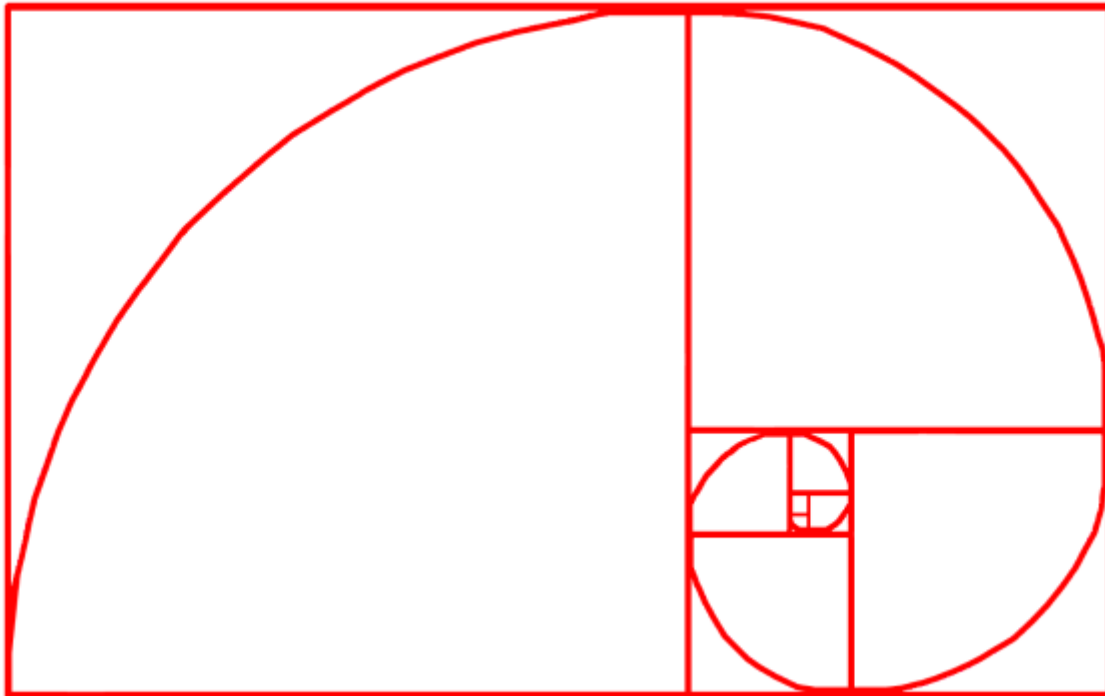


“Natural Beauty”, June 24, 2018
Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Kirkwood, MO

Cover Art:



Readings:

“The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his insouciant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”

-- Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

“[Darwin’s] theory [of sexual selection] implied that female aesthetic judgments were a major force in evolution, and this was countered immediately by misogynistic responders who described female choice [of sexual partners based on male ornamentation] as ‘vicious feminine caprice’. ... [In addition], Darwin was criticized for proposing that there was some other theory that might explain evolution other than natural selection. [These critics believed] that the power of natural selection was its capacity to explain everything and to be a universal explanation to the origin of biodiversity.”

--Richard O. Prum, author of *The Evolution of Beauty*

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Sermon:

The beauty of nature engenders wonder in us. Wonder is one of the more sublime states of being, uniting feelings of belonging with a sense of the mysterious. The question of why beauty exists hovers in the air over our wonder. What is beauty? Why do I find this tree or flower or bird beautiful? While the beautiful seems to become immediately apparent before our gaze, beauty is also shrouded in mystery. Why this beauty and not that? We are enraptured by the beautiful; enchantment grips us like a spell. Abracadabra, you cannot avert your eyes from this beauty. Beauty is magical.

That beauty induces a feeling of wonder in us may be enough to say in a sermon about beauty. Sermons, and religion in general, are part of the humanities perspective. In 1959 C.P. Snow warned that western civilization was splitting into two cultures – one of the sciences, the other of the humanities. However, there were no “TED talks” in 1959. When I listen to them, I often hear an application of the sciences to concerns of the humanities. I’ve participated in both cultures throughout my life. When I was in high school I realized that Darwin’s theory gave the lie to a literal interpretation of the Genesis creation story, which conflict launched me on a life-long passion for the relationship between science and theology. I majored in physics in college and have spent a career in information technology but have graduate course-work in world religions and theology. Having highlighted a humanities perspective about beauty at the outset, that beauty is wonderment, I nevertheless would like to ask some philosophical questions, detour into the mathematics of beauty, and finally delve into the history of the theory of evolution. I do this because I find that my spiritual understandings are deepened by explanations, by scientific and philosophical discoveries, reflections, and connections. I hope your spiritual understandings of beauty will be deepened too.

Dillard herself raises the question of the philosophical status of natural beauty, which I’m going to get at by polling you. First question: if a tree falls in a forest but there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? Raise your hand if you believe yes, there is a sound. Second question: if a flower blooms in a woods but there is no one there to appreciate it, is the flower beautiful? Raise your hand if you believe yes, there is beauty even if not perceived.

In the reading about the free-falling mockingbird, Dillard says the answer must be "that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there." In her book (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) she is driven by the notion that natural beauty is happening everywhere, but that it is her responsibility and privilege to observe it. Wasted moments of beauty are wasted, in her view. Such moments are gifts of nature and should not be ignored lightly by human beings.

This silly philosophical conundrum exposes the distinction in Western thinking between ontology, the category of things or beings that exist, and epistemology, the category of what humans can know about the first category. In ancient Greece, it was believed that beauty existed as a semi-autonomous spiritual entity (an ontological belief), just like the concepts of liberty, creativity, war, and so forth. These semi-autonomous spiritual entities were depicted in statues, vase paintings and in epic poems as the gods and goddesses of Olympia. The goddess of beauty was Aphrodite, and she could bestow her beauty as she willed. Plato’s analogy of the cave laid out the philosophy of the time: at the back of the cave are fires burning, providing light in the cave; people are in the middle of the cave with their backs to the fire; in between the fires and the people are the eternal forms, which exist perfect and unchanging, in the realm of the ontological; the people can only know of the forms from their projected shadows on the

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front wall of the cave that they can see. In this epistemology, people cannot know the forms directly, but must be content with fuzzy vague outlines.

If an ancient Greek person were in this congregation, they surely would have raised their hand to the second poll, reasoning that since beauty is an archetype existing in the eternal realm, and that a flower embodies to some degree the form of beauty, then yes, that happens with or without people. Over the centuries Western Civilization lost its belief in the realm of the eternal forms; words like “Beauty”, “Truth”, “Liberty” came to be thought of as only existing in the human mind. If a person from the Enlightenment were here now, they might have polled yes to the first question, (sound being a physical phenomenon), but no to the second question, believing that beauty does not exist per se, but only as an aspect of human perception and judgement, an aesthetic relationship.

If we modern Westerners tend to think that beauty is only in the eye of the beholder (rather than exists on its own), how is it that humans come to recognize beauty at all?

- One question I Googled was: do children prefer the golden rectangle over rectangles with other ratios between the length of the two sides? [Explain cover art made of golden rectangles.] I was surprised to find that there have been many research studies on this topic, often showing opposite results (some saying “yes, golden rectangle preference is inborn vs. no, learned over time”).
- A topic that has blossomed in the last two decades is the relationship between fractal mathematics and the beauty of nature. Fractals deal with shapes that are self-similar at different scales. For example, the structure of a tree is a fractal shape, in that the trunk with its limbs is similar to a limb with its branches, but at a different scale. [Refer to image of the Mandelbrot set below.] Besides trees, fractals have been used to describe snowflakes and ice crystals, mountain ranges, lightning bolts, the rings of Saturn, ocean waves, animal coloration patterns, the nautilus shell, the pineapple, blood and pulmonary vessels, and Jackson Pollock’s splatter paintings. Self-similarity and not too much order or disorder, are aspects of what we find beautiful in these things. Recently, synchronization of electrical waves within the human brain have been found to follow fractal patterns. Truly, beauty is all around us, and within us. Fractals recognizing fractals, beauty recognizing beauty.

Are humans the only animals that recognize beauty? The history of the theory of evolution offers an interesting answer. According to Richard Prum, the author of The Evolution of Beauty, at the end of The Origin of Species, Darwin was satisfied that the process of natural selection, through which variations in individuals made them more able to reproduce, could explain much of the diversity that he had studied for decades as a naturalist. But he wrote to a friend saying that he hated to see peacock tails, they made him ill. And the reason they made him queasy was that the peacock tail seemed not to be adaptive in prolonging the life of its owner, and so could not be explained by the theory of natural selection. The peacock tail only seemed to be made for beauty. After another ten years, Darwin wrote the book fully titled The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex. The controversy and misunderstanding this book stirred up, namely that humans were descended from apes, eclipsed the new theory that Darwin was proposing to explain the peacock’s beautiful tail, which was that such adornments caused females to favor certain males over others for reproducing. As Prum says, at this point female aesthetic subjectivity entered the sphere of evolutionary biology. Peahens have a sense of what’s a beautiful peacock tail and what’s not so attractive.

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Prum has noted that a fundamentalist strain of evolutionary biology exists even today, with scientists as well as the public believing that everything about animal diversity and physiology can be explained based on its survival value. While I may not have a feathered tail that is subject to genetic pressure based on female mating choices, I do have capabilities that far exceed what is needed for survival, and some of those capabilities – like fingers – allow me to make beauty in the world. Piano playing may not contribute to human survival, but it certainly has a role in female aesthetic mate selection.

To conclude, let us leave the realm of mathematics and evolutionary biology (and their explanatory powers) and re-enter the spiritual realm of the wonder brought about by experiencing beauty. The experience of beauty in nature calls us to be stewards of environmental justice, of just relations among creatures. As the Hopi pray, may I walk in beauty, in harmony and justice with all creation. Or, as Barry Lopez says, using the metaphor of the Garden of Eden:

“Eden is a conversation. It is the conversation of the human with the Divine. And it is the reverberations of that conversation that create a sense of place. It is not a thing, Eden, but a pattern of relationships, made visible in conversation. To live in Eden is to live in the midst of good relations, of just relations scrupulously attended to, imaginatively maintained through time. Altogether we call this beauty.”

May we scrupulously attend to just relations with nature, and may we imaginatively maintain such relations. May we thereby create beauty. Amen and blessed be.

