

A FORCE FOR BEAUTY

Rev. Amy Carol Webb

River of Grass Unitarian Universalist Congregation – Feb. 02, 2014

[sung]

CAME SO FAR FOR BEAUTY (© 1988, Leonard Cohen)

I came so far for Beauty
I left so much behind
My patience and my family
My masterpiece unsigned

I thought I'd be rewarded
For such a lonely choice
And surely she would answer
To such a very hopeless voice

I practiced on my sainthood
I gave to one and all
But the rumours of my virtue
They moved her not at all

I changed my style to silver
I changed my clothes to black
And where I would surrender
Now I would attack

I stormed the old casino
For the money and the flesh
And I myself decided
What was rotten and what was fresh

With men to do my bidding
And broken bones to teach
The value of my pardon
The shadow of my reach

But no, I could not touch her
With such a heavy hand
Her star beyond my order
Her nakedness unmanned

I came so far for Beauty
I left so much behind
My patience and my family
My masterpiece unsigned

I came so far for Beauty – I left so much behind – my patience and my family – my masterpiece unsigned. The words and music of Leonard Cohen, and a more profound music poet there likely has not been in this era. And ... when I first encountered this piece two decades ago, I thought I knew what it meant.

I heard it as an artist's lament for disappointment and loss in the pursuit of Beauty in a warped and wicked world. I came so far for Beauty – I left so much behind – my patience and my family – my masterpiece unsigned. I thought I heard regret for potential forfeited and inspiration surrendered to the vagaries of human folly and foible. And surely on several levels it is that, along with a longing for meaning, purpose and fulfillment – but a closer look amplifies the ways we search for, yearn for, try to create and even crave Beauty in this earthly life.

In a first attempt we think ... maybe Beauty will come to us through sacrifice. Listen to Cohen here, "I thought I'd be rewarded for such a lonely choice, and surely she – she being Beauty – surely she would answer to such a hopeless voice."

We've got this notion of sacrifice and reward in our Judeo-Christian DNA and the cannon of scripture proves it– the Hebrew scripture repeatedly calls for the sacrifice to please a demanding God and in exchange for a promised land. Then in the New Testament, Christians are repeatedly advised that forfeiting comfort and pleasure in this life brings reward in the next. Virtually all known religions feature this arc of sacrifice earning reward. Maybe, just maybe, if I sacrifice *enough*, Beauty will come to me.

Then Cohen takes it another step, "I practiced on my sainthood, I gave to one and all, but the rumors of my virtue, they moved her not at all."

Oh, maaaaan! I know this one too well. And perhaps so do you. Perhaps you, too, still have that child inside that keeps thinking, "If I'm just *good enough*, if I *try* hard enough, if I *please* everyone enough, if I can just be more virtuous, then everything will be beautiful."

I practiced on my sainthood – and practiced and practiced. But the rumors of my virtue, they moved her not at all. Because Beauty is a gift. It is a grace of the Universe. It is not given for sacrifice, nor for practiced sainthood – the Universe gives it to us undeserved – and that's what makes Beauty *Beauty*.

Could any one of us ever earn the breathtaking Beauty of a sunrise, or a field of flowers, or the misty and mystic mountains, or the ineffable Beauty in the face of sleeping newborn baby? Or the Beauty of the music in this sanctuary this very morning. The Beauty of each other's presence. Of what we feel when we gather, when we see one another again.

Beauty is simply here for us. Only waiting for us to *notice*. To claim this Beauty for our lives requires mostly that we slow down – and wake up. Not so easy.

But easier than what is truly required of us to become a *force for Beauty* in the world. For that we must learn to *live the Beauty within ourselves*.

In our world – and not just now, but historically – we are inclined to change *ourselves* for Beauty. Cohen says, “I changed my style to silver” – yep, did that. “I changed my clothes to black.” Yup, that too. I’m not even going to get started here on the lengths of self-editing human beings are willing to go to, to be whatever flavor of beautiful is in fashion any given day.

The point is, our willingness to believe the illusion that our outside qualifies us, or *disqualifies* us, for Beauty. Maybe, just *maybe* if I can change myself to suit your definition of beautiful -- *then* I will be worthy.

Certainly, entire segments of our society are built on – and prey on – this vain pursuit. But Cohen goes deeper here with the second half of this stanza when he says, “And where I would surrender, now I would attack.” And so this verse covers both the alteration of the cosmetic *and* the change of character. Here’s the pursuer of Beauty saying, “Okay ... sacrifice and sainthood didn’t do it, and I can’t seem to *change* myself enough or *be* good enough, so NOW I’m going take Beauty by force!”

“I stormed the old casino for the money and for the flesh!” Money! Pleasure! Power! *That’s* the key. “With men to do my bidding and broken bones to teach, the value of my pardon and the shadow of my reach!” No more sacrifice, no more sainthood, no more changing myself to suit society! Wealth and pleasure and power – *these* will render me worthy and I will *take* Beauty for myself! It’s a position that turns to all those who ever hurt us or made us feel small and ugly and inadequate – or worse – ignored altogether – and screams “**How do you like me now!**”

“But no ... I could not touch her, with such a heavy hand – her star beyond my order, her nakedness unmanned.”

Beauty cannot be *taken*. It cannot be captured any more than cutting flowers traps their Beauty in the vase. No amount of human wealth and might can *force* Beauty into our hearts or minds – or our souls. Her star is beyond our order – she is, at the core, a mystery of this life.

We cannot take her. We can only *serve* her – by making ourselves a force for Beauty.

Because ... the Beauty we seek is not somewhere else. The Beauty is IN US! WE are Beauty! WE are made of the same unstoppable, irrepressible, completely renewable, indefatigable, divine and divining energy that fires and inspires every living thing.

The force that calls the flowers to bloom, calls us to bloom! The force that brings the sun up again tomorrow morning, awakens us to the new day ready to make the world and ourselves better than yesterday. The force that moves in our hearts for our families. For *this* family.

This gathering itself is a force for Beauty. These faces. These hearts. These voices joining drawn to one another in the spirit of Love with all of Unitarian Universalism as a foundation and hope as the flag that leads us and dares us onward. *We came so far for Beauty!*

We came so far for Beauty ... we left so much behind.

I used to feel that phrase as regret, remorse ... or a longing for something that never was or might've been. But no more. Now I hear "we came so far for Beauty" more as "*Look how far we've come!*"

Look how far we've come – as persons and as a faith community. I don't know about you, but I for one came a loooooong way to be here – physically, emotionally, spiritually. And YES, we left so much behind!

We left behind the condemnation and constricture and consternation of the Calvinist dogma our foremothers and forefathers who gave their lives countering it so we could gather in this room today, free in faith, free in pulpit and free in pew. We left behind the notion the earth is ours to rape and pillage in the name of "dominion."

We left behind the straight-jacket doctrine that there is only *one* way to view the order of the universe, *one* name for the divine, and only *one* way to be whole and holy ourselves. We left behind suffering for suffering's sake. We left behind original sin, the wretched idea that we are born depraved and deprived of the inherent worth and dignity we in this room cherish. Thank Goodness we left so much behind!

I came so far for Beauty – I left so much behind – my patience and my family – my masterpiece unsigned.

Yes I did leave my family – my birth family, who love me and whom I love, but we believe in such different things now. Let me be clear, I cherish and respect them for caring about the eternal well-being of my soul, but to follow my own true star of eternal hope -- I had to leave the Oklahoma prairies and the tenets of fundamentalist Christianity.

And yes, I did leave behind my patience.

That's not always a bad thing.

I am impatient to fulfill the promise of Unitarian Universalism. I'm impatient to see us step up for the good work we are called to do in this world, beginning in this zip code. I'm impatient to see us be what we say we are – a force for beautiful change in our time. I'm impatient to put our good ideas into motion with the materials and money and the people and passion it takes to heal our broken world.

And yes -- the masterpiece is yet unsigned. But not because we've given up on it! Not because we've abandoned it! Not because we've lost interest or inspiration! The masterpiece is not unsigned because it doesn't matter to us

The masterpiece is unsigned because it is not finished!

The masterpiece remains unsigned because the work is not done!

The masterpiece – the masterpiece that is a peaceful, just, loving, verdant, beautiful, harmonious, joy-filled and righteous world – that masterpiece, that dream of this faith, our faith, is not yet accomplished. Its hope is not yet fulfilled. This free faith IS that masterpiece! And we ourselves ARE its life force!

You are a force for Beauty. Just as you are. Without senseless sacrifice. Without striving for sainthood. Without altering yourself to match the world's expectations of Beauty and worth. You didn't, you couldn't earn it or capture it. You ARE it. The inherent worth and dignity we hold up as our first Unitarian Universalist principle begins in you. To truly honor the worthiness of every individual – we must begin ... within.

For as the Buddha said, "You can search the ten-fold universe and not find a single being more worthy of loving kindness than yourself."

Oh yes, we came so far for Beauty.

You did. I did. *River of Grass did!* Fifteen years ago you dared to birth a new Beloved Community where there was none. And you have kept growing toward the next horizon ever since. Once again, now, River of Grass approaches new thresholds of faith and fortitude, cresting another wave of the vision you keep before you – tempered by all that came before, to be sure, but daring to ask again how this body of faith can dig deeper and reach higher for that vision.

After service today is this year's mid-year congregational meeting -- right after we get fortified with fresh coffee and cookies. Yeah, cause we know caffeine and sugar is prime fuel for democratic discernment!

Nah ... that's not how River of Grass has come so far. River of Grass has come so far because a whole bunch of people just keep believing that in every challenge there is the seed of strength, in every question is a kernel of truth, in

every doubt there abides a simmering faith -- that in every tear of sorrow there shines a spark of joy, that within every struggle there beats the heart of hope – and that always, *always* love is stronger than fear.

Let us not turn back. Let us not flag or fail. Let no one turn us aside from our purpose and our passion. Let no one question the power of this Unitarian Universalist faith. And let no one underestimate the determination of *this* congregation to be a true and faithful force for Beauty today and in the days to come.

[sung – leading congregation]

How could anyone ever tell you - You are anything less than beautiful
How could anyone ever tell you - You are less than whole
How could anyone fail to notice - That your loving is a miracle
How deeply you're connected to my soul.

Amen, Amain, Aho, Ashe, Namaste, Blessed be ... and may it be so.

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