

A CONTEMPLATIVE JOURNAL OF BEAUTY

*The Mute
Swan*



LATE WINTER 2008

EXPRESSING THE ESSENCE OF FAITH THROUGH GOD'S BEAUTY

Dear Readers

Welcome to our winter issue. The winter issue usually comes out during the first week of January, but we decided to do a Valentine's issue for February. My grown children laugh at me because Valentine's Day is absolutely one of my favorite holidays.

The history of Valentine's Day has several versions of its beginnings. Some believe that it originated with a Roman martyr, St. Valentine, who refused to give up his faith and died on February 14th in the year 269 A.D. There are other stories of other martyrs who also died on Feb. 14th. I tend to go with the Roman martyr, because I think in today's culture we need people who are willing to be martyrs for their faith, for their love. Although I like the superficial celebration, the hearts and chocolate—I think it is also a good day to ask ourselves what 'love' means in our lives. Some of the best and most inspiring wisdom I have heard about 'love' comes from a tiny little old lady who never married, lived in poverty, and rarely experienced the consolations of love during her lifetime. Mother Teresa knew how to 'love,' love God, love her fellow man, and how to "do small things with great love."

A special thank you and prayers for Marietta Della Penna, who thankfully has recovered from serious illness, and has blessed us again with her insights about God's beauty in the world. In this issue we have some articles about, and written by, ordinary people who are becoming saints. They are those who are willing to learn the art of love.

Enjoy your issue.

Blessings of love and beauty,




Editor

Debra Classen

Artwork

Debra Classen

Advisor

Roger Classen

Graphic Design

Adriana Romero

Columnist

Father Robert McCreary, OFM. Cap.

Special thanks to

Doris Tomko

Guest Columnists

Louise Heiss

Joanne Bennardo

Marietta Della Penna

The Mute Swan

P.O. Box 23251

Chagrin Falls, Ohio 44023

p. 216.832.4445

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www.themuteswan.org

www.vividswan.com

debra@themuteswan.org

WHITE FEATHER

JEWISH PRAYER OF LOVE

TO DECLARE FAITH

The Shema

*‘Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God,
the Lord is one!
And you shall love the Lord
your God with all you heart
and with all your soul
and with all your might.’*



Contemplative Prayer

O God of Love

LOUISE HEISS

O God of love and amazing grace who, out of love for us, sent your beloved son to reveal your love for us; he who laid down his life that we might be redeemed. One who taught us there is no greater love than to give one's life to save another, He who taught us to pray with Him, "Our Father, who art in Heaven." (Are there any more blessed words than "Our Father"?)

O God, as we enter into the season of lent, hear our prayer that we, too, might know that kind of love, that love beyond understanding, that love for others. O God, teach us to love, teach us to serve and love you by serving others.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we might have understanding and compassion, help us to work for justice for all, to see your face in the face our neighbor.

O God of love we give you our hearts.

Amen

Cygnets

"There are many in the world that are dying for a piece of bread. But there are many more dying for a taste of love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty, it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There is a terrible hunger for love and also a terrible hunger for God."

—MOTHER TERESA

"Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another."

—THOMAS MERTON

"The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart."

—HELEN KELLER

"One dark night
Fired with love's urgent longings
I went out unseen,
My house being now all stilled."

—ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

A Father's Love

FATHER ROBERT MCCREARY,
OFM CAPUCHIN

When I was asked to reflect on the “beauty of love” for this edition of ‘The Mute Swan,’ I did not need to hesitate a moment. One of the most striking experiences of the beauty of love came to me this past summer when I was lecturing in South Africa to Poor Clare Nuns. I was living in a beautiful city of Shelled, the third oldest city of South Africa. We were living, in fact, at the foot of a snow-covered mountain. The city itself seemed like a Bavarian town in the Alps. Surely beautiful, surely crisp, with air made new by the white snow. On Sunday, I left the convent to go into the town in order to celebrate Mass for the small Catholic congregation. After Mass, I had the joy of meeting so many lovely people, some white, some colored, some black; all brothers and sisters in a post apartheid era.

A young woman invited me to dinner at the home of a venerable architect who is a parishioner. She looked after his affairs, and wanted me to be with them for the evening meal. When I entered the lovely house, the warm fireplace cast dancing tones of bright amber on the white walls. This was an image of what was to come. Others were invited that evening. Paul and Felicity, their son James, who was in a wheel chair and seemed to suffer from some kind of paralysis. As dinner unfolded, Paul needed to feed his son, James. James, who is now 49 years old, had run out in front of a car when he was only four years old and suffered many injuries. The injuries left him mute and somewhat paralyzed. Paul fed James, as he needed to, but Paul fed him with such joy and such inclusion throughout the meal. James could not but feel the persistent presence of his father, who without ignoring us, attended so lovingly to his son. From time to time, James would lean over and touch his father's arm in approval and filial affirmation.

Felicity, his mother, explained that since James was four his being mute did not break their communication. She said in a stunning sentence, “James cannot speak, but we can read him.” As the meal moved on, I reflected to Paul the father, that his loving care for his son would be a sure ticket to heaven. (“Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me!” Matt.25). But Paul answered with a spontaneous exclamation, “Oh no, Father, he is not our ticket to heaven. He IS our heaven; he is a form of divine presence for us.” After a few days, I wanted to go and visit Paul and Felicity and James again. What moved me to make the visit was a desire to receive a blessing from Paul, because he is surely one of the most beautiful fathers that I have ever met. I wanted to receive the blessing of his heart, so that I, as a priest, might be a father something like him.

I visited *Bukkenburg: Studio Pottery and Cottage* in Swellendam that morning. Over tea, I learned that David and Felicity are Jews. Their families had come to South Africa in wake of the troubles in Germany and Lithuania. It was such a joy for me, as a priest, to behold the immense beauty in the faces, hearts and hands of David and Felicity for James. There is a text in the Old Testament that says that Gentiles will “take a Jew by the sleeve and say, ‘We want to go with you, since we have learned that God is with you.’” (Zechariah:8:23). I felt the truth of that text in this Jewish family. James, I must add, glowed with a remarkable beauty, too, as he touched his father's arm and was read by his mother. It did not surprise me that David and Felicity were working hard to help Black people in their area with business opportunities. Nor did it surprise me that they are artists. David gave me a piece of pottery for my niece, Triscia, whose much loved Anna Elizabeth has Downs Syndrome. The lovely amber fire dances, because love is the greatest beauty.

Father McCreary was in South Africa last summer and it was there that he experienced the ‘beauty of love.’ He emailed me his reflections on love for this Valentine’s issue.

FATHER ROBERT MCCREARY IS A CAPUCHIN FRANCISCAN AND HAS A DOCTORATE IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY FROM THE GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY IN ROME. HE HAS ALSO DONE POST-DOCTORAL STUDIES AT NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY AND OXFORD UNIVERSITY, ENGLAND. HE IS ADJUNCT PROFESSOR AT ST. MARY’S SEMINARY IN WICKLIFFE, OHIO.



Dad and Relationship

JOANNE BENNARDO

A simple Shaker clock hangs in my son and daughter-in-law's family room. It measures 11 1/2 inches wide by 27 3/8 inches high. Its gold hands glide over Roman numerals on a white enamel face framed with petite forget-me-nots. It marks the minutes, hours, and days of my family's generations. It reminds me of my dad.

Dad liked to build things. An eclectic collection of his handiwork was evident throughout my childhood home. I remember porch chairs framed with sturdy aluminum and the living room mantle which he molded from the existing mahogany of the house. I think of grade school teachers who instructed the class to imagine our dads when they tried to explain God the Father. Wow! Did God have two jobs and make things out of wood, too?

The massive work bench Dad built always held a work in progress. He used many tools, but didn't seem to have a favorite. They all hung like one big happy family from his pegboard. In my mind's eye, when I see my youthful hand reach for a tool that Dad requested, the tools seemed eager to be part of the project. I know I was.

Dad wore his blue suit to Mass on Sundays, but it couldn't camouflage the remnant traces of grease around his cuticles, under his nails, and in the creases of his knuckles. He prayed the rosary during Mass, and grasped the large black beads firmly in his stained hands. His rosary was his prayer tool. In a small share, he returned the beauty and creativity given to him as a precise builder who measured twice, cut once.

When Dad died seven years ago, his building ended. My mother lovingly gave me the Shaker clock—his last unfinished project. As I completed what Dad couldn't, I felt my hands lay where his had been. The time I spent with the clock became a prayer and my way of saying good-bye. But after several weeks, the time came when I couldn't linger with the sandpaper, stain, or polyurethane any longer. The intricate grooves had been brushed clear of dust and the clock glistened with its last coat of beeswax. My part was done.



My prayer and attention to the Shaker clock created much more than a functional clock. I felt a nudge to share its beauty, strength, and significance. Since Dad and I are both first-born children, I decided to present the clock to my oldest son, John. It was his role to assemble the clock's mechanism. Now the clock is an everyday reminder of the relationships crafted within my family's generations. After all, Dad taught me that relationship is the only worthwhile measurement that counts.

Whether one board is aligned to another, a hammer is set to a nail, a daughter grieves for her father, or a simple Shaker clock keeps time for the next generation, all of God's creation is in relationship. Our talents reflect us, as we reflect one another, and ultimately reflect God..

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 DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW, AND GRANDDAUGHTER, KATIE.

Divinity & Love

MARIETTA DELLA PENNA

Divinity and Love are all of a piece. They may exhibit different patterns and forms, but ultimately they're all of a piece for together or as one they orchestrate what is most precious in our lives—God's love. Can we truly know it? We assign descriptives to his love—unconditional, limitless, eternal—but can we really know this love without sustaining the limited perception that God's love is like our own only much more? We are inundated with ideas, diverse backgrounds, education and cultural expectations that we are forced to suppress what we once knew in childhood, what was once “written on the fleshly tablets of our hearts.”

As we mature and read Scripture, the lives of saints and mystics, even poetry that impassions our soul, we are given hints as to the nature of God's love. Best of all, we have the Gospel that mirrors perfectly this love that “moves the sun and the stars,” surpassing all understanding.

God's love in Christ is a total giving of self, a kenosis that is nothing less than self-sacrificing love. However, much traditional theology may disagree, this self-sacrificing love manifested itself not so much on the cross as in the incarnation. Here we see self-sacrificing love relinquishing divine prerogatives so as to become a human being. So astounding is the humility of God that the endless battle over Christ's divinity continues its struggle among religions and, if we're honest, even within ourselves.

Therese of Lisieux understood God's humility. Perhaps this was why she was given the title “the greatest saint in the modern world.” Often, as part of her prayer, she'd pretend to be a ball that the child Jesus could pick up, throw, and then discard when he was tired. Her sole desire was not to do good works, but to simply love. She was so convinced of this above all else, that this alone was what her Beloved wanted. Yet however daunting God's desire for our love, his love for us never ceases since it is within the nature of perfect Love to give completely of itself.

Not too long ago I picked up a book by Ruth Burrows, a British Carmelite. In this

particular book, *The Essence of Prayer*, Burrows claims that “God chooses to be needy. And what is more needy than a child? Therefore this is what he became.” Divine love made itself powerless in the world. Although salvation is his, he can save only through human beings. Divine Love can be nothing less than Love offering itself nakedly and being received in all our nakedness. Divine Omnipotence then can be nothing more than the omnipotence of love. Scriptural language that belies this and proffers a threatening God is nothing less than a projection of human fear. To be true to itself Divine Love comes to us with no false trappings of power, but as what it is—pure self-gift humbling itself, divesting itself of ‘god-ness’ and stooping to “nothing” in order to transform that “nothing” into itself.

Most of the time we don't find this love in ourselves or in those we meet. Often we're repulsed by what we see and convince ourselves that God cannot be living within. We want a God who dwells in what is pure, undefiled, filled with light, goodness, etc. We loathe to see him in a madman, a serial killer, rapist, thief, and...in a bloody body hanging on a piece of wood. But this is not what the Gospel reveals. Gospel revelation is that he is among “the least of these.”

The 20th century Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, claims that before his resurrection, when Jesus descended into hell, he didn't promise eternal damnation or paradise. He simply stood beside these souls, watching them and loving them. Are we to do anything less?

Another Carmelite, Elizabeth of The Trinity, who entered Carmel shortly after Therese's death, sums it up for us when on her deathbed she whispered, “Everything passes! In the evening of life, love alone remains.”

MARIETTA WAS BORN IN THE BRONX IN NEW YORK CITY. SHE HAS A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN COMMUNICATION ARTS FROM FORDHAM UNIVERSITY AND A MASTERS FROM HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY IN LONG ISLAND. LATER SHE RETURNED TO SCHOOL AND OBTAINED A MASTERS IN THEOLOGY AT THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SEMINARY. MARIETTA WORKED IN A LOCAL PARISH GIVING CLASSES, RETREATS, AND BECAME CERTIFIED AS A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR.



Love's Beauty

DEBRA CLASSEN

The wind was penetrating, as the wind chill dipped below zero; it seemed as if tiny shards of ice sliced through me. The sun made a valiant attempt to yield at least some light, if not warmth. We huddled together, a small, sad mass of people, a barrier against the cold and the unknown. The priest had quickly finished the final prayer, and the military guards removed the flag from the casket and solemnly folded it. Tom had finally succumbed to the cancer. It had been less than a year ago when Tom had accompanied us on this same trip to the church and the cemetery to bury his wife. That day last February had been even colder. In fact, it was a day, they told us at the cemetery, too cold for a burial.

Tom died one month in front of Valentine's Day, and last year his wife had died four days before. Why, I wondered, did I remember these days in relation to Valentine's Day? Because funerals have a lot to do with love, although that's probably not the first thing that comes to most people's minds. The reality of our love is finally the measure of how we lived our lives.

Love's beauty is not to be found or defined by romantic movies, chocolate hearts, or cards with hearts on them. Our culture defines 'love' easily, quickly, in ways that are sexy, exciting or fun, and there is nothing inherently wrong with celebrating 'heart' day. Yet it is the reality of love that I glimpsed on a frigid day standing in a cemetery. Love is expressed within the tension of paradoxes; vulnerable and strong enough to shine through death, utterly raw and sharp, yet naive in its hopefulness and wise in its patience. I glimpsed love for a moment in Tom's eld-

est daughter, as she reached out her hand to accept the guard's folded triangle of an American flag. I heard its echo in Tom's youngest daughter's story about her father. He had waited through the weekend for a priest's visit. He had tenaciously held on to life to receive a final blessing, then breathed his last breath as the priest walked to his car. I felt love's touch when Tom's only sister drove from Detroit to Cleveland and hugged me silently. I saw love's movement in the times my husband finished a long day of rounds in the hospital and yet made one more visit to see Tom again.

Love is to be found in the lives of ordinary people who live extraordinary lives. Tom's life was beautiful, difficult, full of uncertainty, and faithful. He endured the loss of his son, his wife, his own health and remained faithful to God even when He was angry and confused by the tenacity and pain of his own grief and suffering. Tom's marriage to Cece was two people who loved God first, loved one another and remained committed to one another "in sickness and in health, till death do us part;" two people who had to have had moments of despair and doubt with God, but kept praying and loving anyway.

From her letters we now know that Mother Teresa rarely felt the consolations of love. She suffered in the poverty of Calcutta with the daily and visible degradation and despair of human life she saw

on the streets. She suffered with doubt and a dark night of the soul, wondering when she would feel God's embrace. But it was her life, in all the moments of hidden prayers and small acts of love and mercy, that revealed a willingness to know the Crucified Christ, a vulnerable love. She persevered to put love in the places where she felt there was none.

Matthew 25 says that Christ will know us because we first recognized Him and loved Him in the hungry, the poor, the naked—those we fed, sheltered and clothed. It is far easier to struggle with words expressing love, than to find the actions to love those in our midst. I remember a letter a monk once wrote me, 'the greatest art, the most beautiful in this life and the most difficult, is the art of loving one another.'

Tom didn't seem to get enough years: neither did his son or wife, but they had enough time to love God, love one another, and to leave a legacy of love for the living who struggle to learn the art of love. I believe that there are graces the Lord wants to work in the hearts of each of us that are more beautiful than anything we could possibly imagine. We need only abandon ourselves to this love, whether we discover it on the streets of Calcutta, cooking for our family or having coffee with a friend. These moments are a foretaste of the unutterable beauty and love of God, yet to be revealed to us.

*Love's beauty is
not to be found
or defined by
romantic movies,
chocolate hearts,
or cards with
hearts on them.*

NOW PLAYING 'BELLA'

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PRODUCER: GOD

SCREENPLAY: THE BEAUTY OF YOUR SOUL



She was young & beautiful, as she entered a room. Certainly a designer dress, a stunning hat, & carefully applied makeup contributed to the effect. But... one day she would learn that REAL BEAUTY was more, far beyond external adornments.

MERCY
TRUTH
KINDNESS
LOVE
PEACEFULNESS

* Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far beyond rubies; strength & honour are her clothes, in her tongue is the law of grace. Proverbs 31:10, 25-6.



Recommended Readings

JOANNE BENNARDO

A GRIEF OBSERVED

C. S. Lewis

www.randomhouse.com/bantamdell

C. S. Lewis is known to children for *The Chronicles of Nardia* and adults for *The Screwtape Letters*. His genius insight was coupled with dexterity to communicate complex moral issues in a clear and understandable style.

Lewis' wife, Joy, died in 1956, and he was inconsolable in his grief. In the raw pain of grief, Lewis kept a journal which was later printed. Lewis wrote in striking frankness not attempting to cover his stark vulnerability: "Did you ever know, dear, how much you took away with you when you left? You have stripped me even of my past, even of the things we never shared. I was wrong to say the stump was recovering from the pain of the amputation. I was deceived because it has so many ways to hurt me that I discover them only one by one."

Lewis' journal questioned the meaning of life, death, love, and faith in God. He came to look at the death of a spouse as a natural next step following courtship and marriage. He perceived all of humanity as

teachers, and his wife as the ultimate teacher given by God. He concluded that Joy had been only a glimpse of his final joy with God.

I strongly recommend this book, especially to those suffering the loss of a loved one.

IN TIMES OF CAREGIVING

Robert M. Hamma

www.avemariapress.com

Caregiving is a confusing time, to say the least. Often, mail doesn't get opened, laundry backs up, and on some days we can't remember if we even brushed our teeth. For most, it is not a time to focus on reading.

But Robert M. Hamma offers a book of short prayer-like reflections which battle the mayhem. His writings focus both on positive and negative emotional needs. Whether waiting a half hour in a doctor's office or two minutes for the tea-kettle to boil, the author renders insight in a very accessible format. He respectfully reminds caregivers of gratitude, the need for sleep, the many ugly heads of fear, loneliness, feelings of

inadequacy, anger, and guilt.

"A Soldier's Prayer" is an example printed under *Prayers for Moments of Gratitude*. One of its stanzas read, "I asked for power, that I might have the praise of people, I was given weakness, that I might have the need of God. I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life, I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for but everything that I hoped for."

This compact book is a wonderful prayer companion at any time, but especially when formal prayer time is hard to come by.

FRESH BREAD

Joyce Rupp

www.avemariapress.com

While updating my 2008 planner, I found Lent begins earlier than usual this year. In fact, it falls on my birthday! Our oldest son's birthday is later in the month, and often his birthday is a mix of festivity and solemnity—even his 21st birthday. This year it's my turn to mark another year's blessings with the beginning of a reflective



OUR MINISTRY

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

VIVID SWAN—A NEW WEB SITE!!!

We have been working very hard, and we couldn't be more excited about our newest venture. Our site will feature spiritual gifts and gallery works. We will have beautiful art, icons from South America, vintage religious jewelry, original framed collages, gallery photography, one-of-a-kind journals, original watercolors, oils and acrylic paintings featuring several artists. All items are one-of-a-kind beautiful, original pieces.

See: www.VividSwan.com (coming in Spring)

THE MUTE SWAN MINISTRY

The Mute Swan Ministry web site is also being revamped. It will be clear and concise, explaining exactly what we do, why we do it, where the money goes, and how you can help. After four years of running a ministry of 'beauty' we know that a lot of you struggle with what we mean by this. We now have a board and very particular venues for the funds we raise, helping those in need. Our ministry is about discovering God's beauty in the midst of circumstances that are anything but beautiful—illness, illiteracy, poverty, injustice. It is about finding the light of your faith, even in the darkness.

You will be able to interact with us, contribute to the ministry (even online), send us your prayer requests, download the latest online journal, or get involved in the ministry in a myriad of ways. We look forward to hearing from you.

See: www.themuteswan.org



season. This is certainly fitting. One of my favorite books, *Fresh Bread*, can indeed guide me towards God's love, mercy and giftedness while helping me pray my love, repentance, and thankfulness.

The author, Joyce Rupp, is a religious sister of the Servants of Mary and well-known for her plethora of highly regarded writings. Readers often comment that it seems she is writing to them alone. In *Fresh Bread*, Sister invites the reader to journey through the entire year; to pray both through the liturgical and meteorological seasons. She has assigned an appropriate theme to each month—January is "A New Snowfall"—and offers poems, prayers, essays, questions and scripture passages as an aid to heighten the awareness of prayer as our spiritual nourishment. Whether you begin on Ash Wednesday or a warm July day, *Fresh Bread* is a daily prayer guide to be treasured whenever you choose to begin. It nurtures our most essential relationship, that which we share with God.

A sampling: "Jesus, first Bread blessed

and broken, you ask me to be your leaven. You lift me to your Father and gift me with your loving. Jesus, first one blessed and broken, make of me a good handful of dough, one who trusts enough to be kneaded, one who loves enough to be shared."

MY BROTHER JOSEPH

Eugene Kennedy
www.stmartins.com

In this month of February, retailers insist we don't forget our loved ones. They offer us the perfect token gift. Award winning author, Eugene Kennedy, remarks in *My Brother Joseph*, the many gifts he received from his life-long friend, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, but none could have been purchased in a store. Deeply, he cherished his smiles, conversation, and giving example.

They first met in the invigorated era surrounding the Second Vatican Council when Kennedy was a young priest and

Bernardin a young bishop. Kennedy writes, "we seemed to have been friends" before we met. He most admired Bernardin's "gentle, nonargumentative style," and forgiving nature.

These attributes would be tested as the secular world, especially the press, repeatedly attempted to silence Bernardin's social appeals. He worked selflessly for the rights of others. He pioneered for AIDS care, drafted the Church's first sex abuse guidelines, and founded a cancer prayer ministry as he battled pancreatic cancer. Kennedy remarkably offers a personal glimpse to a very public figure, and reveals God's love in their friendship.

The author shares one of many letters he received from Bernardin: "Many thanks for your understanding and friendship—through many ups and downs for many years." Through all the many tiers of private suffering and public torment, the friends remained loyal. Their friendship was rooted in love and sacrifice—it was God's work, profoundly Christian with no limitations.