

Practicing Peace in our Everyday Lives with Beauty, Joy, and Gratitude

*For you shall go out in joy,
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their
hands.*

Isaiah 55:12

On September 10, 2002, world-renowned Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim defied his government's travel ban by crossing into the West Bank under diplomatic escort to perform at the Friends School in Ramallah. He took this risk because he believed deeply that the beauty of his music could help Palestinian school-children see Israelis in new ways.

When Daniel arrived at the school, which has maintained a calming, nonviolent presence in the region since 1889, the concert hall was already filled with excited Palestinian seventh- through twelfth-graders wearing school uniforms of blue and white striped shirts. They had been waiting expectantly for the great Israeli musician, and they applauded enthusiastically as Daniel took the stage. He began by playing Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," and the students listened with rapt delight. After he finished his concert, and the lively applause had subsided, he said: "What I can do is play music . . . for you, and maybe this way, in a very small way for these few moments, we are able to break down the hatred that is so much in the region."¹⁹

Daniel's concert at the Friends school brought him public condemnation and death threats at home, but the Spirit that rimmed his music with beauty that day furthered the cause of peace by

opening the hearts of young Palestinians. At a master class he offered after the concert, Nadia Avouri, one of the students who performed for him, said, “Music breaks all barriers; I don’t look at him as a Jewish person or an Israeli person. I look at him as a musician.”²⁰ In subsequent years Daniel has followed up this initial concert by creating an ongoing fund to provide instruments for the Friends School’s music program.

Poet William Carlos Williams reflected on the absolute necessity for the wisdom that beauty imparts: “It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men and women die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.”²¹ Beauty, joy, and gratitude have the spiritual strength to break through political barriers, transcend religious differences, and bring justice and peace to a world awaiting their penetrating truths and gentle solace.



First, I want to hear about beauty. I want to know what you love. I want to know what words of love have been written on your heart—how you could smile at the bold beauty of a solitary hedgerow campion [flower] in December; how your taste buds might find sweet delight in freshly dug early potatoes, the way your flesh glows in the summer sun. I will tell you one of my amazing delights—how I held my wife up, her arms clamped around my neck, and how I felt against my body the bulge in her belly slip downwards as our daughter came into the world. Love creates beauty. I want to know how you taste beauty, about the woods and beaches that you love; I want to know if God-resonant Bach harmonies lift the top off your head. I want to know how you suck life into your being and live it, feel it, like sharp air in the lungs on a frozen, moon-smiling, diamond-clear night, and how your chest opens to compass the Cosmos.

Adrian Rose, 1998

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[Beauty] breaks through not only at a few highly organized points, it breaks through almost everywhere. Even the minutest things reveal it as well as do the sublimest things, like the stars. Whatever one sees through the microscope, a bit of mold, for example, is charged with beauty. Everything from a dewdrop to Mount Shasta is the bearer of beauty. And yet beauty has no function, no utility. Its value is intrinsic, not extrinsic. It is its own excuse for being. It greases no wheels, it bakes no puddings. It is a gift of sheer grace, a gratuitous largesse. It must imply behind things a Spirit that enjoys beauty for its own sake and that floods the world everywhere with it. Wherever it can break through, it does break through, and our joy in it shows that we are in some sense kindred to the giver and revealer of it.

Rufus M. Jones, 1920

No eyes that have seen beauty,
ever lose their sight.

Jean Toomer, 1923

As I follow the path of my Spirit,
great Joy comes to me.
Because I see everything is necessary—indeed,
I am often permitted to see the meaning and the holiness in
everything,
even that which we call evil and depraved.
When I am in tune,
everything is a miracle to me;
everything is a message bearer;
there is meaning in each moment;
every bush is a burning one;
every leaf is aflame;
every instant is from heaven—
guiding, wooing, instructing me,
leading me through my astonishing life.

Gene Knudsen Hoffman, 1975

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I am inclined to think that joy is the motor,
the thing that keeps everything else going. . . .
Joy produces energy.
Joy makes us strong.

Richard J. Foster, 1978

When my grandchildren were small,
I found I could make them laugh
by rocking them back and forth on my knees
and then suddenly changing the rhythm.
So it is with us.
Joy is the edge between terror and security,
we don't let it in
and so God has to take us by surprise.

Barbara Cummings St. John, 1995

When my spirit is animated by my religion
and is aware of the inviolable Truth prevailing,
my heart dances for joy and gratitude
and sings the praise of God!
Every moment is a mystery.
Even this body of mine,
what a mystery it is,
whose heart is beating incessantly without my knowing,
and whose lungs breathe ceaselessly without my knowing!
This air is God's, the light is God's, we are God's.
I am living with all the universe,
and all the universe is living with me, in God.

Yukio Irie, 1957

Are there difficult things that you can laugh at?
Chances are if you can laugh at them,
it means that you have found a capacity to carry the difficulties
with you
as you consider them and you try to understand them.

If there is conflict for which you have no humor at all and cannot bear humor, it probably means that you do not have the capacity to do this work with your most gracefulness.

John Calvi, 2003

Sometimes those days when the earth gives us its blessing it comes at precisely the moment when the blessing seems to have been taken away. They come at time of loss and uncertainty when it might seem that we have no reason for thankfulness at all. A few years ago I went to visit my doctor because of a rather frightening and violent pain quite unlike anything I had ever known. . . . “We’ll investigate the worst possibilities first,” he said and proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for me to go into the hospital. It all happened so quickly that I was sure there must be something very seriously wrong. . . .

I walked out of his [office] feeling stunned. . . . Yet I walked out into the street and it shone like the New Jerusalem. . . . Houses, shops, pavements, bare winter trees, were all incredibly beautiful to me that morning. Everything was transfigured. Even the fishmonger’s smile, when he handed us two cod fillets, seemed beautiful and very precious, as if it was a gift. In fact everything seemed to be an astonishing gift on that bleak morning when I wondered whether I was being asked to give it all back again.

Jo Farrow, 1990

I step into the abyss of faith; out past logic, theology, and my deepest need, desire, and efforts to stay warm and safe and comforted; out into what looks like an abyss because I can’t see, feel, touch, taste, or more than barely believe in God in that darkness.

“Thank you, God,” I say. “Bless you for what I see but don’t understand. For what hurts. For all I’ve experienced and will experience. Help me to let you, cold or warm, comforting or frozen, into every room of my heart.”

I feel the quiet that precedes peace. But I sense that I still haven’t gone far enough. Even this isn’t honest enough. Suddenly,

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unexpectedly, the last thing I thought I'd say is torn out of me.
“Thank you for the destruction, God.”

Julie Gochenour, 2003

Not at set hours of the day,
nor in set seasons of the year,
does my heart offer its prayer to Heaven.
But it utters its thanks for each sparkle of a child's eye . . .
for each kindly look of the aged,
for every sign of humanity's strength,
and for every noble word of wisdom.
The glorious sun and the melancholy moon call forth gratitude.
Often, at a beaming smile or the slightest nod of a passer-by,
have I taken off my hat in reverent prayer.
For words of tested friendship I bow my knees to God.
Every object of nature and every act of sympathy is an occasion of
thanksgiving.

Inazo Nitobe, 1909

The gospel understood is
“glad tidings of great joy” to all people.
Are you making it so?
Are you doing your part to make it so?

Lucretia Mott, 1867

This is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God: Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you go, so that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one. Thereby you can be a blessing in them and make the witness of God in them bless you. Then you will be a sweet savor and a blessing to the Lord God.

George Fox, written from Launceston Jail, 1656

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Queries

How does my experience of beauty through sight, sound, taste, smell or touch enhance my daily life?

When has beauty in music, art, or the earth jolted me out of my routine existence, and enabled me to see the world with new eyes?²²

Do I live with a grateful heart? How do I express my gratitude?