

Everything is Beautiful

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June 27, 2010

Psalm 19

Genesis 1: 1, 27, 30b-31

Psalm 139: 13-16

Ephesians 5:1-2

One of my favorite recordings as a child was an LP that was put out by a group of Hesston College students in the early 70s. It was about as close to rock and roll as it got in our staid Mennonite household. The album cover intrigued me. It was a photo of a diverse group of young people, some standing on fire escapes, in front of a brick building covered with graffiti. One of the featured songs was the Ray Stevens hit, "Everything is beautiful." The sounds I heard were divine. It was so beautiful.

I found the album years later and listened to it again. I was more than a little disappointed. My education, experience and personal taste (not to mention my awareness of singing in tune and clichéd urban landscapes) changed my perception of what was beautiful. Perhaps Margaret Hamilton Hungerford had it right when she coined the phrase "*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.*"

Beauty is a huge industry in this country. According to a study done in 2008, "More than 55 million cosmetic surgery procedures will be performed in 2015... This more than quadruples the number of procedures performed in 2005."

We want to be beautiful. Supermarket magazines lure us with a standard of beauty that is unachievable except by artists with an airbrush. Beauty, with a

small b, dominates our culture and our economy. But my intent today is not a tirade against fashion models, liposuction and tabloids. I am more interested in Beauty, with a capital B.

Traditionally, beauty has not been part of our lexicon as Protestant Christians. I find no listings in our hymnal indices for beauty. As Mennonites, we are quite aware of our commitment to be disciples, servant leaders, maybe even suffering servants. We are dedicated to following the way of Christ as we read it in the Bible and there are few verses in the Bible that refer to beauty. We do have Proverbs 20.29:

*The glory of youths is their strength,
but the beauty of the aged is their grey hair.*

And there is Ezekiel. It has a number of references to beauty but most of them read like chapter 16:25:

You built your lofty place and prostituted your beauty.

I did find two New Testament references. James (1:11) has this to say:

*For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its **beauty** perishes. It is the same with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.*

I Peter 3 has this inspiring word to wives as they accept the authority of their husbands:

³Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; ⁴rather, let your adornment be the inner self with

*the lasting **beauty** of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight.*

The femtheo Bible study group is reading a book that is neither the Bible nor feminist, but it is inspiring us toward new awareness of our spirituality. In his book, "Beauty: The Invisible Embrace," Irish poet John O'Donohue begins to capture the elusive and ephemeral nature of Beauty. O'Donohue is convincing us that even though the word "beauty" is not prevalent in the Bible it is worth pursuing as part of our faith since the Bible itself illustrates and embodies Beauty: the account of creation, the recounting of love in Song of Songs, the poetry of the Psalms and wisdom literature, the parables.

Our story as a people of God begins with the story of how our habitat, the Earth, came to be. The creator calls the creation into being. How could such wonder as creation come from ugliness? It must come from Beauty. As we heard in Psalm 19, creation articulates the creator's beauty and glory. It is not spoken in words, it is not reasoned. It is demonstrated, it is embodied. And we, the creatures from the Earth, are made in the creator's image. Our beauty is inherent.

What a challenge to live up to, being created in the image of God, in Beauty. No wonder we try so hard to be beautiful. We grasp for it. We try to replicate what we find most pleasing or what others find pleasing. O'Donohue remarks that we must be careful to distinguish between glamour (or style) and Beauty.

You have heard how we are live our faith with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other? (Back when people read newspapers.) Last week my newspaper hand read this by Washington Post fashion writer Robin Ghivan. “Style trumps beauty. If you are not beautiful it is poor genetic luck, but if you don’t have style it is your own fault.” This must be beauty with a small b.

The Beauty we seek calls to us, invites us, and we attempt to respond. O’Donohue says that “Beauty addresses us from a place beyond; it captures our complete attention because it resonates with the sense of the beyond in us.” And yet Beauty is not only the place beyond, it is close and accessible. St. Augustine wrote in his Confessions, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.” This is the mystery: that we at once seek the Beauty beyond even as we find our rest in it here.

If Beauty is ephemeral, subjective, perhaps even fickle, why not concentrate on the concrete – like following in the path of Jesus, or learning to pray or making sure people have food and a roof over their heads? How can we respond to Beauty?

Sometimes our response is as ephemeral and elusive as the call of Beauty itself. Why does the worship arts team create a splendid display each week only to dismantle it again an hour later? I often think of this as our version of sand painting, the religious ritual practiced by Native Americans, Buddhists, indigenous Australian groups and others around the world. The practitioners of sand painting take days to make elaborate artwork out of colored sand, only to destroy it almost as soon as it is finished.

Live performance is similar. We learn our parts for a play or a musical production, practice alone, rehearse together and then it is all over almost before the performance has begun. Yet when the music or theatre is done well, the effect lingers with both performer and observer for hours, days, sometimes years. Worship and performance, when done well, touch us and invite us to participate in Beauty. When we worship, when we attend a performance, we attempt to connect with Beauty — even commune with it as well as with our own created and creative selves.

Part of the allure of Beauty is that while it may be fleeting, it feels personal. A sunset, moonrise, a hawk on a treetop, rows of corn kernels, a deep experience of prayer, a cello concerto, name your own experience of Beauty. Part of the intrigue, part of what calls to us, is the reality that it is passing and yet seems created only for us. Trying to explain the intimacy of the moment takes an artist herself.

We may be created creatures of a divine creator, but we are also serious disciples of a poor, transient rabbi. It is too extravagant to devote ourselves to beauty. Beauty is a luxury that we who care about peace, mercy and justice can't afford to dwell on. But perhaps it is not so luxurious as one might think. O'Donohue maintains that it is Beauty that unites us all at the center. Beauty pulls us toward itself and if we respond the rest falls into place.

O'Donohue says: *“Thomas Aquinas and the medieval thinkers wisely recognized that beauty was at the heart of reality; it was where truth, unity, goodness and presence come together. Without beauty [truth, unity, goodness*

and presence] would be separate and inclined toward destructive conflict with each other... There is a profound equality at the heart of beauty; a graciousness which recognizes and encourages the call of individuality but invites it to serve the dream and creative vision of community.”

If this is true — that Beauty is at the heart of reality, that it invites us to serve community — then our responses to Beauty — worship, awareness, being creators ourselves — need to be primary in our lives. When truth tries to win over unity, or unity takes precedence over goodness, then we must return again to Beauty. When conflict and disagreement distract us, we are called back to the center, to Beauty. This is why we try to keep worship primary in our life together as a community — even when it seems like business meetings would be a more efficient way to deal with difference.

I was surprised to find a very old German word in this Irish poet’s descriptions of Beauty. When I came to the word *gelassenheit* I had to stop and reread the paragraph several times. *Gelassenheit* is a word that I have tended to discount because it feels like part of Anabaptist martyrdom that I want to avoid. I have thought of *gelassenheit* as a giving up of the self, a denial of personhood. O’Donohue instead describes it as inner stillness and calm as “over against the world with all its turbulence, distraction and worry.” He says, “The world cannot ruffle the dignity of a soul that dwells in its own tranquility.”

Perhaps this is what the writer of Ephesians is referring to when he writes of imitating God, of walking in love as Christ offered himself in sacrifice. It is not only surrender, but inner calm that Christ offered, “a gift of pleasing fragrance.”

As we follow Christ we are invited to serenity as well as discipleship. We are called to inner peace **and** working for world peace.

Another poet, Jeff Gundy, a professor at Bluffton University, notes “the experience of beauty and the realm of ethics and action has long been an especially troubling one for Mennonites.” And yet recently deceased Mennonite historian John Oyer, brother of musician Mary Oyer, wrote this:

"Much later in life I came to realize how powerfully God had spoken to me through beauty, especially music. But the strangest part was this: I always returned from my most dramatic encounters with beauty fully resolved to live a moral life of complete goodness and service. I have never been able to account for that feeling."

For those of us who are artists, musicians, dancers, poets and singers, this is a good word. We need not deny our calling; we need not deprive the world of our gifts. Our art and music, dance, poetry and song are not self-indulgent decadence. This is the work of the creator through us; this is Beauty made manifest, dwelling among us a little while. The arts call to the goodness in others; they propel others toward renewed commitment.

Those of us who are not in touch with the artist-musician-dancer-poet part of ourselves are not excluded. We are all invited to be lovers of Beauty, to participate through awareness and presence. We need not be creators of, what the world might call exquisite beauty to experience Beauty with a capitol B. Beauty calls to us through the world, through nature, no matter our economic or education level, our intellect or ability, no matter our sexuality or immigration

status. Beauty cannot be owned; it is accessible to all. We need only open our deepest selves to it.

As you alter your routine this summer, whether in travel or work, with family, friends or colleagues, I invite you to follow the advice of Blaise Pascal and “Carry something beautiful in your mind.” Seek Beauty and find your rest in it.