

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

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Beauty Spots

...When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

--John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.

--Genesis 1:31

As the days of this quarantine have gone on there have been a number of things that have surprised me, but perhaps the most notable has been a hunger for beauty.

No doubt the origin of this hunger comes from the natural world which has been more than doing its part in these bleak weeks to lift our spirits with dazzling displays of beauty all around. As our worlds have shrunk to a very short radius, Mother Nature has been moving in the opposite direction – bursting forth at every turn. Many a day I have been sustained by the fact that the world was still spinning, the sun was still shining (brilliantly), the trees were still blossoming (splendidly), and the birds were still singing (wonderfully). Nature has been putting on a celebration of life which is undimmed by our viral pandemic. And it is glorious.

But the beauty on display from God's creation kindled in me the desire for, the need for more. This was an unconscious yearning at first. Without thinking about why, I found myself listening to more music, picking up dusty books of poetry, and browsing online offerings from art museums--all things I would like for you to believe I do on a regular basis, but that would be stretching the truth. And as I did, I found that, in the depths of my hungry heart, the colors shone brighter, the music sounded sweeter, the poetry rang truer. These spots of beauty were restoring my soul; a burst of fresh water to an increasingly dry and dusty streambed.

I haven't been alone in this, it seems. During these weeks, the internet has proliferated with artists offering informal performances or creations and people have been gobbling them up. [Yo Yo Ma on twitter](#); [opera from people's living rooms](#); [Mo Willems teaching you to draw](#); those [composite vocal videos](#) that bring multiple individual voices into a common chorus to great effect. People had both the need to create and the need to take in something beautiful. And not beautiful strictly in the sense of pretty or pleasant, but in the more profound sense of the word: emotional, moving, cathartic. These "beauty spots" have provided a source of release for our cooped up, anxious hearts. A moment of light and life in a world of increasing darkness and death. They also provided a sense of connection--to the performer, to our fellow viewers, to

the composer or writer or artist of long ago--that we have all been longing for. And notably, gone are the outdated distinctions between high and low art. For [some that sense of connection came from Brahms](#), for others it was [Fiona Apple's new album](#). Even that silly [Bird Opera video](#) seems to be striking an emotional chord with people. Our souls are suffocating, and as our world is shutting down and getting smaller, it is art and beauty that still open for us portals into transcendent worlds of sound and sight. It's not escapism, it's survival; your soul coming up for air as the rising waters of isolation threaten to drown you.

Back in 1983, the scholar Lewis Hyde wrote an eloquent book called, *The Gift*, that quickly became a classic for exploring the nature of the artistic act and how best to value it. In the book, Hyde says that the great test of a work of art is what it sparks in us as we take it in. He writes, "Sometimes then, if we are awake, if the artist really is gifted, the work will induce a moment of grace, a communion, a period during which we too know the hidden coherence of our being and feel the fullness of our lives."¹ (196). Communion, coherence, fullness, these are the gifts that art has given us in this season of isolation, confusion and emptiness.

The reason that art and beauty can combat some of the more spiritual evils of this life, or, put more positively, the reason they can provide those gifts of communion, coherence and fullness for us even in the midst of crisis, is that the creative spirit embodies – better yet incarnates – the creative spirit of God. In these small acts of creation that we call art, we are touching the fringe of the cloak of that Great Spirit that hovered over the waters "in the beginning." To make and absorb art is to feel that same Spirit rest upon you and demand an outlet in speech or form. This is a force beyond our control, being bottled in image, word, or sound so that it might be shared as a remedy for those whose souls are drying up. As Hyde describes the artistic act, it is very much in keeping with this spiritual encounter: "To accept the fruits of these things as gifts is to acknowledge that we are not their owners or masters, that we are, if anything their servants, their ministers" (191). The reason art can provide us with that sense of communion, coherence and fullness is because it brings us into contact with the One who brought all things into being, the original Artist. Like the Creator, art channels an unseen Spirit and gives it visible form. It is an incarnation in every respect: a manifestation of the Spirit of God that you can see, or touch, or hear. In moments of artistic endeavor, the need to create and to ability to appreciate brushes up against the primordial impulse of creativity, which is the heartbeat of our universe.

This is somewhat ironic because, along with many other businesses and services, in this crisis, art has been deemed, "Non-Essential." And not for the first time. The debate about art's value and contribution to society long precedes the Coronavirus. It is annually discussed in budget discussions in schools, colleges, and the federal government. And in those discussions it becomes clear that the arts are usually viewed like dessert: often delightful, occasionally transcendent, but ultimately a distraction from our real nutritional needs.

The question of whether or not art is essential is one with which Hyde was familiar. And one of the ways he addresses it is by reminding us of two of the words the Greeks had for "life":

¹ Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*. Third Edition, Vintage Books, Penguin Random House, New York, NY (2019).

bios and *zoe*. He distinguishes them in this way, “*Bios* is limited life, characterized life, life that dies. *Zoe* is the life that endures; it is the thread that runs through *bios*-life and is not broken when the particular perishes” (41). This distinction between *bios* and *zoe* cannot help but ring true for those who are steeped in the words of Jesus. Think of the Gospel of John when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). Of course he wasn’t talking about sustaining one’s biological need for food and drink. He was attending to the need to sustain the soul, the *zoe*. While Christian Theology is guilty at times of disregarding the *bios*, the flesh, in favor of the life of the Spirit, eternal life, *zoe* both are necessary, because together they make up a complete life. A *bios* without a *zoe* is a colorless existence, while a *zoe* without a *bios* is merely a theoretical one.

When we get into discussions on the purpose of art, its value, whether it is essential or not, we are often positioning the *bios* life against the *zoe* life. What art does, what beauty offers us, depends on arguing for the reality of *zoe* in the midst of our *bios*. And when our *bios* life is under direct attack, it can be all the more challenging to hold to the existence of *zoe* life. It is true, art does not feed, clothe or house people. Those are physical needs that must be attended to without a doubt. But during this pandemic, *zoe* life has been arguing for itself. Art has found a way to rescue our starving souls and feed us, not as a luxury item, or an indulgence, or an escape, but as necessary nourishment to stave off the death of the soul. What we are seeing is that even when our *bios* life is threatened, art and beauty are still essential, not just to human flourishing, but to human existence. Art and beauty are our strongest antidotes to things like fear, despair, depression, anxiety, grief, loneliness; those sicknesses of the soul which are the very real side effects of our current pandemic.

When we are allowed to gather again safely, I hope we will remember what those spots of beauty did for us in this time of quarantine. How they brought us the invaluable gifts of communion, coherence, and fullness to our lock-downed lives. How they shone a light into our darkness, brought some beauty into our pain, and offered us joy amidst the tedium. Art brought Life into a world of death. And that seems about as essential as it gets.