

The World Comes Alive

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 22, 2026

A Hasidic teaching from centuries ago offers this: A wealthy man looked for guidance and advice from a revered rabbi. Upon entering the rabbi's home, he realized how sparse his living quarters were. There was simply a humble place to eat and a scattering of books. "Rabbi," offered the wealthy man, "where is your furniture?" The wise rabbi responded, "where is yours?" Taken aback by the simple question, the man replied, "I am but a visitor in your home." The rabbi offered a smile and replied, "So am I."

We are only visitors here on this finite, earthly realm, impermanent and preciously finite. Material wealth and status are not paramount, but presence and faith are crucial. Let us inquire: How can we be grateful for our limited time and savor all that is beautiful in the midst of all that is truly broken. How do we, as simple guests, engage with the wonder and gifts of creation that surround us?

There is so much pain and sorrow vying for our attention. Perhaps most poignant in this moment is this devastating war. Our news feeds are inundated with bombs, destruction, death, and terror. Our body and spirit hold on to this horror. In many ways, all we can do is pray – whatever that means to each of us. We hold in our hearts sorrows occurring in our own communities – ICE raids, deportations, a housing crisis, poverty. We have familial hardships of anger, impatience, or grief. So much of this is well beyond our control, but we have agency in how we respond. We do not and cannot ignore nor show disregard for the world around us – whether abroad or at home. We cannot ignore war nor suppress fear. But we can connect with a goodness and a beauty that gives us the strength and hope to overcome adversity; cultivating that which makes us more apt to transform the world into a more beautiful and life-sustaining place. Think of the ugliness of the world contrasted with beauty.

It is an acknowledgement of finitude and an awareness of beauty woven together that create a life of purpose, meaning, and wisdom. Impermanence makes wonder all the more urgent.

Today in response to the ills of our world we focus on the simple beauty of this world in which we reside – that which is both significant and seemingly insignificant. No matter how broken and fragmented, there is an inherent beauty that will never abandon us. That which serves to give purpose and meaning. I want to offer a juxtaposition. When we focus on division, we lose sight of the interdependent web that binds us together in blessed unity. When we focus on anger, we no longer hear the whisper of that still, small voice within. We cannot let power overcome the gifts of love. We cannot let fear overpower beauty, nor despair reside as more powerful than hope. That web, this inner whisper, this compassion and love, is always present, we simply invite them into our brief and forever finite lives as visitors to this realm.

What about that so very necessary, tangible beauty we can engage with in each of our days? We need this in order to persevere. Beauty is experienced in different ways to each of us - beauty is held in the eyes of the beholder. Visual and experiential, sacred and profane. I think of the wonder and awe of the natural world – forever flowing rivers, trees imbued with stardust, flowers that emerge no matter how harsh the winter. Beautiful. I think of random acts of kindness – buying groceries for an elderly neighbor. Offering a meal to someone who is grieving. Even smiling at strangers or offering simple compliments to those in our midst. Perhaps this beauty we find is spiritual practices, pausing in prayer while conversing with divinity, resting in meditation to connect with life sustaining mindfulness. We see artwork that inspires wonderment or reverence, or new life that offers hope of what is yet to be born. Beauty is that which forever offers us myriad gifts: hope, strength, solace, and perseverance. Can noticing a wisp of a cloud, offering but a gentle kindness to a stranger, help us to persevere and continuously overcome?

To encounter true beauty is to connect with divinity, to engage with all that is sacred and holy. To move beyond simple acknowledgment and engage with what is around us in ways far deeper than our mere senses can. Beauty is always layered. Each layer we pull

away reveals something new and insightful, adding depth to our observations. Sister Joyce Rupp, a Roman Catholic author, writes about this deeper sense of beauty through the lens of mysticism. It is our hearts attuned to, quote, “looking beyond what is visible.” The breeze does not simply offer a soft touch to our face, it serves to sooth, caress, and quiet the mind. Trees become an emblem of the reciprocity of existence – receiving nourishment from the sun simply to release the oxygen that sustains animal life. A mere voice heard over the phone becomes the doorway to experiencing that web that unites us; the bond of life that connects to all that is.¹ It is far beyond breeze, tree, voice – it is wonder, it is awe, it is life. Beautiful.

Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, embodied the philosophy that beauty is simply reality seen with the eyes of love. So let us explore some dichotomies I reflected upon at a recent retreat. This past week, I immersed myself in a silent Buddhist meditation retreat. I took detailed notes and wrote down three words in my notebook repeatedly: curiosity, kindness, and gratitude. How are these Buddhist teachings applicable? We will pair this with Tagore’s understanding of beauty. We quickly condemn other’s actions when we see the world and all other sentient beings through a lens of judgement. If we intentionally foster a curiosity towards their actions instead, these judgements slip away. When we find faults within ourselves – which inevitably happens – if we ruthlessly criticize ourselves – we begin to slip into despair. If, conversely, we meet ourselves and our actions with loving kindness, we gently guide ourselves through any misstep. If we are reprimanded and see this interaction through a lens of fear, we can immerse ourselves in shame. What happens if, instead, we meet this gentle rebuke through the lens of beauty and find, instead, gratitude for this admonishment? I tried to do this myself - scribbling in my notebook all I could learn after a brief reprimand. Instead of interacting with our short and fleeting lives with detrimental judgement, criticism, and shame, we find curiosity, kindness, and gratitude, which are so very beautiful. When meeting the world through the lens of love, we foster a world of beauty.

¹ “Mysticism: Awareness” by Joyce Rupp

One of my favorite books is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. A blues singer and liberating force, a woman named Shug Avery, is walking through a field of purple wildflowers with the protagonist, Celie. Throughout her short life, Celie endures a multitude of profound hardship, disconnected from joy and beauty. In the depths of their conversation, Shug offers a piece of wisdom to Celie. Shug offers that God is profoundly upset if, quote, "You walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."² Pay attention to the world, she offers. Release your pain and recognize life as beautiful and sacred – all life, even the simple flowers. Beauty is not mere coincidence, it is a gift meant to be cherished. Stop. observe. Smell. Listen. In relation to the sentiments of this book, It is not simply the natural world we are called to admire – it is all the beauty we touched upon earlier. Kindness, art, new life – all gifts from the divine offered to elicit wonder and joy. To ignore beauty is to ignore the sacredness of all creation. All beauty is finite. We are finite. The sacred is all that is everlasting. In reflecting upon this novel, I also reconnected our Story for All Ages. Bud's gift to the world was this simple yet profound appreciation for all of the beautiful things that have been gifted to her. She noticed beauty with eyes, toes, ears, and heart.³

Upon preparing for this sermon two Mary Oliver poems stood out as particularly relevant. Pulled from her poem entitled "Sometimes," Mary Oliver offers this, her simple yet wise instructions for a life well lived. Quote, "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it." The simple phrases woven together serve as a blueprint to life of beauty. Pay attention! How often do we travel through life indifferent to our surroundings – trudging past the color purple as if it were not a gift? How often does the news and current events serve to overshadow our innate ability to connect with wonder and awe? This tangible world offers beauty to the senses as well as spiritual depth – around us and within us – if only we pause to notice. Be astonished, she writes! There is wonder in those first crocuses that immerse through the hard, crusty soil regardless of the harshness of winter. There is awe in a stranger offering random kindness even if their life is in

² *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker pg. 196

³ *Bud Finds Her Gift* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

complete disarray. Tell about it. Share these small gifts and treasures with those in your midst – if not through word than through reciprocity.⁴

Earlier, we joined together in reading Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese.” Feast on these phrases: “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” What does your body love? Is it a particular flower that embodies the innocence of youth? The gratitude that surges in your heart when you look at someone you love? Emotions, sights, tastes – plentiful and beautiful. Quote, “whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination.” Whoever we are and no matter what afflictions we are facing – loneliness, fear – the world is there for us to treasure and embody, if only we imagine it through the lens of love. There is always a beautiful world and so many good people who inhabit it. Imagination invites love and gratitude from the most mundane of things. “Over and over,” Oliver writes, we find our place “in the family of all things.” This speaks to the web of life, to our place in all of creation, the beauty and wonder of all that is, was, and ever will be – available to us and interwoven as a piece of us, as is stardust. We are interwoven and interconnected with all that is beautiful – our own unique place in this eternal web of beauty. Sacred and profane, finite and infinite.⁵

Reciprocity is a fundamental piece of truly cherishing and bestowing beauty. We heard earlier the story of Bud and her grandmother Nokomis. The tale narrates the significance of acts of reciprocity – the beauty we receive, we give in turn. Receptive to the wonder and awe of the natural world, Bud offers her gifts of singing and art in return.⁶ This children’s tale was written by Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, who offers to her adult audience this: “Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open hearts.”⁷ Woven throughout the book is this theme of reciprocity – offering gratitude, forming relationships, performing acts of care in return to the life and beauty this earth so abundantly offers us. When we observe the first yellow daffodil of the

⁴ “Sometimes” by Mary Oliver

⁵ “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver

⁶ *Bud Finds Her Gift* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

⁷ *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer pg. 222

season, taste a succulent strawberry, or notice ancient stars lightyears away, we not only receive but give appreciation for wonder and awe. It is all the beauty we have reflected on. When someone gifts us an act of kindness, we reciprocate by offering this kindness to another, rippling this beauty out in concentric circles to the edges of the web of life.

I want to end with a quote. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “the voice of beauty speaks softly; it creeps into our most fully awakened souls.”⁸ Beauty is silent and it may be illusive. But it finds its way into our souls if we awaken. If we are spiritual beings, those of faith, if we are receptive to awe and wonder, creators of goodness and kindness, beauty finds its way in.

For it is this, the revered rabbi offers, “So am I.” So am I but a visitor to this blessed, broken, and beautiful world. How is it we want to cherish this short and fleeting time? How can we notice and truly revere all beauty amidst so much ugliness and brokenness? We ask ourselves, will I notice the color purple? Will I listen to the Buddhist teaching of gratitude, kindness, and curiosity? Can I offer in abundance that which I so graciously receive? I invite us to bring beauty to our lives no matter what detriments we face. We can each know, in all our finitude, “So am I.”

May it be so, and Amen.

⁸ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche