



A few weeks ago, there was an estate sale at the house across the street from me. The couple who lived there for decades and raised their children there had been musicians for the Dallas Symphony. Estate sales are interesting because they're always a window into the lives of people framed by the stuff that they leave behind. He had an impressive collection of suit jackets and elegant robes. She had an enormous collection of handbags, hats of every kind, and jewelry. Now, I can only assume that what was available at the estate sale was a selection of what they actually had, but it was clear that they loved beautiful things and they created beautiful music.

When I came across our first reading today, the poem *Barbara* by Naomi Shihab Nye, I thought of my neighbors. People with good taste who love beautiful things and yet they also hold on to objects that others would have simply ignored or thrown away without much thought.

For Barbara, in the poem, it's rusted scraps of metal whose glint catches her eye. For my neighbors, it was empty cardboard shoeboxes stacked neatly in closets and greeting cards, faded, hanging on the walls for many, many years after the occasion was celebrated. Barbara saw some beauty in those rusted scraps of metal and it became a practice to bring them home and keep them in a basket in a drawer. Naomi Shihab Nye has a similar spiritual practice, which she calls trash walks. Now she doesn't call it a spiritual practice, but I think that's exactly what it is. Something she does regularly and intentionally to connect with herself, with humanity, with the earth. And because she has the inspired eye of a poet, she finds beauty and meaning in the trash that she finds around her neighborhood and in the process of gathering it.

"Trash bags, silver tongs and cotton garden gloves stay close at hand for my duties," she writes. "I don't have those super long tongs like professional people who clean parking lots with click and pinch devices so you don't have to stoop. The bending is part of the rhythm to me. It's trash yoga. The trash trucks that make their way down the street whose long arms clamp, lift and dump bins. It's an urban rhythm," she says, "A hug at every house."

I want to share a video with you from Shoji Yamasaki, an artist and choreographer who lives in Los Angeles. This is from a performance art project that he calls littered movements begun in 2020 in COVID quarantine when he resorted to walking around his neighborhood to clear his head, picking up trash that he saw along the way, but not before recording it.

This piece, as some of the credits on some of his videos say, "Danced by litter found around Los Angeles and Shoji Yamasaki," is captivating, isn't it? In such an interesting way. I wonder what you found most beautiful in this video. Yamasaki turns pieces of plastic cast away into something powerful, inspiring us to notice and think about the meaning of things blowing around at our feet. Just like Naomi Shihab Nye turns litter into something beautiful, a poem, that inspires us to think more deeply about the sweepings, titters and tatters, odds and ends and residue that we find and how they reflect humanity and what we value.

As many have said from ancient Greeks to Shakespeare to 19th century novelist Margaret Wolfe Hungerford, who coined the phrase, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," there are so many ways to understand and define beauty. Sometimes it is carefully crafted and created. Sometimes it is natural. Sometimes it's tragic. And sometimes it is found in the most unexpected places because the beholder discerns a deeper significance, a beauty that exists below the surface. In a word, beauty is subjective.

Now it's a very human thing to notice and dwell on what is wrong with the world, but beauty is our birthright. And to find beauty in a world where there are many things going wrong and to be inspired and moved by its presence and its persistence, now that's a challenge. A challenge that spiritual practice can help us meet. Whether that practice is trash walks or meditative practices involving visuals or music or creating art or things of beauty ourselves. These are all practices that return us to our essence.

Dr. Sarah Lewis, an art and cultural historian, calls the power of beauty to inspire "aesthetic force." She explains aesthetic force in this way. "It leaves us changed, stunned, dazzled, knocked out. It can quicken the pulse, make us gape, even gasp with astonishment. Its importance is in its animating trait. Not what it is, but what it does to those who behold it in all its forms." Have you ever had that kind of experience that she describes? An experience of witnessing beauty such that your heart and your mind are opened, maybe broken open?

Sophia Peabody of the famous 19th century Unitarian Peabody sisters, Sophia, Elizabeth and Mary, expressed just this experience of aesthetic force in letters that she exchanged with her sister Elizabeth. Now Sophia was a painter, one of the first women to use her actual name as an artist and

to make a living from her art. So she was particularly attuned to beauty and put into equally beautiful words the experience of inspiration. To gaze upon a bank of wildflowers or to study a sculpture, Sophia believed, was to glimpse the creative power of God as it was translated by nature or by human creativity.

Now her sister, Elizabeth, who was a brilliant thinker and a writer and an educator... She's the reason that we have kindergarten in the United States, thought that this was all a bunch of hooey. "Sentiments about beauty do not constitute religion," she wrote to her sister, Sophia. But Sophia though Elizabeth was ignoring an essential part of human experience. As she expressed it, "Beauty is the subtle invisible bond that connects the outward with the inward. Sever this association and may shorn of glory."

The aesthetic force of beauty, whether it is created or natural, tragic or unexpected, opens our hearts to this glorious experience of the sacred that Sophia described. And it goes in the other direction too. The beauty within us helps us to see the beauty in our surroundings. When we recognize the holy within, we can recognize it all around us.

Dr. Sarah Lewis further describes the power of aesthetic force to move our hearts toward justice and transformation. She says, "The seeming lightness of aesthetic force can make us forget that it has weight. Force enough to bring about a self-correction. The acknowledgement of failure at the heart of justice, the moment when we reconcile our past with our intended future selves. Few experiences get us to this place more powerfully with a tender push past the Pretorian guarded doors of reason and logic than the emotive power of aesthetic force."

Dr. Lewis points out that many movements for change have begun or reached a tipping point when an aesthetic encounter or an encounter with beauty in one of its many forms broke open hearts and minds. For example, many people credit Earthrise, the photo taken from Apollo 8 in 1968. Even if you don't know what I'm talking about it, I know that you've seen it. And the awe that we experienced in seeing this perspective of our planet Earth as a galvanizing force for the environmental movement.

The landscape photography of Carlton Watkins, particularly his images of Yosemite Valley, convinced Abraham Lincoln to sign legislation that paved the way for the eventual establishment of the National Park System. A more recent example that I think of is the images of children who've been detained by ICE. Think about the force of those photos of young Liam Ramos wearing his blue bunny hat and his Spider-Man backpack and how beautiful he is and yet how inhumane his treatment. It broke open the hearts of ordinary people all over the country, moved them to do something, to speak out and demand his release and it worked. He and his father returned home to Minnesota.

I want you to close your eyes for a moment if you're comfortable doing so and to think about the most beautiful thing that you have witnessed recently. Let its aesthetic power work in you, awaken you. Now open your eyes and look around you. Where do you see beauty in your midst? Carole King wrote the song, Beautiful, our prelude that the choir sang today, after a realization that she had one

day riding the New York City subway. She looked around in the car and she saw a bunch of very unhappy people. And she realized that what she saw mirrored her inner landscape. Her life felt dull and unhappy at the time, that subtle invisible bond of beauty was missing.

The inspiration that I hope you find as you go about your days is both an inward movement and an outward movement. May the created and natural, tragic and unexpected, beauty in the world hold you and lift you and collect it if you can. Place it in baskets and drawers. Hang it on your walls. Capture it in video. Or simply take it into your memory and into your soul. And may the beauty inside you illuminate the beauty all around you. May beauty be yours now and forever. Amen.