

The Many Faces of Beauty

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 1, 2022

I didn't fully realize the scope of chaplaincy when I began as a seminary student. While serving at a university hospital, I had compassion, I genuinely cared, I offered unconditional love and much needed support, but it was some time before I realized my most important task – to bring the sacred to places where it could not be found. Sitting on a long bench in the hospital's chapel, I prayed to my own sacred about a soul wrenching conversation that I had just had. In that moment, my sacred brought to me all that I needed to know. As a chaplain, I was a conduit for all I held sacred. I was a channel in that hospital – in that place of illness, injury, and death. That is the true power of faith, and the most sacred way to cultivate and nurture beauty. Being a conduit for the sacred. In this place I very rarely shared the faith of anyone I encountered, but in simply connecting with that which was greater than me and greater than them, my humble presence brought to the room whatever sacred was needed. I prayed with the family for a teenager who was about to undergo brain surgery. I held a prayer circle for nurses who lost a colleague to suicide. I held the hand of a man each day who had no family nor friends to visit or care. And the meaning within these interactions was amplified because it was not a prayer from me, but the voice of my sacred entering through me to that hospital steeped in hardship. My sacred is a force of love, and I serve as a channel for this each day.

The sacred is different to each and every one of us – that is the beauty of Unitarian Universalism. When I speak of the sacred today, I invite you to interpret the language however it feels true to you. The sacred can be God, Goddess, nature, Allah, Spirit of love, and infinite more. When I speak of being a conduit of the sacred, I mean we can be a conduit of any of these things that brings faith, love, and beauty to the world around us. Truly, I understand the sacred as anything that is greater than our individual selves. Each one of us is offered this chance to cultivate beauty – to bring the sacred and our holy to the world around us. This is faith.

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith May 2022

I am reminded of the words of Persian poet Saadi,

To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.

It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes.

All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence.

If fate brings suffering to one member

The others cannot stay at rest. ¹

What strikes me is the humble nature of this practice of worship. And it directly speaks to what the sacred is to me – a love that serves to heal the world. Worship is bringing God to the world – that is it. God is seeing the interdependence of all life, knowing if one pains so do all the others. This is the essence of faith and beauty. What we cultivate within serves beyond. And this beauty is reciprocal. When we gift another beauty, we are more apt to notice beauty. When we serve as a conduit for the sacred, we note how our holy is all around us. When we heal ourselves and others, we connect with our own understanding of God – that God of which created us “from one essence.” We can do this one small act at a time.

There are many places we may not expect to find beauty in abundance. In impoverished neighborhoods, residential treatment facilities, the neurology unit of a hospital. And yet I have served that role of chaplain in each of these settings – bringing through me my own sacred. And in each place, I saw laughter, artwork, love, and community. That is what my sacred desired for those suffering in these places, and through my own connection with the divine I was able to bring it. And I saw the sacred in each person I encountered – whether through the hug of a parent, or an innocent and unexpected joke, or simply a smile in the face of adversity. These are the many faces of beauty.

¹ Saadi found in *Singing the Living Tradition*

The words of the Navajo nation remind us that, in beauty, “I am surrounded by it. I am immersed in it... in beauty, it is begun, in beauty, it is ended.”² I can think of nothing more beautiful than the cycle of our lives – nonbeing, to being, to nonbeing again. Occupying realms beyond human imagination, or simply ceasing to exist – each one as remarkable as the other. It is during these two life events that I believe our sacred is most present, and that the journey between them is our turn to bring this life force to the world, and to notice it in the face of another. This is nurturing beauty.

Just as the divine brings beauty through us and our interactions so too is the divine beautiful. Carol P. Christ sees God as a Goddess and in changing gender changes the qualities of God. Not only does she challenge the maleness of God, but also the nature of God. I have found that the Goddess brings love and beauty to the world in unique and precious ways. Instead of a disembodied being, separated from all of us in this realm, both all-powerful and all-knowing, Goddess engages in “touch, process embodiment, and relationship.”³ These changes in the understanding of Goddess can affect how we engage with ourselves, others, and the sacred, emphasizing care and relationship and proximity as beautiful and appreciated instead of traditional detachment. Nothing is wrong with male, but this highlights those treasures of the traditional ideas of femininity, lifting up the sacred beauty found in the Goddess and all she can offer our lives and the lives of those around us as she enters this earth through our bodies made a conduit.

Carol Christ writes of her own theology as well. She writes how she was “transformed” when she saw the sacred in each relationship and activity and interaction. Her theology is based on process theology. She understands Goddess as a power that truly shares both our enjoyment and our hardships – we are not alone in our experiences, and something else cares. We neither rejoice alone nor sorrow alone. When we are a channel for the sacred, neither does anyone in our midst. Process theology offers an understanding of personal freedom in this world and how

² Words from Navajo Nation found in *Singing the Living Tradition*

³ *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* by Carol P. Christ pg. 1

it relates to suffering. How can we make sense of war or oppression or poverty or all those things that serve to cloak the inherent goodness and beauty and relationship in our world? Traditionally, God was all powerful. This new and different idea of God, however, is not all powerful but is trying to persuade each person God is in relationship with – urging each one of us to do good in this world, not evil. We have a choice.⁴ And we can do the work of the sacred – ourselves working to urge others towards good. Can we pause, settle in our hearts, and listen to what the divine is trying to tell us? Can we start each day in our heart space, and guide our actions through the whispers of the sacred? One act at a time we bring goodness and wholeness to this place we all call home.

To me this idea of divine love and ultimate presence and beauty lends truth to the idea of panentheism – of God or the sacred in everything – God’s body is the earth and God resides in every plant, rock, animal, and ray of sunshine. Everything around us is sacred and holy and to be cherished and to be loved. Everything and every person and every creature is beautiful and to be nurtured. The birds, the trees, the clouds – even each other. God is held within. I think of the ancient Sikh words of Tegh Bahadur, “Why do you go to the forest in search of the divine? God lives in all, and abides with you too. As fragrance dwells in a flower, reflection in a mirror, so the Divine dwells inside everything; seek therefore in your own heart.”⁵ The sacred is within us as surely as scent is held within the oils of a flower. There is no need to search for the holy – God is there. I think of God in the unexpected places. Even when concrete destroys nature, the sacred is a dandelion peeking through the cracks. The Spirit – no matter how we understand this life force – is in our hearts. And through this we bring our sacred to each being we encounter – we are each a conduit for the holy, and we can each see the holy and beauty in the face of another. There is a difference between glamor and beauty. Glamor, while it can be fun and inspire creativity, is not beauty. Beauty is sincerity, compassion, strength, humor, faith, determination, kindness. Beauty is when the sacred resides within you.

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⁴ *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* by Carol P. Christ pg. 112

⁵ Tegh Bahadur found in *Singing the Living Tradition*

I want to touch on Liberation Theology as well. Liberation theologians use the word God, and again I invite you to use whatever word speaks to you. The essence of liberation theology – to me – is seeing God in the marginalized and the oppressed. Those with perhaps the greatest beauty are the downtrodden, the least of these, the overlooked, the forgotten. While liberation theology originated as a theology for blacks and Latinos, it is applicable to other marginalized groups. I think of those bodies who are collectively pushed to the wayside, bodies seen as ugly or unnatural. Those with mental illness, physical illness, disabilities, addiction, or those who are black, indigenous, people of color.

Liberation theologian Dwight N. Hopkins writes that God is “always located socially with the poor communities on this earth... wherever and whenever marginalized humanity cries out in the pain and pleasure of forging a new self.” He writes that “Divine activity is revealed in the voice of the voiceless fighting to make a way out of no way.”⁶ The least of these are filled with the sacred. The suffering are met with divine love. Those on the margins have a special connection with all that is holy. This is where God resides. Within each one of us, yes, but with particular attention to the marginalized. How can we live a life espousing the views of liberation theology? By dedicating ourselves, just as the sacred does, to helping those who are hurting the most.

This transitions, to me, seamlessly into humanism. Theists and atheists alike can draw wisdom from the teachings of humanism. It echoes the liberation theology idea of working for the marginalized – we are called to make this world as beautiful as we can. Humanists are called to be the good they want to see in the world. There is still an understanding of something greater than ourselves, perhaps nature, but this is not to be depended upon – it’s up to us. We, through our actions, nurture and tend to the flower garden of humanity. Heaven is not up in the sky, heaven is here, on earth, and we build it with our own hands. Author Mandy Hale writes, “There is nothing more beautiful than someone who goes out of their way to make life

⁶ *Black Theology on God: The Divine in Black Popular Religions* by Dwight N. Hopkins pg. 100

beautiful for others.”⁷ This is one of the most basic tenets of our faith – to do good in the world. Our sacred calls us to this and our sacred resides within us as our bodies are used as a conduit to heal an aching world one beating heart at a time. Love, kindness – that is true beauty. We are inherently good people with common needs, and we can rely on each other for this.

When we notice beauty throughout our lives, it remains with us even once we have left this realm. Joy Harjo writes of a woman’s life, lifting up a series of important memories of beauty – her mother’s voice, her father’s hands, the moon in the window. Throughout adult life, as for all of us, beauty came and went, but when it was lost life was “brutal.” But “beauty always came to lift her up.” She knew, as we know, that beauty was all around and in every living thing – and that we are an interdependent part of it all. She was the corn and the moon and the sunrise. All of life, within us and beyond, has beauty and is filled with the divine, if we pause and notice. Even when we transition out of this realm. The poem concludes:

Death is beautiful, she sang, as she left this story behind her.
Even her bones, said time.
Were tuned to beauty.⁸

May we, in life, be a conduit for the sacred and nurture that inherent beauty all around us. In death, may we all transition to beauty in return.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁷ Mandy Hale from *Soul Matters Worship Research: Nurturing Beauty*

⁸ “The Life of Beauty,” Joy Harjo