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# Fellowship

## Beauty and the Humiliated

by Dan Hirsch

I RECENTLY spent several months in the presence of beauty so intense that I felt only perpetual awe and gratitude. I had been severely depleted, emotionally and physically, by my activism, this sense of connection with the poor and wounded, and needed to take some time off to do some reflection and "re-charge my batteries."

So I traveled for a few weeks, camping by lakes and waterfalls, backpacking far into the Sierras with their breathtaking snow-covered vistas and immense quiet; I was given sanctuary from the world for a time by two lovely monasteries, their monks living lives on the margin of society with a faithfulness I greatly admired. And then I settled down in a redwood forest and listened.

I spent days without speaking a word, just drinking in the silence; I walked in the company of the great trees and the delicate ferns; I split wood for heating, finding truth in Thoreau's observation that "splitting wood warms you twice"; I read poetry aloud in front of a great fireplace at night and did physical labor during the day; and I became close with some people of great wisdom, simplicity, and caring. I returned a different man.

During this time away, sheltered in the heart of the world's goodness, a passage from Camus kept running through my mind as though there were in it the seed of a great truth I had not yet let sprout. Camus, never afraid to confront either the absurdity in life or the beauty of sun and sea, wrote: "Yes, there is beauty and there are

the humiliated. Whatever the difficulties involved, I should like to be unfaithful to neither the one nor the other." Perhaps in that statement is a key to fronting with greater directness that which makes life worth living and that which makes living difficult for so many people throughout the world.

Yes, there is the ocean breaking all foamy against the rocks, and the quiet magnificence of the redwoods, and the tender moments when people make connection, touching the quick of each other. And yes, there are half a million people in prison today for views their governments don't like, and thousands strapped to torture tables, and millions who remain hungry in a world of inexcusable luxury. How can we be faithful in such a world?

We can try to be faithful to both, to the redwoods and seascapes on the one hand and to the sufferings of our sisters and brothers on the other. To be faithful one must love both; to love both we must run from neither; to run from neither we must enjoy fully the beauty of this world and resist mightily its destruction. We know we cannot be fully faithful to either, however, for we stumble and fall so easily, we communicate badly and make many mistakes. But the essence of the kind of fidelity about which Camus was speaking is the willingness to risk, to reach out to the beauty of the natural world and the possible beauty of relationships, fearing but not running from the likelihood of loss. And to risk at the same time the other loss, the one we face when we struggle mightily for the trodden-upon: loss of friends, security, possessions, and for some, even life itself.

With this willingness to risk, this fidelity to life, comes a peace beyond understanding. Because Life is good, and is worth living fully and defending energetically. □

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