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Arlington Street Church
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Bread and Roses

It started with suffrage. In June of 1910, a group of women traveled around the state of Illinois, inspiring support for the right to vote. Helen Todd was among them — a factory inspector who called for the need for laws concerning working conditions, hours, and wages. One night, while staying with a local family, she asked the “hired girl,” as she was described, what she had liked most about the speeches given the night before. The young woman responded, it “was that about the women votin’ so’s everybody would’ve bread and flowers, too.”¹

Helen Todd was electrified by this image, and went on to lift up the phrase, “Bread for all, and roses, too.”

Throughout the 20th century, Lawrence, Massachusetts, was known as Immigrant City, with former residents of 51 nations wedged into its seven square miles. Nearly half of them² had lived in the United States for fewer than five years; most of them found work in the mills. The life expectancy for mill workers was fewer than 40 years. A third of them died of pneumonia from inhaling lint and dust; tuberculosis from close, airless quarters; and workplace accidents within a decade of taking their job.

What came to be known as the Bread and Roses strike began on January 11, 1912, when the power looms that thundered inside the cotton weaving room of Lawrence’s Everett Mill suddenly fell silent. When a mill official demanded to know why the female employees were standing motionless next to their machines, they responded, simply, “not enough pay.”

That night, word of the strike swept through the city’s squalid tenements. the following morning, a walkout cascaded through neighboring mills. Even above

¹ Please see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bread_and_Roses

² 47%

the looms' deafening din, the shouts of strikers could be heard: "Short pay! All out!" By the end of the day, more than 10,000 workers were out on strike.

Although they lacked a shared language and culture, they were united in a common cause. Local farmers arrived with food donations and soup kitchens, community halls, and ethnic organizations held the strikers together. When news of the women's walkout was published around the country, American laborers took up collections for them and their families.

It was a bitter winter, but the mill workers prevailed. On March 14th, the nine-week strike ended when mill owners offered a 15-percent wage hike and overtime compensation. Fifteen thousand workers gathered on Lawrence Common shouting their agreement to accept the offer.

This is American poet James Oppenheim's *Bread and Roses*.

As we come marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill-lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing, "Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses."

As we come marching, marching, we battle, too, for men —
For they are women's children and we mother them again.
Our days shall not be sweated from birth until life closes —
Hearts starve as well as bodies: Give us Bread, but give us Roses.

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of Bread;
Small art and love and beauty their trudging sprits knew —
Yes, it is Bread we fight for — but we fight for Roses, too.

As we come marching marching, we bring the Greater Days —
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler — ten that toil where one reposes —
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.³

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³James Oppenheim (December 1911), *American Magazine*, Colver Publishing House, p. 214

According to legend, Xerxes, the King of Persia — a warrior king leading an army of hardened soldiers — once stopped his army for several days to admire a sycamore tree.

Beauty is not just something extra, a luxury; “hearts starve as well as bodies.”
Beauty is essential.

On Sunday, February 20th, we celebrated the 92nd birthday of our beloved Harriet Bogage. Two of her children, Dave and Terry, brought a huge spray of flowers to decorate the chancel. Afterwards, Ali Jablonsky, one of our affiliated community ministers and a chaplain at Tufts New England Medical Center, sent me a message, which she gave me permission to share with you today. Thank you, Ali!

“Hi, Kim,

“Did you see the ... flowers from Harriet’s family? They were stunning.... I checked in with [Dave and Terry] after the service, [asking] them if they would be taking the flowers, and they said they wanted to leave them behind.... Queen Cheryl ... [asked] if I could bring them to the hospital after worship, stressing that something so beautiful shouldn’t end with our service. Cathy, one of our clinical nursing directors at Tufts, [had come] to the service with her daughter.... [I] asked [her] if they were allowed on her unit — an [adult] inpatient psyche unit — [and] Cathy told me ... that their unit was bursting with very sick people.

“I [drove] Cathy and the flowers to [the hospital] — they barely fit in my Mini Cooper! — where [another] one of the chaplains met us with a cart. They brought them up to the ... unit, and Cathy led a group on beauty and gratitude, [inviting] patients who wanted flowers to pick which [ones] they wanted.... [She] and [the] staff worked to make them ... custom bouquet[s], kept in a safe plastic cup.

“At the end of her evening shift, Cathy texted me to say they gave out every single flower and that the patients loved them. I’m wondering if you could pass this on to Harriet, Dave, and Terry. I’d love ... them to know that their gift kept giving, and at [the hospital], the giving went to a population that is so often overlooked and is so in need of beauty.”

The word “beauty” shares its root with beatitude, blessed, and good. In 1921, Unitarian theologian Von Ogden Vogt wrote *Art and Religion*, laying out his

thesis that art is a primary and necessary factor in the religious life. “In a general way,” he said, “the great lack of Protestantism is not intellectual nor moral but artistic, not ethical but cultural.” Art and religion need each other; religion needs art “to be impressive, to get a hearing, to be enjoyable, to assist reverence, to symbolize old truths, to heighten the imagination, to fire resolve.... Religion cannot complete [its] reformation until [it] has squared [its] experience not only with [the] Scientist and [the] Moralist but also with the Artist.... Every [religious leader is called to be] more aware of the universal hunger for beauty...”⁴

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My colleague Peter A. Friedrichs told this story from a spring day at Stonewall Farm in Keene, New Hampshire. Actually, apparently, this happens annually at dairy farms throughout northern New England — a very special festival to celebrate the season. At Stonewall Farm, it’s called the Dancing of the Ladies.

Do you know about this? Huge crowds gather and stand ten people deep to witness — get ready for it — the ceremonial release of the milking herd from the barn to the field for the first time after the long winter.

Apparently, sprung from the dark confines of the barn, the cows act like children released for recess. Weighing in at close to one ton each,⁵ “the ladies” kick up their heels, prancing and cavorting through the fields. The joy is infectious.

In her book *Changing Light: The Eternal Cycle of Night and Day*, artist and teacher J. Ruth Gendler writes, “Beauty breaks us open and connects us to the hearts of others, the soul of the world; deepens our connections with the places we live and dream about, the people we love, animals and plants, trees and rivers. Beauty opens the door to creativity and wisdom.” In the Kabbalah, the ancient Jewish tradition of a mystical interpretation of the Bible, beauty is where spirit and form meet and the human and the divine are in balance.

Born in 1856 and raised here in Boston, architect Louis Sullivan coined the concept “form follows function.” It became a guiding principle of 20th century architecture. Sullivan was known as the “father of skyscrapers;” a lot of very ugly and soulless buildings, strip malls, sprawling parking lots, and highways cutting through neighborhoods were built from his idea. And then came his student, Frank Lloyd Wright. Did you know he was a Unitarian? In 1879, his parents were

⁴ Please see journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/480292

⁵ 2,000 pounds

founding members of The Meeting House in Shorewood Hills, Wisconsin. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the current church building, completed in 1951.

In his book the *Natural House*, he writes about form and function coalescing and merging until one is indistinct from the other, and in perfect harmony. “Form follows function is mere dogma,” he wrote, “until you realize the higher truth that form and function are one.... They are of each other. Form and function thus become one in design and execution if the nature of materials and method and purpose are all in unison.”⁶

The German animation and design studio Kerzgesagt conducted a study that concluded that the beauty of a city was just as important to its inhabitants as safety and economic opportunity. Again, beauty is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

Naturalist John Muir wrote, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike. This natural beauty-hunger [he invented this word, and we all know exactly what he means by it — beauty-hunger] is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose ... gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks — ... Nature’s sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.”⁷

I’m thinking about a story I heard about a place called Cabrini Green — several blocks of one of the Chicago Housing Authority’s most misguided initiatives. Row upon row, floor upon floor of the poorest of the poor were packed in to Cabrini Green — which was not green. It was, said reporter Paul Luikart, “a tub of economic nitroglycerin balanced on a chopstick of social support.”

Cabrini Green’s most infamous buildings were dismal high-rises known as “the Whites,” named for their slabs of pale, industrial concrete. Useless electrical wires hung down from the roofs; every fourth or fifth window was boarded-up with plywood. By the early 1990s, it was one of the most dangerous public housing sites in the country — an open battlefield for warring gangs. Bullets flew. Fires burned.

⁶ Eric Carlson, *Why Beauty Is Important for Our Lives and Our Cities*, 3/4/19. Please see medium.com/@ericcarlson/why-beauty-is-important-f0253d0e409f

⁷ John Muir, “Nature Writings: The Story of My Boyhood and Youth, My First Summer in the Sierra, the Mountains of California, Stickeen, Selected Essays,” p. 814

And not even the Chicago Police Department, renowned for their toughness, would venture inside.

Finally, after way too many deaths, the CHA realized that Cabrini Green was unsustainable. Residents were relocated — or not — and cranes and demo crews rolled in. One by one, the Whites came down.

But as the shabby construction fell into rubble piles of twisted rebar and enormous chunks of concrete, the demolition of the Whites revealed something extraordinary. In stark contrast to the grim exterior, the cell-like apartments had been painted in vibrant and varied reds, blues, greens. Springing from the extremities of poverty and violence, a ghostlike message from the former residents was transmitted to the rest of the city: Human beings lived here.

It's safe to say that Chicago's better-heeled citizens would have assumed that the people of Cabrini Green had been too preoccupied with daily survival to focus on anything like beauty. Paul Luikart writes, "What the ruins of Cabrini Green suggest is that a longing for the beautiful is actually a ... critical part of the human experience — ... necessary to being human...."

"To be aware means to be intrinsically attracted to beautiful things. On the outside of the terrors of poverty, there are [soul]-numbing buffers against beauty. But when all is torn away — ... lint in your pocket, ... no food on the table, ... nobody left in your life — what in fact remains is the spark of beauty, a little crystal burning with the essence of humanity. Those with nothing, aware of its power, are drawn more urgently to its nascent flame."⁸

French Renaissance man Blaise Pascal said, "In difficult times, carry something beautiful in your heart."

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Beloved spiritual companions,

The warrior king stopped his army
to admire a sycamore tree.
The hunger for beauty is universal —
not a luxury, but a necessity.

May beauty break us open

⁸ Paul Luikart, *Beauty and Poverty*, 2/10/16, in *Nooga Today*. Please see noogatoday.6amcity.com/beauty-and-poverty/

and connect us to the hearts of others,
and the soul of the world.

Bread for all, and roses too!
Amen.