"Dwelling Together in Beauty"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
May 31, 2015

In May of 2012, the editor of the magazine *House Beautiful,* Newell Turner, announced a new partnership with the Home Shopping Network. To announce the new partnership between *House Beautiful* and the Home Shopping Network, Turner tells a story about the founding of the magazine in Chicago in 1896. He continues:

> *Also in 1896, American architect Frank Lloyd Wright began collaborating on a book called* The House Beautiful*, which he designed for an essay written by a Unitarian minister named William C Gannett. That essay praised the values of labor, handicraft, beauty, and simplicity. More to the point Gannett wrote very passionately about the value and importance of beautiful furnishings in everyday life for all people. And that is what we still believe in today at House Beautiful magazine 116 years later.*[1]

Now, I've read William Channing Gannett's essay "The House Beautiful" many times. And, I'm pretty confident that he'd disagree with Turner. Turner, of course, is trying to sell his magazine. Even more, he's trying to help sell the household furnishings that his advertisers have placed in his magazine and now online under the "House Beautiful" banner.

Selling more stuff is a far cry from how Gannett saw houses and the stuff we put in them. In fact, Gannett's essay intentionally challenged the idea that having the house with the most or the nicest stuff is what matters. A challenge that still resounds today in our own time of mass advertising and just so much "stuff." In a time of ecological change, I believe Gannett's framework for thinking about houses can help us reconsider how the spaces we live in are linked to our morals and our planet.

[1] "Behind the Scenes," *House Beautiful.com,* May 2012.

© Stephanie May 2015

What surprises me most about Turner's take on Gannett's text is how completely he misreads Gannett's deep religious and moral viewpoint. Most obviously, the book begins with a line from the Christian Bible, "A building of God, a house not made by hands." Much more than a throwaway line, Gannett uses this as a major theme. He explains how birds do not *make* the materials they use to construct a nest, rather they simply *arrange* materials they find. Likewise, the "handiwork" of human civilization "is nothing but the bird's work; first, a foraging on nature for material, then a re-arranging, re-combining of the plunder." Gannett claims no builder, no material is ever independently manufactured or produced. Whether built by bird or human, all buildings at root are plundered material from sources beyond oneself.

It's important to note that as a Transcendentalist, when Gannett talks about "God" as the source of earthly building material, he's not simply referring to an idea of God "out there" who created the world and left. Rather, he's trying to get the reader to see a great power that is *within* all that we touch, use, or remake in this world. He writes,

> "Call that Great Power "God,' or by what name we will, that power dwells with us in so literal a fashion that every stone and rafter, every table, spoon and paper scrap, bears stamp and signature to eyes that read aright: "The house in which we live is a building of God, a house not made with hands."

It's not the name "God" that matters to Gannett—it's the ability to *see* that what we rely upon to build and fill our houses is always already there. The resources we use are given to us by a power that is in all we touch. We don't *make* these things. We simply reuse, refashion, recycle them.

As you may have figured out over the last year, I'm not a strongly scientific person. This is not to say that I distrust or disparage science. It's just that I've always been more of a humanities person inclined to philosophy and literature rather than biology or physics. But what is increasingly clear is that

© Stephanie May 2015

we all need to be aware and awake to the emerging scientific consensus that we are not simply risking ecological change, but living in it.

As a minister and scholar of religion, my own entry into the questions of a changing ecological context focus on questions of value and meaning. What matters most to us? How do these values and commitments impact our behavior? Our interactions with other people? With our planet? Here is where I believe Gannett can help us. I read his *House Beautiful* essay as an important reflection on values, beauty, and space.

Let's start by talking about space and values. I believe that we are deeply spatial people. Too often I think we approach spaces as value-neutral backdrops to the real action. Spaces are seen as a stage that is simply there, waiting, inert. Rather, I believe we *interact* with spaces—we both have an impact on shaping spaces and are also shaped by them. Have you ever walked into a familiar space and immediately know "something is different"? Or, do you ever find yourself restless to rearrange your desk, clean your car, or head outdoors for a change of scenery? In multiple ways, small and large, we interact with the spaces in which we dwell.

Some of these interactions are rather banal, like deciding to move the couch from one of the room to the other. But some spatial interactions have deep and painful consequences. For example, in a practice known as "red-lining", in 1934 the Federal Housing Association, or FHA, created maps that designated certain spaces as more or less desirable for mortgage loans. The primary criteria for "less desirable" neighborhoods was the presence of a large black population. Rather than rely on credit worthiness of mortgage applicants, those in these "undesirable" red zones would not be given mortgages. Without access to mortgage loans, red-lined neighborhoods and the African American populations that lived within them suffered a loss of economic investment and stability. Although the practice of red-lining neighborhoods was stopped in 1968, the racialized patterns of neighborhoods has lingering impacts until today—even here in Wayland with its majority white population and high rates of home ownership.

© Stephanie May 2015

Choices people make in setting policies can have lasting impact on spaces. Yet, these policy choices are not always destructive like red-lining. For example, more than 50 years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964. 9.1 million acres were immediately protected as wilderness areas. Today, more than 110 million acres have been conserved. Places of wild beauty where logging, mining, roads, and permanent structures are prohibited. We *do* have choices on how we interact with spaces.

I believe that we are now at a time when we will have to reimagine how we interact with our spaces. Already solar panels on rooftops and open spaces are transforming the landscape around us. Yet, I wonder just how much more will change in my lifetime, in my son's. There is so much uncertainty as the eco-system changes around us. Yes, we will need the resources of science and technology to help us address the challenges ahead. But, I think we will also need tools of the spirit.

Which brings us back to Gannet. One of the biggest mistakes Turner made in summarizing Gannett's essay is that he didn't see houses and home furnishings as a moral or spiritual matter. Gannett disagrees. As do I. Spaces are not value-neutral. Rather how we interact we spaces reflects our values. We can create spaces that reinforce patterns of racial injustice. Or we can create spaces that conserve beauty. What kinds of spaces will we help to make?

As we move into an uncertain ecological future, I think we need to reflect deeply on our practices of how we choose to dwell together on the shared space of our planet. I think such reflection begins by remembering that all that we touch is *not* made by human hands . . . not at its elemental core.

Of course, since Gannett wrote this, science has progressed and we can split atoms and do more than most of us can even imagine. Gannett too recognized the emergence of new, more precise technologies. In response, he wrote,

© Stephanie May 2015

> "Still what are we doing but coaxing a little more of world-material from mother nature than the foregathers had learnt the art of coaxing from her when they were furnishing their plain log huts? Foraging on nature like the birds, and re-arranging the plunder—that is all there is of it."

To me, such a way of thinking matters because it reminds us that our lives, our very civilization is dependent upon something we cannot make. The world with its resources of air, water, soil, plants, animals, minerals, all that we need to survive and thrive is *given* to us. We are simply birds plundering the resources for ever more elaborate nests.

Far more than Gannett would have known, we now understand the impact our plundering can have upon the planet. Yet, in his own way, *The House Beautiful*, cautions the reader against unrestrained consumption or plundering. Written at the tail end of the ornate Victorian era, Gannett denounces the practice of investing significant resources into one "nice" room for company, the parlor. Rather he counsels that furnishings that are picturesque and pleasing to the inhabitants matters more than impressing visitors. In other words, dwelling in beauty matters.

Dwelling together in beauty matters because beauty helps to renew our spirits. Limiting our consumption of consumer goods or living a more simple life need not be experienced as only deprivation. Rather, as we learn from Emerson, Thoreau, and the other Transcendentalists that inspired Gannett, we can look for beauty in simplicity—whether it be flowers brought inside or a warm smile from the person across the dinner table.

In so many ways, we do live in a beautiful world. *And* we live in a world where there is *a lot* going wrong for a lot of people. As we face the challenges of a new ecological context, I believe religious communities like ours have important work to do. We need to be able to gather together to lament the losses of life from major storms, drought, flooding, and shifts in weather patterns. And we need to gather together to celebrate the joys and wonders of our world including the first local strawberries of the season and the sound of

© Stephanie May 2015

much needed rain falling outside. As we dwell together, may our choices of how we dwell together be a part of creating spaces of more justice *and* beauty.

So may it be. Amen.

© Stephanie May 2015