

## **Cultivating Beauty**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 7, 2023**

Upon entering a hospital, one is often not immediately met with what we would consider to be beautiful. Leaving an often packed parking lot amidst asphalt and anxiety, we enter a building where the air may smell of chemicals keeping things sanitized, where whitewashed walls invite an image of sterility, where distant beeps of heart monitors and conversations between nursing staff fill a space otherwise heavy with apprehension and distress. And yet as a hospital chaplain I was gifted a unique opportunity to step beyond this outward presentation of angst and efficiency and observe the true wonders hidden within. What was palpable in those rooms simultaneously filled with pain and stress was a sacred creativity and a subdued beauty. Creativity in medication cocktails and a plethora of tests ordered from the medical staff, yes, and creativity found in patients and loved ones surviving – countering illness and trauma with prayers, with gentle and consoling touch, with songs sung by bedside, with treasured memories lifted up to create strength in nostalgia. Patients and their beloveds crafted hope amidst despair and comfort amidst unease. As a chaplain I become a conduit – connecting all that is sacred with all that is ill and broken. It was one of the holiest experiences of my life – working with my God to creatively craft beauty, love, and healing amidst angst, anger, and despair; creating a gateway between immense pain – both physical and emotional – with all that is sacred and holy.

Through this snapshot of the work of a hospital chaplain I hope you note one key element: the work of my patients, their beloveds, and myself to creatively generate beauty. This is what we explore today as we begin our month-long delve into the theme of creativity – intentionally crafting beauty. I begin with a seemingly simply yet truthfully complex question: what is beauty? Perhaps we can first explore the opposite – what is beauty not? As a society we are immersed – daily – with photoshopped images of celebrities and supermodels – of commercials for pills and creams to fix that imperfection or reverse this offensive result of aging. No. True beauty is organic. It is not a snapshot of blue eyes and blond hair and a face devoid of wrinkles,

but something cultivated and tended to within, creating an undisputed sense of wholeness and completeness within our very beings. It is not a search for inauthentic yet sought after aesthetical perfection but an embrace of authentic asymmetry – aesthetics and livelihoods held more handsome because of perceived faults. Beauty is not crafted on an island but creatively shaped and formed by the input we receive from our surroundings – picking and choosing that which we want to integrate into our hearts and souls. Creatively fostering beauty is reflective of the role I played as a chaplain – creating a conduit, of sorts, as everything broken and damaged is embraced by everything good and sacred

So how do we explore this idea of creatively cultivating beauty through a theological lens? In this reflection, we use the word “God” because that is the language of the theologian I quote. I invite you to interpret with whatever word for the sacred holds true for you. Process and womanist theologian Monica Coleman writes extensively of what she calls “creative transformation” – how we can “work with God to implement God’s ideals in the world.”<sup>1</sup> In simple terms, this is akin to a Unitarian Universalist interpretation of the Christian question so often posed, “What would Jesus do?” If the sacred is an entity that cares and interacts with our thoughts both conscious and subconscious, how can we pause to listen to these sacred murmurings, and implement these holy desires into everyday life? If all we hold holy is nature – how do we respond to the whispers of the wind and budding trees – that which represents enduring and everlasting beauty, as well as unending cycles of death and rebirth? How can we bring the ideals of the transcendent into this finite realm? For me, it comes with a pause, a moment to welcome a whisper of the sacred. Even if for a second. Through us, the sacred works to create beauty.

Coleman’s theology offers the sacred as the ultimate source of novelty in the world. We are divinely gifted an opportunity to move beyond any hardship in a way we could not have imagined on our own.<sup>2</sup> I remember as a chaplain being faced with a teenager anticipating brain

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<sup>1</sup> “Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology” by Monica A. Coleman pg. 86

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pgs. 86-92

surgery to remove a malignant tumor. I remember the woman whose husband had just attempted suicide. Whatever happens in these moments - figuring out the next best step – this is sacred. Creating novelty can feel so monumental at a crossroads like this that, to some, it has been deified. Let us offer a caveat here that atheists can very well be a conduit for something sacred – perhaps the love of an ancestor or the imagination that allows one to produce awe and wonder in a work of art. That - that is what we connect to when we do not have a next best step - creativity.

This dedication to change and the sacred is a strength that exists in 12-step groups where individuals are called to submit themselves to their higher power – whatever that may be. Atheists and theists alike have successfully undertaken the journey of sobriety, offered a life they could not have imagined on their own, entering novel territory seemingly beyond reach. Coleman theorizes: God creates novelty, helping to creatively cultivate beauty in the world.

Prominent science fiction author Octavia Butler offers a similar theology. I offer the words of the protagonist in her novel “Parable of the Sower.” “All that you touch you Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God Is Change.”<sup>3</sup>

We are offered an opportunity for divinely inspired creativity and change – what do we do with it? Franciscan priest and writer Richard Rohr writes, “Through darkness and doubt often come the greatest creativity and faith.”<sup>4</sup> We have spoken of this before, but I want to re-examine the wisdom of kintsugi. Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with lacquer and gold – a thin line of gold highlighting where the cracks have been made. We restore that which has been broken by intentionally illuminating the fissures with something beautiful and precious. This offers an alternative to two other options: one, sealing the cracks with a thin, invisible solution that seeks to hide the broken shards and return the object to exactly what is

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<sup>3</sup> *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler

<sup>4</sup> From *Soul Matters Worship Research: Creativity*

had been before or, two, repairing the cracks in such a disorderly and scattered way that the object becomes unsightly and prone to breaking again. Of the three options, which is most beautiful? What leads to “greatest creativity and faith”? I think of an untimely and tragic death, drawing inspiration from my own experiences. We could carry on as if nothing had happened, keeping pain artificially at bay indefinitely by denying it. We could slip into despair with no attempt to recover and lose ourselves entirely in grief. Or we would repair our broken hearts with actions and emotions akin to shining gold. We can mourn, and yet ultimately celebrate tender and joyful memories; we can hold our departed beloved in our cloud of ancestors, their wisdom always but a prayer away; we can love and care for the others who are grieving with even greater intensity and compassion. We can survive, and heal, and creatively generate beauty. Think of all your hardships that welcome a solution of lacquer and gold.

Japanese artists are not alone in creatively accentuating beauty through imperfections. Many indigenous artisans purposefully include mistakes and flaws in their artwork, though the meanings change between various crafts and indigenous Nations. I want to begin with an exploration of an intentional error in beading called the “spirit bead,” for I think we should each carry with us a spirit bead. This misplaced or discolored bead becomes a gateway – a portal – for the Great Spirit to enter the work of art. In personifying the beaded work, the spirit enters us through our flaws and imperfections, not our perfectly crafted prayers nor acts of prestige nor works that garner us accolades. The misplaced, the discolored, the faulty, the imperfect – this is what gains divine attention. So let us not bury it deep within, but celebrate that we are entirely flawed, imperfect individuals with nothing to be ashamed of. Just as are those exquisitely discolored pieces of art, we, too, are beautiful. Furthermore, there are those indigenous peoples who believe that if a woven blanket does not hold an intentional flaw, the evil will escape it and the artist will suffer from “blanket sickness” – ailments that arise when we hold ourselves to unattainable standards of perfection. What does creativity become, when imperfection invites with it all that is sacred and holy, while perfection carries with it illness and affliction?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.conversationsforchange.com/monthly-tidbits/april-tidbit-the-importance-of-mistakes>

Writing this sermon, I was re-evaluating the many anxieties and insecurities I hold within. Are those hidden imperfections more sacred than this sermon I spent days crafting? Is engaging with these flaws – not hiding them – a holy act? I also reflected on my time as a chaplain, and as a conduit for the sacred. I often prayed in the hospital chapel between conversations with the ill and the broken, kneeling between pews as multicolored light penetrated the stained-glass windows. And yet what I prayed for was not perfection, but to be a voice of the holy. Perfect words would not heal as I doubt many patients even listened to or remembered my words. But imperfect yet genuine authenticity? Prayers not heard, but felt? Unconditional love not spoken, but intuited? This was a creative, intentional, entirely imperfect beauty that healed.

What is sacred in life is not necessarily what it culminates in – for we will each ultimately face death. Death is a holy mystery, yes, but what of the journey that brings us there? What will we remember the moment before we slip from this realm? Will we be filled with regret? Satisfaction? Contentment? It is ultimately about the journey. The muddy, dirty, sometimes unpleasant, entirely imperfect journey. So let ours be one of beauty, cultivated through faulty, flawed, yet passionate and intentional creativity. Creativity synonymous with sacred change. Beauty – not of smooth skin, flowing hair, and perfect physique, that which we are bombarded with throughout our days. No. Organic, imperfect beauty that we cultivate within us and between us. Beauty that becomes a channel between all that is sacred and all that hurts. So may we carry this with us as we traverse life and all she offers us. Our broken hearts mended with gold. Our spirit beads connecting all things imperfect with all things sacred – deifying that which may have caused us hurt and embarrassment. May we creatively cultivate beauty, this day, and every day.

May it be so, and Amen.