

Beauty calls forth

Beauty is a spiritual path - seeing beauty, being in its presence, responding to it and creating it. The Greek expression for 'the beautiful' is *to kalon*, which is related to the verb *kalein* which means 'to call.' This gives wonderful insight into beauty and its place in our journey into the Divine. Beauty calls. And our hearts respond. Just take a moment to think of the last time you found yourself in the presence of beauty. Perhaps it was some glorious spectacle in nature, or music, painting, sculpture, dance, thoughts, gestures or words – and think of what that felt like, what it evoked in you.

Christine Valters Paintner, a Benedictine oblate and spiritual teacher, says: "I was initiated into the church of beauty as a young child. Though neither of my parents was religious, we would travel in the summers to my father's native Austria so that we could hike the Tyrolean mountains. There we would stand in wonder and awe, surrounded as we were by massive, snow-capped peaks stretching toward 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".

We do not remain unmoved by beauty, it draws forth a response from us. That response may vary from outward manifestations of joy and wonder, outpourings of appreciation and admiration, to creativity, to silent reverence. I find my most natural response to beauty is silence. For me there is a profound relationship with the beautiful that only silence can adequately express. Beauty can bring us to our knees, metaphorically and literally too. Perhaps this is the most authentic response to beauty. It is certainly the religious response, for it says, 'I have come face to face with the majesty and awe of the Other'.

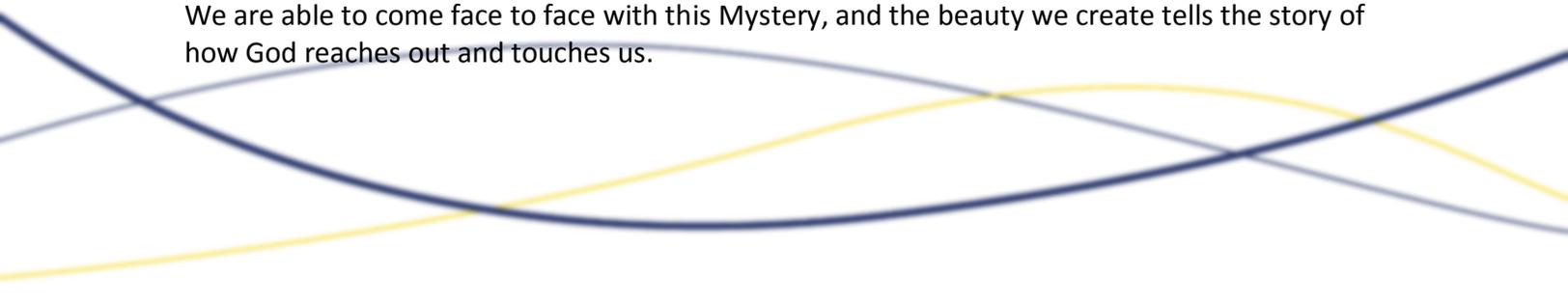
But just what is beautiful? You may know the expression, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder". Doing a little research on this I came upon the following. This saying first appeared in Greek in the third century and although it didn't appear in its current form in print until the nineteenth century, the same thought appeared in various written forms before that time. In 1588 John Lyly in *Euphues and his England* wrote, "As neere is Fancie to Beautie as the pricke to the rose, as the stalke to the rynde, as the earthe to the roote". In Shakespeare's *Love's Labour Lost* we find these words, "Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye", and in 1741 Benjamin Franklin in *Poor Richard's Almanack* wrote, 'Beauty, like supreme dominion / Is but supported by opinion". The following year, David Hume in his *Essays, Moral and Political* said, "Beauty in things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them". The person who is credited with the expression in its current form is Margaret Wolfe Hungerford who, in 1878 in *Molly Bawn*, wrote, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder".

Not only is beauty subjective but, if we go back to that connection between 'to call' and 'the beautiful', we see that what we deem to be beautiful has something to do with what is evoked or called forth from us. We are in a relationship with what we see as beautiful. The great theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, saw beauty as a joyful experience that calls us out of ourselves to connect with others, and most importantly to connect us with the Other. In a

religious sense, beauty is a bridge to God. When we see a beautiful work of art or a glorious sunset or full moon we are confronted with the mystery of its otherness. In beauty we discover the face of God. This was expressed magnificently by the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins in his poem, *The Grandeur of God*: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God / It will flame out like shining from shook foil”. Thomas Merton, the Trappist contemplative monk of the last century, captures that ‘calling forth’ as he writes about sunrise: “Sunrise: it is an event that calls forth solemn music in the very depths of man’s nature, as if one’s whole being had to attune itself to the cosmos and praise God for the new day, praise him in the name of all the creatures that ever were or will ever be” (*Thomas Merton Journal*).

There seem to be many things and experiences that collectively as human beings we find beautiful and which evoke similar responses from us, such as a glorious sunrise or sunset, majestic mountains or the starry sky, but there is also much that we find beautiful simply because of the particular response that is evoked in us and which may not necessarily be called forth in another. Over twenty years ago I visited Bangkok for the first time and found myself, way off the tourist track, wandering the tiny ‘back’ streets. They were filled with humble homes that were nothing more than shacks, a place of poverty and need. In the narrow streets and in the gloomy darkness of the backs of these dwellings people could be seen quietly going about their business and daily interactions, cooking, sitting, talking to each other. But as I walked around, just absorbed in it all, I was overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the place. Objectively speaking, it was poor and shabby, ‘ugly’, and there was pain in observing that. But in the simplicity, humbleness and need, God was there. God was palpable. There was no pretense, the pain of poverty was exposed and raw, and it drew me in and called forth my response and it became beautiful. It made me think of what someone, living and working with the very poor in the ramshackle huts of the South African ‘veld’ had said to me too: “there is something beautiful about the poor and marginalized”. We should never glorify or romanticize poverty. It is what it is. And our only response and our duty are to work to eliminate it. But wandering around that afternoon in the poverty of that part of Bangkok, it was the simplicity and humbleness that made a space for the Divine to enter in that drew me, and that was beauty. In the face of such beauty our only response is to fall to our knees.

We seem to all have a need for beauty. We seem to ache for it, to long for it, to seek it out. When we are tired or feeling down or anxious we go to a beautiful place, perhaps we take a walk on the beach or listen to music, and we are renewed and uplifted. We seem to be called to be attentive to beauty, to open our eyes to it. It’s wonderful, when travelling in the country, to see people standing at look-outs, gazing at the beauty, held there for a moment. We are also called to create beauty ourselves. This is a deeply human endeavor and it is also profoundly religious. In religious art, music and architecture we express our connection with God. In creating this beauty we give God a space in which to be. Think of the soaring arch of a cathedral sanctuary, or an exquisitely moving Bach Cantata, or Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. In creating such beauty we express the Holy and interpret the Holy. God’s mystery is held there. We are able to come face to face with this Mystery, and the beauty we create tells the story of how God reaches out and touches us.



Creating beauty to tell of the Divine embrace goes way back, much further than our Judaeo-Christian origins of course, but we do find some powerful instances of this in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here are a few. In the Book of Exodus, after fleeing Egypt, crossing the Sea of Reeds and being spared from slaughter or imprisonment by the Pharaoh's army, we see Miriam, the sister of Moses, dancing with joy and playing the timbrel as she rejoices in God's liberation of her people. Later in the same Book, God has Bezalel build a tabernacle of gold, silver, stones and wood: "I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting and in carving wood". This beautiful creation was to house the Covenant, the Law, God's bond of love with the Hebrew people. And in the first Book of Chronicles, the ark is brought to Jerusalem, the holy city, amidst the music of horns, trumpets, cymbals, lyre and harp. The story of God's relationship with the Hebrew people is celebrated with beauty. In the Book of Psalms there are many which were composed to sing praise to God and declare God's beauty and majesty - they always refer to singing, dancing and making music in response to the human experience of God's glory and presence: "For you, O Lord are most high over all the earth" (Psalm 97); "Declare God's glory among the nations, his marvellous works among the peoples" (Psalm 96). And then there are others that speak of simply sitting in stillness, silence and longing, and waiting upon God: "I have looked upon you in the sanctuary beholding your power and your glory" (Psalm 63); "My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you" (Psalm 63). The beauty, the wonder and mystery of the Divine Presence cannot fail to touch us, as it did those Hebrew people of so long ago, and evoke a profound response.

But what about our own beauty? We each come into this world created as a unique and beautiful image of God. Thomas Merton describes this self as the 'true self', moulded and crafted lovingly by God. He says that the 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. But that is just the issue: it is 'resting on the bottom of the sea'. Many people go through an entire life without ever really seeing their own inner beauty. And so often, as we know, this blindness to one's inner beauty leads to a distorted self-image, all kinds of destructive behaviours, unhappiness and sometimes tragedy. This beauty can also become concealed under the ordinariness of day to day life. We just keep moving on and we miss it. We have to make an effort and make time and space for it. John O'Donohue, the great writer on spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world, in his book, *Anam Cara*, says: "Only in solitude can you discover a sense of your own beauty. The Divine Artist sent no-one here without the depth and light of divine beauty. This beauty is frequently concealed behind the dull façade of routine. Only in your solitude will you come upon your own beauty. In Connemara, where there are a lot of fishing villages, there is a phrase which says: it is in the unexpected or neglected place that you will find the lobster. In the neglected crevices and corners of your evaded solitude, you will find the treasure that you have always sought elsewhere".

We can become stuck in the familiarity of our daily self and lives, the bits we know best, what Merton calls "the dull façade of routine" - all those well-known ways and patterns we have,

living each day as if on automatic, our too-familiar quirks, the self we take for granted. All this can obscure what lies within and we have to look into that neglected place. To see our own beauty we have to re-orientate our vision. As Merton says, “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”. But that can be painful and frightening for before we get to the hidden majesty, when we do begin to slow down, become quiet and look within, the first things to emerge will be the things we possibly don’t want to see. Much that we may want to deny about ourselves and run away from will arise in the solitude. What is needed is that we trust that beyond and deeper is the beauty of God’s image. Moreover, acknowledging our own poverty will also give God the space to be. But it does take solitude and silence to go there. It takes patience and trust and courage.

To break through what forms our routine vision of the world, as Merton describes it, and to see the beauty outside of ourselves, also takes silence, patience and trust. What is familiar and what is around us every day often remains known to us on a rather superficial level simply because it is familiar, and so its beauty may be lost to us. We need to see the beauty in the seemingly ordinary, in the little things. If we were to slow down, and instead of rushing by, notice all the beauty disclosing itself to us in the few hours from awakening to getting to work or school or wherever we have to be, we would be immersed in a profoundly religious experience – every day!

There is another way too, that seeing the beauty in the familiar requires great courage of us. While we can slow down and hold our gaze long enough to let the beauty of a sunset evoke wonder from us, speak to us of God, and even bring us to our knees, can we also look in what may be the truly neglected places? Can we, for example, look beyond our well-worn stereotypes into the face of the latest person to board a boat to reach our shores and allow the beauty there to call forth something from within us? Can we be brought to our knees by this disclosure of the Divine? Can we do that to the people we don’t like? Can we do that to the people who hurt us? To those who are just ‘different’? Each of us will be able to identify those ‘familiar’ things that are the neglected places for us. And if we dare to go there we will find that beauty lies there. Most of the time we will take little steps along that path for it does require courage, but if we set out at least, we will be closer to knowing that we live, move and have our being in God (St Paul).

So this week you may like to keep a ‘beauty log’. Each time you see beauty, whether it be in nature, in others, in your neglected places, wherever it may be, make a note of it, and simply rejoice that this has touched you and called forth a response from you and that your world has become more beautiful and more holy.

Ms Kerry McCullough
Dean of Mission

