

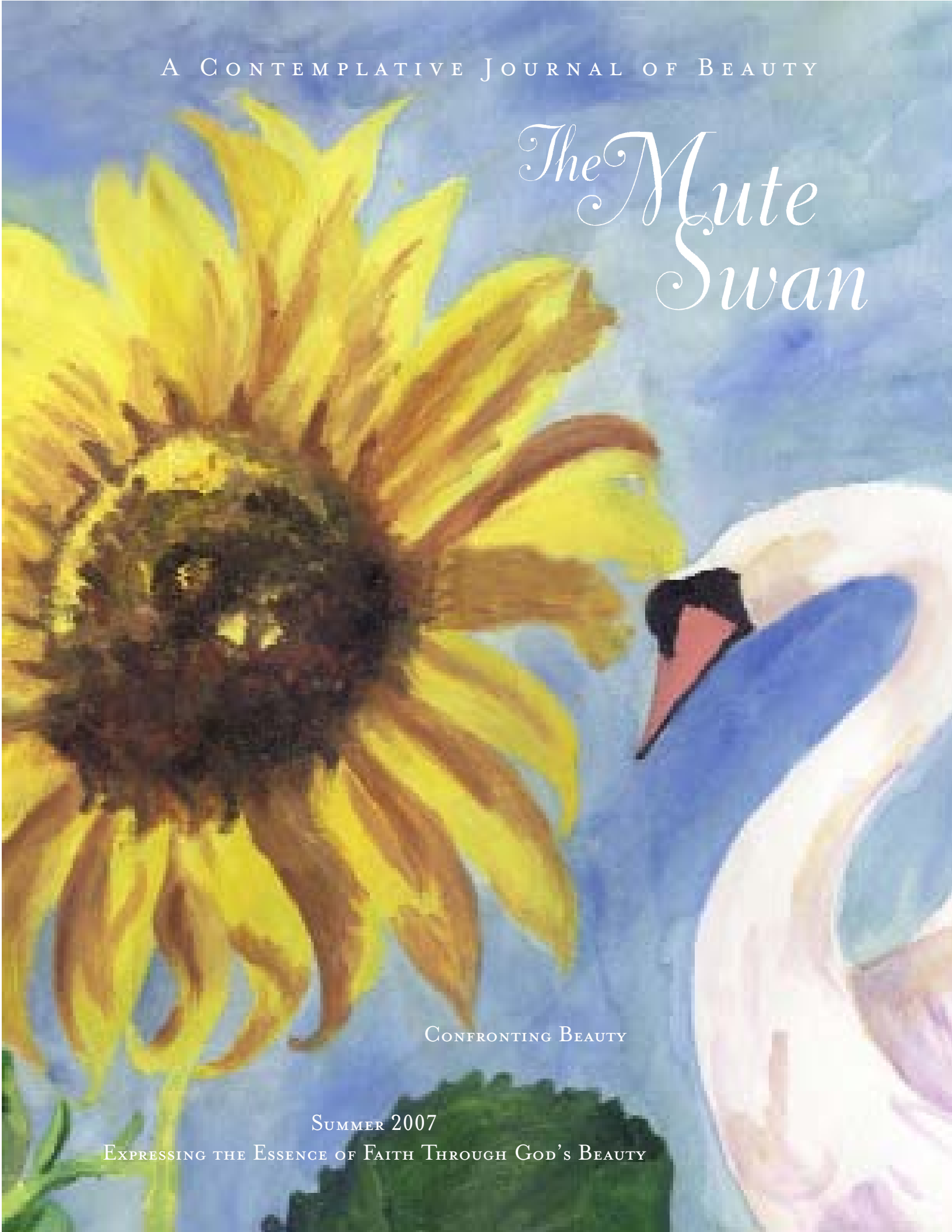
A CONTEMPLATIVE JOURNAL OF BEAUTY

*The Mute  
Swan*

CONFRONTING BEAUTY

SUMMER 2007

EXPRESSING THE ESSENCE OF FAITH THROUGH GOD'S BEAUTY



# The Mute Swan

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*This summer issue is dedicated to my brother, Lawrence Schweitzer, for his ongoing support and encouragement of this ministry and for his insights, advice, moral support and humor which have been a big part of my life and this ministry.*



## Dear Readers

*I am thrilled to present this issue, 'Confronting Beauty'. The topic is seeing God's beauty in the handicapped and disabled, but really that is each of us—some of our disabilities are just more readily visible than others. Several years ago I was writing a theology paper for one of my courses and came across a great academic article by Mark Bredin. His email address was at the end of the article and I decided to write him. To my surprise he responded, graciously and with encouragement of my studies. I eventually sent him some of the Mute Swan journals—finding out that Mark and his family lived in England and he worked with the disabled. We have periodically corresponded and he emailed me several months ago to let me know he was writing a book, 'Confronting Beauty'. He included an excerpt from his book for this issue of our publication. It is a wonderful article with profound insights on the beauty of the disabled.*

*About this same time I received a letter from Joanne Bernardo who went back to college as her children also left for college. We met for coffee, and she enthusiastically offered to write for our summer issue. She interviewed the widow of a couple who had lived an amazing marriage despite the husband's paralysis from a stroke. Joanne's article, "Surrender, Trust, and Love" is an insightful and beautiful article well worth the read. Her portrayal of their marriage is gentle, intimate and courageous and bold at the same time. It gives each of us a different paradigm to see the beauty in marriage and the limitations we each prevail against and struggle with, in ourselves and in our spouses. The Beers' marriage was a testimony of God's love illuminating the beauty in the midst of our limitations. Joanne also reviewed some great books for our 'Recommended Reading' column and contributed many of the 'Cygnet's'.*

*I hope each of you will take the time during these summer months to read this inspiring issue. Print it out, pass it along. I know you will be blessed by the writings of both Mark and Joanne.*

*Debra & Roger*



WHITE FEATHER  
A REFLECTION ON BEAUTY

Apache Seasons  
Lessons on Life

There was an Indian Chief who had four sons. He wanted his sons to learn not to judge things too quickly. So he sent them each on a quest, in turn, to go and look at a pear tree that was a great distance away. The first son went in the winter, the second in the spring, the third in summer, and the youngest son in the fall. When they had all gone and come back, he called them together to describe what they had seen.

The first son said that the tree was ugly, bent, and twisted. The second son said, "No," it was covered with green buds and full of promise. The third son disagreed; he said it was laden with blossoms that smelled so sweet and looked so beautiful, it was the most graceful thing he had ever seen. The last son disagreed with all of them; he said it was ripe and drooping with fruit, full of life and fulfillment.

The man then explained to his sons that they were all right, because they had each seen but only one season in the tree's life. He told them that you cannot judge a tree, or a person, by only one season, and that the essence of who they are and the pleasure, joy, and love that come from that life can only be measured at the end, when all the seasons are up. If you give up when it's winter, you will miss the promise of your spring, the beauty of your summer, fulfillment of your fall.

The moral is this: Don't let the pain of one season destroy the joy of all the rest. Don't judge life by one difficult season. Persevere through the difficult patches and better times are sure to come sometime. Live simply. Love generously. Care deeply. Speak kindly. Leave the rest to God. Happiness keeps you sweet, trials keep you strong, sorrows keep you human, failures keep you humble, success keeps you growing, but only God keeps you going

# Confronting Beauty: Encountering Divine Grace

MARK BREDIN  
CAMBRIDGE, UK

When people say: ‘there but for the grace of God go I’, while looking into the faces of the sick and disabled, a faulty spirituality and misunderstanding of ‘grace’ and ‘beauty’ is revealed. On the contrary, the faces of sick, disabled and disfigured people reflects the beauty of divine grace. We fail to see it because of our false notions of beauty in modern culture. The cause of this failure is the ‘drug like’ enervating nature of the beauty sold by the glossy magazines and media driven by the society we live in. We are dead to divine grace when we fail to encounter people with profound learning disabilities.

Divine grace invites us to look at the world through God’s loving and suffering eyes. God, through people with profound learning disabilities, unmask the deception of our able bodied/minded culture. It is important that we recognize that the world in which we live and work is held in place by the images, ideas, and emotional responses of an able-bodied/minded society. Divine grace uncovers the lie that striving and competing for what others have is the foundation of our lives and that is not what God intended for us.

Jesus uncovers what people do not see. God’s servant was not the muscle bound self-sufficient hunk of Hollywood action movies. We might not be far wrong if we considered Jesus as a person with Down’s Syndrome. Remember, Jesus was seen as one who had ‘gone out of his mind’ (Mark 3.21). In the face, therefore, of the person with profound learning disabilities we are given the opportunity to see God, for he or she offers us a chance of recognizing the character of our neediness.

People with profound learning disabilities leads us to experience fear and guilt that we had not previously experienced, and come to accept who we are and what are the true blocks to our relationship with

God and others.<sup>1</sup> I do not believe we really have understood the extent to which we cover up our wounded hearts and mask our vulnerability behind the barriers of independence. We hide behind books, television, or dogs and cats! We must awaken to the idea that living with vulnerability does not bring destruction but life.

Therefore, if we know God loves and forgives us, it follows we must learn to love ourselves because if we are worth something to God, then we are valuable. Surely if we don’t love ourselves, we cannot love and care for others. The truly healthy person values humanity with all its weaknesses. Many of us have been imbued with competition from our earliest years seeking to win and gain popularity. Such a way of life does not lead to any sense of fellowship, compassion or community or happiness, but to a constant fear of someone beating them. We need to value others on a personal level if we are to encounter the beauty of divine grace.

We cannot possibly know what it is like to be a person with profound learning disabilities. All we know is how we imagine we would feel if we were such a person. The suffering of someone with profound learning disabilities is often caused by the values and skills we place on them. For them living in a society based on achievement and production, it is easy for a carer to impose such values on them. So what is the suffering that we are called to remove? Our human mission is to be un-reconciled with the present world and that mission must mean being a constant disturbance in human society. We must be careful in recognizing our own limitations regarding what suffering is. Through caring for people with learning disabilities we can bring them more suffering. In the light of being with people with profound learning disabilities, how do we remove suffering and what is suffering? We need to learn to be with people at a personal level being together in a mutual way and not transferring on to them our own fears. Learning to see through the other our own

suffering and fears and the suffering we cause the other is important. A good carer will empower the person they are assisting.

In 1997 soon after being in a coma with a head injury, I remember sitting in a café with my wife. Sat next to us was a couple around our age. The wife was assisting her partner who had had a similar injury to me with his food. But he was left unable to function as he had and totally dependent on others for his care. I remember the fear and wanting to get away from that couple. As a result of this I became more aware of how vulnerable we all are and how we must care for each other the way we would wish to be cared for. In our society we are told that suffering is being unable to function economically. This is what I feared so much in my encounter in the café. I had judged that that couple had less of a life than my wife or me. I was told how lucky I was to have recovered and that it was due to the prayers of many. Yet God is no less present in someone who has been brain damaged than in me or anyone else. God cares and loves all equally however successful, strong, or fit the person is.

Experiencing our weaknesses is the beginning of growth towards self-love. The most effective way, I suggest, is for us to leave our comfort zones. In so doing lies the path God opens to us through his divine grace. In these encounters we discover new ways of listening, telling stories, learning the value of touch and letting go of embarrassment or inhibition. We learn to be together in a way that does not depend on intellectual debate or competitiveness but on being willing to give love and respect to those who we have overlooked until now in our haste to get on with our lives.

I want us to think of the Christian message as revolutionary. I believe that revolution is not a programme of seizure of power. It is a programme of transformation

<sup>1</sup> VANIER COMMUNITY AND GROWTH (PAULIST PRESS, 1989): 86.



of relationship that lies at the heart of Jesus' teaching and death. Yet we live in a society that values power and force. Such a way does not value personal relationship as friendship, but sees it in terms of what we can gain from the other. Therefore, we must see mission in prophetic terms of being open to God's grace and being transformed towards loving and caring for the other what ever cost to ourselves.

We live constantly with the vocabulary and grammar of 'enemy' as if we can tell what is right from wrong. It is truly revolutionary to realize that we are all one and created by the same creator. We are all potentially gifts to each other. But seeing the other as someone to fear prevents the transformation of relationships. The sin of one is the sin of all. All is a gift from God and therefore we must learn from each other. Yet in society forgiveness is not part of our vocabulary. Rather, it encourages us

to construct our edifice on the dogma of the certainty that we are right and anything that disturbs this must be avoided or eliminated. Divine grace is encountered in those who disturb and challenge us. Divine grace reveals our slavery and addiction to consumerism. Our constant hunger for novelty and excitement, beauty and choice, wealth and economic growth are defining factors for us. The gift of God's grace challenges us to confront this. I believe that this is a revolution based on biblical principles. Revolution is a revolution that involves setting aside the consumer values of our capitalistic society and forming communities Vanier writes:

Christians must commit themselves to the new communities of welcome, to live with people who have no family, and to show them that they are loved and can grow to greater freedom and that they, in turn, can love and give to others

All revolutionaries speak of freedom and are driven by their need to establish it. But divine grace leads us to greater freedom than society's ideal of freedom which is that individuals are creators and creation is for their benefit.

What then is this greater freedom that Vanier speaks of? God's gift of grace unveils the myth of freedom and beauty allowing us to see as God sees it. Seeing ourselves and others as a gift means that we must be open to them as vehicles through which God shows us how he sees each of us and the world. As we see through God's eyes, we are called to obedience as true revolutionaries. As we move towards this 'greater freedom', God invites us to see what we have done without illusion and deception. In other words, our freedom is in the hands of others. We are free to the extent that we can trust others to stand over against us and call our own 'achievements' into question.

I want to close these reflections on grace and beauty by meditating on the unthinking ways we use the term 'grace'. I began by pointing out the phrase 'there but for the grace of God go I' strongly hints at a faulty understanding of grace, beauty and God. As I finish, I urge us all that when we are in the presence of people with profound learning disabilities we don't think or say: 'There but for the grace of God go I', but 'Here, by the grace of God, is my saviour'.

**MARK BREDIN WORKS WITH ADULTS WITH VARYING LEVELS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES. HE COMPLETED HIS PHD ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND PUBLISHED IT AS JESUS REVOLUTIONARY OF PEACE (PATERNOSTER, 2003). HE IS A FORMER TEACHING FELLOW IN BIBLICAL LANGUAGES AT ST ANDREWS UNIVERSITY, SCOTLAND. HE HAS PUBLISHED WIDELY IN THE AREA OF BIBLICAL STUDIES. HE IS ALSO FREELANCE WRITER AND LECTURER AND HAS WRITTEN VARIOUS COURSES FOR DISTANCE LEARNING. THIS ARTICLE IS A SHORTENED VERSION OF A WORK THAT WILL APPEAR IN THE GROVE BOOKLETS SERIES ON SPIRITUALITY IN MARCH 2008. HE CAN BE CONTACTED AT [MARKRJ.BREDIN@NTLWORLD.COM](mailto:MARKRJ.BREDIN@NTLWORLD.COM)**

# Confronting Love's Beauty

DEBRA CLASSEN

*"Discover beauty....again"*

Summer is a time for weddings and weddings look to the future. Wedding days are special days filled with hope and romantic notions of love. But what about after the wedding, the part where marriage is lived out in the truth of everyday life? I think every wedding should be full of hopeful and romantic visions, it is what human beings yearn for, it is what we write poetry and love songs about. It is these romantic notions that stir the heart of even the most hardened cynic. Weddings are a time to celebrate and indulge our visions of beauty, romance and love and to look to the future with idealism. Yet we all know the reality of our society's couples whose marriages can't survive on wedding day ideals.

The last three weddings I have attended have each had an "ah-hah" moment, stirring romance and optimism in my heart, my belief that love can overcome anything. Yet as I grow older I also recognize the realities that will confront the beauty of love. I remember a wedding our family attended several years ago where the groom struggled with anxiety and doubts. Putting his doubts aside, he married his young bride. Despite a beautiful wedding, the reality of his doubt never diminished and they were not married for long. At another wedding, there was little doubt for bride or groom about their love. The difficult reality of the wedding was the divorce of both sets of parents, which cast a shadow on the sunlight of their love. This couple has thrived and soon expect their first child. I pray that they will contend with the reality of the times that they too will doubt and remember the beauty of the love and commitment of their wedding day.

Several weeks ago our entire family awoke on a beautiful June day to attend the wedding of a couple clearly in love. As the guests arrived, making their way to the outdoor canopy dripping with wisteria, black storm clouds appeared on the horizon. Bridesmaids in pale mint green dresses held bouquets next to a smiling and patient groom. A black funnel cloud churned across

the view of the lake and the air was dark and heavy. The music began as the sky ripped open, with a torrent of pounding rain. We could hardly hear the minister over the din of rain on the tent. Thunder cracked as vows were exchanged, bride and groom kissed and smiled, wet and happy. Ten minutes after the ceremony the sun broke through and I looked for a rainbow. The weather had been a perfect metaphor of the beauty of romantic love and the reality of life.

Each of those ceremonies made me think about the vows—the vows in which two people courageously commit to the thunder of life's realities when it rains on love's beauty. How do we keep the hope of a rainbow alive? How do we find a way to feel the sun again after a torrential downpour? The radiating beauty of the love first discovered in one another and the truth of life must also wed for a life

together "til death do we part". We want to remember, reflect, revive and renew that love, even when reality is adversity or we have become handicapped by finances (richer or poorer) or health (sickness or health).

I have been married close to three decades now and I know the truth of my handicaps, my husband's, our handicaps. I also know God's grace and mercy in my life and in my marriage, how God reveals His beauty in the middle of a downpour. I don't want to darken any couple's romantic, idealistic images of love, but I do want to tell them that marriage is wonderful and difficult and when you lean into a hard wind of reality, keep your eyes open to see the beauty of God's love in your lives. The truth is we all confront the beauty of love with the truth of our handicaps. We must remember, hope for, and seek a vision of beauty first discovered in one another, even when life's rain pours down on the beauty of our love. As Helen Keller knew, despite her handicaps of being blind and deaf, "The most beautiful things...in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart."



*Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all. I accept all. Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands, I commend my soul. I offer it to you Lord, and so need to give myself, to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence. For you are my Father. Amen.*



## *Surrender, Trust, and Love*

JOANNE BENNARDO

This prayer is known as the “Abandonment Prayer” and was written by Jean Vanier, who together with Father Thomas Philippe began “Faith and Sharing” retreats in 1964. The focus of the annual worldwide retreats is on community. Literally everyone is welcome: disabled, elderly, young, homeless, blind, mentally challenged, healthy, rich or poor. It was during one of these retreats that Jim and Mary Lou Beers were first introduced to the prayer which became their mantra. Mary Lou has recited it aloud every night for over thirty years.

On May 12, 1971, Jim Beers was 29 years old, the father of three little girls—ranging in ages from two to five, a salesman for a steel products firm, and an avid just-for-fun baseball player. He and Mary Lou were expecting their fourth child in July. Jim was a little hopeful for a baby boy.

Mary Lou kissed Jim good-bye before he headed back to Columbus. She thought nothing of the headache he mentioned. But within thirty minutes, his car was pulled off to the side of the road. A driver noticed Jim’s erratic driving and pulled over as well. The Good Samaritan drove Jim to a nearby hospital. Days later it was confirmed—Jim had suffered a massive stroke. He lived as a completely paralyzed, dependent stroke survivor until his recent death.

The stroke left Jim unable to stand, walk, talk, swallow, or eat. His movements

were limited to facial expressions and to his customary thumbs-up signs. However, he sustained a passion to share God’s love and joy with others. He and Mary Lou were inspirational speakers for thirty-four years. Jim’s magnetic personality won many hearts. From elementary and high school audiences to adult groups, his sincerity and trustworthiness were contagious. Jim exemplified God’s message of hope and love.

“Hey man, you are dripping all over the place,” bellowed a very observant little girl sitting in the audience during a presentation. Mary Lou explained, “Mr. Beers can’t help it. He’s had a stroke and can’t control the drool that drips from his mouth.”

The little girl walked up to Jim and simply said, “I was just thinking I could keep him real dry.” And so throughout the next hour, she lovingly did just that; she wiped his lips.

Mary Lou is in awe of the beauty of a child who can “name the problem, own it and do something about it.” Scripture is constantly reminding us to be like little children.

“Jim was present in the moment,” says Mary Lou, “he never regretted the past or worried about the future. I think that’s because there were so many times he came close to never having a tomorrow. He was so grateful for every moment.” Mary Lou confides that she used to ask him if “Trust” was his middle name. Writer Huston Smith defines “disciples [as] able to see, moment by moment...at some level of their being, they sense the presence of the wholeness. As though nothing had been before and

nothing will ever be again, and through the frailty of the moment there shines the light of the eternal.”

In 1979, Jim and Mary Lou received two airline tickets to Lourdes, France as a gift. At first, Mary Lou was reluctant to go and leave her young family. She prayed about the trip during Eucharistic Adoration one evening. She picked up her Bible. She opened it to four corresponding New Testament passages she designated by the hymn numbers hanging on the wall over the piano. She says, “I know it’s hokey, and not at all how one should pray the Bible, but...”

In Matthew 9, Mary Lou read about Jesus’ cure of the paralytic. Jesus heals the man with a withered hand in Mark 3. And in Luke’s opening chapter, Zechariah’s speech is miraculously restored. Finally, in John 2, Mary petitions Jesus to come to the aid of the newly married couple of Cana who ran out of wine.

Mary Lou, like her namesake Mary, “pondered these things in her heart.” The Bible verses described Jim: a paralytic with a withered hand who could not speak. And the Cana reading reminded her of the sacred vows they shared. When she arrived home, she sat in her car and cried. She surrendered. God wanted her to accompany Jim to Lourdes, and His nudge could not have been clearer.

After a very arduous twenty-three hour flight, the Beers finally arrived in Lourdes. Jim had a fever, and one of his wheelchair’s tires had melted from exposure to the heat

of the airplane's engine. In spite of this, Jim and Mary Lou proceeded that evening to the Grotto. They witnessed a candle-lit procession of thousands and thousands of petitioners which brought an "overwhelming sense of peace," Mary Lou says wiping tears from her cheeks. "I washed our faces, and an immediate sensation overcame me," she says. The psoriasis that plagued her face for years was completely gone.

In the morning, the pilgrimage ritual offered full immersion to everyone. The men and women were segregated for the baths. Mary Lou could barely see Jim's stretcher as six men lowered him into the very cold spring water. His body responded with a spasm. Meantime, Mary Lou remembers her own experience as one of the most "wonderful, terrifying experiences of my life. I remember feeling like I was new." Once again standing upright, Mary Lou struggled to see beyond the crowds for Jim's reaction to his immersion. She remembers, "When Jim was lifted out of the water", she says, "I didn't need to hear any words when I saw his eyes." Jim communicated everything with his eyes. Mary Lou knew something had happened, and learned later that a miracle did occur, albeit not a physical cure. Jim realized while immersed that though he could not walk or talk, "it matters only that I love."

"God will never abandon us. He knows every hair on our heads. I know that God." One winter day, Mary Lou pushed Jim's wheelchair out of the backdoor onto the ice-covered ramp. The wheelchair sailed out of her hands, and Jim landed in a pile of snow which totally drenched him. She picked him up, dried him off and thanked God he wasn't seriously injured. Mary Lou uses this story to compare God's love. She says, "God picks us up, comforts us, dries us off, and cries with us." This is the underlying theme of every presentation: God loves everyone unconditionally.

In Mary Lou's brightly lit living room, recent photos of granddaughter Claire adorn the coffee table. In one she shows her with Grandpa's Groucho Marx glasses sliding down her cherubic face.

The Groucho glasses are very significant for the Beers family. When Jim's second leg was amputated, he knew that Mary Lou was devastated. In an effort to save her from the somberness of the drab recovery room, he greeted her wearing Groucho Marx glasses quickly changing everyone's mood. This idea of bringing the potential of beauty out of what appears to be a hopeless situation was

the essence of Jim. Mary Lou has told the story of the Groucho glasses many times.

Mary Lou explains that Jim learned earlier than most of us that we humans are not in control. Vanier writes, "Growth begins when we begin to accept our own weakness." Jim was dependent on others for every human necessity. He realized he had no control—only God. In the freedom of his disability, he embraced his need for God. He was in a sacred space which deemphasizes the body and enabled him to "see with better eyes."

Regina High School is a Catholic all-girls school in a suburb of Cleveland. It is recognized for its Clown Ministry. The club performs many shows utilizing mime and sign language. Jim was a longtime member of Regina's Clown Ministry. This past Lent, those who came to witness and pray the Stations of the Cross "saw with better eyes." As an accomplished facial mime, Jim was able to bring God's love and compassion to thousands who watched him. Lent always promised an especially poignant presentation while Jim in his wheelchair conveyed Christ's love on the cross during His final hours.

Earlier in the year, Jim and Mary Lou had been to a conference at St. Bernadette's Parish in their beat-up old station-wagon. Mary Lou had given out glow-in-the-dark stars at the end of the presentation before she wheeled Jim outside to transfer him into the car. The next day, she received a phone call from a man declaring, "I bought you a new car."

"I don't even know you," said Mary Lou, "I can't accept a car."

"My name is John, but that's not important," said the man. "What is it that I bought you a car. God's love is equitable, not equal. We all do what we can afford to do. You pass out stars, I pass out cars."

Jim wrote, "Instead of selling cutting tools, I'm selling Jesus who cuts through hearts, and my commission is Heaven. This year they gave me a company car!"

Many of us take communication for granted. We have the ability to say all we want, and a lot that we probably shouldn't. To assist Jim in communicating, Mary Lou would recite the alphabet, and he would signal her with a thumbs-up sign when she said the letter he intended. Most simple sentences would take at least ten minutes to spell out every letter of each word. "It was long and tedious," says Mary Lou. "We learned early on into his disability how important communication is. Losing his legs wasn't nearly as hard as losing his speech," she says.

Vanier's mother, Madame Pauline

Vanier, urged Henri Nouwen to write a book dedicated to the Sacred Heart. On her ninetieth birthday, Nouwen presented "Mammy" with *Heart Speaks to Heart*. In it, he communicates the longings of his own heart to Jesus: "In the midst of all the human brokenness and human pain, I see, hear and touch the heart of humanity, your humanity, the humanity of all the people embraced by your love."

On December 27, 2006, Jim was surrounded by his devoted wife and their four loving daughters and son. Kathy describes, "Dad breathed into a new life. We were with him as he took his last breath in this world and his first one in eternity." Her father's death reminds her of her niece's birth earlier that year.

"I miss those eyes, it's hard not seeing him," says Mary Lou. "He had so much life in his eyes. So much hope in his eyes. So much joy in his eyes. So much acceptance in his eyes." Much is written about the extraordinary type of vision that Jim possessed. In Matthew 6:22, it is referred to as "the light of the body." As a zealous reader of Nouwen, Mary Lou is very familiar with the phrase, "seeing with new eyes."

Kathy describes the hours leading up to her Dad's death, "My Mom told Dad to keep looking in her eyes and take them to heaven." For Christians, death is never the end of the story. God's love continues to be revealed through a broken body that could not walk or talk—he could love.

Jim's family named his passing the "Christmas Presence." They recognized that his love would always remain and be present in the hearts of all he touched. As he strove to live God's love in the present moment, love perpetuates. Jim fully lived God's love. Theologian Wendy Wright expresses God's infinite love this way: "God becomes small enough to be enclosed in the crook of a human arm, and does so with the uncomplicated trust of a fragile infant surrendered to its mother's warm embrace."

JOANNE BENNARDO IS A NON-TRADITIONAL COLLEGE STUDENT FOCUSING ON SPIRITUAL WRITING. FOR THE PAST 35 YEARS, SHE HAS SHARED HER HAPPINESS WITH HER HUSBAND, ED. SHE IS THANKFUL FOR THE BEAUTY OF THEIR THREE GROWN SONS, TWO DAUGHTER-IN-LAWS, AND GRANDDAUGHTER, KATIE.

## IN FLIGHT

## Recommended Summer Readings

REVIEWS BY JOANNE BENNARDO

**CROSSING THE DESERT**Robert J. Wicks  
([www.sorinbooks.com](http://www.sorinbooks.com))

We know when something simply isn't right within us—often we know the cause, but frequently we can't quite put our finger on it. That's when spiritual writers can be especially enlightening. Their words have a way to mine the unrest that creates our deepest tensions and struggles. Robert J. Wicks, who many may recall from his book, *Riding the Dragon*, is one such light and comes to his writing with a doctorate in psychology. It shouldn't come as any surprise to learn that he and fellow psychologist Henri J. M. Nouwen were close friends. When Nouwen died on September 21, 1996, Wicks was inspired by his grief to write *Crossing the Desert*.

We all struggle towards the beauty of wholeness: some through physical disability, others through mental disability, and yet others through grief, fear, or an endless list of anomalies. Wicks's loss led him to Nouwen's *Desert Wisdom* which emphasizes "the spirit of discipleship." He explains it this way, "Crossing The Desert is about the journey that all of us are called to take—especially when we feel lost, under great stress, or during times of desolation." Also, utilizing the sayings of fourth century Desert Fathers and Mothers from Thomas Merton's *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Wicks invites his readers to allow our hardships to transform us. Once silenced to consciously listen, we become aware of our humility, and grow to courageously embrace the freedom it brings.

Robert J. Wicks reminds those who suffer not to become bitter over personal setbacks, and warns against the temptation to resist another's support, but rather to "take that step forward when being called by God out of darkness into new light."

**KNOW ME, HOLD ME, SING TO ME**Kathleen Chesto  
([www.avemariapress.com](http://www.avemariapress.com))

We've all had the experience at the end of a good book of not wanting to end the rela-



TEGAN CLASSEN

tionship. I recently felt this when I finished Ms. Chesto's book which had become my prayer partner. As a new grandmother of our little Katie, I was seeking to pray my joy. The author, also a new grandmother of her own Katie, created this book of short reflections which I highly recommend, whether you have children or not.

Ms. Chesto insightfully compares observations of her granddaughter to God's observations of each of us. After all, isn't that what we are all trying to do? We attempt to see with God's eyes of love and goodness rather than our own of prejudice, guilt, and fear. The author uses everyday simple examples like playing, reading, and smiling to glimpse God's pleasure for us. The reader is reminded that "Grandparent God" loves us, watches over us, cheers for us, and waits for us whether we are aware of it or not. Like babies who are not aware of the love that

surrounds them, their lack of awareness does not minimize the loving deeds performed for them. "Grandparent God, do you watch to see if we are watching, delighting in our silent expectation?" Kathleen Chesto affirms how the beauty of God teaches us, through the miracle of birth, to recognize the beauty deep within each of us, miraculously and mysteriously independent of the exterior package which wraps it.

**THE BEST AMERICAN SPIRITUAL WRITING 2005**Edited by Philip Zaleski  
([www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com))

For example, in Christopher Bamford's compelling essay "The Gift of the Call," he speaks of God's invitation to each of us to

relationship. The word he chooses to describe this invitation is beauty. He explains that at first “beauty lies at the edge of consciousness, [until it comes into the] light.”

Likewise after reading Mary Gordon’s essay “Appetite for the Absolute,” I again was encouraged. Her questions lingered with me. She reiterates that through the Incarnation, the Word became Flesh. This flesh is the humanity we share with Christ: the Mystery. In honoring our humanity, she asks, “What do we live for if there is nothing we would die for?”

Another writer, Maria Poggi Johnson is a Catholic professor of Theology who once lived in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. In “Us and Them,” she writes of the experience and recognizes God’s constant love in different rituals. There truly is something for everyone in this collection.

#### WOUNDED PROPHET, A PORTRAIT OF HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

Michael Ford

([www.doubleday.com](http://www.doubleday.com))

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch priest and prolific writer who died in 1996. Whether you are familiar with his writings or not, Michael Ford’s biography lends itself to all spiritual journeyers. He parallels Nouwen’s public priestly, academic, pastoral, missionary, and writing careers with his private joys and struggles. He details the circumstances which inspired each book. Some were compilations of psychology lectures presented at Notre Dame, Yale or Harvard, some were retreat

diaries, others recorded his travels, and still others were prayerful reflections derived from artwork, especially icons, Vincent Van Gogh, and Rembrandt van Rijn.

In the title, Ford emphasizes Nouwen’s woundedness—his oneness with the “wounded heart of Christ.” Nouwen suffered from debilitating periods of loneliness, depression, and despair even though he was an accomplished author and sought after lecturer. Nouwen openly wrote of his vulnerability through which his readers recognized their own struggles. As a “wounded healer, [he could] experience a deep wound becoming a source of beauty.”

In 1986, Nouwen became pastor of L’Arche Daybreak, a residential community for those with severe mental and physical disabilities. He soon discovered a “silent, peaceful presence” within bodies which could not communicate or care for themselves. In the sacredness of caring for others, Nouwen lived the Beatitudes and “taught best those things that he needed to learn most. His message focused on God’s reaching out to embrace the belovedness, uniqueness, and vulnerability of each individual person, hoping for an intimate relationship in return.”

#### CAN YOU DRINK THE CUP?

Henri J. M. Nouwen

([www.avemariapress.com](http://www.avemariapress.com))

Most spectators watching a trapeze act simply enjoy the show. But, Henri Nouwen saw God’s hand never allowing us to fall as

we perform and swing through life. Likewise in *Can You Drink the Cup?*, Nouwen lends a metaphor to Matthew 20. He adds, in his easy style, our daily joys and sorrows to Jesus’ suffering and plan for salvation. Dividing the book into his customary three sections, he examines that to partake, we must hold and lift the cup before we finally drink. Nouwen describes how vital it is to recognize what we drink. Drink represents life to humans, and God asks us to accept our drink—to recognize our lives as gift. Our lives are mixed with joys and sorrows, but it is only in knowing and accepting ourselves, that we can truly be grateful. He cautions, “When we are crushed like grapes, we cannot think of the wine we will become.”

When we lift and toast our drinks—our lives with one another in gratitude to God, we accept our full lives with all their limitations. Nouwen explains that this personal, yet universal communion with God and community avails our lives to be a healing and an offering. Vulnerability frees us to share in the mystery of Eucharist and realize we are blessing. Nouwen offers three disciplines to completely drink our lives so to accept God’s new life of salvation. He suggests silence, word, and action: “When we listen in silence to God’s voice and speak with our friends in trust, we will know what we are called to do and we will do it with a grateful heart.” Henri Nouwen extends God’s invitation, “Drinking the cup of salvation means emptying the cup of sorrow and joy so that God can fill it with pure life.”

Enjoy. This is a book you will savor again and again.



# Cygnets

There was a man there who had a withered hand. They watched him closely to see if he would cure him on the Sabbath so that they might accuse him. He said to the man with the withered hand, "Come up here before us." **Mark 3: 1-3**

Beauty is a sacrament; it is Christ's tender smile coming through the world. **Simone Weil**

The glory and beauty of God is the fully alive human being. **Irenaeus**

Our unveiled faces reflect like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, growing brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect. **St. Paul**

God is beauty itself, beautifying all things. God puts into creatures a kind of sheen, a reflection of God's own luminous ray, which is the fountain of all light. **Thomas Aquinas**

At the deepest level of our being, we already know beauty and resonate sympathetically with it because we are ourselves beautiful. In the depth of our souls we carry an icon of the One who is Beautiful. We have within us the image and likeness of God, the source of all beauty. **Ronald Rolheiser**

We are as much as we see. Faith is sight and knowledge. **Henry David Thoreau**

The eyes indicate the antiquity of the soul. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

That inward eye which is the bliss of solitude. **William Wordsworth**

Her eyes are homes of silent prayer. **Lord Alfred Tennyson**

And there people brought to him a paralytic lying on a stretcher. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Courage, child, your sins are forgiven." **Matthew 9:2**



## OUR MINISTRY

*Expressing the Essence of Faith Through God's Beauty....*

### Web Site

We have changed our web site address to reflect our non-profit status. We are now [www.themuteswan.org](http://www.themuteswan.org) and our email address is: [debra@themuteswan.org](mailto:debra@themuteswan.org)

We have also updated our web site—please take time to look it over.

### New Web Site Items

**Online Journal:** The latest issue of our online journal is now online, you can download the issue—so if you don't receive your email with the attachment of the issue, go online and download the issue. But please let us know when you do not receive the issue, so we can rectify the problem. The issue is free and is a part of our ministry outreach; you can help us by forwarding it on to friends and family or printing it out and sharing it. Have new subscribers email us their name and mailing address!

**Speaking Brochure:** The speaking brochure can be downloaded. It includes past engagements and topics, bio, educational background and how to contact us for a retreat, educational seminar, school, civic or church function.

**Special Gift Items:** New brochure and some new items—all proceeds go to the ministry. We now have gift baskets, baked goods, personalized journals, painted pots and plants.

**Photography and Calligraphy:** We have some new artists in our flock—with beautiful work.

**About the Flock:** It is about our community. We have been very blessed to have some talented and passionate people become a part of our ministry—read their bios and how they find God's beauty in their lives.

**Books:** More books, used and new spiritual books, we have over 300 titles.

### Fall

Late fall we will be sending out our once-a-year mailing to raise funds for the ministry, let you know about our gift items, and update you on ministry events. Please let us know your mailing address and that of a friend who might be interested.