

Integrating the Healing Power of Beauty into Spiritual Direction

by

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“Beauty gives [us] the feeling of homecoming, aliveness, wholesomeness, and connection. Beauty possesses the power to heal souls.”¹ The majority of us are very aware of beauty in our environment - and most have sensed the soul soaring in response to beautiful music, art, prose - or indeed anything that inspires awe, appreciation, a sense of peace or stillness and contemplation. Yet in spite of being surrounded by the daily gift of beauty, many of us also live distracted lives, regularly exposed to the ugliness portrayed daily by the media and by multitudinous acts of ‘un-beauty.’ These factors hold significant consequences for how we view ourselves and others, the natural world, and all of life.² Conversely, the regular, intentional inclusion of beauty into one’s life has the power to heal our lives and transform our way of ‘seeing’ the world³.

In this article I would like to discuss the healing power of beauty (aesthetics⁴) and in particular, how we might explore beauty intentionally with directees. As life is meant to be lived in all its fullness,⁵ it is my belief that beauty is an under-utilised resource in work with directees, and indeed within many fields relating to both spirituality and psychology. And yet there is growing evidence to support that the intentional inclusion of beauty into one’s life is both ‘ameliorative,’⁶ and highly protective for both the ‘caregiver’ and the recipient of that care, particularly when working with clients or directees who are struggling with grief, anxiety, burn out and other conditions related to deep suffering. In my studies I discovered that Catholicism, the Orthodox Church - and some Eastern religions - have a rich understanding of the importance and significance of beauty.⁷ However there appeared to be less emphasis in the Protestant tradition regarding the intentional inclusion of beauty as a spiritual practice. It therefore seemed pertinent to explore the healing power of beauty, with particular relevance to contemporary, contemplative spiritual direction. In support of my argument I will draw on my personal journey as well as the research I read, which deepened my understanding of these experiences. To strengthen my findings I studied numerous sources from the fields of psychology and spirituality, to uncover people who had first-hand experience of the healing power of beauty.

Background.

My introduction to the healing power of beauty was initially unexpected. It arose in 2009 after several months of struggling with a severe cough, for which there seemed to be no explanation. Finally the culmination of lack of sleep from the continual coughing and the subsequent stress and fatigue, all while trying to continue my work, led to a moderate ‘burn-

¹ Maalouf, Jean. (2013). *Change Your World: Awakening to the Power of Truth- Beauty- Simplicity-Change*. Xilibri LLC (ebook). No page number - Loc 917.

² For example, ugly acts often reflect a lack of compassion. Moore, Thomas. (2004). *Dark Nights of the Soul: A guide to finding your way through life’s ordeals*. Penguin Group: Great Britain. says: “The greatest evil and destruction arises when people are unable to feel compassion. The beauty of compassion continues to shelter and save our world.” p.181.

³ Ibid. In Loc 962 Maalouf says: “Beauty decentralizes the self from oneself and helps expand towards a greater self. Beauty connects our innermost being to God, others, and the world.”

⁴ Definition: “The collection of those factors which, when combined determine the beauty of something or a lack of it.” Cited in Aldrich, J. (2014). *Connecting Aesthetics, Beauty and Psychology – The Psychology of Beauty*. Retrieved from <http://www.naturibeauty.com/connecting-aesthetics-beauty-and-psychology/>

⁵ “... I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:10. NIV Version.

⁶ Laracy, M. (2015). The Healing Power of Beauty: Surprising Psychological Benefits. *Mind and Spirit: Integrating Psychology and Faith*. A Webinar presented by Dr Laracy. July 23, 2015.

⁷ Please refer to articles in the bibliography for more information such as The Catholic Register and The Imaginative Conservative (see for example, *Beauty: A Necessity, Not a Luxury* <http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/01/beauty-necessity-not-luxury.html>). There is also a beautiful article on the significance of beauty in the Orthodox Church on this site which discusses the Beauty of God: <http://www.antiochian.org/node/23896>

out.’⁸ The recovery process began in a uniquely graced way one sleepless night in April 2009, when I read Isaiah 30:15: “This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (NIV). The word ‘rest’ seemed almost highlighted in bold and with that came the strong impression that I would be leaving work for an extended period of time. I was dismayed and prayed for clear confirmation, and the very next morning my daughter phoned and said that she had woken during the night with the distinct prompting from God that she was to tell me I needed to rest. Shortly after this I reluctantly resigned from my work in a local counselling agency. It was only in hindsight that I realized the unexplained, persistent cough had been signaling the early signs of burn-out for some time, and this timely warning likely protected me from developing more serious symptoms.

However the decision to leave work was still painful and I struggled deeply to understand the “why?” - which led to a crisis of purpose and meaning; my own ‘dark night.’⁹ As I persevered in prayer, I received the assurance that God would give me ‘beauty for ashes’ (Isaiah 61v3). The phrase seemed to have little meaning in the midst of my turmoil, and so I began to seek Him intently – how exactly would He give me beauty for ashes? What was my part in this process, apart from merely resting and recuperating? Shortly after that I had two significant dreams – one was of a house that was clearly in need of renovation, with several rooms that had been closed off. The second was of me holding an emaciated child who I was trying to feed, but could not give enough to sustain her. It was clear to both my spiritual director and myself that my body and soul were both signaling the need for care and attention.

As I began to focus more intently on how to restore my soul, I was drawn to reflect deeply on the phrase ‘beauty for ashes,’ alongside Proverbs 24v3-4,¹⁰ which speaks of a house being filled with treasures. This seemed to be speaking to the house in my dream, and slowly the impression began to unfold that I was to intentionally introduce elements of *beauty* into my daily life. At first I was perplexed and doubtful, feeling that somehow this seemed trivial at best.¹¹ However, the impression persisted and with it came another instruction: I was to take notice of the things that I was drawn to, (the spontaneous heart response, which occurred before I began to ‘second-guess’ my experience) and use these to create a visual journal of my impressions. I realized that the instruction to capture this first impression, ‘the first voice,’¹² was a vital component. I did not initially understand the significance of this but later I noticed two key points: firstly, that themes began to emerge that expanded a sense of personal identity, the ‘true self’¹³ (and greater acceptance of my

⁸ There are many articles that discuss burn-out. However one definition can be found under ‘Preventing Burnout: Signs, Symptoms, Causes and Coping Strategies,’ in HelpGuide.org: <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/preventing-burnout.htm>. It is my belief that the intentional inclusion of everyday beauty is a protective factor. (See previous footnote 6). Since these experiences, the intentional focus on beauty has sustained me through trauma, grief and other high-stress events.

⁹ I am referring here to the dark night of the soul, as explained by Thomas Moore in his book ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ (see Bibliography). For me, this was triggered by feelings of failure alongside disappointment.

¹⁰ Proverbs 24v3 in the NIV: “By wisdom a house is built, by understanding its rooms are filled with rare and precious treasures.” Houses are often symbolic of our own lives also, particularly in dreams.

¹¹ The perception that focusing on beauty is either trivial or excessive is a common response. Laracy discusses this more fully in the article *True Beauty Satisfies the Human Heart* (see Bibliography).

¹² In my experience, the spontaneous first voice was the true heart response; the second voice I would describe as the one that begins to second-guess or undercut this deep inner knowing. It could be described as the voice of self-doubt, criticism etc.

¹³ For readers unfamiliar with these terms, a very brief explanation is that the true self is often defined as the spontaneous, authentic part of us (as opposed to the false self which tries to appear authentic for the purpose of acceptance etc) – and the

'shadow' side) and secondly, I began to notice a new way of seeing beauty alongside an increased sense of creativity. The effects of both these have proven both transformative, sustaining, and even at times, challenging, which I hope to expand upon more fully.

It was then that I began my research to uncover whether others had also been healed through the process of intentionally focusing on everyday beauty. Initially I was both curious and seeking assurance, but this soon developed into a genuine interest that has expanded into much of my life and work. It was these discoveries that finally led to offering an initial retreat on the topic and to my decision to write this assignment.

Definition and Study of Beauty:

Beauty is not easy to define. However, Thomas Moore offers a definition that seems to fit well for the purpose of this assignment in his observation, "Beauty feeds the soul, wakens it, and brings it to life as nothing else can. *Beauty is a deep-seated reaction to some meaningful and stunning representation of life.*"¹⁴ (Emphasis mine).

Therefore, beauty is best captured and defined within the experience of it. Michael Ventura¹⁵ says:

While it is difficult to define what beauty is, because different people find so many different beauties, the experience of beauty is not as hard to define: one's soul and one's world are connected in an engagement of wonder... The experience of beauty is always one of expansion, of opening, of inclusion—a moment of connection, often mysterious, that extends the possibilities of all connection.

This expansion of being that occurs is the characteristic that opens the heart to Mystery and Beauty. Given these descriptions it is not surprising to find that beauty has a rich history, which has been written about over many centuries and across many fields: including philosophy, spirituality and theology, architecture, fine art, science and horticulture.¹⁶

The qualities of beauty:

Beauty is often understood to be a subjective experience, such as we hear in the phrase: 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' However philosophers,¹⁷ amongst others, highlight both the objective and the transcendental characteristics of beauty. The objective qualities could be called the 'knowable,' or even scientific factors, that combine to make an object beautiful: such as harmony, integrity, symmetry, simplicity and clarity. Demarco expands on this by commenting on the works of St Thomas Aquinas, who posited that sight and hearing (the 'senses of knowledge') are both used to capture the experience of beauty. He argues

shadow can also be defined as the hidden part of self, the parts we are less accepting of. Wikipedia offers some simple explanations of these terms but there is also a great deal of literature that explains them more fully than this essay permits).

¹⁴ Moore, Thomas. *Dark Nights of the Soul: A guide to finding your way through life's ordeals*. From his chapter, Dark Beauty, p.209. On page 210 he also writes, "Life often finds its beauty through periods of trial and discouragement."

¹⁵ Ventura, M. (2015). Beauty Resurrected: Awakening Wonder in the Consulting Room. *Psychotherapy Networker*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychonet.org/daily/article/497-beauty-resurrected/> (NB: Unfortunately this article no longer appears to be available on this link. See bibliography for an alternative link).

¹⁶ I am not speaking here of beauty therapy, fashion or similar fields where we are exposed to ideals of physical beauty – although the 'Golden Ratio' that defines physical balance in sculpture, art and architecture could arguably fall into this category.

¹⁷ This is a huge topic, well beyond my ability to define. However St Augustine, St Thomas of Aquinas and others contributed greatly to aesthetic theory in the Middle Ages (see Medieval Theories of Aesthetics in <http://www.iep.utm.edu/m-aesthe/>)

that beauty “is objective in as much as it is an object of knowledge. Beauty has its roots in reality.”¹⁸ For example, Laracy¹⁹ defines clarity as ‘luminosity;’ emphasizing that ‘beauty shines’ and is therefore the principle characteristic of beauty because it attracts and draws in the observer. This last factor relates to the quality of light, which is a physical (or tangible) objective quality. Interestingly, this is how our Lord defined Himself i.e. “I am the light of the world.”²⁰ Qualities such as clarity and integrity could be inter-related with the transcendental characteristics, which are called “qualities of *being* [emphasis mine, which are]: (truth, goodness, unity and beauty).”²¹ Therefore, when we are connected to the true source of Beauty, we shine and have the capacity to be lights in a dark world,²² reflecting the values demonstrated by truth, goodness, unity and a sincere representation of beauty.

Beauty has also entered the world of medicine – for instance, research has demonstrated that beautiful gardens and settings in hospitals promote increased healing, and even restore the desire to live.²³ Since medicine is connected with healing and the care of persons, it could be argued that many of these ideas have application to spiritual direction, as the notion of soul care is also linked to promoting wellness. There are two reasons I suggest this: firstly several authors I read who had studied the link between beauty and spirituality, state that God is the designer and creator of beauty and that beauty exists because it emanates from God who is Beauty.²⁴ Secondly, since the goal of spiritual direction is to assist a directee toward deepening and establishing their relationship with the Holy One, pointing to beauty may be one significant tool for doing this. In fact, beauty has been described as an effective tool for Christian evangelism²⁵ because of this capacity to direct us toward God.²⁶ Many of the beautiful historic cathedrals and religious paintings that we view with awe, were designed to point the person toward the absolute Mystery and wonder of this Eternal Being. This reminds us that Beauty is meant to lead us towards contemplation, to lift our souls to the Source of Life, thus breaking through our apathy and slumber and awakening us once again to the wonder and awe of the Divine. Benner’s description of contemplative prayer fits well with this focus: “*Contemplative prayer is awakening and attentiveness. It is stepping back from our preoccupations and distractions and allowing God to transform our*

¹⁸ DeMarco, D. (2007). Can Beauty Save the World? *Catholics United for the Faith*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cuf.org/2007/11/can-beauty-save-the-world/>

¹⁹ Laracy, M. (2015). *The Healing Power of Beauty: Surprising Psychological Benefits*. Mind and Spirit. Integrating Psychology and Faith. A Webinar presented by Dr Laracy in July 23, 2015.

²⁰ John 8:12

²¹ Laracy, M. (ibid).

²² Matthew 5:14. “You are the light of the world...”

²³ Franklin, D. (2012). How Hospital Gardens Help Patients Heal. *Scientific American*. Retrieved from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/nature-that-nurtures/> This article discusses the work of environmental psychologist Roger Ulrich who studied the connection between the natural environment and healing. See also this article: ‘Creating My Own Healing Environment: One nurse’s experience as a patient’ by Aleta Billadeau, In this article she describes not only how this impacted her own recovery, but also mentions a medical journal on this subject for nurses called ‘Beginnings.’ (Bibliography). 5

²⁴ See for example *Beauty, the Divine Connection: Psychospiritual Reflections* by Fr. George Morelli (d.u.) retrieved from <http://www.antiochian.org/node/23896>

²⁵ Laracy, M. (2015). Dr Laracy discusses this point in her webinar, quoting Pope Benedict XVI: “Beauty – a pathway that opens the spirit to meet Christ, who is the beauty and holiness of God incarnate” (2.12 mins into the webinar). See also Ramage, M.J. (2015). Pope Benedict XVI’s Theology of Beauty and the New Evangelization. *Homiletic & Pastoral Review Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.hprweb.com/2015/01/pope-benedict-xvis-theology-of-beauty-and-the-new-evangelization/>

²⁶ Zahnd, Brian. *Beauty Will Save the World: Rediscovering the allure and mystery of Christianity*. Charisma House: Florida, USA (2012). Zahnd acknowledges that Christianity has not always been presented to the world in its most beautiful form. His book provides a compelling argument for recovering the ‘form and beauty’ of Christianity ‘through a new kind of reformation.’ I read this as an ebook, therefore it does not list pages but Location numbers. See Loc 134.

awareness, our hearts and our lives.”²⁷ She describes it as a practice, a conscious act of ‘making space’ to hear and see anew. John O’Donohue, who dedicated much of his work to the study of beauty, describes this new way of ‘seeing’ as helping us to “beautify our gaze.”²⁸ He says, “... if our style of looking becomes beautiful, then beauty will become visible and shine forth for us... The graced eye can glimpse beauty everywhere.”

Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction provides a natural platform, to explore, savor and contemplate²⁹ the effects of beauty. As directors, we assist directees to notice the unique invitations that are unfolding – to ‘notice what they notice’³⁰- the sense of ‘call’ that undergirds this process is both mysterious and awesome. O’Donohue says:

In Greek the word for beautiful is to kalon. It is related to the word ‘kalein’ which includes the notion of ‘call.’ When we experience Beauty, we feel called. The Beautiful stirs passion and urgency in us and calls us forth from aloneness into the warmth and wonder of an eternal embrace.”³¹

This noticing occurs in the midst of everyday life, serving as a reminder that nothing in our lives is worthless or meaningless, no matter how ordinary it may appear. In the same way, life constantly opens up windows of appreciation for everyday beauty – not just in the pleasurable moments, but also in the seemingly mundane and even in, what Thomas Moore calls, ‘dark beauty.’³² In my view this is an important distinction because of the temptation to view beauty as an optional extra, a luxury, rather than a necessity of life.

Everyday Beauty

This last point is echoed by Ferrucci³³ who observes that everyday beauty is as necessary as breath and food. In fact he goes so far as to say that without an appreciation of this quality, darkness emerges in the soul, which contributes to much of the despair and crime that occurs in the world.³⁴ When we fail to appreciate the beauty of the created world, as well as the beauty present in one another, we are so much more able to inflict suffering – to objectify ourselves, and others in some way. Yet the converse is also true – when our eyes are open to beauty, we ‘see’ anew. Grasping the significance of this is transformative because it helps us grasp and appreciate our own uniqueness, which strengthens us to stand against the ‘glare’ or scrutiny of social expectations and to increase our vitality. As Ferrucci³⁵ says, when people deliberately focus on everyday beauty, they develop:

²⁷ Benner, Juliet. (2011). *Contemplative Vision: A guide to Christian art and prayer*. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL., USA. p. 28.

²⁸ O’Donohue, John. (2004). *Beauty the Invisible Embrace: Rediscovering the true sources of compassion, serenity and hope*. Harper Collins: New York. p.18.

²⁹ Laracy, M. (2015). In her webinar (footnote 6) she says: “Beauty invites contemplation... which is the reception of a gift.”

³⁰ Source unknown

³¹ O’Donohue, John. (2004). *Beauty the Invisible Embrace*, p.13

³² Moore, Thomas. *Dark Nights of the Soul*. p.210 says: “Beauty is not all brightness. In the shadowlands of pain and despair we find slow, dark beauty.”

³³ Ferrucci, P. (2009). *Beauty and the Soul: The extraordinary power of everyday beauty to heal your life*. New York: Penguin Group.

³⁴ Interestingly, in countries where beauty is more evident, such as in buildings, gardens, art and aspects that contribute to human flourishing, the crime rate is significantly lower than countries with a higher industrialized focus. See for example http://dc.urbanturf.com/articles/blog/researchers_draw_a_solid_connection_between_green_spaces_and_lowered_crime/46

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³⁵ Ferrucci, P. (2009). *Beauty and the Soul: The extraordinary power of everyday beauty to heal your life*. p.xiv

“a different character, a more intense love of life, an inner world more richer and more varied, more vital connection to feelings, a greater ease in relationship with others, a stronger identity and more solid self-esteem, a greater competence in making choices and moving through everyday life, a deeper understanding of existence.”

Furthermore, it could be argued that the intentional exposure to everyday beauty is also an antidote to conditions such as depression.³⁶ Beauty holds the capacity to break through the anhedonia³⁷ and therefore contribute towards symptom reduction³⁸ within the constraints of anxiety and depression. In addition, as directors and people-helpers we need a continual renewal from God, and one way He does this is through beauty. Without renewal we experience burnout or other consequences such as compassion fatigue. Likewise many directees come to us because they are struggling to discover where God is in the midst of their concerns. Some directees present with a crisis of faith, which can arise in response to painful life experiences, and which can lead to bouts of anxiety and depression. Laracy³⁹ suggests that both introducing beauty actively into our work [with directees], and cultivating an attitude of beauty towards our work is highly protective. It calls forth life, because it generates renewed hope and faith; as in the words of Psalm 23, it restores the soul. Once beauty has begun to open and expand our souls, we develop a new way of understanding which becomes transformative; it opens the way towards promoting healing and releasing rich creativity. Just as beauty has entered the general spheres of life (inspiring both the Arts and Sciences, including the wonder of mathematics) it also has the potential to affect the individual, helping us identify, appreciate and enrich our own lives and then to offer these qualities as gifts to others.

Christine Valters Paintner says it like this:

“An aesthetic spirituality is one that recognizes this longing as a response to a call already issued, to an invitation always present in the world through beauty's presence. 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.”⁴⁰

Social impact of beauty

Once we are open to perceive beauty, a fresh appreciation begins to stir for all of life. This extends towards creating a healing environment for ourselves, and for those we come into

³⁶ Ventura, M. (2015). Beauty Resurrected: Awakening Wonder in the Consulting Room. He says: “ *Much depression is a symptom (James Hillman might call it a healthy symptom) of resistance to ugliness—a holding-back of the spirit from an aggressively ugly environment. ... [While] beauty opens us, ugliness closes us. We shut down. We blunt our perceptions, our sensitivities. We stop seeing, because seeing gives us no sustenance. We enclose ourselves in our own bodies, the personal circle of our own bodies, because it is unpleasant, unrewarding, to see, feel, scent, and touch what’s around us. We become resigned.*”

³⁷ The reduced capacity to appreciate and experience pleasure e.g. see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anhedonia>

³⁸ Laracy, M.R. (2015) refers to anxiety and depression as the common colds of psychological disorder. She does point out that on occasion patients experiencing more severe symptoms may also require medication and/or counselling before this intervention can be effective

³⁹ Laracy, M. (2015), says symptoms – such as anxiety and depression – might be relieved by the presence of beauty because of its capacity to begin to draw us out of ourselves, and thus to break through the anhedonia. Developing a stance of beauty not only assists to provide a healing environment for the client/directee but also acts to protect the therapist (or director) from burn-out by increasing appreciation and shifting away from a problem focus. The experience of being perceived as beautiful (valuable, worthwhile etc) assists the [directee] towards recovery. NB Naturally a Director would refer a very depressed client for therapy – nonetheless, sometimes depressed directees may want to continue spiritual direction if they are able to do so. The intentional inclusion of ‘everyday beauty’ has a mindful effect, with many health benefits such as reducing stress hormones such as cortisol and promoting the release of endorphins etc.

⁴⁰ Valters Paintner, C. (2009). Beauty and Spirituality, *Patheos: Hosting the Conversation on Faith*. <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Beauty-and-Spirituality>

contact with. For example, when we increase our appreciation for nature we begin to develop an increased ecological awareness. This causes us to question the products we utilize within our own home environments, as well as increasing environmental awareness.⁴¹ This expands to examining the ethical production of the food we purchase; animal husbandry, care of our waterways and so forth. The experience is costly – once this journey has begun it is as though there is an increased sensitivity to the injustices that occur daily. But it also leads to higher ethical practice, increased sensitivity, empathy and compassion for the needs of others. Since spiritual direction seeks to not only assist a person to deepen their relationship with the Divine, but also to outwork this in their lives, it is evident that conversations and practices that enhance and develop the appreciation of Beauty will promote renewal and an outworking of care and service.

Introducing Beauty as a Spiritual Practice

Therefore, perhaps the first step of introducing Beauty into spiritual direction is for the director to consider enhancing their own experience, by developing an intentional practice of focusing on beauty in their own lives. This may include setting time aside to attend a directed or personal retreat, and experimenting with printed resources.⁴² (Using some of the suggestions in the Appendix could serve as a starting point). Developing one's own practice becomes an act of prayerful worship; of gratitude and celebration, which enables us to more easily develop a habit of being that becomes transformative and flows out into our work with directees. Directors could also consider creating a physical healing environment that directees may find healing, which could include factors such as providing ecologically friendly elements (e.g. beeswax candles instead of paraffin wax candles), natural lighting, soothing music and so forth.

Cultivating the intent to discover (hear and 'see,' or perceive) what is beautiful in the directee⁴³ models God's heart, as well as enhancing the protective quality of holistic care toward self and others. Being alert for conversations with directees that focus on elements of beauty – developing a rich exploration around the topics raised - provides a natural doorway for introducing spiritual practices that intentionally focus on beauty. These may include simple questions such as "tell me what is beautiful in your life?"⁴⁴ What do you find beautiful about your work? In your daily life, do you include practices that connect you with beauty in some way? When you have the experience of beauty that you have described (with God, with others, with nature etc) what effect does that have on you? What effect does it have on your relationship with God? Do you have ways that help you stay connected with the experiences of beauty?" Although Micheal Ventura⁴⁵ offers a compelling argument for asking such direct questions relating to beauty, other less provocative questions could

⁴¹ Ferrucci, P. (2009). *Beauty and the Soul: The extraordinary power of everyday beauty to heal your life*. New York: Penguin Group. See the Chapter entitled 'Abuse vs Awe,' p.251; also Butler Bass, D. (2015). *Grounded: Finding God in the World- A spiritual revolution*. New York: HarperCollins

⁴² Pickering, S. (2012). *On Holiday with God: Making your own retreat – a companion and guide*. Canterbury Press: London. In this book, Pickering offers a themed resource called 'appreciating beauty,' p.73.

⁴³ Laracy, M.R. (2011) *The Role of the Experience of Beauty in Psychotherapy*. A Dissertation. The Institute for the Psychological Sciences

⁴⁴ Although this question might sound gender- biased, Michael Ventura suggests that such questions are useful because "the therapist-client relationship is just about the last functioning shared space... where this question can be asked, and more importantly, *heard*" (p.4, 'Beauty Resurrected'). He offers a series of potentially useful questions relevant to exploring beauty on this link: <http://michaelventura.org/beauty-resurrected-january-february-2001/>

⁴⁵ Ventura, M. (2001). See footnote 42 and bibliography

be: “What do you enjoy / what have you enjoyed this last month?” or “What do you do that refreshes and renews you?”⁴⁶ Suggestions for offering resources are offered in the Appendix, but there is also literature available that explores the wonder and transformative effects of the healing power of Beauty.

Examples of the Healing Power of Beauty in Literature

In closing, I would like to share three brief excerpts from some of the literature that recorded the experiences of people who described being healed by beauty.

The first was an article by the afore-mentioned Michael Ventura.⁴⁷ In his article he describes being near-death from ‘acute malnutrition’ at twelve years of age, looking out his hospital window at the changing sky and the flashing wings of pigeons. He says, *“It’s impossible to prove, but I believe that my intake, my inspiration (literally, my breathing in) of the elegance, the beauty, of the birds and the sky, gave me strength and saved my life.”*

The second segment relates to Rollo May, who was a well-known psychologist and is often said to be the ‘father’ of existential psychology. May left a legacy of several books – one entitled ‘My Quest for Beauty.’⁴⁸ As a young man he suffered a nervous breakdown, and in the chapter ‘Beauty Has Kept Me Alive,’ he relates the story of descending a hill and finding himself suddenly knee-deep in a field of poppies:

“It was a gorgeous sight: brilliantly crimson and scarlet...I stood there, intoxicated, wholly captivated by this sight” ... “I realized that I had not listened to my inner voice, which had tried to talk to me about beauty. I had been too hard-working, too ‘principled’ to spend time merely looking at flowers! It seems it had taken a collapse of my whole former way of life for this voice to make itself heard. This inner voice hereafter would always be redolent with the slight perfume that covered the hillside that morning.”

The third and final segment was a chapter in a book entitled ‘Beauty Heals,’ by Douglas A. Anderson.⁴⁹ He describes standing beside a lake, captivated by the beautiful scene before him and the impact it had on his being that informed his work as a pastoral counsellor. His observation reflects the heart of this assignment, which is to encourage directors to reflect upon ways that they might consider integrating the healing power of beauty into their work – for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of directees.

“This is beauty. And this is what my life is about: discovering myself in the midst of beauty with my eyes open to receive it... This is the key to my actual work, my vocation. When I approach my work with the spirit or stance of discovering beauty, I can let go of trying to solve things and I am most able to be a clear channel of God’s Grace and a vehicle of accepting love.”

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⁴⁶ Pritchard, A. SGM Assistant Programme Formation Coordinator. Personal communication 6 July, 2016

⁴⁷ Ventura, M. (2015). Beauty Resurrected: Awakening Wonder in the Consulting Room in *Psychotherapy Network* (see Bibliography).

⁴⁸ May, R. (1985). *My Quest for Beauty*. Dallas, TX. Saybrook. pp 11-13.

⁴⁹ Anderson, D.A. (2013). *Beauty Heals, The Spiritual Horizon of Psychotherapy* by William S Schmidt and Merle R Jordan. UK: Routledge p.77.

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(NB: Please note some titles need to be entered directly into your search engine to open)

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Appendix - Suggestions for Developing Beauty as Spiritual Practice

- Offer handouts with various exercises that explore beauty: for example, contemplative walks, lectio divina or visio divina exercises, poetry with reflective questions, and journaling or collage guidelines. (NB I may also be contacted directly for resources).
- Create a handout on Beauty for the directee to ponder. Suggestions are listed on this website: <http://krmc.net/news/blog/57-beauty-as-spiritual-discipline>
- Suggest directees spend time in nature, being alert to all their senses and noticing what they are spontaneously drawn toward ... birdsong, shells, shrubs, flowers, stones, other sounds, scents and textures. Encourage them to notice what thoughts and feelings emerge as they focus on what they are drawn towards. Is there any sense of the Divine speaking to them through this? (eg as in Matthew 6:26; Luke 12:24 'Look.. consider...'). Encourage them to trust what emerges, to journal the experience and bring it to their next session.
- Create some conversation cards with a variety of scenes and settings. Ask them to choose a card that inspires them then develop a rich conversation around the particular aspects that speak to them. Consider having a sheet of A4 paper on hand and some felts or crayons, where the directee can record key words that emerge eg Serene. "Choose a colour that represents serene for you as you write the word. What is it about the word serene that captures you? What does it evoke in you? If this was an invitation from God, what might this mean for you – for your life?"
- Create a series of artistic stones with designs and emblems painted on them to promote similar contemplative conversations.
- Encourage the client to consider designating a corner somewhere that is set aside especially for beauty. This corner can hold a collection of items that have attracted them on their contemplative walks, for moments of reflection and to provide a daily visual reminder.
- Another suggestion is to encourage the directee to create a craft corner in their home with a simple table, a collection of magazines and some elements to make it uniquely theirs in some way. Add a large shoebox or binder to hold magazine cutouts, colouring tools, scissors, glue sticks and a variety of embellishments plus a scrap book, journal or large cards. As they flick through magazines, they notice the spontaneous heart response and tear out the pages. They may then wish to create a visual collage or to simply journal their own noticings about beauty. This can be particularly useful for strengthening personal identity as over time, themes emerge that help them to identify who they are and who God (Beauty) is to them, invitations that are emerging, goals, dreams and characteristics that are truly beautiful in their lives.

- With clients who are struggling with despondency and low mood, encourage them to begin to deliberately choose one thing each day that represents a touch of beauty for them. This can be as simple as arranging a simple vase of flowers, even wildflowers or a few sprays of greenery. Suggest they slow down and practice being fully present to the moment, offering themselves a space to put aside their concerns for a window of time. This is similar to a mindful practice (such as centering prayer) and therefore holds a number of beneficial effects to the nervous system.
- Begin a simple task mindfully. When I had burnout, chores felt burdensome and yet being surrounded by clutter was disquieting. Being fully present to one selected chore, I would put on some gentle music, light a fragrant candle and set the scene almost as an act of worship. I began to create a couple of natural cleaning items scented with pure essential oils e.g a paste made with peppermint oil became a favourite; an all-purpose spray made with rose oils – these helped to promote a healing environment. Lavender is also known to be soothing. I would celebrate a completed task by arranging a small vase of flowers, a candle, a small dish of petals etc.
- Encourage the directee to beautify their home environment. Simplifying, rearranging, and removing clutter opens space for recovery (see Appendix Two).
- The motions of knitting and crochet are very mindful and soothing plus provide the satisfaction of creating beauty. This can be as simple as knitting cotton facecloths which don't require arduous concentration.
- Create and embellish a journal that captures verses about Beauty, prayers, conversations, art and articles that are introduced into spiritual direction sessions. This encourages the cultivation of an inner landscape of beauty – which John O'Donohue called beautifying the mind (see also Philippians 4:8).
- Lastly, introduce ideas that emerge from your own practice!