

**Melissa:** Thank you so much for doing this today. It's a pleasure to meet you, and I'm excited to hear your insights on beauty today.

**Aundi:** Yeah.

**Melissa:** So, a couple reasons I was drawn to interviewing you on beauty. Well, first of all, I feel like connections with Steve Wiens are awesome. He knows really great people. So, there's that connection.

**But also, I loved the way that you are educating people about these basic, really foundational topics of attachment and trauma and giving people permission to be human essentially. So, I think that that's just beautiful work.**

**The other piece that I'm so interested too...maybe our conversation will go there, maybe not, but just how this concept of being self-compassionate with our bodies because our culture, I don't know, at least in my perspective, it has taught us to be quite harsh when it comes to beauty standards. So, this “try softer” approach perhaps to how are we with our bodies that are really, really amazingly beautiful, if we think about how complex they are, I mean, thinking about trauma even. Okay, I'll stop talking.**

**Aundi:** I think we're going to have a great conversation. It's all interconnected. I don't think of beauty as separate from that conversation. I think it's all wrapped up in it. So, it's good.

**Melissa:** So, maybe I'll back up too. If people are new to your work, do you mind just saying a couple words about kind of the work you're doing in the world?

**Aundi:** Yes, I'd love to tell your listeners a little bit about myself. So, I am in Castle Rock, Colorado, and I am a private practice therapist. I've been working in this arena for probably, gosh, something like 12 years. And so, kind of my history is that I am a survivor of complex relational trauma in my childhood. But I didn't have language for that until my adulthood, not even until I had been a therapist for a little bit of time, did I even actually have the language to understand my experience.

**And so, part of my journey has really been sort of trying to sort of figure out and be curious, “why has my body reacted similar to ways that I have seen war**

veterans sometimes act?" Why did just certain experiences feel so big and disturbing. There was a lot of questions.

And what I came to find and what I've pieced together is that I learned to cope in my childhood by doing something that I call white-knuckling, which is that I became really good and armored up at just protecting myself through achieving, through having the right answers, through pushing through pain all the time.

And then on the outside to other people that looked really good and really capable. It's not that I, I don't shame myself for how I learned to adapt, but it wasn't until my adulthood that I had permission and safety to explore the wounds underneath that required me to be so hard on myself. And so, my work as a therapist, I have written a book, it's called *Try Softer*, and it's really about learning to pay compassionate attention to your own experience.

*Really the crux of it is that when we turn towards our pain, we're actually able to move through it. So often we think of compassion or gentleness or softness as a weakness. I have come to find that my ability, both with myself and with my clients learn to be more integrated and whole allows us to be more of who we've always been. It's like bringing home all the pieces of us that maybe never got to really be part of our stories.*

And so, it's really important work. I'm super passionate about it. It's been just a great honor to be able to steward this message.

**Melissa: Okay. And thank you for doing that. I just think it's so foundational and important. So, thank you for the work that you're doing.**

**The first question I like to ask people is just how do you define beauty?**

**Aundi:** Yeah, this is such a great question, and I was thinking about, because it seemed like it would be simple, but I don't think it is. I'm actually going to read you a quote because I feel like it's my best explanation of how I see beauty, and it's actually from my book *Try Softer*, but it's from the late Irish poet John O'Donohue. And this is from an interview that I think he did with Krista Tippett before he died.

*But he said, "Beauty isn't all about just nice loveliness. Beauty is about more rounded substantial becoming. So I think beauty in that sense is about an emerging fullness, a greater sense of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth, and also a kind of homecoming for the enriched memory of your*

*unfolding life."*

And so, when I heard that quote, it's been a couple years since I heard it, probably like three years, I just stopped in my tracks because I don't think I ever, before I heard that, I don't think I'd ever heard beauty talked about with such depth and complexity before.

And what struck me about the quote is that it was like, it just hit me in a part of my soul that was just like, it was like someone saying something that, it was familiar. It was like I already knew it, but then somebody said it.

And so, for me, I believe beauty is layered and complex, complex and rarely simple.

*I love that he talks about it as a homecoming because for me, that's a lot of times, when I see something beautiful, that's what it feels like. It's like this invitation to be fully with myself, and really what I was made for.*

**Melissa:** Yes. That's so good. I remember, I listened to that interview and I absolutely loved it and listening to his accent...there's something really profound about that. I hadn't heard that, remembered that. Thank you for sharing that. So, given that definition then, where in the world do you see beauty?

**Aundi:** Yeah. So, in my book, one of the things that I talk about is something called beauty hunting. And beauty hunting, I didn't make up the term, I actually don't know who made it up.

*But I use it as a perspective of, I think of beauty as a resource to us like on multiple levels.* And so, I think there are times when I think beauty finds us, and then there are times that we go and we find beauty.

So, like for me, times that beauty finds me is honestly a sunset, like always. I'm often stopped in my tracks when I see a sunset. I have so many memories, I grew up in the Pacific Northwest on the Pacific Ocean. And the sunsets were, there were just times when you're just, I mean, they're just jaw-dropping.

But I grew up with a lot of trauma. And so, one of the things that was so interesting, I can even still remember, is just stopping and noticing this. And it was so, I don't even know, I think complex maybe is the word and to be observing just

stunning beauty. And then also a sense that like things aren't really completely as they should be.

*I think about the other side of that is that I sometimes for myself have learned that when life is hard, I have to look for beauty, I have to hunt for it.*

And so, for me, that sometimes looks like, honestly, it's noticing my kids as they're playing and just like the shape of their cheeks and the length of their eyelashes. Or it's going outside and really observing the details of nature.

*It's really giving myself permission to sink into a moment and to notice the details of the moment. I find that beauty for me is really tied to mindfulness. I have to be present in order to see what's actually there.*

I do feel like beauty is present pretty much everywhere, even in things that maybe we don't think of as beautiful. But I also am a big proponent for not forcing what's not there. I find that in our culture and sometimes in sort of like Christian culture or church culture, I mean, not just that, lots of places in I would say Western culture, there can be this, a forced gratitude is what I think of it.

And it's not that gratitude isn't good or that looking for beauty isn't good, but it's more like we have to allow it to sort of become present to us versus, I think oftentimes, when we force something, the way we'd come to force it is by shaming ourselves, which is sort of that form of white-knuckling it: "I can't believe you don't see how beautiful this flower is. You're so ungrateful." It's like the opposite of what we're going for with that.

**Melissa:** Yes, yes. That's such a good point.

**And so, you mentioned, I mean, you kind of alluded to this that we live in this world where there is profound beauty and there is so much brokenness that we're wading through all the time. So, something I like to ask people about is if there's been an experience of brokenness in your life where you saw or experienced beauty breaking in?**

**Aundi:** Yeah. How much time do we have? I think it's a great question but, yes. This is the rhythm of my life in the sense that, I do think like, for me, coming from a Christian tradition, this is where the "beauty from ashes," the idea that if we're coming from our psychological perspective, it's like posttraumatic growth.

Oftentimes I say to people, I will never wish pain on a person. I never want to celebrate somebody's pain because I think there's enough to go around already.

***But there is this interesting dynamic that when we have the support and the resources that we can move through pain. The things that have been broken can be mended. And that sometimes that becomes our greatest strength, the things that have caused us pain.***

And there's this weird tension though, again, where it's like, I think that can sometimes get weaponized where people are like, “you should be happy for your pain.” And I'm like, “no, slow your roll, that's not it.”

But we have to sit in the tension and the paradox. And so, for me, there have been so many, but one that's come from the last probably, it's probably four years ago, we went through a season of infertility before my son was born. We have two kids, so my son is our second child.

And at that point, we had had something like less than a 5% chance of getting pregnant. And so, I actually did get pregnant. And then I had a miscarriage. But the miscarriage was a really long drawn out thing where it was like went it but there was no heartbeat, but we had to wait to see if there would be growth. It took almost five weeks to really know for sure if it was going to be a viable birth basically is what they say. And so, it was really emotionally exhausting and just hard because we knew the chances were so low anyways.

I think the reason that time, I had already gone through a lot of training around trauma, I had a lot of understanding of my nervous system and my body. I knew that what I was going through was a really big deal. And so, when we finally knew that the baby wasn't going to live on this earth, I just had this time, this experience of just two things happened.

***One, I experienced such a closeness to God, I just felt such a tenderness that just so held in my pain, so loved and honored for my pain. I didn't feel any shame. It was just this really beautiful experience. It was really kind of reparative in many ways to feel so loved.***

And then the second thing is that I also felt really compassionate towards myself. It really made...I had already been practicing in a way “Try Softer.” But it was like I learned how to try even softer for a time, because it was like, it was just exceptionally painful and just a huge loss on multiple levels.

*But the beauty was just this profound sense of love and this profound sense of even in a weird way, I was proud of myself, that I knew that I could hold my head up high. I was worthy of being loved.*

And it was like, as much as that time was so hard, how I went through it allowed me, it kind of became...I sometimes talk about it as though it's like a badge of honor. Not that again, I would never wish that on myself even, but that was something I've lived through and I'm proud of myself for walking through that.

**Melissa:** Thank you so much for that example. I'm thinking about too, Try Softer, it's multifaceted, and it's interesting because I think sometimes when people hear something like Try Softer or self-compassion, it's easy for people to be like, "oh well, that sounds nice." It just sounds kind of weak and fluffy.

**But to think about what you just explained, that that can carry...that is not weak or fluffy, that is exceedingly powerful. That shift in perspective just makes all the difference for moving through pain, essentially. So, thank you for that example, that's really beautiful.**

**Aundi:** Thank you. I appreciate you seeing that, honoring that because you're exactly right. A lot of people hear these ideas of self-compassion or gentleness or try softer and they're like, "oh, you're just so fragile" or whatever. And people are at different places. Sometimes this is not the message that someone's ready to hear. Bless them. It's okay, we're all on our journey.

But I think for me, when I think about my life and some of the things that I've been through, I am quite proud of who I am and I'm quite proud of folks that I've had the opportunity to work with who have learned to be gentle and soft with themselves because I believe it's actually one of the bravest things that we could ever do.

**Melissa:** So, I'm going to shift our attention a little bit to talking about lies about beauty. So, if you could just share maybe a bit about some of the lies that you've experienced when it comes to beauty.

**Aundi:** Yeah, this is such an important element of this. Gosh, I mean, I think for me growing up because, I really definitely connected beauty to body image a lot. I experienced feeling not at home in my body and in myself because I've always been a really, I was really athletic, I played three sports in high school and I played

college basketball. I was a kind of a tomboy and I could beat all the boys at pickup basketball.

And there was a part of that that I actually still to this day is such a resource to me because there's a fire, there's a strength that I know that I possess that I'm so grateful for. And that too is my body.

*But there's this split that happens. And I'm sure this is something that you're aware of, but that happens for young women, where it becomes sort of like, there's this feeling that you have to become an object even to yourself.*

And so, it creates this dissonance because our bodies are good not just because, I mean, we can value how a body looks, but a body is so much more.

*Our bodies are how we experience the world and how, I mean, just you and I were talking before, I just think our bodies are so elegant in the way that they're able to literally process pain. We are designed to move through hardship. That's a beautiful, machine's not the word, but it's like, what kind of brilliance to be able to do that.*

*But it's like there's this one-dimensional view of beauty.*

And so, I think that's the lie to me. The lie is that we're, for me specifically, one of the things I talk about in Try Softer is that this is something I've been unlearning for years, and continue to because we live in a culture that perpetuates the idea that, I think it looks a little different for men and women, but specifically for women, that you are an object to serve the eyes of people who, whether that just be men or just, yeah, just like even, I don't know, consumer culture or whatever. You're valuable because you do  $x$  and because you look like  $x$ .

*And so yeah, I think there's just so many lies and around body image, there's lies around, maybe you can't enjoy life, maybe you can't even feel beautiful unless you meet the criteria of whatever it is.*

There's a lot in there.

*I think for me, there's been a lot of continued unlearning of, it's like, one of the things that I say is that I believe, one of the truest things that I believe is that I am beloved, like I am beloved by God. In a way, that's my name, that's my identity, that's actually who I am. And it's not just my spirit and it's not just my*

*psyche, it's also my body. My body is beloved because my body is me.*

And so, for me, this has become profoundly important that I care and tend to my body as though she is beloved even when it doesn't always maybe feel like it. But to recognize that maybe sometimes the reason it doesn't feel like it isn't necessarily because it's not true but to investigate that and to investigate what's that about. And to use curiosity to look at that.

**Melissa: Thank you. So many good things in there. I love that, and that belovedness of our body.**

**Aundi: Yeah.**

**Melissa: So, I'm loving so many of these perspectives, it's so helpful. I'm seeing too you've thought about this and you've lived into, you're working on living into this perspective. I'm curious if there have been any particular experiences you've had that have transformed your ideas about beauty.**

**Aundi: Yeah, that's a great question. I think it's funny because I think of it as, the more that I have learned to live an embodied life, the more that I have learned to inhabit myself, meaning in every way, to feel my feelings, to be present, to experience joy, to experience, I mean, there's so many things about our humanity that I think for me, particularly as a survivor of trauma, one of the things that's really common is that we actually are more disconnected from our bodies.**

And we live in a culture that's actually pretty disembodied because we value productivity, we value, we sort of have a meritocracy. We value logic, a certain kind of logic, a certain kind of thinking, to the expense of experience, at the expense of embodied life, emotional wisdom, emotional knowing, right brain, experiential knowing.

And again, it's not to say that, we don't want all right brain knowing, but we're really made for both. We're made for our wholeness, for our brain to be fully integrated.

*And so, to your question of really experiencing like the shift around beauty, for me, it's like as I have healed, as I am in and with myself, there is a sense in which I have a greater capacity to be with beauty.*



I always have this image of myself as a kid, like we talked about earlier like viewing a sunset and just, it felt so bittersweet. It was just like it's so good it's almost too good. And so, it hurts.

*It was like, I can't hold the goodness because it's like, it makes me also experience maybe what's not good maybe is the way to say it. And what's so interesting is that the more that I am able to hold my own story and to make space with compassion for my own humanity, the more available I am to see what's already there. It's not necessarily that the outside world has necessarily changed, it's really that my experience of seeing it has really changed.*

**Melissa: Yes. Thank you. And the healing work that you've walked through to get that perspective shift. Yeah.**

**Aundi: Absolutely. Yeah.**

**Melissa: Go ahead.**

**Aundi: Yeah.** I was going to say, this is from earlier in the conversation, but I was going to say, I would love to know, and I'm sure you've talked about this at other times, but how do you define beauty?

**Melissa: So on the podcast, I define it, and this is really loose, but as “the life of God at work in us and among us,” which is so broad, and on purpose I think it's broad because that just contains so much. And that's my working definition.**

**Honestly, I'm having these conversations because I think it's such, it feels like unexplored territory to me. And so, that's why I'm reaching out to people who I see beauty in their work and beauty in what they're putting out into the world and asking them. So, I'm really taking that curious posture to try to expand my own definition that is ever broadening.**

**But in short, that's how I've defined it as just “the life of God at work in us and among us” Like you said, it's complex and it's layered. So, it's like my eyes are being opened all the time too, I should maybe shift my definition, but it would be so long.**

**I don't know if this is correct, but like, I think that beauty is synonymous with God. And so, I think trying to put words around love and mystery itself is like,**

**I don't know if we can do it. And so, I don't know if I'm setting people up for...**

**Aundi:** I think it's great. I think that's a great definition and I think it's good that it's broad because it's so big. And yeah, I mean, I think that, I love that you bring an idea of mystery and this is why I think we need, we're both therapists, and I think our work is really needed.

And I think we also need like poets and prophets and artists and musicians because it's so, it's like, I think of it like, that's why I think partly I love that definition from John O'Donohue, the fullness. There's like a fullness, and I think there's an invitation in the fullness.

And sometimes I think that that's maybe why we, I don't know if this is true for everybody, I'm an Enneagram four so maybe it's particularly true for me.

*I ache sometimes when I see beauty and it makes me think is it because I'm feeling the ache for the wholeness and the fullness that is not yet come, that we are living in the already but not yet of life and the paradox of so many things.*

Anyways, I just wanted to ask you kind of what that looks like for you.

**Melissa:** And it's something that as you bring up the sunset and as you bring up that ache, I actually heard this once, I loved this by, I don't know if you know Greg Boyd, I go to his church. He brought up the term *Sehnsucht*, I don't know if you're familiar with it, but it's a German term about that longing exactly of, I can't remember the exact definition but that reality we experience when we see something beautiful. But the fact that it is just evidence of we're made for another world that is made up of moments of those breathtaking sunsets. And I think CS Lewis has a quote around that too, which I'll not try to quote because I can't remember exactly right now.

And I love putting that idea of homecoming into that, I don't know, because we are awaiting the homecoming where all of that is in its fullness.

**Aundi:** Yeah.

**Melissa:** Okay. So the last official question I like to ask people is, if there is something that you wish people knew about beauty, what would it be?

**Aundi:** I think that what I most wish is that people could give themselves permission to think of it more from a posture of curiosity than shame.

And I think that that's just such a broad, not that, I feel that's not the first place that people go when they think of beauty. I'll take that back. Maybe some people do, especially for women.

*I think that beauty can be a direct line to shame because it's often an automatic feeling of, "well, I'm not that." But I have come to find that curiosity is such a helpful, curiosity and compassion in particular, are just these really beautiful teachers and guides as we are trying to shift a posture.*

And so, I think what I think about is like, maybe for some of your listeners, they don't have a problem seeing beauty, but maybe they don't see it in themselves.

*So, the question would become, what would it look like to get curious with seeing yourself through the lens of how someone else sees you or through the lens of how God sees you.*

And not that it should always come back to ourselves but I think sometimes that's, it's when we bring it to ourselves that sometimes I think we get stuck. We are like, "oh yeah, well, nature's beautiful, but when I look at my life being in process, that's not beautiful, I just think I'm a mess."

*And it's like, I think there's this sense in which if we can get curious and be like, there are so many things that are unfinished that are beautiful. One of the things I talk about in Try Softer is that, it's like the process of blooming is literally as valuable as the actual bloom itself.*

*There's just this sense where, what would it be like to try a new lens? What if beauty is complicated and that's okay? What if there's beauty to be found in places that we don't think there is? And we didn't already decide that there's not beauty, but we just kept our eyes open for it.*

And so, I think that's the thing I would want for folks to know and to try to practice. I think practice is the operative word. So many of us know a lot of facts and there's value to facts.

*But it's practice and it's the living out that actually changes us and changes our brain and our experience.*

And so, I think that's a really important piece.

**Melissa: So many good things. Thank you for that.**

**Aundi:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Melissa: Our conversation has been pretty directed by my questions. Is there anything else when it comes to beauty that you'd like to share that we haven't touched on?**

**Aundi:** No. I think you've asked, I mean, they're great questions and I love that you're exploring this topic because I do think it's much more robust than we typically give it credit for. I think that, I think mostly I just appreciate where you're coming from.

I think the last thing I would say is that if your listeners are anything like me and beauty has caused you to ache or beauty has caused you too long or beauty has made you feel not enough, I think the other thing would just be to encourage you to bring, if you can bring compassion with you, even in the things that are just our normal human experience, what would it be like for us just to soften to that just a little bit knowing that it all, this is very Richard Rohr, like his perspective from him. It all belongs.

And so, there's something valuable there. There's good information. And to honor that. And to know that like, I think that this is something, this is just a gift that God has given us, and it brings up a lot in us, and that's not a bad thing.

**Melissa: Thank you so much, Aundi. This has been really incredible. You bring so much wisdom and compassion to this conversation. This feels really, I don't know, it has an unique air to it because of just who you are and your perspective. So, thank you so much.**

**Aundi:** You are so welcome. Thank you for having me.