

VISIO



DIVINA

The Wisdom of Contemplative Vision

KNOWING BEAUTY

John of the Cross

In contemporary society we say, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” We mean, of course, that beauty is determined by the unique perception of each person who either sees beauty or talks about it. And when we compare with one another what is beautiful for each of us, we find that it is often very different. What seems beautiful to one person may be uninteresting or even ugly to someone else.

What this common understanding of beauty may fail to express is that we each have inside of us what we can call our own “beauty detector.” This means that humans are attracted to beauty no matter what. However they may perceive it, they look for the beautiful and long to find it, though the definition may differ.

Do other creatures see beauty? We do not know for sure. Some birds make displays of beauty around their nests, and arranging beautiful feathers in order to attract a mate. Some creatures collect bright objects and put them in their dens and homes. Is that beautiful to them? Humans also decorate their homes, their bodies, their gardens, and their world, adorning them with what they believe to be beautiful objects and art.

In our museums, we collect and admire beautiful art. In our concert halls we go to listen to beautiful music for hours. Without a doubt, humans are deeply drawn to beauty however it might be defined. Beauty is a central part of our lives. As much as possible we reject what is ugly and choose what is beautiful.

The deep question is, why is this true? How is it that humans have this profound proclivity? A perennial answer from the wisdom traditions is that this is one of the signs of the Creator built into the very fabric of our being. We love beauty because God is called “the Most Beautiful” center of all things, and whatever God touches that carries that fingerprint — even on the inside of ourselves. We are wired to find and love what is beautiful.

Beauty, John of the Cross says, is what the heart wants most. For him, at least, it is the essence of all his desires. It seems true that when we follow the taste, scent, sound or color of beauty that something responds or changes within us.

We are shaped by beauty. It often tames other desires, perhaps those that are even most harmful to us. Even in the social world where there are divisions and deep differences between us, when we are together in the presence of beauty, something shifts and we are unified beyond our differences. Beauty is a healer and unifier—it heals and brings human hearts into deep communion.

John of the Cross (1542-1591) was a Spanish Mystic. Jewish by background, but a Christian saint of much renown, he went through deep and difficult trials in his own soul, many of which were from the religious order to which he belonged. His soul prevailed and grew strong through these trials and, in the end, he was able to write classics of western spirituality that continue to inspire us today.

Reflections on Image and Text:

1. *Three illuminations are given in this reflection that express just a few of our ideas about what is beautiful. Which of these seems most beautiful to you? Would you agree that they are each beautiful in their own way? If so, why do you find them beautiful?*
2. *Notice that in each illumination a rose is used as a symbol of beauty. Have you found the rose is, at least for us in the West, a symbol that we all can agree is beautiful? Do you agree? Why or why not?*
3. *How would you define beauty? Write out a definition and share it with someone to get their response. Journal any discoveries.*
4. *What does the longing of your heart tell you about beauty? How is this longing expressed? To what beautiful things are you most attracted?*
5. *How have you experienced beauty changing the environment, changing the relationships between human beings, or changing your own heart?*
6. *In your view, how does beauty heal our inner and outer divisions? If you have seen beauty heal some situation or some person, describe what you have observed and learned in your journal.*

A Place for Notes and your Journaling:

This reflection, text and its illumination have been provided by Alison Hine and Lynn Bauman as a means for contemplative vision and prayer.

LECTIO DIVINA

The Contemplative Reading of a Sapiential Text

I

*did not have to ask my heart
what it wanted.*

*Of all the desires
I have ever known
only one did I cling to
for it is the essence
of all desire:*

to know beauty.

*—John of the Cross
Arranged and edited
for public reading and illumination by
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Contemplating
THE ILLUMINATIONS





