

For the Beauty of the Earth: The Work of Sculpture and Care for the Environment

By Samuel Fuller, OFM Cap.

The snow crunched under my work shoes as I stepped from my truck onto a pathway between two barns to the entrance of my sculpture studio. I had come to know that sound only in Maine, the sound of fresh snow being compacted underfoot; an untrodden snow, not the trampled mounds of suburban parking lots and sidewalks. I cherished the stillness of the night before dawn. The stars were still out, and the crisp, stark, cold December air was invigorating. You could see the silhouette of the mountain ridge draw its lumbering line under the dark blue night. The moon cast its amber tones on the blanketed fields of snow. I would pause before going upstairs to the studio to take in this hour.



*As A Deer Thirsts**

It was the Advent season of 1993, the first Advent since I had reclaimed my Catholic faith and became a parishioner at the local parish in Camden, Maine. On that first Sunday of Advent, the pastor, Fr. Gerry, preached St. Paul's "Letter to the Romans" declaring that this was a season of hope. In my limited and simplistic manner, I was taken aback. Hope? What do you mean? *We* Christians *know* the story. *We* have Christ. We don't need hope. Other people may still question or ignore the incarnation, but *we* have the fact of Christ. Simply to hope would contradict our faith. Yet, I was curious and went back to the reading. Sure enough, a part of the text does state, *Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?* (v25)¹ But this hope from the First Coming through which we already *have the first fruits of the Spirit* (v23) also has a future component. It is this hope of creation as a yearning for fulfillment that is the thrust of Rom. 8. But even more intriguing is that this hope is waiting to be fulfilled through ...us! *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of*

God...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (vs 19-21) I was surprised by it. I didn't fully understand, but Paul spoke of something compelling, unfolding before our very eyes, into which we were invited to participate. Hope was a dynamic; a state of being that engaged both creation and humanity in an intimately related relationship.

That December, stilled under a starry night on the coast of Maine, poised to enter the studio to work on a sculpture, the meaning of Advent and hope became real. I sensed being caught up in something which spoke of the richness, the fullness, and the depth of life. I now knew hope as a stance of life rooted in the present yet also projected into an ever-expanding future. Being able to engage in the work of sculpture made it all the more concrete.

Inspired by that December, several months later, I wrote the passage below and pinned it on the wall of my studio. I would return to it often. It spoke to me then, and still does today, of not only that expansive depth I had experienced, but also a sense of a call.

*There have been rumors.
There have been sightings.
There have been reports of something incredible,
Something wonderful—
at once terrifying and awe inspiring.
And I wait crouched by the path looking
to see.*

Years earlier, I had been grateful for having discovered sculpture during a year off from college when a friend introduced me to a sculptor, Victor Robinson. He opened his studio to me and showed me a method of working in clay, which, only in hindsight, was I to realize its unusual nature. Generally, clay is worked on a wheel or if worked solid, is hollowed out. Victor showed me a process of building up and of not only working solid, but also firing solid. Yet this proved to be a boon to me as once I had built up a mound of clay, I enjoyed taking away and through a process of engagement, discovering the presence of space. From the beginning, it wasn't about trying to make something but to fully embrace the integrity of the process itself. I wasn't interested in doing "art," but in being true to my experience of life, of going face-to-face with what was at hand. Clay allowed for a rich relationship between form and space, but there was so much more. I had already discovered the work of the theologian, Paul Tillich, who defined courage as "*in spite of*"² and emphasized the being of non-being. He wrote of how the more non-being we can embrace, the stronger our being.³ For me, working in clay, this translated into the process of knowing space first as a void and then discovering it as a

* All photographs of sculptures by Steve Gyurina

1 All Scriptural quotes are from Romans, Chapter 8, *NRSV*

2 Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (London: Collins, 1971), 167.

3 *Ibid*, 173-175.

presence. Through sculpture, what was an intellectual concept, became an existential dynamic.

It was only later, two or three years after that Advent of 1993, that I put pen to paper and wrote about what I then called a process of engagement. I came to view the process of doing sculpture as one of prayer, of asking as a state of being, of remaining with the question and affirming the integrity of the process. I wrote that:

I am directly concerned with the process by which the unknown becomes known through the physical, with being as inextricably related to non-being, fully embracing it as if it is something of and by itself, and as such as known through personal experience, daily life, sensed through the body, and physically manifested... The fundamental concern of my work is to respond to space as a vibrant and palpable presence, experiencing it in ever new ways so as to arrive at a sense of unity.

This involved encountering the other, the clay work at hand. Through such an encounter, what I first saw as a mere object, became, through a relationship of reciprocity and seen through eyes of interiority, a cherished place of arrival and of unity. Whereas with a dialogue, there is a clear distinction between object and subject, with reciprocity such boundaries breakdown and an inter-relationship unfolds. To arrive at such a place, to move from exterior to interior, involves a series of transitions; deconstruction and self-emptying, perseverance, affection, reciprocity, and recognition. The process entails letting go of my original expectations and assumptions and embracing the seemingly strange and awkward. Yet, from what at first seems out of place or inconvenient, reveals itself as the gateway to the arrival of a sense of unity. As much as each piece of sculpture begins with a sense of wonder and of a call, the completion also brings wonder but a sense of rest and an arrival at a place where I never expected to be. The process is not about making something, but rather, through the unfolding and journey of each piece, it allows myself to be available, open, and vulnerable. What I discovered that as much as art is an encounter, it is also coming to a place within oneself outwardly expressed through the clay; a place which one continually discovers as if for the first time, and a place to which others are invited to share and explore.

To journey from that Advent years ago with its memory of being caught up in an exterior landscape and taking in that hour, to then engage in a process of encountering the other through which one arrives at a place only to discover one is standing *within* this otherness⁴, speaks of the richness *and* ambiguity of what it means to see. To discover such a place is to know the world and all of its

⁴ Mary Oliver, *Upstream, Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 14. I am grateful for the author's use of this phrase of location.

mystery and wonder not simply as a piece of real estate or a GPS location but as a seedbed of hope, life, solidarity, and beauty—not yet blossomed but nonetheless planted. What was first perceived as simply given becomes known as gift. The challenge is to know the beauty of creation as not only a moment of inspiration but also as an *abiding presence*⁵ and a source of transformation through which one discovers the beauty of what it means to be human.

Hope is the name of such a place. Here, hope is a lived experience emerging from a process, in this case that of sculpture, full of associations, images, memories, of grief and loss, of heartfelt linear trajectories, and poetic spaces. *Hope is born from within our most inmost life.*⁶ Far from being an idle nostalgia or happy optimism, with such hope there is a sense of humility and patience for, as a lived experience, it is discovered as a gift delivered through perseverance. There is also an inclusiveness with hope, a sense of a non-judgmental generosity that embraces all aspects of our experience that have led up to this point; the seemingly wrong turns if not dead ends, the conundrums, the sense of failure.

With the arrival at this place of hope, everything is placed in a different perspective as now everything belongs. This newly found sense of life blossoms to a sense of fullness and generosity, to a sense of a surplus and abundance of meaning which remains ineffable, yet a compelling and transforming force. There is also a sense of a more expansive identity as one moves beyond one's own self reference to a participation in something collective.

Further, with such hope, there is a time reference as the present takes on a much more vibrant resonance. In a sense, one is healed from the past which

allows the present to come into relief. Further, one is released into the future as one is able to move forward, not only with renewed meaning, but also with trust. All of this gives one a sense of freedom with which to engage the present as it is now known as in a different context than before, as something more than the mere extension of the past. Hope is not sentimental or wishful thinking for the future. First and foremost, it is an orientation grounded in one's encounter with the present. Only by being able to relate to the present as it is, is one then able to move beyond it and into the future with all that it offers. This is the source of the exuberance of hope—an eager attentiveness to the present as it points to something beyond itself.

With such attentiveness comes a profound relationality of hope, a sense of belonging. With the movement from the exterior to an inner place, what might have beforehand been seen through

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope, Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001), 17. The author in writing about hope makes the important distinction between these two states.

⁶ Paul Tihon, SJ, "Lived Hope and Freedom in the Face of Death", lecture given to the School of Philosophical and Religious Sciences of the Faculties of St Louis in Brussels, trans. Olga Prendergast.



Paschal Joy

the eyes of a tourist, is now known in terms of a pilgrim as one allows one to be shaped by the landscape and to let the claim of the landscape take hold on one's identity. Geography becomes a metaphor for one's own journey.⁷ A sense of belonging and connection is fundamental to what it means to be human. Without such a sense, one becomes subject to fragmentation, distracted by a legion of insecurities and anxieties.

Yet, belonging seems to bring forth a fundamental contradiction as our faith tells us that our true home is beyond this one here, this earth which at times we know all too well as a vale of tears.

Why bother with care for creation if we are just passing through? But the very word, *belonging*, composed of *being* and *longing*, begs ambiguity. Without a sense of being or *presence-ing* any sense of longing easily becomes untethered or estranged. Our lives may not be essentially fulfilled here but that doesn't negate the opportunity to encounter what is before us. What does it signify to be blind to the face of Christ in one's brother and sister or blind to the latest expression of the Trinity in creation, as witnessed by St. Francis? The image of a pregnant woman comes to mind as offering an insight to the nature of belonging; aware of the wonder of such an event yet also aware that it bears so much more than what is seen. Such is the richness and poignancy of faith.

The sense of belonging is taken deeper and revealed as transformative through the charisma of St. Francis and the gift of fraternity. While belonging is fundamental for one's own individual growth, Franciscan spirituality provides the path to a broader and more authentic identity. St. Francis' act of embracing lepers, and thereby discovering that *what seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body*⁸, became the foundation of such a gift by discovering the face of Christ in the outcasts of society. The expansiveness and transformation of St. Francis' identity continued as he then discovered the face of God's love in all of creation. In the same sense that he was able to discover what it meant to be *simple and subject to all*⁹, he discovered the same fraternal relationship with creation; Sister Water, Brother Wind, Mother Earth. The former begets the latter with the sequence unfolding as an integral interdependency and reciprocity between the two. What St. Francis exemplifies is the fullness of what it means to be human. The depth and profundity of such relationality was such that for St. Francis, each specific encounter, *this* cricket, *this* brother, became an encounter with the latest expression of the Trinity. One has arrived from finding reciprocity through the soulful movement from exterior to interior— to discovering God in all things.

Solidarity can be seen as an amplification of fraternity, yet I came to know it as a distinct transition. In contrast to such a collective participation, it's depressing being a spiritual tourist. It all too easily leads to spiritual gluttony. Without praxis, what seems to be a source of life and inspiration, quickly dissipates as one casually seeks the next attraction without any real encounter. I felt on the verge on becoming one. I had read and reread *Care for*

Creation {a Franciscan spirituality of the earth }.¹⁰ I had been down to Washington, D.C. during the summer of 2011 with Franciscan Action Network (FAN) for two weeks to learn about climate change and what the Catholic Church had to say about it—turns out, quite a bit. The following year, at the parish where I served as parochial vicar, we had a two-day workshop with FAN and then the following weekend, I was off to Arizona for a four-day FAN workshop. Afterwards, before leaving Arizona, I felt compelled to make a stronger commitment to the urgency of climate change. To my mind, given my journey and being a Franciscan, to be authentic demanded nothing less. I was determined to become involved in a public event as a means of encounter.

Over the next six months, through a process that unfolded in a way I could never have expected, a group of five of us came together to share our passion, commitment, and gifts to plan and organize in downtown Hartford, Connecticut, the 2013 *Riverfront Earth Day*, sponsored by the Interreligious Eco-Justice Network (IREJN). We were elated by the turnout. The event included an interfaith prayer service, a march with banners, puppets and drums, and a gathering at a plaza where we heard speeches and enjoyed family events, environmental displays, and food vendors. The next year, we held another *Riverfront Earth Day* with the same format. As successful as it was, I sensed that I was becoming an event planner, and that something was missing. During that spring, I had seen a flier for an event at a Catholic Charities family center in downtown Hartford. I called up the family center and met with them. Once there, I realized this was the missing piece—engagement not only with Catholic Charities, but also with the neighborhood centers of Hartford. This was where one met people and their needs in the very neighborhoods in which they lived. It was as if one could now work from the ground up and offer a more authentic and inclusive participation. What I had discovered was a sense of solidarity. It was this which became the driving dynamic for my involvement with the event the following year which grew exponentially into the *Hartford Earth Festival and the Connecticut Climate March*.

St. Pope John Paul II, in *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* (*On Social Concern, 1987*), describes solidarity as a virtue or fruit of interdependence. (#38) This is full of insight and defines solidarity as more than how



Metamorphosis

¹⁰ Ilia Delio, OSF, Keith Douglass Warner, OFM, Pamela Wood, *Care for Creation* {a franciscan spirituality of the earth} (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2008)

⁷ Douglas E Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2013) Chapter 4 offers an excellent articulation of the combined effect of geography, autobiography and metaphor and cites the work of the landscape photographer Robert Adams in how such a combination offers, "an affection for life."

⁸ Francis of Assisi, *The Testament*, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, volume 1, *The Saint*, eds by Regis Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman and William Short (New York: New City Press, 1999)

⁹ Ibid

it is normally understood. To act in solidarity is usually taken to do an individual action, such as a protest. What John Paul II suggests is a more transformative model of an abiding presence, as it presupposes an already ongoing engagement of interconnectedness with the concerns of others, the give and take of relationship, and working together. From this, one's own sense of identity is already deepened and broadened through a process of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-giving. This is interdependence. To then discover solidarity as fruitfulness is a measure beyond measure, a gift which speaks of the reciprocity of relationships as taking on a life of its own. It is as if one discovers a new capacity and depth of relationship with a collective force which provides a source of affirmation, meaning, and direction. One's own sense of identity is broadened. One has moved from self-assertion to giving expression to something other; the affirmation of virtue and value in the service of others. Submitting to such a collective presence doesn't negate one's identity but affirms it as one discovers a deeper and more authentic relationality. One's identity is discovered as part of a constellation of associations and dimensions involving, not only all that life offers, but also, the fullness, the poignancy, the authenticity, and the beauty of what it means to be human. As John Paul II writes, "Solidarity is not a vague feeling of compassion...but a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good...because we are all really responsible for all" (#38). He develops this further by saying that "Solidarity helps us to see the 'other'...not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity to be exploited...but as our 'neighbor,'" (#39).

An encounter with the other, of going face-to-face with what is at hand and with the unknown while submitting to a presence and a process—this is never an isolated act. It becomes a source of life and an expanded relationality leading to a renewed sense of identity. Yet, what does this really mean: "A renewed sense of identity?" That we discover a sense of who we are? It is not so much defining who we are but discovering the fullness of who we are called to be. We know things by contrast, and by turning to Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*, we see outlined those forces which hinder such a call.

Conventional wisdom has it that *Laudato Si* is different than the norm of the formal teaching of the Catholic church—that it is too political, or that it is all about climate change. With the phrase mentioned in only four of the 246 paragraphs, this is hardly the case. This, by itself, is a sober comment on the pseudo debate on the issue, which only we in the United States have had the luxury of entertaining. The encyclical, subtitled, *Care For Our Common Home*, serves to articulate how care for our environment is intertwined for care for each other and all of humanity as encapsulated in the term "integral ecology." It proceeds to name those tendencies which have diminished our human dignity and sense of belonging and relationship whether consumerism, a throw away culture, unsustainable development, blind faith in 'the laws' of the market, the myth of progress, the technocratic paradigm, and practical realism. It is, particularly with these last two, that Pope Francis offers the most chilling commentary. He writes, "It is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one dimensional paradigm...which exalts the concept of a subject who using logical and rational procedures progressively approaches and gains control over an external object" (#106). He articulates the nature of practical realism as *When human beings place themselves at the center they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative* (#122). What is so unnerving about these insights is the sense of loss of any encounter and of any relationality. There is not only a profound impoverishment and reduction of one's humanity, but also a lack of any connection with creation and all of its wonder and beauty. Instead of an encounter with the other, a journey from an

exterior landscape to one's center and then back outward to the world, there is mere manipulation of data with the subject as the sole reference isolated in one's individual silo. The call to be is reduced to an obsessive need for data. Pope Francis proceeds to link the diminishment of our identity with failure to care for creation. *Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's immediate interests. There is a logic in all this whereby different attitudes can feed on one another, leading to environmental degradation and social decay* (#122).

Will "beauty save the world," as suggested by Dostoevsky in *The Idiot*? Pope John Paul II quoted this line in his *Letter to Artists*, under the heading "The Saving Power of Beauty." Yet, what is beauty? There are plenty of postcards, calendars, and screen savers that one could offer as an example of beauty. But the question remains. There has to be a sense of beauty that is more than just the descriptive and more than just the seen with a listing of attributes. As such, beauty can easily become something nice to look at but ultimately superfluous.¹¹ I've suggested that beauty is relational as it conveys poignancy which calls us not only to a deeper sense of our interiority but also through which we rediscover our humanity. A full definition of beauty has to include a sense of challenge as it presents an impulse, a haunting suggestion of unity to which we are called. To approach such an invitation, we may first have to learn how to grieve as only through first dying, to our self-constructed identities, can we discover the capacities to hold and bear the fullness of life with all of its seeming chaos and mystery. By undertaking such a challenge, there is a sense of redemption to arrive at a sense of new life of which we could never fathom by ourselves and to realize that such life touches each of us personally in ways we could never expect. Through what at first seemed chaotic, is discovered as meaningful and offering a sense of direction. This is the fertile ground of beauty revealed through humility.

Not by itself can beauty save, but only if we remain open to the intimate claim that creation has on our being, calling us to discover anew, not only the depth and dignity of our identity, but also the unseen nature of beauty. To take a stance of radical openness, whether in spite of or in song, whereby the seeming strange and awkward become a gateway rather than a stumbling block, to move forward with eyes and heart wide open; this is to seek to be authentic and to go face-to-face with the situation at hand. It is in this sense of belonging, of solidarity, and of hope that we discover the fullness of who we are called to be in Christ with a shared sense of humanity with all and in profound reciprocal relationship with all of creation; all for the beauty of what it means to be human, all for the beauty of the earth. The fullness of Rom. 8 comes to the fore. *For in hope we were saved.* (v 24).

11 For a thoughtful examination of the nature of beauty see Francois Cheng, *The Way of Beauty- Five Meditations For Spiritual Transformation* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006)



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