

for fix-it projects to keep himself busy. Henry had suggested he consult Susan before putting in new electrical outlets or shrubbery, but Herschel liked to surprise the family with his offerings.

Herschel's other hobby was sending interesting forwards to his email list. Not just jokes. Herschel sent virus warnings, missing children reports, and partisan political messages. Henry had tried and failed to get his father to check out these items on Snopes before forwarding them to dozens of people. He also tried to teach Herschel to "cut and paste" and use "blind carbon copy" when he sent out a mass mailing, so he wouldn't be sending scores of addresses into cyber space to be exposed to real viruses or spambots. Herschel thought his son worried too much and he sent him prayers. In fact, Herschel's email specialty was prayers. Not actual responses to the needs of people he knew, but cheaply-rhymed verses from greeting cards, recycled with clip-art flowers and tinny sound files of old hymns, making their way around the internet with the addition of chain-letter-style promises of what would happen if you passed them on, and warnings of the consequences of failing to do so. Sending out prayers gave Herschel a warm feeling.

On December 20th of the Plaid Christmas, Susan was putting cookies in the oven when the doorbell rang. By the time she got to the door, the brown parcel service van was pulling away from the curb and a box was sitting on the Christmas welcome mat, right over the "Joy" in "Joy to the World." The odd thing was, there was no shipper's packaging. Susan admired the wrapping on the gift – a heavy but supple brown paper,

almost like suede cloth, and a real silk ribbon woven in royal Stewart tartan – the ultimate expression of her chosen motif for the year. Though there was no tag to identify sender or recipient, Susan felt sure the wonderful box was intended for her. It felt like an affirmation of her good taste. She couldn't really imagine Henry picking out such perfect wrapping. Anyway, why would he have a gift delivered to the house? But it was exactly the right size and shape to hold the silver and crystal bowl from Dillman's she had hinted to Henry would be a suitable Christmas gift for her. Marjory? Her best friend at church knew she was doing plaid this year, but Susan and Marjory didn't usually exchange gifts as nice as this box promised. The buzzer on the oven interrupted her speculation on the origin of the box and Susan hurried back to her cookies, leaving the gift on the hall table.

Herschel saw the box when he returned home from his bowling league. He hadn't felt much like Christmas since Eleanor died, but there was something about this box that caught his eye. For one thing, it was the right size to hold the bowling bag he had been looking at in the pro shop that afternoon. And Henry had noticed last week that the handle on his dad's current bag was pulling loose on one side. Why not? A new bowling bag would make a great gift. Herschel smiled and whistled a Christmas carol up the stairs to his garage suite.

When Hillary saw the chic brown package she stopped to feel the luxurious texture of the special paper and curl a loose end of the silk ribbon in her fingers. She wondered who her mother might be sending the

elegant box to. She thought it might be for their new pastor's family or maybe for Grandma Sutton.

Hank was next to find the fancy gift box on the hall table. He hefted it for weight and gave a good shake before heading to the kitchen to sample cookies. He wasn't sure the box was heavy enough to be a bike helmet, but it was the right size. A helmet might mean there was a BMX bike in his future.

The box was still in the hallway when Henry came in after work. Even his usual disinterest in the Christmas hoopla was not proof against the insistent glamour of the gift. He could see that the paper and ribbon were very fine and likely costly. He expected the box was something his wife had prepared for her mother. He knew how Susan prized pretty wrappings, for even simple gifts, and he reminded himself to go to Dillman's to shop for her so he could ask for a fancy wrapping that might be the equal of this box.

It was after supper before Susan thought about the wonderful Plaid Christmas box again. No one else had mentioned it. The Stewarts knew how to be discreet about surprises, especially at Christmas...how to allow someone the joy of making a surprise. Susan placed the box prominently under the tree, only sorry that its beautiful wrapping made her own best efforts look a shade shabby. An untagged box in the pile gave a little mystery, a little excitement she thought, to an event that was losing some of its fervency as the children got older.

The last few days before Christmas flew by in a rush of activity, as always. Hank begged off The Nutcracker

performance by asking to go bowling with Grandpa Herschel. On their way out, his eye fell on the big square box and he had the horrible thought that Grandpa might give him a bowling ball for Christmas if he acted too enthusiastic about the game.

Christmas Eve – hot chocolate, cider, cookies and caroling, followed by candlelight communion at the church.... It was midnight before anyone at the Stewart house got to bed. Still, Christmas morning, Hillary woke about five and brought her stocking into her room from the doorknob. That was a compromise worked out when the children were very young and wanted to start opening gifts before Hank and Susan had even a few hours of sleep. Hank and Hillary were allowed to retrieve their stockings at any hour, as long as they kept them in their rooms. Then, when Henry and Susan got up at seven or so, the family approached the hallowed tree together for the serious rituals of consumerism. Sometimes Hillary actually went back to sleep for a bit after delighting in the clever toys and unusual treats Susan had searched out for the stockings. As a teenager, Hank was now actually more interested in sleeping in than getting his stocking early. So, it was after eight by the time everyone was awake and supplied with cups of coffee or chocolate and pastries.

The Stewarts followed a strict protocol for opening gifts, one package at a time, youngest to oldest, then around again. Even with only five of them, the process could take a couple of hours, since Susan insisted on taking pictures of each gift opening – first the person holding the box; then ripping the wrapping; finally the appreciative smile or modeling of the gift. Since the

children had been posed this way all their lives, it seemed normal to them. Although lately, Hank sometimes complained about his mother's picture taking when his friends were around. Henry had tried a few times to get Susan to put down the camera and enjoy the moment, but by now he knew better. She would have been disappointed not to capture the moment on film, even though she had given up scrapbooking several years earlier. She had boxes of unfiled prints and discs, and now computer space, taken up with snapshots, most of which would never be seen by anyone past the first obligatory clicking through the lot when she sent them out. Many of them weren't worth a second look anyway.

When the living room floor was covered with wrapping paper and no one had another box to open, the beautiful mystery gift was still under the tree. No one confessed to knowing anything about it, and it was decided Grandpa Herschel should open the box...after Susan took a photo, of course. Inside the elegant package were six smaller boxes, wrapped identically to the larger one, but each had a gift tag: Herschel, Henry, Susan, Hank, Hillary, and finally – The Stewart Family. Grandpa handed out boxes and remarked that each was pretty heavy for its size.

Upon opening, each box contained a green velvet drawstring bag. Henry and Hillary both shook a dozen or more large, antique gold pieces from their bags and exclaimed in delight. Susan, Hank and Grandpa Herschel were eager to share the good fortune but their bags each contained a heavy lump of coal. Susan struggled to keep puzzlement from turning into anger.

Hank didn't bother making the effort and complained loudly, dumping the lump of coal on the carpet. Grandpa Herschel allowed as how it was a pretty poor trick alright, but quickly recovered, saying he had a diamond in his bag, it just wasn't finished yet. He handed the final box to Susan to open. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

All the pleasure and anticipation created by the beautiful gift had disappeared. Father and daughter were a little embarrassed to receive riches when someone seemed to be scolding the other family members. Hillary began counting her coins into piles to share with her mother, brother and grandfather. Henry realized he would be expected to do the same. Susan untied the last tartan silk ribbon and caressed the luxurious special paper one last time, trying to recapture some of the excitement she had felt when the original box was delivered.

In the final green velvet drawstring bag was a miniature bagpipe. Its bag was another example of the Royal Stewart colors. The mouthpiece and drones of the instrument were carved of wood and lacquered black. Instead of a chanter, the last and lower pipe, was a small crank, the handle of a music box hidden in the woolen folds of the little bagpipe. Susan turned the crank and cocked her ear to the melody. "Listen."

The tune played several bars before anyone recognized it. "Amazing Grace," Hillary shouted.

"But, what does it mean?" Susan asked.

Henry held a stack of coins like oversized poker chips, ready to ante them out to the stacks Hillary started. “It means nobody gets what he deserves. No one. It’s all grace.”

Beauty Will Save the World

“Beauty will save the world.” – Dostoevsky

1. skin deep
 2. department store make-up counter
 3. Talking Points
 4. Scientific
 5. Dream on
 6. Survival of the fittest
 7. I'm not good at math
 8. Eyes to See
 9. incarnation
 10. Longing
 11. origins
 12. Guilty Pleasures
 13. The Outsiders
 14. How Beauty Will Save the World
 15. Artists' Call to Arms
-

skin deep

news magazines analyze
gossip rags pander
musicians from cool jazz
to hot rap celebrate
beauty of face and form
industries manufacture
trappings to transform
pseudo-medicine adds
subtracts to sculpture
mortals into mannequins
master the masque
stitch pretty silk purses
display and discuss
one quarter-inch deep
beguile beholding eyes

department store make-up counter

saleswoman in a smock
designed to make her look
medical or at least
scientific
women consult her
looking for miracles
willing to pay
for hope

Talking Points

"Just another pretty face,"
my opponents have said,
as if presenting a pleasing
demeanor were an easy feat;
as if the lack of beauty
were some virtue.

I promise to do my best
to be easy-on-the-eyes;
to smile on the just
and the unjust, just like
sunshine. That's my platform:
I'll brighten your day.
You could do worse.

Scientific

"Studies have shown"
across cultures
the standard of beauty
is symmetry.
They never studied you,
O my beauty,
with one dimple
and a crooked smile.

Dream on

So, I was in the Prado ...or maybe it was the Louvre?
And there was this statue, see. I think it was Venus,
or Aphrodite, or that one with wings? Anyway, she was missing some parts. And the big deal was somebody had found them, the missing parts. And there was going to be a big blowout to announce it. Because I was number fifty or something that day, I was chosen to lift the drape. The press was there, CNN and the networks. I was a little bit nervous, but it was so exciting! So, anyway, the time came, I pulled this velvet cord, the big drape floated up on a pulley and it was ... my cousin Roberta! All this time they'd thought the statue was some goddess, some queen or something, and it turned out to be Roberta. I'll tell you, it was a little disappointing. I mean Roberta's pretty, but, come on now, se-

riously,
hard-working mother of two, freckles,
hasn't had a good haircut in maybe forever;
woman who visits her grandmother in the
nursing home
every week and volunteers for the PTA; organ-
izes
the community garden; recycles and makes
soup
out of everything. A goddess?
Well...maybe.

Survival of the fittest

Everybody knows the beauty
that will save the world is not
the silicone-sculpted body
of a Hollywood starlet.
It's not even pristine forests
and unsullied rivers, or music
and paintings about the same.
It's Father Damien, working
with Hawaiian lepers until
his own fingers rotted off
and Mother Teresa caring
for Calcutta's human refuse,
despairing of her own salvation.
It's your grandmother,
in a ragged robe, overweight
and overworked, getting up
in the night to comfort you
when you're sick or afraid;
and a factory worker who's lost
his job but performs his last shift
as carefully as the first. Those
are the beauties, the virtuous
and praiseworthy, who reenact
redemption, and teach us
that living is more than surviving.

I'm not a math person

I was not good at numbers. As a "word person,"

I got by with the fewest possible math classes. At sixty, I've never had a course in geometry. But now, I understand. I see the fractals spinning on my computer screen; diagrams of DNA; models of molecules – and finally I get it. Only, it's too late for me. Like Moses, I glimpse the Promised Land from the mountain

but will never enter. I see the patterns, numerical sequences, rules – roots and wings of so much beauty – and I can only admire from a distance and write a poem to apologize to my brother artists, the mathematicians.

Eyes to See

The attraction of tiny – small
animals, dollhouses, a baby’s fist –
is that miniature is a window
to the inner working of the world.
Drawn in to microcosm, we grasp
the enormity, complexity, of life.
Some strange magnification occurs
in its reverse. It’s what Blake knew
when he saw the “world in a grain
of sand” – you can see the big picture
with a very small lens.

incarnation

so it's only a shell
don't discount the importance
of a good package
don't buy the lie
that ethereal is somehow better
or nobler than flesh
Divinity handled
the mud of human frame
blessed the clay
and finally slipped, Himself
into human skin to show us beauty
at its deepest, best

Longing

Dale limosna, mujer;
que no hay en la vida nada
como la pena de ser
ciego en Granada. – Francisco Icaza
A walkway on the hillside
overlooking the Alhambra
boasts a plaque with these words:
“Give alms (to a blind beggar)
for in life there is nothing
like the pain of being blind
in Granada.” Indeed, the view
is made for the adjective
“breathtaking.” In afternoon
Spring sunshine, dusty green
ancient hills envelope rose-gold
angles and arches of the fortress
to make a picture of Shangri-La.
And the vision is that sort that pains
the heart with its poignant promise,
reminds us we are made for beauty.

origins

genesis out of chaos
form from the void
the brooding Spirit
evokes, vocalizes
realizes shape
and substance
grandeur of creation
repeats at conception
when life takes shape
in dark recesses
members fashioned
in the mind of God
seeds covered
in rotting compost
pulled out of darkness
by hands of rain
and fingers of light
from bowels of earth
the pattern, the pattern
becomes clear
treasure drawn forth
from squalid obscurity
from death and decay
life, beauty, diamonds
on our knees in wonder
we study the matrix
and think it the Muse
because we cannot see
the Wind, cannot hear

the Voice calling

Guilty Pleasures

I'll confess I don't always want what's lovely

or true and good and pure. Sometimes

I just want a hamburger and fries;

want to sit in the dark and play solitaire

or watch a makeover show where somebody

is transformed, so I don't have to be.

The Outsiders

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient,
ever new,
late have I loved you! You were within me, but
I was outside,
and it was there that I searched for you. – St.
Augustine

It's not just country singers
"looking for love
in all the wrong places."
From Augustine till now,
we search for the beauty
our hearts desire –
turning from one lover
to the next, one possession
to another, serial
adrenaline rushes,
fevered crushes –
while all along
Beauty has sought us
in our heart of hearts;
has wooed us
with everlasting love
and called us to come
inside, to come home.

How beauty will save the world

An interview with a local beauty reveals her deepest dreams: Oh, my goodness, she says, to tell you the God's-honest truth, I haven't thought about it, but I will.

I've heard there are some who would want to save
the whales and some who want peace in the world.

Of course, everyone wants peace in the world, but I'm not sure I see how a beauty contest could do anything that would save a whale, or anything else. My goodness, it's just a little pageant I hope will make me some cash for tuition. The truth is, if anyone's interested in truth, I don't think there's anything in the world the Harper County Dumpling Queen will be able to change. Now, real true beauty, my grandmother says, is more like goodness – how you are on the inside. You could save a person's life, or maybe you could save your money and then help get out the truth about some cause. Giving is the goodness that really makes a difference in the world. Believe me, I understand that beauty is more than looking pretty and I will do what I can to spread around goodwill for Harper County, if they choose me. Save a line in your story about beauty

to tell my grandmother's version: the truth
that there's no greater beauty in the world
than giving of yourself. And the goodness
by which we measure all other goodness
is a gift of life that forever will
be remembered and honored in this world.
Even folks who don't believe 'Jesus saves,'
still have a hard time denying the truth
that sacrifice is ultimate beauty.
All around the world, wherever goodness
is displayed, its beauty is what will
be able to save and point men to Truth.

Artists' Call to Arms

If beauty will save
the world, what
can we do?

See it, name it,
create it, be it,
appreciate.

Open our eyes,
call all we see
by its true name.

Goodness named
will grow; evil
named must hide.

So paint the dark
and sing the light.

Dance the decisions.

Write confusion,
photograph clarity.

Beauty is truth.

About the Author

Becky Haigler is retired after 24 years of teaching Spanish in Texas public schools. As an Air Force wife, she lived in Spain, Germany, Japan, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas. Her poetry has appeared in *Cappers Magazine*, *Christian Single Magazine*, *Jack and Jill*, *Writer's Guidelines*, *Devo'Zine*, and *Lubbock Magazine*. Her short stories for adolescents have been published by several denominational presses. Becky has two magic realism stories in the anthology *Able to....*, from NeoNuma Arts Press. Her collection of stories, *not so GRIMM*, debuts in 2010. Becky resides in Shreveport LA with her husband Dave Haigler. She has two daughters and three granddaughters.
