



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Finding beauty in a broken world

Clay Nelson © 8 September 2019

Borrowing a line from T S Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Terry Tempest Williams opens her book, *Finding beauty in a broken world*, with this reflection:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins—
The cosmos works by harmony of tensions like the lyre and the bow
And so it was I entered the broken world
Turning shadow into transient beauty
Once upon a time, we knew the world from birth

We watched the towers collapse. We watched America choose war. The peace in our hearts shattered.

How to pick up the pieces?
What to do with these pieces?

I was desperate to retrieve the poetry I had lost.

Standing in a rocky point in Maine, looking east toward the horizon at dusk, I faced the ocean, "*Give me one wild word.*" It was all I asked of the sea.

The tide was out. The mudflats exposed. A gull picked up a large white clam, hovered high above the rocks, then dropped it. The clam broke open, and the gull swooped down to eat the fleshy animal inside.

"Give me one wild word to follow..."

And the word the sea rolled back to me was "mosaic."

This is how Williams explains her decision to journey to Ravenna, Italy to become an apprentice in a mosaic workshop.

Ravenna is home to dazzling mosaics that tell the narrative of its spiritual history of evolving pagan and Christian perspectives in cut stone and glass. What Williams learned from her teacher was that the techniques to breaking and composing the tiles and glass take only fifteen minutes to learn and a lifetime to master. "A mosaic is a conversation between what is broken," she wrote. A life-long conversation, I surmised.

It was that line that got snagged in my brain, demanding I explore its meaning more fully in today's talk. It reminded me of a painting Rachel did of one of our members who had had a mastectomy and chose not to hide the scar but to adorn it with a tattooed work of art. It

reminded me of a line from the Leonard Cohen song *Anthem* we heard earlier, “*There is a crack (a crack in everything). That’s how the light gets in.*”

The opening question in my conversation is where does the beauty come from?

Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel prize in Literature, says it flows from:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.
It is the same life that shoots in joy
through the numberless blades of grass
and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.
It is the same life that is rocked
In the ocean cradle of birth and death,
In ebb and flow.
I feel my limbs are made glorious
by the touch of this world of life.
And my pride is from the life-throb of ages
dancing in my blood this moment.

Trappist monk, writer, theologian, mystic, poet, social activist, and scholar of comparative religion Thomas Merton answered my question thus: “There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all. *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out of me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature. . . .”

Tagore’s and Merton’s words resonate for me from my youth when I would walk a deserted beach being pounded by a relentless surf on a stormy day, or walk in bush after a rain shower, the silence being broken by the birdsong. In such moments I encountered not only nature, I also first became acquainted with what I could alternately refer to as my centre, myself, my soul, but all too briefly.

Instead, sad to say, as years went by doubts I came to learn often overshadowed that early insight, that early intuition. But, I also can look back on moments where it shone through, where bit by bit I came into who I was at heart. I’ve now reached the time in my life when I think I’m more attuned to my true self than I ever was before, though I’ve still got a lot more learning to do.

We’re in territory here that every religious tradition that I know of touches on. Victoria Safford describes it as “the part of you that is most uniquely you, deeper than mind, more durable even than your will — and holy if you like that word, or sacred. It is the essence of identity, radiant with dignity and worth.”

The Irish priest John O’Donohue writes, “There is a voice within you that no one, not even you, has ever heard — the music of your own spirit. It takes a long time to sift through the more superficial voices on your own gift in order to enter into the deep significance and

tonality of your Otherness. When you speak from that deep, inner voice, you are really speaking from the unique tabernacle of your own presence.”

Christians call it the soul. Buddhists call it original nature. Jews call it the spark of the divine. Hindus call it Atman. Humanists call it identity and integrity. Each of those names carries different descriptors and radically different theologies, yet they each also point to a universal experience of true identity that is fundamentally ours.

And for all of them, coming to know and affirm this part of ourselves is central to the religious life because in a basic way this gives us a sense of agency and purpose. Knowing who we are teaches us that we are not flotsam and jetsam being blown across the world. We are beings with worth and integrity, as well as, in Merton’s words, sweetness and beauty, capable of meaningful action and joy.

So, how is it that so often it seems that instead we are stuck in the mire of doubt and despair, doing damage to each other and the earth?

Parker Palmer, author, educator and activist, frames all this with the notion we are each born with a true self. The problem is, Parker says, that “from the moment of birth onward, the soul or true self is assailed by deforming forces from without and within.” That is to say, not only do other people impinge on us, but we can create our own demons in how we respond. So, many of us take on lives of what Palmer calls “self-impersonation,” identities that we create to respond to the circumstances we face but have little to do with who we are.

In time, we may even lose touch with the true self we sought to protect. And when that happens, he said, we are at risk of losing our moral compass, that sense of identity that grounds us. Our essential beauty becomes trapped within us.

“I have met too many people,” Palmer writes, “who suffer from an empty self. They have a bottomless pit where their identity should be — an inner void they try to fill with competitive success, consumerism, sexism, racism, or anything that might give them the illusion of being better than others.”

It is the kind of attitude that looks like self-centredness but actually has its origin in no sense of self at all. What may appear as a selfish act, Parker says, is actually an effort to fill the emptiness we feel inside, often in ways that harm us or bring grief to others.

We don’t necessarily do it intentionally, but because we have lost connection with our own inner integrity we allow ourselves to be co-opted into someone else’s scheme, a scheme that offers no true benefits for us but profits the other in any number of ways.

Others of us may be aware of an inner true self but shelter it from others around us. So, we live a divided life, split between the constructed self that we show to the larger world and the hidden identity we keep to ourselves.

We may get by, even succeed materially living like that, but inside we never lose sight of the lie at the centre of how we live our lives. And that lie works on us, often breeding anxiety, self-loathing, or just numbness. It makes for a precarious existence. So, how do we recover our true self, that hidden wholeness that is our birth right? How do we break through the shell concealing our inner beauty?

Palmer argues that we must find or create safe space for our true self to show itself. This is not as easy as may sound. Our true self has experienced enough wounds to be wary. It may be hidden away, but it is not soft or weak. Instead, he says, it is more like a wild animal, and like a wild animal it is “tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy and self-sufficient.”

This image invites us to see our true self as a source of strength and courage. It is something, he says, that knows how to survive in hard places, but it is also shy, seeking safety in the dense underbrush. It won't be flushed out, or badgered or harangued into showing itself.

Palmer tells the story of his own history with depression, which he came to see as centred in a lost sense of self. The experience, he says, left him in a “deadly darkness,” where “the faculties that I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered.”

All the same, he said, “from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul.”

Inner work can help acquaint us with our true self, but we can never fully come into ourselves by ourselves. We need engagement with a community.

Unfortunately, community is not always a safe place. As Parker Palmer puts it, “community in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away. In spaces ranging from congregations to classrooms, we preach and teach, assert and argue, claim and proclaim, admonish and advise, and generally behave in ways that drive everything original and wild into hiding.”

In these circumstances, he says, “the intellect, emotions, will, and ego may emerge, but not the soul: we scare off all the soulful things, like respectful relationship, goodwill, and hope.”

What we need, he argues, is a context that respects the solitude of our individual selves while affirming our deep connection to one another.

In such a setting, he says, “Solitude does not necessarily mean living apart from others; rather it means never living apart from one's self.” While community, he says, “does not mean necessarily living face-to-face with others; rather it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other.”

Creating that sort of context requires that communities like ours develop a kind of discipline, discipline that counteracts a prevailing culture that measures the worth of people by what they produce, by their gender, their race, and the dozen other ways we judge one another as we compete for glory and gain.

The discipline that we need, says Parker Palmer, is one that is centred in cultivating the soul, the true self, the hidden wholeness within each of us, and elevating it from a shy presence we seek in the forest to a teacher.

As life breaks through to who we are the light gets in, revealing the beauty of who we are in the mosaic we have become. A mosaic that tells the story of how we found ourselves again

from that time on the beach. We have become a work of art, the light revealing the beauty of our connection to one another and to ourselves.