

Death's vision

As my father was dying, I saw God's radiant face more clearly.

by [Catherine Ricketts](#) in the [June 1, 2022](#) issue



(Source image: The Empyrean (highest heaven), by Gustave Doré from the illustrations for Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*)

It began with a diagnosis. My 68-year-old father, a Presbyterian minister, had a brain tumor. He lived with the cancer for almost two years, while my mother and brothers and I lived with the anticipation of his death. Each of us dropped what we were doing to participate in giving care, and our world became small, confined to my parents' house in Philadelphia, the blocks between the house and the park where Dad pushed his walker, and the cancer center.

My frame of vision narrowed around my family. Within these new parameters, small things at the tips of my fingers came into focus. The bright faces of radishes and dahlias at the market in the park. My mother's silver hair. My new husband's face, softened in sleep. I was sensitized to the pleasures of the proximate, even pleasures tucked inside the grotesque. Dad's blue eyes were as bright as glass, though his hair

grew in patches and his face was swollen.

We were mourning, yes, but we were mourning the end of a joyful life, and these tokens seemed congruous with our memorial. What comes most quickly to mind when I remember that time is not a feeling of despair but the visual beauty that made the despair bearable. Intimacy with my father while he died clarified my gaze to see the presence of grace.

There is a certain clarity that comes when death is near. Sight is a prismatic concept, with aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, and in my proximity to death, my vision was changed comprehensively. In the Christian tradition, death and sight have long been closely related. For centuries, the church—in the East and West alike—understood the *visio Dei*, or the vision of God in Christ, to be the final aim of human life, and beholding God the primary activity of eternity.

The theology of this “beatific vision” is lifted from the biblical system of metaphor in which the pursuit of holiness culminates in seeing God’s face. “Your face, Lord, do I seek,” sings the psalmist. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” Jesus preaches. Paul writes, “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face-to-face.” In this conception of life after death, we are beatified, or made supremely happy, as the fog of mortality is lifted and we see God as God is.

Since my father’s vigil, I’ve often wondered: How is visual beauty related to the presence of God? What was that attending light, glossing the dahlias and opening my eyes to their happy faces? Did I glimpse the countenance of God? And if death is the opening through which divine beauty comes into focus, could proximity to death while we live be the beginning of the beatific vision?

A dominant strain in the tradition imagines that the beatific vision can begin while we live. In this view, divine appearances like Abraham’s trinity of visitors and Moses’ burning bush are not just symbols of God; they are God’s real substance, begun to be made visible. We too can glimpse God, whether faintly in the pleasures of the ordinary or vividly in mystical visions. Thus conceived, the beatific vision is not a static and immediate unveiling of God’s face in the moment of death but a gradual process through which our sight is perpetually clarified.

Dante pictured it this way: glimpses of divine light on the path to God prepare our eyes to behold God’s radiance in its fullness. Gregory of Nyssa imagined that our capacity to see God increases eternally. God’s essence can never be fully

understood, Gregory said, and our longing to see the divine face will be eternally stirred even as it is fulfilled.

In a recent study of the doctrine, Hans Boersma explores the philosophical precedents for the beatific vision in the writings of Plato. In the *Symposium*, the sage Diotima speaks of stages of perceiving beauty. Our ability to perceive beauty begins with a single person, she says. As we behold a human face and form, we become sensitized and newly able to behold the beauty of all humans. This sensitization enables us to see the beauty of ideas—morally edifying abstractions. As we contemplate beautiful ideas, our gaze is further changed, and finally able to discern an eternal, immaterial form “of unbelievable beauty.”

For Plato, a gradual clarifying of vision reveals first the material, then the moral, and finally the eternal. True vision begins with the eyes and deepens into some fundamental faculty of perception, call it mind or soul or spirit. The notion of progressive perception suggests that the eternal process of seeing God in Christ can begin here and now, as we’re trained to behold increasingly more of God’s beauty.

I first heard the words “beatific vision” on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound, off the coast of Washington State. There, heavy fog sits on the horizon. Some days, it is comprehensive. You stand on a beach among driftwood and black stones and see water lapping the shore; beyond that, everything is obscured as if by breath on glass. Some days, dense clouds sit low on the other side of the water. Now and then, though, the cover lifts, and across the sound you see the Olympic peaks, covered in snow and pink light, and the mountains’ green foothills, and all their colors playing on the face of the water.

I had gone to the island to study writing. Poet Scott Cairns was teaching Annie Dillard’s *Holy the Firm*, an inquiry into the problem of evil that is set in this very region. “I came here to study hard things—rock mountain and salt sea—and to temper my spirit on their edges,” Dillard writes, and I too had come with questions more difficult than any I’d asked before.

While my dad was sick, my brother Joe, who had for years lived with substance use disorder, began using opioids. Two years later, we took a family vacation to Italy, all of us together without Dad. Joe was clean on the trip. He picked up a used copy of Plato’s *Republic* and read it between tours of cathedrals and art museums in Venice and Rome. An atheist, he was peculiarly drawn to the transcendent that week. Then

he came home, used heroin laced with fentanyl, and died.

This death did not take on the same aesthetic quality as my father's. This was a dark death. I remember vomit and sirens and the sallow skin of the friend who'd sold him the drug. The way I had seen the world while my father died now seemed fanciful—there was no use for sensory beauty in the center of harrowing loss.

It was through this fog of grief that I came to Whidbey Island. Grief and its attendant questions: How do I honor in death a person who was hard to love while he lived? What good is prayer against human agency and the holds of addiction? And most urgently: Is my brother in heaven?

One morning over coffee, I expressed this latter question, this tender, essential question, to another writer. Chris Hoke was a pastor to gang members who also wrote books and had come as chaplain to our student cohort. He heard my mourning trapped inside theological puzzles. He quoted the Orthodox saints, who place their hope in *theosis*—a gradual summit of holiness. Gently, Chris helped me to imagine my brother beyond death, seeing more clearly a God who sees him with the clarity of divine love. "Who knows," Chris said, "Joe may begin squinting, shadowed as he was in darkness—and aren't we all. But the saints trust that our eyes will adjust over time, enabling us to behold infinitely more of the merciful face of God."

In the biblical metaphor, sight is associated with knowledge, both in the sense of understanding and in the sense of interpersonal intimacy. "Show me your face," says one lover to the other in the Song of Songs. The more I learned about the *visio Dei*, the more I understood that it is only as God looks with radiance on our faces that we see God's face. "In your light we see light," says the psalmist.

As I pictured God regarding my brother, I began to see Joe under God's gaze. I stared at photos of him—the infant, the boy, the young man, lovely and lonely—until I saw not an addict or misanthrope but someone beautiful and beloved. Sensory beauty no longer comforted me, but I began to see with some deeper faculty of perception. With a changed gaze, I beheld my brother through the eyes of love.

"Death is the mother of beauty," suggests Wallace Stevens in "Sunday Morning." Christian Wiman writes that, for years, he took these words as credo, believing that to live with the awareness of one's mortality brought beauty into focus. Then Wiman was diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer, and he saw the world as not luminous but hazed. "I felt a maddening, muffled quality to the world around

me—which, paradoxically, went hand in hand with the most acute, interior sensations of pain,” he writes. For Wiman, proximity to death did not heighten his delight in the material world as he expected it might. ““Death is the mother of beauty,”” he concedes, “is a phrase that could only have been written by a man for whom death was an abstraction.”

And yet it was during the onset of illness that Wiman apprehended “that insistent, persistent gravity of the ghost called God” attending him as an animate presence, and that he gave us some of the most lucid spiritual writing of our time. Though he did not see the material world with greater clarity, his spiritual sight was refined. Perhaps he was primed for this refining by all those years of attention to ordinary beauty. Wiman, I think, is more prepared than many of us to behold God’s face forever.

Kate Bowler, who lives with colon cancer, recalls a moment when the presence of God came into sharp focus. She’d woken after surgery, knowing it was unlikely she would live longer than a year. Her torso reassembled, she felt disposable, as if her body was no longer good. Then pastors and professors from the divinity school where she works came to put their hands on her shoulders and head and to bless her. She describes a very intense feeling of being beloved by God. “God sometimes gives us these moments of supernatural closeness,” she says, “and it is often directly correlated with our times of greatest suffering.” The feeling faded. Moments like this do. But the image stays with her—through the faces of friends, circling her like a halo, she saw the adoring face of God.

Likewise, it was through my most acute moments of grief that I came to see not just aesthetic beauty but the beauty of God’s mercy. Rather than trying to get over my brother’s death, I got close to it—I held the cold hands of the questions that came with surprising loss. From birth I’d been enculturated in the hope of life everlasting, but the notion of the *visio Dei* gave me something new to hope in—not a sudden salvation that depended on a decision made in a person’s lifetime but a gradual salvation that might begin imperceptibly but increases eternally. I have come to believe that when the fog of hurt and sin fade away, the vision of God will be so captivating that all of us will worship with the supreme happiness imagined in the beatific vision. Heaven is fuller than I’d realized, and God more benevolent. Up close to death, my vision was sensitized first to the aesthetic and then to the eternal: I see God, that radiant face, that spectacular mountain of mercy, more clearly.

If death is an opening through which we can see the face of God, where then should we situate ourselves? Years have passed since I lost Dad and Joe. I've given birth to two sons; I focus now on infant faces and the rhythms of life's beginning. And I'm glad about that. I do not wish to romanticize illness or sudden loss; I hope it's a long while before I find myself again in grief's center. And so I am not suggesting that we seek proximity to death; it will come near to all of us, to claim our beloveds, to take our own bodies. What I am suggesting is that when it comes near, we might open our eyes and see the very face of God.