

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
27 September, 2009

## Wabi-Sabi Living

Master weavers in ancient Persia intentionally wove a mistake into their rugs. Only G\*d, they said, could create something perfect, and they didn't want to incur the wrath of the Creator by attempting an imitation.

I heard this from a tour guide in the Museum of Fine Art when I was in fifth grade. I've been trying to understand it ever since.

Did you ever see the movie, "Philadelphia?" If not, please do. In particular, I commend you to one of the most extraordinary scenes in the history of cinema, when Tom Hanks, having been fired from his law firm for having AIDS, plays a recording of opera singer Maria Callas, in the part of Maddalena, singing, *La Mamma Morta*. I don't speak Italian, and I have never learned to listen to opera, but this rendering of the aria undoes me every time. Surely, if the ancient Persians were right, G\*d is angry: it's perfect. For just a few moments, our longing for something beautiful and unmarred is sated. Part of why it is profoundly moving is precisely because perfection is, for the vast

majority of time, utterly unattainable.

I love those moments, and I look for them. They come to us through the senses: the voice of a loved one in the clear, cold autumn air; the maple leaf turned from green to scarlet; the smell of spicy, mulling cider; the first hot sip. We can string together these experiences of perfection, and be well-nourished.

But as we well know, they are nowhere near the whole story. Everywhere, there is deterioration and brokenness and all manner of discord. I felt it so strongly when Kem and I emerged from backpacking in the spectacular beauty of the High Sierras this summer, and drove down into the city. It was not a charitable impression: I thought, *Human beings are a blight upon this earth.*

But you can't live like that, with 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.

Some of you have heard the story of the iconic moment I surrendered my will and my life to imperfection.

Many years ago, I had been invited to participate in the consecration of a Catholic bishop. Needless to say, this felt like a big deal; I felt, in many ways, that I was up to bat for the home team with the bases very loaded. I wrote the best piece I could write, got into my girliest shoes, and waited for the babysitter to arrive ... which she didn't.

I arrived at the church with my infant daughter, gave her a bottle, and, just before I was to speak, handed her off to the priest seated to my left, who looked like I'd just put a bomb in his arms. *Terrified* doesn't even begin to describe it. I whispered, "Thanks so much! I'll be right back," and stepped up onto the chancel. I knew for many of the women in attendance, this was the lightning-strike moment; a lot was resting on my delivery. And so I started in, and shortly, made a kind of sweeping gesture to my left, where the bishop was seated, where, I saw just then, Jamie had spit up on the shoulder of my black robe.

Demonstrating remarkable restraint, I continued to speak. But across my brain printed out the words, in large letters: You Will Never Be Cool Again.

Perhaps because of this complicated and not altogether friendly relationship to the imperfect, it came as a great relief to me when, not long afterwards, my beloved friend and colleague of blessed memory, Peter Fleck, wrote a book called *The Blessings of Imperfection*. How do we live, as people of spirit, 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?

Here's something that helped me: a Japanese legend.

A young man named Sen no Rikyu 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 Rikyu by sending him into his garden and telling him to attend to it. Sen no Rikyu cleared the debris, pruned, raked, cleaned up the borders, and watered. It 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. He became Takino Joo's most famous student, a tea master in his own right.

This story is told in Japan to illustrate an aesthetic that emerged “in the fifteenth century as a reaction to the prevailing ... lavishness, ornamentation, and rich materials.” The word for this aesthetic, this ideal, is *wabi-sabi*.<sup>1</sup> Wabi-sabi is the art of finding beauty in impermanence, incompleteness, and imperfection, and above all, of revering what is authentic.<sup>2</sup> Author Richard R. Powell writes, “It nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.”<sup>3</sup>

There is no English translation of wabi-sabi; I suspect that, in the English-speaking world, for the most part, we're still trapped in worship of lavishness, ornamentation, and riches. Leonard Koren, who introduced wabi-sabi to the West with his book, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, describes wabi-sabi as “a nature-based aesthetic paradigm that [restores] a

---

1 please see Robyn Griggs Lawrence, *The Wabi-Sabi House: The Japanese Art of Imperfect Beauty*, for the concepts and quotations (unless otherwise cited) that follow

2 please see Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*

3 please see Richard R. Powell, *Wabi Sabi Simple*

measure of sanity and proportion to the art of living. Deep, multidimensional elusive wabi-sabi [appears] to be the perfect antidote to the pervasively slick, saccharine, corporate style of beauty that ... [is] desensitizing American society.” Author Robyn Griggs Lawrence writes, “Broadly, wabi-sabi is everything that today's sleek, mass-produced, technology-saturated culture isn't.” It's a farm stand, rather than the supermarket; a walk, not a plane ride; a single iris, not a huge bouquet. And “to discover wabi-sabi is to see the singular beauty” in something that may at first appear un-beautiful.

Robyn Griggs Lawrence teaches that wabi-sabi living begins at home. “One of the simplest things ... you can do,” she says, “is [to] keep [a] vase filled with something seasonal, which does a lot of things like bring your connection to the outdoors inside, and make you pay attention to the seasons.

“If you have something that’s meaningful that was passed down that’s more heirloom,” she continues, “use it.

“Focus on what you drink your coffee or tea out of in the morning. If it’s a cup that you picked up that has advertising on it, try to find something that you can really appreciate that’s kind of heavy in the hand, like handmade pottery that you interact with and use every day....”

She continues, “...Take the time to set the table nicely, [and] sit down together ... for dinner.... Use cloth napkins, and don’t put store containers on the table.... This is part of the whole ritual and enjoyment of the meal....

“[Try] doing some tasks by hand that you normally do with machines, such as washing the dishes, and paying more attention as you sweep. Pay attention to eating seasonally. One of the things that the tea teachers I worked with in Japan said was to make your food preparation a meditation instead of a chore....

“Give yourself five minutes of quiet time each day. Create a treasure alcove. Place something you value (anything you want, from an [antique] to a stone) in a special place....

Robyn Griggs Lawrence concludes, “Anything that you interact with on a regular basis you want to have soul.”<sup>4</sup>

And that's the heart of it, beginning and end.

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] doesn't require money, training, or special skills. It takes a mind quiet enough to appreciate muted beauty, courage not to fear bareness, willingness to accept things as they are.... It depends on the ability to slow down, to shift the balance from doing to being, to appreciating rather than perfecting.”<sup>5</sup>

---

4 Susan Chaityn Lebovits, *Living a Wabi Sabi Life: An Interview with Robyn Griggs Lawrence*. See [http://www.ecosalon.com/living\\_a\\_wabi\\_sabi\\_life\\_and\\_tips\\_to\\_get\\_started/](http://www.ecosalon.com/living_a_wabi_sabi_life_and_tips_to_get_started/)

5 Robyn Griggs Lawrence, *op cit*

*Appreciating rather than perfecting:* in other words, saying *yes* to things exactly as they are, in this moment; not lingering in the past, not flinging ourselves into the future, but arriving, here ... here in the gift of the present.

Lucy Kaplansky wrote *Broken Things*, one of the best love songs in celebration of love after love, love after our hearts have been broken. It says, in part,

You can have my heart  
It isn't new  
It's been used and broken and only comes in blue

You can have my heart  
If you don't mind broken things....  
You can have my life  
If you don't mind these tears....

I heard that you make old things new  
So I give these pieces all to you

If you want it you can have my heart....<sup>6</sup>

Wabi-sabi living is living *yes*: yes to what Zorba the Greek called *the full*

---

6 Lucy Kaplansky, *Broken Things*, on the album "Every Single Day"

*catastrophe*, yes to creation out of chaos. Wabi-sabi living is open-minded, open-hearted, and open-handed: *yes* to life.

It's simple, but it's not easy ... the same way letting go is simple, but not easy. I have to tell you one more story, very briefly; this is in Peter Fleck's *The Blessings of Imperfection*, from a chapter entitled "The Messiness of It All."

Peter's grandson, Benjamin, grew up in a university town in Iowa, surrounded by farms. At the age of four, Benjamin owned an imaginary farm, where all manner of extraordinary events unfolded. One day, he told his mother, my friend Andrea, "Mom, you know what happened last night? Last night, the vet came, and you know he did? He cut a little piece off the hoof of the cow, and now she has a calf."

Seizing the moment, Andrea, a good Unitarian Universalist, launched into a long and detailed explanation of how calves actually come to be. Triumphant, she concluded, "So you see, Benjamin, *that* is how it really happens."

Benjamin looked her straight in the eye, and said, *Not on my farm!*

Right. There are some things that exceed the limits, even of wabi-sabi.

My spiritual companions, I commend us to this aesthetic that affirms life on life's terms; that seeks and cherishes hidden beauty; that values *being* over doing, a quiet mind, and a peaceful heart. And I offer you this new affirmation to

address our foibles and follies, and which we can use on our imaginary farm, or not:

*O, that's so wabi-sabi!*

May we seek and find the blessings of imperfection.