

Beauty and the Power to Love

by: *Ronald L. Dart*

Sometimes important ideas can come from unexpected places. I came across an article in the journal, First Things, by an architect, Catesby Leigh. Leigh is a Roman Catholic. He'd been provoked by an article on church architecture by another architect and I have no idea what would have prompted me of all people to read an article on church architecture. But, having picked it up and read the first paragraph, I couldn't put it down. The author wrote very well. He pulled no punches and he hit on something that has been nagging at my mind for quite a long time. He got me in the first paragraph. He said, "It's no secret that the state of religious architecture in America is bad—really bad. The American idea of inevitable progress runs into a brick wall when we compare the quality of our architectural output a century ago with the stuff we are building now." Nothing high flown about his rhetoric. He just calls it bad, really bad, and he speaks of the stuff we're building now. He set out to discuss the problem, and I'll come back to his argument, but first think about this idea.

Nearly every form of art, music, and beauty has become seriously degraded in the past 100 years. To me, his complaint about architecture was only one facet of a massive societal change that has been going on for a long time and, particularly, has accelerated in the past 50 years. There's been a terrible fading of beauty. Something has happened; something has changed. Something has gone out of our lives and, frankly, I'm worried that we will never get it back. I think we have sacrificed love on the altar of modernism. Having lost the power to love, men have lost the power to create beauty, for beauty arises from love. I heard someone say recently that the creation of the universe was an act of love. I'll never forget a phrase out of Rollo May's book, *Love and Will*. He said, "When men lose the power to love, they substitute power over." And in this last 50 years women have gone from being objects of love to sex objects. Women have participated in the terrible deed and there's no beauty in it; there is only lust. It's reflected in the way young women dress. Someone dubbed it "slut wear." Beauty is not the object. Sex is the object. There's a terrible irony that arose from the women's movement. Women were worried about becoming sex objects and didn't want to be looked at that way. But somehow they've sacrificed beauty and love, and there's nothing left but sex.

It seems to me that there are two sources of beauty. One is the Creator and the other is the lover. I was reading a book called *Lone Star*, by T. R. Ferenbach, and he was talking about West Texas back in the early days. West Texas, for the settler, the farmer, the cattleman, the first people going out there, was a hard country. They did not see the beauty in West Texas that we might see as we drive through today in our SUVs. To the pioneers, it was just hard country, nothing pretty about it. Now that we can tour the country in relative comfort (even when backpacking, we can get back to our Jeep), we can now see how beautiful hard country can be. Beauty, in that way, is in the eye of the beholder. It's in the one who loves it. Someone who has the time, the capacity, the feeling for it, can look at this rugged, rough, hard country and say how beautiful it is. You may see an old woman walking along the street with a cane. To you she's just a faded flower, an old crone. But to the man who loves her, she is still the very exemplar of beauty. And that's what I mean about the beauty that is created by the Creator and the beauty that is created in the eye of the lover.

The Song of Solomon is a marvelous love poem, but many have wondered why it's in the Bible at all. It doesn't seem to speak of God. It's two people, in love, very excited about one another, very obsessed with one another's bodies. It speaks of human love. I think the Song of Solomon is there because human love is of a piece with the love of God. A man who can no longer love a good woman will probably find it very difficult, maybe impossible, to love God because of something that has gone wrong inside of him. In the Song of Solomon we have two lovers who are absolutely besotted with one another and everything around them becomes beautiful. Take this short verse from the first chapter of the Song of Songs: "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes. Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir." They could make love in the grass, they could make love under a tent, but they've created a house with aromatic woods and things that are beautiful all around them. Every sense is filled with beauty for lovers.

Have you noticed how the expression "to make love" has all but disappeared from the lexicon. Now people say, "We were having sex," not "We were making love." Having sex. Songs used to speak of making love and the music that grew out of that era and that sentiment was often very beautiful. Now songs are about having sex. They have rhythm and very little else. There's not much that can be called beauty in modern music. The reason for this should be obvious if you think about it. Love and beauty are inexorably bound together. Rollo May was right: "When men lose the power to love, they substitute power over." In other words, they become authoritarian. It's what lies at the root of wife abuse and child abuse. It has always been a problem for some men and some women that, in losing the power to love—when the love goes out of their lives—they abuse one another and, worst of all, they abuse the children. But now it's become the pattern of an entire society. Led by universities, followed by the schools, love is no longer the thing. Sex has been put in place of

love and what used to be love has become a sequence of power plays on both sides. As a result, utility has been exalted over beauty.

Partly, this is what Catesby Leigh was moaning about. I used to marvel while driving through Europe at the incredible cathedrals I saw there. I wondered at the cost and the labor that went into them. It cost far more in human terms to build those churches then, than it would today with the machinery we have. We can just throw them up. Assuming, of course, that anyone today would care to build anything like that. But Catesby Leigh cited an example that made me stop and think. Speaking of an earlier time in American history, of the immigrants that came from Europe and various places and settled, he spoke of Chicago's Polish immigrants toiling away in the stockyards and steel mills, who dug into their meager savings to build fine baroque churches modeled on Polish prototypes from the 17th and 18th centuries. Later he said, "The magnificence is what matters, not its supposed social origin." I guess I had thought that it was the mandarins of an earlier century who mandated these churches, but it was the Polish immigrants—the little people—who dug deep in their pockets, and it was they who financed these great churches. Why would they do a thing like that? I may be wrong, but I think it was from love of God. If Bach could labor over a magnificent piece of music for the glory of God ("The Saint Matthew Passion" comes to mind), why can't an architect design a magnificent church for the love of God? And why can't ordinary laboring people build it for the love of God?

As I was working my way through this idea, the 27th Psalm came to mind. The psalmist says, "One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple." To behold the beauty of the Lord. Solomon's temple was a gorgeous edifice. It probably would not have been terribly impressive by modern standards, but there was gold everywhere, the symmetry was there—it was a well-constructed, beautiful building. The psalmist entered and, in looking at the temple and the beauty of the temple, he looked beyond it to the beauty of the Lord himself. One thing I have desired of the Lord is that I would dwell in the house of the Lord forever, to behold the beauty of the Lord himself, and to inquire in his temple— to be able to get answers to all those questions that bedevil us in this life; to be able to get the answers about the origin of the universe: the extent of it, what's actually going on, and how stars are made and how they die; to get a complete set of facts and to go beyond to the philosophy and to be able to understand the love of God that led to the creation of the universe as we look out and see it. Imagine all the days of eternity to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire of him. Now I don't know what people to whom beauty is not important would make of this. For some people, what is important to them is what works and there is a name for it: it's called utilitarianism. But to behold the beauty of the Lord, to be able to inquire of him, that's a whole different thing.

The author Victor Frankl gave me a new and valuable insight on this in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. I recommend the book very highly. Victor Frankl was a German psychiatrist; he was Jewish. He was taken, like so many other Jews, to a concentrations camp, and he often had to get up in the dark of the morning, in cold, cold weather and march out with the other prisoners to dig ditches, or do whatever manual labor they assigned him to do. One cold morning when they were walking, his partner came alongside him, hid his mouth behind his upturned collar, and whispered suddenly, "If our wives could see us now. I do hope they're better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us." Victor Frankl said, "That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. As we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting one another time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew. Each of us was thinking about his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds, but my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, I saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun that was beginning to rise."

Isn't it fascinating how a man in that kind of extreme circumstance would be held up by his love for his wife and her love for him? He went on to say, "A thought transfixed me. For the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is said in the song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which men can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart. The salvation of man is through love and in love." I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world, still may know bliss be it only for a brief moment in the contemplation of his beloved. Think about it. "The ultimate and highest goal," he said, "to which men can aspire is to love and to be loved." And somehow Victor Frankl made a connection between the love that he had with his wife, a transcendent love between the two of them, and the love of God.

He went on to say, "For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words 'The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.'" It's a blessing to mankind that this great man survived to tell his story. It's the survivors of the concentration camps who have told their stories and helped us to understand both the depths of the evil of man, and also, strangely, for the power of love to help a man endure. He said, "As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and of nature as never before. Under their influence, sometimes he even forgot his own frightful circumstances. If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to the Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains, there's so much glowing in the sunset through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never had believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty. Despite that

factor, maybe even because of it, we were carried away by nature's beauty which we had missed for so long. One evening while we were resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside we saw sinister clouds blowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colors from steel blue to blood red. The desolate gray mud huts provided a sharp contrast while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, 'How beautiful the world could be.'" But the years in the concentration camps took their toll. And I don't know if any of them realized the extent of how much a toll it had taken until they were set free.

All the way through reading this book about his experiences, *Man's Search for Meaning*, I was looking forward to the moment when they were set free from that camp. Only later did the irony dawn me that I knew the end of the story and, so, could look forward to the end, but Frankl had no idea of what the end of the story would be. For me the liberation of the prisoners was a moment of tears as I read through his book. He said on the day they were finally released from the concentration camp, when the white flag was put up, "With tired steps we prisoners dragged ourselves to the camp gates, timidly we looked around and glanced at each other questioningly, then we ventured a few steps out of the camp. This time no orders were shouted at us, there was no need to duck quickly to avoid a blow or a kick. Oh no, this time the guards offered us cigarettes. We hardly recognized them at first. They had hurriedly changed into civilian clothes. We walked slowly along the road leading from the camp. Soon our legs hurt and threatened to buckle, but we limped on. We wanted to see the camp's surroundings for the first time with the eyes of free men. 'Freedom,' we repeated to ourselves, and yet we couldn't grasp it. We had said this word so often during all the years we dreamed about it, it had lost its meaning. Its reality did not penetrate into our consciences, we could not grasp the fact that freedom was ours. We came to meadows full of flowers. We saw and realized that they were there, but we had no feelings about them. The first spark of joy came when we saw a rooster with a tail of multi-colored feathers, but it was only a spark. We did not yet belong to this world. In the evening, when all of us met again in our hut, one said secretly to another, 'Tell me, were you pleased today?' and the other replied, feeling ashamed because he didn't know we all felt the same way 'Truthfully, no.' We had literally lost the ability to feel pleased and had to re-learn it slowly."

I have an idea they had lost the ability to feel—emotionally, that is. They felt the pain of a rifle butt on their head, but as far as emotional feelings, they'd lost it. And this is where another question arises, an important question. When a man has lost the power to love, to see beauty, to create beauty, how does he get it back? Victor Frankl described what happened to him, "One day a few days after the liberation, I walked through the country, past flowering meadows for miles and miles, toward the market town near the camp. Larks rose to the sky, I

could hear their joyous song. There was no one to be seen for miles around. There was nothing but the wide earth, and the sky, and the larks jubilation and the freedom of space. I stopped and looked around and up to the sky and then I went down on my knees. At that moment there was very little I knew of myself or of the world. I had but one sentence in mind, always the same, 'I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and he answered me in the freedom of space.' How long I knelt there and repeated this sentence, memory can no longer recall, but I know that on that day, in that hour, my new life started. Step for step, I progressed until I again became the human being." For Frankl there seems to be two sources for the restoration of the power to love. They were beauty and freedom. Probably in reverse order: Freedom and beauty.

Thomas Kramer suggested another way of restoration. It was in his Doctrine of Repentance. David Virtue wrote about that particular doctrine. Kramer's most striking characteristic was consistently to forgive his enemies. Why? Because to Kramer, it was the highest form of evangelism. The logic is breathtaking, but simple. Christ commands us to love our enemies so we can be sons of our heavenly Father. If divine love is to love one's enemies, then that must be the same kind of love by which God saves sinners. Of course, that in fact, is what the Apostle Paul himself wrote in Romans 5:10: ". . . when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. . ." God saved us while we were enemies. Not when we deserved it, but when we didn't. So now we have three elements before us. To restore a lost power to love we need: freedom, beauty, repentance.

There's a marvelous passage in Isaiah 61:1-3 that Jesus used in one of his very first sermons. He said, "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified." I'm reasonably sure that none of this will take place very rapidly, but we've got to get ourselves free from the past and free from our own sins, our own mistakes. And we do that by falling to our knees before God, in repentance, and by turning our lives over to him. This is one of the things that people try to tell us when they talk about how they were saved from drug addiction, alcoholism, and other types of torn up lives by the simple act of accepting Jesus Christ as personal savior.

Later the prophet said, "For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: [he, meaning Jesus] he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall

see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him." Think about that. It isn't the beauty created; it is the beauty we see in One who will forgive.

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