

# “Beauty’s Ability to Nurture Us”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on May 1, 2022

As we heard in the reading that Sandy shared with us, the Episcopal Priest and modern mystic, Matthew Fox, asserts that “Looking for and enjoying beauty is a way to nourish the soul.” I recognize that it is quite possible his choice of words, specifically the word “soul,” may be problematic for some of you. If that is the case for you, I would invite you to consider other words that might be less objectionable. For example, you might replace “the soul” with “one’s psyche,” “one’s mental state,” or “one’s emotional well-being.” I offer these alternatives to the word “soul” in order to allow each of us the opportunity to explore what I believe is at the heart of what Fox is asserting—namely, that beauty nourishes and nurtures us.

In the following quote from the book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, the late Irish poet, author, priest, and Hegelian philosopher, John O’Donohue, echoes Fox’s assertion. He writes:

The human soul is hungry for beauty: we seek it everywhere — in landscape, music, art, clothes, furniture, gardening, companionship, love, religion and in ourselves... When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming. Some of our most wonderful memories are of beautiful places where we felt immediately at home. We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful for it meets the needs of our soul... Beauty brings a sense of completion and sureness. Without any calculation, we can slip into the Beautiful with the same ease as we slip into the seamless embrace of water; something ancient in us already trusts that this embrace will hold us.

Like Fox, O’Donohue uses the word soul. Again, if you find this word objectionable I would invite you to consider other words that would be more acceptable.

Both of these authors tell us that there is something about beauty, or “the Beautiful,” as O’Donohue puts it, that provides us with something that is beneficial. He seems to imply that there is something about beauty that comforts us, that supports us, that helps to sustain us. He doesn’t tell us specifically what that something is. Instead, he tells us that “the Beautiful” brings us a sense of homecoming. He says that “beauty brings a sense of completion and sureness.”

I would propose that the manner in which Fox and O’Donohue write about beauty and what it offers us is both intentional and necessary. It is intentional so as not to adversely influence anyone’s experience or perspective of how beauty nurtures and nourishes. It is necessary because none of us can know specifically or decisively how beauty nourishes another. Science can tell us how food, water or breathable air nurture and nourish us. But to my knowledge, science hasn’t yet been able to quantify or qualify the ways in which beauty nurtures and nourishes us. It is quite possible, therefore, that many of us may have difficulty specifically and decisively stating how beauty nourishes us. And yet, I imagine that most, if not all of us, would agree that beauty is something we appreciate, enjoy and seek out. I think we would agree that a life without beauty, or at least a life where we were unable to perceive beauty, would be seriously lacking. If for some unknown reason we were unable to experience or perceive beauty, we would feel a tremendous loss. We would grieve that loss and know that we were deprived.

This morning, I hope that each of us will have moments when we experience beauty. And as we experience beauty, I would invite us to consider the ways we feel nurtured by such experiences. Like Fox and O’Donohue, I am not going to attempt to speak directly or specifically to the ways that beauty nourishes and nurtures us. If I were to even attempt to do so, I would demonstrate not my insight or wisdom, but my inadequacies. Instead, I believe the best way to discover the ways beauty nourishes and nurtures us is to do so ourselves, through personal experience. Shortly, I will provide an opportunity for each of us to enter a time of exploration and discovery. But before that, it would be important for each of us to recognize what I will call

our “baseline.” Our baseline is the mental, emotional and/or physical state we are in at this moment. Getting a sense of our baseline will allow us to identify changes that occur when we encounter beauty.

Let’s begin with a body scan. Take a moment now to notice how your body feels sitting in your chair. Notice whether you feel warm, cool, or just right. Notice where there might be any discomfort or tension in your body. As you take a few seconds to do a body scan, you can get a sense of your body’s current physical state.

Now I invite you to do a mood check. When I say mood check, I am referring to how you are feeling emotionally. Notice how you are feeling emotionally at this moment. Once you have a good sense of how you are feeling, it might be helpful to name the mood you are in. Some examples might be calm, joyful, peaceful, unsettled, irritable, or anxious. These are just a few examples. There are many other words to select from. The benefit of giving your mood a name is that it will provide a marker of what you feel now to measure against a bit later.

Finally, I would ask you to check in on our current mental state. Focus your attention on your thoughts. Are your thoughts about what is going on in this current moment here in the room you are in? Are your thoughts orderly? Are they cohesive and connected one to the next. Or might they be disorganized or even distracting? If you notice yourself having any judgmental thoughts about your current mental state, I encourage you to be gentle and compassionate with yourself. Notice the judgment and then let it go. The purpose of this process is simply to get a baseline so you can notice how experiencing beauty affects you.

Now, I want to invite you to gently, even tenderly, explore your own experiences of beauty. And as you do so, I would ask you to notice what happens with your body, mind and emotions. There are many ways to experience beauty so I am going to suggest that we focus on beauty using one perceptive sense at a time. Let’s begin with the sense of sight.

Anyone who has their eyesight now, or had eyesight for a significant period of their life, has seen something beautiful. I would invite you to either recall something beautiful you have seen in the past, or something you perceive to be beautiful that you can focus your gaze on from where you are sitting. There are many beautiful visual images in nature, including sunrises and sunsets, a full moon reflected in a perfectly still lake, or the Milky Way. If you would prefer, you might want to focus on some piece of art, such as a painting by Vincent van Gogh. Whatever visual image you choose, focus all of your attention on it. Allow yourself to be fully engaged with it. Take some time now to see the beauty in all of its splendor. (Long pause)

Now do another scan of your body, mood and mind. Notice whether there has been a change from the previous scan you did. If there has been a change, acknowledge it to yourself. (Pause)

Next, I would invite you to focus your attention on your sense of sound, your hearing. In this instance, I would ask you to recall something beautiful that you have heard in the past. You might want to close your eyes to increase your focus on the sense of sound. You might recall a moving piece of music you have heard, possibly a piece that Laurel has played for us. Or maybe the music is by one of your favorite singers. Then again, the song might be that of a bird that is singing its little heart out for a mate. Whatever beautiful sound you imagine, allow yourself to focus all of your attention on it. Allow yourself to be completely surrounded by it. Take some time now to hear the beauty in all of its vibrancy. (Long pause)

Now do another scan of your body, mood and mind. Notice whether there has been a change from the first or the second scan you did. If there has been a change, acknowledge it to yourself. (Pause)

There is one last perceptive sense that I would invite you to engage with as we explore beauty’s affects on us. That is the sense of smell. Again, closing your eyes may help you focus on smell. This is a time of year when, at one point or another, I smell spring in the air. Smelling spring in the air is always a moment of beauty for me. Maybe you have had that experience recently. If not, I would invite you to recall a time when beauty filled your nostrils. Maybe it was the smell of flowers — flowers in a garden, in an open meadow or on mountain hillside, or maybe the flowers were on a tree, such as a fruit tree. Take some time now to experience the full beauty of the smell. (Long pause)

Now do one more scan of your body, mood and mind. Notice whether there has been a change from the previous scans you did. If there has been a change, acknowledge it to yourself. (Pause)

Thank you for engaging in this process of experiencing and exploring beauty and how beauty can affect us. I hope this experience was a pleasurable one for you. And I hope as you engaged beauty with the three senses I mentioned, sight, hearing and smell, the experience created a positive change for you. Maybe the change involved how your body feels. Maybe your mood shifted. Possibly your thoughts improved in some way. Maybe there was a change in all three of these areas. I am certain the changes, whatever they might have been, were unique to each one of us. I say this because I know that beauty affects each one of us on a personal level and in a way that is unique and special. Such is the power and the mystery of beauty.

In closing, I want to share one last quote with you from O'Donohue's book, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. "Beauty invites refinement of feeling and thought. It calls us ever towards a greater fullness of presence." May you see, hear and smell beauty often. And each time you encounter beauty, may you feel embraced, enriched, enlivened, nourished and nurtured.

So may it be.