

Unearthing the Beautiful
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When Father Antonio Loffredo arrived in Naples, Italy, he found the city menaced by the Camorra mafia, its streets strewn with trash and most of its kids lost to the drug trade, trapped by a life they were born into. But underneath its cobblestones and violence and ugliness laid something else entirely -- three levels of magnificent frescoes decorating the floors, walls and ceilings of San Genarro, the largest burial ground in Southern Italy dating back to the 2nd century. Yet like the streets above it, the catacombs were severely neglected. Mud and dirt covered the floor; an old lighting system left much of the artwork in shadows; and a storeroom had been stuffed with waste and old equipment from a nearby hospital. It would all have to go to unearth the treasures buried beneath.

Employing the city's youth, Father Loffredo and the children went about the painstaking, time-consuming process of clearing out the muck, junk and trash that filled the caverns and concealed its beauty. After years of hard work, what they found was truly remarkable; rare and exquisite mosaics adorning the tombs of Christian saints and martyrs were carved right into hardened volcanic ash. The restoration is breathtaking - not only because of the artwork, but also for the new life it has brought to the city and the endless opportunities it has afforded its youth.

To me, this is what these High Holidays are all about -- clearing away the mud, and muck and trash of our lives that entrap us through harmful thinking, unhealthy behavior and bad habits; and, then, unearthing the beautiful, essential, holy self that lies buried beneath all of it. *Rosh Hashanah* is actually called *Hayom Harat Olam*, translated "today the world is born anew." But literally, *Hayom Harat Olam* means "today the world is pregnant with possibility." If our *teshuvah*, -- our turning, returning and repentance -- is sincere, there is no thing in ourselves or our lives that we cannot manifest. Like the youth of San Genarro, we are not trapped by the lives we are born into or even by the lives we currently live. And like the restoration of the catacombs, the labor can be painstaking and time-consuming, but Judaism tells us, it is also possible to work through our crud and unearth our beauty, our best selves, and our full potential.

In her book, *On Being Human: A Memoir of Waking Up, Living Real and Listening Hard*, Jennifer Pastiloff, a life coach of sorts, describes this process as "beauty hunting." What she means by this is accepting yourself as you are and having the courage to look honestly at yourself and see not only that which is damaged and flawed, but also that which is truly good, strong, vital and holy, because to be human is to be beautifully perfectly imperfect. We are not the amount of money in our bank accounts or the kind of car we drive or the size of the house we live in. We are not our physical illnesses or our emotional and mental limitations. And we are surely not the wrinkles on our skin or the extra pounds on our body. We are the goodness in our hearts, the kindnesses we do, and the love we share.

Unfortunately, most of us equate our shortcomings with our person. We think, "Because I am fearful, I am weak; or because I express anger, I am cruel; or because I do the

minimum in work, school, or at home, I am lazy." But our tradition teaches us differently. The concept of sin in Judaism has nothing to do with our character. Our flaws are not value judgments. Indeed, the word for sin in Judaism is *cheyt*, which literally means, "to miss the mark." *Teshuvah*, repentance and return, an honest look at where we could do better, is the process by which we re-align ourselves. Since I feel fearful, out of control, and uninspired, I will reach out to someone to help me through my anxiety, anger and staleness. I will learn tools that enable me to uncover what these emotions are masking: why do I feel them, what false stories have I been telling myself about myself, how can I break through them and find courage, lightness, and inspiration? These answers will help me sort out why am I settling for less than I deserve or less than I could be. The same is true if I can't even imagine the life I want to live or I don't know what makes me happy, or I can't figure out where to begin; whether lonely, disconnected or depressed, praying for clarity, reaching out and accepting the helping hand held out to you is the first step.

I know how hard and painful this process can sometimes be for many of us, particularly to hunt for the beauty within ourselves. Like many of you, I am still working on accepting myself as I am and taking care of me. Like many of us, there are changes I am facing in my own life that leave me feeling afraid and overwhelmed. So, in my beautiful imperfection, there are times when I run and hide, numbing myself with busyness and food and retail therapy and my new favorite, Mojitos. I truly appreciate those of you who have offered to listen, to be present for me, and to love me without judgment. It can seem like if I let myself feel the weight of it all that I will break apart and there will be no one to pick up the pieces . . . or no one who will want to.

But in my heart, I also have faith in God; in you, my community; in dear, dear friends and unconditionally loving family, and in my own resiliency to catch me if I fall. It is like our communal confession on *Yom Kippur* when we confess our sins together, as if we are saying to one another, "I got you!" Regardless of my and our fears, or frailties, or failings, I know and believe to the depths of my soul that, no matter what, I cannot give up hunting for beauty within and around me and neither can you, because this is what it means to be human and that is all we are asked to be.

So the second step in becoming a beauty hunter is to show up for yourself and for others. So often in life we come up with excuses for why we can't or don't want to do things, or look at our fears and frailties and flaws, or meet people, or go out of our way to help others. We find ourselves saying, "No, I don't need to go to therapy or to take a daily walk, or to grab a cup of coffee with a good friend," as if looking at our problems will make them more real and unmanageable than they are. Or "no, I can't meet you, or go there, or do that. I wish I could, but I can't. I'm busy, I don't have enough time, I have too much work to do, it's out of my way, I'm too tired," as if we don't need the companionship and support of other humans in our lives to reflect our own beauty and worth back to us. Or if the person is in need, sick, or going through hardship, we convince ourselves, "going will make me uncomfortable, I'm afraid, I don't know what to say, what if I catch it," as if depression is a communicable disease.

But when we do say, yes, we can find ourselves in the presence of unimaginable beauty and holiness. I will not mention her name, but a member of our congregation is an older woman with a broken back. Yet you would never know it, or how much pain she is in, because her smile lights up the universe and the immense gratitude she has for her life is

all she shares. Whether it is the love she expresses toward her family, the concern she offers for others, the fullness of the life she is living even though she is essentially home and chair bound, the light that emanates from her outshines everything else. She is among the fiercest beauty hunters I have ever met. With her tiny little body and her enormous spirit, she strives with every fiber of her being to find the good. Surely there is fear there, but there is also so much beauty. Both exist at once. That is life, or at least how our life could be if we say, "yes, I will be there" for others and for ourselves. Unimaginably full and beautiful and holy.

So this is the second step to beginning anew, to bettering ourselves and our relationships, to reaching our full potential, to becoming a beauty hunter: show up. Show up for yourself, for those you love, for those who need you. Step out of your own way. Face the discomfort and fear. And be present. Tomorrow morning we will read the *Akeida*, the awful, as in filled with awe, story of the binding of Isaac. When God calls to him, Abraham answers, "*Hineini*, Here I am," just in time to stave off the slaughter of his son. Had he not been fully present in that moment, who knows what would have happened.

Cantor Jen hates that when she asked me how I remember your names, that I say, "I pay attention." But it is the truth. I listen to your stories fiercely, I pay attention to who and what matters to you, I tell you the truth and I remember. I may not have all of the answers to your questions, but I am fully present. My friends, when you listen to people and when you show up, like *really* show up, there is beauty everywhere. And when you start noticing it, you can't unsee it and it has the power to transform your life forever. In my fifteenth year as your rabbi, I can honestly say, you do that for me every day. And I suspect, after tonight, many of you will be holding me accountable for paying attention, telling the truth and being present for me as much as I am for you. And I thank you for that because it is through you that my beauty and worth are reflected back at me.

My friends, if these High Holidays teach us anything it is that none of us are prisoners of our past, held captive by it. Indeed, engaging in *teshuvah* and God's forgiveness together mean that we can rewrite our stories. The *Unetaneh Tokef* we will pray tomorrow says, "You open the book of our days, and what is written there proclaims itself, for it bears the signature of every human being (GOR, p. 107)." This truth teaches us that we can let go of whatever is holding us back from whom and what and where we want to be. Rather than convincing ourselves it isn't the right time, we can say yes instead of no. Rather than being stuck in our stinking thinking and old habits, we can train ourselves to believe I am enough. I am here. I am love. Rather than trying to do it all alone, we can ask for help. *Hayom Harat Olam*, today the world is pregnant with possibilities, and so are we. Beginning right now, we can create a new ending for ourselves, we can love ourselves enough to choose the lives we deserve personally, professionally and communally.

What if you are not a prisoner of your inner critic, or disconnected or afraid? What if you can honestly say, "I love myself. I love my life and I have a great one," or as one congregant tells me, "if I were any better, I'd be in jail?" Then give it away, share the wealth with others. Love your family more. Spend more time with your friends. Tackle your bucket list. Fulfill that one goal you have always wanted to do. For me it would be write that book. Above all, help others in need. The late Dr. Wayne Dyer, tells us always to ask ourselves: "How may I serve?" How can I be there for those who are hurting? How can I share my plenty with people in need? Where can I give more *tzedakah*? How can I support our

Temple and assure its future? Where in our community can I volunteer? No matter how good you are, we are commanded to keep asking ourselves, "now what?" How can I be even better, do even more, live a life of service whereby I lift people up?

The High Holidays are our opportunity not really to discover, but to recover those things that have been lost to us -- not only the broken parts of ourselves that cause us shame, but also those things that bring us joy and purpose and fulfillment. As Leonard Cohen sings, "It is the cracks that let the light in." When we practice compassion for ourselves and others, when we are willing to accept our imperfect perfection, we uncover the beauty within us and them. As we break old patterns, our lives become lighter and brighter. When we offer kindness to ourselves and others, when we let ourselves and others see who we truly are, we become loveable. Our tradition teaches us that we can discard the junk cluttering up our hearts and souls, and carry only what we need -- love.

Today, the restored caverns of San Genarro glisten under high-tech lighting, paid for through donations and grants from such corporations as IBM and Vodafone, as well as from local foundations. The effect is breathtaking. Not only have ticket sales increased to 40,000 visitors per year, but also the project helps employ roughly 40 people, mostly young. That's 40 jobs in one of the poorest neighborhoods in one of the poorest regions of Italy, where youth unemployment is well over 50%. Many of these young men and women have gone on to college and into business and administration. They, like the catacombs, are living proof that none of us is trapped by the life we were born into. Or, as Father Loffredo says, anything can be cured, by offering something beautiful in its place . . . belief in yourself and others, faith and hope in a better future, and giving and receiving love. If nothing else, at the end of our lives, when we ask ourselves: *What have I done?*, let our answer be, *I have done love*. For love is the most beautiful find of all.

That is our task during these High Holidays and every day to become beauty hunters. May this *Rosh Hashanah* and the new year before us be an opportunity for all of us -- a doorway to more light, to more love, to a more beautiful life. Amen.