



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Beauty and Adult Faith Formation (Part 5)

Centuries ago Plato said: “The most effective kind of education is that a child should play amongst lovely things.” Perhaps his assertion could be paraphrased: The most effective kind of education is that adults should learn and grow amongst lovely things.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis says: “Every form of catechesis would do well to attend to the “way of beauty” (via pulchritudinis). Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties. Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus. ...

If, as Saint Augustine says, we love only that which is beautiful, the incarnate Son, as the revelation of infinite beauty, is supremely lovable and draws us to himself with bonds of love. So a formation in the via pulchritudinis ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith.

Each particular Church should encourage the use of the arts in evangelization, building on the treasures of the past but also drawing upon the wide variety of contemporary expressions so as to transmit the faith in a new “language of parables”. We must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty which may mean little to the evangelizers, yet prove particularly attractive for others.” (#167)

In our past issues, we’ve looked at beauty from various viewpoints, often suggesting ways to incorporate beauty within our adult faith formation settings, processes and programs. This issue **looks again specifically at our adult faith formation endeavors:**

- A review of some of the practices and approaches we’ve touched upon previously
- A few additional ideas – because beauty pervades our Catholic tradition and all we do

“Whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is gracious,
if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.”

~ Philippians 4:8

Beauty within our Communication

What messages do we send out in our Sunday bulletin, newsletters, website and social media? Are they filled with good news, quotes that touch hearts, homilies that earn a repeat performance? Beauty in words, images, ideas and thoughts touch our hearts on a deep level.

Our Speech Itself

We don’t have to look far to realize that we live in an extremely violent society. Everyone’s life has been touched by it, probably in countless ways. We deplore it and say we want it to stop. Do we contribute to it in unconscious ways? Listen to our language. Even when we don’t mean to be violent, our language might be. We have become so used to it, often we don’t even notice. Instead of writing a check, we cut a check. We crunch the numbers. We grab a bite to eat. The winner hits the jackpot. We work at a breakneck pace. Our backs are killing us. We execute a command. We shoot an email.

We have products that shout it out, fight stains, and combat bad breath. We destroy bacteria and odors. An ad recently proclaimed, “Our mints can beat up your mints.” We even say, “We’ll kill you with kindness.” When we finish something, we terminate. Instead of just a due date, there’s a deadline. We drink Orange Crush.

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Sports talk is filled with violent language: We beat them. They massacred us. Strike out. Competition contributes a great deal to violent language. One glaring example is the ice-skating competition entitled Ice Wars.

Instead, can we use peaceful, beautiful language?

EVOLVING FROM VIOLENT LANGUAGE
Anna Taylor

INSTEAD OF	SAY THIS
We're going to pull the trigger	We're going to launch
I'll take a stab at [it]	I'll take the first pass at [it]
Did we jump the gun?	Did we start too soon?
I'll bite the bullet	I won't avoid it any longer
That'll kill two birds with one stone	That'll feed two birds with one score
What's the deadline?	What's the due date?
We have to pick our battles	We have to choose our opportunities
Can you shoot me an email?	Can you send me an email?
That was overkill	That was a bit excessive
I bombed the presentation	I didn't do my best
Let's just roll with the punches	Let's just move forward
We can soften the blow by...	We can make it a little easier by...
I'm going to take a shot in the dark	I'm going to take a guess
That's not a bad idea	That's a good idea
Let's not beat a dead horse	Let's not focus on that anymore
I was blown away by her presentation	I was impressed by her presentation
I was kicking around an idea	I was thinking through an idea
He's a straight shooter in meetings	He's pretty direct in meetings

The Environment/Setting for Adult Faith Formation

Jacquelyne Witter, EdD, tells us (*FaithWorks*, March 2005) that at the completion of an adult faith formation series, a participant told her that she didn't always come because of the topic or the speaker.

"Sometimes I just came because I knew the room would be beautiful and the food would be good and that's what I needed that day," she confessed.

She also then commented, as she thanked Jacquelyne, that even though she might not have come for the content, she usually discovered something new or grew in some way.

Jacquelyne Witter goes on to say:

"...This incident is an important reminder that one of the most important considerations for the ministry of adult faith formation is hospitality. I haven't found any one who would disagree with this, but sometimes we have limited our understanding of this important reality. There is more to genuine hospitality than nametags, centerpieces and refreshments. It is not a trivial or incidental consideration. The external practice of hospitality is an outward manifestation of an interior disposition that is essential for those who are committed to effective formation of adults."

You might also want to revisit [GEMS #16](#).

Prayer Experiences

We invite our participants to encounter Divine beauty continually through prayer experiences. Catholic prayer and worship is imbued with beauty; beautiful artwork, music, words, signs, symbols, gestures, rituals, nature, literature and theater are all a part of the treasury of Catholic spirituality that enables us to encounter Divine beauty.

Silence is also connected with beauty. A beautiful piece of art or a sunset can leave us speechless. We may find ourselves gazing contemplatively at a trickling stream or at leaves filtering the sunlight. Silence leaves room to listen to God with our hearts.

How often do we use contemplative practices such as meditation, lectio divina (sacred reading), or mindfulness exercises within our prayer times? These practices can help participants access the deeper layers of their spirituality through inner beauty.

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Some authors speak of “Useless Beauty.” Acknowledging, of course, that some beauty is useful; at the same time, it seems that there is some beauty that seems to have no purpose except to be. (You might find this article a wonderful reflection: [Useless Beauty: A Canticle for the Cosmos - What do we make of a universe saturated with an extravagance of beauty?](#))

Perhaps this prayer, by an unknown author, speaks, too, of Useless Beauty.

“Prayer of Thanksgiving for Those Whose Work is Invisible”

For those who paint the undersides of boats ...
makers of ornamental drains on roofs too high to be observed ...

cobblers who labor on the soles of shoes ...
seamstresses who hem the insides of linings ...

dentists who polish upper molars ...
those who carefully trim overgrown trees and bushes ...

electricians ...
family cooks who lovingly prepare meals ...

surgeons whose sutures are things of beauty ...
artists who suppress what does injustice to their vision ...

those who pray unceasingly ...
those whose contributions are never acknowledged but whose efforts are
known to You alone.
Deo Gratias!

An Exploration of Beauty Itself

What about an adult faith formation offering (or series) which is designed to help people reflect on beauty itself – increasing their awareness and appreciation?

Here are some thought-provoking questions for adults to ponder when faced with beauty:

- What is beauty, and how does it manifest itself in various aspects of life?
- What are some examples of beauty you've encountered recently? How did they affect you?
- How does beauty influence our emotions and perceptions of the world?
- Is beauty a universal concept, or is it subjective and culturally influenced?
- Can beauty exist independently, or does it require an observer to appreciate it?
- Can beauty be found in all things, or are there certain criteria that must be met?
- Have you ever encountered beauty in simplicity? What makes simplicity beautiful?
- How does beauty in nature differ from beauty in human-made creations?
- Can beauty be a source of inspiration? If so, how has it inspired you or others around you?
- What role does beauty play in fostering creativity and inspiration?
- How does beauty impact our sense of well-being and mental health?
- Can something be both beautiful and tragic simultaneously?
- Have you ever experienced beauty in challenging or unexpected situations? What made it beautiful despite the circumstances?
- How does beauty evolve and change as we age and gain life experiences?
- Is there a connection between beauty and truth or authenticity?
- How does the pursuit of beauty intersect with the pursuit of happiness?

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- Does beauty have a moral dimension? Can it be a force for good or evil?
- Can beauty be found in imperfections and asymmetry, or does it require perfection?
- How does the concept of beauty influence our personal and societal values?
- Does the appreciation of beauty differ between individuals, and if so, why?
- Is beauty a luxury, or is it a fundamental human need?
- Can beauty be a source of healing and transformation?
- How does technology impact our perception and experience of beauty?
- What is the relationship between beauty and love?

When we come upon beautiful things,
they act like small tears in the surface of the world
that pull us through to some vaster space.

~ Elaine Scarry

Some Activities to Invite Adults to Explore Beauty

Nature's Beauty:

- Spend time outdoors: Go for a walk in a park, sit by a lake or on the parish grounds.
- Observe the intricate details: Pay attention to the patterns, colors, and textures of leaves, flowers, and landscapes.
- Ask: What aspects of nature's beauty resonate with you the most? How does it make you feel?

Art and Creativity:

- Visit museums or art galleries: Explore various forms of art, from paintings and sculptures to installations and photography.
- Observe different styles: Take note of the differences between classical, abstract, modern, and other art genres.
- Ask: What emotions does this artwork evoke in you? What do you find beautiful about it? Does it connect you with God?

Human Connection:

- Engage in meaningful conversations: During adult faith formation times share stories and experiences.
- Listen actively: Pay attention to the words, emotions, and expressions of others.
- Ask: What do you find beautiful in the people around you? What acts of kindness and compassion do you appreciate?

Inner Beauty:

- Practice mindfulness and self-reflection: Invite adults (especially after a retreat or prayer time) to meditate or journal about their thoughts, emotions, and experiences.
- Cultivate self-compassion: Affirm and encourage adults to acknowledge their strengths, accomplishments, and uniqueness (especially in relationship to the theme you're exploring).
- Ask yourself: What qualities or traits do you find beautiful in yourself? How can you appreciate your own journey and growth?

Cultural Beauty:

- Explore diverse traditions: Learn about different cultures' art, music, and customs.
- Attend cultural events: Participate in festivals, concerts, or dance performances from various backgrounds.
- Ask: What aspects of different cultures' beauty resonate with you? How can you/we appreciate and celebrate diversity?

Beauty in Imperfection:

- Embrace imperfections: Understand that beauty can also lie in flaws and uniqueness.

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- Learn from challenges: Appreciate the growth and strength gained from overcoming difficulties.
- Ask: How can you find beauty in imperfections, both in yourself and others?

Have you tried these ideas to incorporate beauty in adult faith formation?

- Take pilgrimages to places of beauty in your local area; nature; church places, museums, etc.
- Use the internet to bring/visit places of beauty in the church and the world.
- Utilize visually striking films, short videos, or multimedia presentations that explore spiritual themes. Engage in discussions about the messages conveyed through these visual mediums.

You might also revisit [GEMS #38](#).

- How might you use these resources for prayer and/or book study?
 - [Beauty Quotes](#)
 - [Embracing a Beautiful God](#)
 - [Beauty: What It is and Why It Matters](#)
 - [Beauty: The Invisible Embrace](#)
 - [The Beauty of Us All: Celebrating The Diversity of The World](#)
 - [In Praise of the Useless Life](#)
 - [Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder](#)
- During retreats and sessions, encourage learners – as part of their “take-aways” – to take "Beauty Breaks." Take a break from their routine once a week or for a shorter time once a day, whatever works for them. Take a walk, go to a museum, read a poem -- or better, write a poem. There are many ways to put yourself in Beauty's embrace!

- The practice of Beauty is, of course, an organic part of daily life, but it also needs regular intentional practice. It's much like gratitude practice, in that we hope we are always grateful, but it helps to have a gratitude journal.

Encourage people to begin a Beauty Break journal. Any notebook will do, or a new file on the computer. Just choose a piece of art or a tree, a kitten, or whatever in life today draws them, speaks to them, or lures them into a moment of depth and contemplation. Make note of it in a few sentences.

Leading Adults to Catholic Social Living through Beauty

When we help adults look upon reality through the lens of divine revelation, we lead them to see the beautiful in what a purely human gaze often perceives as unattractive, namely, in the faces of persons who are poor, sick, suffering and alone.

Adult faith formation strives to make a difference in the lives of individuals and in the wider community by challenging learners to recognize the inherent beauty and worth of every person, and to serve others, especially the poor, with compassion and justice. By embracing the call to serve, the active response of our adults to all those in need holds strong transformative potential for a world seeking beauty, justice, peace and unity.

Whenever I experience something beautiful,
I am with Soul.
That moment of inward breath,
that pause and awareness of "how beautiful this is"
is a prayer of appreciation,
a moment of gratitude in which I behold beauty
and am one with it.

~ Jean Shinoda Bolen

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Invite adults to express their spiritual journey through creative means can be a fulfilling, beautiful and transformative process

Throughout these GEMS issues, we've talked a great deal about **observing** beauty. At the same time, how do we **invite them to respond to their learnings and reflections through beauty and creativity?**

- Invite participants to express their faith through various forms, such as painting, composing music, drawing, sculpture, poetry or dance. Provide art supplies and dedicated time for creative expression related to the topics being discussed.
- Invite adults to participate in storytelling exercises where they can retell biblical stories or share personal experiences creatively. This could involve role-playing, using props, or even creating short skits.
- Encourage participants to write essays, poems, or short stories that explore various aspects of their faith, spirituality, or religious beliefs.
- Host adult formation times that focus on specific creative activities, like calligraphy, iconography, or meditation through art. These hands-on experiences can deepen their connection to the material.
 - See [GEMS #74](#).
- Incorporate music into your sessions. Encourage participants to write songs, compose prayers, or engage in group singing and worship with instruments.
- Provide thought-provoking prompts or themes related to spirituality to help participants start their creative journey. For example, ask them to create art or write about a moment of spiritual insight or connection they experienced.
- Invite participants to present and discuss their creative works related to spirituality.
- Invite artists or individuals who have used creativity as a means to express their faith or spiritual journey. Their stories and experiences can inspire participants to embrace creativity themselves.

- Initiate group projects where participants work together to create something that represents their collective faith experiences, such as a mural, a collage, or a written anthology.
- Organize exhibits, concerts, or open-mic events where participants can showcase their spiritual artworks, writings, or musical compositions.
 - See [GEMS #82](#).
- Reflect on the Process: Encourage participants to reflect on their creative process and how it relates to their spiritual journey. Suggest journaling as a way for adults to reflect on their faith journey and the insights gained during the faith formation sessions. Encourage them to explore their thoughts, emotions, and spiritual experiences through writing.



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Lifelong Faith Studio: <https://www.lifelongfaithstudio.com/>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:
 - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>
 - https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_aff_-_journal_special_issue.pdf