

Surprised by beauty: Shining with god's glory

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

I was away on a retreat recently when the mirror surprised me. Normally, I can hardly bear to see my own face in the mornings, so it was only by chance that I happened to glance into the mirror as I turned on the light switch. There was my face looking back at me. My wet hair was sticking up every which way, and water was trickling down the side of my nose. And I was smiling. Pleased with the person I saw there, I smiled in return.

Then it hit me. For the first time in my whole life I was looking in the mirror and liking what I saw. I was happy at the sight of my own face; I was enjoying the shape of it, the appearance of my eyes and mouth, my nose and wet, silly hair. In that moment, I found myself beautiful.

I found myself beautiful? What a terrible thing for a polite person, especially a religious person, to say. But I don't mean "pretty"; after all, "pretty" has no more to do with "beautiful" than "nice" has to do with "good." "Pretty" is measured against another standard. It is a comparative term, having more to do with what our culture tells us we ought to look like if we are to be desirable and successful in it. It is like grading on a curve: in order for one person to be pretty, 29 people have to fail to meet the mark. No, in these terms, I wasn't pretty and never will be.

Beauty, however, is something else entirely. For a single moment, I had seen myself as God sees me and sees each of us, stripped of all the daily judgments we render against ourselves and each other for our failures to live up to our own and others' expectations. In short, what I saw that day in the mirror was the image of God within me, which makes each of us beautiful just as we are. There is no grading curve when it comes to measuring beauty.

Most of the women I know live out their lives, both private and at work, under a burden of expectation that has nothing to do with goodness or beauty or truth. We all seem to be vulnerable to the disapproval or approval of others.

Yet in my retreats to St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota, I have come to know a group of women who don't live this way. Yes, they are burdened like the rest of us with work and schedules, sadness, anxieties and aggravations. But they embrace the world more on their own terms than other women I know. The sisters don't seem to worry about appearing "womanly," whatever that means. No one apologizes for the way she looks. They are also fearless in conversation: I can talk to them about anything and know that they won't be frightened of it. They are living out a powerful call to ministry by being who they are in the midst of a larger culture that rejects what they stand for, yet this doesn't deter them from enjoying life and each other. They are proud of each other's character, work and creative efforts. They like each other as well as love each other, and laugh, grieve, think and celebrate with their whole beings.

It was when I was with the women at St. Benedict's that I saw and rejoiced in my face in the mirror. I believe that the beauty I glimpsed that morning is related to God. A little treatise called "On the Divine Name" helps me explain. Sixth-century Christian theologian Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (commonly called Pseudo-Dionysius) talks about the nature of God and how that nature is reflected in the world.

[God] is given this name [Beauty] because it is the cause of harmony and splendor in everything, because like a light, it flashes onto everything the beauty-causing impartations of its own well-spring ray. Beauty "bids" all things to itself . . . and gathers everything into itself. . . . From this beauty comes the existence of everything, each being exhibiting its own way of beauty. For beauty is the cause of harmony, of sympathy, of community . . .

The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good, for everything looks to the Beautiful and the Good as the cause of being, and there is nothing in the world without a share of the Beautiful and the Good.

For Dionysius, beauty has an independent existence because it is a fundamental name for God. God as Beauty, he says, is the source of everything that exists, the cause of all things that are. Beauty is the Creator that makes everything what it most particularly—and beautifully—is.

Whatever is truly beautiful, then, is objectively beautiful because it is God who bestows beauty on it. God flashes God's beauty like rays of light upon the world and

structures our world so that all things can share in and image God's beauty. Atoms and planets in their orbits, the changing seasons, the species of animals and plants, the wearing away of rock into dirt, the shifting tides of the oceans, the laws of mathematics, me looking at my face in the mirror—all shine with the glory which God as Beauty placed in them.

Dionysius adds that beauty also means "the Good." If this is so, you can see why we must say that beautiful is not the same as "very pretty." "Pretty" may be pleasing, but it has nothing to do with goodness. Worse, "pretty" may be positively evil in its effect on its beholders. Think, for example, of the anorexia, bulimia and poor self-image that afflict not only grown American women but children of six or seven who consider themselves unacceptably "fat" next to the starved models our media holds up as beautiful. Think of the bound feet of Chinese women. How can any human characteristic be truly beautiful if it demeans, demoralizes and destroys the human being that seeks to possess it?

All this talk of beauty is very encouraging, but it still leaves us with a question. What about the disagreement from culture to culture and from person to person over what is and is not beautiful? If you had been beside me that morning, maybe you would have looked at my image in the mirror and said to yourself, "That is the ugliest mug I have seen in my life!" Doesn't this fact almost force us to admit that what is beautiful is only a matter of individual or cultural taste?

Fortunately, Dionysius's insight helps us here too. If God as Creator has made every thing what it—beautifully—is, then different cultures and different individuals can consider different things to be beautiful without our having to claim that it is all only a matter of subjective taste. Diversity, he says, is as real as unity. God has made us all different from each other; God's beauty has filled our world with real variety. Differentiation, diversity and thus complexity are basic to the beauty of creation. No one culture or person in this life can possibly perceive the whole of our world's ever proliferating, complex, exuberant beauty, because this reflection of the beauty of God is without limit.

A person or culture trained to discern the subtle beauty of a Japanese Noh play may be unable to discern the beauty of a Shakespearean tragedy. A person attuned to beauty in the natural world may be unable to see the beauty in the faces of a crowd at a baseball game. You might have hated the setting for the psalm the schola cantorum sang, while I was transported by it.

This doesn't mean that you or I are making "merely" subjective judgments that have nothing to do with reality. But whether we see it or not, all things are beautiful in their own way. God has created all of them, and given each one God's own Beauty.