

## Awakening to Beauty

John O'Donohue

WE LIVE BETWEEN the act of awakening and the act of surrender. Each morning we awaken to the light and the invitation to a new day in the world of time; each night we surrender to the dark to be taken to play in the world of dreams where time is no more. At birth we were awakened and emerged to become visible in the world. At death we will surrender again to the dark to become invisible. Awakening and surrender: They frame each day and each life; between them is the journey where anything can happen, the beauty and the frailty.

The human soul is hungry for beauty; we seek it everywhere -- in landscape, music, art, clothes, furniture, gardening, companionship, love, religion, and in ourselves. No one would desire not to be beautiful. When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming. We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful, for it meets the needs of our soul. For a while the strain of struggle and endurance are relieved and our frailty becomes illuminated by a different light in which we come to glimpse behind the shutter of appearances the sure form of things. In the experience of beauty we awaken and surrender in the same act. We find that we slip into the Beautiful with the same ease as we slip into the seamless embrace of water; something ancient within us already trusts that this embrace will hold us.

THESE TIMES ARE rife with anxiety and uncertainty. In the hearts of people some natural ease has been broken. Our trust in the future has lost its innocence. We know now that anything can happen, from one minute to the next. Politics, religion, economics, and the institutions of family and community, all have become abruptly unsure. At first, it sounds completely naive to suggest that now might be the time to invoke and awaken beauty. Why? Because there is nowhere else to turn and we are desperate; furthermore, it is because we have so disastrously neglected the Beautiful that we now find ourselves in such terrible crisis.

In a sense, all the contemporary crises can be reduced to a crisis about the nature of beauty. When we address difficulty in terms of the call to beauty, new invitations come alive. Perhaps, for the first time, we gain a clear view of how much ugliness we endure and allow. The media generate relentless images of mediocrity and ugliness in their talk shows, tapestries of smothered language and frenetic gratification. Beauty is mostly forgotten and made to seem naive and romantic. The blindness of development creates rooms, buildings, and suburbs that lack grace and mystery. Socially, this influences the atmosphere in the workplace, the schoolroom, the boardroom, and the community. We are turning more and more of our beautiful earth into a wasteland. Much of the stress and emptiness that haunt us can be traced back to our lack of attention to beauty. Internally the mind becomes coarse and dull if it remains unvisited by images and thoughts that hold the radiance of beauty.

Sadly, whether from resentment, fear, or blindness, beauty is often refused, repudiated, or cut down to the size of our timid perceptions. The tragedy is that what we refuse to attend to cannot reach us. In turning away from beauty, we turn away from all that is wholesome and true, and deliver ourselves into an exile where the vulgar and artificial dull and deaden the human spirit. In their vicinity we are unable

to feel or think with any refinement. They cannot truly engage us because of their emptiness; they pound our minds and feelings because they lack the coherence to embrace the inner form of the soul. They are not a presence but rather an absence that evicts and vacates.

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**To think about:**

1. O'Donohue speaks of the absence of beauty in our world and its effect upon our lives. Are there places where you might intentionally seek beauty and begin a practice of attending to it?

2. God calls us to love all people. And when we do not, we feel guilty. But, honestly, it is hard to love the unlovable. Even when we try to "see Christ in the other," it is hard to work up any feelings or actions of love toward that one or that situation.

Could we, instead, look for that which is lovely – not *lovable*, but lovely, meaning carrying within it some aspect of God's grace? Even in the most difficult of situations, can we see or at least pray to see some spark of the potential for loveliness?

3. "When we address difficulty in terms of the call to beauty, new invitations come alive," says O'Donohue. In what situations in our lives might we be open to the invitation to see things in terms of the call to beauty?