



Macy Gray's "Beauty In The World"

Greg Pelley, Ministerial Intern

Delivered at [WellSprings Congregation](#), Chester Springs, PA

April 21, 2013

Edited Transcript

I found myself the other day walking through the produce section at Wegmans Food Market. I saw a particularly striking eggplant, mottled and streaked in a deep purple and cream. Now, I don't particularly care for eggplant. Nonetheless, this one was really quite beautiful: richly colored and wonderfully shaped. I immediately started quietly humming the song we just sang, "Beauty in the World" as I moved on through the aisle. And yes, I must confess, right there in front of the cabbage, I did, in fact, shake my booty... just a tiny bit. And that made me smile, lifted me from the drudgery of the grocery run, and reminded me how much fun life can be when I take the time to notice something beautiful, connect it to the world somehow and by so doing, connect myself to the world. A deeply spiritual experience right there between the apples and the potatoes, co-created by me, an eggplant, and a song.

I think that is what this message series, "Songs of the Spirit" is all about. It is about how we might express — connect — our spirituality abundantly in our everyday life. Not just about getting religion on Sunday morning, but how does it show up on Monday? How do we express the energy that charges us up here into the world?

I chose the song "Beauty in the World" today, not because of the eggplant, but more because I think we are co-creators of the abundant beauty that we can see in the world around us every day. It starts with, as the song goes, noticing the beauty around, but I think there are ways we can transform our lives by engaging in a practice of co-creation.

Prior to embarking on the path to ministry, I was an architect. Twenty-ish years ago, when I was neck-deep in the education and training for that work at the University of Illinois, the profession was still a white, male-dominated world. True, it was starting to change as more women and persons of color were beginning to arrive into the studios, and I think the landscape of the profession has blessedly become more diverse, for the better. But twenty years ago, we were still mostly white, mostly middle and upper-middle class, and male. And at that time, a design education meant spending many, many (many) hours in the university studios - the proverbial ivory towers where we learned to design, well, ivory towers.

Now, you can well imagine that as architecture students, one of the topics of discussion that would come up was *BEAUTY*. We had a professor that insisted that for something to be beautiful, above all other attributes, it had to have a clear order and a defined structure. At the time, I liked that idea. But then I ran across some images by a Swiss artist named Ursus Wehrli, whose work kind of pokes fun at our attempts to constrain beauty in such rational terms.

In any case, my understanding of beauty has and continues to evolve. Which is why I have recently become intrigued by another definition of beauty.

Alfred North Whitehead was a mathematician and philosopher of the early 20th century and one of the fathers of a rich and complex philosophical school of thought called process relational thinking. He sees beauty as the coming together of the most intensely contrasting things to create something new. Perhaps, this image approximates what Whitehead is saying: [Slide: *A flower growing through crack in the pavement*]

I invite you to hold on to this idea of creation of beauty for a moment.

There is a line of critical thinking that philosophers and theologians wrestle with called the *is/ought* question. This is the question of how do we understand the world as it IS, against the world as it OUGHT to be (as we might imagine it to be). Now, philosophers and theologians aren't the only ones who work on the is/ought questions. In fact, I think we all do this every day.

Macy Gray's song points to this. We just sang:

*I know you're fed up
Life don't let up for us
All they talk about is what's been going down?
What's been messed up for us?*

It is very easy to get stuck there - in the *is* of the world, or at least in the *is* of the world that drags us down into fear, suspicion, and even violence.

Let's take the recent, very high-profile story of the death of Trayvon Martin. In this story, we find a disconnect between the way the world *is* — a world where a young black man in a hoodie is viewed as suspicious and dangerous, a world where a young white man fears for his safety such that he feels it necessary to patrol his neighborhood armed with a 9mm pistol — and the way many of us think the world *ought* to be. That is, a world where a young black man in a hoodie is not considered a threat to anyone; a world where a young white man does not live in fear of any other person and finds no need for a weapon. So Whitehead is suggesting that when we bring together intensely contrasting things, beauty is what emerges and that beauty forms the bridge, a way to (re)connect the way the world *is* with the way we imagine it *ought* to be.

Into the landscape of architectural education that I described earlier... enters a professor at Auburn University named Samuel Mockbee. Mockbee's radical idea was to take his privileged architecture students out of their comfortable surroundings and place them in the middle of Hale County, Alabama, one of the poorest counties in Alabama, and by extension, the country. There, the students would design and build houses and civic structures for rural, mostly African-American and impoverished clients, real people with very real and worthy lives. It was an experiment in bringing together two intense contrasts, an attempt to transform both the residents of Hale County and the Auburn architecture students. This experiment would be called the Rural Studio.

One of the early projects completed by the students was a home for Anderson and Ora Lee Harris. When Mockbee first approached Mr. Harris and offered to have the Rural Studio design and build him and his wife a new home, Harris was living in a single-room shack with no plumbing or electricity. But Harris declined the offer of a new home, saying, "No, I don't think I'll take one of those today." (As Mockbee tells it, "As though [we were] selling Amway.")

Mockbee assumed that Harris was apprehensive because of the obvious distrust he must have learned, historically, of big white men from Mississippi trying to give something away. It is reasonable to see that such offers probably never turned out well.

But Harris objects to this characterization, saying, "I wasn't afraid of no white man. I didn't have nothing, and I was scared they'd take what I did have."

Harris's response is, perhaps, a reminder that we assume we are all working from the same map — that we take our world view for granted. Who wouldn't want a free house? Particularly, why wouldn't an impoverished elderly African-American man who, by his own admission, has nothing, not want a free house?

Despite the encounter, Mockbee's students wanted to work with the Harris family. In the telling of the story, the students were able, after much persuasion, to convince Harris to accept the help. Once he did, he relished the design process and spent much of his time helping the students and cooking meals for them.

From this coming together of intense contrasts, both social and cultural beauty was created. They call it the [Butterfly House](#). But I think the beauty of the architecture is really symbolic of a deeper beauty — a transformation of all those involved.

But to get to the transformation, we have to acknowledge the risks here for Harris, Mockbee, and the Rural Studio students.

Harris had to risk the vulnerability of his poverty, of his dignity, of his self-sufficiency. The Rural Studio students had to risk engaging with the Harris family with an openness to be changed by the process. It would have been easy to come in to Hale County as the privileged class and offer solutions to all the problems of poverty, race, class, and cultural differences. “We know how to fix your suffering, let us do it.” Instead, they risked their own worldview by engaging with an intensely contrasting one. Instead of bringing their preconceived ideas of what life was like for Anderson Harris, they engaged him in a conversation that I believe changed them all. And beauty emerged. Not simply the beauty of the Butterfly House, but a deeper beauty that connected the way the world *is* with the way they imagined the world *ought* to be.

So how would this idea of creating beauty work in the case of the death of Trayvon Martin? Could beauty be created? To be sure, to find the contrasting elements, the contrasting world views, the contrasting cultures, isn’t too hard to do. There are plenty of people who are resigned to the way the world is, and the death of Trayvon Martin is a tragic example of the *is*-ness of the world. And there are those who are outraged — outraged because they imagine, even demand, a view of the world that *ought* to be — free from the fear and violence that led to Trayvon’s death.

To create beauty as I have been talking about today would mean bringing together these contrasting elements, these people with intensely contrasting views, and engage in a process of dialog and understanding.

But there is a catch. For beauty, for transformation to occur, those that engage in this process must be willing to risk their own vulnerability. It won’t work if the dialog becomes about proving a point, convincing the other of the rightness of your position, of somehow winning. To engage in the work, the people involved must be willing to be profoundly changed by the encounter. They must be willing to not know what the results will be and to intentionally let them unfold. This is tough work, even countercultural, but I think with intention and practice, beauty is possible for all those touched by this case.

Yet, we don’t live in Sanford, Florida. We don’t live in Hale County, Alabama. We live here, in our own lives. How does this co-creation of beauty in bringing together the intense contrasts work for us?

I’ll share this story. Many of you have heard it before, as Reverend Ken has told it.

Many years ago, I had picked up my daughter, Grace, from her preschool. I think she would have been about 2 years old. Once home, I was in a hurry to get inside the house to get to whatever it was I needed to do that day.

So I bounded up the back stairs, unlocked the door, and turned to find Grace hunched down on the sidewalk, her blankie in one hand and a stick in the other, intently staring at the ground.

I barked at her, “GRACE! Come on! We NEED to get inside!”

She cocked her head a bit, barely acknowledging me, but her eyes never left whatever had caught her attention.

I got more frustrated, more impatient. “GRACE! NOW!”

She stood up and dropped the stick, but her eyes never left the ground. Then, suddenly, I realized that *this* was one of those moments. This was one of those times where I was trying to enforce my power and privilege as the adult, rather than find myself engaged with my daughter and whatever she was staring at there on the ground.

I sighed, and let the door close. As I walked back down the steps, I quietly asked her, “What do you see?”

She picked up the stick and pointed. An ant, maybe a couple of millimeters long, was pushing a crumb of bread about five times its size.

I sat down, and Grace, wordlessly slipped into my lap. We watched as the ant pushed and pulled, crawled over and under the crumb, slowly inching it off the pavement, disappearing into the grass. It was excruciating to watch, and fascinating. Most of all, it was beautiful.

As the ant slipped out of sight, Grace stood up, dropped the stick and walked to the door. I just sat there, not knowing what to do, what to say.

When she reached the door, Grace turned to me and said, “Come ON, Daddy!”

I would have missed it. If I had held onto my power and privilege over my young daughter, I would have missed the beauty of that ant. If I had not risked my own vulnerability, I would have missed the beauty of quietly sitting with my daughter in my lap on a warm fall afternoon. I would have missed that opportunity to engage more deeply in the world, to engage more deeply in relationship with my daughter.

In that moment, the ant, the crumb, Grace, and I — we were co-creators of beauty in the world. We were suspended in a moment that bridged the way the world *is* and the way the world *ought* to be.

So I think this is what is available, what is possible for us. We are co-creators of the beauty in this world.

I know you're fed up. Life don't let up for us. All they talk about is what's been going down, what's been messed up for us.

But as the song says, when we “notice the blue skies, notice the butterflies, notice me. Stop and smell the flowers....” we become co-creators of that beauty. It is present and possible for us today.

And when we find it, when we create it, there lies joy, and in that joy there is little else to do than, yes, “shake our booties,” to “lose it (in) the sweet music, and dance with me.”

May it be so, and amen.