

# *Beguiled by Beauty*

*Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion - Wendy Farley*

Book Review by Rev Dr Sarah Agnew

In 'Beguiled by Beauty,' Wendy Farley emphasises that 'other beings in their particularity and in their interconnectedness exist for themselves' (p.55). Every living thing matters, inherently matters, 'because it shimmers with sacred worth' (p.55).

Farley acknowledges the tension of this sacred worthiness, this inherent beauty, existing in 'a world in which beings are constantly threatened, in which their integrity is betrayed and assaulted' (p.55). There is a balance to Farley's discussion of contemplative practice, a gentleness to which she calls the reader. When Farley encourages the posture and practice of gratitude, for example, she acknowledges that one may not be ready, now, or indeed ever, for gratitude in a particular situation (p.107): and that is okay, good, not failing at contemplation or compassion.

This gentle honesty pervades the discussion of intent, practice, posture, and discipline. Farley sets before the reader the ideal, the goal, and then reminds the reader that, actually, the goal is not the purpose. Purpose is found and fulfilled in striving; in even the act of preparing to practice is contemplative practice.

I was confronted by Farley's bold articulation of desire as an element of our relationship with God. But such is the generosity of Farley's approach, I felt invited to respect her authentic use of language and that she would respect my authentic use of language. Even so, this book may have more appeal for readers open to a breadth of language for God – Farley uses Mother, Divine, Bright Abyss, Lady Love, as well as 'God.' She also draws on a range of traditions to enrich her understanding and practice of Christian spirituality.

As Farley began to articulate a contemplative practice and posture, I was encouraged in my own enacting of a contemplative and compassionate way of being. In her discussion on prayer, she spoke of our praying for each other 'lighting a candle of hope in the presence of' Holy One (p.114). 'Weaving our prayer into the divine light, we may be able to release a bit from our ideas about what *should* happen' (p.114) and with the Spirit, try to find peace with whatever happens (p. 115, my emphasis).

As Farley spoke of guarding heart and mind through contemplative practice, again, she reminded us that practices will change. Seek what is helpful for you, for this moment or season. Be gentle: when seeking more silence in your day, it may be taking the rubbish out of a noisy house to look up at the sunset sky. 'However infinitesimal, every second of

conscious quiet feeds the soul and plants seeds that will grow in unexpected ways' (p.74).

'Beguiled by Beauty' won't be for everyone, in its language and ideas. But if readers can meet Farley with the generosity with which she writes, there might be encouragement in here for more than you or I suppose. Which itself is an expression of the contemplative compassionate way into which this book invites us.