"Behold the Beauty of the Lord" – Henri Nouwen's Awe-filled Ruminations on Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

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Introduction

"Christianity is, above all, a way of *seeing*," says Thomist scholar Robert Barron in his book *And Now I See . . . A Theology of Transformation.* He goes on further to claim, in the book's Prelude:

> What unifies figures as diverse as James Joyce, Caravaggio, John Milton, the architect of Chartres, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the later Bod Dylan is a peculiar and distinctive *take* on things, a style, a way, which flows finally from Jesus of Nazareth. Origen remarked that holiness is seeing with the eyes of Christ. Teilhard de Chardin said, with great passion, that his mission as a Christian thinker was to help people *see*. And Thomas Aquinas said that the ultimate goal of the Christian life is a 'beatific vision,' an act of *seeing*.[1]

Heavily implicit in this quote of Barron's is the fact the this type of spiritual seeing—which has to do with a distinct way of perceiving reality—directly correlates with the process of transformation. This, of course, is a familiar, key construct in Ignatian spirituality where the practice of the *daily examen* serves to deepen our capacity to see and discern as a way of life.[2] Suffice it to say that the very essence of genuine transformation is a deep change in our inner consciousness. The all-too-familiar expression "Oh now I see!" is akin to what Dutch practical theologian Jacob Firet refers to as a "hermeneutic moment" where one finally gets reality straight, a moment which hopefully further ushers one into an "agogic moment" or what James Loder labels "the transforming moment" in which an authentic *metanoia* experience occurs.[3]

The fundamental question confronting us is: how does one acquire this kind of spiritual seeing? Allow me to direct you attention for a moment to one of the writings of the Apostle Paul recorded in the New Testament that dramatically portrays this process. In his letter to the Corinthians,

> The apostle Paul contrasts the veiled minds of unbelievers who have been blinded by the god of this age with the unveiled minds of believers who are enabled by the Holy Spirit to *see* the glory of the Lord *in the face of Jesus Christ* (2 Cor 3:14-4:6). As they do so, Paul says, they are "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). The *seeing*, clearly, is of a spiritual sort and takes place in what today we would call our imaginations.[4]

In other words, imagination which acts as "our main receptor to the spiritual world" plays a crucial role in our ability to see or perceive things.[5] In the passage I just read, the word "beholding" (*katoptrizo*) literally means "to look at a reflection" (as in a mirror). So then, where does this reflection occur? It almost goes without saying that it takes place in the mind.[6] Thus we can conclude that imagination is about seeing with our mind.

One fascinating truth is, we do become what we see. Our kind of seeing determines what we become. Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

> We are as we come to see and as that seeing becomes enduring in our intentionality. We do not come to see, however, just by looking but by training our vision through the metaphors and symbols that constitute our central convictions. How we come to see therefore is a function of how we come to be since our seeing necessarily is determined by how our basic images are embodied by the self—i.e., in our character.[7]

In the words of Quaker educator Parker Palmer, "our seeing shapes our being."[8] And if I may hasten to add, the reverse also holds true: our being determines *how* we see. Richard Rohr insists: "We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are."[9] In

reality there is not only a reciprocal dynamic at play here but also a cyclical one. John O'Donohue, in his book *Divine Beauty* states, "We live between the act of awakening and the act of surrender."[10] Moreover, he argues that both the act of awakening and surrender are shaped by seeing because *how* we see determines *what* we see, and what we see shapes our soul. Little wonder why seeing is so foundational to the spiritual journey.[11]

If we're honest enough to admit it, I would hazard to guess that most of us are visually challenged. We all can learn and cultivate how to see better. In a way, "Our spiritual seeing is conditioned by our physical seeing." And "If we go through life oblivious to the things that our physical eyes invite us to notice, it is almost impossible for us to be truly attentive to spiritual realities."[12]

This short presentation serves as an invitation for us to deepen our capacity to see—to view the familiar with a new set of eyes—in the hope that doing so will enliven us to see in the visible those things that are invisible, leaving us with a lingering sense of wonderment. For our purposes, I have chosen to utilize Henri Nouwen's awe-filled ruminations of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* painting via a process I would refer to as *Visio Divina* (Sacred or Divine Seeing). It constitutes a visual meditative technique that simultaneously engages our imagination and our senses more intentionally. Through such a spiritual practice Nouwen exemplified for us, I hope to highlight the tensional realities involved in coming face to face with God's character of love in all its glory and sacredness, the kind that can only lead to a profound, interior change in us.

Visio Divina

Henri Nouwen is widely recognized as one of 20th century's prolific spiritual writers, next only in popularity to the famed, contemplative monk, Thomas Merton. But no other writing of Nouwen's has captured countless people's attention than *The Return of the Prodigal Son*—a book which highlights his profoundly mature reflection on Rembrandt's hugely popular painting depicting the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son in the Bible. Needless to say, his visual foray into the painting of Rembrandt has proven to be a unique meditative process unmatched in its vividness, an endeavor only the intensity of a person like Nouwen could pull off.

Henri Nouwen may strike many as a natural "seer" – one graced with an exceptional ability to see. Possessing the vision of a true contemplative, Nouwen indeed could easily navigate his way from opaqueness to transparency and see reality beneath, underneath, above, and beyond the surface of things. Yet he himself insists that seeing is a choice that we can cultivate with great intentionality on our part. Nouwen submits:

> We are forever seeing. We see clearly or vaguely, but we always find something to see. But what do we really choose to see? We do have a choice. Just as we are responsible for what we eat, so we are responsible for what we see. It is easy to become a victim of the vast array of visual stimuli surrounding us. A spiritual life . . . requires us to take conscious steps to safeguard that inner space where we can keep our eyes fixed on the beauty of the Lord.[13]

Thomas á Kempis long ago prayed a prayer that we all would do well to echo:

> Grant us, O Lord, to know that which is worth knowing, to praise that which pleases you most, to esteem that highly which to you is precious. Give us the right judgment to discern between things visible and things spiritual, and, above all, to seek after the good pleasure of your will. Amen.[14]

The dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, John Drury, notes that viewing works of art (such as that of Rembrandt's) "entails a contemplative waiting upon them which puts us alongside those who painted them so devoutly by putting us in the realm of prayer, with its passive expectancy, its active openness." [15] Henri Nouwen experienced precisely what Drury describes here. Rembrandt, the painter became to him "a faithful companion and guide." In fact, he confessed: "It seemed as though my fellow Dutchman had been given to me as a special companion."[16] Drury adds that "worship and looking at pictures require the same kind of attention—a mixture of curiosity with a relaxed readiness to let things suggest themselves in their own good time."[17] As Juliet Benner, a visual artist and art docent clarifies:

> Christian art provides a way of opening ourselves in our depths and totality to an encounter with God. By learning how to engage biblical stories with the totality of our being, the Word gains access to the deep places within us that cannot be reached by words or reason alone. It opens us to the mystery of that which cannot be reduced to thoughts or beliefs. It helps us love God with all of our heart, all of our mind, all of our soul and all of our strength.[18]

Though the object of his extended meditation is a contemporary painting, Henri Nouwen delved into the process with the same affectual tenderness and contemplative awareness as he would any other Byzantine icon. Evidently, Nouwen had long engaged in the spiritual practice of icon meditation and no doubt profited much from such regular exercise. He was convinced that icons "are created for the sole purpose of offering access, through the gate of the visible, to the mystery of the invisible." Moreover, they "are painted to lead us into the room of prayer and bring us close to the heart of God," even offering us "a glimpse of heaven."[19]

With that kind of rich, background conviction propelling him, Henri Nouwen undoubtedly accessed the painting of Rembrandt with such spiritually keen eyes, so to speak. He saw the artwork in the same penetrating way that he read the biblical text of the narrative story, perhaps keeping in mind the reality that "God-based holy images seek to express the same gospel message that Scripture communicates by words." Thus, in this case, "Image and Word help illuminate each other."[20] Such is the integrated type of *Visio Divina* I am demonstrating here.

According to Tilden Edwards, there are at least three ways of seeing, which he labels as *innocent*, *split*, and *participative*.[21] For instance, when we open our eyes to look, there is an instant before we separate from what we see in order to interpret it with our minds. We are just present *in* what we see, with an open innocence. But the innocent flash fades as our minds step outside the unity in order to see through the mind's interpretive power. As this happens a hard object is created, split off from a subject (the interpreting mind). Self-consciousness rises with this split. Edwards calls our attention to the third brand of seeing which, he qualifies, marks the beginning of contemplative awareness. Accordingly, "It involves a way of remaining innocently present with our eyes, adding to the pure innocent way of seeing an intentional quality of energetic awareness. In this awareness we can desire to live directly out of God's vibrant presence. Such participative seeing qualifies our understanding of analytical sight. The latter takes place within a still coinherent reality; its outsidedness is relative to this reality. This being so, it is possible to see analytically without finally separating from either the situation or God." This seems to characterize Henri Nouwen's participative version of *Visio Divina*.

Henri Nouwen's Awe-filled Ruminations

Evidently, Nouwen did not merely view Rembrandt's painting for a protracted period of time. Once transfixed with the magic and enchantment of it all, Nouwen beheld nothing but the beauty of the Lord, embodied in the tangible expression of God's limitless love which Nouwen readily appropriated for himself. It could be said that he embarked on a mystical journey of being enraptured by the unconditional love of God that transformed his inner consciousness forever because of such awe-filled encounter with LOVE itself.

Led into mystery by Mystery, Nouwen was able to unpack for us the ramifications of what such transcendent encounter may mean for our continuing conversion and renewal even as we progressively experience our own version of homecoming to our true self—just like his own experience and that of the prodigal himself in the biblical story. Allow me to give you a glimpse of some of his ruminations (in his very own words):

> *When I saw the Rembrandt painting with the returning son being embraced by his father, I was totally overwhelmed and I said, "That's where I want to be." I began to think of myself as the runaway son wanting to return home. But then . . . the older son started to speak to me. I'm the oldest son myself and I recognized a lot of resentment in me, a lot of not fully enjoying where I was in my life. I woke up to the truth that both those young people lived in me.*
>
> *[I also realized that] it's time for [me] to become the father! That's who [I'm called] to be.*
>
> *Look at the father figure in the painting. This person has the hand of a mother and the hand of a father, the male hand and the female hand touching a beloved child. Look at the figure of a father who is like a mother bird with a big cloak to safely enwrap her young close to her body. Look at the one who wants to welcome the child home without asking any questions. The father doesn't even want to hear the story of the younger son. The father doesn't even want to hear the story of the*

> *elder child. He simply wants them "home," around the same table with him, growing up to become like him.*
>
> *In a moment I suddenly realized that my final vocation is not only to return home but also to welcome people home by saying, "I'm so glad you are here! I'm so glad you're here! Come now. Bring out the beautiful cloak, bring the precious ring, find the best sandals. Let's celebrate because you've finally come home."*[22]

The Vision of Homecoming

Rembrandt's painting, as Henri Nouwen came to see it, has become his personal painting, "the painting that contained not only the heart of the story that God wants to tell [him], but also the heart of the story that [he] wants to tell God and God's people. All of the Gospel is there. All of [his] life is there. All of the lives of [his] friends is there. The painting has become a mysterious window through which [he] can step into the Kingdom of God.[23] It was, for Nouwen, a true vision of homecoming—highlighting the home of God within him: the fact that God dwells in his innermost being. His invitation was "to make [his] home where God has made his."[24] [Nouwen's] intense response to the father's embrace of his son told [him] that [he] was desperately searching for that inner place where [he] too could be held as safely as the young man in the painting.[25] Nouwen concluded:

> I have a new vocation now. It is the vocation to speak and write from [a new] place back into the many places of my own and other people's restless lives. I have to kneel before the Father, put my ear against his chest and listen, without interruption, to the heartbeat of God. Then and only then, can I say carefully and very gently what I hear. I know now that I have to speak from eternity to time, from the lasting joy into the passing realities of our short existence in this world, from the house of love into the houses of fear, from God's abode into the dwellings of human beings. I am well aware of the enormity of this vocation. Still, I am confident that it is the only way for me. One could call it the "prophetic" vision: looking at people and this world through the eyes of God.[26]

Conclusion

For Henri Nouwen, the whole visual experience proved to be all about this thing called amazing LOVE—which involves "the challenge to love as the father and be loved as the son"—reckoned by many as "the ultimate revelation of the parable."[27] Indeed the prodigal son story is heart-warming portrayal of how God patiently waits to be in communion with us. Even if we leave home for a while, Love waits for our return.[28] Such love, when truly internalized, can only be genuinely transformative.

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[1] Robert Barron, *And Now I See . . . A Theology of Transformation* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 1.

[2] Cf. David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 89.

[3] See Ray S. Anderson, *Spiritual Caregiving as Secular Sacrament: A Practical Theology for Professional Caregivers* (New York, NY: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd, 2003), 142-143; 82-83. Cf. Ray S. Anderson, *Christian s Who Counsel: The Vocation of Wholistic Therapy* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Seminary Press, 1990), 66-67.

[4] Gregory A. Boyd, *Seeing is Believing: Experiencing Jesus through Imaginative Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 16.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 87.

[7] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1981), 2.

[8] Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: NY, HarperOne, 1993), xxiii.

[9] Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2009), 82.

[10] John O'Donohue, *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (London: Transworld, 2003), 1.

[11] Juliet Benner, *Contemplative Vision: A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 12.

[12] Ibid., 13.

[13] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1987), 12.

[14] Quoted from a handout written by Paul Kiler (Art as Servant Ministries).

[15] John Drury, *Painting the Word* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), xii.

[16] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York, NY: Image Books, 1994), 5.

[17] Drury, *Painting the Word*, xiv.

[18] Benner, *Contemplative Vision*, 16.

[19] Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, 14.

[20] Quoted from a handout written by Paul Kiler (Art as Servant Ministries).

[21] Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987, 1995), 44.

[22] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Home Tonight: Further Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2009), 130-131.

[23] Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal*, 15.

[24] Ibid., 16.

[25] Ibid., 17.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., back cover blurb.

[28] Nouwen, *Home Tonight*, 120.