

“How Do We Nurture Beauty?”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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During May we have been focusing on the theme of nurturing beauty. So far this month we have approached this theme from a number of different perspectives. We have explored how beauty nurtures us. We have heard about the nurturing beauty of motherhood. And we have contemplated some ways that awakening to beauty can be nurturing, both for us as well as others. This morning we will ponder the question; “How do we nurture beauty?”, as we consider our theme from yet another angle.

Before we dive into how we might nurture beauty, We need to take a moment to consider another question, a why question. Why would we spend time nurturing beauty? This question might seem unnecessary to you. Maybe you already know the answer. Maybe you think everyone else should know the answer as well. I raise this question because in the culture we live in, productivity, and specifically economic productivity, has a very high value. I would say that economic productivity is one of the dominant values, if not the predominant value, in our culture. Thinking about nurturing beauty while also taking into account the cultural value given to economic productivity, it is easy to recognize that spending time nurturing beauty might be questioned. Some might claim that nurturing beauty has less value or benefit than other, more profitable endeavors. In my estimation, the value that our culture places on economic productivity is excessive. I would even go a step further and say that the degree to which economic productivity is valued has become both limiting and harmful.

I believe that both the reading and the Story for All Ages this morning provide answers to why we would spend time nurturing beauty. In the Story for All Ages, Bernard was both in awe of, and inspired by, the beauty he saw in the paintings his friend, Vincent, made. At the end of the story he was so awed and inspired that instead of going to the park to play with his friends, he took up a sketch pad, opened a box of colored pencils, and began to draw. I know that this is only a story, but it is also a reflection of what can happen, what has happened, so many times in real life. Many artists of today say that they were so moved by a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music, a poem, a play, a dance or some other art form that their life was changed from that moment on. That is what I imagine occurred for Bernard. From the moment he saw Vincent painting in the park his eyes were opened, and his life took on a new sense of purpose. Any elementary teacher who has taught for a significant period of time has quite likely seen one of the children in their class inspired and transformed by the beauty they have seen. Such is the power of beauty to transform a person’s life.

The initial lines of the reading this morning speak to the question of why it is beneficial to spend time nurturing beauty. Let’s hear those first lines again.

When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world. We were created to be creators. At its deepest heart, creativity is meant to serve and evoke beauty. When this desire and capacity come alive, new wells spring up in parched ground;

O’Donohue was a poet, author, Catholic priest, and Hegelian philosopher. He asserts that we are here to be creators and that beauty is a doorway to living into our creative essence.

O’Donohue’s claim in these lines echoes perspectives that are found in process philosophy. Process philosophy was developed in the early 20th century by the English mathematician, philosopher and former Harvard University professor, Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead’s process philosophy was later expanded and adapted into a theology. In theological school, I was immediately drawn to process theology for several reasons. The first reason was that it was totally logical and rational. That is not to say it was easy to grasp or understand, which it was not. It challenged many of the concepts I had been taught throughout the course of my life. A second reason I was drawn to process thought was because it totally upended traditional perspectives on the nature of God. In process thought, the concept of God is dramatically different than the

ideas about God that I had been taught in church. For those of you who have difficulty with the word “God,” I would ask that you attempt to set aside the ideas and concepts of God you learned in church. Whitehead asserted that God is not necessarily tied to religion. Here is a quote from the *Handbook of Process Theology* written by Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman that provides an example of how dramatically different the concept of God is in this philosophical framework. “God is not the only ultimate in the process system of thought, if by ‘ultimate’ we mean irreducible. In process thought creativity is also ultimate.”

You may be wondering at this point how process philosophy connects to the title of my sermon, how do we nurture beauty. As I indicated previously, before answering this “how” question, it is important that we consider a “why” question; why would we spend time nurturing beauty? We need to answer this “why” question in order to move beyond the limitations that our current cultural value on productivity creates. Process philosophy and theology answer this “why” question. This philosophy and theology answer the question by stating that creativity is ultimate. It answers the “why” question by encouraging us, as C. Robert Mesle writes in *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*, to “see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts.” When we do this, we can act in ways that have the highest benefit for, and be in alignment with, the world around us and the over-riding purpose of all that is. The concepts from process philosophy that I have just mentioned are not new. Such concepts are contained in teachings from Native Peoples of this land and from around the world. Reading #682 in our hymnal, which is attributed to the Navajo people of this land, is one example. It states: Beauty is before me, and Beauty is behind me, above me and below me hovers the beautiful. I am surrounded by it, I am immersed in it... In beauty it is begun. In beauty it is ended. By putting these concepts from process philosophy and Native American wisdom and spiritual teachings together with what O’Donohue asserts in our reading, we can recognize that beauty and creativity are woven so tightly together in the reality of all existence that it is impossible to separate one from the other.

So now that we have answered the question of why it is important to spend time nurturing beauty, we can delve into the question of how we nurture beauty. There is no single or simple answer to how we nurture beauty. Instead, there are an infinite number of answers. In fact, there is an infinite number of answers to this question in every moment. A bit later in the book that our reading comes from, O’Donohue writes that: “Beauty does not linger, it only visits.” He tells us what all of us have experienced so many times in our lives—that is that beauty exists in the moment. Beauty is in the moment that we live in, and in the moment that we are able to perceive. As I indicated in my sermon last week, in any moment we are quite likely unable to perceive beauty that is present but outside of our conscious awareness. When we awaken to beauty, we increase our ability to nurture beauty, both the beauty that is already present, as well as the beauty that is possible and yet to exist.

Here is more of what O’Donohue says about beauty.

... beauty’s visitation affects us and invites us into its rhythm, it calls us to feel, think and act beautifully in the world: to create and live a life that awakens the Beautiful. A life without delight is only half a life. Lest this be construed as a plea for decadence or a self-indulgence that is blind to the horrors of the world, we should remember that beauty does not restrict its visitations only to those whom fortune or circumstances favour. Indeed, it is often the whispers and glimpses of beauty which enable people to endure on desperate fronts. Even, and perhaps especially, in the bleakest times, we can still discover and awaken beauty; these are precisely the times when we need it most.

I think all of us would agree that there is far too much bleakness in the world we currently live in. We see, hear and feel the bleakness that exists. We know on a deep level that we are called to transform that bleakness into beauty. And as conscious beings, we are able to recognize our capacity to create beauty in spite of, and even out of, bleakness.

Because beauty is impermanent, and because beauty invites us into its rhythm, we need to modify our original question of how do we nurture beauty. The question actually needs to be, how do we nurture beauty

now? — and now — and now. We can nurture beauty moment to moment. We can nurture beauty by attending to and actualizing our creative capabilities and capacity.

As we awaken to the call of beauty and allow our creative essence to answer, more beauty emerges to bless us and to bless the world. We can, and I hope we will, strive to nurture beauty in any, and in every moment. In the short time we have been together this morning there have been so many moments of beauty that I have experienced. The beauty of our building. The beauty of the flowers on our grounds. The beauty of people warmly greeting one another. The beauty of the music which has graced our ears. The beauty of the children's presence. I could go on and on. I hope you are thinking about the beauty you have been aware of this morning. Every aspect of the beauty I just mentioned has been nurtured by the people of this Fellowship and those who are attending our service this morning. I invite and even encourage you to reflect on the beauty that you have nurtured this morning. And in your reflection, I would ask you to notice both the impetus that moved you, as well as the benefits that came about as a result of that impetus. My experience has led me to the conclusion that every time I answer the call to nurture beauty, beauty nurtures and nourishes me. My experiences with this cycle where beauty nurtures me, then I nurture beauty, which leads to my being nurtured by beauty yet again, leads me to agree with Whitehead's perspective when he states: "The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of beauty." My desire and my intention is to live in alignment with the purpose of the Universe. To fulfill this desire and intention — to answer the question; "How do I nurture beauty? — I must use my creative capacity, in each moment to nurture beauty as best I can.

With the challenge, and the invitation, to nurture beauty at the forefront of my mind, I look to process philosophy and theology as I seek to find ways to nurture beauty in my life. The following quote from the *Handbook of Process Theology* provides a few examples of how I might do this.

...the lure of God within each human life is not only a lure to live. It is also a lure to live well; that is, to live with beauty—with harmony and intensity—relative to the situation at hand. In other words, the indwelling lure of God within each human life is more than an inner impulse to creatively adapt to new situations. It is also an impulse to seek the good, to be open to what is true, and to celebrate the beautiful. The good, the true, and the beautiful are themselves forms of creative adaptation. Some outward expressions include the creation of music, enjoyment of friendships, cooking of food, pursuit of knowledge, telling of stories, pursuit of justice, building of community, dancing in the moonlight, courage in suffering, and befriending of strangers. The lure of God within human life takes many forms, all of which make the whole richer.

The ways to nurture beauty are more numerous than the stars that exist. May we each find our own ways, moment to moment, to nurture beauty. And may we each make the whole richer in ways that cannot be measured by any economic system humans have devised, or ever will devise.

So may it be.