

7/25/10 Sermon

“Beauty, Truth, and Goodness”

David Hudson, Speaker

Twenty years ago our young family took a short backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail in western Maine – an overnight – from Grafton Notch near the New Hampshire border, over the twin peaks of the Baldpate Mountains, to a valley on the other side. It was a glorious trip; a front that brought several days of heavy rain had just passed through, the skies were clear and blue, the air dry, and the temperature – in the mid-70s – perfect.

Early in the morning of the first day we left our van in the small parking area in the notch where the trail crosses the road and began the ascent of West Baldpate. It was a steeper climb than I remembered from a hike years earlier. As fit as I was at the time, I struggled, carrying the lion’s share of the family’s gear – 60 pounds, I figured. But we all made it, including the old man and the four year-old, who had enough to do to get himself to the top. As you can imagine, the climb was worth it. We could make out peaks far to the northeast across the vast spruce forests of Maine – a hundred miles or more – all the way to the big one, Mt. Katahdin, we imagined.

We lunched on the top, took lots of pictures, and descended to the headwaters of a small brook on the northeast side of the mountain, where we set up our tent and spent the night. In the morning, after breakfast, we hiked a few hundred yards back up the trail to a side trail that descended down the mountain along the brook to a road, where our trip would end. I hiked back up over the mountain (like the mule that I was) to fetch the van and bring it the 20 miles or so around the mountain to the place where this trail crossed the road.

Kate and the three boys were just emerging when I arrived with the van, for years of disuse had left this more-or-less abandoned side trail covered with fallen trees. It had been slow going. We loaded up, and, as we drove off, I said something about the wonderful record of our little trip we would have in the pictures Kate had taken. It was then that she realized that we had left the camera on a log at the trail junction where we had separated earlier in the day. We were devastated. Knowing that our memories of the experience would stay with us did little to console us.

One day the following January, however, Kate answered the phone to hear a man telling her that he believed he had her camera. He was a newspaper columnist in Maine, syndicated throughout New England. Gene Letourneau was his name, an outdoor writer, a name I recognized.

His story was that a young man thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail had found the camera on the log where we had stopped to rest – the same day, I imagine – and carried it north with him the last 300 miles of his journey to the northern terminus of the trail on the summit of Katahdin, using it along the way until the film ran out.

When he returned to his home in Charlotte, North Carolina, he developed the film, which, of course, included the pictures Kate had taken. Seeing the trio of bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, tow-headed boys smiling proudly at the top of the mountain in front of the cairn marking the summit, his mother – one Martha Peters - announced that they had to find the camera's owners and get these beautiful pictures to them.

But how? Well ... it turned out that she knew Gene Letourneau. She sent the camera and the pictures to him and asked him for help. He wrote a column about the event, including a picture of the three boys, asking for anyone who might know them to contact him. And, wouldn't you know, several employees of the place on the coast we had been vacationing for a number of years – Hiram Blake Camp – saw the picture, recognized the boys, read the column and called Mr. Letourneau, who then called us. This is the camera, and this is one of the pictures Kate took. We treasure them, as you can imagine. It's clear why the hiker's mother was determined that we should have them.

Why do I relate this story – apart from the fact that I love to tell it – and haven't had the chance to do so for years? It's because of what it says about the concepts of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, which we as UUs purport to honor. Eileen and Ace Edwards spent real money at the Heart's Desire auction back in February for the privilege of presenting me with a sermon topic. "Beauty, Truth, and Goodness- Individual and Collective" was their choice, and this is my take on it.

Sages have devoted lifetimes to developing entire philosophies on the subject. I have 20 minutes – less now. I will skim the surface. But again, this story reveals a lot about the subject.

Who could not see beauty from the top of that mountain? Or in the image of those three happy little boys? But beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It is subjective. It is the view of the individual – or of the "I" sphere – as Ken Wilbur, the integral philosopher, tells us. Sri Aurobindo calls it, of the three ways, the "way of the heart". The father of process philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead, considered beauty the motive, compelling force in the Universe, its defining characteristic. There are some forms that seem to be universally

regarded as beautiful – classical architecture, a sweeping vista, the patterns of a snowflake, a human shape, a face – but, in the end, this form of truth must be individual and subjective.

A stranger's gesture of extreme kindness and thoughtfulness – Martha Peters', requiring time and effort – represents, for me, goodness. Goodness – or morality – is the truth of the "we" sphere; it is the collection of values that represent agreements that we make among ourselves as to how we will get along, Wilbur says. It is Aurobindo's way of the will or action.

Postmodernism would tell us that ideas about goodness, then, are cultural constructs – not absolutes, not carved in stone – like the early collection of such values that Moses brought back down from the mountain. They would be, then, collective notions of truth.

Henry Nelson Wieman, the process philosopher/theologian whom I have mentioned often, believes that goodness is the primary force in the Universe – that we create it through the process of creative interchange with our fellows on the planet – that we are compelled to do so – and that the world moves slowly, but inexorably toward goodness. Goodness happens, he says, when we absorb the view of another – a view different from our own – into our own worldview – altering our view – enlarging it – broadening it.

But Wieman does not delineate forms of goodness. He lays out the process by which it operates. It is not subjective – but inter-subjective – emerging, as it does from culture and human interchange; goodness changes; it grows.

Some would see this act of kindness as evidence of objective truth – with a capital "T; not modernists – heirs of the Enlightenment – for whom only the measureable, external world of material "stuff" can be the subject of Truth – but others for whom the interior world is equally real and valid. I would be among those who would assert that there is, operating in the Universe, a power or force that compels us to goodness – a powerful creative force for life – what the philosopher Bergson called the "élan vital" – the life force – I along with Emerson and the process philosophers Whitehead and Hartshorne and Wieman and Rebecca Parker and the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

Objective truth is the province – or view – of the "it" sphere – says Wilbur. "It" is what is. It is Aurobindo's way of the intellect.

Emerson would say that Truth is individual, in that it is something we intuit. We don't learn it; we know it in our guts; we need only open ourselves to it. When we do, it comes to us; we know what is right and true.

Most of the great spiritual traditions grew from the inspirations of and revelations to a single sage – the Truths of individuals – Jesus, Buddha, Muhammed. But even the great sages were of a time and place; their ideas about Truth emerge from a given perspective or worldview – making them, in part, the products of culture.

The philosopher Georg Hegel, in the early 19th Century, was the first to advance the idea that Truth changes and grows – that it develops as culture and human consciousness develop, hand-in-hand. Hegel believed that Truth is a product of worldview, that it is valid as such, but that, in the stream of the unfolding or development of Absolute Truth, it is only an incomplete stage.

He and Bergson, at the end of the 19th Century, along with the process philosophers of the 20th Century, believed in the idea of the universe as unfolding, as a creative “becoming”, moving in a direction, drawn toward the three core values of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness – the “eternal forms”, Whitehead says, that draw us by Divine persuasion in what they call “the direction of perfection”.

Integral philosophy, led by Ken Wilbur, has grown out of the work of Hegel, Bergson, the process philosophers, and others, to further this idea of the development both of cultural worldviews and individual consciousness.

Culture, they say, has developed in stages, from the earliest archaic stage, through the magical stage, in which natural spirits are the motive forces in the world; through the traditional/mythic stage, out of which the great spiritual traditions grew in pre-modernity, and which is still alive and well today among fundamentalists all over the globe; through modernity, the stage of rationality whose development we call the Enlightenment; through post-modernity – the stage of relativity, that holds that Truth is only a cultural construct and that all truths are equal, the stage of multi-culturalism; to the integral stage, which holds not that all truths are equal, but, rather, that all truths are partial – that, as consciousness grows broader and deeper, to include more of what is in the Universe, new Truths develop which transcend existing truths but also include them. Again, this is an articulation of a process whereby truth grows. Nothing is thrown out with the bath – the way that the validity of the unseen, interior world ... the world of the spirit – was thrown out by scientific materialism with the ascendancy of modernity.

Sounding like Emerson, Wilbur says that within each of us lies the capacity and potential to develop or expand to an awareness of the Universal Spirit, of which we are a part. And, again sounding like Emerson, he says that

intuitions of that Universal Spirit are available to all of us, at any level of development – sometimes as a “peak experience” – the kind we might experience at the birth of a child or on the top of a mountain.

And here is where the rubber meets the road for us UUs, who honor the principle of the “free and disciplined search for Truth” – for whom no truth is carved in stone – and who are often skeptical of the whole idea of Truth. In his book *Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution*, the integral thinker Steve McIntosh suggests that the way to make Beauty, Truth, and Goodness real in our lives ... the way to broaden and develop our own consciousness ... the way to improve the human condition at the same time ... and the way to assist in the evolution of culture from one worldview to a more expansive and inclusive one: that way is to practice them – to live them. In so doing we metabolize them, taking them in and giving them out – breathing them in and out, as it were – creating a circuit of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness.

We take in Truth through learning and give it back through teaching.

We take in beauty by appreciating it – fleeting glimpses of relative actual perfection, McIntosh calls them – and we give it back through creative expression of many kinds.

The spiritual practice of Goodness includes the ways we teach truth and express beauty, McIntosh says, but it also includes stillness – receiving goodness through contemplation, meditation, prayer, worship – all forms of stillness, he says. This is what Emerson meant by making oneself open to Truth.

With a new understanding of the significance of our everyday actions, we can come to sense that our ordinary activities can become a kind of spiritual practice through which we reach for an expanded consciousness and awareness – and, pulling in the wisdom that we find there, use it to promote the common good and improve the human condition.

For McIntosh, the manifestations of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness that we encounter or create in our daily lives are the most direct ways that we can experience the Universal Spirit. These are the comprehensible elements of Deity, he says. In other words, this is where we see God. And he adds that it is in the pursuit of these values that we find the pinnacle of human life.

Returning our camera, Martha Peters practiced goodness. She expanded her consciousness – just a bit perhaps – widening it to include a broader understanding of “we” – just a bit closer to the notion of universal

compassion. And in the process she shared it with the Hudsons – breathing out goodness and truth so that we could breathe it in – pulling us into wider, broader, deeper consciousness – improving the human condition in the process, perhaps. The process philosopher Charles Hartshorne would say that this is an example of “our existence from moment to moment enriching the divine life”. Wieman would say that this is creating goodness, lured or persuaded by the goodness that he calls God.

Whether or not we believe in any concept of Spirit, there is great power in the practice of these primary values of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness – Whitehead’s “eternal forms” – for it is in doing so that our principle becomes more than a nice, fuzzy idea. Beauty, Truth, and Goodness may not be absolutes, carved on stone tablets. They may be social constructs. They may be unique to the individual. They may change with time, evolve. But, regardless, the practice of these values makes the world a better place, enriches us as practitioners, expanding our consciousness, drawing it to a higher level, and contributing, if only infinitesimally, to the evolution of our culture. This is what it means to dedicate oneself and one’s movement to a free and disciplined search for Truth.

It is exactly what the founders of the UU Society of Geneva, Illinois, meant when they wrote their covenant in 1842, a covenant that congregation recites in worship to this day. They will recite it this morning, I am sure! They did when Kate and I were members 22 years ago. They will say:

“Being desirous of promoting practical goodness in the world, and of aiding each other in our moral and religious improvement, we have associated ourselves together—not as agreeing in opinion, not as having attained universal truth in belief or perfection in character, but as seekers after truth and goodness.”

May we faithfully conduct such a free and disciplined search! And may that search change our lives and the world.