

# **Being open to the soft power of beauty**

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Almost everyone has been deeply touched by something beautiful. For example, by beautiful music, a meaningful painting, an overwhelming landscape, a flock of birds, or by the gaze of the other. Most of the time, beauty experiences have come our way unexpectedly and have made us feel very good.

## **The depth of beauty experiences**

What is beauty anyway? The Irish philosopher and poet John O'Donohue, known for his ideas about Celtic spirituality, has argued in his book *Divine Beauty* that real beauty goes beyond personality, good looks, or fashion. According to him, it is always mysterious and elusive, and is hidden under the surface of the material world: 'Beauty does not linger, it only visits. Yet beauty's visitation affects us and invites us into its rhythm, it calls us to feel, think and act beautifully in the world: to create and live a life that awakens the Beautiful.' It goes without saying, I think, that our heart plays a central role in beauty experiences. Beauty is not a quality we can acquire by buying – or stealing – an object, a large house or a piece of land. It escapes the external power and control that we exercise from our heads.

We must remember that we were all born as vulnerable, subjective beings with an open, curious mind. Then we experienced the world as a meaningful, animated place, with which we continuously participated and felt inextricably connected. That open-mindedness and sense of belonging have also ensured that as small children we were often captivated by the inherent beauty of life, which we sometimes perceived in the smallest details.

### **Self-protection and ego-identification**

Of course, it would be great if we could continue to be open and vulnerable throughout our lives, and continue to experience life as meaningful and animated. However, in this regard, we have all faced a few obstacles on our path. First of all, as the American ecologist and cultural philosopher David Abram has pointed out, physical life is difficult – the body is an imperfect and fragile entity that is exposed to scars, contempt by others, disease, and decay. Moreover, as he has noted with some irony, there are all kinds of things around us that can eat us and eventually will. It is not surprising that this reality has evoked in us a strong need for self-protection.

In addition, a few years after our birth, we have all had to deal with an ego development. If at some point we have remained stuck in a strong ego-identification, then a persistent sense of separation has come to the fore in us. With the result that we have closed our minds more and more, and feel mainly placed in opposition to the world and other people.

### **Isolation of beauty experiences**

Abram rightly states that if we completely shield ourselves from our vulnerability, we also isolate ourselves from the deepest sources of joy that physical, material life has to offer. Of course, these sources of joy also include the experiences of beauty. The energy that was originally intended to keep developing our inner potential, then starts to project itself outwards and can degenerate into polarization, into dualistic struggle against others. When our minds have gone into the fight-or-flight mode, we still pay little attention to the beauty that surrounds us.

That we should not underestimate the impact of this, at the moment can be seen all around us in the world. As I have explained in my Dutch book *Het helende verhaal* ('The healing story'), this is not a phenomenon that is only individual and recent in nature, but it is based on a collective cultural development of thousands of years in our Western world.

### **Included in a larger whole**

In any case, this makes it important to know how we can remain vulnerable and open in life. To do this, we must first realize that the open mind with which we were once born is not only focused on our human world, but also extends to our natural environment. In this context, David Abram has aptly qualified the natural world as *the more-than-human world* – a term that has since been adopted by many other people.

On a collective level, this means that our society is always fully included in the larger context of living, cyclical nature. On an individual level, this means that our bodies are always embedded in a much larger, and in fact immeasurable, landscape body – from which we are nourished biologically, psychologically, and spiritually. When we are aware that our lives are part of a larger whole, we become receptive to experiences of beauty. Through their soft, healing power – which is often still considered ‘feminine’ – , other soft forces are also evoked in us, including empathy, connection and caring.

### **Materialist science**

Unfortunately, in our Western culture over time we have lost sight of this embeddedness of our human life in the more-than-human world. In it, the idea arose that as humans we exist outside and elevated above nature – and that we can therefore observe and investigate it from without. At a certain point, this became the foundation of the materialist view of science. Central in this is that to build objective, reliable knowledge, researchers must avoid their subjective involvement in the research. They are urged not to be deceived by their hearts and their feelings. This vision of science has had a major influence on our perception of reality.

In this way, we have artificially reduced reality to its material – quantitatively measurable – manifestation. Non-measurable qualitative phenomena, including the subjective beauty experiences, we have a priori put aside as irrelevant. This vision of science has certainly given us many positive things, including comfort and technological inventions. But it is no news, of course, that for centuries it has also legitimized the borderless

exploitation and pollution of the earth, including all the ugliness that has accompanied it.

### **Viewing earth from outer space**

Fortunately, since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been developments in science – such as in quantum physics – that are gradually undermining the materialist view. Interestingly, this undermining process has sometimes unintentionally come about in an indirect way. When astronauts started exploring space scientifically in the 1960s, they were often deeply struck by the beauty of the place they came from during their journey. They often underwent a mystical awakening experience and became aware that our lives – like those of all the other earth beings – are always fully embedded in the matrix of Mother Earth. They had taken off the detached glasses of objectivity and their hearts had started to speak again. The forgotten reality experience of openness and vulnerability from their own childhood had been brought back to life.

We all know the iconic photos of our ‘blue planet’ from space, including of course ‘Earthrise’, taken by the astronauts and published from the end of the 1960s. These have undeniably influenced the worldview of all humanity. They have helped to make us more aware of the living environment and the larger context in which our human lives take place.

### **Earth as a living organism**

It is no coincidence, I think, that in the same period the English scientist James Lovelock, while working at NASA on the study of the Martian atmosphere, suddenly began to take an interest in the atmosphere of Earth. As with the astronauts, his attention was drawn back to Earth. This eventually resulted in the Gaia theory, in which Earth is considered a self-regulating organism – a living entity in which all life forms, including us humans, play an important role in maintaining the balance.

Despite the fierce criticism that erupted among scientists about the name of the theory, it could not be prevented that – due to the connection of Earth with the Greek Goddess Gaia – in many people a sense had been awakened

that the surrounding natural world is animated and meaningful. The Gaia theory – together with the photos of the Earth from space – have not only ensured that we have collectively opened our minds much more to beauty experiences in nature. They have also changed what we consider beautiful in it.

### **Experience nature from the inside out**

In this regard, Abram emphasizes that the air we breathe, the entire atmosphere in which our life takes place, is also part of the Earth – and that therefore we actually do not live ON the Earth, but IN the Earth. According to him, our distant ancestors were already familiar with this. For them, it was self-evident that they always lived *in* their natural environment. It is, in Abram's words, an ‘ancient interiority that was once our common birthright – the ancestral sense of the surrounding earthly cosmos as the voluminous *inside* of an immense Body, or Tent, or Temple.’

Due to the renewed attention to Earth and our place in it, we have increasingly felt the need to be in regular contact with our natural environment – and to experience its beauty personally. Long walks through beautiful natural landscapes, including the Camino in northern Spain, have become extremely popular. All kinds of ecotherapy have emerged. From Japan, *shinrin yoku* or forest bathing, has spread all over the world. ‘Wilderness guides’ give retreats in unspoiled natural areas. In short, we have come to (re)discover that contact with nature, and the beauty experiences it evokes, also have a healing effect.

### **The changing view of the animal and plant world**

The earthly focus has also made us look differently at the animal world. The research of primatologists such as Jane Goodall and Frans de Waal has opened our minds to the emotional world of great apes. The Netflix documentary *My Octopus Teacher* has shown that octopuses are empathetic animals. A vulnerable insect such as the butterfly called the painted lady appears to be able to migrate from Africa to the Netherlands. These kinds of new insights have broadened and deepened our experience of animal beauty.

We have also started to look differently at the plant world. Several researchers, including Suzanne Simard and Merlin Sheldrake, have drawn our attention to the gigantic fungal networks that exist underground and how important they are for the exchange of nutrients and communication between trees and plants. This has made us also look with different eyes at the vegetation above ground. Where we once considered a neatly mown lawn quite beautiful, in line with our idea of civilization, more and more we are consciously allowing to rewild these places with varied 'wild' plants – which we had previously written off as 'weeds'. In addition, we have started to (re)discover that plants also have a form of consciousness.

American naturalist, herbalist and writer Vanessa Chakour has pointed out that much of her work in the field of plants is focused on lifting the 'green veil' to help others see the 'wild beauty' of countless species. To feel a real connection with nature around us, she says, it is necessary to 'slow down, pay attention and listen with our whole being'. Then the plants can become our teachers, of which we as students quickly learn that they have 'a remarkable awareness and responsiveness'. American botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer, who is doing her research from a Native American perspective, thinks that in this regard, for example, we can learn a lot from the dandelion. For her, this flower, which has long been mistakenly considered a weed, is a symbol of resilience, adaptability, and reciprocity.

### **Vincent saw what we didn't see yet**

Vincent van Gogh's paintings are illustrative of the process of change that has manifested itself in the field of the beauty experience – in particular his paintings of the landscapes in southern France. During his lifetime, at the end of the nineteenth century, very few people liked his paintings. It was not possible to sell them then, not even at low prices. But despite of this, Van Gogh kept believing in the quality of his creations and continued unabated on his chosen path.

We are now reaping the benefits of that. Nowadays, millions of people from all over the world travel to the Netherlands to come face to face in the

museums with the colourful, vibrant landscapes from Van Gogh's French period. Like the photographs of Earth from space, his paintings have now taken on an iconic quality, which has made us experience the beauty of the surrounding natural world differently. Now we see that Van Gogh lifts the green veil of nature, making the wild beauty behind it tangible. Now we experience that his world, and therefore also our world, is completely intertwined with the more-than-human world and that there is an uninterrupted, intense exchange between the two.

### **Being embraced by beauty**

John O'Donohue was convinced that we humans belong outside in nature and feel at home in it. There we remember who we are and why we are here. When we emerge from our offices, rooms, and houses, we do not so much *go out*, but we *come in* a world where we can experience beauty as an 'invisible embrace'. Just like our distant ancestors, we can experience the natural world as the voluminous inside of an immense Temple.

When our attention is drawn to the beauty of trees, plants, flowers or fruits, we perceive vulnerable life forms, which have been able to develop their potential. We see a wonderful diversity, which has arisen from the cyclical interaction between winter cold and summer heat, between nightly darkness and daily light, between rain and drought. We see the result of constant balancing between the downward force of gravitation and the upward force of growth, of continuing to bend with changing wind directions and speeds, and of continuously cooperating with other life forms (including fungi, birds, insects, and also us humans). And all of this being powered from an underlying consciousness.

As Chakour, Kimmerer, and others have pointed out, we can consider plants our teachers. They teach us that it is also important for ourselves to remain open and vulnerable in life – to continue to face the world from our hearts. This allows the soft, healing power of beauty to keep entering us, to keep nourishing our connected, caring and empathetic side.

This power is patient and strong enough to keep finding a way up – as with dandelions or grass between the pavement tiles.

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## **Selected sources**

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