

RESPONDING TO BEAUTY'S CALL

The Shape of an Aesthetic Spirituality

Christine Valters Paintner

Longing

Beauty is to the spirit what food is to the flesh. It fills an emptiness in you which nothing else can fill.

Frederick Buechner (1926-)

I WAS INITIATED INTO THE CHURCH OF BEAUTY as a young child. Though neither of my parents were religious people, we would travel in the summers to my father's native Austria so that we could hike in the Tyrolean mountains. There we would stand in wonder and awe, surrounded as we were by massive, snow-capped peaks stretching towards the heavens. In the cities of Europe, too, we would walk with quiet reverence through the sacred space of museums and great cathedrals. The beauty of art and nature called to me.

Later in my life, it was this reverence for the aesthetic dimension that opened my heart to a religious commitment within the Roman Catholic Church. I had a profound longing for connection to a sense of meaning, to something greater than myself. I found deep resonance with an incarnational and sacramental spirituality. I could worship in a community that saw God so clearly in the stuff of our lives. Art directs us towards the realm of the senses; it immerses us in the physicality and sensuousness of the world. The arts are also integrative; they have the ability to unite intellect, body and emotion. I loved liturgies where I could touch, taste, smell, hear and see my way to the heart of the holy.

Art and symbol-making are ancient practices. As far as we can tell, they go back to the beginning of human consciousness. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer went so far as to designate the human race as *homo symbolicus*; human beings are inherently symbol-making

creatures. The aesthetic impulse seems to be a universal longing. As humans we seem to have an inherent need to express ourselves in gesture, song, story, symbol, colour, image, ritual. We use these to make sense of the world and to break open its meaning. The beat of the drum, the painting of icons, the soaring arch of a sanctuary space—we rely on the aesthetic in order both to express and to interpret the holy. The arts are evocative rather than descriptive; hence they provide a space within which God's mystery can be held.

Scripture tells us about our spiritual ancestors, and in particular about how the arts cultivated their relationships with God. The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with images of the arts. Miriam dances for joy and plays timbrels in response to God's graciousness and liberation (Exodus 15:20). God has Bezalel bring together the artists of the community so that they can build a fitting tabernacle of gold, silver, stones and wood (Exodus 31:1-5). As the ark of the covenant returns to Jerusalem, Israel shouts 'to the sound of the horn, trumpets, and cymbals', and makes 'loud music on harps and lyres', while David dances exuberantly in celebration of the ark's return (1 Chronicles 15:28-29). The psalms were composed and sung in response to a deep longing for God; they express praise for God's beauty and presence in all of creation.

The Greek for 'the beautiful' is to *kairos*, an adjective related to the verb *kalein*—'to call'. Ancient peoples knew the longing in the human heart rising from an emptiness that, to use Buechner's phrase in the epigraph above, only beauty could fill. Beauty calls, and our heart reverberates with delight. When we experience beauty, there is a sense of homecoming; we find ourselves in the



place where we have always longed to be, in the place where we find ourselves at peace.

Hans Urs von Balthasar saw beauty as a joyful experience which calls us out of ourselves to connect with others and, most importantly, to connect us with the Other. Beauty is a bridge to God, and art is a means of cooperating with the divine in creation's act. For von Balthasar, the aesthetic saturates all of creation; it is not one source of insight among others, with its own autonomy. The aesthetic is woven into the fabric of human experience and our knowledge of things. When we see a beautiful work of art, or a radiant sunset, we are confronted with the mystery of its otherness. Every person has an aching need for beauty; in beauty we discover the face of God.

Spiritual and aesthetic experiences are intimately linked. Both reveal the unutterable, the invisible, the transcendent. Art invites engagement, interaction; it makes space for encounter with God. Symbols convey the multidimensionality of God, in ways that words cannot. Spirituality is about a longing for this God, for a connection to life's dimension of mystery, to the ultimacy that fills our world with meaning. An aesthetic spirituality is one that recognises this longing as a response to a call already issued, to an invitation always present in the world. We are called to awaken to beauty, to see more deeply, to cultivate practices of attentiveness. We are invited to let beauty penetrate the heart, and to respond to it by creating further beauty in our own lives.

Awakening

Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

—Ar-Rumi (1207-1273)

Anyone taking the time to read this article must have had many moments of awakening to beauty, moments of wonder and awe at the potent fullness of the world. The process is much like the spiritual journey: We awaken to a moment of beauty where we are surprised by its sheer grace. The Spirit blows our hearts wide open. But then, consumerism and busyness can make us forget beauty's exuberance, and once again we are dulled to majesty's presence in our midst. To participate in beauty is to come into the presence of the holy; yet all too easily we can exile ourselves from God.

Beauty includes what pleases us, but also much more. The experience of beauty is deeper than words; it touches the most profound recesses of our souls, and awakens us to a world beyond the daily grind. When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world. The awakening to beauty invites us to look on all things with sustained attention and loving gaze.

This awakening may come through a moment of profound joy such as giving birth or looking up at the vast night sky. But beauty pierces the dark corners of our world as well. Beauty is a powerful force precisely because it is so close to the brokenness, the fracturedness of our experiences. Beauty dwells in the cracks of our lives.

I was awakened to this truth in a profound way during the five days I sat vigil with my mother as she lay unconscious and dying in the hospital after a sudden onset of relentless pneumonia. I held her hands gently and rubbed lotion into her arms as a private act of anointing. I felt such tenderness for her failing body, a body which had become luminous even when we were bathed in the harsh fluorescent glow of hospital lights. Beside her body, surrounded as it was by a complex web of tubing, I found myself in sacred space: the most terrible of places and the most beautiful. The hours I lingered at this threshold with her were the holiest of my entire life. Beauty embraced me, sustained me through this passageway. Beauty awakens us with wonder and awe. We gasp as we catch our breath, and break out of our routine vision to see a glimpse of the divine presence radiating through all the corners of the world.

Seeing

Nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small. We haven't time— and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.

—Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986)

Once we are awakened, beauty invites us to a new way of seeing; it offers graced vision. The graced eye can glimpse beauty everywhere, seeing the divine at work in the hidden depths of things. It is so easy to let our senses be dulled and to settle for the ordinary. Often, life seems to be just what it offers on the surface; as Ecclesiastes puts it, 'there is nothing new under the sun'. The technology, speed and busyness so

prized by our Western culture foster a habit of blindness. For all the bustle, a dreary sameness comes to mark the places where we live.

The eye of aesthetic spirituality sees more than other eyes, and its ears hear more. Art helps to facilitate this awakening by granting us epiphanies through its transfigurations of the ordinary. We come to know more than what appears to us, and we begin to see all of life as what the Celts called a 'thin place'.

When our eyes are graced with wonder, the world reveals its wonders to us. For John O'Donohue, seeing is not merely a physical act:

... the heart of vision is shaped by the state of the soul. When the soul is alive to beauty, we begin to see life in a fresh and vital way.¹

What we see is determined by how we see, and each of us is responsible for our seeing.

There is a scene in the film *American Beauty* that fosters this kind of graced vision. A white plastic bag is caught in the wind, in front of metal doors covered with graffiti. The bag dances in different directions, up and down, side to side, lifted and lowered by the air. The audience is invited to a slow, deliberate seeing, and what begins as a piece of litter on a dirty street becomes a symbol of how, even in the toughest and least expected places, beauty happens. Ricky Fitts, the character showing this image to his friend mumbles:

Sometimes, there's so much beauty in the world, I can't take it—like my heart's going to cave in.

For brief moments, art transfigures the world around us, as it reveals beauty's radiance. Art wakes us up and trains our perceptions. For the purpose of art is not to send us to an alternative world, but rather to return us, even as our vision has been renewed, to the realm of the ordinary.

Some, like Augustine, have used 'beauty' as a name for God, a usage which expresses something about the divine nature. Beauty has long been considered one of the great means through which God is revealed to us, as, in von Balthasar's phrase, we 'see the form'. To

¹ John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 1E-19.

experience beauty is to have your life enlarged—an aesthetic spirituality is about seeing the beauty of God in more and more places.

Von Balthasar believed that the word 'glory' in the Bible indicated the beauty of God. Of truth, goodness and beauty, the three transcendental attributes of God, it was beauty that, for von Balthasar, was the least obscured by our fallen nature, and therefore provided the clearest path to the Beatific Vision. Human encounter with the divine begins in a moment of aesthetic perception, in that glimpse of radiance, mystery and meaning which we can see in a work of art or in the natural world.

In the gospel story of the transfiguration, beauty becomes a window onto the divine. The burning light that once appeared to Moses in the bush now radiates from Jesus himself: 'his face shone like the sun' (Matthew 17:2). For Gregory Palamas, it was the disciples who changed at the transfiguration, not Christ. Christ was transfigured,

... not by the addition of something he was not, but by the manifestation to his disciples of what he really was. He opened their eyes so that instead of being blind they could see.²

Because their perception grew sharper, they were able to behold Christ as He truly is.

We will only see beauty, through contemplating a picture or 'really seeing' a flower, if we train ourselves to do so. To peer into a deeper reality is a metaphysical endeavour, requiring that we 'see' with more than merely our eyes, and that we sense with more than merely our natural senses. Thomas Dubay has noted that,

The full experience of a rose requires that we see with our minds the inner energy, the hidden origin, the radical form, and not simply the manifested colours, shapes and proportions.³

² The *Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, volume 4 (London: Faber, 1995), 222.

³ Thomas Dubay, *The Eschatological Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 65.

Experiencing a rose's beauty involves more than merely our natural senses, more than our everyday powers of seeing. All the more does the point apply when it comes to experiencing God's glory.

Cultivating

Pilgrims go into the woods, but they carry with them the beauty which they visit ... Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything that is beautiful, for beauty is God's handwriting—a stepside secretariat. Welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky, in every fair flower, and thank God for it as a cup of blessing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

How do we welcome the glory of beauty into our lives? How do we cultivate a habit of staying awake and of seeing deeply the beauty of the world around us? As Georgia O'Keefe reminds us, it takes time to see a flower, the way it takes time to develop a friendship. In a culture where the refrain 'I'm so busy' continually reverberates around us, time is something that we have to claim and inhabit. Beauty transports us to



kairos time, time apart from the everyday, even if eventually it will also, having given us a new perspective, immerse us back in our everyday lives.

We can only welcome beauty if we adopt a posture of deep seeing and listening, and give the experience both time and space. We need deliberately to cultivate spaciousness in our lives if we are to apprehend the beauty that is there. One way in which we can do this is through the practice of Sabbath-keeping. Honouring the Sabbath recognises that we need space and time reserved for rest,

renewal and revelation. Sabbath-keeping helps us to let go of our compulsions, and to free our hearts and minds from distractions so we can focus fully on welcoming, receiving and delighting in God's beauty.

Beauty invites us to relish and take pleasure in the senses, to linger and savour. Beauty cannot be rushed or captured. When the disciples saw Jesus transfigured, they wanted to build a dwelling for his glory, but beauty cannot be domesticated.

But perhaps there is a prior question. Perhaps we can only welcome the beauty of the world around us if we can welcome the beauty that lies deep within us. We are created in the image of God, yet how often we deny our own beauty. What prevents us from recognising the beautiful presence of God within us?

Thomas Merton used the phrase 'the false self' to name what keeps us from truly seeing our own beauty. The false self wears masks; it acts only for the sake of others' approval, or to meet the expectations of family, culture, work; it is attached to things, placing more importance on them than they merit. The false self is perpetuated by the illusions we live under, by the veils we hold before our eyes, by the anxieties and fears with which we live. It is nourished by the merely superficial. The false self distorts us, either by inflating us or deflating us. It can appear as the intellectual self that wants to hover above the mess of life in clear but ungrounded ideas. Or as the ethical self that wants to live by some abstract moral code rather than wrestle with lived realities. The false self is what holds on too tightly to anything other than God.

We each arrive in this world created as a unique and beautiful image of God. Merton describes this self as the 'true self', moulded and crafted lovingly by God. The true self wants nothing more, or less, than for us to be who we were created to be. That core of our being, created by God as whole and beautiful, is a wave in the ocean of God, a flame in God's fire. For Merton, the true inner self is a jewel resting on the bottom of the sea, and the path of contemplation is the journey to this true self from the false one:

**Beauty
nourishes
our true
selves**

I break through the superficial exterior appearances that form my routine vision of the world and my own self, and I find myself in the presence of hidden majesty.⁴

This is the eye of aesthetic perception, seeing the 'hidden majesty' saturating the world. When we cultivate a welcoming way of life through contemplative practice, one that creates space to develop habits of seeing, our own beauty becomes more visible to us.

Teresa of Avila also described the soul as a jewel—a single diamond within which there is a castle with seven successive interior rooms. The central room is the place of the most intimate communion with God. Attachments keep us from entering this holy and hidden room that is deep within ourselves. When we reach that final room of the soul, the scales are removed from the soul's eyes, and we see how truly beautiful we are.

I attended a contemplative retreat several years ago. On the second day we were invited to go out into the natural world and spend time imagining God's profound love for creation, and indeed participate in it. I spent several hours that afternoon with an old oak tree, grand, gnarled and glorious. I had no doubt that God loved this particular tree with passion and fullness and I could feel my heart slowly expand with joy imagining God's delight in its beauty. On the fourth day we were invited to turn this love for nature we had imagined inwards, and to sense how that same divine love and delight were also directed toward each of us human creatures. It was such a simple exercise, but it led to a profound moment for me. Delighting in this love, I was invited to see how God loves every person in this way. Suddenly, the world everywhere I looked was 'charged with the grandeur of God', as Gerard Manley Hopkins so eloquently states.

Sister Wendy Beckett observes that art is spiritual when it makes us 'more aware of what we are meant to be'.⁵ Contemplation cultivates in us a spaciousness necessary for the ability to welcome the beauty that dwells everywhere. In this act of welcome, we can come to see ourselves as radiating that same beauty, and begin to know ourselves as we truly are. In that insight we can revel more deeply in the beauty all around us.

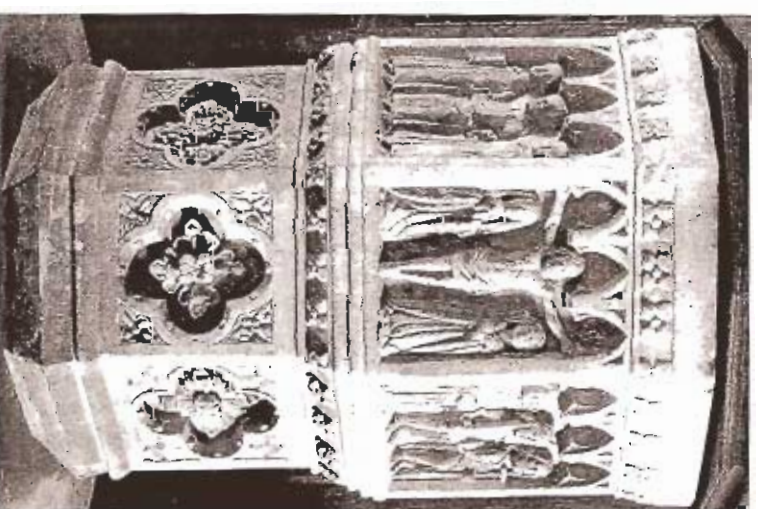
Creating

*And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?*

Mary Oliver (1935-)

Awakening to beauty and seeing deeply into the beauty of the world demand of us a response. Beauty holds possibilities that enlarge and delight the heart. As our vision of what is possible is expanded, we are called to participate in the creative act ourselves. Our limited vision is broken wide open, and hope is born. The creative act and the prophetic act are woven together. An aesthetic spirituality honours creativity as one of Scripture's 'ancient paths, where the good way lies' (Jeremiah 6:16).

Art-making is a participation in God's creative activity. Every human being bears the image of God; every human being who creates, speaks, sings, writes or sculpts reflects something of the Creator. Art invites us to touch what is deepest in our being, and to do so with abandon. So will the divine spark be released within us, perhaps in forms we have never dreamt of. Whenever we awaken beauty, we are helping to make God present to the world. Every creative act calls forth the presence of God in beautiful colours and sounds and textures. The art-making process always transforms the raw materials with which the artist works. Like the spiritual journey, creative processes are transformation.



⁴ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 41.

⁵ Wendy Beckett, *Art and the Sacred: The Mystical Now* (New York: Universe, 1993), 7.

I take great delight in the classes I teach on the integration of the arts, spirituality and creativity, as I try to engage students in the creative process. The first day of class is often marked by tentativeness and resistance. Messages about what makes 'good art' linger, and must be cleared away. I invite students to surrender themselves to the process; they should listen to the Spirit within, and not worry about the product. Essential for the process is a safe space that allows them freedom to express their inner movements. There always develops a sense of play and enchantment that transforms the space of the room. Students are often surprised at what comes to them in this time of prayer. Symbols arise within them like dream images, offering them new insight both about themselves and about God.

As John O'Donohue says, 'at the deepest level, creativity is holiness'.⁶ Creativity is not just about art-making, however. The primary creative act is living our daily lives:

Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.⁷

We are called by beauty to make our life a work of art. More formal artistic processes such as painting, singing or dancing are valuable because they teach us skills, and ways of being in the world, that are essential for passionate and vital living. Through making art we come to know ourselves more deeply, and are given the space to discover and express our own voice. We take risks so as to be visible to the world. We learn to slow down and to see with graced vision. We discover the values of improvisation, and we surrender to a process greater than ourselves. Art-making helps us to be present to mystery. We give meaningful expression to our commitments, values and ideas. We make beauty present. The practices of art empower everyday life.

To Root an Aesthetic Spirituality

Longing, awakening, seeing, cultivating, creating—each of the previous sections of this article has been headed with a participle. An aesthetic

spirituality is active; it is properly evoked through verbs that point us towards a dynamic process, rather than through nouns that designate qualities to be nurtured or practices to be observed. The ways of being fostered by an aesthetic spirituality need to take root and become ever more expansive; the habit of seeing the world with eyes of beauty needs to become embodied in a way of life.

An aesthetic spirituality invites us into renewed ways of being in the world. All of our senses can be heightened and awakened to a world beneath and beyond surface appearances. God can be found in all that is sensuous and passionate. Wassily Kandinsky wrote that all reality has a spiritual dimension and an inner meaning; to be truly human is to resonate with the super-sensuous dimension of things. By this he does not mean that we should leave the world of the senses behind. Rather we are to immerse ourselves in the intensity and depth of the sense experience, so that it reveals the spiritual to us. We are to engage with what is most vital and provocative.

Beauty calls us to pay attention, to take time to relish and delight, and to make God's presence visible. Art-making can lead to beautiful relationships, to meaningful work, to the striving for justice, and to the building of the Kingdom. Ultimately it is our whole lives that are to be 'God's work of art'.⁸

Christine Valters Painter received her PhD in Christian Spirituality from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She teaches courses on the intersection of art, creativity and Christian spirituality and is a spiritual director, retreat leader and writer. She lives in Seattle, Washington, and is a Benedictine Oblate. She can be reached at christine@satcrlcenter.org.

⁶ O'Donohue, *Beauty*, 142.

⁷ John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, April 1999, n. 2.

⁸ Ephesians 2:10, NIB.