

"Beauty as Spiritual Impulse"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

February 2, 2014

Beauty is before me and
 beauty behind me.
 Above me and below me
 hovers the beautiful.
 I am surrounded by it
 I am immersed in it.
 In my youth, I am aware of it
 and in old age,
 I shall walk quietly the beautiful path.
 In beauty it is begun.
 In beauty, it is ended.

Navaho

.....

I was so excited because against all scheduling odds, by moving big logistical mountains, Randi, Amy, and Nancy were coming to visit. The four of us have weathered over 30 years of friendship. Young adult drama played out onstage, backstage, on front porches, long walks home, and then came graduation, shared adventures to far off places, surprising turns, distance and reunion, weddings, divorces, joy and sorrow and cancer thrown in for good measure all make up the swirl of our shared history. We had wistfully dreamed of a beach weekend for years. Years. And finally there was a date. I prepared. I planned menus ... shopped ... made our home shine.

And then the red letter day came. I prepared for their arrival. Oh joy! I set the table. I cut flowers from the garden – a garden that my partner, Kate, lovingly tends; champagne flutes were placed just so ... plates were set out ... silverware rolled up in cloth napkins ... I picked music that was summer-breezy and turned up the volume so that they would hear it as they made their way to the front door.

It had to be beautiful. Not Downton Abby-beautiful but rather 187 Lower Boulevard-beautiful. Beautiful as in: my dearly beloved are arriving and I want them to walk in the door, take in all that had been created for their delight and feel in that beauty a deep sense of welcome, hospitality and love. For, that moment is the pay-off for the holy anticipation of reunion.

They arrived and immediately there were tears mixed with laughter rising up from the soles of our feet through the soul of deepest memory and gratitude.

Sermon © Reverend Carolyn Patierno. All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission only.

That's beauty. And it lifts our spirit and lives in memory.

And this is beauty:

The Sunday after Labor Day is when this congregation celebrates our Water Communion. The sun always shines on that Sunday. We set up the chancel table with a ceramic bowl – used as a bread bowl by Joel Ackerman's grandmother for a generation generations ago. We fill it up with our offerings and through the course the service, the light moves across the mural, hits the glistening, water-filled bowl, and then sends a shimmering reflection of our communion upon the mural. It drives most of the congregation to distraction. We anticipate that shimmering reflection so much so that in a way, it has become part of the ritual. It is as though Spirit manifests to remind us of the strength of our communion. And in our delight we respond, "We see you. We feel you."

That's beauty. And it lifts our spirits and lives in memory.

In fact, beauty is part and parcel of every worship service at All Souls. Right here in what used to be the showroom for a car dealership. Imagine this room without the skylight; the windows; the mural, the red of the chairs ... the majesty of the music ... the smell of coffee wafting in from the kitchen. The memory of weddings, child dedications, memorial services, Christmas Eve with candles raised ... any given Sunday when one Soul turns to another and says, "So really, how are you?"

That's beauty.

"Real beauty is my aim." Mohatmas Gandhi said that - a man who achieved in his lifetime remarkable beauty. He also said, "When I admire the wonder of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands."

Beauty is about expanding the soul. Our forebears understood that deeply enough to engrave "beauty" along with "truth and love" on this chalice, the one that graces our pulpit. We are transformed when we create and experience beauty.

The wise woman said,

Beauty ... comes from the interior. We know it is present because we feel something that transforms us. ... Beauty can wake us up to care, to enlarge our world, to feel the pleasure of being alive. It is a place, a tree, a shore, a forest Beauty is a smell that invites us to remember some lovely person. Beauty is music that opens our hearts, a child who beckons our smile, a breath of air that calls us to the path we need to follow.

From "Yearning for Beauty" (an article appearing in the journal *The Other Side*) by, Ivone Gebara

Beauty wakes us up to care and to enlarge our world. It is a spiritual impulse, after all. In our quest for meaning, beauty enhances that search. In our quest for justice for all, beauty enhances that work.

As many of you likely know, Pete Seeger died last week. Pete Seeger was one who lived his life in the light of beauty. His quest for justice played out through his music and through his gentle and loving spirit. Several years ago he performed at our General Assembly. Hearts leapt at the sight of his slight figure and the sound of his familiar songs.

Several years ago I attended a workshop with Holly Near, another folk singer committed to justice. She offered encouragement to attendees, telling them that when singing, one must strive to get the message across. In other words, one must *perform*. The sound of it - "perform" - ruffled one man's feathers and he said as much when he claimed that Pete Seeger, for example, would never lower himself *to perform*. To which a righteous Holly Near replied, "I have been in Pete Seeger's *living room* when he's singing. Believe me, Pete Seeger *always* performs."

To perform is to create beauty ... in Pete Seeger's case, to create beauty that expands the soul; that enlarges our world; that moves us to stand with the oppressed and to move in the direction of a more just world.

"Real beauty is my aim" Gandhi

The wise woman said, "Our task is simply to believe in the redemptive qualities of doing justice and loving beauty. Our saving gift is to insist on both."

In the early 20th century, textile and garment workers fleeing from unspeakable working conditions in factories all through this country insisted on both justice and beauty as they sang:

"As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead go crying through our singing, their ancient song of bread! Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew: yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too!"

"... doing justice and loving beauty. Our saving gift is to insist on both."

The Navaho people understand that to be alive is to walk with beauty. We are surrounded by it. We are immersed in it. But we must, as spiritual beings, look up and recognize it in its glory. Create it in our humility and longing.

And in old age, what more should we hope for than to walk quietly the beautiful path for in beauty life begins and so in beauty does it end? On Saturday we will memorialize our dearly beloved Wally Fenn. Wally who understood beauty. Who played taps at numberless gravesides. Who strapped bells on his feet and danced in the glow of the rising of the sun. Two weeks later we will memorialize Don Farrington, a man who loved and made music while also standing with and advocating for vulnerable children and families.

All through their lives and to the end, Don and Wally walked the beautiful path.

And so shall we all. In ways that we too often over look; beauty works its mystery.

And so go from this day and into the next and the next, creating and recognizing the beauty that surrounds us and in which we are immersed. In times of sorrow and in times of joy, bring beauty close as balm and celebration.

May it be so.

Amen.