



Beauty

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries, and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

At first glance, selecting “beauty” as the monthly theme for May seems to be an obvious choice. While we may marvel at the beauty of fresh new snow, by this time of year, we are longing for the black-cruled mounds of snow to reveal something — well — beautiful underneath. Spring green! Flowers! Flowering trees! Most of us anticipate the coming of spring not only as an antidote to the cold temperatures and treacherous sidewalks, but because nature makes herself so stunningly beautiful, delighting us with beauty enhanced by the fact that it is so fleeting. If the definition of beauty as “A combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight,” it seems like such a simple concept — one that we all can agree on, right?

Not so fast. As we dig deeper into the concept of beauty, we realize that it’s complex and multifaceted. Google “beauty” and what comes up are thousands of websites all advertising beauty “products.” They are usually geared towards either younger or older women, although the market has expanded to include cisgender-men and even children. However, the politics of what is considered “beautiful” changes. Early in the 20th century, Black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey described European or white standards of beauty as a deep dimension of oppression. White standards of beauty, Garvey argued devalued Black bodies. Although 21st century understandings of “beauty” continue to evolve, the image of beauty which is constantly reinforced in Western culture is thin, young, white, able-bodied, wrinkle and fat-free.

Philosophers and theologians would argue that beauty is not skin-deep;

that beauty is inextricably linked to something far less tangible. Islam would locate beauty in that which connects us to the universe and the divine in each other. “Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty,” said the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him). Judaism reminds us that each of us is created in the Divine image and that the outer body reflects the inner beauty of the Creator. Jesus would continually invite those around him to behold God’s presence in one another. In all three of these great religious traditions, beauty doesn’t exist as a stand-alone concept. It exists in relation to another; in fact, we could say that we cannot experience beauty without being in some form of relationship to it. I may view an astonishing sunset, but I am not separated from that experience; I am in relationship to it. The experience of beauty can uplift us and inspire us towards appreciating that beauty on its own merit; or, it can create a desire to own it — claim it — make it ours and keep it forever. This is the challenge of beauty. It will always change. It will never stay the same. It is ephemeral. It is also deeply subjective, as we bring our apperceptions about what constitutes an aesthetically pleasing experience to that which has captured our attention and appreciation.

Why then, do we believe that an infant’s face is more beautiful than an aged one? Why are millions drawn to see Mona Lisa’s smile, a painting which of inestimable value, while at the same time, millions purchase copies of paintings by Thomas Kinkade? Some would look at Kinkade’s work and find great beauty, others have called it kitsch. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons why trying to define beauty will ultimately fail,

because one person’s idea of what is aesthetically pleasing may not affect another as powerfully.

If we can learn anything from our engagement with Unitarian Universalism, it is the sure fact that engagement with these questions may not bring us closer to *the* truth, but to a deeper understanding of other’s truths. What once may be perceived as “ugly” can be appreciated on a more nuanced level as we expand our capacity to understand and to feel. If we can get behind and beneath our initial reaction to something as “beautiful” or “ugly” we can allow beauty to lead us into something more than a shallow appreciation or rejection. We can go to the heart of how these assemblages of shape, color, texture, form come together to create an experience that provides a window into the Mystery that lives in, among and beyond us.

As you go about your days this month, see if you can apply this chant to that which you experience:

Beauty is before me and beauty behind me; above 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 trail. In beauty it is begun; in beauty it is ended.

May it be so.

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Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme please see this month’s Spiritual Practice Packet, available online at unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html.