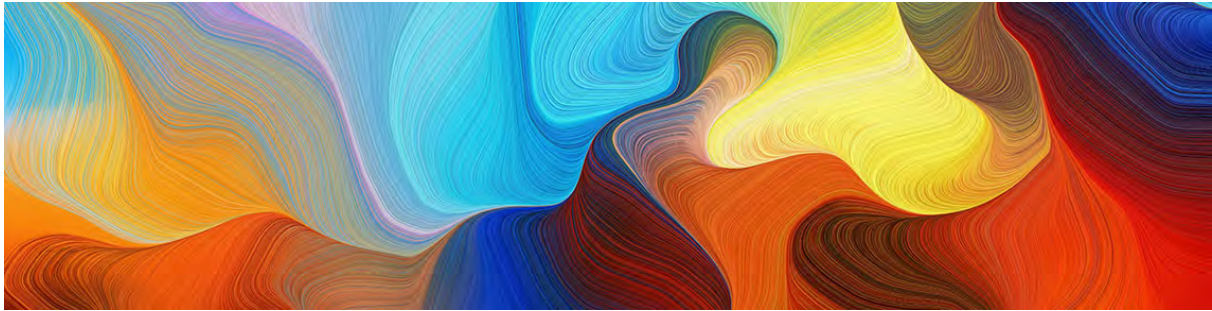


Interior Impulse



Our CEN practice of gathering at 4.00 pm remains a touchstone to consciously stop our activity for a time and deepen our awareness of the Divine permeating all. It is to surrender to the desire 'to be' and, in the stillness to listen for the whisper of the interior impulse. In the silence, perhaps we are drawn to the places of need in ourselves, in our local communities and in our world community. Across towns, cities and countries we are connected in solidarity as A community that believes in the healing, transforming power of the Divine.

As we continue to journey through these COVID times I find myself becoming ever more nurtured and expanded by the arts. What do the arts mean to you? Pablo Picasso wrote:

*"Art washes from the soul
the dust of everyday life."*¹

Through the ages, we humans have found ways to give expression to what is happening in us and around us. Pause a moment, be still. Come, look far back into the distance...do you see the markings on the cave walls? Listen now intently. Do you hear the rhythmic beating of drums? And are you seeing the vibrant cultural dance?

We might say that the arts touch into the very core of our being. They give us a way of expressing what is real and true and being drawn into and touched by the very origin of life itself.

Pope John Paul II speaks thus to artists:

*"Dear artists, you well know that there are many impulses which, either from within or from without, can inspire your talent. Every genuine inspiration, however, contains some tremor of that "breath" with which the Creator Spirit suffused the work of creation from the very beginning. Overseeing the mysterious laws governing the universe, the divine breath of the Creator Spirit reaches out to human genius and stirs its creative power. He touches it with a kind of inner illumination which brings together the sense of the good and the beautiful, and he awakens energies of mind and heart which enable it to conceive an idea and give it form in a work of art."*²

¹ Exact source unknown.

²Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists, 1999

Art then can inspire us and take us into the very breath of God. There, our mind, heart and spirit are stirred and awakened.



I was introduced to the arts as a young child. The sound of scales being practised on the piano and the violin and my mother joining us in solidarity singing “la la la la la...” up and down, is a lovely memory to recall.



Even though my fingers often stumbled and much screeching came from my sister’s uneven bowing, mum’s “la la la la la...” kept us practising.

As you might guess, my dear mother loved music. She turned up the volume on the radio and immersed herself in the sounds. At times she would sit at the piano and play from her well-worn French music book. Something held her through the sounds which took her beyond or beneath. Wherever it was, a joyous calm was there in my mother as she played. Thomas Merton, expressed it in this way:

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”³

Maybe my mother was finding more of herself as she lost herself in the music.

Music is an integral part of my everyday life. I wake in the dark of early morning, pull open the curtains, turn on FM Classical, sit in my chair and watch the light bring the lavender bush and the bold red pelargonium into focus. A very conscious recognition and acknowledgement of the Divine in the ordinary all about me and in me unfolds.

Often I come to music with a particular intent. As I listen to Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, I hear lightness and joy in his being as he walks through the countryside - something he loved to do often with his son. I hear the flowing waters and brooks they pass by and picture the village folk they meet dancing and partying. I am stirred by the drops of rain building to a climax of thunder, lightning, high winds, and pouring rain and then easing into an occasional distant thunderclap. All this culminating into a full orchestra of penetrating harmony, filling me with gratitude and awe. So much here is infused with the Divine: father son relating, the beauty of creation, the ordinary activity of village life.

Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony makes present what is around him. As I listen, I too become present and even more, I am reminded of and participate in the ongoing experience of incarnation.

What is the place of music in your life? When did you last listen intentionally to a favourite piece? What arose in you? A memory? A feeling? And how did you respond?

³ Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island, 1967

And what of poetry? When we read poems written by William Wordsworth, a great lover of nature, are not our hearts stirred and lifted evoking gratitude and wonder? His vivid word pictures, tones and rhythms invite us right into an experience.



Who can forget that vivid image of *a host of golden daffodils*? Do we not see them *dancing*? And do we not feel the *breeze* on our face? And what fills our being? Isn't it the Divine in the daffodils; in the dancing; in the breeze? Does the impulse arise in us to acknowledge in praise and thanks?

*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.⁴*

What about Gerard Manly Hopkins's poem, *The Grandeur of God*. Are we not drawn into the magnificence of the Divine?

*The world is charged
with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness,
like the ooze of oil
Crushed.⁵*

And then we are sharply reminded of the 'toil' and 'trade' that depletes and rapes this magnificence. For those of us deeply connected to the land, Pope Francis' words take us into that soul pain:

"God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of soul almost as a physical ailment..."⁶



⁴ William Wordsworth, first published in 1807, I wander lonely as a cloud

⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Poems and Prose* (Penguin Classics, 1985).

⁶ Laudato Si' 89

Still, the ever faithful, ever renewing nature of the Divine continues to permeate the world with a deep “freshness”.

Who cannot be moved by Hopkin’s breath-taking exclamation “ah! bright wings”?

A phrase holding deep abiding hope in the ongoing immanence of the Divine saturating all things.

I celebrate poets and composers who shared their lives so wholly. When we look more closely into their lives, we see they have laid bare in their creative endeavours not only their ecstatic joys but their deepest sufferings.



Beethoven wrote the ‘Moonlight Sonata’ when he was stone deaf. Imagine! Daniel O’Leary captures such integrity and wholeness in this way:

“Whenever art captures the core being, the truth, the ‘isness’ or interiority of anything, there too is a moment of divine revelation... works of art inescapably witness, by their truth and beauty, to their fount and origin in God...”⁷

Nigel Westlake, one of our contemporary composers suffered indescribably when his son Eli 21, was brutally murdered. For long, Nigel was immobilized by grief. He named that time as a: “Call to Silence.”⁸ He eventually emerged from that silent place, and composed a poignant and stirring *Missa Solis*, for Eli. A year or so on, he collaborated with singer-songwriter Lior in creating *Compassion*, a symphony of songs.

As Nigel leads the orchestra, the qualities of mercy pour forth from Lior’s voice. Listening to *Compassion*⁹ touches “the darkest depth of the soul...an appeal to mystery”¹⁰ along with truth, ‘isness’. *Compassion* evokes an intimate encounter with the utter

“pathos of the Divine.”¹¹

You would remember that in an earlier CEN reflection, Madeline reflected on Etty Hillesum, the young woman whose diary describes her capacity to be awake to the ‘interior impulse’.

⁷ O’Leary Daniel, *Treasured and Transformed*, 2018, Garratt Publishing, p. 198, 203

⁸ Kathy Evans, June 7, 2013, *Sydney Morning Herald*

⁹ Utube: *Compassion* – Lior and Nigel Westlake – La Yuminu

¹⁰ Pope John Paul 11, 4 April 1999, *Letter to Artists*

¹¹ *Ibid*

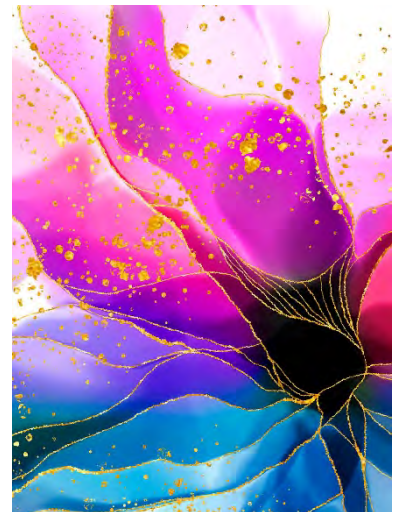
Nigel Westlake's immense grief was transformed into the viscerally liberating work, *Compassion that* he and Lior created. Etty knew such inner visceral liberation too. She once noted:

"I had a liberating thought which surfaced in me, a hesitant, tender young blade of grass thrusting its way through a wilderness of weeds: if there were only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite that whole barbaric gang, and because of that one decent German, it is wrong to pour hatred over an entire people."¹²

I can only believe the Divine's creative energy is right there in the depths of grief and the horror ever transforming and liberating. I remember well whilst working in the Sudan, visiting a Nuba soldier in Mother of Mercy Hospital, Gidal in the Nuba Mountains. He was sitting bolt upright in bed. His black face whitened by the blast of a fire ball aimed at him on the battle ground. His eyes wide, stared into space. At prayer that evening psalm 40:6 came readily to mind. The psalmist of long ago offered comfort, compassion and that remarkable Love that comes with surrender and solidarity took hold.

*"Sacrifice and offering are not
your desire for us
for, you have opened our
heart's ear.
Burnt offerings are not required.*

*My heart affirms my surrender,
in the Book of Life, it is written:
"I abandon myself into your hands,
for I love You and wish only
to create with You,
O my Belove,
for You are the Life of my life forever."¹³*



Teilhard de Chardin's words hold it for me in this way:

"You who batter us and then dress our wounds, you who resist us and yield to us..."¹⁴

I gasp at the paradox of it. The infinite unconditional love of the Divine.

The late art historian and passionate BBC Art presenter Sister Wendy Beckett believed that:

"All art that really draws us to look at it deeply is spiritual. Art accepts all the sadness and transforms it, implicitly affirming that beauty is essentially the presence of God."¹⁵

¹² Etty Hillesum, *Etty: A Diary, 1941-43*

¹³ Nan Merrill, *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*

¹⁴ Ursula King, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

¹⁵ <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com> › Affirmation of Beauty Spirituality &Practice

This reaches into and resonates with what I experience when I listen to Nigel, when I read Etty's accounts and when I ponder my own experiences.

It holds true too of a recent experience at the National Gallery of Victoria. I wandered into a special exhibition, *Salon et Lumiere*. In semi-darkness I saw the four walls of the Salon¹⁶ covered with paintings depicting a vast range of aspects that are part of our world. As I stood looking, a stirring soundscape began to fill the space. Images of rain drops fell over the art works, life-size birds across the walls, animals and people moved over the works. As all of this happened, light was projected onto individual art works. All of this went on for some minutes culminating in the glorious, *Flower Duet*¹⁷ from *Lakme*. What a visual, sensual, rapturous experience! An encounter with the Divine!? Certainly, a clear reminder that every part of our world is utterly saturated and deeply penetrated by the Divine. Our world is continuously and relentlessly caught up in the Divine and possessed by grace from its very origin. Sometimes I am more awake to this awareness than at others. The experience is embedded in the very marrow of my bones. It cries out God's utter faithfulness reminding me of Paul's:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹⁸



La Pietà by Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni

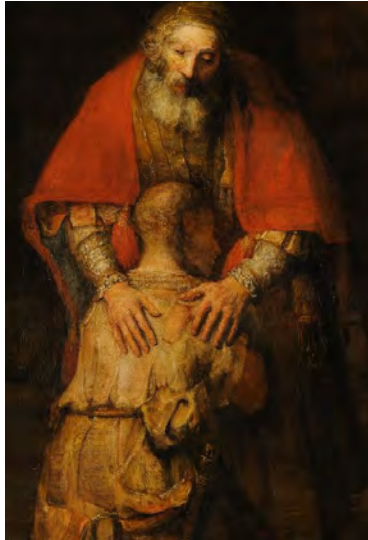
When we gaze upon Michelangelo's Pietà what words arise? Immeasurable sorrow, all-embracing serenity, overwhelming exquisiteness? We know the story that Michelangelo claimed he could "see" this sculpture hidden in the stone, that it was his work to simply chisel away so that the sculpture could freely emerge... 'interior impulse'? I look at Mary's grief-stricken face looking with such attentive tenderness and intimacy at her son resting deeply in the folds of the garments. Michelangelo's work manifests the extravagant tenderness and intimacy of the Divine. And I stand gazing in silence and awe.

¹⁶ NGV Salon Gallery, *A Virtual Tour* YouTube NGV Melbourne

¹⁷ <https://www.liveabout.com> › Classical Music › Operas | Story and Lyrics Translation for the Flower Duet

¹⁸ Romans 8:38-39

That profound tenderness I also find in Rembrandt's painting of *The Loving Father* as I observe the intense yet soft gaze of the father, full of longing for his son, full of compassion and full of love. The artist's work brings close the unceasing yearning of the Divine to hold and to heal, to rejoice and to celebrate.



The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn

The presence of God indeed surrounds us. Artists of every kind make apparent what is already there. Whatever medium is used by the artist, the work makes visible what is invisible. We are invited to see, to hear, and to consider our response. In our deep listening do we hear the whisper of Spirit stirring in us? Can we sense the emotion, name it? The range is enormous, spanning from tenderness to roughness; from pathos to joy; from calm to angst; from hope to despair. Whatever the emotion the artist draws out of us is the essence of something – in that “something” more of life is revealed.

The Author of Life, the Divine, Aquinas noted:

“... is beauty itself,
beautifying all things
with a holy beauty.”¹⁹

While Bishop Richard Harries says:

*“Works of art inescapably witness by their truth and beauty,
to their font and origin in God...”*²⁰

As we come to our CEN contemplative practice may we be further opened to the presence of the Divine by means of the arts. May we be graciously attentive to the ‘interior impulse’ that arises and come to know its invitation. May we be sustained through and through by the indwelling of the Divine, ever present in our midst. May that grace, be grace for all whom we encounter, and healing grace for those we bring to mind and heart in this sacred hour.

Nicole Rotaru RSM

¹⁹Matthew Fox, *Sheer Joy*

²⁰ Quoted in Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God*.