

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

with Carolyn Arends

Transcript for Session 4

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Welcome back to session four. Hard to believe this will be our final session in our 2024 meditation series produced by the Henri Nouwen Society. A Beautiful Adventure: the gift of the arts in spiritual formation has been our theme and topic with our special guest, Carolyn Arends. Carolyn, we're so grateful to you for the incredibly rich invitation that you have offered for us to find new, perhaps, and fresh ways of engaging with our spiritual lives through the arts. Welcome back and welcome to session four.

Carolyn Arends: Thank you so much, Wendy. It is great to be back and like you, I cannot believe there is just one session left in our beautiful adventure. Although I want to say to everyone who's tuning in, if you are in any way persuaded to allow art and beauty to be your allies in your life and friendship with God, your adventure is just getting started. So far, we've explored four ways in which the arts can be secret agents in our formation. The first you'll recall is that in a world designed to leave us chronically distracted, the arts can help us train to pay attention. The second is that in a culture engineered to keep us complacent, the arts can help us stir up the kind of longing that leads to wonder and awe and hopefulness. The third is that the arts, because of their rich metaphorical nature, can help us find new and powerful ways of seeing. They can remind us that we live in a world of irreducible, inexhaustible mysteries and that God is the most wondrous and beautiful inexhaustible mystery of all. The arts can help us sanctify our imaginations, renew our minds, and train to resist the reductionistic impulses that can be so strong within us.

I wonder if you had a chance to try out suggested practice from the last session and find a metaphor that represents the way you are currently experiencing or not experiencing God. Did that metaphor surprise you with any fresh meaning?

The fourth thing we've explored together is the way that the arts can help us train to love things and beings for more than their usefulness and for more than the way they map onto our lives. I hope you were able to try a practice of listening to a form of music outside your preferred genres and that maybe you were surprised by the beauty that appeared on its own terms.

Well, we have two more gifts of the arts to explore, so let's get started. A fifth way that the arts can help us train instead of try in our life and friendship with God is this: The arts help us train for incarnational living. To explain what the invitation is here, we need to answer three questions. The first question is "What do we mean by the incarnation?" The second question is, "What does it mean for us to live incarnationally?" And the third question is, "How can the arts help us train for incarnational living?"

So let's start with that first question: What do we mean by the incarnation? Well, John's gospel tells us that the eternal word, the second person of the trinity became flesh and made his dwelling among us. I love how the Message paraphrase puts this: "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." Theologians called what happened the first Christmas morning or more accurately, what happened in the womb of a young girl nine months before the first Christmas morning, they call that the incarnation. That word incarnation, it comes from the Latin word *carne*. Let me ask you, have you ever had chili con carne? *Carne* means meat. So when we talk about the incarnation, we're talking about God with meat on him. God made tangible touchable, huggable wonderful. There is a shocking vulnerability to the incarnation, a wild and reckless abandon. Chris Hall says he thinks the angels were likely gob-smacked That first Christmas Eve looking at each other in astonishment saying, "We didn't know that God could do this, and even if we had known God could do this, we never would've dreamed that God would do this." The incarnation changes everything.

So let's ask our second question. What does it mean for us to live incarnationally? I want to suggest it means at least a couple of things. First, it means that we are called to have an embodied faith, which is just a fancy way of saying that our spiritual formation must make its way into our actual bodies. I suspect that's why there are so many scriptures that invite us to involve our bodies in our worship, to raise our hands or shout for joy or dance or bow down or pour out water as a physical act of repentance. Even the simple act of singing, which we find commended all over the Bible is profoundly embodied because it requires our lungs and diaphragms and vocal cords to agree with whatever it is we're singing. Paying attention to this call to incarnational embodiment is important because there's been a problematic tendency in Christianity to be a little wary and sometimes even a little squeamish about our bodies.

When I was an undergrad in psychology, I took a physiology of religion course at my Christian university. We learned that often when a person has a profound religious experience, hormonal and neurochemical changes take place in that person's body. Now, some of my fellow classmates were discouraged thinking those physiological changes proved that our seemingly transcendent experiences are really just the firing of synapses and the release of hormones. But I didn't see it that way. I think it only makes sense that

the God who made us knows how to connect with us through the available resources, the hormones and neurons that he built into our own bodies. The incarnation tells us resoundingly that matter matters. Our bodies matter to God.

I have the privilege of overseeing a program called the Renovare Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation, and one of the practices we offer our students is a half day activity originally suggested by Dallas Willard that we call Releasing the Body to God. Students are encouraged to find some time alone to slowly and prayerfully consider each part of their bodies from the top of their heads to the soles of their feet. They're invited to first thank God for each part, even the parts they wish were thinner or stronger or taller or shorter, or parts that might have tripped them up in the past, literally or spiritually. Second, they're invited to become aware of God's deep and unconditional love for every part of their bodies. And third, they're invited to consecrate each part of their bodies for God, asking God to fill every inch of their bodies with his light and empower each part of their bodies for God's purposes. My favorite part of this exercise is the suggestion to go look in the mirror and think of something that irritates you, and then notice how that irritation changes the light in your eyes and the look on your face. Almost none of us have the poker faces that we think we do. The invitation is to become aware of how your face interacts with the world when you're irritated, and then lift that irritated expression up to God asking him to shine through your face. In all circumstances, this might be a slow process, but it's a good prayer. Or you might think of something that stresses you out or makes you afraid, and notice how that gets embodied in your, your shoulders or your jaw or your stomach. Can you release that tension to God and ask God to bring shalom to your nervous system? The invitation ultimately is to become more aware of how your inner being shows up in your body, realizing that God not only deeply loves your body, but also wants it to be the place where God's love in you is revealed to the world.

This awareness that our bodies are the sight of our interaction with the world brings us to the second dimension of the call to live incarnationally, which is that just as Jesus in the incarnation made the invisible God visible, so are we called to make God's love and goodness visible in our own bodies and lives. In the words of St. Teresa of Avila, "Christ has no body on earth but yours. No hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us." Now, Henri Nouwen understands the call to live incarnationally primarily as a call to with-ness. In *Bread for the Journey*, Henri writes, "Ministry happens when you participate in the mystery of being with. The whole incarnation, God with us, Emmanuel is first of all being with people. Caring means to cry out with compassion literally means to be with those who suffer. Ministry means we are to be precisely where people are vulnerable, not to fix or change it. That might be an unintended fruit of it, but that is not why you are

there. Jesus is, first of all, God with us. The mystery is that he shared our lives. So ministry is being with the sick, the dying, being with people wherever they are, whatever their problems. We dare to be with them in their weakness and trust that if we are entering into people's vulnerable places, we will experience immense joy. That is the mystery of ministry. You can't solve the world's problems, but you can be with people."

So living incarnationally is in some respects quite simple. It just means showing up more specifically. It means moving your body to a place where it's needed. You don't necessarily have to have all the answers. In fact, offering easy answers to people in pain may do more harm than good

I've heard that the trumpeter, Miles Davis would sometimes advise his band mates to quote, think of a note and don't play it. As a musician, I understand, allow for space in the music. Don't always rush in and listen. Well, sometimes the most helpful thing we can do is think of a truth and then embody it rather than say it. When we long to tell a hurting friend that she's not alone, we can simply sit with her as a tangible incarnational reminder that she isn't. When we want to reassure a struggling family that God cares for them, a well-timed casserole can demonstrate that very fact. That's living incarnationally.

So how did the arts help with this? I'm glad you asked. Art is a wonderful ally in training to live incarnationally because it invites us to take truth and embody it in physical materials, materials like clay, paint, language movement, or sonic wave forms. And in so doing model, the Jesus who took huge abstract ideas and said, well, it's like a farmer and some seed, it's like a shepherd and some sheep. It's like a woman and some coins. It's like a father and some sons. With art, we can take the invisible, an emotion or a thought, an energy or some other immaterial reality, and we can make it visible or tangible, hearable. We take unembodied realities and we make them embodied. We give them physical form. Another way to say that is that art can help us make immaterial things. Material and art can help us take abstractions, important things, but things that only exist conceptually and turn them into something concrete. Now, sometimes we can be weak at this in Christian art. We rightly desire to communicate wonderful abstractions like salvation and mercy and justice and redemption, but we forget to follow Jesus's lead in making them concrete.

Whenever I teach songwriting classes, I ask my students to go through their lyrics and circle any abstractions, anything that's just a concept that doesn't have any physical form, and then see if they can replace those abstractions with concrete elements that can embody the abstractions.

Now, do you know the famous country song, the Gambler, recorded by Kenny Rogers? I'm going to sing it now and I'm going to trust that you're singing it with me, okay? It goes,

you got to know and whole them no and to fold them. Know when to walk away. Know when to run. You never count your money when you're sitting at the table. There'll be time and enough for counting when the dealing's done. Okay, hopefully you know that song. In one of my favorite books on songwriting. Chris Blake points out that Don Schultz, the songwriter who wrote the gambler, outlines a whole philosophy of living in that song. But what if Blake asks, Schultz had just gone with abstractions rather than the concrete images that represent them. You'd have something like, well, let's see. You got to know when to hold them. Know when to fold them. The abstraction there is something like it's important to know when to persist in trying to achieve your goals and when to give up. Know when to walk away. Know when to run the abstraction. There is something like you have to know when to decide to give up what you're doing gradually and know when to give up quickly. Third line, you never count your money when you're sitting at the table. The abstraction there is something like you should never make a judgment about how your life is going while it's going on. And the fourth line, there'll be time enough for counting when the dealing's done, the abstraction there, the idea behind it is something like, there'll be plenty of time to look back to see how it all went after your life is over.

Well, let's imagine that the brighter had gone with the extractions instead of the concrete metaphors that represent them, you'd have something like, it's important to know when to persist and trying to achieve your goals and when to give up. You have to know when to decide to give up what you're doing gradually and to know when to give up quickly. You should never make a judgment about how your life is going while it's going on. There'll be plenty of time to look back to see how it all went after your life is over. Really catchy, right? The thing is, my students laugh when I give them that example, but then I ask them, "Okay, but how many worship songs do just the same thing?" I thank you for your sacrifice. I praise you for your justice and mercy. Redemption is mine abstraction after abstraction, beautiful ideas, but abstractions.

But when a piece of art can embody an abstraction in something concrete, something incarnation, then the truth can land in our bodies and in our imaginations and in our hearts. Listen to the way Henri Nouwen reflects on the physicality of Rembrandt's return of the prodigal son. "What gives Rembrandt's portrayal of the Father such an irresistible power is that the most divine is captured in the most human. I see a half blind old man with a mustache and a parted beard dressed in a gold embroidered garment, and with a deep red cloak, laying his large stiffened hands on the shoulders of his returning son. This is very specific concrete and describable. I also see, however, infinite compassion, unconditional love, everlasting forgiveness, divine realities emanating from a father who is the creator of the universe. Here, both the human and the divine, the fragile and the powerful, the old and the eternally young are fully expressed. This is Rembrandt's genius. The spiritual truth is completely in fleshed."

The word became flesh and came and dwelt among us. The spiritual truth is completely fleshed. I remember years ago hearing a single line in a song by the songwriter Chris Rice. The line was, sometimes love has to drive a nail into its own hand. Sometimes love has to drive a nail into its own hand. Now, I had heard about Christ sacrifice for me on the cross all my life to the point of losing my sense of wonder about something utterly wondrous. But with that one line, sometimes love has to drive a nail into its own hand. Christ's sacrifice suddenly hit me afresh at a deeper level than ever before. The late theologian and philosopher John McQueary describes art as "Something like revelation. What has revealed has been there all the time, but it has gone unnoticed in our humdrum everyday experience. It needs the sensitivity of the artist to bring it to light so that we notice things for the first time."

While the Trinity longs to make our embodied lives artful revelations of God's love and goodness. And while only God can heal our whole selves and transform us into the kind of people who can make God's love and goodness visible, apprenticing ourselves to art can set us on a beautiful adventure of finding new ways of experiencing, and then embodying that love. It's one of the ways we can train instead of trying.

Before we move on to our final exploration, I want to invite you to look closely at the hands in Rembrandt's painting. Here's something I'm more than a little embarrassed to admit. Before I read Henri's reflections on that painting, it's dark Dutch Baroque style left me a little cold. I did not give it my careful attention, nor did I learn to love it on its own terms until I let Henri's book lead me into a *Visio Divina* of the painting. It was a closeup of the father's hands in the painting that first captivated Henri, and it was Henri's reflections on those hands that eventually captivated me. See if they've captivate you, perhaps afresh if you've meditated on them before. Let me read to you a bit from Henri's reflections on the hands. And then as you meditate on the image, I'll share with you a song of my own that I mentioned back in our first session, a song called *In Good Hands*.

"The true center of Rembrandt's painting," writes Henri, "is the hands of the father on them all the light is concentrated on them. The eyes of the bystanders are focused in them. Mercy becomes flesh upon them. Forgiveness, reconciliation and healing come together and through them, not only the tired son, but also the worn out Father find their rest. Gradually over the years, I have come to know those hands. They have held me from the hour of my conception. They welcomed me at my birth, held me close to my mother's breast, fed me and kept me warm. They have protected me in times of danger and consoled me in times of grief. They have waved me goodbye and always, always welcomed me back. Those hands are God's hands. They are also the hands of my parents, teachers, friends, healers, and all those whom God has given me to remind me how safely I am held. Notice that the two hands are quite different. The father's left hand touching.

The son's shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal son's shoulder and back. I can see a certain pressure, especially in the thumb that hand seems not only to touch, but with its strength also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grip. How different is the father's right hand. This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft and very tender. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality. It lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It wants to caress to stroke and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand. As soon as I recognize the difference between the two hands of the Father, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is Mother as well as Father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds and she caresses, he confirms and she consoles. He is indeed God in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood are fully present. That gentle caressing right hand echoes for me the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Can a woman forget her baby at the breast? Feel no pity for the child she has born? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you. Look, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands."

As you continue to take in the hands in this painting, I'll share my song in good hands, which is a meditation on the hands of the Jesus who told us, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father."

His hands were, oh, I'm sure of that. Years of nails and hammer with his father.

And his hands were dirty. I know they must have me. The times heal my eyes with mud and water.

*And though I have never seen face to face. I can say this much I understand
I believe that he is holding me now
So I know I am in good hands.*

*Well, his hands were steady. Breaking the bread. The 5,000 souls who came to hear him.
And his hands were gentle. I know they must have been. The little children clamoured to be near him.*

*And though I have never seen face to face. I can say this much I understand
I believe that he is holding me now
So I know I am in good hands.*

So his hands were wounded. He gave his life. We know by those scars how much he loves us.

*And though I have never seen face to face. I can say this much I understand
I believe that he is holding us now
So I know I am in good hands. We're in good hands. I'm sure I am, we're in good hands.*

All right, my friends, we're ready to look at the sixth way that arts can help us train instead of try in the beautiful adventure of our formational journeys. I should note that will, this will be the last gift of the arts we explore in this series, there are many other ways that the arts and beauty can be allies that we haven't touched upon. You've probably already thought of a bunch, and I hope you will continue experimenting with additional ways the arts can wonderfully assist us in our lives and friendships with God. But for now, here is a sixth way the arts and beauty can help us train instead of try in our life and friendship with God: The arts help us train for direct experience.

One of my dearest mentors is a South African writer and retired pastor named Trevor Hudson. Trevor brings his unique mix of Methodist and Jesuit training to his teaching at the Renovare Institute. One thing that Trevor is always reminding us is that we are not healed and transformed by information. Though information can be helpful and we are not healed and transformed by inspiration, though inspiration can be encouraging. So how are we healed and transformed? Through interaction, through connection, through communion. Trevor got a personal reminder of this a few years ago when he was on a silent retreat directed by William Berry. Each day, Trevor had just one block of time to meet with Father Berry and speak aloud. One day Trevor found some commentary on the book of John in the monastery library, and he suddenly saw the text in a new and exciting way. He could hardly wait to meet with Father Barry to tell him what he'd learned. When the time came, Trevor launched into his discovery about John's gospel, but his director looked decidedly disinterested. Finally, with the wind taken out of his sails, Trevor asked, "Am I boring you?" Bill Berry smiled, "Trevor," he said, "insight is second prize. Encounter is first prize." Insight is second prize, encounter is first prize. I don't know about you, but I feel like my religious education and my own temperament constantly tempt me to focus on the second prize of insight and intellectual knowledge and to miss and maybe even avoid the first prize of direct experience, interaction, and encounter in a fascinating and sprawling treatise called the Master and his emissary psychiatrist, neuroscience research and philosopher Ian McGilchrist addresses the modern tendency to privilege propositional knowledge over relational knowledge. McGilchrist explains that theorists working in epistemology often distinguish between three types of knowledge. First, there is knowledge that can be expressed in propositional or know that statements. For example, I know that two plus two equals four. Second, there is functional or practical knowledge. I know how to add numbers together. And then third, there is acquaintance knowledge gained through direct encounter with another person, place, or thing. I know and have personally experienced how my daughter's mood and countenance will change when

she finishes her math homework in many languages other than English. The profound differences between these ways of knowing are signified by distinct words for each kind of knowing. But in English, we only have the verb to know. Propositional knowledge is important of course. In the faith, it's the stuff of creeds and doctrine, and it helps us on our way. But acquaintance knowledge, the knowledge of relationship and direct experience is almost always what the Bible is referring to when it talks about knowing God. In the original Hebrew, the word for knowing God is the same word for intimacy in marriage. It is a deep communion, a knowing of the heart. So while a verse like Isaiah 1: 18, "Come, let us reason together" uses a word that connotes propositional knowledge. A verse like Psalm 46: 10, "Be still and know that I am God" uses the word for a deep and intimate kind of knowing.

Now, here's where McGilchrist's background in neuroscience comes in. McGilchrist notes that a lot of our ideas about the right and left hemispheres of the brain are pretty hackneyed. It's not true, for example, that all of our creativity lies in our right brain and all our rationality in our left hemisphere. But what is true is that the two hemispheres have decidedly different ways of attending to the world. McGilchrist catalogued studies on brain lateralization that reveal that the left hemisphere attends to the world by abstracting and extracting 'know that' propositions breaking up incoming information into bits, it can sort and file away into categories. The right hemisphere, on the other hand, is oriented towards the acquaintance knowledge of relationality and unfiltered direct experience. Fascinatingly, at least to me anyways, hopefully to you, the hemispheres work this way in all creatures that have brains. When birds are searching for food on the ground, for example, they will use their right eye, which is connected to the left hemisphere, to look down and narrow their focus so that they can distinguish seeds from gravel while they use their left eye, which is connected to the right hemisphere to scan the horizon, stay open for potential mates or predators. So are you tracking left hemisphere: details and reduction, breaking things down into propositional knowledge. Right hemisphere: receptivity and relationality openness to acquaintance knowledge. But Gilchrist suggests that both takes on the world are essential, but that the proper use of the left hemisphere's capacity for reduction and dissection is in service to the right hemisphere's propensity for reception and connection. Problematically, since about the time humans develop discursive language, the fossil records show that in the human brain, the left hemisphere's way of attending to the world has become increasingly dominant. Like literally in the fossil records, it's gone from the right hemisphere being a little bigger than the left to the left hemisphere being a little bigger than the right, leading to what McGilchrist calls a 'spectacular hijack' in which all knowledge, truth, and meaning has been tragically reduced to only that which the left hemisphere can codify and articulate. In the second half of McGilchrist's book, he goes through the history of Western thought and culture to demonstrate how the value we place on relational knowledge, the domain of the right hemisphere, has been all but

obliterated by the left brain quest for atomized propositional knowledge.

Listen to how Owen Barfield describes our problem. “The evolution of humankind has signified not alone the steady expansion of consciousness, man getting to know more and more about more and more. There has been a parallel process of contraction, which was also a process of awakening, a gradual focusing or pinpointing down from an earlier kind of knowledge, which could be called participation. It was at once more universal and less clear. Thus, it is rather true to say that we have come to know more and more about less and less.” We’ve come to know more and more about less and less.

So how do we recover the priority of relational knowledge when to a large extent we’ve been shaped and formed to diminish or reject it? Well, do you remember how Henri defined spiritual formation? He said, “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.” I wonder if that journey from mind to heart might also be described as a journey from the left hemisphere to the right, or at least a journey from a completely dominant left hemisphere into a richer, more whole brained take on the world. So how do we take that journey toward direct experience, interaction, and encounter with each other, and with the God who calls us beloved?

Well, neurology researchers tell us that art and beauty tend to light up the right brain like a Christmas tree. But of course, you don’t need a scientist to tell you that. If you’ve ever been transported by a piece of art, if it’s ever led you to worship, you know what a powerful ally art can be in opening ourselves up to direct experience. When we are moved by art and beauty, we often speak in terms of wonder or astonishment or awakening. It might seem kind of strange that we need the arts, which are themselves a kind of mediated experience, to help awaken us to direct experience. But perhaps the left hemisphere mode of imposing ourselves onto the world in order to make sense of it is so deeply entrenched in human consciousness that we need the sensual powers of the arts to reawaken us to the world that is actually right here.

So, only God can offer us a direct experience of himself. But don’t be surprised if he uses art to do it sometimes. You never know when you will find yourself saying more than you can even say. And knowing more than you ever imagined you could know.

I’ve mentioned Ron Rolheiser’s book, *The Shattered Lantern* a time or two in this series, and as we begin to wrap things up, I need to return to it once more. Rolheiser tells the classic story of a fish who comes to his mother and says, “mom, what’s water? They keep talking about water at school, but I don’t know what it is.” Now, we might be tempted to make fun of this little fish, given that it’s water that he lives in. But the truth is, we live and

move and have our being within the heart of the trinity, and we often have no clue.

So let's go back to our fish. His mom says, sure, son, I'll teach you about water. And she takes him down to the bottom of the ocean where she sets up a slide projector. Naturally there she shows her little fish, some pictures of water and some pictures of land until he begins to understand what water is. Oh, he says, I think I get it now. I know what water is. But the mama fish knows that so far her son only has propositional, know-that knowledge. It's helpful, but it's only second prize. So the mom tells her fish, now, son, now that you know about water, here's what I want you to do. Just take a little time to be still and let the water that's all around you flow through you. Notice how cool it is and the way the currents caress you. Give it some time, son, and then you will understand.

And this of course, is the invitation to you and to me to undergo the beautiful adventure of making the journey from the mind to the heart. To still ourselves long enough to let God's love flow through us and cool us, and caress us. To encounter and really know the one who calls us. Beloved.

As we close, I want to invite you to pray with a seascape from Van Gogh. I invite you to engage with your eyes and your whole brain, and your body and your heart and your soul as we pray this prayer from Henri.

Dear Lord, today, I thought of the words of Vincent Van Gogh. It is true, there is an ebb and flow, but the sea remains the sea. You Lord are the sea. Although I experience many ups and downs in my emotions and often feel great shifts and changes in my inner life, you remain the same. Your sameness is not the sameness of a rock, but the sameness of a faithful lover. Out of your love. I came to life by your love. I am sustained and to your love. I am always called back. There are days of sadness and days of joy. There are feelings of guilt and feelings of gratitude. There are moments of failure and moments of success, but all of them are embraced by your unwavering love. Oh Lord, sea of love and goodness. Let me not fear too much the storms and winds of my daily life and let me know there is ebb and flow, but the sea remains the sea. Amen.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Thank you so much, Carolyn. Indeed. The sea is still the sea. Yeah, beautiful. As you were talking about the incarnation, it struck me that the arts can be an ally in dismantling some of our binary thinking. The dichotomy between spirit and soul and body – spirit is good and body is bad. And it just struck me because I was in Italy a couple of months ago and was in art galleries seeing all of the nudes, right? And we've looked at the body as being bad and sex in particular as being very bad or something, you know, that's shameful. And it seems to me that the arts have given us this gift of reclaiming the beauty of our created embodiedness. And that's been throughout

generations and generations. It isn't a modern thing or a pre-modern. The arts have always looked at this gift of our whole self and tried to offer that to us. In what ways have you experienced art, sort of taking away the either/or and putting you in that place of both/and where we might say there's two seemingly almost contradictory things, but when they're held in tension, there's something even more deeply truthful about it.

Carolyn Arends: Well, first I, I love your point that we've needed kind of this correction all through history. It has kind of been usually the artists that say, no, no, look how beautiful it is. And they've sometimes, you know, been ostracized for that and sometimes been celebrated for that. But that, that gift is like a, a, a thread that runs through history. So I love, I love that and probably still have enough of my Baptist upbringing that I still have work to do. I still need to spend time with some, some beautifully painted nudes and, and celebrate the body. And, and of course, issues around shame about our bodies and body image are, are so entrenched. So we, we need this help in lots of ways.

The capacity for art to hold paradox, um, has, is kind of a lifesaver for me. I grew up thinking everything should be binary. It was wrong or right. And, you know, your doctrine should all start with the same letter. And you know, there should be four points and that should about settle it. And in my mid twenties, I had a real crisis kind of, all of a sudden not being able to perceive God's presence. And that was when I started to read in the Masters and see in all different kinds of art that one of the sort of glorious things about God is God's capacity to hold paradox. And actually, usually when there is some paradox, it's usually a sign that you're onto something rather than a threat. So I'm trying to think, of course right now while you ask me, I'm trying to think of good examples of, of that sort of thing.

There's, there's a lyric in a Sarah Dark song that says, "Praise be for severity. That has kissed us on the cheek." Praise be for severity that has kissed us on the cheek. Or my friend Rich Mullens would write about "the reckless raging fury that they call the love of God." Somehow God's tenderness and God's ferocity and his love for us holding those things together.

So I would just say, and I'm now, I'll go to bed tonight and I'll think of 40 examples of various kinds of art that, that hold that paradox. But I would just say, I think you're really on something and to people sharing in this conversation, when you notice paradox, lean into it, see what's there, because usually there's something richer. You know there are things that are not yet dreamt of in our philosophy that are waiting.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: I think that's a great invitation and, and an opportunity for a new practice to look for paradox in art and see what it might reveal to you.

I was listening to you talk about direct experience too. And this memory came back to me and, and it's a story I've told often. I was one of the delegates at the Lausanne Congress in South Africa in 2010. And one of the day's themes was truth. And there were a number of Western speakers who spoke from the vantage point of apologetics. And it was, it was very propositional. And I remember my discomfort increasing throughout the day. And one of the last speakers was this little diminutive German theologian. I don't even remember his name to this day, but he was bespectacled with his little round glasses, and in a fairly quiet voice, he said, "The truth is a person and his name is Jesus." And I just remember it was like, I could exhale for the first time that day. And there's something I think knit into our beings as incarnationally made right, we're created in the image of a creator who became incarnate, that longs for that relational connection that not containable, not reducible notion of that which brings life. The truth will set us free. Well, if we have the truth in a nice little box, then we have freedom in a nice little box too. So in your teaching with Renovare and other places, how do you resist that expectation that you will present things in nice, neat boxes? Certainly the arts, but tell us more about, about how you do that in your teaching.

Carolyn Arends: <silence> Well, that is in process, because I actually still have quite an affection for nice, neat little boxes and God has to sort of blow them up over and over again. For me, what is it C.S. Lewis said, "My idea of God is only an idea." And it can easily be an idol and it has to be shattered time after time, and sometimes it's God who shatters it. So I do, you know, I do think there is a place for being able to articulate and try to get clarity about our understanding the best that we can at this moment. Even that statement, 'the truth is a person' is a very important kind of statement that opens us up into this whole world of experience. So I think it's a little bit of a dance. And one thing I really love about the program that I get to oversee the Renovare Institute, the person who originally built that program, a guy named Gary Moon, he told me, "Just imagine that you're in a train and it's running down tracks and one rail of the track is our cognition. It is our ideas. One of, one of our founding teachers, Dallas Willard said, "We do live at the mercy of our ideas." And so that one track is kind of opening up our narratives about who God is, who we are, what the world is, what the gospel is. Opening that up to the light, really looking at it, getting healing in the places where there's distortions. So that one track is cognition. But the other track is experience. It's getting it into our bodies. It's connection, it's encounter, it's first prize. And he said, "Our dream for this program is that we're not going to privilege one track over the other. We're not going to pay lip service to experience and then be talking heads, you know, all the time that we're together." And there's a real intentionality there that really helps us you know, considering that it's an education program really helps us try to give weight to both those things.

So we try to give just as much time to practice and experience and conversation and

silence. You know, when I first came into the program, we do these week long residencies and there's a 24 hour period towards the end of each residency that's just grand silence. We just all go into silence. And I would think, man, you know, people are paying to be here. Can't they do their silence on their own? You know, maybe I should fill this all up with stuff. And I learned very quickly you know, people when they were reflecting on the week later, they would always say it was the gift was in the silence. That's when they could begin to take what they had heard with their minds and bring it down into their hearts. So we try, we try to do the dance, we try to keep the partners, fairly represented. And then what the other piece that Gary told me is, "We do all of this in community." That's the secret sauce. We do it with each other. We are checks and balances for each other. You know, those of us who are overly heady, are loved into experience by those who are all heart. Those who are just all heart, are loved into looking at their narratives by those who are heady. And together we approach something like life and relationship together.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: In our conversation portions, one of the things I've noticed is how different elements of the six ways that the arts companion us have become sort of interwoven and borrow from one another. And I think that's a beautiful tapestry and it's certainly our hope that our listeners will take those same threads and weave something new for themselves in a way that suits and fits who you particularly are. And in that way, you've given us such a tremendous gift. Carolyn, at the end of this series, we just say a huge thank you from both our mind and our heart through the conduit of our embodiedness for the gift that you have been to the Henri Nouwen Community. Thank you.

Carolyn Arends: Oh, thank you. My whole self says thank you.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Thank you so much, friends for being with us for our four part meditation series, A Beautiful Adventure: the Gift of the Arts in Spiritual Formation. And a huge thank you to Carolyn Arends, who's offered us such a rich invitation to make space for God through the arts. Now this series has been made available free of charge to all who registered and will live on, on our YouTube channel, accessible to anyone with an interest in this area. If you have appreciated the series and would like to help cover the cost of its production, we encourage you to go to our website: <https://app.etapestry.com/onlineforms/HenriNouwenSociety/onetimegift-usd.html> where you can make your tax receipt-able gifts. And we're so grateful for your partnership and participation with us in making resources like this available to friends all across the world.

Thanks again and God bless.