

**"SPIRITUALITY AND BEAUTY" by John North**  
**(From Winter 1998 issue of Spiritual Growth Ministries Newsletter)**

Spirituality and beauty certainly belong together but writing about the connection is very problematic. Both spirituality and beauty object to being analysed into some sort of cerebral catalogue. Spirituality and beauty are so intensely individual that one person's treasure will often be meaningless to another. So, in keeping with the subject, what follows will be a personal meander which I hope may be of help to others to reflect and find wonder in their own unique experiences of spirituality and beauty.

I was pondering this topic as I went for a walk through some bush. After the bright and breezy fields, it was calm, cool and dim under the trees. I had been walking briskly but soon slowed down for this was not a place to rush through. Along with the general atmosphere of calm and coolness, I began to notice more particular things; the fern fronds arching overhead with their delicate symmetry, perhaps in contrast to my life which sometimes appears clumsy and ill-proportioned; my eyes followed the many trunks, rising up, varied in size, texture and age, some battered by storms but still reaching up to the sunlight; I had a joke or two with a couple of fan-tails who were not very impressed by my attempts to imitate their cheeps. So it went on as I wandered and looked and received until the words, "restores my soul" drifted into my mind. That's what was happening. I had not been consciously thinking of God but my soul was being restored in the presence of beauty. It reminded me of a sort of conversation I had a long time ago when I was overwhelmed by a beautiful scene. A quiet voice seemed to be saying ;

"You like it?"

"Oh yes."

"Good. I made it for you."

Or the words spoken near the end of "The Screwtape Letters" when Christian passes through death into light and exclaims, "So it was you all the time!"

The point I'm making is that we can enjoy beauty for its own loveliness and don't have to force religion into the experience. And yet, on reflection afterwards, we realise "It was you all the time."

Beauty simply needs to be received. This sounds obvious but being able to receive is not so easy in a world where activity and getting things done is so highly valued. It reminds me of an A A Milne conversation when Rabbit asked Winnie the Pooh:

"Did you make that song up?"

"Well I sort of made it up," said Pooh. "It isn't brain," he went on humbly, "because you know why, Rabbit; but it comes to me sometimes."

"Ah" said Rabbit who never let things come to him, but always went and fetched them.

This is where beauty and spirituality come together. The receptive attitude is essential if we want to appreciate the beauty of forest or sea or poetry or music, or of God. Are we ready to let something (Someone?) come or do we miss the magic because we are trying to get what cannot be got?

In olden days, we are told, people believed in a three-storied universe consisting of heaven, earth and hell. I think I believe in two interwoven universes, the material and the spiritual, the earthy and the transcendent. These two can only be divided in theory because in our experience, they are so interwoven. Here is another link between beauty and spirituality. Experiencing beauty brings us in touch with the transcendent. So-called ordinary things can become full of spirit and open doors and windows to new dimensions and vistas.

The wonder of beauty, in nature, art or human form is that it penetrates straight to the heart, to the centre of our being. We wander round a gallery and more or less enjoy a whole row of paintings. Then suddenly, one reaches out to me. I am encountered by something which calls my name, as it were, and requires a response. We can relax and enjoy our music until suddenly a wonderful voice or the grief of the oboe or an unexpected change of key turns our soul over. We read thousands of words but one day they seize us and change us.

"Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,

Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lacked anything....."

(Thank you, George Herbert)

A small child glows with excitement and the child within us leaps too at the wonder of life. We gaze into a tired old face on a pillow in the old folk's home but those eyes are full of love and vitality, inspiring us with their beauty.

We can't go and get beauty, just as God is not "gettable". But we can choose to go and be where beauty is and let it restore our soul. An important part of spiritual growth is building up a treasury of what (and who) restores us.

It may be the walk through the bush or along the beach. It will be the CDs or cassettes that are there to comfort or inspire us. It will be those words in the Bible to which we turn again and again because they feed and reassure us. There are those beautiful people who radiate something lovely so that just to be with them is a blessing. It may be that old seat in the back garden, place of refuge and peace. It may be that marvellous vista of ocean or mountains...life is full of treasures available to us, gifts from God to restore our soul. We would all be the richer if we took more time to reflect on our personal treasury of beauty.

Some people refer to nature as "God's other book." Perhaps we could refer to beauty as "God's indirect speech." Often it's only afterwards that we realise Who was leading us by the still waters or the thundering ocean: Who it was who made us lie down in green pastures or invited us to tramp across the golden tussock.

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