

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

with Carolyn Arends

Transcript for Session 3

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Welcome back friends to the 2024 meditation series produced by the Henri Nouwen Society. We've entitled this year's series A Beautiful Adventure: the Gift of the Arts in Spiritual Formation. Our guest speaker is Carolyn Arends. Carolyn has served widely at universities and seminaries. She's released 14 albums and three critically acclaimed books, and she's the director of Education for Renavare, a far reaching organization that encourages and nurtures personal and spiritual renewal. Welcome back Carolyn, and welcome to session three.

Carolyn Arends: Thank you, Wendy. It is so good to be back with you and back with you, our viewers. We're so glad you're here. Let's think about where we've been so far. We've explored two ways in which the arts can be allies in the beautiful adventure of our friendship with God. Two ways that exposure to art and receptivity to art and the creation of art can help us train instead of try as we become intentional about our own formation. Now you'll recall, I hope, that the first thing we explored was the way that art can help us train to pay attention. We talked about the fact that God is constantly speaking and moving in the inner movements of our hearts as well as in the events and relationships around us, but that our environment is designed to hijack and really colonize our attention. And it seldom works to just grit our teeth and try harder to pay attention to the Trinity and to each other.

But the arts in cooperation with other practices like silence and solitude give us beautiful and truly rewarding opportunities to train to pay attention. The arts can disciple and even hope to heal our senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Now, I'm curious whether you had a chance to try the contemplative photography practice I suggested in the last session. I hope you did. And if so, what did you discover in your neighborhood that you may have otherwise overlooked? Did the practice have any lingering effect? Did you notice yourself noticing more beauty in the following days? I hope so. And then you'll recall that we explored a second way that the arts can be secret agents for our good. We explored the idea that the arts and beauty in general can help us train in longing in a world that seeks to keep us comfortable, unreflective and numb.

Receiving and creating art and beauty can help wake us up and get us in touch with the

deep groans of the world, of our own spirits and of God's spirit. What's beautiful about this is that waking up to our own longing can also wake us up to wonder and to awe and ultimately to hope. During last session's conversation with Wendy, I was particularly struck by her idea that receptivity to beauty in art, in nature, and in each other is one of the key ingredients needed to cultivate hopefulness. I hope that you'll be brave enough to continue to look and listen for things around you that are so beautiful that they hurt. Now, many of the examples of art we have looked at so far have been classic or contemporary paintings, but that's just because of the limitations of sharing various kinds of art over video.

I hope you will continue to expand your imagination about what the arts can include. Everything from film and dance and music to artfully made clothing and food and gardens, to poetry and woodworking projects and bead work. Hey, if you make it to the beach this summer, consider making a sandcastle as creatively as you possibly can. Art is everywhere. I'm curious about how your working understanding of the spiritual formation journey is coming along as we work through these sessions. Is it feeling like an invitation to a beautiful adventure? Let's let Henri continue to cast the vision for us. "Spiritual formation," Henri writes, "prepares us for a life in which we move away from our fears, compulsions, resentments, and sorrows to serve with joy and courage in the world, even when this leads us to places we would rather not go. Spiritual formation helps us to see the face of God in the midst of a hardened world and in our own heart."

This freedom helps us to use our skills and our very lives to make that face visible to all who live in and fear as Jesus told his disciples. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. With that vision of beautiful freedom in mind. We're going to look today at two more ways in which the arts can be powerful allies. So get ready.

The first of those two is this: The arts help us train for the renewing of our minds. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world," the Apostle Paul urged the church in Rome, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." But how does the renewing of our minds happen? Well, let's talk for a minute about the way our minds work and the importance of metaphors. Now, I've got to confess, I grew up in a faith tradition that was often wary and sometimes quite confused about metaphorical language.

I attended a Christian liberal arts university in the 1980s during a time when much of my community was very earnest to safeguard what we called, quote, the plain meaning of the Bible, end quote. This meant that we often missed a lot of the metaphors. Many of us, however, were fans of the band U2, and I had a classmate named Ken Jacobson who could do a wonderful Bono impression. I'll never forget the way that Ken would sing the U2 song, I still haven't found what I'm looking for. I have spoke with the tongue of angels. I have

held the hand of a devil, not literally, it's only a metaphor. He was dosing us. He had to put that in there to calm us down. But the truth was we weren't comfortable with metaphors, but we needed metaphors back then and we need them now. Metaphors are the basis of all mental learning.

We are able to take in new information by relating the new idea or experience to something we already know, and then holding the two things together. Now, what does this have to do with art? Well, theologian and musician, Jeremy Bigby argues that all art is metaphorical. Every genre. And that it always brings together at least two elements that are normally apart. And the fact that art is metaphorical matters because we tend to understand the world and God and ourselves in terms of our dominant metaphors. Metaphors are the lenses through which we view the world. If you always looked at the night sky through a piece of glass with straight lines streaked on it, you would be utterly convinced that the stars all lined up in rows.

Now, Jesus really understands this feature of our minds throughout his earthly ministry. He was constantly astonished and really heartbroken by the impoverished mental images people had of his father. He was always trying to give people new, healthier, more beautiful metaphors for God. Metaphors like loving father shepherd of the lost sheep, extravagant host, keeper of the sparrows.

Well, today our metaphors continue to need remediation and once again, the arts can help. For example, from Newton on, we have tended, at least in the West, more and more to use the metaphor of machine as a dominant picture for understanding the world. And the more we've done that, the more we've understood the world and ourselves mechanistically. We even talk about our brains like they're computers. I do that all the time. I say there's no more room on the hard drive or I'm out of ram. But human beings are immeasurably more complex than computers. We need new metaphors.

Our formation, our ability to open ourselves up to the love of God is massively shaped, massively shaped by our understanding of who God is and who we are. And art, well, art can give us new vistas for understanding God and the world. Because the world is in some ways like a machine. Yes, but it can also be like a Baryshnikov leap, a Coptic fresco, a Miles Davis trumpet solo, van Gogh sunflowers, or a U2 anthem.

This is why we need a variety of rich and illuminative metaphors for the spiritual journey itself. This is why sometimes we might speak of our journey as a kind of apprenticeship where Jesus is the master and we are the student. Other times we might speak of our discipleship to Jesus. Sometimes we might sense an invitation to surrender into the metaphor of friendship or the metaphor of parenthood coming to the mothering Father,

heart of God, like a little child. In our more aesthetic and energetic moments, we might think of our formation journey in terms of athletic training metaphors, the apostle Paul was fond of those. But in our wounded moments, we may need to understand our life with God as more hospital than gymnasium. The mystics might encourage us to think of God as the lover and ourselves as the beloved, as Henri would. In our highly creative moments, we might think of spiritual practices as something like the journey of a musician, remembering that just as a musician practices, in order to cultivate the ability to play music with freedom, we too can use some practice on the journey to a freer and more psychologically and spiritually musical playful life.

Each of those metaphors tells us something true about the invitation of love that God extends to us and we need them all. We need a wide range of creative generative metaphors to help us see different facets of the diamond that is our life with God. We mentioned in the last session that Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is a wonderful extended *Visio Davina* on the Rembrandt painting that depicts the biblical parable. In that book, Henri first allows the younger brother to serve as a powerful metaphor for the state of his soul. Then the metaphor of the older brother, and finally, the metaphor of the Father. Through the use of those three metaphors, Henri offers us a deeper and richer understanding of communion with God than we could have possibly received from just one.

So art helps us train for the renewing of our minds by offering us banquets a beautiful and challenging metaphors to expand and enrich our understanding of God, the world and ourselves.

But there's more besides giving us new ways of perceiving the world. The reality is that artwork metaphorically also helps us train to renew our minds. In another way, in his book *Resounding Truth*, Jeremy Bigby argues not only that all art is metaphorical, but also that because it is metaphorical, it generates what he calls a surplus of meaning. In other words, even a single metaphor can somehow hold or point to rich layers of meaning. Now, Bigby makes this case by analyzing Shakespeare's straightforward figure of speech. Juliet is the sun from *Romeo and Juliet*. Now, if we wanted to translate that metaphor into propositional language, we'd have to flatten it out into a singular meaning something like Juliet seems to glow, or Juliet makes me hot, or Juliet gives me life. But if we leave the metaphor intact, it can mean all those things and more. We get to enjoy a depth, a richness of meaning that is not only irreducible but also inexhaustible.

This is likely why Jesus so often offered the metaphors that we call parables in place of expository teaching. In *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen suggests we're meant to climb inside Jesus's parables living within them until we discover their richness.

Whereas a strictly worded definition closes down the mind, Henri writes, a parable opens it up. This is one of the many reasons that Jesus answered questions with stories rather than theological arguments. Our minds need to be reshaped and renewed because we think the world is exhaustible, that we can master it eventually.

Everywhere we go, we are confronted with wondrous irreducible mysteries, not least the limitless mysteries of other human beings and of our own souls, but we are constantly reducing those mysteries and we can be quite careless in making assumptions. For example, I suspect that some of the polarization we experience in the world today comes from our tendency to observe the way a person looks or acts, and immediately jump to a reductionistic judgment about who that person is. Or we hear someone express a viewpoint on one issue and immediately presume to know what that person thinks about every issue. I am so guilty of this sin of presuming what people think and feel, and I find that human beings constantly challenge my first impressions and surprise me if I will only give them the space and time and attention that will allow for the irreducible mystery of who they are to begin to unfold.

Ron Rolheiser brilliantly diagnoses our reductionistic situation. In his really helpful book, *The Shattered Lantern*, he argues that our pre-enlightenment ancestors had a willingness to let the world be enchanted, which gave them what he calls a high symbolic hedge. They did not suffer from our compulsion to drain the meaning out of our experience and flatten it down into a low symbolic hedge. Our low symbolic hedge has made it difficult for us to receive or even perceive the mysteries all around us, including and especially the active presence of God speaking into and out of the thick of our days. To illustrate what he means, Rolheiser imagines a middle aged man beset by chronic back pain. What does this pain mean? It can mean that he has arthritis, a medical symbol, or it can mean that he is undergoing some sort of midlife crisis, a psychological symbol, or it can mean that he is undergoing the Paschal mystery that this is his cross, his chance to keep Jesus company, a religious symbol. Or it might mean all three. The symbols with which we enter and interpret our experience can be low: suffering arthritis or high: being part of the Paschal mystery with a high symbolic hedge. The experience can hold all three of those meanings, and our suffering friend can and should be encouraged to seek medical and psychological and spiritual support while allowing his experience to be as complex and layered and imbued with meaning as it actually is.

So how do we train to recover a higher symbolic hedge? Art can help us by reminding us in its stubbornly metaphorical way that even simple truths are irreducible and inexhaustible. And I'm not arguing that art or any of our experiences for that matter can mean anything we want them to mean. I'm just suggesting that while both metaphors and our experiences will have specific meanings, those meanings will be bottomless. And the

inexhaustible of the world is really good news because it points to the infinite goodness and love and majesty of the God who made it. I've heard my friend and mentor the theologian, Christopher Hale, imagine our lives in eternity as a progressive journey, deeper and deeper into the inexhaustible beauty of the Trinity. He imagines we'll see some facet of God and we'll gasp. Oh Lord, it's so wonderful. I'm going to need a little time to process this, and the Lord will answer. Sure, take all the time you need, and maybe after, you know the equivalent of about 10,000 years or so, we'll be ready to see another facet of the diamond and God will show us even more of who He is, and we'll go on like that forever traveling deeper and deeper into the wonder and beauty of the Trinity because you simply can't get to the bottom of God's goodness and love. That will be a beautiful adventure indeed.

So let's take a few minutes to live inside the metaphor of the parable of the prodigal Son and to see if doing so can help us begin to renew the ways we think about God and God's love. This is a photograph of a sculpture entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Charlie McCee. Take a few moments to pray with your eyes as you take in this image after a moment. As you do, I will read just a sentence or two from the parable. Jesus told us in Luke chapter 15. So he got up and went to his father, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him one more time. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son through his arms around him and kissed them.

Thank you for giving that image your careful attention. Did you find that the metaphor of the sculpture, alongside the metaphor of the parable, was able to enrich your perception of the love of God? I trust that it did because art, religious or otherwise can contribute powerfully to the life of the spirit by inviting us to make explicit the multiplicity of meaning implicit and ordinary life. Now, only God can transform us through the renewing of our minds, but apprenticing ourselves to art is one of the spiritual disciplines we can use to cooperate with him in the sanctifying of our imaginations.

Well, let's move on to a fourth way that art can help us train instead of try. When it comes to our life and friendship with God, it's this, the arts can help us train to appreciate things and beings for more than their usefulness. Our inspiration for this gift of the arts is the words of the psalmist. One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. Why? Just to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. Now, many pieces of art have a practical purpose. Think of a crystal water jug or a richly elegant pen. But usually what helps us identify art as art is the fact that we appreciate it for more than its usefulness. We value it purely for its aesthetic qualities, its beauty.

In this sense, art is extra utilitarian. Well, the stubborn streaks of both pragmatism and narcissism in our culture push us towards utilitarianism. They make us highly prone to see other things and especially other people only in terms of how they map onto us and our perceived needs. We tend to pursue relationships that can fill particular roles in our lives to teach us something or improve our professional or social standings.

Now, I can remember, for example, that when I had young children, it was nearly impossible for me not to view any teenagers I met as primarily potential babysitters. I was not good at seeing them for just for their beautiful, mysterious, complex, irreducible selves. Instead of getting to know them on their own terms, I was chronically sizing them up for babysitter suitability. So how do I push against the narcissism and pragmatism that have me viewing everything in the world primarily in terms of what it can do for me?

Well, I can try to appreciate things and people just for the glory of who they are, but once again, training is likely to be a much more fruitful path than trying and the arts once more can be wonderful allies in this quest here. Once again, giving some loving attention to art that does not immediately appeal to me might be especially helpful. Can I train to quiet the narcissist in me, the one who demands that everything in the world be cut to my size? Can I learn to see or hear or taste or touch or the smell the beauty of something that has nothing to offer me other than the delightful fact that it exists? In doing so, I may find that one of the gifts to be found in training to appreciate things and beings on their own terms is that I also begin to expand my definition and my apprehension of beauty.

A couple of years ago, I was attending a retreat near Phoenix, Arizona. On the drive from the airport to the retreat center, I was overwhelmed, sorry, Phoenix, I was overwhelmed by the barren ugliness of the desert. Where I live in British Columbia, there is lush greenery everywhere you look. But there in Phoenix things just felt scorched and dry and monochrome. I found myself wondering why on earth anyone would live there or build a retreat center there. But a funny thing happened on about the third day of my stay, I stepped out on my little balcony and looked out over the property, letting my eyes take in the stubborn resilience of the ridiculously jaunty cacti and the majestic verigated sweep of the side of Camelback mountain. Imagine my shock when I realized I was in an exquisitely beautiful place. Later that day, I confessed to a local that had taken me a while to see how lovely the desert was. He grinned and said, "Yeah, I can take a few days for you folks from the northwest to accept Arizona's beauty on its own terms." Hmm, I wonder how much beauty I have missed in my life because of my tendency to want it only on my own terms. Listen to what Henri says about learning to resist the temptation to evaluate everything around us on the basis of its usefulness. "To us, there is beauty and goodness right where we are. There are trees and flowers to enjoy paintings and sculptures to admire most of all. There are people who smile, play, and show kindness and gentleness. They're all around us

to be recognized as free gifts to receive in gratitude. But our temptation, our temptation, is to collect all the beauty and goodness surrounding us as helpful information we can use, we can use for our projects, but then we cannot enjoy it, and we soon find that we need a vacation to restore ourselves. Let's try to see the goodness and the beauty in front of us before we go elsewhere to look for it."

Only the God who takes note of every sparrow and knows the hairs on our heads can give us eyes to see every creature the way that God does. But the arts can and should be means of grace given to us by the master artist that can help us learn to attend to God's image and every single one of God's image bearers and every atom of his creation.

Before I head into some conversation with Wendy, let me offer you two possible practices to try on your own. The first practice will help you enjoy the metaphorical nature of art. As you train for the renewing of your mind, it simply involves finding or making an object that represents how you are currently experiencing or not experiencing God. If it's a found object, it could be a piece of art, but it could also be a rock or a leaf or a childhood toy or a photograph or really any number of things. And if it's something you make, the options are truly endless. You might use beads or clay or sand or Play-Doh or poetry or music or any material at all. But the idea is just that you will find or create something that represents the current state of your life with God, and then see how that metaphor speaks to you and maybe even surprises you with meaning that you did not expect.

The second practice will help you allow art to train you in appreciating things and beings for more than the way they map on to you and your preferences. The invitation for this practice is to listen to a piece of music in a genre that you might not otherwise hear or gravitate toward. Try to pick a song or album that is generally well reviewed but is not normally your cup of tea. Listen to the music several times with careful attention. Notice what is happening in the bass. Ask yourself if there is more than one instrumental melody playing at once. If there are words, ask yourself whether the music is saying the same thing that the lyrics are saying. The goal is not necessarily to become a fan of that particular genre of music, but to become open to receiving whatever beauty it might have to offer on its own terms. I feel quite hopeful that either or both of those practices can lead you on a beautiful adventure.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Thank you so much, Carolyn. Another rich invitation to make space in our lives. As you were talking about usefulness, utilitarianism and how challenging it is to resist that system that we're steeped in, I couldn't help but think that for some of us, the opposite of usefulness is sometimes connected with a notion of laziness. That if we're resisting making everything useful, are we then just sort of opening the door to sloth or to acedia, that ancient term that talks about sort of a disconnection. I'm just struck by

how do we give ourselves permission to resist that utilitarianism without just sort of becoming self-absorbed? Without it becoming an extension of our narcissism?

Carolyn Arends: Mm, that's a great question. As soon as you get this sorted, I want you to call me and let me know. You know, I think we will probably have a tendency to err on one side or the other. For me, the challenge is always to do things that don't feel productive is actually the challenge, the invitation. So, sometimes people will say, just waste time with God, and I feel allergic to that. No, I don't want to waste time. Life is short and there's so much to do. So for me, I think I'd have to lean into Eugene Peterson's definition of sloth. He sometimes says that super frantic, busy pastors and, and people that work in the ministry, I heard him say that they can be slothful. And I thought, Eugene, come on. They're the busiest people I know. And he said, well, they're using their busyness to avoid the deep, hard work of pressing into their life with God. And so their busyness becomes a kind of sloth. So for me, I have to be more aware of that form of sloth. But I do hear what you're saying. There can be an overcorrection in the other direction where our lives are not bearing any kind of fruit. And I don't know, you know, one of my favorite expressions about Jesus is that he came to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. I just find that to be so true over and over again when I'm getting too comfortable. He comes along, gives me a little loving nudge. When I'm disturbed, he comes along with great, great comfort. And I think, you know, for anyone listening or for us in our, in our lives when we're getting a little too, non-utilitarian, unproductive, there will be some sort of prompt if we're leaning into our life with God. And if we're getting too driven, then too there will be some kind of prompt. But the condition to hear that prompt in either way will be some kind of cultivation of openness in our life with God, which will take moments that don't feel particularly productive. What have you found in this area?

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Well, it strikes me that Henri Nouwen was someone who was very driven, who was very busy, especially near the end of his life as his speaking requests and writing commitments and so on continued to expand. And yet Henri reiterated many times that we're not called to be productive. We called to be fruitful. And so I think for myself, as someone who can be drawn to either extreme, I'm a bit of two minds that way. One of my contemplative practices, if I'm feeling pulled this way or that is, is to say, what would fruitfulness look like right now? And try to tease out that distinction between, "Am I ticking things off a to-do list just to prove I'm okay?" or might creating space actually bear more fruit. You're way ahead of us on the west coast - where I am on the east coast, our flowering trees are still in bloom, and then those petals will drop and it'll be some time before you even see fruit. And then even when you see it, for it to ripen takes time. And how useful is the tree being during that time? So, I think Henri's call to fruitfulness, even though I think sometimes that was a challenge for him in his own drivenness, is one of the ways we can resist that system of utilitarianism and allow you know, fruit. Art I think can

be fruitful in very deep ways, but it might take us some time to attune to and apprehend what that fruitfulness is.

Carolyn Arends: Yeah, it will be in season and there may be dark seasons of the sap running and the roots going deeper. And, I think that is just a brilliantly helpful metaphor and using the word fruitfulness instead of productivity or achievement. I love it because a tree really cannot decide to bear fruit. A tree just puts its roots down and the fruit comes, you know, and so it kind of takes the pressure off us and allows us to realize it's what God cultivates within us that will bear fruit. So I love that as a guiding question. I'm going to use that. What would be fruitful in this situation? Love it. Thank you.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Well, it's helpful too, I think - I attempt to be a gardener. But I have a lot of gardens and a busy life. Well, last year I did actually do a pretty decent job with fall pruning and, and one of my shrubs is just gloriously blooming right now. And I think what a difference that pruning made. And then there's other times where, you know, there wasn't enough snow in the winter, and so the following spring, the blooms aren't as gorgeous and full because that particular plant didn't have enough water through the winter dormant season. And again, that's not something the plant decided or didn't decide, but the plant responded to the environment it found itself in. And so I think some of those metaphors, since you spoke so much about metaphors, help us perhaps to give ourselves some space and permission to recognize that sometimes there are external things that happen in our life that affect how we're able to bear fruit. And to know that, you know, we're still that loved plant, right? To push the metaphor, you know, the plant isn't any less loved because it's gone through a hard season of drought or whatever.

Carolyn Arends: Not a bit. I love it. Very helpful. That's got to go on the metaphor list for sure.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: I had another question that struck me while I was listening to this session, and that was, I grew up in a Protestant denomination that was very much historically part of the reformation. And so most of our worship spaces were quite stark, quite devoid of images. And I remember even being quite a young child and the idea of image and idolatry were just really knit together. And so I wonder if you might comment on uncoupling the fear of idolatry from welcoming images, art, visuals. You know, you spoke about a practice where we might actually create something that would expand our sense of God, and, and I could imagine my grandmother saying, oh, oh, oh, you know, that might seem dangerous to her.

Carolyn Arends: Right? That's a great question. And, and I do want to say that there can be something beautiful about a clean, clear uncluttered space, you know, just austere

architecture. There can be something beautiful about that. However, that said, I think that God gave us our eyes and ears and taste and touch and smell for a reason. And I think that we are only following Jesus' example in the way he would point to images in nature and in his stories to help us understand his love for us and the kingdom. So I think we can relax a little bit, and the coaching would be, I think Madeleine L'Engle talks about the difference between an icon and an idol. That an icon is something you look through in order to encounter the Trinity, the God who made you and loves you. An idol is something you look at and blocks you know, any access to anything behind it. And the tricky thing, the thing we do need to be aware of is that sometimes a really beautiful icon, something we look through, and it does help usher us into an awareness of the presence of God. It can, if we're not careful, fossilize into an idol. So we might have a really profound experience with God through a certain image or certain song or style of worship or candle that we light or whatever it is. But if we're not careful, we'll fossilize that into an idol and we'll start to objectify God and expect God to show up. Now it's like a talisman, you know, it's just this thing we do and it makes God show up. And we shouldn't be surprised if God goes, yeah, no, we're not going to do that. You're not going to objectify me and reduce me to a formula. So I think our safety check is just anytime we're using anything, any kind of image or really anything in the, in the created world to facilitate our conversation with God, we just say, am I using this as an icon or as an idol? And I think if we ask that, we'll be okay.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: There's some wonderful wisdom there. Thank you so much for this important session, Carolyn. I know. I'm looking forward to session number four.

Carolyn Arends: Thank you, Wendy. I'll see you soon.