

**Faithful Companions And Guides:
Art and Nature as God's Chosen Vocabulary
By Ken Gire**

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Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the one in which God is reaching his hand to Adam's, their fingers not quite touching, symbolizes God's relationship to all humanity for all of human history. Whenever he succeeds in reaching us, a window opens between heaven and earth in a moment of revelation.

What we are offered at those moments of revelation is something so much more tantalizing than Turkish Delight. We are offered words from God. Words of grace and love. Words of guidance and correction. Words of wisdom and understanding. Words of forgiveness and assurance. Words that our soul hungers for.

"Man shall not live by bread alone," Jesus said, "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." If this is true, our very lives depend on those words. They are, in fact, the daily bread of our soul. But what are those words? And where do we find them?

Rain from God's Mouth

Through the prophet Isaiah, God provides a clue: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

Many have understood this passage as a reference to the scriptures, thinking if a verse is quoted in conversation, or if a pamphlet of verses is put in a sack lunch for the homeless, or if a Bible is put into the hands of a skeptic, fruit will come of it. Often, though, our experience proves otherwise. The passage, in fact, suggests otherwise.

Look deeper into the analogy. It compares the word that goes out of God's mouth to the rain and snow that go out of the sky. When rain or snow falls to the ground, it trickles into streams, pools into lakes, filters into subterranean wells. Dip your hand in a lake, and there is rain channeled from the mountains and snow melted from its peaks. Dig a well, and there also is something of the rain. Peer into the stem of a honeysuckle, and there is a nectared tear wept by the rain. Crush a leaf, and out comes a drop of what was once rain. Bite into a peach, and there is something of the winter snow mingled with spring showers in its succulent juices. Even in the desert, where there seems no trace of moisture, you can cut open a saguaro cactus and find something of the rain reservoired inside.

Like rain and snow, the word of God permeates the earth. To say God's word can be found only in certain places, like the Bible, for example, is to say, in effect, that rain water can be found only in lakes where it is most visible. But everywhere we look there are traces of his word--in history, in the circumstances of our lives, in every nook of humanity and every crannied flower of creation.

If God created the world with words that went forth from his mouth, words like "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years," it follows that the sun and moon and stars are echoes of those words and that something of the divine mind and its purposes can be understood in studying them. If we look with the right eyes, listen with the right ears, we will understand the natural creation as a form of sign language through which God expresses himself.

If aeons ago God spoke judgment on the world through an inundating sermon of water, then the geological strata form the sedimentary pages where those words are recorded. If the word of God went forth and became flesh and dwelt among us, then every word and every deed of the life of Christ became the vocabulary through which God spoke to the world, and through which he speaks to it still. If the word of God dwells within us, then God speaks to others, however inarticulately, through the language of our life.

If God says yes in answer to our prayers, then the circumstances that constitute that answer are echoes of the yes he has spoken. Most often those answers come to us by way of a messenger. That messenger may be an angel or a work

of art, a prophet or a person we met for lunch, a scripture or a song, a vision or a dream, a scene from nature or from a night at the movies. Just as the rain and snow do not cycle back to the atmosphere without first accomplishing their work on earth, so these messengers do not return to God empty-handed without accomplishing the purpose for which they were sent out.

Something of his word has also been written in our soul. Not just the moral law written on the tablets of our heart, although that too. But something like the genealogy of Christ recorded in Luke's gospel, which traces the Messiah's lineage, not back to Abraham as Matthew's genealogy does, but all the way back to God himself. We have within us a generic memory, so to speak, of such a lineage.

Like any memory, it can be repressed, but it cannot be erased. Something has been written in the depths of our being, something the soul strains to recall, words inscribed by the very hand of God, inky recollections of our origins, telling us we are more than a mere collection of chemical reactions or animal instincts.

Jesus tried to tell us that when he answered the question posed to him regarding whether or not we should pay taxes. He had someone in the crowd examine a coin and then asked, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" When the reply was, "Caesar's," Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." The inference we can draw from his illustration is that we, like the coin, bear the portrait and inscription of our sovereign. We bear within our soul the very image of God, stamped with his likeness, with the inscription that we belong to him. The coin can be defaced or devalued, but its origin and ownership are indisputable. Indeed, there is more to us than we know.

At times like this, Jesus spoke in plain language. Other times, though, he spoke in parables, which is how I think God most often speaks to us. He speaks to us in parables through nature, uses the language of parable in history and in dreams and in the circumstances of our lives. Sometimes those circumstances come together in such an extraordinary set of coincidences it catches our attention. What we see in those circumstances are pieces of a puzzle we are invited to put together. The longer we stare at the individual pieces, the more connections we see. Colors match, shapes interlock, and before long a picture emerges. Just like working with a jigsaw puzzle, one moment we see only irregular shapes of green, the next moment we see grass; one moment we see only disconnected shards of blue, the next moment we see sky.

The Art of Getting the Message

Parables are pictures that emerge from the jigsaw events of life, however irregular or disconnected they may first appear. "All happenings, great and small, are parables whereby God speaks," said Malcolm Muggeridge; "the art of life is to get the message." To see all that is offered us at the windows of the soul and to reach out and receive what is offered--this is the art of living.

But it is an art and not a science, and so it is not as exact as most of us would prefer. There is room for error. Which makes us uncomfortable. But because it's not all black and white but more like shadows cast by the substance of things unseen, there is also room for faith.

But there is a danger, even for the faithful. The natural tendency is to analyze such moments of grace, formalize them into principles so the moment can be recreated, and then legalize the principles into codes of conduct as a measure of spirituality. In doing so, we take not only the spontaneity out of our relationship with God but also the vitality.

God, though, will not allow himself to be confined like a genie in a lamp. Neither will he allow himself to be controlled as a genie is controlled by the holder of the lamp, summoned at the will of the one who knows just where to rub and how often. It is God who opens the window, not us. All we can do is receive, or not receive, what is offered there.

C.S. Lewis told a story of a woman artist who was thrown into a dungeon whose only light came from a barred window high above. In the dungeon the woman gave birth to a son. As he grew, she told him about the outside world, a world of wheat fields and mountain streams and cresting emerald waves crashing on golden shores.

But the boy couldn't understand her words. So with the drawing pad and pencils she had brought with her into the dungeon, she drew him pictures. At first she thought he understood. But one day while talking with him, she realized he didn't. He thought the outside world was made up of charcoal-gray pencil lines on faded-white backgrounds, and concluded that the world outside the dungeon was less than the world inside.

The story is a parable, showing us in much the same way the artist tried to show her son, that all we see before us are merely pencil sketches of the world beyond us. Every person is a stick-figured image of God; every place of natural beauty, a charcoal rendering of paradise; every pleasure, a flat and faded version of the joy that awaits us. But we need to be boosted to a window before we can see beyond the lines of our own experience. Only then will we see how big the trees are, how bright the flowers, how breathtaking the view.

"A work of art introduces us to emotions which we have never cherished before," said Abraham Heschel. "Great works produce rather than satisfy needs by giving the world fresh cravings."

When we look at a work of art, it becomes a window hewn out of the dungeon wall that separates this world from the next. And looking out that window, our soul, as Solzhenitsyn put it, "begins to ache." Or it should, if we are looking at it the right way.

C.S. Lewis explained that the right way to look at a work of art when he said: "We sit down before a picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive."

For many of us, though, that is not what we do. We look and listen, but instead of receiving, we react; instead of surrendering, we resist; instead of coming away changed, we come away critical. And that is true whether we come away from a movie we see on Saturday night or a sermon we hear on Sunday morning.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest who once taught at Notre Dame and Harvard and who, until his recent death, worked and lived with a community of mentally handicapped people, came away deeply moved from one of Rembrandt's works of art, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. His response to the picture was the response C.S. Lewis urged we all should have in relation to a work of art--to receive what it is offering us.

After reflecting on its impact on him, Nouwen remarked: "The painting has become a mysterious window through which I can step into the kingdom of God." So deep was the ache aroused in him by a mere print of the painting that Nouwen felt compelled to travel to St. Petersburg, Russia, to see the original. Once there, he sat in front of that mysterious window for four hours: Looking. Listening. Receiving. In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he recalls the experience.

And so there I was; facing the painting that had been on my mind and in my heart for nearly three years. I was stunned by its majestic beauty. Its size, larger than life; its abundant reds, browns, and yellows; its shadowy recess and bright foreground, but most of all the light-enveloped embrace of father and son surrounded by four mysterious bystanders, all of this gripped me with an intensity far beyond my anticipation. There had been moments in which I had wondered whether the real painting might disappoint me. The opposite was true. Its grandeur and splendor made everything recede into the background and held me completely captivated.

Rembrandt's embrace remained imprinted on my soul far more profoundly than any temporary expression of emotional support. It had brought me into touch with something within me that lies far beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home. While busy with many people, involved in many issues, and quite visible in many places, the homecoming of the prodigal son stayed with me and continued to take on even greater significance in my spiritual life. The yearning for a lasting home, brought to consciousness by Rembrandt's painting, grew deeper and stronger, somehow making the painter himself into a faithful companion and guide.

Having spent much more time in movie theaters than museums, I have had no encounters with art as the one Henri Nouwen had. What encounters I have had, for the most part, have been little more than captioned summaries by hurried tour guides. Like my encounter with the art of Vincent van Gogh.

I met him at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, when taking my mother there, who was visiting me from out of town. What I knew about van Gogh was limited to three things: that only one of his paintings had sold in his lifetime; that at some time in his troubled life he had cut off his ear; and that he had finally ended his troubled life by committing suicide. One other thing: that the Getty Museum had recently purchased the artist's painting, *Irises*, at auction from Sotheby's for some stratospheric figure in the tens of millions of dollars.

I first saw the painting hanging on a wall, roped off, with a guard standing next to it. My reaction to van Gogh's painting was as unlike Henri Nouwen's reaction to Rembrandt's as could possibly be imagined. I stood, not sat, before it. And at a distance. I looked, not for four hours, not even for four minutes. A minute, maybe, that's all. My reaction? Disbelief. How could such an ordinary painting sell for so outrageous a price? *Irises*, of all things. A backyard, garden variety of irises. I shook my head. And I walked away.

That was the last I saw of van Gogh.

Until a few years later when I heard somewhere from someone, though I can't remember now where I heard it or from whom, that van Gogh believed in God, and at one time in his life, passionately. I recalled the song Don McLean recorded as a tribute to him. "Vincent" was the title; "Starry, starry night," the first line. I was at a grocery store, of all places, when I heard the song again over the speakers in the ceiling. I went to the next aisle and stood under one of the speakers so I could hear the lyrics more clearly. I stood, still at a distance, but this time I listened.

Now I understand
What you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free.
They would not listen,
They did not know how.
Perhaps they'll listen now.

Was I one of the ones the singer was referring to, one of the ones who wouldn't listen, who didn't know how? What did the songwriter understand that I didn't? What was Vincent trying to say? And what, if anything, was he trying to say to me?

That week I went to a music store, bought the CD, and listened to "Vincent's" lyrics. I went to a bookstore, bought a three-volume collection of his letters, and started reading. I went to another bookstore, bought several books about the artist, and thumbed through the pages of his life, stopping here and there at pictures of sunflowers and birds flying over wheat fields, portraits of simple people, sad people mostly, and one of a sower in the field.

He started out in life, I discovered, wanting "to sow the words of the Bible" to poor and working-class people. In preparation for this he would sit at his desk night after night and copy page after page of the Bible, translating them into English, German, and French. "I read it daily," he wrote, "but I should like to know it by heart and to view life in the light of its words."

While in London, he went to the remotest parts of the city and preached to the poorest of the poor. He felt destined to follow in his father's vocational footsteps as a pastor, so he sought a theological education. But Vincent's temperament and zeal and eccentricities distanced him from the religious establishment. "He didn't know the meaning of submission," one of his fellow students remarked. And maybe that's why the school he attended assigned him, more as a concession than a commission, to be a "lay evangelist" in an impoverished coal-mining town.

The conditions in which the miners worked were abysmal. Laboring in the dark and gaseous bowels of the earth, they faced the dangers of poisoned air, explosions, underground flooding, and collapse of the mine itself. The long hours of backbreaking labor took their toll too. "Most of the miners," Vincent wrote, "are thin and pale from fever; they look tired and emaciated, weather-beaten and aged before their time."

On September 24, 1880, he wrote his brother Theo: "The miners and the weavers still constitute a race apart from other laborers and artisans, and I feel a great sympathy for them."

Vincent lived among the miners, sharing their poverty. He went down in the mines to be with them, breathing into his lungs the same black dust they breathed into theirs. He visited the sick among them, bandaging their wounds, praying with them. And he preached to them on Sundays, trying the best he could to infuse a little light, a little hope, a little encouragement into their coal-dark lives.

"I should be very happy if someday I could draw them," he wrote Theo, "so that those unknown or little-known types would be brought before the eyes of the people."

Before long, that is what he did. Rilke would later write of this as the beginning of van Gogh's life as an artist. "And so he becomes what is called an evangelist, and he goes to a mining district and tells the people the story of the gospel. And while he talks, he begins to draw. And finally he doesn't even notice how he's stopped talking and is only drawing."

The Journey of an Artist

Because of Vincent's extreme self-denial, his fanatical zeal, and his unwillingness to follow the guidelines set before him, the governing body overseeing his ministry terminated his position. Angered and embittered, Vincent left, and, at twenty-seven years of age, embarked on what was to become his journey as an artist.

"I want you to understand clearly my conception of art," he wrote Theo at the beginning of that journey. "I want to do drawings which touch some people....In either figure or landscape I want to progress so far that people will say of my work, he feels deeply, he feels tenderly."

Vincent was drawn to common laborers, the poor and downtrodden, particularly. He painted pictures of a peasant woman sewing, of women working in a peat field, of farmers eating around their table after a long day of toil. He painted a young peasant with a sickle, a woman weeping, two women kneeling in prayer, a woman with a child in her lap, a girl looking at a baby in its cradle.

I tried to look at van Gogh's pictures the way Henri Nouwen looked at Rembrandt's painting. I looked. I listened. But it was like listening to a foreign language. The vocabulary of his colors, the grammar of his compositions, were all new to me. I needed a translator, someone who could interpret this cryptic sign language.

I turned to the poet Rilke, who had spent much time studying Cezanne, Rodin, and van Gogh, among others. He had spent hour after hour in museums, studying works of art. In reading his letters, it was of some consolation to me to hear the poet admitting his eyes were also too immature on their own to see much. It was not until he had met and talked with artists themselves that he learned how to look at their work.

I turned to Vincent's letters and met him there. It was like talking with the artist himself. I listened and from him learned how to look at his pictures.

In those letters, Vincent taught me the purpose of his paintings. "In a picture, I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize..."

His sketch *At Eternity's Gate* is of a man sitting in a chair, his face buried in his hands. "In this print I have tried to express," said van Gogh, "what seems to me one of the strongest proofs of the existence...of God and eternity--certainly in the infinitely touching expression of such a little old man, which he himself is perhaps unconscious of, when he is sitting quietly in his corner by the fire. At the same time there is something precious, something noble, which cannot be destined for worms."

But no one seemed to understand what this impassioned artist was trying to say. It was as if it were a foreign language to everyone else as well. Through years of rejection, loneliness, and depression, Vincent's mental state deteriorated. So did the state of his spiritual life. The erosion of faith is chronicled in the letters he wrote over the ten years that spanned his life as an artist. The scripture quotations, references to God, and reflections of his faith gradually grew fewer and farther between. At the same time, the anguish and despair grew greater and darker and more turbulent.

On May 8, 1889, the ailing artist was admitted to Saint-Remy asylum a few miles northeast of Arles, France. He was given a bedroom there, sparsely furnished, and a small room off it. In the meticulously researched movie about van Gogh's life, *Lust for Life*, the nun who first showed him his room at the asylum asked, "Would you like me to open the windows?"

Vincent nodded. When she opened them, he looked out on the countryside with its sun-washed fields. It was a turning point in his life. He converted the small room off his bedroom into a studio and started once again to paint.

The window in that studio overlooked a garden. In that garden grew a plot of flowers. From that plot came his first painting at the asylum. He signed it in the lower right-hand corner, "Vincent." He titled it, simply, *Irises*. It was the painting that helped restore his sanity--and the painting, a hundred years later, before which I stood at a distance, shook my head, and walked away.

At the asylum, Vincent regained his sanity, for a time anyway. Later that year he finished the painting *Starry Night*, the one Don McLean alluded to in his song. In it we see something of the dark night of Vincent's soul. But in it we see something of the starlight too.

Dreaming of Black Dots

Of that painting, Vincent wrote: "That raises again the eternal question: Is the whole of life visible to us, or do we in fact know only the one hemisphere before we die? For my part I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream, in the same simple way as I dream about the black dots representing towns and villages on a map."

But only Theo could see the light in Vincent's soul. Everyone else saw only the darkness, if they stopped long enough to see even that. Vincent wrote, "There may be a great fire in our soul, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passersby see only a wisp of smoke coming through the chimney, and go along their way."

How sad life must have been for him. To feel so deeply, to want to communicate those feelings so passionately, and yet to have people stand off at a distance, shake their heads, and walk away. Eventually his physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional states all deteriorated. Darkness was everywhere.

In the end, only Theo understood the passion burning within Vincent, a fire that burned and burned until at last it burned out. The last spark is captured on canvas in a picture he painted in July 1890, titled simply, *Cornfield with Crows*. Vincent wrote Theo about the painting. "A vast field of wheat under trouble skies," is the way he described it, "and I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and extreme loneliness."

Somewhere in those vast fields under those troubled skies Vincent shot himself. The bullet lodged below his heart. The wound was not immediately fatal, and he was taken to his room where he was attended by a physician and where his brother rushed to his side.

At 1:30 in the morning, on July 29, 1890, while Theo was holding Vincent in his arms, the artist spoke his last words: "La tristesse durea." "The sadness will never go away."

Someone once said that you are a success if, at the end of your life, the people who knew you best are the ones who respect you most. The two people who knew Vincent best were his brother and his mother. "He has a great heart that is always searching for something to do for others," his brother wrote of him. Not a bad epitaph. I would settle for it in a heartbeat. "Vincent's letters," wrote his mother, "which contain so many interesting things, prove that with all his peculiarities, he yet shows a warm interest in the poor; that surely will not remain unobserved by God."

It saddened me, shamed me even, that his life had been unobserved by me, and his work by me so casually dismissed. But his life, I'm certain, as his mother was certain, did not go unobserved by God. Nor were his works casually dismissed. Not by God, anyway.

Through his pictures and his letters, through a movie and a song about him, I saw the artist and something of the artist's soul. But I saw something else. I saw through him something of the great artist of souls--Jesus. "Christ," said van Gogh, "is more of an artist than the artists; he works in the living spirit and the living flesh; he makes men instead of statues."

Like Vincent, Jesus drew our attention to a sower in the field, birds of the air, flowers of the field, faces of the poor. Like Vincent, he has, to borrow Don McLean's words, "eyes that know the darkness in my soul," and hands like an artist's that soothed "weathered faces lined in pain." Like Vincent, he put frames around "ragged men in ragged clothes." And like Vincent, he "tried to set them free."

But unlike Vincent, who died from a self-inflicted wound, Jesus died from wounds inflicted by others. Unlike Vincent, whose last days were filled with despair, on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he encouraged his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled, for he was going to prepare a place for them in his father's house. Even in the pain of his own cross, he encouraged a thief on the cross next to him with the hope of heaven. And even in his forsakenness, Jesus entrusted his spirit to his father's hands.

In spite of some similarities, much separates the two artists, both in the way they lived and the way they died. But maybe it is not too much to suggest that even in their deaths they had something in common. "A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." "The sadness will never go away."

There is something of Vincent's sadness and Christ's sorrow mingled in the last lines of Don McLean's song.

Now I think I know
What you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free.
They would not listen,
They're not listening still,
Perhaps they never will.

Passersby stood at a distance and criticized both artists. They shook their heads at their pictures. And they walked away. What were these two artists trying to say, and what were they trying to say to me and to you?

"Look at the pictures" is what I think they were saying. And if you look with the right eyes, those pictures will become windows leading out of the dungeon so the prodigal part of us can find its way home.

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