

Who is Beautiful?
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Sunday, May 7, 2023
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

In April of (2014), (Lupita Amondi Nyong'o, the author of the children's book *Sulwe* that we heard earlier) was named "The Most Beautiful Woman" by *People* (magazine) and was named the new face of Lancôme, making her the first black woman to appear on the brand. Later that November, she was named "Woman of the Year" by *Glamour*, [Lupita Nyong'o - Wikipedia](#). But Nyong'o drew on her own childhood experiences to write the book. In her childhood she received the message that she was too dark to be beautiful.

In her book *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* Jenny Morris writes, "I was riding the subway one day when this woman came up to me, sat down by me, and said, 'Oh, my God, it's such a shame! Such a pretty girl, such ugly hands (my hands and feet are deformed by syndactylism). So I said to her, 'So, would it be better if I were all ugly?'" Can Jenny Morris not possibly be beautiful?

In a longer quote from the same book Morris writes, "The assumptions about us are: That we feel ugly, inadequate and ashamed of our disability. That we crave to be 'normal' and 'whole.' That nothing can be gained from the experience. That whatever we choose to do or think is done as 'therapy' to take our mind off our condition. That we are naïve and lead sheltered lives. That we need 'taking out of ourselves,' with diversions and rewards that only the normal world can provide. That we pursue an interest because it is a 'challenge' through which we can 'prove' ourselves capable. That we feel our condition is an unjust punishment. That our disability has made us bitter and neurotic. That we never give up hope of a cure. That we are asexual or sexually inadequate. That any able-bodied person who marries us must have done so for a suspicious motive and never through love. That if we have a partner who is also disabled, we chose each other for no other reason. That if our relationship fails, it is entirely due to our disability. That if we are gifted, successful or attractive before the onset of disability our fate is infinitely more 'tragic' than if we were none of these things." So, no person with a disability can be attractive, can be beautiful?

But perhaps ideas are changing. This week Mattel announced a new Barbie doll, one with Down's Syndrome. Wyatt Grantham-Philips reported for the Associated Press that, "Barbie's new doll representing a person with Down syndrome is part of Mattel's 2023 Fashionistas line, which is aimed at increasing diversity and inclusivity. Previous dolls that have been introduced to the Fashionistas line include a Ken doll with a prosthetic leg, a Barbie with hearing aids and dolls with a skin condition called vitiligo," [Mattel introduces first Barbie with Down syndrome - The Washington Post](#).

As a child I thought I couldn't be beautiful because we had to shop for my clothes in the Chubby department. But recently I went to a store and there in a large display above the women's department was a picture of a large size model looking confident and beautiful in a two-piece bathing suit. I heard an interview on NPR this week with the author and illustrator Vashti Harrison about her new children's book *Big*. It has a picture of a big little girl in a pink tutu on the cover. Harrison starts with the girl as a

baby. For quite a while, “You’re so big” is a compliment -- until it isn’t. In the book the child eventually reclaims the word big and embraces it [Author-illustrator Vashti Harrison wants her book and the word 'big' to affirm kids : NPR.](#)

Back in 2004 a soap company commissioned a study on what women thought about beauty. “The study was conducted through a phone survey and interviewed 3,200 women aged 18 to 64 across ten countries. Following this study, (they) found that:

Only 2% of women call themselves ‘beautiful.’

72% find their beauty ‘average.’

68% strongly agreed that ‘the media and advertising set an unrealistic standard of beauty that most women can't ever achieve.’

75% wished that ‘the media did a better job portraying women of diverse physical attractiveness – shape, and size.’”

The company has had some missteps, but their real beauty campaign has gone viral, and people really are considering whether our conception of beauty is too narrow. [Dove Real Beauty Campaign: Analysis & Message | StudySmarter.](#)

That company commissioned a study of women, but can men not be beautiful? Again, society has been telling us “no.” Men can be ruggedly handsome. Comments about “pretty” boys are usually followed by some comment such as that they should have been a girl. Beauty apparently is gendered, or, I might hope, it is past tense – has been gendered

I don’t think one has to wear certain things to be beautiful, but men are more restricted by society than women. If I come into a congregational event wearing a fedora, vest and tie people may give me compliments on my outfit. If one of you who identifies as male comes to a congregational event wearing some makeup, some ruffles and lace you are more likely to get sideways glances than compliments. It is hardly fair. Can we not all wear whatever makes us feel beautiful?

And for those who identify as gender queer, I am old enough to remember the long running Saturday Night Live skits of Pat, [Pat \(Saturday Night Live\) - Wikipedia.](#) I did not recognize them as painfully biased then, but Joey Soloway, the non-binary and gender non-conforming creator, producer and director of the Amazon original series “TransParent” said they felt the premise and character were painful to non-binary and transgender people. Can one not be gender queer and beautiful?

The Unitarian Universalist flower communion that we will celebrate today honors everyone’s beauty. The ceremony is 100 years old this year. UU ministers David and Teresa Schwartz have written a brief history of its creator the Rev. Norbert Čapek.

“His mother was a devout Catholic, his father agnostic. He became an acolyte at age 10, in 1890 at St. Martin’s Catholic Church. In the years that followed, he became disillusioned: his priest was a cynic.

“At 18, apprenticed to his uncle, a successful tailor in Vienna, Norbert discovered the Baptists and became a minister. He founded almost a dozen churches from Ukraine to Budapest.

Yet, slowly, his faith became more and more liberal.

“He left Bohemia under government threat and accepted a call to serve a Baptist church in New York City... until one day in 1919. That day, he wrote in his diary: ‘I cannot be a Baptist anymore, even in compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside me.’

“Norbert and his wife, Mája Čapek, joined a Unitarian church in New Jersey in 1921—for the same reason a whole lot of you did: their children liked the religious education program....

“World War I ended. His home country now independent, he and Maja returned home to Czechoslovakia.

“His Unitarian church was the Prague Liberal Religious Fellowship. In just 20 years, his church had 3,200 members.

“The traditional Christian communion service of bread and wine wouldn’t meet the needs of his congregation, because his church—like ours—had people who believed different things.

“Čapek turned to the beauty of the countryside; to the beauty of flowers. In 1923, he developed the flower ceremony. He asked his congregants to bring a flower to church—from their gardens, the field, or the roadside. He invited each person to place their flower in a vase. There was the church community, no less unique for being united. Following the service, each person could take a flower from the vase—a different one than they had brought.

“Čapek was a visionary minister with a church ahead of its time, a BOLD church, a church thinking beyond its doors, beyond what it thought possible.

“It was a church that was willing to take risks; to make tough decisions; to bear disappointment; and to build a new way...first by building a church, and that church could build up the world.

“That is our church. That was Čapek’s church.

“For this, the Gestapo arrested him in 1942. The Nazis accused Čapek of listening to foreign broadcasts, and sent him to the Dachau concentration camp.

“Even in starvation and torture, he held a flower ceremony with his fellow prisoners, finding whatever flowers they could among the weeds of the camp. They testified to a beauty larger than themselves, and a love that would outlive them.

“The Nazis killed Norbert Čapek. But his spirit, courage, and commitment (his beauty, if you will) live on, today. Those qualities have passed, now, to us, to make them real.

“His wife Mája brought the flower ceremony to the Unitarian Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1940.

“What we are about to do is not a historical reenactment of something over and done, but an affirmation of our continuity with the generations of struggle for ever-widening liberty.

“This flower ceremony, lovely though it is, isn’t a diversion from ugly reality, but a gentle fierceness which proclaims that in the midst of sinister days there is always the light of beauty. (Remember the words I shared earlier from the theologian Robert McAfee Brown, “Where there is beauty apparent, we are to enjoy it; where there is beauty hidden, we are to unveil it; where there is no beauty at all, we are to create it.”)

“We are here not to recall something that happened, but to remember something that is happening: to re-member—to put it back together again—and in that remembering, may we put ourselves back together again, each as a part of the body of this (beautiful) community: out of many, one.

“Today, we celebrate this ritual of solemnity and joy.

“As Čapek asked his people to bring a flower and celebrate beauty, so shall we,” [The Story of Norbert Čapek's Flower Ceremony | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#).

We celebrate the beauty of ourselves. We celebrate the beauty of each other. We celebrate the beauty of our congregation. We celebrate the beauty of our world. Society may try to blind us to that beauty, but it is our work to see beauty everywhere even as Čapek and his fellow prisoners did. May we too testify to a beauty larger than ourselves, and to a love that will outlive us.

As the Rev. Kimberlee Tomczak Carlson says, “May we savor the beauty of our abundance and diversity, always cherishing one another.”

I invite you to come forward and take a flower different from the one you brought symbolizing the sharing of our beauty, gifts and brightness with one another. If you cannot come forward, please indicate to an usher that you wish them to bring a flower to you. If you are with us via Zoom this morning you might virtually both offer and claim a flower in the chat.