

“A Vision of Glory”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

There was this young architect, and he was working diligently on a project he had been hired to do outside. It was a beautiful Zen garden, and he worked on it day after day. He had just the right sand, set up the stones, did the work and the study to find out how they did it in ancient Japan. He wanted to make some of that same symbolic gesture in this place in the city.

One day as he was working on it, he noticed, which kind of freaked him out a little bit, that this old monk was watching the whole progress. And, he found out that this monk, as he was working, was an old Japanese monk, who was a professor at the local university, who taught about Zen Buddhism.

Then the architect was really worried because – would he get it all right? So, he worked and he worked the sand. He reinvestigated his studies, to make sure that everything was just so.

Finally, the day came and it was done. And, after not having spoken to each other in all this time, he went over to the monk and he said, “What do you think?” The monk nodded and walked over. You see, it was a mess. It was early spring, and he had had to move all of the twigs and leaves that had blown off the trees over the winter, and were still blowing around. You had the garbage wrappers. And, he had created this big tarp, and would throw everything up onto that tarp to keep it out of the way, so that the garden looked pristine and perfect.

The monk nodded his appreciation for what the architect had done. He walked over pulls on the cord, and all of that trash, dirt, twigs and leaves fall all over his beautiful Zen garden. The monk turned to him, looks down, and he said, “Now, beautiful.”

The architect just looked shocked, and the Buddhist monk said, “It *shines* now.”

Thomas Moore, in his book, “Ageless Soul” – and if you have been reading my daily devotions, you are almost sick of it, because I have talked so much about it – tells this story of the monk and the architect to explain a concept called “Wabi-Sabi.” I looked it up on you-tube. If you’re British, its “Wabí-Sabí.” We will use that phrase – I’m probably not pronouncing it right – as a concept for understanding the world.

Wabi-Sabi means an embracing of the imperfect. So, he talks about the idea that there is beauty in those things that are marred and scratched, and imperfect in this world. Thomas Moore talks about a barn when it was new and shiny, it was nice. It worked well. But when you went back a hundred years later and saw it scarring; it’s the character in that old barn. It really does come alive, and speaks to you in a way that a young, polished barn – a well-painted one doesn’t. That is Wabi-Sabi; that is understanding.

If you ever bought Amish furniture; an Amish person would do their very best to make that furniture perfect. But, if it was too perfect, they would very subtly mark it with an imperfection; because the Amish believe that only God is perfect – so if you have any

Amish wood furniture, go home and peek around and look, because somewhere in there is an imperfection, I dare you to find it. What they were explaining is, in our imperfection – in the Wabi-Sabi – we experience true joy and perfection.

Now, Thomas Moore wrote this book about the “Ageless Soul” to speak to people at different generations of life; mainly speaking to older people about how to live a joyous life, when you are living with more and more Wabi-Sabi on your face, with wrinkles; more and more Wabi-Sabi on your foot that bothers you (and you have to have surgery on Thursday); more Wabi-Sabi as you get old, and your hair is either falling out or turning grey; more Wabi-Sabi, as you get out of the chair slowly or, God forbid, if you play with your grandson on the floor, and then have to get on all fours, just to get up off the floor. [Laughter.] There is a whole lot of Wabi-Sabi as we get older. But there is an embracing of that soul, and that depth of that experience, and joy and love and appreciation, that you don’t have when you are young.

I got to thinking about it. Actually every stage (this isn’t just a sermon for older people), when you move into adolescence, you mourn the fact that you are no longer a child. Now, all of a sudden, when you hit adolescence your decisions have consequences in a way they didn’t when you were young. That can be looked at as a character flaw, as a frustration that you are losing something from childhood to adolescence, as well as gleaning something. Now you have more independence; you can more decisions on your own.

As you move into young adulthood from adolescence, you make even more decisions; but that can also be a scarring – a marking – because now more responsibility is thrust upon you.

Then, anybody who just had a child recently, will know life does change dramatically. It’s no longer your own, and you grieve the freedoms you used to have, as much as you cherish that little one who you are holding in your arms.

You lose and you gain. And, the Wabi-Sabi of that moment, according to Thomas Moore, is that appreciation; and, that recognition that while we lose in each stage of our life, we also have things to gain. What Thomas Moore wanted to say is that [in] each one of these moments you can still shine. What that Zen master was saying is that, even with the scarring of life – the burdens that come with age – the struggles with each new step that is thrust upon you, with each year that goes by – it is in those moments of frustration, those imperfections, that the soul shines.

You throw the twigs and the dirt and the little bit of garbage onto the Zen; it marks it as unique – imperfect – but special in its own way.

If you have ever looked at an artist who does faces – I am very disinterested. At first, you go to the beautiful faces because they just look so marvelous. In their beauty is awe. But, I always tend to go to the faces in the end in these galleries of pictures, to the old faces with their markings; and, you wonder where each wrinkle came from, what each story is behind each one of those wrinkles. The little puff under the eyes. Each one of those has a meaning and a story – and was earned. (Believe me, I earned my wrinkles, Hannah.) [Laughter.] It speaks to who we are and to who we have become.

I knew two flute players one time. One was amazing, and her proficiency – she never missed a note when she played. Oh, it was great if you were watching along with the music, because that young lady never missed. She was on.

While it was meaningful that it fit so perfectly with what the music said, it missed a little something: It didn't have soul.

Then there was this other young lady, and occasionally she might miss a note or she would cheat a little bit, and make one note a little longer than it should have been, or clip another note that was a little shorter than it was to be, according to the music that was laid down. But it danced. It moved. It had soul. And, I would much rather, any day of the week, listen to the flute player who may miss, or cheat, or play with the music on the page, that gave me soul and gave me a tear in my eye, than the person who was technically perfect, but I didn't feel anything behind the music.

Now, I'm no musician, but I think if you talk to musicians they might agree with me. That's the imperfection that gives you the Wabi-Sabi of the Zen master – to understand that the imperfect is actually the powerful blessing.

Thomas Moore goes on back. He said, "Do you want to shine in your older age, or in any stage of your life?" And, that is the understanding that the Holy Spirit takes our imperfections and molds them into something unique and special, and he knows where he speaks.

Thomas Moore is a former Roman Catholic monk, who left to find spirituality in a new way. He has written, oh my gosh, 15-20 books over the last 25 years. [He's an] amazing man and became a psychotherapist, to find God in a new way – through examining the imperfections of the human soul and the human psyche. And, through that experience of delving into the psychological aspects of life, found that it is in the imperfect people – that we consider not quite perfect – where true creativity, true joy and a shining of life comes through.

The people who sometimes, according to Thomas Moore, had it the hardest, whose faces were a little more grizzled, because they had to work a little harder in this life, ended up being far more interesting; whose story is so powerful, in how they have overcome and often how God – [how] they saw God in the midst of that work transforming their lives – transfiguring their lives – and the fact that they can shine in the midst of all of the difficulties, all of the layers of wrinkles and challenges and hardness upon their face; but didn't harden their soul; didn't harden their personality; [it] kept them pliable in their relationships with others, became a much more interesting pallet of artistic personality, than those who look pretty on the outside, but didn't have many challenges in life, and frankly weren't that interesting.

So, Thomas Moore pretty much ends the book challenging people of all ages – especially older people – to embrace their challenges that they have had in their life; to appreciate the imperfections upon their face; the imperfections of the limp in their walk; the imperfections of the pains that they have in their back or their hips; as a symbol of what they have not only endured, but overcome.

The symbol of the wisdom in that limp, or in that wrinkle, that helped them be who God made them to be, as a reminder that they have overcome in the past, they will overcome in the future, and that God will one day let God's light shine upon them – transfiguring their face, their bodies – as God is bringing them home to God's Kingdom. Jesus knew that. And, if you don't think you need that, when Jesus went up that mountain, it was the last moment of his ministry before he walked down that mountain into Jerusalem and died on that cross.

God knew that Jesus, who was totally perfect – never made a mistake or a sin according to Scripture – needed help, so he sent Moses and Elijah. Moses, who had his face transfigured on the mountain, as Claire [the liturgist] read in Exodus. Even Jesus needed a moment of help, and Moses and Elijah were not enough. God had to come down in the cloud, holler out almost the same words that were in his baptism – a reminder of his baptism – “This is my beloved. Listen to him.” And, Jesus needed to hear that he was still worthy, and he was powerful, and strong enough to humbly die, so that all might live. He needed to be transfigured in that moment.

And when our limps and our pains, and our frustrations and our wrinkles get the best of us, you call on God at that moment and ask the Holy Spirit to shine on you, so that you can see how God sees you – as special, as strong, as enduring – and you will see yourself as special, unique and shining; because, look what you have been through already, and you know you can get through more, until God's final light shines on your face and your soul, in God's Heavenly Kingdom.

Amen.