

# Connecting

*Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship*

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines

*a Unitarian Universalist Congregation*

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2025 May

## Beauty

### CHALICE LIGHTING

Words of John Keats:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.”

### CHECK IN

### OPENING QUESTIONS

1. A go-round question for everyone to answer: What’s something you find beautiful that most other people seem not to?
2. Pick a couple or so of these to answer or comment on:
  - a) Confucius claimed, “Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.” Is this true? What does it mean to say that *everything* is beautiful?
  - b) How would you explain and defend Keats’ claim that beauty and truth are the same thing?
  - c) In terms of the human form, beauty is more associated with young women than with older women or men or any age. Why is that? Could we or should we try to change that?
  - d) We rarely hear the phrase, “a little bit beautiful.” Do most people – and do you – tend to think of things as either beautiful or not – without much thought given to comparative degree of beauty? If so, is that a mistake?
  - e) With the notable exception of music, beauty tends to be a visual perception. For those of us who are sighted, most of the arts and all of natural and personal beauty seem to rely first and foremost on our vision. So how would becoming blind – as best as you can imagine – shift your relationship to beauty? Can you imagine how you would reconceive the nature of beauty?
  - f) Is there such a thing as too much beauty? In what ways do you withdraw from experiences of beauty, and why?

## QUOTATIONS *Which of these help your understanding of beauty?*

1. "It is not sufficient to see and to know the beauty of a work. We must feel and be affected by it." -- Voltaire
2. "It takes the one hundred men in ten million who understand beauty, which isn't imitation or an improvement on the beautiful as already understood by the common herd, twenty or thirty years to convince the twenty thousand next most sensitive souls after their own that this new beauty is truly beautiful." -- Stendhal
3. "No beauty shines brighter than that of a good heart." -- Shanina Shaik
4. "Life is full of beauty. Notice it. Notice the bumble bee, the small child, and the smiling faces. Smell the rain, and feel the wind. Live your life to the fullest potential, and fight for your dreams." -- Ashley Smith
5. "When I admire the wonders of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in the worship of the creator." -- Mahatma Gandhi
6. "Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it." -- Confucius
7. "As beautiful as trees are to look at, we don't see what goes on underground - as they grow roots. Trees must develop deep roots in order to grow strong and produce their beauty. But we don't see the roots. We just see and enjoy the beauty. In much the same way, what goes on inside of us is like the roots of a tree." -- Joyce Meyer
8. "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul." -- John Muir
9. "Let the beauty of what you love be what you do." -- Rumi
10. "There is a lot of beauty in your imperfections, in your uniqueness." -- Ileana D'Cruz
11. "Mathematics has beauty and romance. It's not a boring place to be, the mathematical world. It's an extraordinary place; it's worth spending time there." -- Marcus du Sautoy
12. "Beauty and the devil are the same thing." -- Robert Mapplethorpe
13. "Perhaps the mission of an artist is to interpret beauty to people - the beauty within themselves." -- Langston Hughes
14. "We needed something to express our joy, our beauty, our power. And the rainbow did that." -- Gilbert Baker
15. "He who marvels at the beauty of the world in summer will find equal cause for wonder and admiration in winter." -- John Burroughs
16. "Beauty has no boundaries, no rules, no colors. Beauty is like a religion. You can include everything inside it." -- Alessandro Michele
17. "Aging has a wonderful beauty and we should have respect for that." -- Eartha Kitt
18. "Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of man." -- Fyodor Dostoevsky
19. "Beauty is the illumination of your soul." -- John O'Donohue
20. "Of life's two chief prizes, beauty and truth, I found the first in a loving heart and the second in a laborer's hand." -- Khalil Gibran

## READINGS

*Read these pieces with pencil in hand. Underline parts that seem worth remembering to you. Be ready to share in your group meeting what you underlined – and what those selected words mean to you.*

### Beauty

Crispin Sartwell<sup>1</sup>

**1. Beauty as Objective.** Beauty has traditionally been counted among the ultimate values, with goodness, truth, and justice. As such, from the Greeks up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most philosophical accounts of beauty treated it as an objective quality: they located it in the beautiful object itself or in the qualities of that object. Augustine asks whether things are beautiful because they give delight, or whether they give delight because they are beautiful; he emphatically opts for the second.

Plato's account in the *Symposium* and Plotinus's in the *Enneads* connect beauty to a response of love and desire, but locate beauty itself in the realm of the Forms, and the beauty of particular objects in their participation in the Form. Nevertheless, it is conventional in ancient treatments of the topic also to pay tribute to the pleasures of beauty, often described in quite ecstatic terms, as in Plotinus: "This is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce: wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight."

**2. Beauty as Subjective.** By the eighteenth-century, beauty was predominantly seen as subjective. Even so, some philosophers saw that controversies often arise about the beauty of particular things, such as works of art and literature, and that in such controversies, reasons can sometimes be given and will sometimes be found convincing. They saw, as well, that if beauty is completely relative to individual experiencers, it ceases to be a paramount value, or even recognizable as a value at all. If beauty is a subjective pleasure, it would seem to have no higher status than anything that entertains, amuses, or distracts; it would seem odd or ridiculous to regard it as being comparable in importance to truth or justice.

**3. Recent Insights.** All plausible accounts of beauty connect it to a pleasurable or profound or loving response, even if they do not locate beauty purely in the eye of the beholder. Recent philosophers have developed a number of insights – in particular, these three:

**(a). Beauty is relational.** Beauty is neither exclusively to the subject nor to the object, but to the relation between them. When we attribute beauty to the night sky, for instance, we do not take ourselves simply to be reporting a state of pleasure in ourselves; we are turned outward toward it; we are celebrating the real world. On the other hand, if there were no perceivers capable of experiencing such things, there would be no beauty. Beauty, rather, emerges in situations in which subject and object are juxtaposed and connected.

**(b). Beauty requires exploration and interpretation.** Alexander Nehamas characterizes beauty as an invitation to further experiences, a way that things invite us in, while also possibly fending us off. The beautiful object invites us – indeed, requires us – to explore and

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted excerpt from "Beauty," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

interpret. Beauty is not to be regarded as an instantaneously apprehensible feature of surface.

**(c). Beauty is social.** Beauty is something we share, or something we want to share, and shared experiences of beauty are particularly intense forms of communication. Thus, the experience of beauty is not primarily within the skull of the experiencer, but connects observers and objects such as works of art and literature in communities of appreciation.

**4. Beauty as Oppression.** Beauty is linked to the erotic, but the erotic is not a neutral or universal site, and we need to ask whose sexuality is in play in the history of beauty, with what effects. This history is associated with the objectification and exploitation of women. Feminists beginning in the 19th century gave fundamental critiques of the use of beauty as a set of norms to control women's bodies or to constrain their self-presentation and even their self-image in profound and disabling ways.

Feminists such as Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth*, surveyed the ways women are represented throughout Western popular culture: in advertising, music videos, etc. Such practices have the effect of constraining women to certain acceptable ways of presenting themselves publicly, which in turn greatly constrains how seriously they are taken, or how much of themselves they can express in public space. As have many other commentators, Wolf connects the representation of the "beautiful" female body, in Western high art but especially in popular culture, to eating disorders and many other self-destructive behaviors, and indicates that a real overturning of gender hierarchy will require deeply re-construing the concept of beauty.

Early in the 20th century, black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) described European or white standards of beauty as a deep dimension of oppression, quite similarly to the way Naomi Wolf describes beauty standards for women. These standards are relentlessly reinforced in authoritative images, but they are incompatible with black skin, black bodies, and also traditional African ways of understanding human beauty. White standards of beauty, Garvey argued, devalue black bodies. The truly oppressive aspects of such norms can be seen in the way they induce self-alienation, as Wolf argues with regard to sexualized images of women. Garvey condemns skin bleaching and hair straightening as ways that black people are taught to devalue themselves by white standards of beauty.

**5. Beauty as Resistance.** If beauty has been an element in oppression, it has also been an element in resistance. For both Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, a key moment in the transformation of racial oppression would be the affirmation of standards of black beauty that are not parasitic on white standards, and hence not directly involved in racial oppression. This was systematically developed after Malcolm's death in the "natural" hairstyles and African fabrics in the Black Power movement – and the slogan "Black is beautiful."

The exploration of beauty, in some ways flipping it over into an instrument of feminist resistance, or showing directly how women's beauty could be experienced outside of patriarchy, has been a theme of much art by women of the 20th and 21st centuries. Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers and Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" place settings undertake to absorb

and reverse the objectifying gaze. “Beauty seems in need of rehabilitation today as an impulse that can be as liberating as it has been deemed enslaving,” wrote philosopher Peg Zeglin Brand in 2000. “Confident young women today pack their closets with mini-skirts and sensible suits. Young female artists toy with feminine stereotypes in ways that make their feminist elders uncomfortable. They recognize that ... beauty can be a double-edged sword – as capable of destabilizing rigid conventions and restrictive behavioral models as it is of reinforcing them.”

## **Beauty in Nature: God Manifesting Joy**

Pulkit Mathur<sup>2</sup>

Why is nature so beautiful? Why does a short walk amidst nature have such a calming influence on our mind? Why does the sight of flowers, butterflies and rainbows fill our hearts with joy unspeakable? What is the utility in admiring a sunset, or delighting at the sight of snow-capped mountains, when it serves no evolutionary purpose?

Nature is beautiful because it is a manifestation of God’s joy. A verse from the Taittiriya Upanishad says: “God is Ananda (joy or bliss). From (God’s) joy does spring all this Creation, by joy is it maintained, towards joy does it progress, and into joy does it enter.”

Rabindranath Tagore explains that this “means that God’s Creation has not its source in any necessity; it comes from his fullness of joy; it is his love that creates, therefore in Creation is his own revealment. Just as the joy of a singer is expressed in the form of a song, so too, is the joy of God expressed in the form of Creation. Therefore, the beauty of Nature is not a mirage of the imagination, but it reflects the joy of the Infinite and thus draws us to lose ourselves in it.”

When we come across a beautiful flower, or a serene landscape, we are able to switch our consciousness from focusing on our troubles, to awareness of the great Infinite Joy that permeates everything. Nature’s beauty helps us recognize the oneness of all things individualized in many forms.

## **Life is Beautiful**

E.O. Wilson<sup>3</sup>

“Put these three elements together [open spaces with clear views, scattered clumps of trees, and a smattering of lakes and rivers]: it seems that whenever people are given a free choice, they move to open tree-studded land on prominences overlooking water.

Psychologists have noticed that people entering unfamiliar places tend to move toward towers and other large objects breaking the skyline. Given leisure time, they stroll along shores and river banks.... When people are confined to crowded cities or featureless land, they go to considerable lengths to recreate an intermediate terrain, something that can tentatively be called the savanna gestalt.” (110-11)

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.spiritualbee.com/posts/why-is-nature-beautiful/>, adapted, abridged.

<sup>3</sup>Selections from E.O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (1984).

*In addition to scattered trees or shrubs, and the occasional pool or fountain, the savanna had one other feature that we have come to be genetically encoded to be attracted toward: abundant and diverse life.*

*“Life of any kind is infinitely more interesting than almost any conceivable variety of inanimate matter.” (84)*

*Cyril Smith compared the most attractive patterns of the physical world and technology to artistic representations of plants and animals, and found:*

*“People react more quickly and fully to organisms than to machines. They will walk into nature, to explore, hunt, and garden, if given the chance. They prefer entities that are complicated, growing, and sufficiently unpredictable to be interesting. They are inclined to treat their most formidable contraptions as living things.” (116)*

*Nature is beautiful when it signals the presence of diverse life – and life is beautiful because we need it. We have needed to be in the midst of biodiversity for so many millions of years that it is now wired firmly into our DNA – and our spirits:*

*“To explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development. To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents.” (1)*

## **Evolutionary Function of Art**

*Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) said, “All things beautiful are difficult.” Denis Dutton’s TED talk<sup>4</sup> gives us an evolutionary basis for Spinoza’s point. Dutton begins with an account of humans evolving to find nature beautiful, then builds on that account to an explanation for art. His basic claim: We are attracted to – that is, find beautiful – art that is difficult. No one would buy tickets to the ballet or a concert if just about everybody could dance or play music as well as the performers we go to see and hear. The paintings hanging in art museums are the ones that the curators – whose tastes are shaped by culture generally – recognize as rare products of talent and refinement. Those paintings are significantly different from what “just anybody” could paint. They aren’t rare because they’re so beautiful – rather, it’s the other way around: we find them beautiful because the skill that could produce them is so rare. Dutton’s argument is that the ability to do something difficult and exceptional is a signal of mate suitability. Art, like the peacock’s tail, is uselessly extravagant – but such extravagance is a sign of not having to struggle just to survive. Ability to make something particularly well – by any standard recognizable as requiring a learned skill carried to an exceptional level – is an indicator of health, intelligence, and enough status and wealth to have the leisure to make something “for its own sake,” not directly useful. So mate selection rewarded and reinforced human propensity to display artistic skill. And since the peacocks with the biggest tails really were, often enough, good mates, the human propensity to be attracted to art – to find beautiful that which is difficult – was also reinforced. The following is an adapted excerpt from Dutton’s talk:*

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<sup>4</sup> “A Darwinian Theory of Beauty,” [https://www.ted.com/talks/denis\\_dutton\\_a\\_darwinian\\_theory\\_of\\_beauty](https://www.ted.com/talks/denis_dutton_a_darwinian_theory_of_beauty)

The experience of beauty is one of the ways that evolution has of arousing and sustaining interest or fascination, even obsession, in order to encourage us toward making the most adaptive decisions for survival and reproduction. Consider the magnetic pull of beautiful landscapes. People in very different cultures all over the world tend to like a particular kind of landscape, a landscape that just happens to be similar to the pleistocene savannas where we evolved. This landscape shows up today on calendars, on postcards, in the design of golf courses and public parks and in gold-framed pictures that hang in living rooms from New York to New Zealand. It's a kind of Hudson River school landscape featuring open spaces of low grasses interspersed with copses of trees.

The trees, by the way, are often preferred if they fork near the ground, that is to say, if they're trees you could scramble up if you were in a tight fix. The landscape shows the presence of water directly in view, or evidence of water in a bluish distance, indications of animal or bird life as well as diverse greenery and finally -- get this -- a path or a road, perhaps a riverbank or a shoreline, that extends into the distance, almost inviting you to follow it. This landscape type is regarded as beautiful, even by people in countries that don't have it. The ideal savanna landscape is one of the clearest examples where human beings everywhere find beauty in similar visual experience.

It is widely assumed that the earliest human artworks are the stupendously skillful cave paintings that we all know from Lascaux and Chauvet. But artistic and decorative skills are actually much older than that. Beautiful shell necklaces that look like something you'd see at an arts and crafts fair, as well as ochre body paint, have been found from around 100,000 years ago. But the most intriguing prehistoric artifacts are older even than this. I have in mind the so-called Acheulean hand axes. They go back about two-and-a-half-million years. Then, about 1.4 million years ago, *Homo erectus* started shaping single, thin stone blades, sometimes rounded ovals, but often in what are to our eyes an arresting, symmetrical pointed leaf or teardrop form. These Acheulian hand axes have been unearthed in their thousands, scattered across Asia, Europe and Africa, almost everywhere *Homo erectus* and *Homo ergaster* roamed. Now, the sheer numbers of these hand axes shows that they can't have been made for butchering animals. And the plot really thickens when you realize that, unlike other pleistocene tools, the hand axes often exhibit no evidence of wear on their delicate blade edges. And some, in any event, are too big to use for butchery. Their symmetry, their attractive materials and, above all, their meticulous workmanship are simply quite beautiful to our eyes, even today.

What were these artifacts for? The best available answer is that they were literally the earliest known works of art, practical tools transformed into captivating aesthetic objects, contemplated both for their elegant shape and their virtuoso craftsmanship. Hand axes mark an evolutionary advance in human history - tools fashioned to function as what Darwinians call "fitness signals" -- that is to say, displays that are performances like the peacock's tail, except that, unlike hair and feathers, the hand axes are consciously cleverly crafted.



Competently made hand axes indicated desirable personal qualities -- intelligence, fine motor control, planning ability, conscientiousness and sometimes access to rare materials. Over tens of thousands of generations, such skills increased the status of those who displayed them and gained a reproductive advantage over the less capable. You know, it's an old line, but it has been shown to work -- "Why don't you come up to my cave, so I can show you my hand axes?"

Except that hand axes have been functioning this way since before there were even the oldest of old lines -- before there was language. This object was made by a hominid ancestor, *Homo erectus* or *Homo ergaster*, between 50,000 and 100,000 years before language.

For us moderns, virtuoso technique is used to create imaginary worlds in fiction and in movies, to express intense emotions with music, painting and dance. But still, one fundamental trait of the ancestral personality persists in our aesthetic cravings: the beauty we find in skilled performances. From Lascaux to the Louvre to Carnegie Hall, human beings have a permanent innate taste for virtuoso displays in the arts. We find beauty in something done well.



## Finding the Beauty in Life

Logan Haney<sup>5</sup>

I'm a firm believer that anything can be beautiful if you look at it in the right way. Even the most damaged objects are unique in ways that no other object can replicate. The problem is we get used to overlooking the amazing pieces of life around us each day.

Finding Beauty is a very simple process. Wherever you are, try to see the things around you in a new way. If there is a beautiful park on your way to work, take a moment to fully appreciate it. If you're on the subway into work, take a moment to acknowledge the different people around you.

If you're leaving the office, find one thing that's cool or inspiring. Maybe you want to examine the vast architecture of your city. Or, maybe you could take a few seconds to appreciate the small intricacies that allow you to use the pen in your hand. Either way, there is an opportunity to really savor the objects and people in your life.

**Beauty is Everywhere.** Once you start looking for beauty, I think you'll find there is a lot more of it than you first thought. I still find new things every day to appreciate. I have to remind myself how amazing it is that we created things as commonplace as electricity and lightbulbs. This simple act of searching for beauty has helped reduce the number of things I take for granted.

**Your Definition of Beauty Might Change.** As you take the time to really see and contemplate the things in your surroundings, you might realize that your definition of beauty begins to change. Maybe you thought your house was falling apart, but now you've started to recognize some of its charming aspects. You used to think the workplace always felt dark and dreary, but now you're starting to see it's actually pretty lively and colorful.

**You Begin to Enjoy things More.** When we can truly appreciate things for what they are, we're able to enjoy them more. It's really hard to enjoy something when we're constantly focused on them. This simple shift to looking for bright spots might lead to a realization that we like something as it is. Sometimes, we get so focused on the imperfections of an object that we forget how wonderful its other qualities are.

**Being Present with Our Perspectives.** The only requirement for recognizing the beauty around us is paying attention to the thoughts and emotions we're using to look at the present moment. If we're in a state of anger, we're probably going to see things in a way that brings us more anger. However, we have the power to make a shift. All it takes is the search for one beautiful thing. That one beautiful thing might be the reminder you need to be present for our wonderful universe and all its precious moments.

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<sup>5</sup><https://medium.com/live-your-life-on-purpose/finding-the-beauty-in-life-f3d49a1d416b>

## **SPIRITUAL EXERCISE: Find Beauty** (adapted fr Rick Hanson, *Just One Thing*)

Beauty is that which delights the senses -- including the "sixth sense" of the mind. Different people find beauty in different forms and places. You don't have to go to a museum, listen to a symphony, or eat a gourmet meal to be in the presence of beauty. For example, here are some of the (maybe strange) things I find beautiful: A clump of grass in a sidewalk crack. The horn of a train as it moves away. The smell of cinnamon. The curve of highway cloverleaves. Kitchen knives. The faces of nurses. Courage. Falling water. A glazed donut. The touch of cashmere. Foam. Frisbees. Snakes. Geometrical proofs. Worn pennies. The feeling of catching a football. What are some things that are beautiful to you?

There's so much beauty all around us. But I think that for many people, there is little sense of this. That was certainly true for me before I started deliberately looking for beauty. And then we wonder why life doesn't seem very delightful!

What do you feel when you encounter beauty, including in its everyday forms? Perhaps your heart opens, something eases in the mind, there's pleasure, and your spirits lift. The experience of beauty relieves stress, nourishes hope, and reminds us that there's much more to life than grinding through tasks. The sense of beauty can also be shared -- have you ever admired a sunset with a friend? -- bringing you closer to others.

**How.** Take a few moments each day to open to beauty. Really look at the things around you -- particularly at the ordinary things we tend to tune out, such as the sky, appliances, grass, cars, weeds, familiar views, bookshelves, or sidewalks. Try the same with everyday sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Also seek out lovely memories, feelings, or ideas.

Hunt for beauty like a child looking for seashells on a bountiful beach. Be open to things outside the frame of "nice" or "pretty." Let yourself be surprised. Find beauty in unexpected places.

When you find beauty, feel it. Open to a growing sense of boundless beauty above and below and stretching in all directions, like you're floating in a sea of rose petals. Recognize the beauty in others, in their character, choices, sacrifices, aspirations. Understand the beauty in noble failures, quiet determination, leaps of insight, and joy at the good fortune of others. Hear the beauty of a parent's voice soothing a child, of friends laughing, of the click and clack of a teacher's chalk on the blackboard. See the beauty in the face of someone at the very beginning of this life, and see it in the face of someone at the very end.

Recognize the beauty in your own heart. Don't duck this one: as others are beautiful, so are you. Make beauty with your hands, your words, and your actions. Even the breath is beautiful. Breathing in beauty, let beauty breathe you.

**For Journaling.** Every day for a week, describe what you encountered that was beautiful that day.

### **The Thing About Rainbows**

Faithyna Leonard

They say rainbows are beauty unleashed,  
But what of the souls beneath?  
These rainbows are exquisite, it's true,  
But does the same apply to me and you?  
  
We all long for a kiss in the rain,  
But what of the foretaste of pain?  
The puddles that pool all of our sorrows,  
Will you still love me tomorrows?  
  
The same rain that causes shivers on my  
    skin,  
Is the same sensation of your lips closing in.  
My love brightens the hues of every rainbow  
    I see,  
Even through the rain does her love bring  
    comfort to me.

### **Beauty**

Leon Herald (1922)

Over beauty I am a weeping willow.  
I begged of God to grant me a look at  
    beauty,  
And He sent me traveling a billion years  
To come to this world.  
I came my way an empty vessel, longing for  
    beauty.  
I shall go my way fulfilled, glorifying beauty.  
  
When I look on beauty  
I secure a day's provision;  
Thus I accumulate food for another billion  
    years.  
When I see beauty  
It propels wheels in me,  
And puts me in communication with God  
    instantly,  
To thank him that I am arrived.  
  
My only grief in life is to see a thing without  
    beauty.  
Over beauty I am a weeping willow.

### **Beauty**

Gustav Davidson (1925)

Beauty is a multi-colored top  
Pirouetting in the grey brain of an apathetic  
    world.  
  
Beauty is sudden arrest,  
Imperial interruption:  
A cracked vase set at an odd angle on a  
    Gothic credenza,  
A star in water,  
A ships whistle through the night.  
  
Beauty is Caliban making himself  
    presentable to Mirand,  
De Bergerac in the garden of Roxane.  
Beauty is Caligula the tyrant  
Asthenic at the feet of his wife Caesonia.  
  
Beauty is Chicago Calling to New York,  
London calling to Paris.  
Beauty is rain falling tardily on a dead  
    magnolia;  
Condors screaming in their iron cages.  
  
Beauty is Lucifer among the angels of  
    redemption;  
Iscaiot, repentant, on the highway from  
    Golgotha.

### **Beauty**

James J. Ryan (1932)

Is there an end to this story  
That started long ago?  
I see snow melt to roses  
And roses flame to snow ...

## Faithyna's Family Page

Faithyna Leonard

Here is a reminder of something simple, yet powerful: you are beautiful. Not because of what you wear or how the world sees you, but because of how you love, how you show up, and how you carry others. Your beauty isn't a decoration — it's a light that warms every space you enter. The world tries to shrink beauty into filters and reflections, but real beauty has depth. It lives in shared laughter, quiet kindness, and the strength it takes to be soft in a hard world.

Look around — beauty is everywhere: in sunsets, music, and the hands that comfort. And when you begin to see it out there, you'll start to feel it within — because you belong to that same beautiful world.

To help guide this reflection, we have explored some beautiful stories that highlight the theme of beauty:

1. Peter Brown, ***The Curious Garden***. Liam cares for a forgotten patch of greenery in a gray city. His small act of care transforms the space — and eventually, the whole city. Beauty often begins with quiet tending, and it grows when we nurture what's within.
2. Talitha Shipman, ***Finding Beauty***. Shows a young girl discovering that beauty isn't in shiny things, but in everyday moments — a hug, a song, a helping hand. It reminds us that beauty is simple, present, and often found when we slow down and look.
3. Heather Avis, ***Different – A Great Thing to Be!*** Macy embraces her uniqueness with joy. Her confidence helps others see that what makes us different can also be what makes us shine. Being yourself is not just okay — it's beautiful.
4. Tarang Rawat and Elena Napoli, ***Becoming Beautiful***. This follows a girl's journey through the world's expectations of beauty. In the end, she realizes that true beauty is not about changing, but about embracing who she already is.

So, wherever you are in your journey — whether you're blooming, searching, growing, or healing — know this: you are already beautiful. Keep noticing the beauty around you, and keep being the beauty the world needs.

## CHECK OUT

From everything we've shared during this time together, what overall message stands out for you?

## EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

Words of Plotinus: "This is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce: wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight."

*Connecting* is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Text not otherwise attributed is by Rev. Meredith Garmon. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme. Next issue: 2025 Jun: Community