

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches
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Viewpoint



Beauty

A worship service by
Rev Phil Silk

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Introduction

Unitarian congregations in the UK are mostly small. Usually not more than twenty people will attend on a Sunday. It means a well constructed worship service can have a limited life and be heard by only a handful of people. But many Unitarian services are of a good quality and worthy of wider attention.

Members of the NUF who browse the web site: www.nufonline.org.uk will know that we have a section on it for sermons and addresses that can be read through for personal pleasure or contemplation - or even borrowed.

I have to admit to being vain enough to look now and then and to see how my own submissions are faring - each visit is counted.

Phil Silk is not a vain man. He does put together a really good worship service and I think we are fortunate that this one went on the NUF site. It tells us something that this particular service has been visited 1850 times since he posted it at the beginning of 2010. It easily keeps its spot at the top of our 'hit parade' and has been there for many months.

So Thank You Phil.

At our House Party 2- 4 Nov 2012 (see page 18) we will be discussing and preparing material for home worship – and not forgetting that Unitarian ancestor Charles Dickens.

Hope you can be there.

SERVICE ON THE THEME OF BEAUTY

CHALICE LIGHTING

As many do around the world, let us begin our service by lighting our chalice. Today let us be reminded of beauty in all its forms as we see the light shining for us.

OPENING WORDS

This is a fellowship of liberal religion. We come from different places, with differing experiences, needs, thoughts and feelings, ready to share in the celebration of life; ready to explore life's problems and possibilities, mysteries and meanings, together.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages people everywhere have been seeking the theory and practice of what Jesus called 'abundant living' or the kingdom of heaven or eternal life. Secularists as well as religionists want to live a good life, however we can define it. There are thousands of recipes around and many ways of approaching the quest. For religious liberals, worship is one of the methods we use to explore what is of worth, empowering us to think and feel our way towards better lives, for us and for others.

How often have you heard the summary of the desired path as 'Truth, Beauty and Goodness – or perhaps Love'. Oversimplified, of course. But we certainly do pay a great deal of attention to the search for truth – 'known or to be known' as the Universalists used to say, and so we should. And we probably have spent too much time on 'Goodness', as if ethics and morality were the main dimension of a fully spiritual life. Important, yes; but there is much more to the good life. I do not doubt our concern for the value of love is well worth the effort. But how much time have we spent on the supposedly crucial value of beauty? The middle item in a list is usually underdone, but I wonder why we have nearly ignored it over the years?

How important is beauty to you? Could you define it? More important, I bet you could give plenty of examples.

PART ONE: What is Beauty?

Despite being universally experienced and valued, beauty is not easily defined. It seems to be that which gives pleasure to the senses, especially sight; but it also appeals to our minds and emotions. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" we say, not in the stimulus itself. We probably agree more on what we consider 'ugly'; but we are not unanimous about

that, either. Some words linked to 'beauty' are 'artistic'; 'harmonious'; 'wonderful'; 'gorgeous'; 'miracle'; 'awesome'; and more.

Now let me share a few quotes on the topic:

1. Plato said: "The beautiful is the only perfect good which men and women love by instinct"
 2. Von Ogden Vogt wrote: "Beauty is one of the necessities of human experience, and we must integrate it into (our) whole spiritual life in obedience to the mandates of truth and goodness. Beauty, as well as truth and goodness, must be harmonised into the discipline and experience of worship, for the permeating influence of these three – and ONLY the permeating influence of these three – can satisfy the demand and hunger of human nature for the all-inclusive and richly meaningful experience of the human spirit. The art of worship is the all-comprehending Art.
 3. Henry Nelson Weiman claims: "All signs which communicate from person to person and from group to group, with minimum loss, the qualities of events each has known are examples of art." (THE SOURCE OF HUMAN GOOD p.23)
 4. Chagall warned us; "Art is the unceasing effort to compete with the beauty of flowers – and never succeeding."
 5. The UUA Department of Education, published a document on the arts in '64, which said: "Art is a way of conveying and apprehending reality through the direct approach of intuition rather than by means of the rational powers. It is a way of expressing meaning. This approach to reality has existed as long as man himself, and to reach reality in this way, through the making of symbols is, as philosopher of art, Susanne Langer has said, man's highest function. During the last centuries it has been minimised because the emphasis on man's reason has been predominant. But even some scientists are recognizing its validity."
6. A Suffolk Interfaith Group Muslim once responded to a Chelsea Flower Show by saying; "In the Muslim view beauty is God's attitude; the prophet of Islam, Mohammed (peace be upon him), said 'Allah is beautiful and loves beauty.' This took me to the thought that we are all from God, even the ones who deny God; their nature, unknowingly, leads them to the quest and admiration of beauty. This is what links us to our spiritual nature, makes us search for our links to our origin which is from the beautiful Allah."

Being a modern scholar, I not only consulted the dictionary and my own resources, but also turned to Google for sites on beauty. And what did I find? A screen full of links to beauty of appearance and related products! Only one serious site, Wikipedia, which seemed to have plenty of good material. I confess I relied on my own files, but do want to share their definition: "Beauty is a characteristic of a person, animal, place, object or idea that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure, meaning or satisfaction...Physical attractiveness is one dimension. See aesthetics, sociology, social psychology and culture for more ideas, including ugliness."

READING: "Beauty Tips" by Audrey Hepburn, actress and former Belgian underground carrier as a teenager

1. For attractive lips: Speak words of kindness
2. For lovely eyes: Seek out the good in people
3. For a slim figure: Share your food with the hungry
4. For beautiful hair: Let a child run his or her fingers through it once a day
5. For poise: walk with the knowledge you'll never walk alone
6. People: even more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed, and redeemed; Never throw out anybody. Remember, if you ever need a helping hand, you'll find one at the end of your arm. As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands, one for helping yourself, the other for helping others.
7. The beauty of a woman is not in the clothes she wears, the figure that she carries, or the way she combs her hair. The beauty of a woman is seen in her eyes, because that is the doorway to her heart, the place where love resides. True beauty in a woman is reflected in her soul. It is the caring that she lovingly gives, the passion that she shows. And the beauty of a woman only grows with the passing of the years." ('Spice', 3/03)

PART TWO: Sources of Beauty

READING: from 'Endymion' by John Keats

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid-forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such, too, is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read;
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink."

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Well, it certainly can be joyful, but forever? I'll settle for 'a joy for a very long time'. And I'm sure you will agree we certainly need joy in our lives!

So, we need more joyful beauty in our lives, yes? Where shall we get it? I suggest we specifically look both outside ourselves and inside ourselves. We can all find beauty in nature and in much that human beings have made. One of our hymns puts it this way: "Seek not afar for beauty: lo it glows/In dew-wet grasses all about your feet;/In birds, in sunshine, childlike faces sweet, In stars and mountain summits topped with snows."

Here are three more quotes about natural beauty.

Alan Moore, founder of the Butterfly Gardeners Association, which follows the 'National Geographic's view that: "Beauty seems to be an intrinsic part of nature, and perhaps even the organising principle of reality. Scientists, in testing their theories, invariably find that the simplest, most elegant, most beautiful equation, is the correct one. Rainbows, butterflies and the periodic table are some of the examples of intrinsic beauty. The world will be saved by beauty." ('Positive News', Summer 01)

Lord Grey of Falloden puts it this way: 'To those who have some feeling that the natural world has beauty in it I would say, Cultivate that feeling and encourage it in every way you can. Consider the seasons, the joy of spring, the splendour of summer, the sunset colours of autumn, the delicate and graceful bareness of winter trees, the beauty of light upon water, what the old Greek called the unnumbered smiling of the sea. In the feeling for that beauty, if we have it, we possess a pearl of great price." (Unitarian Christian Herald", July 9

Raymond John Baughan, from the introduction to his book of meditations called "The Sound of Silence" tells us:

"To many of us, the world has become so familiar, we no longer experience it. I have tried to discover again some of the taste and feel and look of life. I found this venture a waking up to recognize who you are, and who I am, and what we might be. If only momentarily, the quest took me, amoeba-like, into the reaches of my own being.

"To meditate is to rediscover some aspects of life which we have neglected or forgotten. Sometimes what another man has said to himself reminds us of ourselves. I have had a stranger's phrase crack my horizon like a shell and offer another world to live in. My language may bring no such earth-shaking event to you, but it may invite you to an exploration of your own."

One source of beauty is the seasons. Being Autumn, I will share three passages on this season; there are plenty of examples of all the others.

READING: From the Hymn “Autumn Ways” by Frederick Lucian Hosmer

I walk the unfrequented road
With open eye and ear;
I watch afield the farmer load
The bounty of the year.
I gather where I did not sow,
And bind the mystic sheaf,
The amber air, the river’s flow,
The rustle of the leaf.

A beauty springtime never knew
Haunts all the quiet ways,
And sweeter shines the landscape through
Its veil of autumn haze.

I face the hills, the streams, the wood,
And feel with all akin;
My heart expands: their fortitude
And peace and joy flow in.

READING: “On a Cold and Frosty Morning” by Phil Silk

Today is another nice November day
In October !:
Bright shiny shapes,
Clouds of breath,
But no wind.
Yet the trees have decided
Today is the day to
Let go of their treasures
Which take their maiden flights one at a time,
A kaleidoscope of coloured motion.

Walking down the decorated path
I, too, become touched
By their gentle, joyous fall.

READING: "The Rose By Every Other Name" by Judith Campbell

The October Rose just bloomed again.
It's so out of sync
And so very welcome.

It blooms in June, and I almost never see it.
The sun is already too high,
And what the sun doesn't cook,
The June bugs chew to blackened lace.

July and August in New England are not kind to roses,
And all mine can do is hang on for dear life.

It's happy, though.
I planted it over the septic system
So it silently and fruitfully survives the summer and the winter
And graces me in October with two or three
Reminders of how beautiful and hopeful life is,
Even at the waning of the year
When we sometimes need it most.

The rose was a mother's day gift.
Left on the kitchen table several years ago by a kid too full of
Basketball and fishing to do the 'proper' thing.
The mindless saccharine obeisance
Decreed by Hallmark and its peers.
I was grateful for that.

The kid left me a rose bush on the kitchen table
And took off.

The rose bush stayed, and I even planted it.
Now there's a miracle.
My procrastination is most evident in the garden
And even my good intentions often
Wither on a vine I forgot to plant.
I'm a kindly 'tough love' gardener,
When I stick some newcomer into my so-called garden,
I'm inclined to say

'there you are, plant,
Here's a hole and a worm and some dirt,
The rest is up to you...go for it!'

Come to think of it, kids are like that,
A little variation on the hole and dirt theme,
But not all that much.
You do what you can
And then you say
...'Go for it, kid!'

The rose reminds me of that kid
And of our time together.

Legs with an appetite, dirt on his face,
Sweaty running shoes that if left unnoticed under a chair
Could sour milk and fog a mirror.

He left me a rose on the kitchen table.
And it bloomed again.

Thank God.

Have you noticed that the views have blended? The stimulus of nature interpreted and expressed by people. That's life: integrated. No problem for Unitarians...

READING: From the HYMN "A World of Wonder" written by Sydney
Henry Knight

The sun at high noon,
The stars in dark space,
The light of the moon
On our upturned face,
The high clouds, the rain clouds
The lark song on high -
We gaze up in wonder
Above to the sky.
The green grassy blade,
The grasshopper's sound,

The creatures of shade
That live in the ground,
The dark soil, the moist soil,
Where plants spring to birth -
We look down at wonder
Below in the earth.

The glad joys that heal
The tears in our eyes
The longings we feel,
The light of surprise
Our night dreams, our day dreams,
Our thoughts ranging wide -
We live with a whole world
Of wonder inside

Here are two more samples of what others have found beautiful. I hope you do, too.

READING: “My Epiphany” by Val Worthington; “With Heart and Mind 2”
p.44

The path was right beside the loch and I was sure that I was completely alone in the glen, apart from the sheep on the hills, the curlews and high soaring of the eagle. The majesty of the mountains, bejewelled with brushstrokes of amethysts, gold, topazes, emeralds and agates, guarded me on all sides.

As I walked, my legs brushed the tussocks of bracken and harebells, decorated with perfect spiders' webs hanging with raindrop diamante. Not even the faraway bleating of a lamb for its mother took away the trust I felt in witnessing the secrets of this place. Here I could be selfish and let my soul be quenched by the spell being cast before me.

Then, I saw the angler at the end of the loch, and longed to ask him when he discovered this sacred Eden. The whistling of his line stretching out over the water guided me securely across the bogs underfoot. I stopped not far from him and lifted my head, as the angler did, to look up the glen.

I could hardly breathe.

The mountains seemed to gently slide themselves to one side and I saw the amethysts on the slopes giving way to the emeralds set right down to the water's edge and enhanced by the clearest sapphire blues above.

We were both voiceless.

It would have been blasphemous to be otherwise at such a moment.

I stood, as he did, aware that even time may be still, and just said a silent word of gratitude.

READING: "Water" anonymous contribution to the Bradford and Kirkdale anthology "Mosaics", June 1993

Elemental, Formless,
Without colour, taste or dimension.
Life-giving, without which there is no life,
And by which all life is sustained.
Eternal Cleanser, Comforter, Healer, Preserver.
Water – delighting our senses,
Exciting our wonder,
Mighty Niagara,
Tender in the dews of morning.

Mysterious in mountain tarn,
Joyful in a fountain's spray,
Nourishing a whole world
Of life and Beauty in oceans' depths.

Water – refreshing the feet of the Pilgrim,
Cleansing the eyes of the penitent,
Seal of the Spirit,
Twice blessed and blessing
In baptism's quiet hour.
Consoling, releasing for the grieving one.
Water – our one remaining innocence.
Suffusing the eyes of the beloved one, and
Which of us can resist a baby's tears?
Water freely bestowed and Eternal.
Wonderful water.

RESPONSIVE READING “The Arts of Man” by Kenneth Patton, no. 12,
“Readings for the Celebration of Life”

Let us sing for the arts of man.

LET US SING FOR SINGING AND DANCE FOR DANCING.

This be our thanksgiving, that man is a creature fashioned of delight and enabled with passion.

FORMS AND SHAPES ARE FOR HIM A READY WISDOM.

He brings forth an offspring of loveliness, the children of his mind mated to his emotion.

THE CREATURES OF HIS MIND ARE WEIRD AND GRACEFUL.

The arts of man are keys unto doors.

THEY ARE WINGS FOR THE FLYING OF UNMARKED SKIES.

Poems are feet for running; they break open a path through the valley of questions.

THE BRUSH OF THE PAINTER IS LIGHTNING OPENING TO THE EYES THE AWFUL MOUNTAINS OF THE NIGHT.

Sculpture reveals the secret in the fullness of sunlight and shadow.

DANCING IS THE NARRATION OF THE DREAM; THE DANCER IS THE MOVING BODY OF THE VISION.

The play and story tell the history of people in uncreated worlds.

THE WORDLESS VOICE OF MUSIC CALLS A GREETING FROM BEYOND THE DOORWAYS OF THE UNKNOWN.

Would you meet your brother and walk among hidden places?

THEN LISTEN TO HIS SONGS OF TONGUE AND VIOL, FOR HE

WILL TELL YOU MORE THAN HE KNOWS TO TELL.

His dance invites you to brotherhood.

HIS CARVING WILL GIVE FORM AND KNOWLEDGE TO YOUR FELLOWSHIP.

PART THREE Barriers

We have realised, or at least been reminded, that beauty is a very valuable, powerful source of wealth in the search for rich and rewarding life, for us and for others. Beauty in nature, beauty crafted by mankind, however defined. We have shared a wide variety of examples, helping us to appreciate how much beauty there is available to us. Why, then, has this aspect of life frequently been undervalued?

As I was considering this paradox, I came up with several possible reasons. In no particular order, let me quickly mention them.

1. Too busy. We focus on the job – or jobs – at hand and rush on.
2. Too familiar. We get used to things and gradually do not appreciate them – until we lose them, or suddenly notice them again.
3. Undervalued. We really do not think beauty is very important.
4. Aware that people can be very strong on aesthetics and still very weak on morality, as in WWII.
5. Puritanical. Some are so aware of the bad things in life they think it is wrong to enjoy the good things.

You may think of other reasons and I am sure we could explore these further.

PART FOUR Conclusions

Let us rejoice in the knowledge that each one of us can both appreciate and create beauty, internally as well as externally. Let us recognise how important it is that we are open to the widespread beauty available to us, in spite of the ugliness around us. Let us commit ourselves to promoting beauty in our personal and group lives.

Perhaps the greatest beauty is not of appearance; not of personality; but of character. Being fully aware of beauty can help us become more beautiful people.

Let me end with two more readings.

READING: "Play trumpet, 'cello, harp and flute" by Andrew Hill
(Hymn 133, 'Sing Your Faith')

Play trumpet, 'cello, harp and flute;
Play organ, violin and lute.
Write poems and read the written word;
Write plays, tell stories to be heard;
And let the cosmos all around
With love and justice then resound.

Paint pictures dark and paintings bright;
Paint with a brush and paint with light.
Dance a minuet and highland fling;
Dance two by two and in a ring;
And let the cosmos all around
With love and justice then resound.

Speak words of comfort and of peace;
Speak gently so that wars may cease.
Sing melodies and measured phrase;
Sing songs to set the world ablaze;
And let the cosmos all around
With love and justice then resound."

READING: "You'll know who I am by the song I sing" by Richard Gilbert
(pp.46 - "Celebrate The Interval")

Sing the song that wells up inside you;
Sing the song only you can set to music;
Sing the song whose words are known only by you.
Sing the song you have lived.

The melody line is the pattern of your life
As it ascends to the high notes
And plunges to the low.
It is unique, this melody of yours –
The sharps and flats form a configuration
That bespeaks who you are.
The tempo is the pace of one who dances
By an inner music of the soul.
You are the melody.

The harmony which undergirds the melody
Has patterns all its own.
It pulses from a centred source
Known only to a solitary composer.
Its sturdy strains resonate repeatedly,
Giving body to the song.
Its rhythmic sequence repeats itself,
Again and yet again,
Holding the song together
While the melody fades from time to time.
You are the harmony.

The lyrics set to music
Are the poetry of a life lived.
They sing the bid of one
Who has known joy at first hand.
They sing the pain of one
Who has been wounded;
They express a mystery of being
Known only to you.

Words –

A few from the numberless,
Set in sequence from a myriad of choices –
Could only have been written by you.
You are the lyrics.

You are the melody.
You are the harmony.
You are the lyrics.
You are the song.
Sing, while yet you have voice.
Sing, the song that is in you.
Sing! Sing!

Life is but a song to sing.
Even if you sing off key, sing loud and clear.”

CLOSING WORDS

Our service comes to a close, but our lives go on. Let us seek, create and share beauty throughout the days ahead, wherever we are.

Amen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Silk is a former editor of the "Viewpoint" and an active member of the Newcastle-under-Lyme Unitarians. After nine years serving(3)UUA churches, he taught at Woodhouse Grove School in Bradford for 21 years. He has been active in Unitarianism in Yorkshire, Scotland, the Midlands and nationally.

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

*Tony McNeile,
102 Turton Rd,
BOLTON.
BL2 3DY*

or E-mail to nuf@nufonline.org.uk

National Unitarian Fellowship

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2nd - 4th November 2012

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For more details contact the Secretary Ken Smith
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Articles for the Viewpoint to:

Rev. Tony McNeile
102 Turton Road
BOLTON
BL2 3DY

or

Seeking information about the
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or

E-mail: nuf@nufonline.org.uk