

IN SEARCH OF BEAUTY

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INTRODUCTION

It seems fitting that the last presentation of these days is on BEAUTY – but perhaps the title “In Search of Beauty” is misleading, for it seems to me that in these days we have encountered BEAUTY over and over:

the beauty of friends, old and new
the beauty and wisdom of the presenters
the beauty of our surroundings
the beauty of our prayer together
 the liturgies
 the music and dance.

In these days we have been gifted, touched by God through Beauty everywhere.

Much of what I am going to say I owe to John O’Donohue, author of ANAM CARA and of the book BEAUTY: The Invisible Embrace. I read and drew upon other writers as well: John Navone, Rollo May, Frederick Buechner, Gerald O’Collins among them.

I invite you now to listen to the words of Jessica Powers, words written before she entered the Carmelites in a letter to a friend:

The desirable thing about beauty is that we can find great rapture in it, without any consideration of our own inadequacies. In this vein, I have often thought that the beauty of God is more than the love of God.

When I think of the love of God, I become aware of my own emptiness of heart; when I think of the goodness of God, I recall my innumerable needs; when I think of the mercy of God, I remember my

own failures; but when I think of the beauty of God, I cease to exist at all, I become a living adoration. (Winter Music by Dolores R. Leckey pg 92)

These words of Jessica Powers, written to a friend before she entered Carmel, have long captured my attention. . . “when I think of the beauty of God, I cease to exist at all. I become a living adoration.”

What is Jessica Powers saying? What is this beauty of God that draws her?

And you may remember reading these words of St John of the Cross:

I did not have to ask my heart what it wanted
because of all the desires I have ever known,
just one did I cling to
for it was the essence of all desire:
to know beauty.

or the lines in his Spiritual Canticle – Stanza 36:

Let us rejoice, Beloved,
and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty. . .

and his commentary on these lines in which he “expresses his mystical experience of the beauty of God not through a mere description but rather through a kind of intense prayer in which he forgets his reader in concentration on his Beloved. In this outpouring of his heart the word ‘beauty’ appears 23 times.” (footnote)

Perhaps we can agree with Rollo May who puts it this way: “Beauty is the mystery that enchants us.”

It seems that Beauty draws us out of ourselves,
draws us into the mystery of the invisible One
holds everything together – joy and pain – in one
pervasive Presence
is pure gift
is the eternal splendor of the One showing through the
Many
is that which draws us into silence and wonder
is, as O’Donohue puts it. “the invisible embrace.”

I invite you now to take a few minutes to remember an experience of beauty in your life, perhaps one that has already leapt into your mind as I have been talking: a place – a room, the woods, the ocean, the mountains
a thing - a flower, a painting, a piece of jewelry
a face - of a loved one, a friend

Drink in again the power of this beauty. I invite you to touch again this moment of beauty that touched you deeply, delighted your heart, moved your heart, perhaps brought tears to your eyes.

Allow that moment to be present to you again.
What happens in you now as you recall this gift? What are your feelings?

Beauty carries us to a place of sheer delight, of peace, of joy. Is that not true?

John O'Donohue, in his wonderful book on Beauty writes:
the beautiful captures our complete attention because it resonates with the sense of the beyond in us. . .the beyond is constantly beckoning us. . .it protrudes into the present and into Presence. This is what makes us urgent, passionate and open. This ardent kinship with beyond is at the heart of our love for beauty.

The beyond – God – we are drawn always toward that which is mystery, that for which our hearts, our souls long. And beauty seems to touch this place in us, draws us deeper into mystery, into the beyond, into God.

A longing – do you find within you a longing for that which you know not? a longing that on seeing beauty is intensified? that sometimes results in tears?

When we see something beautiful, really beautiful, there seems to be both joy and longing. Is that not true? For what are we longing? It would seem that we are longing for that which beauty is – the invisible embrace.

We may think and feel that we want a good many things in this life, but in the end nothing satisfies and we come to the end and perhaps then recognize that what we want, really want, with the deepest part of our heart, is God alone.

So perhaps the answer to the question “what do you long for?” is:
wholeness, union, love, freedom, justice,
goodness.
for our world, for those we love, for ourselves

Where is this to be found? Obviously only in God – in the Beyond who is God, in the One who is God, in the One who draws me out of myself into I know not what.

And what is more, as you know, this is precisely what God desires! And our Creator God has every intention of doing all that is possible to do to bring about our wholeness, our healing, our freedom, our very union with God’s Self. God is always at work in the world, actively bringing about God’s intention, actively working to bring about the divine intention. And it seems to many authors I have read over these past months, God uses beauty as a great means of bringing this about, touching our hearts, inciting our longing, drawing us to the very Heart of God’s Self.

God wants so much to be known, to be loved, to enter fully into each one of us that God reaches out to us in every way possible – through the trees, the flowers, the birds, even the rocks of the earth, the stars at night - but especially God makes God’s Self known to us, God reveals God’s Beauty to us in every human being we meet – IF we are willing to attend, to see, to listen, to open ourselves to the new revelation that will undoubtedly change us. That’s the catch – as Nancy said – if we are open and vulnerable we will be changed, transformed over time. We may not be in control as we would like. We may not know how we will be changed and that frightens us.

You may know the author Frederick Buechner. In his account *THE SACRED JOURNEY* he describes a moment when he and his wife and daughter were visiting Sea World in Orlando on a beautiful day. The bleachers were packed as six killer whales were released into the tank.

What with the dazzle of the sky and sun, the beautiful young people on the platform, the soft southern air and the crowds all around us watching the performance with a delight matched only by what seemed the delight of the performing whales, it was as if the whole creation – men and women and beasts and sun and water and earth and sky and, for all I know, God. . . was caught up in one great,

jubilant dance of unimaginable beauty. And then, right in the midst of it, I was astonished to find that my eyes were filled with tears.

My wife and daughter had a similar experience. . .I believe there is no mystery about why we shed tears. We shed tears because we had a glimpse of the Peaceable Kingdom, and it had almost broken our hearts. For a few moments we had seen Eden and been a part of the great dance that goes on at the heart of creation. We shed tears because we were given a glimpse of the way life was created to be and is not.

Have you wept on seeing something beautiful? Of course you have. There are various reasons for our tears. As Bruechner says, we have seen what ought to be, what is meant to be, and our hearts break for the loss. And we also know that we have been touched by God and sometimes it is simply too much for us to bear, or the joy of it carries us beyond ourselves and the only response is tears. In any experience like that, in any experience of Beauty, we are touched by God, we are drawn by God into the Heart of the Trinity and it is almost too much for us.

I still remember vividly an experience I had a couple of years ago. The Museum of Fine Arts in Balboa Park in San Diego held what they called Art Alive. The Museum selected two or three pictures from each gallery and invited creative artists, florists, to create a floral arrangement that captured the painting. They could use flowers, greens, sticks, branches – even the covering that drops from the palm trees. I went from gallery to gallery, each one more beautiful than the last. Tears flowed. So overwhelming was this experience I had to leave without seeing them all. I was changed by that experience, and even now when I think of it, I feel the deep joy and experience the longing for the “I know not what.”

The experience of Beauty is God’s gift. It is drawing us to God’s Self, beyond our limitations, beyond the limitations and imperfections of the world into the Infinite.

Our Loving Creator God makes visible the Beauty that is God alone, the Beauty that shines through every bit of the created universe if we have eyes to see and ears to hear and fingers to touch and tongues to taste. Even the smell of a rose garden, of lavender, can draw one deeply into another whole world if one is willing to allow oneself to go there.

God wants union with us, so “God seduces us,” as Jeremiah says. “And I let myself be seduced,” he added. That’s the trick: first, am I attentive enough to see God, the God who is everywhere? then, do I allow God to seduce me? Am I willing to be vulnerable to God’s seduction? Am I willing to let go into the “I know not what”?

Everything is meant to bring us to God, especially beautiful people, beautiful things and scenes and moments that fill our eyes with tears.

Beauty does that – if we let it – beautiful music, paintings, textures, moments of gentleness, compassion.

The REAL PRESENCE that Nancy spoke of – the presence of God that each one of us carries and reveals if we allow it, if we are willing to see it EVERYWHERE, even in ourselves.

Remember, too, that as Kathleen listed Sophie’s conditions for prayer, #5 was DELIGHT IN BEAUTY.

Beauty tells of God. Tells us something more of God, of who God is, of what God is like, of how much God loves us and desires us and is willing to give for us.

There is another aspect of the Beautiful that perhaps it would be well to consider. The Greek word for the BEAUTIFUL is related to the Greek word for CALL. When we experience beauty, we feel called, to what, we are only dimly aware of, but perhaps it could be described as the union, the wholeness, the perfection mentioned in regard to the longing within us. It seems to be a longing to partake in something great, unique, to accomplish something important, a call to accomplish that which our heart desires. Thus it could be said we feel called to take part with the Christ, in the redemption of the world.

Which leads to another aspect of Beauty – since Beauty issues from the depths, it emerges from intense engagement with chaos, confusion, contradiction. Beauty is often won from the heart of darkness.

As we listen to the news, watch the papers and the current films, we may find that our hearts aches with the pain and the suffering, the oppression and the degradation of human beings, with the poverty we see in the world in

which we live. Perhaps it is here then in the midst of all this distress and injustice, we hear the call, we feel the call, to order, to infinite wholeness, to compassion, to all embracing love. . .in a word, to Beauty. In these uncertain times, perhaps it is true that , as Dostoevsky wrote many years ago, “it is beauty that can save us.”

Another person, a violinist, Anna-Sophie Mutter says this, :”Beauty, for me, is felt to be beautiful only when it is contrasted with its opposite, when we can see the abyss, the shadow.”

I remember a great musician saying once of a young singer whose voice was technically correct, well trained, accurate and all. “She is good. But once her heart is broken, she will be great.”

Beauty issues from the depths, and life with all its dimensions of joy and suffering, of goodness and evil takes us into the depths.

Remember the words of Isaiah 53: Without beauty, without majesty (we saw Him.
No looks to attract our eyes;
A thing despised and rejected by men. . .

And yet, we know, we see, we touch the Beauty of this Son of God whenever we look at the Cross. “How beautiful. . .are the feet of the one who brings good news, who heralds peace, brings happiness, proclaims salvation.”

As O’Donohue says: “The beauty that emerges from woundedness is a beauty infused with feeling, a beauty different from the beauty of landscapes and the cold beauty of a perfect form. This is a beauty that has suffered its way through the ache of desolation until the words or music emerged to equal the hunger and desperation at its heart. . . not all woundedness succeeds in finding its way through to beauty of form. . .(but) where woundedness can be refined into beauty a wonderful transfiguration takes place. . . compassion, born from one’s own woundedness is one of the most beautiful presences a person can bring to the world.

The union of life and death, of joy and suffering ---

Patricia spoke of it

Kathleen reminded us that Sophie evidenced this union in her life

Nancy shared how she lived this union and was changed, how her clients were evidence of it and the Eucharist - this prayer, this ritual that makes present to us, that draws us into the woundedness transfigured into beauty, compassion, into union.

Perhaps Dostoevsky is right, that it is Beauty that will save the world.

Thus, real BEAUTY is:

the REVELATION OF THE DIVINE – God revealing God’s Self to us in every created thing so that we might know God, love God, and be totally united to God.

For through real BEAUTY:

the PRESENCE OF GOD SHINES THROUGH – all things, shining through all things, even those things, those people that we might tend to consider ugly.

As Teilhard de Chardin says: “By virtue of the Creation and still more of the Incarnation, NOTHING here below is PROFANE for those who know how to see.” “The presence of the Incarnate Word penetrates like a universal element. It shines at the heart of all things.”

Do we see God? Are our eyes open to the beauty that is God and that shines out EVERYWHERE?

Story of finding the cricket in NY

BEAUTY is the MYSTERY OF THE RADIANCE THAT COMES FROM THE UNION OF JOY AND SUFFERING – that all things are in God, all joy, all light, all darkness, all being

BEAUTY is THE LOVE OF GOD TOUCHING THE OTHER AND DRAWING THAT OTHER TO THE ONE BEHIND IT ALL- TO GOD - meeting the world from union with God, responding from the love of God that is in my heart and thus uniting with the presence of God that is in all things.

To put it simply, BEAUTY is that which reveals God. As God is in everything, according to St Paul (COI 3:) “Christ is in everything, Christ is everything.” all things are beautiful if we know how to see. Again, from O’Donohue , “In a sense the question of beauty is about a way of looking at things. It is everywhere, and everything has beauty; it is merely a matter of discovering it.” For “Beauty is not a quality externally present in something. It emerges at that threshold where reverence of mind engages the subtle presence of the other person, place or object. The hidden heart of beauty offers itself only when it is approached in a rhythm worthy of its trust and showing.”

Approached with reverence – or as Webster defines it: profound awe and respect and often love. Do we look with profound awe at the world, at human beings? at anything? at ourselves? And what is it to look with reverence?

One aspect of reverence, I think, is SILENCE. We have spoken a lot about silence these days.

Listen to these poetic words of Ken Phelan:

a rose blossom fell on my shoulder
silently
holding all the light of God in its delicate color
silently
speaking endless words of beauty and joy
silently
kissing my hands with perfume breath
silently

courageous
full of life
ready to die
silently

a meaningless footnote to the course of my life
yet a tablet –

upon which is carved
the silent statues of God

What then, is required of us if we would see Beauty? One writer put it this way: “The graced eye can glimpse beauty everywhere, seeing the divine at work in the hidden depths of things.” (Christine V. Painter)

Seeing – that’s the key. What is it to see? The WAY we look at things has a huge influence on what becomes visible for us. Are we so caught up in the busyness of our lives, accomplishments, producing, that we don’t have time to see?

Perhaps it is that we need to train ourselves to see Beauty, for Beauty is all around us, in everything, always. We do not see the revelation of God that every created being is. We do not see the compassion, the love, the self-giving of God in every aspect of the Created Universe. We simply do not see.

“The presence of the Incarnate Word penetrates like a universal element. It shines at the heart of all things.” (Teilhard) And we do not see this God! Oh, to be sure, sometimes we do. But let us open our eyes and pay attention that this God might make known to us God’s very Self.

Each one of us is responsible for HOW we see, and how we see determines WHAT we see. Seeing is not merely a physical act: the heart of vision is shaped by the state of soul. When the soul is alive to beauty we begin to see life in a fresh and vital way. We have often heard that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This is usually taken to mean that the sense of beauty is utterly subjective; there is no accounting for tastes because each person’s taste is different. The statement has another more subtle meaning: if our style of looking becomes beautiful, then beauty will become visible and shine forth for us. We will be surprised to discover beauty in unexpected places where the ungraceful eye would never linger. Once it was written “I have seen beauty in the teeth of dead dogs.”

“The graced eye” – the eye of one conscious of God’s presence – “can glimpse beauty anywhere, for beauty does not reserve itself for special elite moments of instances; it does not wait for perfection but is present already

secretly in everything. When we beautify our gaze, the grace of hidden beauty becomes our joy and our sanctuary.” O Donohue

How do we train ourselves to see? with what attitude do we approach the world, others, in search of beauty? O’Donohue suggests we approach with
attention reverence respect care
worthiness sensitivity graciousness
that we seek communion rather than merely connection
that we live from the heart, for it is from the heart that we connect
with beauty

“...beauty is the homeland of the heart. The human heart is the masterpiece of the primal artist. When God created it, it was fashioned for an eternal kinship with beauty; God knew that the human heart would always be wedded to God; for the other name of God is beauty. The heart is the tabernacle of divine beauty.

I did not have to ask my heart what it wanted, wrote John of the Cross
because of all the desires I have ever known,
just one did I cling to
for it was the essence of all desire:
to know beauty.

So what are we talking about - what is the beauty of God? we are talking about that LOVE, that PASSION that draws us out of ourselves, even as God was drawn out of God’s Self, in compassion. We are talking about goodness and graciousness and truth; of justice and creativity or birthing, and of union , the very presence, the very essence of God. The outpouring of God’s Self.

We are talking about mystery and the absolute, the wholeness and completeness, the fulfillment of that for which we long, that toward which our heart is drawn. The deep desire of our heart, that for which we are willing to give our life.

And all of this is a gift being offered always.

What do we know of God? Bausch says this:

I can say nothing of God except that I saw the red flame of a cardinal against the snow this morning as I drank tea.

I can say nothing of God except that the warm smell of potato soup and the sharp tang of cheddar cheese shimmied up my nose when a friend made lunch for me.

I can say nothing of God except that in the afternoon I washed my face in a cold mountain stream, and it stung my skin and left me feeling fresh and clean.

I can say nothing of God except that two nights ago a cricket sang a funny song in my closet amidst the socks and silence.

I can say nothing of God except that stones can speak, and deer fly in my dreams, that a strange child smiled at me in the supermarket, and that each blade of green grass wears a locket with God's face inside, and that on every hair on my cat's face is written "Alleluia!"

I can say nothing of God except that the rough texture of grainy bread on my tongue and the sweet, liquid acid of grape in my throat are a bittersweet memory of compassion and a taste of heaven.

Beauty, beauty everywhere, reveals God.
Touches my heart,
Draws me out of myself,
Unites me to the Divine,
So that, in the words of Jessica Powers, I become a living adoration.

Perhaps Dostoevsky is right: that it is Beauty that will save the world.
For Beauty is God drawing us into God's very Self,
so, that in having a taste of Eternal Love
Eternal Union
Eternal Embrace
our hearts will remain open and vulnerable in our longing.

Let us take a moment to be in touch with this desire of my heart, to ask God to help me to be open enough to receive all that God wants to give me in the

Beauty, “the Presence of the Incarnate Word that shines at the heart of all things.”