyes of the skunk – eyes that are always there, and yet the eyes that are so often overlooked, surpassed by what is expected – a fear, a disgust. Nye’s poem narrates the Valentine’s Day gift of a man to his lover – the gift of a skunk. When the man in this poem bestowed upon his lover this gift, it was not met with gratitude, delight, or love, but with upset- anger. And yet it is this protagonist that has the true claim to beauty, for “he re-invented them as valentines, and they became beautiful.” That which was feared became alluring. Beaded, black eyes, partially hidden behind lashes and offset from the backdrop of black fur. The poem continues, “nothing was ugly just because the world said so.” Nothing was ugly just because the world said so. To me this brings a sense of awe, of wonderment – of a mindset full of potential for beauty – potential I would dare to call, “holy.”

If a skunk can be reimagined, I ask, what else?

What about the holy potential in the complex beauty in a snake, slithering through tall grasses, or the beauty in toads, green, brown, slimy, and covered in warts. What can be appreciated when these creatures are met, not with an expectation of fear or hatred, but an open acceptance and perhaps wonder. How can we find the poetry in slime, in warts.

What about the shadows on our ceilings? The garage? We live in a world of poetry, if only we can find it – in a world of old socks and muddy sidewalks and rotting bananas and cockroaches, just as much as we live in a world of roses and sunsets and butterflies and rainbows – we live in the midst of all of these natural wonders, and yet there is a dichotomy present in what we celebrate and what we scorn. Can we find the poetry?

There are many stories exemplifying the beauty, the wonder, the healing power that comes when one is rid of these expectations, when one encounters the world without the veil of preconceived notions. The fourth source of our faith, Jewish and Christian teachings, offer many. In Christianity, Jesus is attributed to performing magical miracles, but I argue against this notion. I think Jesus was a man who saw people for who they truly were, and- in receiving this recognition, people were healed. The miracles were not magic – the miracles were simply that he saw people for who they truly are. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan writes, “I presume that Jesus, who did not and could not cure that disease [leprosy] or any other one, healed the poor man’s illness by refusing to accept the disease’s ritual uncleanness and social ostracization.” The people in these stories were healed because they were not seen as unclean; healed because they were not ostracized.

I think of the everyday healing that happens when someone looks past what is expected – when we don't see others through a lens distorted by preconceived notions or prejudices. That everyday healing. Seeing the poetry in imperfection. Think of a teenager, meticulously picking out an outfit to wear or a team to participate in or deciding what to bring in for lunch – know I have been there. Wondering every day how I would be perceived by others; dictating much of what I did based on this fear of judgement. What about that simple, everyday healing that happens when a teenager feels as if they are seen for them, and not what they are wearing, or how they talk, or what their hair looks like? If we simply see each other through kind eyes. I remember that power. I will always remember the girl in middle school who asked me to share a lunch with her when I was sitting alone, lonely and sad and so self-conscious. Every day healing. Do you see this woman?

Yet beyond this teenage angst, there are many in society who struggle – who suffer – because they are so often viewed by society through this lens of expectations and preconceived notions – through stigma.

What about the least of these. The drug addicts, those struggling with mental illness, marginalized groups of all kinds – the poor, people of color, immigrants, the undocumented. Groups of people who have been feared and misunderstood for generations – people who face stigma every day. Stigma that comes when we view the world through a veil of expectations. People who navigate this world knowing they are judged simply for these labels that are forced upon them – defined by these negative characteristics people have come to expect from them. We are all familiar with these common depictions; Depictions of the self-centered addict; Of

the person struggling with mental illness who is dangerous or unable to function in society.

Common beliefs that the poor are lazy. Do you see this woman?

We may have many quick judgements when we see a person pushing a cart and speaking to someone who does not appear to be present, or when we see an exhausted unhoused person on the street, or a snap judgement if someone appears to be drunk – often, we may see our expectations. We may not truly see these people.

There are those who are able to hide these stigmatized aspects of their lives – those who you would never know suffer from bipolar disorder or struggle to pay the rent – those who are able to and do hide these parts of themselves so as not to be met with scorn. Afraid to share such fundamental pieces of who they are – not because there is anything wrong with these pieces of self, but because of the potentially harmful reactions they would receive. There are those who simply cannot hide this – those who are met with judgement because of the color of their skin or country of origin.

Imagine if these expectations were lifted – how healing this could be. Imagine if it were ok to talk about one's mental illness the same way we talk about diabetes, or to admit that we are stuck in a world of addiction and be met with love and care.

Let's take a moment to highlight some real stories. Some real poetry. Let's truly see people.

What about the addict who fights every day to free themselves from the daily torture that is needing that next drug? Who spends nights at Alcoholics Anonymous, trying to regain control of their life? I see a poem in that. What about the person struggling with mental illness who works so very hard to overcome; attending therapy or taking medication – working daily to

heal. What about the poor woman working multiple jobs? People, trying to live. Can we see poetry in this? The bravery?

Where does this come from? Why are these negative expectations so prevalent? Why do we not see the poetry? Why do we not see this woman? It is part of our worldviews – how we were all raised in this society. This does not necessarily mean whoever raised us was racist or bigoted, it means that we saw news stories where crimes were attributed to someone suffering from schizophrenia, or saw how people on the sidewalk reacted when they past a person who is unhoused. Often, we are trained only to what society as called beautiful. Often, we are trained not to see that woman. We are trained to see fear, hate. It is pervasive in ways we do not even realize or take notice – and in this way our expectations separate us. Our expectations don't allow us to see the full humanity of every person. Could we, perhaps, find poetry?

As a hospital chaplain, I was trained to rid myself of these expectations – to have the ability to walk into a room and have no preconceived notions about what I was about to experience – or, to try my best. To walk into a room – any room – with a blank slate. The room with the man who needs a hand held because no family visits him – not wondering why is this, but holding his hand. Or the woman who is missing teeth due to drug use – not seeing less than, or judging, but seeing her – and praying to whomever she would like to pray about whatever she would like to pray about.

Our Time for All Ages today. The Dusters and the Sanders. The Sanders did not see poetry in the Dusters, they saw dirt as a marker of their inferiority. This marker of inferiority meant that

the Sanders wanted nothing to do with the Dusters. And no one knew why this was, but everyone knew that it was. And it pervaded their society. And, yet, when society fell apart, the Dusters surprised the Sanders by being kind, helpful, and loving. And yet the Sanders had always looked down on this loving group. Could we, perhaps, find poetry in the dirt? Or perhaps, in a weed.

Mary Oliver writes,

“Queen Anne’s lace is hardly prized but all the same it isn’t idle; look how it stands straight on its thin stems, how it scrubs its white faces with the rags of the sun, how it makes all the loveliness it can”

Not prized; scrubbed with rags; and yet standing straight; making loveliness – may we live like this plant; standing straight no matter how thin our stem may feel – may we see all weeds this way; all of the “lesser thans” – see the loveliness in the petals that are so often overlooked.

As the hymn we just sung so eloquently asks, how could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you you were less than whole? How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle? How deeply your connected to my soul.

Everyone in here is beautiful; whole; a miracle. So are those beyond these walls. We know as Unitarian Universalists that everyone has inherent worth and dignity, but how do we practice this. This inherent worth means that we need to look past any expectations that arise from stigma. This inherent dignity means we need to see the beauty that each and every person has to offer. Instead of seeing through the lens of stigma; we need to see through a lens that

allows us to be aware of stigma. Being aware of the harm that stigma brings, and using our privilege to do the work necessary to dismantle this.

How freeing it would be not to have to hide ourselves – if people didn't have these expectations – if people didn't see labels but saw each person for who they are.

This allows us to work together, to see the good and get things done, to have a basic faith in people.

And, it allows us to simply enjoy. Just to be. To sit and admire the maggots devour a fallen tree. To find the beauty in the earthy smell of the mud that splashed onto your shoes or clothing. To enjoy the sounds of traffic as numerous bodies navigate freeways and highways and parkways.

To simply enjoy. To see the poetry. To truly see that woman – not a sinner, but as a woman with strength, courage. To see that humanness in every person we encounter. To be truly oneself, fear of judgement of others.

Simply, to let the beauty of life unfold.

So I ask, what, to you, is a skunk? I hope it is the eyes. I hope it is the tiny pink tongue. I hope it is the stark contrast between the white and black fur. What, to you, is a skunk?

May it be so, and Amen.