



Beauty as Well as Bread

BY LISSA ANNE GUNDLACH, SENIOR MINISTER, NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF PASADENA, CALIFORNIA



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You are imperfect;
permanently and
inevitably flawed.
And you are
beautiful.

—Amy Bloom



A monthly for religious liberals

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For many years, I spent most Monday evenings in the basement of All Souls Church in New York City, where their fellowship hall, nicknamed “Friendship Hall,” was transformed into a dining room for over 300 guests.

Some of the guests were experiencing homelessness or had marginal housing. Some were couch surfing with friends or family or living in shelters, with little privacy, harshly regimented schedules and constant threats of violence or theft. These guests were largely invisible to most members of the wealthy Upper East Side congregation, though some of them lived side-by-side in crowded, rent controlled apartments, or close by in single room occupancies.

All Souls was famous for having the best soup kitchen in town. I once got in a cab across town and started chatting about where I worked, only to have the driver share rave reviews about the chicken and the jazz pianist. This positive reputation wasn’t based only on the abundant, freshly prepared food and drink, but also in the radical hospitality that the volunteers, many from the congregation, provided.

At the end of every Monday night, guests spilled out into the All Souls courtyard to smoke and chat. Many lingered in the garden as long as they could. Others went their separate ways and began to blend back into the city landscape once again.

I always took the subway home. On the platform, I started to recognize our guests. I remember the first time I noticed a gentleman who had recently dined at the church. He was dressed in tattered clothes and set himself apart from the crowd. What first caught my eye was a yellow plastic bag bulging with the take-out containers provided for leftovers that each guest was offered.

What I noticed next was a bouquet of flowers, stems carefully wrapped in another plastic bag, the same kind that held the take-out containers. Not just any flowers, but unmistakably the church chancel dedication flowers, beautifully varied in color and texture and arranged by a loving hand and careful eye.

I remembered that on Monday afternoons, along with ensuring that each table was meticulously set, an All Souls volunteer creatively disassembled the two enormous vases of Sunday chancel flowers, rearranging them into two dozen smaller vases, one for each table.

I’m not sure why, but frankly, I was surprised. I’m not proud to say that at first a question arose in my mind, *Why would a hungry homeless person want to take flowers home with him? What would he do with them?*

As quickly as that thought came and went, heavily laden with my own judgments and assumptions, another feeling overtook me. Once I could set aside my class-based prejudices I was moved that the guest had taken time to wrap the flowers to enjoy and bring home. *Everyone needs beauty*, I said to myself. *Of course, everyone deserves beauty.*

Beauty makes a difference in people’s lives, if only for a few brief moments. I imagined the bouquet somehow providing a balm against the harshness of the life to which he returned. Just as the food nourished

his body, the beauty of the flowers nourished his soul.

After that day, I began to see each week that many of the guests treasured the flowers as much as the food. Two young sisters delighted in taking the flowers with them at the end of the meal, quarreling over who got the prettiest ones. A woman with long beautiful hair tucked azaleas into her braid.

Beauty is not meant to be kept to ourselves.

Each week I watched as, like clockwork, an older woman stayed until the last moments of the evening, then traveled from table to table gathering the remaining bouquets together into one large arrangement. I asked her if she liked to have the flowers in her home. “Of course, what else would I do with them?” she replied curtly in a heavy German accent. What else, indeed, but enjoy them? Why did I even need to ask why?

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.

These words were written by naturalist John Muir in his 1912 book, *The Yosemite*. He described beauty as a “hunger” shared by every person, from wealth or poverty.

Muir was right. Beauty is a fundamental human need. We seek out beauty, delight in beauty and need to create it in our lives. I know this is true in my own life. I come from a long line of gardeners, farmers and florists. Every spring in New York City, I would haul pots of flowers and herbs and vegetable starts up three flights of stairs to my tiny fire escape to make a garden. I rushed to the farmers market every

Saturday to buy fresh flowers, and delighted in my walks to the Botanic Gardens. Beauty is not a luxury, but a necessity.

I think this is what Unitarian minister Norbert Čapek was thinking about when he created the flower communion nearly a hundred years ago in Prague. Most of his members had come from the Roman Catholic Church, and while they were eager for a new religious community, they did not feel comfortable with the bread and wine of the Catholic communion ritual. Still, Čapek felt that the bread and wine ritual bonded members to their faith and to each other.

In a time not unlike today, with extremism and authoritarianism on the rise, he looked for a substitute symbol in the peace of the pastoral countryside, undisrupted by human conflict. No wars were fought in the name of the flower, no hatred or oppression, no bigotry or harshness. To Čapek, flowers represented pure, boundless innocence, and the temporary but vivid pleasure of color and fragrance.

Čapek felt that beautiful flowers would challenge his members to discover the same sense of beauty in each other, even—and especially—because of their differences. While it is easy to see beauty in a flower, seeing the beauty of another person is more difficult. And yet that is what our task is as a religious community—to bring out one another’s beauty and to celebrate it.

Von Ogden Vogt, 20th century Unitarian theologian, knew this well—he called beauty one of “three liberal religious absolutes, alongside truth and goodness.” Truth begets beauty, which begets goodness, and vice versa. He wrote:

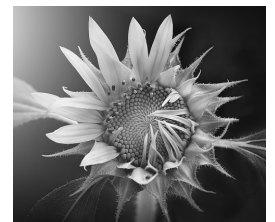
Anything beautiful is an end product, and the joy we have of it an end in itself. But our satisfac-

tion is not enough. The sense of beauty calls us to look and see the object in itself. It says, “See this flower..., see this person, they are beautiful in themselves.” It says, “See this person—not see this voter, this customer, this employer, this saleslady—but rather, see this person, as [they are] is in and for [themselves].”

All those Monday nights spent at the All Souls soup kitchen taught me this well. As we chatted about the flowers, I began to really see the beauty of the guests as they were nourished in body and soul. Our common humanity eclipsed the separateness of our lives.

Our charge is not only to see beauty in the flowers, but also to see beauty in one another—friend, family and comrade, sometimes obscured by the common rhythms of our day-to-day. The thing about beauty is that it is meant to be shared. I think about our members who gather up the beauty of their yards every week to create flower arrangements for church every Sunday, or those whose ministry is to make incredible bouquets, and then give them away only for the pleasure and delight it brings others.

Beauty is not meant to be kept to ourselves. We must take the beauty of our beloved community out into the world to share it with others who so badly need deep and soulful nourishment. We must take it to the polls as we exercise our role as citizens advocating for a return to civility and politics of human rights and human dignity. We must take it out into the sanctuaries of nature as we celebrate and revel in the brief but bountiful blossoming of summer. ■



Loving Ugly

BY **RANWA HAMMAMY**, CHAPLAIN WITH THE CENTER FOR ELDER'S INDEPENDENCE, CONCORD, CALIFORNIA

Have you ever been worshipped? I'm not talking about the "bring offerings to an altar built in your name" kind of worship—although if you do happen to have offerings of chocolate, I'm open. I'm talking about the core meaning of the word worship, looking into its origins and oldest implications. I'm wondering if you have ever had anyone hold you and your life in awe? I'm curious if you have had someone ascribe worth to the fullness of your being? Have you ever been worshipped?

One of my favorite recent examples of this kind of worship comes from a joyously unexpected place—the movie *Magic Mike XXL*. It's a story about five male strippers on a road trip for one last major hoorah at an annual stripper convention. In the last scene of the film, when our main characters are about to take the stage, their MC, played by Jada Pinkett Smith, asks the crowd of women if they are "ready to be worshipped."

What then takes place is a kind of worship that, as feminist writer Roxanne Gay describes it, caused moviegoers to throw actual dollar bills at the screen. It was raunchy, it was risqué, it was filled with fantasies of all kinds. As each character performed his act, we saw consenting women of various body shapes, skin colors, and ages being treated as attractive, sensual, and yes, sexual beings. Throughout the scene, we saw women with many—though admittedly not all—kinds of bodies being held up as worthy of physical intimacy and love, as attractive and beautiful.

And the effects of that worship were made clear immediately after I saw the movie with my friend. When the film was over, we started walking down the theater steps to exit. As we began making our way out of the room, we found ourselves behind a couple of women,



one of whom looked to be in her 40s and another who looked older, maybe in her 70s. As we followed them down the steps, the older of these two women turned to us, grinned and said: "I need to find myself a young man!" The exchange was made ever more perfect by the 20-something theater employee, whose eyes went wide with shock when the older woman exclaimed her need.

Part what makes *Magic Mike* more than a film about five male entertainers on a road trip is its prophetic message about the limited definition of what we call physically "beautiful" in our society. In affirming the beauty and worthiness of a range of women's physical forms, it challenges the exclusionary features that are so often required for anyone to be considered beautiful. In worshipping this wider-than-traditionally-accepted range of women's bodies, the film ascribes worth to—sees the beauty of—what has so often been called "ugly."

That message contradicts the way that many of the physical characteristics we might call "ugly" are treated in our typical discourse. Rather than see them as features worthy of worship, we are too often taught that we need to change or eradicate them. We are sold make-up to hide acne marks and wrinkles; we use control-top pantyhose and heels to get the "perfect" butt and thighs; we color the gray in our hair; we cycle through the newest diet and exercise fad every month because we think,

"Maybe this one will actually get rid of my gut." Our culture is constantly reminding us that to be worthy of the label "beautiful" we have to get rid of everything that is not part of a very specific, and largely unrealistic, idolized form.

And when we say something is "ugly" in our society, what else are we attributing to those physical characteristics? What are we saying about what we believe is its nature? About how we should interact with it? Something that is "ugly" is unattractive. It is unpleasant or repugnant. Something that is ugly is repulsive, nasty, shameful, objectionable, horrible, vile, or even frightful. When we call something "ugly," we are saying it is "less than." We are saying it is not worthy of love.

And that angle just considers how we are constantly approaching what we have been conditioned to see as *physically* ugly. What does it mean for all that we have been conditioned to see as *socially* or *culturally* ugly? What does it mean for people whose characteristics we have been conditioned to view as unpleasant not just to our eyes, but also to our minds? Repulsive and shameful to our spirits? Objectionable or frightful in our hearts? What else are we saying is not worthy of our worship? Not worthy of our love?

What has been deemed "ugly" in our society is unfortunately not limited to our body image. Much of the marginalization, hatred, and violence inflicted upon certain people and communities is the result of being judged and treated as "ugly," as with people who our larger cultural narratives tell us don't live up to what we are conditioned to think is "good" or "right."

In the example of racism, black and brown lives have been historically portrayed and treated as "ugly," as less good and less worthy than white lives. From narratives of savagery about indigenous peoples, to narratives of inferiority justifying the forced enslavement of Africans in European colonies,

people of color have long been presented as being “ugly” in U.S. cultural history. What we call our “criminal justice system” has long been used to treat black and brown people as ugly—as inherently violent, threatening, and criminal.

Narratives surrounding gender identity also carry their own ideas of what has been deemed culturally “ugly” or objectionable. In a sad example, in 2015 residents of the city of Houston voted to overturn HERO, the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance that had made it illegal to discriminate against anyone on the basis of multiple protected classes, including race, disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. HERO was a great example of a “loving ugly” measure, designed to prevent treatment of certain marginalized identities as “less than,” by offering protections that affirmed their inherent worth and legal rights. Unfortunately, what happened in Houston with the repeal of HERO was anything but love.

When this kind of treatment of people and communities as “ugly” or “less than” in our society goes unchallenged, the consequences can be devastating and even fatal. Verbal abuse and the denial of legal protections can cause trans and gender-non-conforming people, especially youth, to internalize the messages of hate and worthlessness that surround them, and lead to their pursuit of self-harm and suicide at rates that are nearly ten times the average.

But we know that the narratives around what is seen as worthy and beautiful, and what is seen as less than and ugly, can and have to be changed. And if we wish to live into that first Unitarian Universalist principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we must commit ourselves to affirming people whose worth and beauty have for too long been denied.

And that work, that effort, *is* happening. Today, there are numerous movements by people on the margins, people who have been treated as “ugly,” to

proclaim their beauty and challenge the attitudes and structures that say they are anything else. These are movements of self-love, assertions of worthiness and power that are being led by the very people who have been denied their right to be worshipped, to have their lives held in awe.

In the area of body image, particularly for women, there is a growing effort to affirm the beauty of all body sizes, shapes, and colors. There are campaigns like the international movement, *The Body Is Not an Apology*, founded by Sonya Renee Taylor. This campaign promotes radical body empowerment, and the affirmation of “perfectly imperfect bodies, shaped by differences in age, race, size, gender, dis/ability, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, class, and other attributes” as all beautiful and worthy of love. There’s also Mirna Valerio, a marathon runner whose blog, *Fat Girl Running*, breaks through the stereotype that bigger bodies cannot be healthy or capable of amazing athletic feats.

So how are we called to love what has for too long been called ugly?

It is worth noting that Taylor and Valerio are women of color, a reality that points to another campaign of self-love and affirmation of worth—Black Lives Matter, which, in the words of its organizers, “is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” It is a richly intersectional effort that both includes and goes beyond challenging police brutality and mass incarceration. It seeks to ensure the inclusion and affirmation of black lives and experiences in multiple justice movements such as disability justice, housing affordability, employment and economic justice, healthcare access, and LGBTQ equality. It resists cultural narratives that

have dehumanized or erased the experience of being black in our society, and thus helps to make black lives visible, reminding all of us that they have yet to be treated as the worthy and beautiful lives that they are.

And despite the heartbreaking outcome of the HERO vote in Houston, there have been many successes that lift up the beauty and worth of trans lives. Twenty states have laws on the books that explicitly protect transgender people from discrimination. Transgender storylines, and in particular ones featuring transgender actors, are slowly gaining nuanced representation in popular culture and media. While invisibility and fear-based lies continue to present trans lives as ugly, major legal and cultural efforts have challenged this assumption with life-saving affirmations of worth.

So how are we called to love what has for too long been called ugly? Some of us may hold identities or be part of communities that continue to bear the status of ugly in our society. Loving what has been called ugly in your life may very much be an act of self-love, a breaking down of the cage of lies that have declared you are not beautiful or powerful, or worthy of worship. Loving “ugly” may largely be an act of resistance to cultural narratives around your worth, through the celebration of your own beauty.

For all of us, and especially those who may hold identities that have historically had the privilege of being affirmed as beautiful and worthy, loving ugly is an active process. It is much more than simply believing that all people possess an inherent worth and sacred beauty that should never be denied, although that is an essential part of the process. But feeling or thinking that so much of what has been called ugly should be seen as beautiful is not the same as acting upon it.

To love ugly is to engage in the act of transformation, to commit ourselves to ensuring the affirmation of another’s



worth. It is to take the risk of naming the beauty and value of what has been called

ugly in the public sphere, knowing there will likely be resistance. It is to lovingly challenge the assumptions of ugliness embedded in the minds and hearts of those closest to us, knowing that the cost to our relationships is likely to be less than the cost to the lives that have been deemed less worthy if those assumptions are allowed to go unaddressed.

It requires a willingness to be transformed ourselves—a willingness to let our relationships with the people who have been called “ugly” and “less worthy” change how our minds and hearts understand the world. Loving ugly means we build into our lives regular interactions and relationships of accountability that ensure we are indeed listening to the proclamations of self-worth being made by the “ugly” members of our society. It means checking our actions to make sure they are in line with the needs and direction of the people whose worth we are seeking to affirm.

Loving ugly means not necessarily being the ones to lead change, but rather becoming respectful and accountable accomplices in the work for universal justice. Loving ugly is a process of learning from the visions of those who have been called less worthy or less beautiful, and supporting their strategies for achieving affirmation and change. It is not so much about giving power to the marginalized in our society, but instead about seeing and following the power they already have, the power that nobody else has been willing to recognize. It is about actively worshipping the beautiful in all the infinite variety of its forms, making more and more places for that beauty to bloom and grow. ■

Inner Beauty

BY TIMOTHY, CLF MEMBER INCARCERATED IN FLORIDA

I entered prison in 1989 and did not care about beauty. I hadn't for many years. I did not seek it, didn't even pay attention to it. Beauty had never been a part of my life. At the young age of six I was placed into the care and custody of the State of Colorado. For the next 12 years I suffered severe forms of physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse by staff and by older kids.

When I turned 18 I was kicked out with no job, no money, no family, and no idea how to function on my own. Within three years I'd already been to prison twice, and was on my way back for a third time with a fresh 60-year sentence.

Beauty? All I had seen in my life was ugliness, pain and the worst in humans. So what did I know about beauty?

Halfway into my current sentence I started a spiritual journey that changed my life, my outlook, my entire being. It was during this journey that I discovered beauty. I also discovered that beauty comes in many forms.

I've looked at certain men and thought: “Wow, he is so beautiful.” The physical beauty of another human being is one of the most easily recognized forms of beauty.

I've walked to chow at night and was amazed by the beauty of the moon and stars. On the rec yard I've admired the beauty of a hawk flying overhead and the beauty of a mockingbird's song.

Some people find beauty in written words or songs, while others admire the beauty of various forms of art. One guy I worked with would talk for hours about the beauty of math, how the perfection of a difficult equation was beauty in itself.

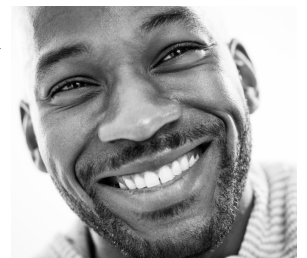
While it is difficult to do in prison, I now try to see the beauty that sur-

rounds me. Whether it is the trees on the other side of the fence, a wild flower growing on the yard, a touching poem, or a heart-tugging song, I search for that beauty.

The most rewarding beauty that I've found is the beauty of a kind soul. No matter how a person looks on the outside, it is what's inside that has affected me the most. Prison is a place filled with egotistical, selfish, manipulating, cruel people. So it is particularly special when I come across that rare animal—a beautiful inner person.

The unselfish act of helping others in need, of sticking up for the weak, of giving freely with no ulterior motives: this is the beauty that changes lives, the beauty that makes us look at our own inner self. This is the beauty that allows us to have hope for the future no matter how bleak the present is.

It is this inner beauty that has the power to change the world we live in. If we all nurtured our



inner beauty, tended it until it blossomed, then that beauty would spread its seeds to others. Let your inner beauty shine; allow others to see your inner beauty by your actions. No matter how ugly the world is, our inner beauty can thrive and spread. ■

Do you find beauty—even inspiration—in the words that you find in *Quest* each month? Perhaps you'd like to share the gift of *Quest* with someone you care about who would also find beauty and sustenance here. Go to questformeaning.org/clfuu/ subscribe-to-quest/ to purchase a subscription that will bring a monthly healing dose of beauty to someone's door. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

When my child Jie was 4, we were waiting in line at the post office behind a very dark-skinned man who wore a kufi cap, tunic and pants of a colorful African fabric featuring oranges, yellows and reds. My child looked up at him in wonder. “You’re beautiful!” Jie declared. And then, more thoughtfully, Jie asked, “Are you allowed to be beautiful?”

As I reflected on what might have caused this response, the intersection of race and gender, it seemed likely it was the man’s gender that caused Jie’s question. Jie’s pre-school teachers included several African women who wore traditional clothing, and Jie had never addressed them similarly. So a few minutes later, when we were outside, I asked Jie, “Do you think that men are not allowed to be beautiful?” And Jie replied solemnly, “Well, they never are.”

I’ve thought about this as we have deepened into this theme of beauty: Why it is that beauty is associated with the feminine and not the masculine? I asked several heterosexual women friends if they ever told their husbands or boyfriends that they were beautiful, and they seemed bewildered by the very question. They responded that no, they had not. Nor, they said when I prodded, did they think of these beloved men as beautiful. Handsome, sexy, all kinds of other things, but not beautiful. And when I asked why not, these women—feminist, thoughtful, women—said they thought it would be an insult to tell a man such a thing.

I guess we’ve decided in western culture that beauty is a feminine thing. Beauty is for women, not men, at least not cisgender heterosexual men. Not “manly” men. Beauty is...weak? A

romp with my search engine instructs me that it’s OK to call pre-adolescent boys beautiful; after that they are handsome or good-looking.

This is perplexing to me. I think of birds; if someone says they see a beautiful cardinal or peacock, you can bet they’re talking about a male of the species. It is the male with the bright plumage, with the opulent beauty, while the females are more drab and subdued. Biologists think this may be so the males draw away predators’ attention from the females. In their case, beauty is a strength, indicating their willingness to give their very lives to protect their mates.

I also think back to decades ago when I studied the dialogues of Plato, and how often he spoke of beauty. In that completely male universe of ancient Greece that he wrote about, beauty was alive and important!

The readers of *Quest* are a diverse lot, and I’m sure people of all genders will agree and disagree with my assessment that men are, generally, “not allowed” to be beautiful. I am less interested in whether that is universally true than I am in why it would appear to be true to a four year old who was just beginning to tune into what gender and beauty mean in America. I am grateful that the gender revolution we are experiencing is affecting, among other things, our assumptions about what beauty means.

For most women, beauty is a form of tyranny. We are judged by our looks from the day we are born, and most of us know in exactly which ways we fail to measure up. Beauty standards are heavily determined by white supremacy: recently a magazine cover that purported to show the most beautiful women in the world showed seven reed-thin, blonde-haired, blue-eyed women who looked almost identical to the casual eye.

For me, at least, early adolescence was when these beauty standards felt the most assaultive, as I was beginning to see myself as a woman. Like many of

my peers, I went to physically painful lengths to try to fit the molds which were not mine to fit—following preposterous diets, sleeping on orange juice cans to straighten my curly hair, slathering baby oil on my fair skin and burning it bright red to try to have a tan. Women of color I know have shared even more extreme pains they’ve suffered to try to fit beauty standards which left them out completely.

The theologian Carter Heyward said that homophobia is the club by which sexism is beaten into our bodies. As I look back to those years, any boy who looked anything remotely akin to “beautiful” would have been subjected to ceaseless ridicule, much of it steeped in homophobic slurs. While boys had role models to follow that were as impossible as the girls’, they were about courage or accomplishment, not about physical beauty.

What, I wonder, would it be like, if we had a standard of beauty that was accessible for everyone—all genders, all races, all kinds of bodies? What if TV shows and magazines were full of people noted for their brilliant smiles, the light in their eyes, the graceful curve of their shoulder? What if we had published lists of the top ten coziest laps for grandchildren or the Most Soothing Hands of 2018? What if we de-sexualized as well as de-standardized beauty, so that we could say to a co-worker “You look so beautiful with snow in your hair,” or to a child “You are so beautiful running across the soccer field.”

Perhaps we could not only give one another permission to look for and admire the wide range of beauty in the people around us, we could give ourselves permission to see and admire our own beauty, and to walk in the world conscious of the fact that we have beauty to share. ■



REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

The saying goes that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” What is beautiful to one person might very well do nothing for another. It might be hard to find a person who doesn’t see beauty in a colorful sunset, but what if that sunset were highlighted by swooping bats? Some people would find that more beautiful, some people less. (Me, I’m firmly in the Bats Are Beautiful camp.) You might find nothing more lovely to all of your senses than a perfectly ripe banana, but you will never convince me to share that opinion. Ick.

Seeing beauty is something we learn, something we practice.

What we find beautiful depends largely on our associations with it—our history and our loves and our fears. Which means that seeing things as beautiful isn’t something that just happens because some things are beautiful and some things aren’t. Seeing beauty is something we learn, something we practice. It’s a skill that you can develop. Rev. Joe Cleveland, minister of our church in Saratoga Springs, New York, tells this story about practicing beauty when he was a child:

In the house where I grew up, there is a big window—a sliding glass door, really—that looks out on the backyard. Out behind our house was a kind of clearing with trees to both sides. We had a bird feeder out there in the clearing and my mom made sure that it was filled with birdseed. Next to that big window that looked out at the trees and the clearing and the bird feeder, my



mom always kept bird books and a pair of binoculars.

I don’t know how much time I spent looking out that window at the birds. We’d spot a bird and then look it up and figure out what it was. And I would even just page through those guidebooks sometimes, looking at the birds and the amazing pictures of them. Fascinating and beautiful!

I saw more beautiful birds out of that back window than I would have otherwise because my mom helped make sure that we were prepared to see them. I knew the binoculars and bird books were there and so sometimes, even when I hadn’t noticed some bird flying by, I would pick them up anyway. I would practice using them. I would practice how to focus them. And I just got comfortable with how they felt in my hands and what it felt like to hold them to my face.

And there was never a time when I used those binoculars that I didn’t see something fascinating if I looked long enough. Using the binoculars helped me to focus my attention, which is often hard for me to do. And they helped me see things that I couldn’t see without them.

Some beauty is easy to see. But I think there is a lot of beauty that I wouldn’t notice if I didn’t practice looking for it. There is beauty in unexpected places. And the more I practice looking for beauty, the more I am ready for it, and the more beauty I find in my world.

“The more I practice looking for beauty, the more I am ready for it, and the more beauty I find in my world.” That’s a powerful statement. It’s easy to go through life wanting the world to provide us with beauty and pleasure, but the responsibility might rest not with the world, but rather with us. The world is throwing out amazing beauty

across each and every square inch. Have you ever seen magnified pictures of sand or leaves or skin? The patterns of bark on a tree or the smell of cut grass or the rhythmic sound of a sprinkler can be art and music. But it can take practice and effort to see and appreciate that beauty rather than simply ignoring it as the background of our days.



I got up at 5:00AM to see the full moon shining rust-red

in sky—a total lunar eclipse. I am not a fan of 5AM. I could have given it a miss. (OK, I almost did. I’m really not a morning person.) But I got up and stood on the driveway in my pajamas in the dark because it seemed like it would be a shame to let that beauty just slip by. If the solar system was going to line up the sun and the earth and the moon to create such a spectacle, I felt like it would be a little ungrateful to not bother to see it.

There are plenty of ads out there in the world demanding that you should work and pay and even suffer to be beautiful, but I suspect that we would be better off with messages that instead pushed us to make an effort to be witnesses to beauty.

A song in our hymnbook, based on a poem by Sara Teasdale, begins: “Life has loveliness to sell.” Yes, we buy beauty with the currency of our attention, our openness, our willingness to be moved. We buy life’s loveliness when we look beyond our assumptions to see the beauty in the people around us that comes from the inside rather than from the surface. We buy life’s loveliness when we stop to look, or listen or smell, or when we create beauty through art or music or dance or cooking or poetry or a welcoming smile. We buy life’s loveliness through deliberate practice, through a determination that, in Annie Dillard’s words, “creation need not play to an empty house.” ■



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Aching Beauty

BY **KAREN G. JOHNSTON**, MINISTER, THE UNITARIAN SOCIETY,
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What to do with beauty?
or joy, for that matter—
in the midst of tragedy,
of violence, of cruelty?

What do we do with the living?

Give each their due.
Do not lose ourselves in any of it,
but find ourselves anew.

Where there is beauty,
amplify it.
Where beauty is hidden,
reveal it.
Where beauty is ruined,
restore it.
Where beauty is absent,
create it.

This will be our gift to our aching world. ■