

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 9th May 2010

Sculpture: Expression of Life

Welcome everyone to Essex Church, home of Kensington Unitarians on this chilly Sunday morning - welcome those of you who are new to this place or to Unitarian worship, welcome to those of you who are here most weeks, welcome to strangers and welcome to friends. This is a community made by all those who walk through our doors on a Sunday morning or for the many other activities that take place here during the week. If you are new today do stay if you'd like to for a cup of tea and a chat after the service.

I invite you now to take a breath and to tell yourself that you are truly here, you have arrived. Be focussed and present. Relax. We have all arrived in different states this morning – but know yourself to be truly welcomed just as you are. May we all find something of what we most are in need during the next hour – may the weary find rest, may the troubled find peace, may those who feel blessed find new ways to share their good fortune with others, and may we sense that we are part of something greater than ourselves – whatever our faith and our beliefs we are part of the great stream of life itself, flowing, moving, ever onwards together.

Chalice Lighting:

May the light of this chalice, this symbol of our worldwide Unitarian community, may this light shine in all of our hearts and remind us of the fire of creativity that is the mark of our shared humanity. May human creativity shine ever more brightly in our world that we may find new ways to overcome old problems, new ways to make this world a more just and loving place for all.

Prayer for Candles of Joy and Concern:

May the joys and concerns spoken here this morning and those which remain unspoken, known only to those who hold them close, may all our joys and concerns be enfolded in the warmth of this community and may that warmth extend in sympathy and compassion to all who are hurting in our wider world. Amen

Address:

When our children were little we used to tease them about sculptures. One of our games was to pretend that we'd just seen the sculpture move and that they'd just missed it. We had a favourite sculpture of a horse in the garden of Chatsworth house and in another favourite game we used to get them up on his back and then try and tempt the horse forward and then tell them he wasn't moving because they were far too heavy. Now some people would say that art only becomes art when it evokes a response in the observer. I'm not sure about that as a definition but it certainly is one of art's delights – its ability to engage and energise people. In the reading we heard earlier on from Satish Kumar writing the editorial in an issue of Resurgence magazine, he wrote somewhat disparagingly about modern art as too often ugly or slick and smart. Perhaps it's just that we are so very fortunate to live in London where we are treated to such a wondrous variety of artistic expression both in galleries and public spaces but for me there is much to celebrate about art today. And that's why I wanted to speak this morning particularly about sculpture which is one of those features of life that becomes I think more pleasurable when it's shared.

Have you spotted the baby elephants on London's streets yet? There are a few near the tube station in Notting Hill and 260 throughout London – all decorated by different artists and designers, with the aim of raising awareness and ultimately raising money when they are auctioned for a charity working to protect Asian elephants. It's such a fun way to liven up London's busy streets and to stop us in our tracks for a moment. I watched a crowd of Spanish school students the other day all gathered round the elephant near Waterstones bookshop which is covered with words - trying to read upside down and photograph each other in interesting positions in relation to the elephant who looked inscrutably on at their antics.

That inscrutability – that sense that there is something going on beneath the surface of a sculpture – that is a quality that draws the observer in, makes us look more deeply, starts our own imaginations working. The quotation from Michelangelo on the front of our order of service sheet:

“Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.”

expresses something similar from an artist's point of view – there is something within that seeks expression and an artist is someone who senses the potential creation that is already lying within the material chosen.

Andy Goldsworthy, is an artist who works within the natural world – sometimes known as land art. His materials are not brush or canvas but snowflakes and flowers, leaves and stones. There's an article about his work on display here in the church today. This is what Goldsworthy writes about this search for that which is already within

“As with all my work, whether it's a leaf on a rock or ice on a rock, I'm trying to get beneath the surface appearance of things. Working the surface of a stone is an attempt to understand the internal energy of the stone.”

Just as artists such as Goldsworthy and Michelangelo are challenged by their chosen materials so I think are we too as viewers challenged by the art we observe – challenged to take time to reflect and delve more deeply into our own personal response, challenged to consider the world from another point of view. There is a special exhibition on at the British Museum at the moment of sculptures from the 12th to 15th centuries in what is now Nigeria – this thriving and wealthy city state was known as Ife – spelt IFE.

The art critic Waldemar Januszczak is passionate about these sculptures. In a recent newspaper review he wrote that “nobody - and I mean nobody – in Britain should miss this glorious display of Ife sculpture which has arrived at the British Museum. Why? Because it changes our understanding of civilisation. Because it rewrites the story of art. Because it is a once in a lifetime revolutionary event. If none of these is a big enough reason for you, then go along merely to enjoy some of the most graceful and lovely sculpture ever made.”

It's hard to describe the impressive composure of these sculptures, mostly heads, and cast mostly in bronze using a very difficult 'lost wax' process. They are so finely worked that early European archaeologists who saw them thought that they must have been created by a lost Greek tribe who'd somehow travelled across the Sahara and settled in West Africa. What struck me most about these Ife sculptures was that although they are stylised, created with a certain look, yet each has a feel of individuality about it – something of the character of a real person is somehow lurking there beneath the enigmatic gaze.

Apparently the Yoruba tribe have a creation myth in which life begins in the land of Ife, the wellspring of humanity emerges from that land. And humanity's search for the origins of life is shown in the multitude of creation myths from around the world; it's so interesting to read again and again, in such myths, of humanity being formed from the earth itself, with gods and goddesses as sculptors.

The Shilluk people have a myth in which they explain the different coloured skins of human beings caused by their god Juok finding different coloured earth, sand and clay with which to work.

The Chinese creation myth manages to explain why some people are sharper than others. The half dragon goddess Nuwa started to form human beings from clay and she was delighted with the hundreds that she had made, running and jumping about on their little legs. But she realised that she would never have enough time to shape enough humans individually so she stuck her stick into the muddy pool and then flicked little bits of mud from it and each drop of mud dried in the sun and took human shape. It is said that the humans Nuwa individually shaped were the ones with the sharpest minds who then took charge of everyone else.

According to the Qur'an, "God chose a sounding clay and mud to make man. God then breathed His spirit into dry mud and man came into being. The spirit that God breathed in man represents His own Soul" (Shariati).

"And the Eternal God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2.7). This biblical description of man being created from dust, and God breathing life in man is similar to the creation description in Islam.

Like the Bible, the Qur'an also mentions humanity as God's favourite creation. God made man from mud and blew His own soul into him – we humans are portrayed in these sacred texts as a combination of spirit and matter – of breath and earth.

There is so much that can be explored in creation myths, not least of which being the many that involve a diving creature, beavers or birds for example, - a creature diving into the waters that are everywhere and bringing a speck of earthy mud up from the depths to the surface, to the air, to consciousness if you like. And the planet and all life is formed from that speck of dirt brought up from the depths.

In modern life the ecological movement speaks of humanity as a co-creator with the divine – stewards with responsibility for the well being of creation – for life here on earth. And it is as co-creators that I invite you now to take part in creating a sculpture of our own using just cocktail sticks and marshmallows.

Benediction:

The Persian poet Hafiz once wrote that at the end of his life he would not wish to be lying in his bed regretting that he had not kissed the earth often enough. May we all in our different ways be sure to kiss the earth that brings us life and grants us all our life's experiences. Go well now and blessed be.