



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Beauty and Adult Faith Formation (Part 2: Why we need beauty)

There is an ancient Persian saying: “If I have one penny, with half of it I buy some bread, and with the other half I buy a violet.” This is a reminder that beauty is as vital for our lives as is food.

As we explore paying attention to beauty in our adult faith formation endeavors, we take a few moments – in this issue – to reflect on the many reasons why we need beauty.

People often say that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” and I say that the most liberating thing about beauty is realizing that you are the beholder.

This empowers us to find beauty in places where others have not dared to look, including inside ourselves.

~ Salma Hayek

Emotional and Psychological Well-being:

Beauty, whether found in nature, art, or human interactions, has the power to evoke positive emotions such as joy, awe, and admiration. Beauty has the power to evoke positive emotions such as joy, happiness, awe, and peace. These experiences can uplift our mood, reduce stress, and promote psychological well-being.



Aesthetic Appreciation:

Beauty often stimulates our senses, enhances our perception and allows us to appreciate the world around us in a unique way. It enriches our experiences and makes life more enjoyable.



Sense of Meaning and Purpose:

Beauty can infuse life with a sense of meaning and purpose, encouraging individuals to seek out and cherish moments of beauty in their everyday lives. Beauty grounds, connecting us while lifting our spirits no matter what circumstance we find ourselves in.

Everyone strongly desires meaning and beauty, mediated (as Gerard Manley Hopkins would put it) “in ten thousand places.”



Moves Us out of the Hum-Drum

Think of the power of beauty! What happens when there is a solar eclipse? Its beauty entices people from their ordinary undertakings: people leave work, gather in public places, and use special glasses to take in the mystery and beauty of such an event. People are riveted to an “Eagle Cam” as they watch the birth of baby eagles.

How often do we scroll Instagram or Facebook and stop on a video about something beautiful that has happened, or watch a feel-good movie? Share a humorous image? We seek out heart-warming stories, moments of beauty – whether real or fictional – which touch our sometimes ordinary days.

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Healing and Therapeutic Effects:

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin's claims that "the world will be saved by beauty!" Beauty is a catalyst for healing and hope during difficult moments in our lives. Beauty can have therapeutic effects, helping individuals cope with challenges and providing comfort.

Beauty saves, and the poets and writers continually remind us. St. Augustine, in his book *De Musica*, offers a metaphor: Beauty is "a plank against the waves of the sea."

It is possible to experience wonder, joy, beauty, happiness, and hope while also acknowledging grief, difficulty, and being in the ugly trenches.

In April 2015, a car packed with explosives detonated in the busy Mansour district of Baghdad, killing at least 10 people and injuring 27. After this incident, something very unusual happened. Karim Wasfi went to the bombsite, took out his cello, sat down on a chair amid ash and rubble in a black suit, his long hair combed back, and started to play.

Why go to the site of a car bomb to play your cello? Wasfi, the renowned conductor of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, said simply, "The other side chose to turn every element, every aspect of life into a battle and into a war zone. I chose to turn every corner of Iraq into a spot for civility, beauty and compassion. I wanted to show what beauty can be in the ugly face of car bombs, and to respect the souls of the fallen ones."

When he played, soldiers cried. People kissed. They clapped, they felt alive, they felt human and they felt appreciated and respected.

In his blog, <https://evofaith.com/how-beauty-can-save-us/>, John van de Laar writes: "Where ugliness destroys, beauty creates. What ugliness divides, beauty unites. And while ugliness dehumanizes, beauty dignifies, uplifts, and humanizes. A beautiful environment increases mental health. Beauty inspires hope and joy. And beauty can be revolutionary in challenging ugliness in the status quo, as the artists and musicians of Sophiatown did in Apartheid South Africa. Even scientists refer to mathematical work like Einstein's theories of relativity as beautiful.

There is a transcendent, spiritual quality to beauty that nourishes the human soul. And there is nothing so effective at transforming ugliness as true beauty. But beauty is more than just what is aesthetically pleasing to the senses.

When something speaks truth and leads us into a deeper experience of goodness, it is beautiful even if it seems aesthetically 'ugly.' People who have lived well and loved deeply can be beautiful even when their physical appearance is unremarkable or scarred in some way."

John van de Laar suggests some simple actions to draw on the power of beauty amid hard times:

- Work on expanding your definition of beauty. Seek it out in unexpected places and people, and learn to listen to your heart when it responds to surprising beauty.
- Create beauty in your own way and ignore the opinions of others. If it is beautiful for you, embrace it and celebrate it.
- Resist the temptation to reduce beauty to the skin-deep facsimile that is often sold to us by society. Seek out the deeper beauty of the interesting, mysterious, uncomfortable, challenging, inspiring, complex, and confusing.
- When confronted with ugliness, seek out beauty as soon as possible. Allow it to fill and heal you.
- Make connecting with beauty a regular spiritual practice. Read poetry, listen to music, walk in nature, share laughter with loved ones, watch movies, play with your pets, make funny faces at babies, tell silly jokes, listen to the stories of the elderly, hold the hand of the dying, celebrate the courage of protesters against injustice or join them.



Stress Reduction:

Engaging with beauty, whether through art, nature, or other forms, can help reduce stress and promote relaxation. Beauty provides a welcome respite from the pressures of everyday life.

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Numerous research studies have shown that beauty can lift our spirits and ease our stress. A visit to the art museum, attendance at a concert, a stroll along a beach, the taste of a favorite meal, the face of a happy child, or the sight of a mother duck swimming with her brood of ducklings - all have a way of lifting our hearts and calming our spirits.

In *Two Dogs and a Parrot*, Joan Chittister reminds us: "To be enriched by beauty is to have within us the sight of life that will never go away, that will never leave us empty... When we begin to recognize beauty, to see it all around us, it has done its work on us. Steeped in beauty, we have become beautiful ourselves. We are calm now, uplifted, enriched by the world around us, deepened in our sensitivities, our vision of the world more finely honed. We become the beauty we have seen everywhere."



Social Interaction and Bonding:

Because we are all drawn to beauty, it can act as a social glue, bringing us together to share experiences and discussions about what we find beautiful. Beauty – which can be found in multiple ways and places (nature, art, music, poetry, dance, religious ritual) - serves as a bridge between people of different persuasions, different ways of life. It accentuates our one humanity.

Beauty has the potential to unite us with other people. Whether we know people by name or not (and may never see them again), we feel united at Christmas liturgy, at a musical concert, cheering for our team, watching NASA's latest efforts, or marveling at fireworks.



An awareness of others:

While absorbed in a book of poetry, encountering a moment of compassion and harmony in the midst of chaos, or marveling once again at a sunset and gold twilight, we feel differently. We act differently, too, with

kindness and attention to the suffering of others; we tread lightly upon the earth; we seek a sense of fairness and symmetry and harmony in our social relations.

Wherever we happen to encounter beauty -- a landscape, a song, a poem, a flower, a symphony, a frayed relationship restored to harmony -- we feel caught up in something beyond us. We become lovers of the earth and practitioners of gentleness with one another.



Unity with All Creation

Patricia Adams Farmer, in her book, *Fat Soul*, describes it this way: "God is the very Soul of the world, the One who lures us and all creation toward widening circles of Beauty. God yearns for beautiful relationships of earth and sky and people and turtles. God yearns for us to know that we are all of a piece, all deeply interwoven and wholly beautiful in our differences."



Inspiration and Aspiration:

Beauty often serves as a source of inspiration, fueling creativity and innovation, encouraging individuals to pursue excellence and strive for improvement in various aspects of life, be it personal goals, art, music, literature, architecture, technology, or scientific advancements.



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Cultural Identity:

Beauty is often intertwined with cultural values and traditions. It helps define and reinforce cultural identities and can be a source of pride and unity among communities.



Preservation and Conservation:

Beauty can inspire people to protect and preserve the natural world, cultural heritage, heritage sites, traditional practices, and artistic creations, recognizing their value and importance for future generations.



Identity and Individuality:

People often find beauty in unique aspects of themselves and others, leading to a sense of identity and individuality. In paying attention to the beauty in self-expression, many have defined their personal identities through various creative outlets.

Call to Make the World a better place:

Beauty is also a challenging source for meaningful discussions on justice and morality. Beauty can serve as a counterpoint to the world we too often experience where kindness is frequently diminished in favor of bullying and bigotry.

Patricia Adams Farmer, in an e-course on “Living with Beauty,” (<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/ecourses/course/view/10251/living-with-beauty>) mentions some of our large issues that could use some inspiration from beauty.

- “The Climate Crisis: Strong waves become quite literal due to the rising sea levels and more intense storms resulting from climate change. Our spiritual walk needs to be grounded in the sacred, God-filled Beauty of the natural world -- the same world that inspired artists like Van Gogh and poets like Mary Oliver. Celebrating creation changes the way we interact with nature. Beauty's lure to walk outside, feed the birds, care for wildlife, paint landscapes, and plant trees will certainly go a long way in saving our planet for future generations.”
- “Racism: Within Beauty's wide embrace, we can learn to not only reconnect with nature and save it from further destruction, but we can also reconnect with one another. With our working definition of beauty as "intense harmony," we can see now that this is beauty with a capital B -- a dream for the future, perhaps the very dream of God.”
- “Morality: Iris Murdoch, philosopher and novelist, defines moral beauty as "an occasion for 'unselfing'." She tells the story of feeling anxious and brooding over something that hurt her ego, when she looks out the window to see a "hovering kestrel." She says, "In a moment, everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel.”
- “Religion: Most of us come from a religious tradition that has something beautiful going for it. As a Christian minister, I often think that the Beauty of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount could save us.”



Sense of Wonder and Curiosity:

Beauty often sparks a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world, encouraging exploration and a desire to learn more.



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Spirituality and Oneness with God:

And last, but certainly uppermost, beauty is a pathway to God.

“Sometimes it is said that if God really wanted us to believe, he would speak to us. To which God might well reply that he shouts at us all the time through the beauty that surrounds us. We can hardly go anywhere without being inundated by beauty.”

(<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/380/article/apologetics-beauty>)

National Geographic photographer, DeWitt Jones, answers the question: Why am I a Beauty hunter? “Because Beauty is God's way of remaining obvious. (<http://celebratewhatsright.com/tedx>)

In his March 31, 2014 interview with Belgian communications students, Pope Francis gave a message to both believers and non-believers, stating that if one genuinely seeks beauty, they will find a path to the Lord.

"When man finds himself, he seeks God. Maybe he is unable to find him, but walks on a path of honesty, seeking truth, on a path of goodness and a path of beauty. For me, a young person who loves truth and seeks it, loves goodness and is good, is a good person, and seeks and loves beauty, is on the good path and will surely find God!"

Some ways that beauty leads us to God:

- **Divine Creation:** Beauty, as manifested in the natural world, is evidence of God's creative power and presence. When we encounter breathtaking landscapes, intricate life forms, or stunning works of art, it can inspire a sense of awe and wonder, leading us to feel connected to something greater than themselves.
- **Beauty as a Divine Attribute:** Beauty is one of the divine attributes of God. God is the epitome of perfection and beauty, and the beautiful aspects of creation reflect God's inherent nature. Thus, experiencing beauty can evoke a sense of closeness to God.
- **Spiritual Transcendence:** Beauty can move us beyond the mundane and ordinary, lifting our spirits and transporting us to a higher state of consciousness. Many people experience a profound sense of spiritual transcendence when they encounter beauty, whether in nature, art, music, or acts of kindness and compassion. This sense of

transcendence can lead us to seek a deeper connection with God.

- **Beauty in Religious Practices:** Religious practices and rituals incorporate elements of beauty to facilitate a connection with God. We see this in the architecture of sacred spaces, the use of art, music, and poetry in religious ceremonies, and the appreciation of the beauty of religious scriptures and symbols.
- **Beauty as a Glimpse of the Divine:** God is often described as the source of all beauty and the ultimate standard of perfection. Thus, encountering beauty in the world can be seen as catching a glimpse of God's attributes.
- **Beauty as a Path to God:** Contemplation of beauty can serve as a form of meditation or prayer, helping us to quiet our minds and open our hearts to the divine presence. Through aesthetic experiences, we often find ourselves more receptive to spiritual insights and revelations.
- **Beauty as a Source of Joy and Gratitude:** Experiencing beauty can evoke feelings of joy, gratitude, and a sense of abundance. Gratitude is a spiritual practice, fostering a deeper connection with the divine by acknowledging and appreciating the beauty and blessings in one's life.

“In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty, there really is the presence of God.

There is as it were, an incarnation of God in the world and it is indicated by beauty.

The beautiful is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible.”

~ Simone Weil

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Ways to respond to our need for beauty

Here are a few steps to recognize and respond to our need for beauty. We will continue to explore these ideas in the coming issues. For right now, you might want to ask yourself:

- Which of these ways am I attentive to? Which ones might I want to concentrate on a little more?
- How do I incorporate these needs and responses into adult faith formation?

➤ **Nature appreciation:** Spend time in nature and observe the beauty of the natural world. Whether it's a park, a forest, a beach, or a garden, take the time to appreciate the intricacies of the plants, animals, and landscapes around you. This can lead to a sense of wonder and awe, deepening your connection to the beauty of creation.

➤ **Creative expression:** Engage in creative activities like painting, drawing, writing, photography, or any form of artistic expression. Creating and appreciating art can be a deeply spiritual experience, allowing you to tap into your inner emotions and connect with the beauty within and around you.

➤ **Appreciate art and culture:** Visit museums, art galleries, or attend cultural events like concerts or theater performances. Art exposes us to diverse perspectives and emotions, enriching our lives.

➤ **Create a beautiful space:** Decorate your home (and your meeting spaces) in a way that reflects your personal aesthetics and brings you joy. A harmonious environment can positively impact your (and others') mood and mental well-being.

➤ **Meditation and mindfulness:** Practice meditation or mindfulness to cultivate a greater awareness of the present moment. By focusing on the present, you can notice the beauty in even the simplest things, like the sound of birds chirping, the feeling of a gentle breeze, or the taste of a delicious meal.

➤ **Nourish your body and soul:** Eat wholesome and delicious food, exercise regularly, and take care of your overall well-being. Feeling good from the inside reflects in your perception of beauty.

➤ **Music and sound:** Listen to uplifting and soul-nourishing music or sounds that resonate with your spiritual journey. Explore various genres to discover what resonates with you the most. Music has the power to evoke emotions and can be a gateway to experiencing beauty on a profound level.

➤ **Acts of kindness:** Beauty is not just visual; it can be found in kindness, empathy, and connection with others. Engaging in acts of kindness and compassion can be a way of connecting with beauty. When you show kindness to others or yourself, you contribute to the beauty of the world by fostering a sense of harmony and love. Acts of love and compassion can create beautiful moments and memories.

➤ **Rituals and prayer:** Incorporate beauty into your prayer and rituals. This might involve lighting candles, using beautiful symbols or imagery, or setting up a prayer space that reflects the liturgical year or the beauty in your life.

➤ **Gratitude practice:** Cultivate gratitude for the beauty in your life. Gratitude helps you see the beauty in the everyday things we often take for granted. Make it a habit to regularly acknowledge and appreciate the beautiful aspects of your existence, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. Acknowledging and appreciating the blessings in your life can shift your perspective towards greater contentment.

➤ **Read:** Scripture and inspiring literature contain profound wisdom and poetry that exalts beauty. They can take us on journeys to other worlds and open our minds to new ideas and perspectives, celebrating the beauty of life, love, and God.

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- **Seek out beauty in unexpected places:** Train yourself to find beauty in the mundane and ordinary. Sometimes, the most profound beauty lies in the smallest, seemingly insignificant moments.
- **Share beauty with others:** Spread joy by sharing beautiful things, experiences, or moments with friends, family, or even strangers. Beauty multiplies when it is shared.
- **Silence and stillness:** Spend time in silence and stillness to create space for beauty to unfold within your consciousness. It's in the quiet moments that we can often perceive the subtle and profound beauty that surrounds us.



Janet Schaeffler, OP
www.janetschaeffler.com
jschaeffler@adriandominicans.org

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In contemporary America,
most people are not moved by claims of truth or goodness.

Relativism has made truth to be whatever you want,
thereby turning the good into whatever makes you feel good.

So how can you engage the average nonbeliever?
How can you place him on the road that would lead him back
to the Truth and the Good?

Show him beauty.

~ Father John Cihak

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Lifelong Faith Studio: <https://www.lifelongfaithstudio.com/>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:
 - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>
 - https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_faith_journal_special_issue.pdf