

Beauty Hunt

Author gives us notes on this essential quality

Your neighbor and your neighbor's neighbor have the bumper sticker; it's practically a mantra for those in Northern California.

It's Anne Herbert's oft-repeated advice "Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty."

A nice sentiment, yes; but one that's often trashed by the rush, stress and fear of modern life.

Still, somewhere deep inside us, we know it's an admirable pledge.

Question is, how do we keep that belief — that life is beautiful — alive in an often ugly world?

J. Ruth

If You Go

WHO: J. Ruth Gendler, 'Notes on the Need for Beauty.'

WHEN: 7:30 p.m.

Wednesday.

WHERE: Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola.

DETAILS: 462-4415.

FIND IT

ONLINE: Listen to our podcast interview at www.santacruzsentinel.com.

Gendler gives us a generous array of ways in her new book "Notes on the Need for Beauty: An Intimate Look at an Essential Quality" [Marlowe & Co., \$15.95]. Curiously, Gendler attends to the subject of ugliness almost as much as beauty in her book.

"Ugliness is, like beauty, endlessly simple,

complex, rich and worth thinking about," she said.

A Berkeley-based artist, writer and teacher, Gendler got interested in writing her new book while working on a previous one, "The Book of Qualities."

In that book, she became intrigued by qualities that were opposites.

"Beauty comes from seeing the world without the filter of fear. Ugliness is seeing the world through the filter of fear," Gendler quotes a therapist in her book by way of explanation.

Quite often, Gendler said, what we see as ugliness is only suffering.

"I was also interested," she added, "in the idea that we use the same word — beautiful — to describe a motorcycle and a landscape."

On Wednesday, Gendler will read from her book at the Capitola Book Cafe.

Although "Notes on the Need For Beauty" is not a book about mascara, garden design or how to use color in the bedroom, Gendler does spend some time in those areas.

She looks at advertising's negative impact on body image, at our often narrow relationship to nature and, as well, at our unquenchable desire to rest inside beauty, whether it's beautiful music, a rich sunset or the peace of friendship.

"Beauty is a subject that is endlessly interesting," she said.

"One woman told me of a 93-year-old woman who had been ready to die, then changed her mind and asked for her earrings.

"I arrange the clothes in my closet by color. And for other people, it's ice cream."

Despite the different ways we

Excerpt from 'Notes on the Need for Beauty'

'Through attention and study, empathy and imagination, we appreciate how partial our seeing is, how many other ways there are to see, how much beauty we see, and how much beauty we don't see. Taking a walk with different people offers a vivid reminder that by training and affinity we have very different eyes. The prairie eye and the forest eye, yes, but also the cat lover's eye, the cloud lover's eye, the eye that notices doors and windows, the oak and alder eye, the suspicious eye, the generous eye.

'Walking in a familiar place with a new friend, walking in a new place with an old friend, walking with young children [is it because they are so close to the ground that they are willing to stop, explore, sniff out so much more than the rest of us?] I am always surprised by what we say to each other and see together. I hike with an old friend in the Colorado mountains as she identifies wildflowers, reads evidence of elk in the grass, talks about her recent trip to Tibet. The words come not just from us talking, but from our being together in this place. My friends, with their vision and their language, enlarge my world, help me see beauty, give me my eyes.'

Further reading

■ "The Phenomenon of Life," The "Process of Creating Life and "A Vision of the Living World" by Christopher Alexander.

■ "No More Secondhand Art" by Peter London.

■ "Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit" by Corita Kent and Jan Stewart.

■ "Six Names of Beauty" by Crispin Sartwell.

■ "The Mountain That Loved a Bird," a children's story by Alice McLerran.

view beauty, Gendler believes in a basic definition.

"I think that beauty is the connection between the senses and the soul; between the intimate and the immense. I believe that beauty is the oscillation between our soul and the soul of the world."

In other words, keeping beauty front and center in our lives keeps us attuned to each other in a Zen, holistic way.

"Beauty thrives on attention," Gendler writes, adding that those who hold it dear are more likely to notice it.

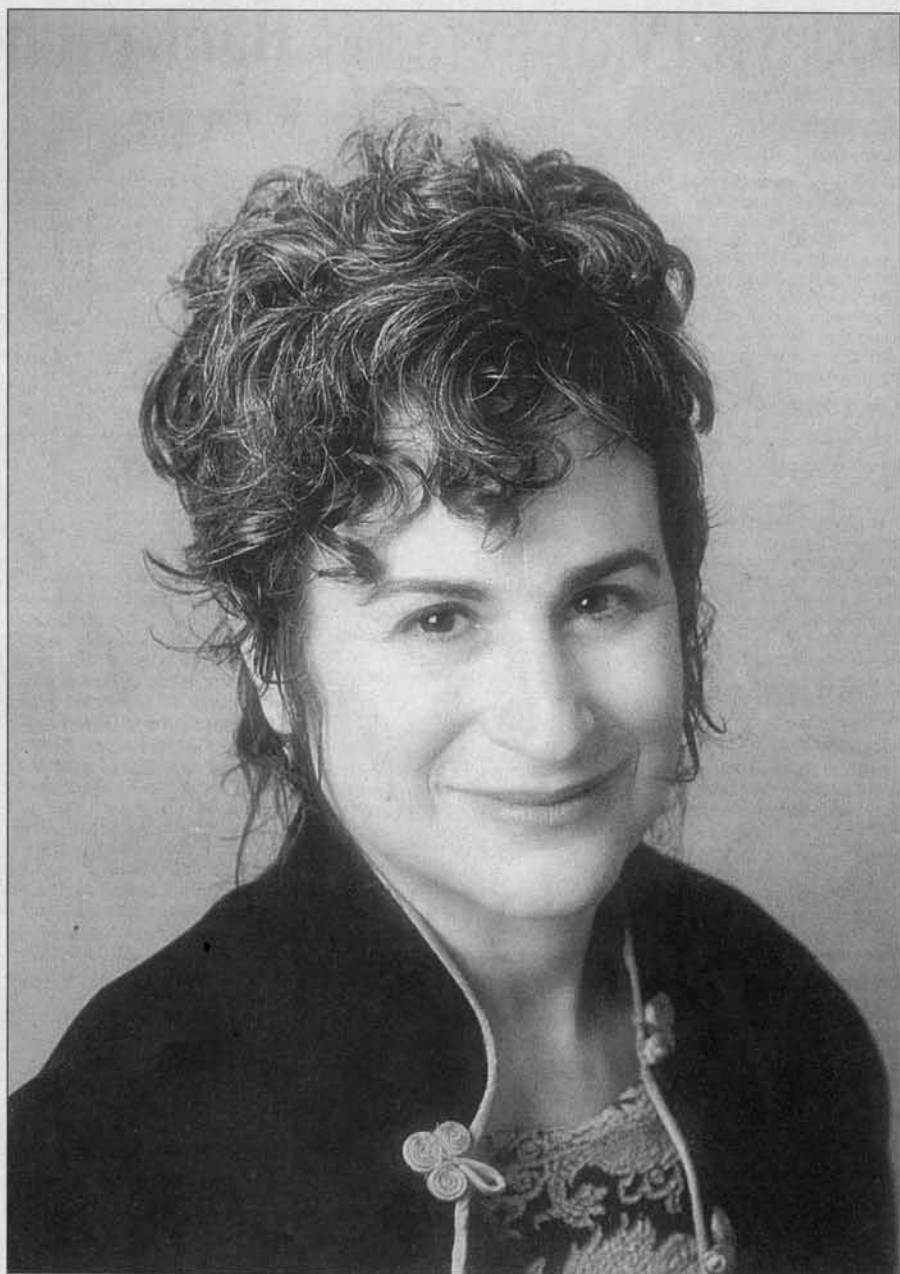
"But one of the things I've had to accept," she admitted, "is that while some things are beautiful to most of us, some things aren't, like the friend who had 10 or 12 'beautiful' motorcycles."

But if it's possible for prisoners to take refuge in the beauty of clouds across the sky, other people are decidedly beauty-deprived.

"Seeing beauty is a question of wanting to see it, to being open to it, receptive, of intending to see it."

Gendler suggests a simple exercise to begin seeing beauty.

"At the end of every day,



Contributed photos

Ruth Gendler encourages us to seek beauty every day.

Some exercises to help you see/find beauty

■ Visit a place you frequent but pick out things you wouldn't normally notice.

■ On a walk, look about you as a cat or a bird might.

■ Watch how the rising or setting sun changes what you are looking at.

■ Meditate in the nude with compassion for yourself.

■ Engage with a piece of art until you feel you know the person who made it.

■ See something beautiful in what is deemed ugly; something ugly in what is deemed beautiful.

■ Make a mask of your inner self.

■ Tell the story of your body from your ear lobes to your heels.

■ Look in a mirror until your face becomes that of a stranger; look at a stranger until you can see him with the eyes of a longtime friend.

think about three things that touched you that day."

One thing's for sure, we can't live without it.

"Beauty," Gendler said, "is essential to life. Without it, we are soulless."



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Ruth Gendler suggests that we can conjure beauty through walks, meditation and introspection.

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