

## Get Your Life Back Week 3- Weekly Personal Study

### **DAY ONE: BEAUTY'S POWER**

Beauty comforts. Beauty heals. Why else would we send flowers to a hospital room or funeral? I've been personally convinced of this for years, so it was with delight I opened a lovely little book a friend recommended: *On Beauty and Being Just* by Harvard aesthetics professor Elaine Scarry. The author is trying to restore the high place of beauty in a skeptical world:

Beauty is life-saving. ... Augustine described it plank amid the waves of the sea." Proust makes a version of this claim over and over again. Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living worth living. ... It is as though one has suddenly been washed up onto a merciful beach.

That's it-beauty rescues. It rescues because it is merciful, comforting. It heals, restores, revives, renews. This is why people in convalescence want to sit in a garden, or by a window overlooking the sea. Research shows that patients recovered faster, needed fewer pain killers, and left the hospital sooner if their windows allowed views of nature. "The pleasure we take in beauty is inexhaustible," writes Scarry. "No matter how long beautiful things endure, they cannot out-endure our longing for them."

Stasi and I were on a mission of sorts to the UK last spring, a whirlwind trip with something like nineteen engagements in nine days. We spent two nights in the London suburb of St. Albans, one of those trendy little British towns where cobblestones streets and fifteenth-century buildings meet art galleries and upscale restaurants. It was crowded, unusually hot, with lots and lots of traffic. My sensitivity was probably heightened by my exhaustion -and the exhaust- the sound of motorcycles roaring up and down the narrow streets was really getting on my nerves. What was charming soon felt harming. At that moment I received a text from my wife, who had left the thoroughfare earlier to go in search of the cathedral: "Come to the cathedral; step inside."

As soon as I entered the garden-like grounds I began to feel better. Grass. Flowers. Trees. I stepped into the sanctuary and found myself alone. Coolness. Soft, colored light filtered down through the stained glass windows. The heavy stone structure held out every bit of city noise. Far up in front, hidden from view, the chapel choir was practicing. It was heavenly, and thus it was healing. Heaven always heals. Beauty heals, partly because it proclaims that there is goodness in the world and that goodness prevails, or is preserved, or will somehow outlast all harm and darkness.

1. When is the last time that beauty made your heart beat faster?

2. Can you think of a time that you saw-or experienced firsthand--the healing power of beauty? What was the object of beauty and how did it help bring restoration?

3. Professor Elaine Scarry says, "No matter how long beautiful things endure, they cannot out-endure our longing for them." What beauty do you find yourself longing most for-and why?

## **DAY TWO: A GENTLE GRACE**

Beauty also sings to us songs of abundance.

I recently spent an afternoon seated in a camp chair high above a lake in the Wind River Mountains, simply drinking in the valley before me. The lake and granite cliffs were like Yosemite, gorgeous and grand, but my eyes were continually drawn to the evergreen forests on the mountain slopes. These are well-watered forests, so thick and lush it seemed I could see a million trees along a few miles of slope. My soul loved it, and I tried to pay attention to why. It had to do with abundance. One tree is a miracle; a hundred trees a celebration. But the staggering presence of tens of thousands of tall, thriving evergreens in dense profusion fills the soul with memories of Eden, visions that speak messages. "Beautiful things, as Matisse shows, always carry greetings from other worlds within them. The Christian understands those greetings to come from the kingdom of God itself

But most of all, beauty reassures. This is especially important to our search here for the grace beauty offers our life with God. We need reassuring.

Beauty reassures us that goodness is still real in the world, more real than harm or scarcity or evil. Beauty reassures us of abundance, especially that God is absolutely abundant in goodness and in life. Beauty reassures us there is plenty of life to be had. I believe beauty reassures us that the end of this story is wonderful. The French impressionist Matisse "repeatedly said that he wanted to make paintings so serenely beautiful that when one came upon them, suddenly all problems would subside."

Beauty is such a gentle grace. Like God, it rarely shouts, rarely intrudes. Rather it woos, soothes, invites; it romances and caresses. We often sigh in the presence of beauty as it begins to minister to us—a good, deep soul-sigh.

1. Do you pay attention to what your soul loves? If so, can you name something that soothed it recently?

2. In what ways does beauty reassure us that goodness is still real in the world?

3. Have you considered beauty as a “gentle grace” before now? How might seeing it in this way increase your appreciation for it?

### **DAY THREE: PLASTIC WRAP**

I ran across a news release so shocking I had to read it twice. It didn't make the front page, but it should have: the average person now spends 93 percent of their life indoors (this includes your transportation time in car, bus, or metro). Ninety-three percent—such a staggering piece of information. We should pause for a moment and let the tragedy sink in.

That means if you live to be 100, you will have spent 93 of those years in a little compartment and only 7 outside in the dazzling, living world. If we live to the more usual 75, we will spend 69 and three-fourths of our years indoors, and only 5 and one-fourth outside. This includes our childhood, how does it be a child when they venture outside only a few months of their entire childhood?

This is a catastrophe, the final nail in the coffin to human soul. You live nearly all your life in a fake world: Artificial lighting instead of the warmth of sunlight or the cool of moonlight or the darkness of night itself. Artificial climate rather than the wild beauty of real weather; your world is always 68 degrees. All the surfaces you touch are things like plastic, nylon, and faux leather instead of meadow, wood and stream. Fake fireplaces; wax fruit. The atmosphere you inhabit is now asphyxiating with artificial smells-mostly chemicals and "air fresheners"-instead of cut grass, wood smoke, and salt air (is anyone weeping yet?). In place of the cry of the hawk, the thunder of a waterfall, and the comfort of crickets, your world spews out artificial sounds-all the licks and beeps and whir of technology, the hum of the HVAC. Dear God, even the plants in your little bubble are fake. They give no oxygen; only the plastic off-gases toxins, and if that isn't a signal fire I don't know what is.

This is a life for people in a science fiction novel. This would be understandable, acceptable, if we'd colonized Mars and by necessity you lived in a bubble. But this is not the life God ordained for the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve, whose habitat is this sumptuous earth. It's like putting wild horses in a Styrofoam box for the rest of their lives.

You live a bodily existence. The physical life, with all the glories of senses, appetites, and passions-this is the life God meant for us. It's through our senses we learn most every important lesson. Even in spiritual acts of worship and prayer we are standing or kneeling, engaging bodily. God put your soul in this amazing body and then put you in a world perfectly designed for that experience. Which is why the rescue of the soul takes place through our engagement with the real world.

Living in an artificial world is like spending your life wrapped in plastic wrap. You wonder why you feel tired, numb, a little depressed, when the simple answer is you have vitamin D deficiency; there's no sunlight in your life, literally and figuratively.

Our body, soul, and spirit atrophy because we were made to inhabit a real world, drawing life, joy, and strength from it. To be shaped by it, to relish in it. Living your whole life with gloves on, a filtered experience, never really feeling anything. Then wonder why your soul feels numb.

1. What is described above as "a catastrophe, the final nail in the coffin for the human soul"?

2. Look around you as you read this. How much of your world would you say is artificial? List as many items as you can in the space below.

3. This reading includes the statement that “the rescue of the soul takes place through our engagement with the real world. Can you give an example of how this has been for you? If it hasn't yet, would you like it to be?

4. Did you realize how soul-numbing time spent in an artificial world could be? What can you begin doing to get more sunlight in your life?

#### **DAY FOUR: GOD IS OUT THERE**

We are looking for more of God. You're far more likely to find him in a walk through an orchard or a sit by a pond than you are in a subway terminal. Of course God is with us and for us wherever we are, but in terms of refreshment, renewal, restoration, in terms of finding God in ways we can drink deeply of his wonderful being, you'd do better to look for him in the cry of the gull than the scream of the siren. God inhabits the world he made; his vibrancy permeates all creation:

*The whole earth is filled with his glory! (Isaiah 6:3, NLT).*

*Christ... ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself (Ephesians 4:9-10, NLT).*

In the most beloved of Psalms, perhaps the most beloved of all Scripture, David wrote a poem to celebrate the restoration of his soul. Notice that God took him into nature to accomplish that:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul (Psalm 23:1-3).*

Be careful you don't dismiss this as something belonging to an agrarian age. God could have taken David into the palace to renew him; he could have taken him into the home of a friend or family member; he could have chosen the bustling markets of Jerusalem. In other words, there were plenty of indoor options for God to employ. But his choice for David's resuscitation was nature, his greenhouse, filled with his own life, pulsing with his glory, unique in its ability to restore and renew his children.

The rescue is always close at hand. The Spirit of God still hovers over creation; nature is ever renewed with "the dearest freshness." There's nothing better for a fried soul than to get in the woods or walk in the park. Lie on your back in the grass and watch the clouds go by. Sit on the beach and watch the breakers.

Recently I was on a two-week business trip; it began with an overnight flight, ten hours in a tube. From there it was airports, hotels, cars-an entirely artificial existence. Everything was fake-weather, lighting, sounds. On the last night, a massive thunderstorm let loose in the city. My car was parked two blocks away. Instead of trying to avoid the rain by calling a cab, or cringing and moping at the fact that I would get utterly soaked, I relished it. I rejoiced the entire two torrential blocks; I whooped and shouted and let the rain utterly douse me. After days upon days in the artificial, it was a cleansing baptism.

1. While God is everywhere, do you tend to experience more of God's presence outdoors or indoors?

2. When is a recent example where this happened?

3. In Psalm 23:1-3, do you think the setting is relevant to the transformation David experienced? Why or why not?

## DAY FIVE: ALLOWING NATURE TO HEAL

I recently had a fried-soul kind of day. One where everything seems to go sideways from the moment you get out of bed; I'll bet you've had one of these:

There's no milk, so there's no cereal, and you're late anyway, so there's no breakfast. You're halfway to work when realize you forgot your phone---so you're late to work because you went back and got your phone and now you're behind on everything. People are tweaked at you. You look forward to lunch as your first chance to come up for air, but the line at your favorite taco joint is out the door, and though you should have stayed, you're already well on your way to totally fried, so you leave in frustration, which only makes you skip lunch, which justifies your use of chocolate and caffeine to see you through the afternoon. But that completely takes your legs out from under you, and all you end up accomplishing is making a list of the things you need to do, which overwhelms you. By the time you get home, you are seriously fried.

I was strung out, deep in a vat of anger, frustration, self-indulging cynicism, and fatigue. A dangerous place to be. The next move would be rescue or the knockout punch. After a cold dinner I went out on the porch and just sat there. I knew I needed rescue, and I knew the nearest hope of that was the porch.

It was a beautiful Indian summer evening, the kind where the heat of the day has warmed the breezes, but you can also feel the cool from the mountains beginning to trickle down like refreshing streams. Nature began its gentle work.

My heart started coming to the surface, as it often does when I can get away into nature and let beauty have its effect on me. Mind you I didn't get to the beach. I'm not canoeing some mountain lake. I'm simply sitting on my back porch. It doesn't take much; rescue is always at hand. Warm summer evening, cool breeze, beautiful sky now turning that deep navy blue just before dark, crickets making their eternal melodies.

That's when the carnival started.

*A beer would make this a lot better, went the voice. Or maybe tequila. You oughta go find some cookies.* Some agitated place in me started clamoring for relief. It felt like two kingdoms were vying for my soul. The carnival was offering relief. Nature was offering restoration. They are leagues apart, my friends. Leagues apart.

Relief is momentary; it's checking out, numbing, sedating yourself. Television is relief. Eating a bag of cookies is relief. Tequila is relief. And let's be honest-relief is what we reach for because it's immediate and usually within our grasp. Most of us turn there, when what we really need is restoration.

Nature heals; nature restores. Think of sitting on the beach watching the waves roll in at sunset and compare it to turning on the tube and vegging in front of Narcos or Fear the

Walking Dead. The experiences could not be farther apart. Remember how you feel sitting by a small brook, listening to its little musical songs, and contrast that to an hour of HALO. Video games offer relief; nature offers restoration.

This is what David was trying to put words to when he reported finding God in green meadows and beside quiet waters, emerging with a refreshed soul. Or as another translation has it, "He renews my strength" (Psalm 23:3, NLT). The world we live in fries the soul on a daily basis, fries it with a vengeance (it feels vengeful). We need the immersion David spoke of.

So I stayed on the porch, choosing to ignore the chorus of vendors trying to get me to leave in search of some relief. I knew if I left, all I would find was sugar or alcohol, and my soul would be no better for it. So I chose to let the evening continue to have its healing ministry.

Remember-God doesn't like to shout. His invitation are much more gentle.

Sunset was over; night was falling, and still I sat there. The evening itself was cool now, and an owl was hootin somewhere off in the distance. I could feel my soul settlin down even more; the feeling was like unwrinkling or disentangling on a soul level, as your body does in a hot tub. *Thank you for this gift of beauty, I said. I receive it into my soul.*

Darkness, crickets, coolness, quiet. I felt like I'd been through detox. When I fell into bed that night, it was as if the hellish day had never even happened. Restoration. So much better than mere relief.

1. Can you recall a recent day in your life where everything ways from the moment you got out of bed? What were some of the factors that caused things to spiral downward?

2. In the midst of that difficult time, what would momentary relief have looked like? Now, what would real restoration look like?

3. Which option did you choose...and what was the result?