

"Rainbows"

When Bridget Meyers, summer service organizer, and I were scheduling this service and she asked me what I wanted to preach about, I knew I wanted to devote this summer Sunday morning with you to the contemplation of something beautiful. Our attention is taken up so often with the business side of living - making ends meet, meeting our responsibilities, coping - or not coping - with demands. And the mainstream media news that most of us hear, read and see on a daily basis saturates us with conflict and negativity. Even though there are wondrous happenings, harmonious creations and compassionate actions taking place all the time, our culture focusses overwhelmingly on conflict and tragedy. It can weigh down your soul.

You have taken time away from that secular world of negativity this morning to come here and join with kindred spirits for an hour or two of holy peace. Whatever your specific reason for coming - fellowship, curiosity, or comfort - I trust you will find strength for your soul today.

So often I hear people ask "Why is there suffering in the world, and in my life? Why is there so much ugliness?" I, too, often ask these questions. But there is an equally important and genuine line of questioning: "Why is there such extravagant beauty in the world?"

On a summer morning, when we wake and hear them singing, it may occur to us to ask "Why do birds sing" as it has been proven they do, "simply for the joy of it?" Why are we so made that we can appreciate their beauty?

Why should light meeting the water in the atmosphere refract into a dazzling arch of color - excessively beautiful - inspiring us universally to simply BE in a moment of appreciative wonder? Is all that beauty necessary? Is our inclination to be entranced and opened up by beauty just part of what it means to be a human being? And if so, what purpose does this inclination serve?

These are questions which balance ugliness and despair, for me. Mythology, religion and science offer their responses to these fundamental questions. Whatever response we may find most satisfying, it seems true that we are genuinely strengthened when we give ourselves the space and permission to appreciate beauty. When we feel weighed down by sorrows and concerns, or low down because we are less than perfect, we may remind ourselves to ask "What is beautiful here?" "What is beautiful within me and around me?" For as Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote: "Just to BE is a blessing. Just to LIVE is holy."

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk much-loved in the West, says that in any moment, whatever is happening, there is always something beautiful to be appreciated. That beauty can be as simple and, at the same time as expansive, as the beautiful blue sky.

I hope you will not mind if I segway back to my childhood in Oklahoma once again this

week to share a sky-related anecdote. When I was growing up, my father had an airplane - a Cessna, with a special paint job done in his favorite colors - turquoise, cream and navy blue. We flew at least once a week, and I spent many hours out at the airport with my Dad while he serviced the airplane and tinkered around the hanger. In that part of the country, where the land is so flat, the sky is much more a part of the scenery, and out at the airport, I passed allot of time looking at that sky, scanning for planes, listening to the bobolinks and larks, smelling the odors of wildflowers, grasses, and livestock out in the meadows adjacent to the airport. I went around between the airplane hangers built of sheet metal and practiced making echoes - whooping, singing riffs and calling out my own name; I watched for fireflies when the evening drew in.

One afternoon out at the airport, when I was about 4, I asked my Dad "Why is the sky blue?" Without hesitation, he replied "The sky isn't really blue. It only appears blue to you because white light from the sun passes through the earth's atmosphere before it gets to us. The blue rays in the white light are absorbed by the gasses in our atmosphere, and they scatter, making the sky appear blue, though it really isn't."

He went on about his business. But his answer was quite perplexing for a person such as myself who had only recently learned her colors. My mother leaned down and said to me quietly, "Lanie, the sky really is blue."

That question and my parents' two responses were an early lesson in paradox that I have always remembered. The sky is blue, the sky is not blue. Both are true, as Mother and Dad said. So, on the one hand,

- 1) I was assured I could rely upon and trust what I see
and at the same time I learned
- 2) Things are not always what they seem to be.

On the one side, there is the truth of mothers, poets, and common sense, and on the other, there is the truth of dads who fly machines in the sky and do science. I resolved this apparent conflict by deciding that poetry and science see the same sky with different faculties engaged, and both yield valid perspectives.

Children look with faculties that have not been fully divided into "poetic" or "scientific." A child's question "Why is the sky blue?" marks the beginning of a quest for meaning - it is the outward sign of a longing to be connected more deeply through knowledge. And because the child is beginning to wonder, there is an indication that some kind of division or objectivity about the outer world has been established - the child no longer feels exactly "at one" with nature as she would have at an earlier age. She is beginning to be aware there are some wonderful things - like the color of the sky - that she doesn't understand yet. So a child's sense of being at one with nature is followed by a dawning awareness of being a separate self IN nature - and wonder steps into this gap.

If we are fortunate, or resilient, wonder stays with us all our lives to bridge the gap between ourselves and our world. It inspires poetry wherein we may ask questions

which ensoul the world around us like Naima's in this morning's Reading, "Being Human:" "I wonder if rainbows get shy back stage, not sure if their colors match right?" Wonder inspired Isaac Newton to narrow a beam of sunlight so that it passed through a hole, shone through a prism and thereby formed, as he said "a coloured image of the Sun."

When we look at the sky and at the play of light in the heavens in all its various and wonderful shades, from sunrises and sunsets to rainbows and circles round the moon, there is often an answering light within the soul rising up and through our awareness. Who can look at a rainbow without experiencing wonder? In the ephemeral moments of gazing at a rainbow, we are conscious of being held in nature's grace. Whether a person is 8 or 88, Native American or East European, fundamentalist right winger or lime green liberal, the rainbow opens everyone's heart with the simple virtue of beauty. I bet you both George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden like rainbows. Both would be happy to cross over a bow of lighted colors and into their respective brands of paradise someday.

Perhaps this is why representations and stories of rainbows are found everywhere, from spinning indicator wheels on Macintosh computers to bumper stickers, supermarket markdown tags, illustrations in children's books. I will take a chance and ask for a show of hands (I hear you can get away with this kind of thing in Summer Services): How many of you presently have, or have had at one time, a child's drawing of a rainbow tacked up on your refrigerator? Rainbow images enhance all kinds of subjects, rainbow stories and myths are found in every culture.

I'd like to share three contemporary rainbow images with you. I chose these three from the plethora of rainbow lore because I think they reveal the transformative and healing power of the rainbow.

Fred Stern is an artist and teacher who has traveled the world creating rainbows. With grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and other sources he has made rainbows, as he says "in support of global unity, peace and humanitarian causes." Under his direction, the New York City fire department provided a fireboat to spray water into the air over the East River to create a rainbow over the United Nations Building as a metaphor for world peace. Among many other events, he has orchestrated rainbows at an Arab/Israeli peace conference in Gaza, at the Hague Appeal for Peace conference, at a Florida "Relay for Life" benefitting the American Cancer Society, and in New Mexico to launch an Alzheimer's Awareness drive. As a Memorial to the Holocaust he created a piece called "Keshet Sheket," Hebrew for "Silent Rainbow," over the Havel River in Potsdam, Germany.

Here is Fred's account of his rainbow creation at the Trinity test site in New Mexico, in April, 2000. [<http://www.rainbowmaker.us/content/trinity.php>]

"Trinity Site is was where the first atomic bomb was detonated. The site is open to the public on April 1, and October 1, each year. This year several friends and I drove to the

site with a back pack water sprayer. I was going to attempt to create a small scale rainbow as a symbolic cleansing of the world's nuclear past.

We entered the site at 8:00 a.m. only to find the weather rainy and overcast. I checked the sprayer in the parking lot and found there was too much wind to create a rainbow. We waited. It started to snow. Around noon, the sky cleared. I entered the site and created a small rainbow using a prism on the obelisk marking the site of detonation....

I went back to the van to try the sprayer once again. It was still too windy for it to work. As I was placing the sprayer back in the van a Department of Defense military policeman came up to me and said 'You are the Rainbow Man and we have been waiting for you. If you attempt to enter the site with that device I will have to escort you from the facility.' We asked him if he would escort us through the southern gate..... He agreed.....We [then drove] escorted through the entire missile range.

After exiting the range and getting on the highway we looked back to see a natural rainbow in the sky. The cleansing was complete."

I marvel at the imagination and vision of this artist who has created rainbows to draw attention to planetary values, to bring delight to those who seek healing and their loved ones, to commemorate and heal humanity's losses. What chutzpah - to travel to an epicenter of nuclear destruction - the Trinity Bomb Site - with his backpack water sprayer and rainbow-making prism, and what grace his journey exemplified as nature herself created the cleansing rainbow he could not.

I wrote to Fred Stern after I found his website and read about his work some years ago. He graciously wrote back, and encouraged me to help spread the rainbow message. Perhaps we might create a large scale rainbow here in Burlington some day. "I feel if our planet were to have a flag," says Fred, "it would not be a piece of cloth, it would be the rainbow."

The rainbow flag that IS made out of cloth has symbolized pride for so many. I know I do not have to tell you of the healing power this flag embodies worldwide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer people - and the Straight folks who love them. I know that you in this Society have courageously stood for gender equality. You have been a witness for love and justice. I want you to know how proud I am to join you in this struggle. The celebration of diversity is truly a celebration. Life is much more interesting because there are so many hues and variations humanity.

I do not expect any church, denomination or society to be perfect. I have allot to learn about the experience of others. Even in our own liberal and loving denomination we must go further in our quest for equality. I have learned, for instance, that folks who are bisexual often feel invisible or oppressed in our churches. And to tell the truth, I have a hard time with all the acronyms and I still wonder whether "Q" should be "Queer" or "Questioning." And where are the magnificent Drag Queens in this mix? I admit my ignorance - and, I know, I am not alone. But our hearts and minds are open.

The more we know about gender and sexuality, it seems, the more we realize how much we don't know. You can never quite reach the end of that rainbow where it touches the earth in justice. But in the meantime, I, like you, perhaps, put a rainbow flag up on my front door. Every time I look at it, I think of my dear friend Todd and the day we visited the Castro District in San Francisco together years ago. I had never seen so many rainbow flags - and until that day, I didn't know what they symbolized.

Red: for Life
Orange: for Healing
Yellow: Sunlight
Green: Nature
Blue: Serenity
Violet: for Spirit

Todd is in the Violet zone now, in the Spirit. I know many of you have dear ones you think of when you see the rainbow flag, living and in the beyond. The vision of it flying makes us proud to be part of a radical, loving, healing movement for justice.

In many accounts, both ancient and contemporary, the rainbow represents a bridge between this world and the next. I was never very fond of one currently popular and decidedly sentimental version of this image: that of the "Rainbow Bridge" beyond which our beloved companion animals who have died are frolicking in eternally green fields while they wait for us to cross over and join them. But I have come to appreciate the healing power of the Rainbow Bridge, and in closing I share this story with those of you in mind especially who have regrets because you could not be with your beloved animal at the time of their passing.

Six years and 5 days ago, my Brown Dog Como passed away. Those of you who have been fortunate enough to have a soul mate from another species will know what I mean when I say I have dearly loved a number of dogs, but Como was my soul sister. She had been failing all the preceding spring; she stopped eating, and twice I arranged for the vet to come to our house and euthanize her. As if she knew what I was thinking, she rallied both times; she made it clear she was going out under her own steam. So we waited.

I had to make a trip to Colorado, to make arrangements about my grandparent's house. I scheduled the trip for midsummer, thinking Como would be well beyond the beyond by that time. But she was not. It almost as if as long as I was with her, she would not, or could not leave. Wherever I was, was home - so where could she go?

I left her in the care of my companion, Keith, and my daughter Johanna and I journeyed West. Como held on, spending her time sleeping and drifting between this world and the next on her bed there at home. I was so relieved when the time came to return. Johanna and I made the drive from the Colorado house down through northern New Mexico toward Albuquerque, and the plane back. Enroute we stopped in Santa Fe, where I went to College. As we drove up towards the campus, as sometimes happens

on summer afternoons after a storm in those mountains, an extraordinarily beautiful and vivid rainbow formed, arching from Monte Sol to Mount Adeleya. I was invigorated and filled with joy at the sight of that rainbow; I was happy to be with my daughter, in a place I knew and loved well, sharing such a lovely vision. At that moment, there was nothing but the rainbow in my consciousness.

The next day, we got back to New England. At the airport, I learned Como had died the preceding afternoon. Later, I worked it out that she had died at the exact time that rainbow appeared over the mountains.

Through the guilt I felt at leaving her, and the deep loss I felt with her passing, I held onto the vision of the rainbow. The rainbow did not fill the emptiness. But it raised a question - Was it a sign? Was it a message? Was it merely a coincidence? I don't know. But the fact that I have a question - a small opening in death's certainty to let the light in - is enough. So I do not scoff at the Rainbow Bridge story anymore; I know its healing power.

Each one of us has his or her own rainbow stories. May the power and beauty of our stories nurture us, give us courage, and inspire us to create our own rainbows, as light shines through the prism of our souls.

Blessed Be.