

“Awakening to Beauty”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is an old saying that I imagine all of us are familiar with. The specific wording of this old saying is attributed to Margaret Wolfe Hungerford, who included this specific phrase in her 1878 book titled *Molly Brown*. While Hungerford is credited with penning this specific wording, the idea that is at the core of this saying has been stated numerous times prior to Hungerford’s time. The playwright, poet and author, William Shakespeare, the philosopher, David Hume, and the writer, scientist, inventor and statesman, Benjamin Franklin, each expressed the basic sentiment of this phrase before Hungerford was born. While both Hungerford and Shakespeare specifically mentioned the eye as the means to perceiving beauty, Hume and Franklin didn’t limit the perception of beauty just to the eye. Franklin wrote that beauty; “Is but supported by opinion.” And Hume claimed that; “Beauty in things exists merely in the mind that contemplates them.”

This morning’s reading by Frazier Hunt would seem to confirm what the old saying is asserting. That assertion is that each of us perceives beauty in our own way, and to our own degree. As Hunt states in the reading, his attention that July afternoon was on his emotions. More specifically, his attention was on a feeling of disappointment. As a result of his inward focus, he was unable to see, or perceive, the beauty that was all around him. His internal focus was broken as he spotted Helen Keller walking toward him. Once he shifted his focus to his sight, Keller’s actions awakened him to what he had been missing. As he stated so succinctly and powerfully; “It took the sightless eyes and sealed ears of this extraordinary woman to show me beauty and bravery.”

While it is true that the eye can show us beauty, the ability to perceive beauty goes beyond just our ability to see. Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, could not see or hear the beauty on that July afternoon. She was able, however, to smell it and to feel it. Hunt, on the other hand, tells us that he had eyes to see and ears to hear, and yet he was both blind and deaf to the beauty that was all around him. Upon awakening to his unintentional and self-created blindness and deafness, Hunt was brought to tears by Keller’s presence and actions.

When I first read Hunt’s article many years ago, I was catapulted back in time. I recalled a time in my own life—a time when I was experiencing a great deal of stress—when my eyes were suddenly opened to the beauty around me—beauty that I had been unable to see just moments before. I was unable to see the beauty because, like Hunt, I had been immersed in my own emotional struggles. I know that the experience of being unable to see, hear or feel the beauty around us is common. I know this from my decades of experience as a psychotherapist. There were so many times during my counseling career when a client would tell me about how they came to recognize and appreciate something beautiful that they had previously been unaware of. My guess is that many of you have had such an experience. These experiences are opportunities for us to gain awareness and insight. They benefit us in the moment, and they can also benefit us long-term if we recall and refer to them periodically. Recalling such experiences periodically can remind us that there is more to perceive than we are usually aware of in any given moment.

Our Story for All Ages this morning offered another example of awakening to beauty. The beginning of this story seems to affirm the old saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The problem for Sulwe was that a significant number of the people in her life were unable to see her beauty, either inside or out, because of their opinions about skin color. The messages Sulwe received from her classmates came through loud and clear. Light and bright skin color was beautiful. Dark skin color was not. The message that was conveyed so powerfully to Sulwe is one that is received by many people of color in this country as well as other parts of the world. It is a message that isn’t just harmful to the individuals who receive it. The message is harmful to all of us. It is harmful to all of us since it hampers the ability to experience the beauty of skin that is dark in color as well as the beauty that a person’s skin surrounds—the beauty that is at the core of the person’s being.

In order to become awakened to her own beauty, Sulwe needed more than just her eyes to be opened. She needed affirmation. She needed affirmation because her eyes weren't able to see the physical beauty of her dark skin. The messages she had been given, and which she had come to believe, influenced her mind and her opinion to the point where she couldn't see the beauty of her skin, or of herself as a person.

As with our reading, the first time I read *Sulwe*, I thought of a time in my own life when I was unable to see myself in a positive way. Like Sulwe, this occurred when I was a child. And like Sulwe, my perception of a particular physical aspect of my appearance seemed anything but beautiful to me. This kind of experience is so common that there are all manner of businesses, including large companies, that market ways for people to see and feel themselves to be beautiful. While these businesses and companies may provide significant benefit through what they offer, I find it sad that so many people have difficulty experiencing the beauty that is their very essence. The Libby Roderick song we sang just a few minutes ago, "How Could Anyone," calls us to recognize our own beauty. It is also an anthem that encourages all of us to affirm the beauty in the people we know, as well as those we don't know.

On one level, both the reading and the Story for All Ages seem to affirm that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." And yet both also challenge, in one way or another, some aspect of this old saying. I have already mentioned some of the ways both the reading and the Story for All Ages present alternative perspectives to what this old saying asserts. There are probably other alternative perspectives that the reading or the story brought to mind for you. I hope you will share the alternative perspectives with me or with one another at some point in the near future.

It seems clear to me that, each in their own way, the old saying, the reading and the story, *Sulwe*, tell us that there are times when we are blind, deaf, or numb to beauty that is present around us, as well as at the very core of our being. What are we to do then, to gain more awareness of this beauty that we are missing? How do we open our senses and expand our opinions or perspectives to experience the beauty that we are not perceiving? Even if I knew all of the ways we might experience the beauty we are missing, which I don't, I certainly couldn't talk about more than just a few of them in one sermon.

This morning I would offer two ways that we might heighten the awareness and experience of beauty. The focus of the first of these two ways involves how each of us can increase our own awareness and experience of beauty. The first step is to make a conscious decision, every day, to discover and appreciate the beauty that is present around us. Making a conscious decision, every day, to be aware of beauty, alerts all of our senses. By setting an intention in our mind, we invite our senses to be open to, and on the alert for, beauty. Once we have set an intention, our senses will seek to fulfill that intention. And if you want to take this a step further, you could consider creating some type of daily practice of seeing, hearing or feeling beauty. Developing such a practice can enhance your perceptive acuity. Developing such a practice can increase the likelihood that you will be able to perceive beauty in places and things that you previously didn't even notice.

The second way focuses not on how we might personally experience more beauty, but on how we might increase the experience of beauty for others. The reading by Frazier Hunt, the story, *Sulwe*, and the hymn, "How Could Anyone," each offer examples of how someone can open another person's awareness to beauty. The reading by Hunt tells how one person, by their mere presence, can open the eyes of another to the beauty that surrounds them. Any of us can do this for another in so many different ways. I am sure all of us can imagine multiple ways we could do this.

The story and the hymn, on the other hand, offer examples of how one person can assist another in recognizing their own beauty. I am sure all of us know how to assist another person in recognizing physical aspects of themselves that are beautiful. Offering compliments about how a person looks is relatively easy. It is also something all of us have done. What can be even more beneficial than complimenting someone on their looks is telling a person about the beauty we recognize within them. When we convey to another person that we perceive the beauty of their inherent worth and dignity, we affirm the person for who they are, not just for what they look like.

As we sang "How Could Anyone," I looked out upon those of you who are in the sanctuary this morning. You likely aren't aware that as I was singing this song, I was singing it to and for each and every one

of you. For me, your loving is a miracle, and you are connected to my soul. Thank you for the beauty you bring into my life. Thank you for the beauty you bring into one another's lives. Thank you for offering the beauty of your being to the world.

It is my hope this morning that in the course of this service each of us will experience beauty in something that we see, hear or feel. As our senses attend to the beauty that we encounter, may we feel gifted, nurtured, enlivened and uplifted. And as we go forth from this place and these people, may we frequently be awakened to the beauty that is both around us and within us. May we remember that we have the power, through our words and actions, to assist those we encounter to see and feel the beauty that is within them. Awakening to beauty brings joy to life and makes the world a better place to live—a better place to live for you, for me and for all of us.

Blessed be.