

Beautifuler Things
June 20th, 2021
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister here, at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, VT. Today is Father's Day. Happy Father's Day! Today is Sunday, June 20th and the title of this morning's reflection is Beautifuler Things. This reflection is about finding higher resolution in photography, in spirit and in real life.

Fathers and their children don't always understand each other. Sometimes things don't get resolved but there is a love that holds them, a love that holds us all, a love that surpasses common understanding. It's bigger than us. Beautifuler Things is about this kind of love. It's not about petty stuff. It's about something else. It's about slowing down enough to see and hear to beautiful songs of life...and to dance with them without even taking any lessons. To all souls, I say, "Good morning." It is good to be together.

How long does it take to see a flower? How long does it take to learn its dance?

My dad was a decent dancer. He more than held his own but he was no Fred Astaire, if you know what I mean. He taught me all he could in the time we had and I'm grateful for that. More than the choreography, though, he taught me how to keep joy underfoot, how to step so soft and lightly in my soul...and I'm so glad because he helped me understand the dancing in all those old movies.

Quietly departing from the party scene in the heart of the city, Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse—dressed up all in white—secretly stole away into the darkness. They retreated from the light...as the music and the movement of the party went on without them. They withdrew without warning, without a single word. No one noticed and once away, they told a story.

Dancing in the dark 'til the tune ends
We're dancing in the dark and it soon ends
We're waltzing in the wonder of why we're here
Time hurries by, we're here, and we're gone
Looking for the light of a new love
To brighten up the night, I have you, love
And we can face the music together

Dancing in the Dark. We first heard this song in 1931, in Broadway show called The Band Wagon. It was written by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz back in the day. This song was popular...very popular. It's been recorded many times since...by the orchestras of Artie Shaw and Stuart Foster in '41 and '44 respectively...and by Art Tatum on solo piano ten years later. It was recorded by Julian "Cannonball" Adderly and Miles Davis on Something Else. That was back in 1958. It's beautiful. [show]

Adderly and Davis were inspired by Sarah Vaughn who recorded the song two years earlier. Johnny Mathis recorded it in 1965, the year I was born. Another ten years later, Barbara Cook performed it—hauntingly—before a full house at Carnegie Hall. Dancing in the Dark was the title track of the 1987 album by Sonny Rollins. The list goes on and on. Students at UMass/Amherst did it acapella just last year—virtually, of course, because of COVID. We can't let this one go.

My favorite version is when Bird did it—when Charlie Parker did it with strings—for Norman Grantz back in 1950. Bird was Charlie Parker's nickname...because he played so beautifully...because he played with such grace and with such eloquence...in difficult days, in dark days.

Charlie Parker was very wise. He respected the darkness. He saw the beauty in it...wordlessly. Every bird I know respects the darkness. They welcome it with open arms. They let the darkness come until the morning. Human beings are different, generally. So often, we fight the night and its darkness. We resist it...with streetlights and tapered candles. We resist...with lanterns and with our lamps all trimmed and burning. We resist it with the fires around which we tend to gather—looking for the light of a new love...to brighten up the night...

Birds are different. They let the darkness come. They welcome it in all of its beauty, grace and eloquence. Birds respect darkness. In fact, they're grateful for it. Darkness offers rest and helps us to mark the passage of time. And time is very important...to every bird I know and to us all, especially this morning...and so I ask again, how long does it take to see the beauty of a flower? It's sort of a riddle. How many days and nights do flowers need to show their gifts?

How will we answer this question? How should we begin? Scientifically? We could say that from seed, a flower needs at least three days to sprout. We could say that eaf development starts around Day 6 and takes three weeks...after which begins the blossom stage. So, in the neighborhood of thirty days, a flower begins to bloom. We could say all of that and, according to the science of the flowers, we'd be right but it doesn't make sense. It shouldn't take so long to see a flower's beauty.

Cameras can 'see' beauty in a fraction of this time, in a fraction of a second, actually. Shutter speeds are fast. In fact, I took this picture just last week...in my car on my way home from Hanover. [pause] I'd stopped at a traffic light and I had a moment or two. So, I picked up my phone and selected its camera option. I pointed and clicked and voila! There it was, the almost instantaneous beauty of a flower!

And the quality is good enough. The color is good...and the composition... It's decent photo...and if I was going for greater detail—and I had a different camera and different lens—I could schedule the shutter to stay open much longer...and I could narrow the aperture, squinting the eye of the camera, as it were, and changing the shutter speed accordingly to get the right effect... It's what Ansel Adams did when he took this picture at Half Dome. For 5 whole seconds, he held the shutter open and look what happened at that super-slow shutter speed. It's just gorgeous. Just look at the resolution.

So, according to the science of photography, it doesn't take 30 days, not even close. It only takes a fraction of that time, a fraction of a second...and even if you're

really particular, it takes five seconds tops. But that doesn't seem right either...that it should take so short a time to see beauty.

Maybe there's a sweet spot in between. Maybe we can strike a balance between these two extremes. Or maybe there is a resolution that is altogether different, somehow outside of the boundaries of time...somehow more defined by timelessness. I believe that when we find it, we'll be able to answer the question that's before us—how long does it take to see the beauty of a flower? Because the answer to this question lies at the still point between two sciences—the science of flowers and the science of photography...and because the answer to this question lies beyond them both. Some questions can only be answered by the wisdom of the heart? ...by the wisdom of the heart that is inclined toward gratitude? ...by the wisdom of the soul that's biased by grace?

A man named Louie Schwartzberg gave a TED Talk on this very subject—the subject of flower gratitude photography. This is not a real subject, of course, not in the academic sense. You can't major in it in college but there he was, this Louie Schwartzberg guy, giving a TED Talk on the West Coast. I thought that the things he said were wise. He said,

Hi, everybody. [] When I graduated UCLA, I moved to northern California. I lived in a little town called Elk on the Mendocino coast. I didn't have a phone or TV... Life was good back then... I'd go the General Store for a cup of coffee and a brownie... I didn't have much money but I had time and a sense of wonder.

So, I started shooting time-lapse photography. It would take me a month to shoot a four-minute roll of film because that's all I could afford. I have been shooting time-lapse flowers continuously, non-stop, 24-hours a day, seven days a week for over thirty years...and to see them move is a dance I'll never get tire of. Their beauty immerses us with color, taste, touch and also supplies a third of the food we eat.

I think he's wise. I wonder what he'd say, if asked, "How long does it take to see the beauty of a flower?" I wonder if he'd say that it takes thirty years...or if he'd say that it takes not time at all...because the flowers are always dancing...in the light of day and in darkness—24-7-365...year after lovely year. Maybe it takes a lifetime to see the beauty of a flower. Maybe it takes is even longer than that, as we learn to survive ourselves...which makes me wonder—with whose eyes do I see the flower's beauty? With my own eyes or with the eyes of those who can before? ...or with my father's eyes. It's hard to say.

What breath is it—whose breath?—that carries their sweet scent, their fragrance, their aroma? What wind has them dancing all alone and in a crowd? Fred Astaire knows the answer...knows the joy beneath his feet...the joy that my father taught me...not that I knew enough to say, "Thank you" at the time. The joy beneath our feet is the spirit of life that calls us on...is the wind beneath our wings. Louie Schwartzberg continues,

Beauty and seduction are nature's tools for survival because we protect what we fall in love with. [Let's all fall in love with life, shall we? Beauty and

seduction open] our hearts and makes us realize that we are part of nature and we are not separate from it.

Louie Schwartzberg was working on a project. He called it Happiness Revealed. This project offers perspective and sage advice on a sacred choice, the choice between passively viewing life and actively engage with it (and really exploring it). It offers perspective and sage advice on the broader topic of gratitude—gratitude, that station within us that keeps us dancing, each to our gift...dancing in the soulshine sun and dancing in the dark.

The first speaker in Happiness Revealed offered beauty, grace and eloquence ...encouraged us to actively engage with life...because television is make-believe. It entertains but it doesn't expand the imagination like life does. It doesn't invite us to go deeper.

You know what? This is inelegant but it's really hard for me to convey the speaker's meaning with the right pathos and the right energy. I can't reproduce it. It's much better if you see it for yourself. [show]

When I watch TV, it's just some show that you just, that are pretend. And when you explore, you get more imagination than you already had. When you get more imagination, it makes you want to go deeper in so you get more as see beautifuler things. The path—if it's a path—could lead you to lead you to a beach or something...and it could be beautiful.

I love how she comes as close, as close as humanly possible, to picking her nose in the middle of delivering such deep wisdom...the deep wisdom of beautifuler things...the deep wisdom of higher resolution. May we all hold space enough in our daily lives this possibility.

I had my mind blown the other day...or the other night. I'm not sure how best to express this...because the darkness had come and the birds had long been silent, waiting for the dawn. Birds keep love alive by singing and so do we. The birds sing and the flowers...sing...and there are perfect reasons why. The birds and flowers sing for the presence of beautifuler things...and beautifuler things keep love alive. They keep us dancing, dancing with the joy beneath our feet. It's not complicated. Children understand this easily...and they teach us. They teach us to explore life, to expand the imagination, to re-engage with one another after times of solitude.

For the past 15 months, it's like we've all been on TV, engaging with one another in only two dimensions...by way of cell phones and computer screens and the internet. This time is coming to an end. I feel so awkward. I've forgotten how to eat in public. I have to start showering more often. I can no longer assume that no one will ever see my pants. I may need coaching.

We are entering new day and we are returning to old ways but the whole wide world is different and so are we. There is so much to rebuild...and I want to do so wisely. I want to be guided by better baseline assumptions, guided by higher resolutions and greater possibilities.

Impossibly early in the morning, before the new day knows its name, as the first lights of the sun slowly gather on the eastern horizon, the birds (who had been silent all of the night) begin their singing. I used to think it was pretty but I think it's more than pretty. I've been brought to a new sense of things by a strange man named Charles Kellogg.

Kellogg was an artist and a traveling entertainer who made a name for himself a hundred years ago, catching the attention of academic scholarship. Kellogg was a nature singer on the vaudeville circuit. He made a living by precisely imitating bird songs with his voice. He was amazing. And more fantastically (and most unusually), they say that Kellogg acquired the ability to extinguish fire with music. I promise, I'm not making this up. Lord knows how he did it. How wild is this world in which we live!!! One could easily spend a lifetime exploring its wonders...if you open ot possibility.

I love the idea that music has powers beyond those of commercial entertainment. The other day, at the Wednesday gathering, at one of the brown-bag lunches that we've been having behind North Chapel, I brought a guitar and played it softly as we sat together, as we ate together and as we laughed together. It was perfect for me. No one interrupted the flow of our togetherness for a performance...and neither was it "background music," releasing us from silence. No. the music was just present with us, like another friend with a sandwich, like the sounds of the flowing river, like the singing of the birds all around us.

Now, the thing that I love most about Kellogg—and what I feel I have in common with him—is his utter amazement with everyday living. I love music best when it says, "Thank you" to everyday life. I want to shout that from the highest mountains. I want to cry out to the heavens, "Thank you!!" I want to do this at the top of my lungs...every day...but I settle for playing music uneventfully...early morning music at Silver Lake has become my favorite. I want to shout from highest mountains but I settle for meeting music like a time-honored friend who doesn't call attention to himself...who come over often enough to know where the towels are and is willing make up his own bed if he's staying the night.

Of course, I never met Charles Kellogg. He died decades before I was born. I never truly met him face-to-face but I feel like I know him spiritually. I feel like he's there every morning when I play at Silver Lake.

It was something that Kellogg said that made me think that this was possible. It was something that he said in an interview that eased my mind. He said,
Most people who listen to the singing of [bird] songs fail to notice that all songbirds sing in the ecstatic mode and not in the lyric mode.

Kellogg is corny and quirky and esoteric but what he says is deeply meaningful to me. He asks us to think deeply, He asks us to consider that when the birds are singing, they are ecstatic. Always. Their singing doesn't fade and doesn't change. It stays the same. This is something that men forget over time and need to be reminded.

In an old SciFi movie, there's a conversation between a young man and an old man. And though the old man is a leader, is a Councilor of the State, he is tired and he's beginning to surrender. He's giving up. He's giving in to the seeming futility of

life while the young man is busy trying to save the world. So, they clash a bit. The young man asks the old man about what it means to be a leader...about whether he has been trying to make a point from his position of power and the old man says, grimly, "No, no point. Old men like me don't bother with making points. There's no point."

And the young man questions this. He asks, "Is that why there are no young men on the Council [that you lead]?"

And the old man turns to the young man. Impressed, he smiles at him and says, "Good point." Just look at the resolution.

As younger men, as sons—and, of course, more broadly, as human beings—it makes good sense to scream at the top of our lungs. Later, as older men, as fathers—and, once again, more broadly—it makes good sense to sing at the top of our lungs.

The birds are singing. It is how they've learned to say "Thank you" to this life. They are singing all around and so can we...at the top of our lungs...in gratitude and ecstasy. How better to say yes to life and our exploration of it, to our active engagement with it...come what may?

How long does it take to see the beauty of a flower? I don't know but you may have an answer. However long it takes us, we will hear the flowers singing and we will see them dancing like Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire...

Dancing in the dark 'til the tune ends

We're waltzing in the wonder of why we're here

Happy Father's Day to everyone. Keep the joy beneath your feet. Offer the best to life, knowing the best is yet to come.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.