**The Lessons of Wabi-Sabi**

**April 7, 2019  Rev. Janet Onnie**

**​**Once upon a time in Japan there was a young man named Sen no Rikyu who set his sights on learning the tea ceremony, which is mind-bogglingly detailed and complicated and spectacularly hard to master. As was the custom of those days, he approached tea master Takino Joo, who tested Sen no Rikya by sending him into this garden and telling him to attend to it. Sen no Rikyu cleared the debris, pruned, raked, cleaned up the borders, and watered. The garden was immaculate. It was beautiful. But before presenting his work to the master, he shook a cherry tree, causing a few flowers to spill randomly onto the ground, thus marring the perfection of the garden. Sen no Rikyu became Takino Joo’s most famous student, a tea master in his own right.

A word about the Japanese Tea ceremony and tea masters. Tea had arrived in Japan via China around the 10th century CE. Zen monks had offered it as a stimulant to help fellow monks undergo excruciating meditation sessions, and developed their own rituals around drinking tea. By the 14th century tea drinking had spread through the secular culture and resulted in elaborate status rituals for the upper classes. Large tea rooms evolved that were ostentatious displays of

In response and even in protest to this display in a roiling era of civil strife, tea masters who were also Zen monks began to use deliberately common utensils when they practiced tea. Sen no Rikyu’s simple tea ceremony offered an oasis of quietude and grace amid the prevailing rancor and gaudiness. He served tea in humble bowls, made his own utensils from unlacquered bamboo, and crafted small tea houses resembling a farmer’s wooden framed hut with rough mud walls and thatched roof. This deliberately populist ceremony touched a nerve, transforming a cultural mindset regarding beauty.

Have you ever noticed that every time you hear that something is simply inexplicable, a bunch of people write books about it. Wabi-Sabi is one such example. If you were to ask any person from Japan to explain wabi-sabi you would hear that it’s a matter of perception and intuition, not of explanation. What I can say about this is that wabi-sabi is an aesthetic. It parallels Zen Buddhism’s influences on Japanese culture and its origins are traced to the Japanese Tea Ceremony.

Wabi-Sabi is the art of finding beauty in impermanence, incompleteness, and imperfection. Above all it is a reverence to what is authentic. Author Richard R. Powell write, “It nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.”

Wabi-Sabi is two words, not to be confused with the Japanese horseradish, wasabi. Wabi can mean simple, unmaterialistic, humble by choice, and in tune with nature. Someone who is perfectly herself and never craves to be anything else would be described as wabi. Think of a farmer, or of tools that are simple in design and used until they crack or wear out. Think of the weathered hands that work those tools.

The word Sabi by itself means “the bloom of time.” It connotes natural progression – tarnish, hoariness, rust– the extinguished gloss of that which once sparkled. It’s the understanding that beauty is fleeting. By the 13th century sabi’s meaning had evolved into taking pleasure in things that were old and faded.

“Taking pleasure in things that were old and faded.” Things that are imperfect. Things that are authentic. Maybe you can see why I thought learning about wabi-sabi might be of interest to this particular congregation. It certainly is to me.

Some aspects of Wabi-Sabi show up in process theology, which is a reference point of Unitarian Universalist theology. For instance, the metaphysical basis of Wabi-Sabi states that things are either devolving toward, or evolving from, nothingness. As the universe destructs it also constructs. New things emerge out of nothingness. But we can’t really determine by cursory observation whether something is in the evolving or devolving mode.

For example, if we didn’t know differently we might mistake the newborn baby boy—small, wrinkled, bent, a little grotesque looking – for the very old man on the brink of death. And nothingness itself – instead of being empty space as in the West – is alive with possibility. In metaphysical terms, Wabi-Sabi suggests that the universe is in constant motion toward or away from potential. In process theology terms the universe is in a never-ending process of creation. The difference is that process theologians claim that humankind are co-creators in this process. The Wabi-Sabi aesthetic makes no such claim.

Like many Unitarian Universalists, those who embrace the Wabi-Sabi spiritual values affirm that truth comes from the observation of nature. The Japanese didn’t particularly trust nature, but they learned from it. Three of the most obvious lessons gleaned from millennia of contact with nature (and leavened with Taoist thought) were incorporated into the wisdom of Wabi-Sabi. First, all things are impermanent. Second, all things are imperfect. Last, all things are incomplete. I want to address each of these values.

Let’s talk first about impermanence. Things that have all the earmarks of substance – things that are hard, inert, solid – present nothing more than the illusion of permanence. Everything wears down. Even intangible things like reputation, family heritage, historical memory, scientific theorems, mathematical proofs, great art and literature fade into oblivion. Who today can remember the reputation or family heritage of a 12th century French peasant? And, Star Trek aside, do we really think that Mozart will be on a 34th century playlist?

Some things wear down faster than others. A mountain will last longer than a flower, but eventually even the mountain is worn down. I heard a someone note that his eyesight was becoming more and more problematic and that his knees were also failing. I didn’t say, but wish I had, that his joints and eyes may be failing but his soul was an A+. Everything – and that includes us – wears down. We may find the aesthetic of wabi-sabi useful in responding to this reality.

The second lesson of wabi-sabi is perfection – or rather imperfection . I think we’ve all had a moment where we experienced perfection. Often they come to us through our senses. For me, it’s a cool, crystal clear morning listening to an owl call while the smell of brewing coffee floats through the open window. Take just a minute now and think about a time you experienced perfection. We can string together these moments of perfection and be well-nourished. But we also know they are nowhere near the whole story. All we have to do in turn on the television or pull up some version of social media and it would appear that everywhere there is deterioration and brokenness and all manner of discord. But you can’t focus exclusively on that perspective and not go a little crazy. While there is perfection in this world, for the most part we miss the mark no matter how hard we strive.

So here’s the question: How do we, as people of spirit, live with the longing for order and cause and effect and neatness on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the chaos that is life on life’s terms? How can we receive the blessings of imperfection?

Lucky for us that imperfection was the subject of the latest UU World centerfold. If you haven’t read it I encourage you to do so. Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, framed her thoughts in the context of working for racial justice. She wrote, “Nothing we do will be perfect. Most of the time when the work is at its most essential, you will not personally be having a great deal of fun. It will break you open if you’re paying attention, and your heartbreak will not always be directed ‘out there,’ but sometimes right at home, into the very deepest recesses of your soul, where you and I and all of us will come to the dawning realization that we are not now and have never been innocent or perfect or pure.”

You heard a little about that in the Sharing Abundance today and will hear more of it in the April 21st forum on the witness at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery. It sounds to me like an affirmation of Rev. Ladd’s assertion that “Liberal religious people not only tend to believe that we are called to perfection, but we also believe that we are already basically perfect, already basically converted, and already basically blessed. At times, we like to imagine these things without allowing for further conversions that might impinge on our freedom to be exactly as we already are and to do exactly what we have been doing all along.” Ouch!

Ladd and initiatives like Bryan Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative calls for re-building a doctrine of human nature that allows for brokenness while also regularly experiencing conversion toward a will to mutuality. This brokenness – this imperfection – is one of the Wabi-Sabi values. In his song, Anthem, Leonard Cohen, wrote “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” There’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in. Cohen, by the way, studied Zen Buddhism deeply, becoming a monk for several years. We are imperfect beings in an imperfect world. Can we find beauty in our imperfection?

The third spiritual value of Wabi-Sabi is the notion that all things are incomplete. Everything, including the universe itself, is in a constant, never-ending state of becoming or dissolving. Often we arbitrarily designate moments, points along the way, as ‘finished’ or complete’. But when does something’s destiny finally come to fruition? Is the plant complete when it flowers? When it goes to seed? When the seeds sprout? When everything turns into compost?

Wabi-sabi is not found in nature at moments of bloom and lushness, but at moments of inception or subsiding. It is not about gorgeous flowers, majestic trees, or bold landscapes. It’s about the minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral things so subtle they are invisible to vulgar eyes. We may already feel the poetry of these qualities, and yet we live in a culture that prefers to thoughtlessly throw things and people away as soon as they aren’t young and shiny any more. Wabi-sabi redeems the poignant beauty of decay, which is as much a part of our reality as is emergence.

Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all transient beings on this planet. Wabi-sabi is flea markets, not warehouse stores; aged wood not Pergo; rice paper, not glass. It celebrates cracks and crevices and all the other marks that time, weather, and loving us leave behind. The images of decline and decay force us to contemplate our own mortality and they evoke an existential loneliness and tender sadness. They also stir mingled bittersweet comfort, since we know all existence share the same fate. When culture seems too much – too raucous, too contentious, too gaudy, too vexing, too whatever – simplify through nature and grace. See wabi sabi where it exists all around you in the ordinary and natural. Nature’s cycles of growth, decay, and erosion are embodied in frayed edges, rust, liver spots. Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time.

Wabi-sabi gives us westerners a language for honoring the beauty in what is humble, imperfect, broken or passing away. Wabi-sabi living is living that infuses our lives with the spare, serene beauty that creates the space for imagination, creativity, community. Bringing wabi-sabi into our lives depends on the ability to slow down, to shift the balance from doing to being; to appreciating rather than perfecting.

This is a tough sell for us hard-charging Unitarian Universalists. But one of the most important tasks of religion, generally, and Unitarian Universalism in particular is to create community that recognizes and actively celebrates that which is not perfect. Because all of us are impermanent, imperfect, and incomplete. What we also are – or are trying to be – is authentic. And that, beloveds, is wabi-sabi. May we find comfort in our authenticity and strength in a community that appreciates the beauty in all things. Amen.