

Sonya Renee Taylor is an author and activist. In the book she wrote a few years ago, she tells the story about a time she participated in the Southern Fried Poetry Slam. That's a competition where people perform their poems. They get up to three minutes per piece. Then, five audience members are randomly selected to give each performer a score. On this day, Taylor was at the hotel with her teammates—a diverse group in terms of bodies, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientations. Taylor calls it a microcosm of the world she'd like to live in.

One of her teammates was really worried that day, though. She was afraid she might be pregnant. She'd had a casual hookup with a man, with no intention or desire to pursue a relationship with him, and certainly not to have a baby with him, but the two had not used contraception. Taylor was a sexual health and public health worker earlier in life, and so she heard herself ask—not meaning to pry but out of habit because it used to be her business to ask such things—why did you choose not to use a condom with this person with whom you do not want to have a baby? Her teammate, who has cerebral palsy replied, “My disability makes sex hard already, with positioning and stuff. I just didn't feel like it was okay to make a big deal about using condoms.”

Taylor was not only deeply struck by the meaning underlying this answer, it resonated with her personally. Out of a sense that she needed to apologize for her body's relative limitations, her teammate had sacrificed protection. She had offered that up, had offered her body up, in a sense, as a kind of apology for itself.

“Your body is not an apology,” Taylor told her teammate. But as she spoke these words, she says, “My entire being rang in resonance. I was transported to all the times I had given away my own body in penance. A reel of memories scrolled through my mind of all the ways I told the world I was sorry for having this wrong, bad body... the words I said were as much for me as they were for her.”

Later, Taylor could not forget this epiphany. She went on to write a book called *The Body is Not an Apology*, and to found a whole project promoting radical self-love.<sup>1</sup>

Our theological theme for May is “beauty.” Unfortunately, when I hear that word, this kind of thing is what comes to my mind first. The narrow ideas we are all taught about what it means to *be* beautiful; about what kind of bodies are beautiful and therefore good enough; and what kind we should be embarrassed about, ashamed of, etc. It's all so toxic, it has contaminated the word itself, beauty; it has given the notion of beauty a sharp-edged connotation.

I'll bet every single person here has felt that sharp edge at least sometimes, if not a lot of the time. You know exactly what I mean.

We receive this messaging almost nonstop. It's most pervasive in marketing, which is all around us all the time. Some of the messaging is super direct: we are told to brighten our skin, get rid of wrinkles, tame frizz, lose weight (we hear that one oh so often), etc. And some of the messaging is indirect. We learn a lot by who is hired as a model for clothing or cosmetics, and who is not. Who drives the car in a car commercial, and who does not. Typically missing from

ads about everyday things: people who are blind, or who use wheelchairs, people who speak English as a second language, people who are non-binary or trans, people who have very dark skin, large-bodied people, and adults who are only five feet tall... or shorter. Similarly, in movies and shows, we receive messages not only through what the characters are concerned with, but by who plays successful characters who are desired by others, and who plays a minor role or negative role. Representation matters. A lot.

I have two things to say about this.

First, since we don't know if we live more than once, we should eat the butter. Ok, that's just *my motto*. We should eat butter, and cookies, and take the time to make our delicious salads extra fancy, and generally enjoy being alive as much as possible. (The spirit of this motto applies to lots of things, so if there's a specific reason you shouldn't eat butter, don't worry).

Second, none of that is truly about beauty. It's about hierarchy, power, and profit. You actually are beautiful, and by the end of this sermon, I'm going to tell why.

In order to get there though, we need to drop the whole idea of beautiful humans, and think of beautiful other things first. So, go ahead and do that. Think of something that you personally find beautiful. Anything you want, whether it's something you see, hear, or sense by some other means.

Got it?

Okay, now how do you know? How do you know it's beautiful?

Check in with yourself. What do you notice in your body when you think of the beautiful thing? Can you feel it in your chest? Does it "take your breath away?" That's a phrase we use. We call a beautiful thing "breathtaking." It touches a similar place in us as awe and wonder. I feel it somewhere between my heart and the upper part of my stomach.

Frank Wilczek is a Nobel prize winning physicist and a professor at MIT. He wrote a book called *A Beautiful Question*, in which he takes up the question "does the world embody beautiful ideas?" This is almost a theological question. It's definitely a spiritual one in the sense that it's about an intangible thing that matters to humans: the experience of a beauty that moves us. He finds this question easier to respond to than the classically religious question, "What does this mean?" as in, does the universe have meaning. I agree that ultimate meaning would be hard to get at. I find it easier, and much more useful, to focus on what is meaningful rather than whether there is an ultimate meaning.

Beauty, Wilczek says, is also about what is meaningful to humans. Beauty may not be some overarching purpose of the universe, it may not be *The Meaning*, but it's not entirely subjective either. There are some things that humans as a species tend to find beautiful. Like sunrises. Sunsets. Mountains in the distance. Or the view from the top of one. Works of art. The sound of a choir harmonizing. (How lucky are we today?)

Wilczek describes beauty as "things that evolution has primed us to enjoy and want to come back to and feel pleasure in experiencing." And speaking as a physicist, he says, "there is a remarkable overlap between the concepts of beauty that you find in art and literature and music, and things that you find as the deepest themes of our understanding of the physical

world.”<sup>ii</sup> He says what drives his work in physics is trying to get “more beautiful equations and a more coherent description of how things work.”

Isn't that interesting?

Symmetry is one of the things humans find beautiful. Symmetry not just as in butterfly wings, or things that seem to match on each side, but other kinds of symmetry as well. The word symmetry refers to harmony, balance, equity, congruity (as in something you can count on to be consistent). And in physics, symmetry is a property that remains unchanged. Wilzcek gives the example of Einstein's theory of relativity, which says, well, here's an example: the other day I rode on the back of a motorcycle from the mountain down toward the river on Tramway Blvd. Breathtaking. I'm eating the butter. On that ride, even though it appeared to me as though some objects were coming toward me and others were moving away, and the ones that were closest seemed to be moving fastest, while the ones in the distance were slower, in fact none of those objects were changing at all. They were following the same rules as always. Symmetry. That, too, is a kind of consistency. Balance.

Another idea in physics that has a kind of beauty is the notion of complementarity: the idea that different ways of describing the universe may be both accurate and mutually incompatible. Wilzcek gives the example of light being both a wave and a particle. It's useful to think of it each way, as a wave and as a particle. However it is not possible for light to literally be both at once. It is beyond me to explain more about what that means, though I do think there are probably several people in this congregation who could explain it. (Preferably not in the receiving line, friends!).

Wilzcek's conversation partner, the interviewer Krista Tippet, compared this to seemingly contradictory descriptions of what a human being is: each of us is nothing but a collection of particles and light, and we are also thinking feeling human beings.

That's really something, isn't it? We are particles and light. We are actually made up of a lot of empty space when you get down to it. But also, we have twinkling eyes, or freckles, or strong hands, skin in deep and beautiful tones, voices for laughing, singing, whispering. And we are huggable, and we love, and think, and experience joy, pleasure, and awe. Sometimes even right in the midst of great hardship. We are born that way. And, we are born to be at home in ourselves, too. In our bodies, whatever their shape, color, gender, etc. It isn't until we are exposed to the toxic messages that we begin to doubt whether we ourselves are beautiful.

But you are. Obviously. And there was a time when you automatically knew it.

Know it again now. Know it.

If you struggle with that, that's not a failure on your part. It really is hard to unlearn what we are taught. So be gentle with yourself, beautiful. And I recommend looking up Sonya Renee Taylor. Her book, workbook, and website are all great resources.

Before we close, I want to lift up once more the beautiful thing that is happening in this sanctuary in just a few hours. At 3pm, we'll host the One New Mexico gospel concert. That's a big, joyful event. It brings theologically and racially diverse congregations together to sing. It's the kind of collaboration and celebration of diversity that many UUs express a deep longing for.

It is an antidote to hate, to what is in the news today. Susan and members of our congregation have been involved in this annual event for several years now. You can support it and increase our momentum around it by coming today and having a great time, surrounded by your fellow beautiful humans, singing beautiful harmonies.

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<sup>i</sup> Taylor, Sonya Renee. *The Body is Not an Apology: the power of radical self-love*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Berrett-Koehler: Oakland, 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/frank-wilczek-beauty-as-a-compass-for-truth/>