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The
Grace of
Beauty

ITS MYSTERY, POWER,
AND DELIGHT IN DAILY LIFE



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INTRODUCTION

You are driving home one evening, and you catch sight of the setting sun, a bright orange disk amid swirls of pink and purple clouds.

Or you are walking in a favorite park when suddenly a doe and her two fawns bound across the path in front of you.

Or you bite into a plump yellow pear and instantly you are transported to a cherished pear tree in your grandparents' back yard.

Or you turn on the car radio and hear the opening strains of a favorite song.

Or you step out onto the back porch in May and catch the faint scent of lilacs.

How do you respond to beauty breaking into your ordinary day? If you are anything like me, you may find yourself whispering a soft “Wow!” or even a heartfelt “Thank you, God!”

Yes, we experience beauty at every turn in life. And the experience of beauty can affect us in many ways. It can stop us in our tracks, lighten our heart, calm our anxiety, ease our pain, move us to tears, or awaken in us the sense that we are part of something much larger than ourselves. Beauty even has the power to draw us to the ultimate source of all beauty, our Creator God or, more accurately, our *Creating* God.

Yet we live in a world also beset with ugliness—the ugliness of hatred, division, war, greed, injustices of all kinds, and even violence to this beautiful planet we call home. On a regular basis, then, we must be reminded of our intrinsic need for beauty in our lives. This book is such a reminder. It explores the mystery, power, charm, and illusiveness of beauty. It delves into the relationship of beauty first to God and then to other aspects of our lives, such as love, creation, healing, friendship, morality, service, brokenness, humor, and even grief.

Each chapter in this book consists of an introductory quote, a reflection, and questions for personal or communal sharing. Each chapter concludes with a prayer, poem, or short meditation related to the theme of that chapter. Firmly believing that music can enrich our pondering and prayer, I have also suggested a music video from YouTube for each chapter.

Over sixteen centuries ago, St. Augustine of Hippo, at the time of his conversion, penned those famous words to God, “Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new.” His experience of God as Beauty radically altered the trajectory of his life. Our experience of beauty can have a similar impact on us. For the grace of beauty has the power to realign our mind and heart toward the Source of all Beauty, our Beloved God.

prayer

*Beautiful God,
be with me as I ponder beauty
in my everyday life.*

*Help me to grow in my awareness
of the beauty all around me:
in creation, in other people, in myself,
and in human-made beauty expressed in color, line, texture,
word, symbol, sound, gesture, and movement.*

*Help me to grow in my appreciation of beauty's mystery,
power, delight, and absolute necessity for my life.*

*Give me the grace to contribute my own
particular beauty to this world—
especially through beauty's highest expression: selfless loving.*

I ask these things of you,

“O Beauty ever ancient, ever new.” Amen.



CHAPTER I

What Is Beauty?

“I am never more aware of the limitations of language than when I try to describe beauty.”

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

Beauty has been defined in many ways. The Greek philosopher Plato saw beauty as the harmony and proportion of parts. His compatriot Aristotle described beauty’s chief characteristics as order, symmetry, and definiteness. More recently, the writer Chet Raymo added something to that understanding of beauty. He said that beauty resides in the balance between order and disorder. He was implying, I think, that too much order and symmetry might be more boring than beautiful. So the woman with the updo is made more beautiful by the strand of hair cascading from her otherwise perfectly ordered hairdo.

St. Thomas Aquinas added another dimension to the understanding of beauty when he wrote *pulchra dicuntur quae visa placent*. This means “things that give pleasure when perceived are called beautiful.” We perceive beauty through our eyes, yes, but also through our ears, our nose, our touch, our taste. Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto in B-flat minor is beautiful to hear, while the scent

of honeysuckle is beautiful to smell. Many of us find a clean fluffy towel pleasurable to the touch, while a ripe red strawberry is pleasing to the taste. Beauty, then, is that which pleases any of the senses, often more than one at the same time.

Many poets have spoken of beauty's appeal to the senses. In his poem "Each and All," Ralph Waldo Emerson describes several experiences of beauty. One day he was walking near a river when he heard a sparrow singing in a tree. He brought the sparrow home (it takes poetic license to bring a sparrow home!), and the bird continued to sing. But Emerson laments that the experience of beauty fell short of what he had experienced outside. Why? He says, "For I did not bring home the river and the sky—/ He sang to my ear—they sang to my eye." Similarly, while walking on the beach, he gathers a few shells and brings them home, hoping to replicate the beauty of his beach experience. But again, he is disappointed, for the shells "left their beauty on the shore, / With the sun, the sand, and the wild uproar." Emerson concludes: "Nothing is fair or good alone." Things are usually beautiful within a context, that is, in their arrangement with other things.

Beauty can be defined in yet another way. If you look up the word "beauty" on the internet, you will find hundreds of ads for beauty products. Today, beauty has become a \$160 billion-a-year global industry! In his book *Love Me*, photographer Zed Nelsen says that "body improvement has become a new religion." Body improvement or body beautification includes things like diets, creams, and makeup of all sorts. It also includes actual surgeries: face-lifts, nose jobs, breast implants, liposuction, and hair restoration, to name a few. There is even a surgery to shorten toes and secure them with metal pins so they fit more easily into three-inch stilettos. (Ouch!) Little wonder Thomas Troeger, professor at Yale Divinity School, laments that beauty has been commercialized and

degraded. He writes, “Beauty is reduced to being young, fit, rich, and glamorous.” What is needed, he says, is a “theology of beauty.”

Any discussion of beauty or a theology of beauty must address this age-old question: Is beauty in the eye of the beholder—as the ancient Greek maxim proposed? My answer to that question is *yes* and *no*. Yes, what we determine is beautiful is somewhat subjective. Our sense of beauty is conditioned by many factors, such as our culture, personal experience, age, gender, education, and religion, to name a few. In some cultures, for example, women are considered beautiful if they are “well-rounded” and have tattooed faces and short-cropped hair. Other cultures deem women beautiful if they have very thin bodies, clear complexions, and long silky hair (preferably blonde). What constitutes beauty in music will vary from person to person too. The music that brings pleasure to a fifty-five-year-old might be quite different from the music that delights a teenager. What constitutes “a beautiful day in the neighborhood” might be conditioned by where the neighborhood is: Miami, Peoria, Honolulu, or Nome. So yes, to an extent, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

At the same time there are some things that many people, if not most people, would label beautiful. What about the sight of the *aurora borealis*, or polar lights, in the night sky? Or a painting like *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer? Or the gentle plucking of a harp? Or Harper Lee’s powerful novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Or the smell and taste of freshly baked bread? The fact is some things seem almost objectively beautiful.

Earlier in this chapter, we noted Aquinas’s definition of beauty. Beauty gives us pleasure, he said. In other words, beauty has an effect on us. In the next chapter we will explore some of the specific ways beauty affects us.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you define or describe beauty?
2. Have you ever had an experience where beauty was definitely in the eye of the beholder? Can you name some things that are considered beautiful by most people?
3. Recall an experience of beauty you have had recently. What made it beautiful? What effect did this experience of beauty have on you?

Thank You, God, for Beauty

*Thank you, God, for beauty,
for harmony and proportion,
for order, symmetry, and definiteness,
and for the balance of order and disorder.
Thank you for the pleasure beauty gives us,
the pleasure to our eyes, ears, nose, touch, and taste.
Thank you for oceans and snowflakes,
for giraffes and ladybugs,
for watercolor paintings and clay pots,
for movies, plays, and photographs,
for chirping birds and grand symphonies,
for the scent of roses and the smell of rain,
for the feel of clean sheets and a toddler's hug,
for the taste of a hot cup of coffee or a cold bottle of beer.
Thank you, God, for beauty in all its forms
and the pleasure it bestows on us.
For we believe that all the beauty we experience
is but a faint reflection of you, O Most Beautiful One. Amen.*

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Suggested YouTube video: “Creation Calls” by Brian Doerkson

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CHAPTER 3

The Healing Power of Beauty

*“Beauty gives [us] the feeling of homecoming,
aliveness, wholesomeness, and connection.
Beauty possesses the power to heal souls.”*

JEAN MAALOUF

Does beauty really possess the power to heal?
To answer that question, let us begin with “Sister Joan’s” story. When Joan was about forty, her doctor discovered a mass on her kidney. It was either a harmless cyst or a cancerous tumor. The doctor ordered several tests and prepared Joan for the worst. While waiting for the test results, Joan became very anxious and fearful. A few days later, she received the doctor’s report: the mass was a cyst.

Joan was greatly relieved, but she was shaken by the ordeal. Two weeks later, when she made a retreat, she was still teary-eyed and heavy-hearted. After talking with her director, she decided that, during the retreat, she would visit “a pretty place” every afternoon. She said, “I had the feeling that beauty would heal me.” One after-

noon she drove to the city's botanical gardens, ten acres of beautiful flowers in full bloom. As she slowly walked the pathways, she was immersed in beauty with every step. As she strolled along, she felt something happening within her. "I experienced a deep peace pouring into me," she said. "Gradually I found myself being healed of my fear and anxiety." Later she described the experience as "an anointing."

Spiritual director Linda Parnell writes, "The regular, intentional inclusion of beauty into one's life has the power to heal our lives and transform our way of 'seeing' the world." She speaks not only from her ministry of directing others but also from her own experience. At one point in her life, she found herself with an "unexplained persistent cough." Greatly overworked and lacking in sleep, she realized she was on the verge of serious burnout. Through her personal prayer and the encouragement of her adult daughter, Parnell resigned her position and began the slow work of recuperation. She started by intentionally introducing elements of beauty back into her daily life. She created a visual journal of things around her that she was naturally drawn to. She says, "I began to notice a new way of seeing beauty." Along with this new way of seeing came "an increased sense of creativity. The effects of both have proven transformative." She was eventually able to return to work, but she was a changed and wiser woman—thanks to beauty.

Many Christian churches, especially the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, have a history of emphasizing the importance of beauty. Currently I help with the RCIA at St. Mary Parish in Chardon, Ohio. I have given the presentation on Mary for several years. During the talk, I show various artistic representations of the annunciation—from the traditional (Mary kneeling on a prie-dieu) to the contemporary (Mary wearing saddle shoes). I always conclude my talk with a "field trip" into the church. Once there, we look for all the artistic representations of Mary we can find. In

doing so, we all (myself included) come to a greater appreciation of the simple beauty of our church—the wooden pews, stained-glass windows, dark wood altar, statues, icons, stations of the cross, wall hanging, sanctuary lamp. It is easy to see why some people come to Mass early not only to pray but also just to *be* with all that beauty.

We might be wondering, how does the healing power of beauty work. There are, no doubt, a number of ways. We will look at three of them.

First, *beauty grounds us*. It asks us for our full attention. When we are entranced by beauty, we are rooted in the here and now. A lovely sunset, for example, requests our attention in the present moment. We cannot make it happen any sooner than the appointed time. We cannot put off watching it for even fifteen minutes, for it will be gone by then. To enjoy a sunset we cannot be doing other things—like figuring out a solution to a problem, or carrying on a deep conversation with another, or texting. When beauty grounds us, it simultaneously *affirms life*. In his book *Beauty and the Soul*, Piero Ferrucci writes, “The more we can perceive beauty in our surroundings and also inside us, the more we feel at home and glad to exist.”

Second, *beauty stimulates the imagination*. When we feel overwhelmed by our problems or imprisoned by our circumstances, beauty has a way of activating our imagination. Beauty can lead us to see things in a different way and to envision new possibilities. Recently I saw a short documentary on YouTube titled *Landfill Harmonic*. It tells the story of a group of young people living next to a garbage dump in Cateura, Paraguay. Most of their families eke out a living by picking things out of the garbage and selling them. Amazingly, these children have made musical instruments from objects they found in the trash. A cello, for example, was made from a large oilcan and pieces of discarded wood. Most of the children live in extreme poverty, but they play beautiful clas-

sical music on their recycled instruments. One girl said, “My life would be meaningless without music.” It was the beauty of music that led them to find an imaginative way to form an orchestra and to produce music of their own.

Third, *beauty eases our sense of aloneness*. As I mentioned earlier, beauty connects us to others—and to *the Other*, namely, God. When we experience the beautiful, we feel our oneness with each other. This experience of connectedness to others can ease the sense of isolation often associated with depression, pain, and sorrow. And the experience of oneness with God convinces us that whatever we are experiencing in our life—whether ugly, beautiful, or something in between—we are being held in God’s loving embrace.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever had an experience of beauty’s healing power? If so, reflect on this experience. What were the circumstances? What beauty did you experience? How did you feel after your experience with beauty?
2. Do you regularly and intentionally include beauty in your life? If so, how do you do this? If not, what is hindering you from doing this?
3. How aware are you of the beauty of your place of worship. Next time you go to church, look around and notice things you would label beautiful. Are there any aspects of the worship environment that you believe distract from the beauty?

Poppies Make Good Doctors

I have it on good authority:

Poppies make good doctors.

Dr. Rollo May, renowned psychologist,

tells this story. As a young man,

he suffered a nervous breakdown.

In his gloom and distress, he went for a walk one day

and came upon a field of red poppies.

Almost as far as the eye could see,

they stood there in their humble splendor,

gently bobbing in the sun.

Dr. May walked into their midst,

until he was knee-deep in poppies.

For several minutes he stood with them,

basking in their good company.

Later he wrote, "I just stood there,

intoxicated, wholly captivated by the poppies."

Prior to this experience,

he had been too busy to "waste his time"

looking at flowers.

But now, in his utter desolation,

he needed their beauty

to bring himself back to life.

Later he said of his poppy experience:

"Beauty kept me alive."

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Suggested YouTube video: "Abide with Me" by Carrie Newcomer and Parker J. Palmer