

“Beauty Will Save Us”

Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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From “Make it Beautiful” by Samuel Wells 12.16.20 issue of the “Christian Century”

As a widower plans a funeral, or as a person faces another kind of loss, I invariably return to these simple words: ‘I hope that, in the midst of your sorrow and the bleakness of what you’re facing, you can yet find a way to make it beautiful.’

Notice those words don’t say, ‘If it can’t be good.’ Beauty isn’t an alternative to goodness; it isn’t a distraction from depth, seriousness, honesty, or integrity. Nor do they say, ‘Make it *pretty*.’ Making it beautiful is about realizing we’re usually operating on a mundane level, where things will seldom make sense and where most things are fragile and contingent. In the face of dismay, the best approach is to go up a level, to a realm of fittingness, and recalibrated priorities. ... But making it beautiful also addresses the powerlessness at the heart of grief. There is, it turns out, something you can do, and that is to take the wisdom, grace, or soul of what’s been lost and portray its transcendent quality in word, deed, or collective gesture.

The pandemic has been an experience of powerlessness and sadness for most of us. It hasn’t been happy. But we can still make it beautiful.

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This past Friday was Tammy’s mother’s “heavenly birthday” – as it is said. You know how it is as that first anniversary of a loved one’s death draws near. You are pulled by memory of their last days of life and your own first days of raw grief. Now a year later that grief has changed but is ever present. So, it is for Tammy. On Wednesday she gives me a heads up saying she won’t be reachable for a bit. “Actually”, she says, “I’m going out to buy an orchid plant.” When she later texts me photos of the orchids (because she ended up buying two – both join another she admitted that she bought a few days earlier) the two plants glow with beauty. She says, “They were a need.”

A need indeed. “In the midst of [her] sorrow and the bleakness of what [Tammy] is facing, [she ... found] a way to make it beautiful.”

Even in the midst of disaster, grief, or tragedy, beauty is an ever-present reminder that there is good waiting to be coaxed forth. Like the random yet determined flower that forces its way through the ever so slight crack in the sidewalk, beauty will push through all manner of tragedy as balm for our aching hearts. Poets, saints, and sages wisely remind us of this power.

Hear these words of the poet Denise Levertov:

Who can utter
the poignance of all that is constantly
threatened, invaded, expended

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and constantly
nevertheless
persists in beauty,

"In California" By Denise Levertov, from *A Door in the Hive*

Another smart guy had this to say, "Behold the lilies of the field. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these." Jesus encourages us to behold – to look up to see - the lilies of the field. When we do, we cannot help but be moved. Beauty nudges our small concerns. To allow beauty to have its way with us is to thaw the frozen heart ... to nourish the soul.

In memory, please come with me to 19 Jay Street to All Souls to Unity Hall. Place yourselves there, in the row where you sit. To those of you who are new to All Souls and have not yet or may never cross the threshold I invite you to imagine.

It is the Sunday after Labor Day and the day when this congregation celebrates our Water Communion. The sun always seems to shine 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. As we fill it up with our offerings of water through the course the service, sunlight 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. It is as though Spirit manifests to remind us of the strength of our communion through this light-filled beauty.

That's beauty and it lifts our spirits; it lives in memory but when in the midst of a pandemic we reimagine this beloved ritual, we make sure that beauty is at its center.

SLIDE: WATER COMMUNION TABLE JULY 2021

Let's take a look around the sanctuary. In what had once been a car dealership's showroom since 2007 we have looked up to the sky through the majestic skylight strung with 1000 colorful origami cranes; rested our gaze upon the mural's soothing colors inspired by the sunset on the Long Island Sound; soothed our souls through the glory of the music. We harbor memories of child dedications, memorial services, weddings, Christmas Eve with candles raised ... flower communion with flowers bouncing overhead while Bil plays "The Waltz of the Flowers."

These are the ways that beauty expands the soul. Our forebears understood that deeply. Here is the long view of the chalice that graces the front of our pulpit.

SLIDE: LONG VIEW OF CHALICE

And here it is close up.

SLIDE: UPCLOSE VIEW OF THE CHALICE

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You see that the words engraved on the chalice are "Love, beauty, & truth." These are the words that frame the pulpit from which we speak and sing and pray.

Love. Beauty. Truth.

These three are what frame a life of integrity. These three frame the life we share at All Souls. Love, beauty and truth guide our mission to create a welcoming, caring, justice-seeking community within and beyond our walls. Say it with me: *a welcoming, caring, justice-seeking community within and beyond our walls.*

And beauty propels us in this mission – as do love and truth.

Let's consider beauty from a different angle. We just wrapped up an adult faith formation series that focused on UU theology. We relied on the book *House of Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the 21st Century*. In a chapter about defending against evil, Rebecca Parker defines evil in this way, she writes:

Evil springs from ignorance and denial of the beauty and goodness of life.

Consider the last four years and the administration that was at the helm. And then consider how you felt when at President Biden and Vice-President Harris' inauguration you heard beautiful and heartfelt singing. When you witnessed a young woman step up to the dais and share her powerful poetry. When you saw the brightly colored flags that filled the mall in the absence of people – you and me and our neighbors who could not be there this year.

Consider the memorial that took place the night before for the hundreds of thousands of people who have died of COVID. The hauntingly beautiful luminaries that lit the reflecting pool. The sorrowful yet determined interpretation of "Amazing Grace".

In the midst of the current bleakness, good and wise people found a way to make it beautiful and by doing so, defended our country from those who are ignorant of and deny the beauty and goodness of life.

Every time, beauty will save us.

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."

The wise man said that, *The pandemic has been an experience of powerlessness and sadness for most of us. It hasn't been happy. But we can still make it beautiful.*

In this dark of winter when compassionate distancing is the norm, when we struggle with loneliness, there is still something we can do. Let's continue to make it beautiful.

May we remember to behold the lilies of the field and open our hearts to beauty in all the places it calls to us.

Amen.