

Truth and Beauty: Making Whole What is Broken

Allison Claire 3/24/19

There is a famous poem from the 19th century, by the English Romantic poet John Keats, called Ode on a Grecian Urn. The poet gazes on the urn, rhapsodizes about its beauty, and ponders the scenes of village life painted on its sides. The poem ends with these words: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Keats was invoking an idea that goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks: the idea that Truth and Beauty are inseparable.

I'm... skeptical. Or maybe it's that I'm not much interested in Truth and Beauty as abstract concepts. You know, Truth with a capital T — as if there's only one. Or Beauty with a capital B — as if beauty existed independently of our perceptions of the world. What I'm interested in is the messy reality of multiple, contradictory truths — small "t" truths — that co-exist without canceling each other out. What I'm interested in — and what Unitarian Universalism has called me to explore with my eyes and my heart as open as possible — is this world we actually live in, where beautiful truths and heartbreaking truths and horrifying truths all co-exist, and where beauty and ugliness and brokenness, joy and suffering, aren't competing for position as the Ultimate Truth and don't need any single unifying explanation.

Which is why I love the words of the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer, which I first came across in my 20s and which have served as a

beacon for me ever since. Gordimer wrote: “The truth isn’t always beauty, but the hunger for it is.” Those words still have the power to stop me in my tracks, and they are the inspiration for my remarks this morning. “The truth isn’t always beauty, but the hunger for it is.”

Sorry, Keats. The truth isn’t always beauty. Sometimes the truth hurts. There are hard truths, there are bitter truths. There are truths which are so far from beauty that we avert our eyes: the truth of what happens sometimes behind closed doors. The truth of what I feel, or don’t feel. The truth of what he did to her. The truth of what we have done to each other. Truths of genocide, of slavery and lynching, the truth of landmines and atomic bombs and chemical weapons. The truth of hunger. The truth about conditions in refugee camps and detention centers. The truth about habitat destruction and species loss. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It is not always pretty. It can be almost unbearable.

So often we try to bury, or deny, or ignore the painful truths, and cover them up with a facade that hides the ugliness. Sometimes we even decorate the facade and try to make it pretty. Has that ever worked out? In my experience, painful truths that get buried always find a way out — and usually after they have already done a lot of damage. Like an internal infection, a buried truth festers and poisons. Individual traumas, buried, can damage a person’s mental and physical health. Social traumas, unacknowledged, can destroy democracy.

The truth isn’t always beauty — but the hunger for it is.

Nadine Gordimer was a white, Jewish South African writer, who was an outspoken opponent of apartheid and winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize for literature. Her lines about truth and beauty come from a personal essay about her childhood, but they also speak to the larger social context in which she lived and wrote. Gordimer relentlessly explored the complicity of white South Africans like herself who benefited from white supremacy, and was committed to telling uncomfortable truths about privilege and the violence against black bodies that made it possible.

After the collapse of apartheid, when the Black majority in South Africa ruled their country for the first time, there was a great need for truth-telling. People understood that a just society could not be created in the aftermath of oppression and generational trauma without the excavation and public airing of even the most painful truths. Rather than seeking revenge, which would have made national unity impossible, the new government decided to seek reconciliation — but only after, and on the basis of, radical truth telling.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation process, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, became a model for other nations seeking restorative justice in the aftermath of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. In hearings across the country, people confronted the perpetrators of violence with the truth of their suffering and the truth of their humanity. Perpetrators on all sides, who publicly told the truth about abuses they had committed, were granted amnesty. As painful as the process was, the hunger for truth created the conditions for a new beginning.

I have often thought that the United States needs its own Truth and Reconciliation process, to grapple head on with our legacy of genocide against indigenous peoples, slavery and lynching, and other forms of violence that form the historical foundation for present injustices. I am heartened by the efforts of folks like Bryan Stevenson, who spoke at our UU General Assembly a couple of years ago, and his colleagues at the Equal Justice Institute who have founded the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, and the Community Remembrance Project to commemorate victims of lynching across the country.

Hiding from terrible truths — whether it's Holocaust denial, climate change denial, or refusal to hear the voices of the Me Too movement — only perpetuates the damage. It is the same thing on the societal level that we see in families that look good on the outside while terrible suffering is being experienced on the inside. The refusal to name the brokenness, and to acknowledge the need for healing, keeps things broken. Pretending that things are OK, or trying to make them look good, prevents real healing.

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Often, people are afraid that telling painful or ugly truths will make things worse. Sometimes, people think that acknowledging a painful or ugly truth will negate what is good or beautiful. But it doesn't work that way! Acknowledging everything that is wrong in our country doesn't mean that *nothing* is good. Acknowledging what is broken in our hearts doesn't

mean that **we** are not good. And acknowledging what is broken in our families, our communities or our churches doesn't mean that there is not also great love, and great beauty. Beauty and brokenness can and do co-exist **all the time**. That is the essence of the human condition.

Which reminds me of a song! Savuka was a multi-racial South African band founded by Johnny Clegg in 1986. The name, Savuka, is Zulu for "we have risen." They blended traditional Zulu music with rock, and their songs often tackled political themes. Their very existence was political, because under apartheid it was illegal for black and white musicians to play together on the same stage, or to mixed audiences. One of my favorite Savuka albums, which was part of the sound track of my life for a while, is called "Cruel, Crazy, Beautiful World." The title track is a song written from parent to child, wishing clear blue skies for the little one while knowing that the world will deliver both great joy and great suffering. The refrain goes, "It's a cruel, crazy, beautiful world/Every time you wake up, I hope its under a blue sky/ it's a cruel, crazy, beautiful world/One day when you wake up, I will have to say goodbye."

What I love most about this song is its ending: After acknowledging the cruelty, the craziness, **and** the beauty of the world, the father sings to his son: "It's your world, so live in it!" In performing this song, the band was singing to Black South Africans, and to multi-racial anti-apartheid coalitions: "It's your world, so live in it!"

To really live in our world, we have to live in **all** of it. We have to live in the cruelty and the craziness without sticking our heads in the sand, or we

won't be able to see the beauty, feel the joy, dance and sing along. "It's your world, so **live in it!**" All of it.

We can look around us, at our kindred across the globe, and see that people do find beauty, and make beauty, even in the midst of brokenness and horror. People plant flowers and paint murals in favelas. People sing and dance in refugee camps and in exile. Is that not amazing?! The human impulse to create beauty, even under conditions of oppression and poverty and violence, can be crushed by circumstances in the short term, but it always comes back. Perhaps because beauty gives us strength to confront the truths that are not beautiful. And perhaps because beauty itself — whether it is the curve of a brach against the sky, or the the curve of a ceramic urn, or the face of a beloved one — reminds us of truths, like Interdependence, like the power of Spirit, which are not negated by human brokenness.

Erika Hewit suggests, in the reading we heard earlier, that brokenness and wholeness may be opposites, but they are not mutually exclusive. Our inherent wholeness is a fundamental truth which is not negated by the the experience of brokenness.

What's more, brokenness isn't always ugly.

I recently read an article about learning from our regrets. The author, Jennifer Taitz, who is a clinical instructor in psychiatry at UCLA, used a wonderful metaphor. She wrote, "There's a Japanese art called Kintsugi. Literally translated, this means 'golden repair.' . . . Kintsugi is a philosophy

of repairing broken things, like cracks in pottery for example. Rather than hide an item's imperfections, the reparation process highlights them. Those imperfections are considered part of an item's history, and repairing it this way can add beauty to the original items — like using precious metal to fill cracks in pottery.”

Did you get that? Rather than hiding brokenness, the reparation process deliberately highlights it — and this **adds** beauty, rather than distracting from it. Wow. If you are not familiar with Kintsugi as a ceramic art, you can find endless images online. I chose this chalice image for a reason, which I'll get to in a moment. But first, just ask yourself: What if repairing what is broken, and creating beauty where there has been ugliness, does not require covering anything up or making it seem like new? What if we embraced the beauty of the piecing back together, the beauty of creating something new out of the wreckage of the old, in a way that celebrates and highlights — instead of hiding — the process of transformation?

Reading about kintsugi made me think of a very different sort of art that highlights what has traditionally been hidden or “prettified” in ways that obscure the truth. I remember being blown away decades ago by a black and white photographic image on a feminist poster: a topless woman, arms flung wide and head tossed back in laughter or triumph, with a large botanical tattoo across her chest where her breasts used to be, highlighting rather than hiding her mastectomy scars. I had never seen, or imagined the possibility of, such an image. It was gorgeous. I tried to find this image online recently, and couldn't — because what was unimaginable in 1979 is now so widely celebrated. The internet in 2019 is

overflowing with gorgeous photographic portraits of people who have adorned their scars, amputations, and physical differences with tattoos and other forms of body art. It's like body Kintsugi. Adding beauty, claiming inherent wholeness, without trying to make something look like society says it "should," or like it did before.

So back to our kintsugi chalice. I have talked about the difficulty that societies and individuals have in telling, and facing, painful truths — Especially truths about our brokenness, and about the ways we have damaged one another and ourselves. The same is true for religious communities, including Unitarian Universalism.

For example, white UUs, myself included, have proudly claimed that part of our Unitarian and Universalist heritage that's full of abolitionists and civil rights heroes. Of course that is a beautiful and noble part of our heritage, of which we are rightly proud! Yet we have remained largely and often deliberately ignorant of that part of our Unitarian and Universalist heritage that includes churches built with slave labor; missions to "civilize" indigenous peoples like the Ute of Colorado; betrayals by the UUA and its General Assembly — which means us, the congregations! — of Black ministers and lay leaders during the 1960s and 70s; and the more recent controversies about racial equity and white supremacy in UUA staff hiring and power structures. The experiences of people of color in our movement are truths that white UUs too often turn away from, or hurry past in search of a feel-good Kuumbaya moment.

Here's another example. It's easy for us to feel good about our denomination's long history of support for gay and lesbian rights, and the fact that UU ministers were blessing same-sex unions decades before "marriage equality" was conceivable. And yet, even as we wave that beautiful rainbow flag, we fail to see the pain we keep causing our transgender, non-binary (meaning neither female nor male), and gender non-conforming kindred with ignorant assumptions, micro-aggressions, and sometimes flat out bigotry. To learn about an example of this, I encourage you to visit the website of the UU World, our denomination's magazine. The home page is currently devoted to a recent controversy over a well-intended but hurtful article published in the latest issue. (If you have questions on this topic, I am available to chat.)

When we fail to live up to our values as a religious community, we demonstrate our brokenness. Which can become an opportunity for healing, if we make it so. I was pondering these issues when I came across the article about Kintsugi, and I immediately thought that the image of a kintsugi chalice would be a wonderful way to convey that we do not need to hide our brokenness and past mistakes as UUs in order to repair our Beloved Community and celebrate its beauty.

Unsurprisingly, I am not the first person to have had this idea. Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, an organization of African-American clergy and lay leaders within our denomination, has created worship materials for addressing the racial wounds within our congregations and our movement. Want to guess what the children's activity is? Making a kinstugi chalice! You can learn more about Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, other

People of Color organizations within our movement, and our UU history of internal racial brokenness and restorative justice, at UUA.org.

Kintsugi also speaks to me on a personal level, as someone who has had to rebuild integrity after brokenness in my personal life, and heal wounds caused by things I'd rather not look at. I bet this makes me a lot like you. Brokenness, after all, is part of the human condition. So is the ability to heal. And what makes real healing possible is the hunger for truth. When my need for liberation from suffering finally outweighs the deadly grip of denial, and I find myself willing — even eager — to unearth the truth of my feelings and experiences even in their ugliness, then healing can happen. Then I can manifest my inherent wholeness in a way that does not hide my imperfections, but celebrates the beauty of the repair.

Nadine Gordimer said, “The truth isn’t always beauty, but the hunger for it is.” Let us hunger for the light of Truth. Let us yearn for that light so that we may see what is real, and confront it honestly. Where the truth is beautiful, may we celebrate it. Where the truth is painful, may we admit it. And may we make our reparations in ways that do not obscure the hard truths of history, but that proclaim the beauty of our commitment to healing what has been broken.

So may it be.