

## A Beautiful Adventure: the Gift of the Arts in Spiritual Formation

with Carolyn Arends

### Transcript for Session 1

**Wendy VanderWal Martin:** Welcome to our 2024 Meditation Series produced by the Henri Nouwen Society. This year we're focusing on the theme of the arts, and we've titled this series A Beautiful Adventure, the Gift of the Arts in Spiritual Formation. And our guest speaker this year is Carolyn Arends. Carolyn has released 14 albums and is the author of three critically acclaimed books. In addition to her busy touring and speaking schedule, Carolyn has been a regular columnist for Christianity Today, Faith Today, and CT Women, and has served as an adjunct professor at several universities and seminaries. Carolyn's also the Director of Education for Renovare, a far reaching organization that encourages and nurtures personal and spiritual renewal. Welcome to our first session, and a special and warm welcome to Carolyn.

**Carolyn Arends:** Thank you, Wendy. It is a deep privilege to get to work with you and the Society, and I'm excited to see where our beautiful adventure takes us. So I will dive in and I'll start with a story. Many years ago back in a time when my main vocation was as a touring recording artist, I found myself performing at a concert in a beautiful old church in Erie, Pennsylvania. And at the concert, I sang a song called In Good Hands, which is a meditation on the hands of Christ. Afterward, as my duo partner, Spencer and I were packing up our gear, the church's custodian stopped by and he said, "Hey, when you were singing that song about Jesus's hands, you couldn't see it, but the sun was sitting behind you and it was making those stained glass pictures of Jesus glow. The sound of your buddy's violin was bouncing off those stone walls. And well, you didn't know it, but you was saying more than you was even saying." You was saying more than you was even saying. I've always remembered that story and the way it speaks to the power of the arts.

In this series, we're going to explore the arts and beauty and the human capacity for creativity as good gifts from God that can help us say more than we even know how to say, help us feel more than we even knew we were capable of feeling, and help us connect with ourselves and with each other and with God in ways that we didn't even know we could connect. More specifically, we're going to focus our attention on the unique way that engagement with the arts can serve as a kind of secret agent in our own spiritual formation.

Now, I've got to tell you, investigating the connection between the arts and spiritual formation in a series presented by the Henri Nouwen Society is a wonderful privilege, and I think so very fitting. To encounter the work of Henri Nouwen is to encounter a teacher and writer who is exquisitely artful in his passion for spiritual formation and profoundly spiritual in his passion for art. So in the warm glow of Henri's legacy, I'm excited to see what we can learn together about the role of the arts in spiritual formation.

I think it will really help us if we use this first session of our four-part series to address some possible obstacles, get clear on some definitions, and consider some important invitations. Then in subsequent sessions, we'll look closely at six different ways that the arts can be allies in our spiritual formation. Now, some of you, I'm willing to bet are watching this, and you're really drawn to the idea of exploring the role of the arts in spiritual formation, but I also bet that others of you may be experiencing some resistance to our proposed journey.

So let me address two possible objections that you might have. Here's possible objection number one, you may not consider yourself to be particularly artsy or creative. If that's the case, I'd like to point out two things. First, I want to suggest that there is no possible way that the arts are not part of your life. Referring to the arts is just a shorthand way of referring to the products of human creativity, paintings and photographs and billboards and sculptures, and music, and films, and Netflix series, and books and blog posts and dance and theater and culinary creations and gardens and textiles. You get the idea if you are a connoisseur of the fine arts, that is wonderful, but even if you're not, unless you live in an empty cave, I can pretty much guarantee that your world is saturated by various products of human creativity. So given that you are surrounded by art, I'm hoping you might be up to thinking about the formational role that art plays in your life.

Second, I'd like to suggest that there is no possible way that you are not creative. Think about the first five words of the Hebrew Bible. In the beginning, God created even before the biblical writers tell us that God is infinite or omnipresent. They tell us that God is creative. And then just a couple of chapters later, the writers of Genesis tell us that we are made in the Creator's image. So it only makes sense that we, God's little image bearers are designed to flourish when we exercise our own creativity and engage with the creativity of others.

One of the things I remember so clearly from the pandemic a few years ago was that the lockdown seemed to trigger a need in many, many people to do something creative. A scroll through social media in those days revealed all manner of projects, knitting, painting, beating, landscaping, sourdough.

What do you think that was about? In a wonderful book about faith and art entitled *Walking on Water*, Madeleine L'Engle borrows from Leonard Bernstein to define creativity as quote, "Making cosmos in chaos." In the midst of the chaos of our inner and outer world, a poem or a painting or a loaf of bread for that matter comes into being, and extrinsically possesses an order and a meaning that defy the apparent randomness of life. So maybe it makes sense that faced with the chaos of a pandemic and its global effects, many of us discovered a near primal instinct to create our own little patches of cosmos. I think our response to the pandemic illustrates something important. To be human is to be creative. If you're watching this and you're a human, you are creative.

The author Gary Mullinder, has a way of thinking about creativity that I love. He says that just as God hovered over the formless deep and began to fill it with expressions of himself at the beginning of creation, you and I are creative whenever we notice a void and fill it with something of ourselves. The artists among us filled that void with art. But that's just one of a million ways to do it. It could be the way you turn a business proposal into a thing of beauty or last night's chaotic leftovers into something tasty or a sibling war into a family game night. There's no such thing as an uncreative person because there is no one who does not bear the image of the Creator. Now, I just said, you don't have to be involved in the arts to be creative, and that is absolutely true. But because you are by nature a creative being, I want to argue that those special products of human creativity that we identify as the arts have something special to offer you.

So again, I'm hoping you'll be up for exploring what the arts might have to offer you in your life with God. Now, that brings me to the second possible objection. Number two is that you may not consider yourself to be particularly into spiritual formation. Well, whether you are into spiritual formation or whether you're not, I think it will be helpful to take a few minutes here to consider what we mean by the term spiritual formation. The truth is that every living creature gets some sort of formation, whether they're aware of it or not. In the case of us humans, because we're both body and spirit, we can properly call the way we are formed our spiritual formation. Now, think about who you are today. You did not become you in a test tube. Your strengths and your weaknesses, your sense of humor, your trigger points, your delights and your wounds.

So much of what makes you you is the product and at least a significant part of your own spiritual formation. And your own spiritual formation is the unfolding product of a whole constellation of variables. Your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, your siblings and friends, your teachers and mentors, your work, the way you've been endlessly marketed to all the neural pathways you've formed in your brain through multiple exposures to ideas and images, and through repeated patterns of thought and through the forces of habit. The way you've been loved, the way you've been wounded,

your spiritual formation is the product of every conversation you've ever had, every book you've ever read, every song that's ever moved you, every joke you've ever laughed at, and every image that has ever caught your eye. So if you're not sure what you think about spiritual formation, let me assure you that spiritual formation is not some optional process for hyper spiritual people.

We're all undergoing a spiritual formation all the time. Now, it's true that many people go through life unaware of the ways in which they're being formed, but the great news is that once you become aware of how you have been formed and are being formed, there are things you can do about who you are now and about who you are becoming. There is an invitation on the table for us to become more intentional about what and especially who we let shape us.

Now, I happen to believe as Henri Nouwen believed, that Christian spiritual formation is the way to go. If you're watching this, I suspect that you are at least open to that possibility. And Christian spiritual formation is what happens when you intentionally center your life in Christ. I think the pattern works something like this. You look around and you begin to realize that you live in a world that is very intentionally designed to form you into an anxious, needy, restless consumer. And then you look up or maybe within to the inner movements of the Spirit in your heart, and you discover a God who calls you beloved and who longs to heal you and make you progressively whole and holy. So you embark on a Christian spiritual formation journey. You set your eyes on Jesus as the example of what it means to live a fully formed flourishing human life. And you look for ways to intentionally open your heart to a spirit of ways to give God consent, to do the forming and transforming work in you that only God can do. Henri Nouwen and often talked about spiritual formation primarily as a journey we take from the mind to the heart. In a book simply called *Spiritual Formation*, which was curated and published after his death, Henri writes, "Spiritual formation I've come to believe is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It's about the movements from the mind to the heart through prayer in its many forms that reunite us with God, each other and our truest selves."

In many of his writings, Henri notes that this journey into the heart usually won't happen without our intentionality and our cooperation. In another book called *Spiritual Direction*, Henri writes, "Spiritual formation is the ever increasing capacity to live a spiritual life from the heart. A spiritual life cannot be formed without discipline, practice and accountability."

There are many spiritual disciplines. Now, it's not hard to find lists of classic spiritual disciplines. I work, as Wendy mentioned, with a spiritual formation organization called *Renovare*. And our movement was sparked when our founder, Richard Foster, wrote a book called *Celebration of Discipline*. In the book, Richard invited his mostly Protestant

audience to rediscover the classic spiritual disciplines, those practices and rhythms and habits that Christ followers have found most helpful over the past two millennia.

In his book, Richard listed 12 of these disciplines: meditation, prayer, fasting and study, which he grouped together as the inward disciplines; simplicity, solitude, submission, and service, which he called the outward disciplines; and confession, worship, guidance, and celebration, which he called the corporate disciplines, things we do together. Then Richard's good friend and ministry partner, the philosopher Dallas Willard, wrote a companion book called *The Spirit of the Disciplines* in which he regrouped many of the same disciplines that Richard had identified into disciplines of abstinence and disciplines of engagement. Dallas also added five more disciplines to the list: fellowship, frugality, chastity, service, and secrecy. As for Henri Nouwen, in his book *Spiritual Formation*, he places special emphasis on five practices. The first is what he calls the discipline of the heart, by which he means a regular practice of attending to the movements of our inner lives. The second is the practice of *Lectio Divina* and the remaining three practices are silence, community and service.

Now, of course, in addition to these robust lists, we could, and we should add an endless number of other disciplines and practices. Listen to how Henri finishes that quote we were looking at a few minutes ago. I'll pick it up again. "A spiritual life cannot be formed without discipline, practice, and accountability. There are many spiritual disciplines, almost anything that regularly asks us to slow down and order our time, desires and thoughts to counteract selfishness, impulsiveness, or hurried fogginess of mind can be a spiritual discipline." In his earlier book, *Making All Things New*, Henri offers an even simpler definition for spiritual disciplines. He writes, "A spiritual discipline is the concentrated effort to create some inner and outer space in our lives. A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray or to say it better allows the Spirit of God to pray in us."

So you may discover that a regular practice of gratitude as you savor your morning coffee, or a regular practice of dancing with your kids in the living room, or a regular practice of getting out on your mountain bike becomes a vital spiritual discipline in your life with God.

In fact, your whole life can become a kind of playground or a laboratory where you and God play and experiment and see what best allows you to connect and what best cultivates greater love in you for God and neighbor. And it is here in this freedom of building upon the classic spiritual disciplines that we will spend the rest of this series exploring three more practices that can be particularly helpful: exposure to art, creation of art, and receptivity to art.

Now, before we can call our work here done and move on to our exploration of the arts, we should talk about two other foundational ideas in spiritual formation that will be critical to our adventure. The first is an idea that Dallas Willard articulates well, and it's this, in the spiritual life, as in every other part of life, training is better than trying. So often when we discover a fissure or a crack in our personality, a place of malformation where we need healing or transformation, our instinctive response is to say, "I'll try harder next time." For example, let's say I behave selfishly in a given situation. I might notice my selfishness and resolve to try harder next time. But that approach seldom brings about lasting change and usually ends in disappointment, which ultimately only increases my self-absorption. I need to train instead of try.

As a very practical example of this principle, let's imagine I decide to run a marathon in three months time, despite the fact that I'm not currently running with any regularity at all. And let's say I resolve to try my very hardest on the day of the race. And I watched some very inspirational movies about marathons, and I put some motivational posters on my wall with sayings like, "You can do it" and "Give it your best" and "Go all in." And I ask some friends to cheer me on, and maybe they even pray for me. But I do not do one training run before the marathon. How do you think it will go? Even if I try my absolute hardest on the day of the race, probably not very well. Correct? I can guarantee not very well. Training, if I wanted to run a marathon, training would be much, much more fruitful than trying.

Now, this principle is obvious to us in many aspects of our lives, but for some reason we tend to miss it in our spiritual lives. There is an invitation in our lives with God to train instead of try. Now, please note this. This doesn't mean that we turn the spiritual life into a series of techniques and exercises where we try to get to a place of self-mastery for God. Far from it, progress in the spiritual life is actually about a growing intimacy with God, coupled with a growing dependency upon God. The more we grow, the less self-reliant we become, and the deeper our recognition that only God can heal us becomes.

So we train not to fix ourselves, but to learn how to turn our hearts and minds toward the Trinity with increasing frequency and with increasing tenderness in this spiritual disciplines really can help us train instead of try.

Now, there's one other closely related concept we should mention here, and that is the principle of indirection. The principle of indirection. This is the idea that when we become aware of an area of malformation that needs healing, it usually doesn't work to try to address that thing directly. To show you what I mean, let's imagine a person who struggles with a short temper becoming someone who does not easily lose their temper, is that person's spiritual marathon. And just trying harder is probably not going to be particularly

helpful. But the Spirit may invite that individual into an indirect practice of fasting. And in fasting, if that person will turn her heart toward God, every time she notices a hunger pain, she may begin to receive healing through her increased dependency on God, as well as through the discovery that her impulses and appetites don't have to have the last word.

Or let's imagine someone who struggles with terrible anxiety. Just trying to be less anxious is not going to be helpful for that person. But the Spirit may invite that person to spend, I don't know, six months meditating on the 23rd Psalm, and that indirect training may begin bit by bit to open up that person's soul to God's deep and abiding peace.

Let's take one more example and imagine someone who struggles with pride. Now, it's almost impossible to cultivate humility with direct effort. It's typically not long at all until we feel proud at being humble, which doesn't work. But the Spirit may invite that person into a discipline of secret hidden service, doing things for other people that no one sees or knows anything about. And in that indirect training, a noisy ego may over time begin to settle down until one day that person can say, with the Psalmist, "I have calmed and quieted myself. I'm a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child, I am content."

So as we begin our exploration of the role of the arts, as allies in our formation, a beautiful adventure, let's keep these things in mind. You are by virtue of being a human being deeply creative. If you live anywhere other than an empty cave, you are surrounded by the products of human creativity, which we call art. You are receiving a spiritual formation whether you are aware of it or not, and you are invited to center your formation in Jesus, the one who longs to love you into your full flourishing. Learning to cooperate with God's desire to heal and transform us is greatly aided by practices of openness and friendship that we can call spiritual disciplines. And our formation journey is also greatly aided by our understanding that we are much better off to train instead of try, and that we will often train through indirect means.

But right now, before we close this session and move into some conversation, I want to invite you into a three-part practice. The first part of this practice is to think creatively about the state of your own soul. I want to ask you, "If you had to come up with an image or a metaphor that describes your inner life at the moment, what might it be?" Does it feel like your soul is a whirlwind, maybe, or more like a shimmering? Like a hungry wolf, a shy or wounded child, a hibernating bear? Maybe your soul feels like a cozy campfire or maybe more like a dumpster fire, or maybe like a candle that's right on the verge of going out. What is that image for you? If something comes to mind, be sure to jot it down.

In fact, I hope you'll take some time to sketch it out, either by pressing pause on this video right now, or by circling back to this invitation in the next day or two. Now, if you're a good

visual artist, you might want to draw something quite detailed. But if you're not a visual artist like me, feel free to use stick figures or to find an image online or in a magazine that captures your inner state at the moment. So that's the first part of our practice: coming up with an image that represents your inner being at the moment. For the second part of our practice, I want to offer you a second image to hold alongside whatever image you currently have, the image that came to mind for your inner being. And the second image I want to offer you is the image of your soul as a garden.

I'm going to read a prayer written by Richard Foster, and I invite you to just close your eyes and meditate on the words of the prayer and just see how, how the words resonate. See if any of them land in the soil of your own heart. So take a couple breaths, settle in, and I'll read this short prayer:

Spirit of the living God, be the gardener of my soul. For so long, I have been waiting silent and still experiencing a winter of the soul. But now in the strong name of Jesus Christ, I dare to ask, clear away the dead growth of the past. Break up the hard clods of custom and routine, stir in the rich compost of vision and challenge, bury deep in my soul the implanted word, cultivate and water, and tend my heart until new life buds and opens and flowers. Amen.

Thank you for doing that. Okay, there's one more part to our practice. For this third part of the practice I'm going to read that prayer one more time, but this time we will put an image on the screen that I hope you will find helpful. This image is a contemporary painting entitled, "Christ the Gardener" by Joel Briggs. So as we put the image up, just take the image in, allowing your eyes to pray alongside your heart while I read this prayer one more time:

Spirit of the living God be the gardener of my soul. For so long, I have been waiting silent and still experiencing a winter of the soul. But now in the strong name of Jesus Christ, I dare to ask, clear away the dead growth of the past. Break up the hard clods of custom and routine, stir in the rich compost of vision and challenge, bury deep in my soul, the implanted word, cultivate and water, and tend my heart until new life buds and opens and flowers. Amen.

Thanks my friends, don't forget to circle back and draw that first image that came to mind for the state of your soul. And I'm looking forward to some conversation with Wendy.

**Wendy VanderWal Martin:** Carolyn, thank you so much for such a rich opening session. You've unpacked spiritual formation. You've given us an appetizer about the ways that art can accompany us in this journey. I love the fact that you raised the idea that we are being



formed no matter what. And so the question is, are we intentional about making some key discerning choices about what it is that is going to form us?

Now, one of the things I was thinking about as you were sharing with us is that words like training and discipline, even practice, can be trigger words for some people. I'm one of the ones who, you know, had piano lessons and had to practice and hated every minute of it, and was very grateful when I could finally quit <laugh>. And, and I wonder about, painting a picture of what it is we're being formed for. What is the vision of healing and freedom that that comes with intentionally discerning what is going to shape us and form us, and then making room and space for the practices that bring that to fruition. Can you paint some of that picture for us?

**Carolyn Arends:** I can try and it's a great question, and, and I'm not particularly slave-ish about, you can call them other things if you want. You can call them habits or rhythms or adventures or, you know, they don't have to be called disciplines. I remember I was on tour and I had never heard of Richard Foster. I now work with his organization, but I was on tour and my bassist was reading this book called Celebration of Discipline. And I thought, that is the most unappealing title for a book I've ever heard of in my entire life. And I kind of thought my bass player was a very structured discipline person, and I thought, well, of course he would like this book, but none of the rest of us will. But he kept saying, no, no, you've got, you need to read this, you need to read this.

And when I did, the opening chapter of that book talks about, you know, how it says over and over in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's letters, that righteousness is a gift from God. You know, it's not anything we earn. And I was saying, yeah, amen. Amen. And then the book says something like, you know, but there are these entrenched patterns of the human heart. And I thought, well, that's, that's true. I, there are these little kind of ingrained habits of selfishness, just little, little petty things, really, but I can't get free from them. And then he said, we don't have to be hung on the horns of the dilemma of either us trying to heal ourselves, you know, human works, human righteousness, or God's working grace, because God has given us these disciplines, and you can use a different word for them, but given us these means, these gracious beautiful means, these practices really of friendship that allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us.

And when I read that line that the, that the disciplines don't do anything, really, they don't change us in any way, except that they allow us to keep company with God. You know, stop all our running around in our distraction and keep God company with God, place ourselves before him. Open ourselves up to him, give him consent so that he can transform us. When I read that line, I had this picture of this gorgeous waterfall and just fresh, gushing beautiful water. And I could see myself and I knew that this waterfall was

God's blessing. God's love, God's acceptance, God's empowerment, God's healing, all of it. It was all, everything I longed for. And in my mind's eye, I could see this waterfall. And I was just running around the edges of this waterfall, super, you know, just busy and hot and thirsty, and there was no fence around the waterfall, but I was just running around the edges of it, complaining about my thirst, and complaining about how hot I was. And I suddenly saw that there are these practices that our brothers and sisters in the faith have been testing out and saying, really help for a couple thousand years that just help us get in the waterfall. And then getting in the waterfall. First and foremost, I think the vision is intimacy with God, it's friendship with God. If anything else comes before that, it just becomes another idolatry. So really the goal, the vision is knowing "I am my beloved's and he is mine." In some traditions we would talk about this maybe even as terms as lofty as union with God. But that's the dream, that's the vision. This friendship, this intimacy, this deep heart-to-heart relationship with God. And then the fruit of that just can't help but be a progressive inner freedom from the things that enslave us, the little selfish bent parts of ourselves that keep us from loving and living the way that we want to. The fruit of this growing intimacy with God is a gradual healing of those things. So to me, that's worth some disciplines, even if we have to think of a nicer name for them.

**Wendy VanderWal Martin:** Well, thank you. I think the permission to form our own lexicon in ways that will feel like gift to us rather than obligation or perhaps feed into some old tapes of striving or works-based religion is really wonderful. So the idea that if [the word] discipline isn't working for you, you know, what energizes you or what are the rhythms of your life or, or even what are the gifts of the journey? So the title of this series is just such a wonderful one, A Beautiful Adventure. And I think that alone for me paints a picture that's anything but striving or anything but trying to be more religious. That it, you know, conjures up sort of, you know, a Lord of the Rings in the best part where the eagles pick you up, right? And take you ... those of you who don't know Lord of the Rings, it's the wonderful part at the end where after much hardship, you're picked up and flown to where you need to be. It strikes me that spiritual formation isn't an either or, it's a both/and. Right there is this gift and breakthrough, and God shows up and we didn't do anything <laugh>. And then there are the intentions, the rhythms, the gifts, the practices, the training, the disciplines that help us walk out and just get ourselves in position ready for that encounter. And what we hope with this series is that whether you've been on the journey and very intentional for a long time, or whether some of this is a new concept, that the arts with intention will provide some newness, some freshness, or maybe language for what you've been doing for a long time already. Carolyn, you, you've laid out the series really beautifully for us in this session, but maybe just give us a tidbit, a little teaser, an appetizer. What can people look forward to for next week?

**Carolyn Arends:** Ah, well over the coming weeks, each of the remaining sessions, we're going to explore two different ways that the arts can kind of be our allies, our friends, our helps. And I think, I love what you were just saying. You know, sometimes it's just encounter that's just sheer grace and it just comes out of nowhere. And other times it's in God gives us some agency and some intentionality helps us sort of grow into our healing. And, I think we'll find that even in our engagement with the arts, that some of it will just be like, you know, it'll just come, it'll just be encounter. It'll just be amazing. And some of it'll be like, I might have to, you know, look at this a couple different ways, or listen to this a couple different ways. So I think it's going to work out all our different kind of muscles and invite us into a really beautiful adventure. And so we'll be tackling those first two ways that arts can be allies next week.

**Wendy VanderWal Martin:**

And the beautiful thing about the arts is that they're vast. That there's no one little container for the arts. And so no matter who you are or how you learn or what you're drawn to, there will be a place of connection and communion for you. So thank you to Carolyn and thank you to you for being with us for this first session of A Beautiful Adventure: the Gift of the Arts in Spiritual Formation.