Aesthetic Spirituality

John Muir wrote in his *Travels in Alaska*, “Beneath the frosty shadows of the fiord we stood hushed and awe-stricken, gazing at the holy vision; and had we seen the heavens opened and God made manifest, our attention could not have been more tremendously strained.”[Muir] Of this experience of watching sunrise through the glaciers, Muir states that those on his berg were left with “hearts ready for fate” and enriched forever. This perception of beauty in nature filled Muir with a connection to the divine. As many of his writings indicate, it is this appreciation for beauty in nature, this aesthetic experience, which fueled Muir’s spirituality. What is an aesthetic experience and how can it fuel one’s spirituality? In fact, is it possible for there to be such a thing as an aesthetic spirituality?

In the academic world, aesthetics is often understood to relate to art, and the judgment of its beauty and value. Its name embodies a reference to sense perception. However, the bond with the senses has been overlooked as it developed into a distinct philosophical discipline. Aesthetics began as an appreciation of nature, and has narrowed its scope to that which is made by man [Berleant, 2].

According to Arnold Berleant, the senses of sight and hearing are considered the aesthetic senses. Greek philosophers considered these senses to be the most closely related to the operation of reason, and therefore gave these two senses priority over touch, taste, and smell. In fact, of the five senses, it is sight and hearing that are distance receptors, allowing us to appreciate with detachment and even isolation [Berleant, 75]. Berleant calls for a new view on aesthetics, one which regards touch, taste, and smell to be as important as sight and hearing and leads one to aesthetic
embodiment. “Aesthetic embodiment is being fully present through the distinctive presence of the body with the sensory focus and intensity we associate with the experience of art. It is being most completely human.” [88]

Aesthetics is often a judgment of what is beautiful and what is valuable. Gordon Graham states that “to call something beautiful is not just to describe it, but to react to it.” [13] Experiencing beauty can often awaken us to a world beyond the day-to-day. Beauty can lead us to wonder and awe [Paintner]. Robert Fuller states that experiences of wonder often lead to enhanced rapport. From a perceptual standpoint, wonder makes attending to objects for their own sake rewarding. From a cognitive standpoint, wonder allows for accommodation rather than assimilation. Each of these changes can lead to greater empathy and a concern for the wider world [Fuller, 147].

This wonder produced by the embodied experience of beauty leads us to William Clebsch’s aesthetic spirituality. According to Clebsch, aesthetic spirituality is rooted in a consciousness of beauty. Aesthetic spirituality is about seeing the beauty of the divine, of finding the divine in places not usually conceived of as beautiful [Paintner].

The traditional view of aesthetics’ relationship to art does not negate this aesthetic spirituality. According to Christine Paintner, “art wakes us up and trains our perceptions.” Formal art can teach us new ways of living in the world, of perceiving the world [Paintner]. But beauty can also be found in nature, and to “appreciate the sublime in nature is to apprehend its power and majesty, its awesomeness we might say.” [Graham, 169]

Robert Miller states that postmodern spirituality is an aesthetic spirituality. Miller argues that we do not need cold truth for spirituality, but warm beauty that is emotional
and experiential. Finding something beautiful often leads one to love something, which in turn often leads to greater compassion toward that thing, a desire to help for the sake of helping, not out of fear or desire for reward [Miller].

So then, one can see that through such an aesthetic experience as the beauty of the sunrise on a glacier one can be lead to an appreciation of beauty, to wonder, to a renewed way of seeing the world. For those spiritually inclined, beauty and aesthetics can call us to “break out of our routine vision, to see a glimpse of the divine presence radiating through all the corners of the world.”[Paintner]


