

The Spiritual Spa

*Getting Away without
Going Away*



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Introduction

WHAT could be better at the end of a long day than a retreat to a spa—a place of serenity, peace, and physical and mental refreshment? While some consider visiting a spa to be the self-indulgent behavior of the wealthy, others take a different view. They relish a few hours, a day or even a week of physical pampering as a way of recharging not only the body, but the spirit, too.

Days of recollection and weekend or week-long religious retreats are more specifically the spas of the spiritual realm. While they are available to many, they are not accessible for all. Even those who tap these spiritual resources generally find they can do so only once or twice a year. Most never have the opportunity to do this at all.

Over many years of observing deeply spiritual women, I have concluded that they have something in common, whether or not they make religious retreats. They are able to find spiritual-spa-refreshment in everyday living. Somehow they have discovered ways to spiritualize their mundane tasks. Recently I attended the funeral of a fellow member of my parish, an 80-year-old woman, who was one of these women. The church was full of people whose needs she had quietly served over many decades. Bernice had that grace-filled ability to spiritualize the ordinary. The priest who gave the homily pointed out that, as the mother of twelve children, she sure had changed a lot of diapers! After the laughter subsided, he added, “But she understood she was doing God’s will with every . . . single . . . one.”

The congregation fell quiet, pensive. Perhaps others were reflecting on what I was thinking: that is, how little spiritual attention I have paid to the everyday things of my life. Usually I rush through my daily routine so I can get to more exciting and interesting adventures. Could I be missing something? I believe so.

I'm convinced I've been overlooking an important source of spiritual refreshment, one I call "The Spiritual Spa." At this "spa" we can learn how to spiritually relax and shut out the voices in our heads, so that even changing diapers can refresh us and teach us. After all, it is those daily activities that provide clues to the mystery of who we are, why we are here, and why we are in this place at this moment in history. Of course, we will not know the answers to these questions until after we die, but spiritualizing our routine gives purpose and meaning to what would otherwise seem inconsequential. Recognizing there is spiritual value in daily work is the first step to accepting these tasks, not only as God's will, but to see them, as they are: essential to our personal salvation. If we cannot learn to look at our lives this way, we risk living lives that Karl Rahner, S.J., describes as "nothing but the ordinary routine, all business and activity, a desert filled with empty sound and meaningless fury" (*Encounters With Silence*, 1960).

The running theme of the chapters that follow is surrender. At a physical spa, one surrenders the physical self to the masseuse, the hair stylist, the make-up expert, the dietician and the fitness director, knowing the final result will be physical refreshment. The Spiritual Spa requires surrender of an interior kind. Such surrender releases the power we possess (whether we are conscious of it or not) to step into the refreshing pool of God's grace. It is in this way that we can revitalize and renew

ourselves at our core. There are strategic ways to approach this, and it is my hope that this book will help readers, working independently or in a group, to incorporate a few into their everyday routine.

Now, let me invite you to visit the rooms of the Spiritual Spa. These rooms are familiar, yet if we can look at them in a different way, they offer an opportunity for some refreshing self-discovery.

Beauty

The (Im) Possible Standard?

SHE has to be at least 60 now. *The Girl from Ipanema*. As I pore over documents attesting to my impending qualification for Medicare and Social Security, and—when I (dare) look in the mirror to see hard evidence that I qualify, I feel good about that!

The *Girl* “swayed so gently” along *Ipanema*, that famous beach in Rio de Janeiro inhabited by The Beautiful People. The song about her was popular in the 1960s, when I was . . . hmmm, well, swaying because I was heavy-with-child. I swayed for three years in a row, never for one moment feeling like the girl in the song: “. . . tall and tan and young and lovely. . .” Well, O.K., so I was young . . . I guess I was tan, too, but the resemblance stopped there.

A Midwesterner transplanted to Southern California, I loved the beach, and I went there frequently. I waddled along the surf when I was pregnant with my first child. With that baby in arms and my second pregnancy barely under my belt, I continued to pack lunches and blankets and bottles and head for the shore. When I was expecting my third child—the first two still in diapers—I gave up the beach and resigned myself to easier trips to our apartment complex swimming pool. But no matter; whether I went to the beach or the pool, the *Girl from Ipanema* was there.

I really need to get over this.



Yet, today, as I observe the young emulating *their* Beautiful People while anxiously harboring the secret knowledge that they will never measure up, I really need to *remember* this. A good place for reflection is the Spiritual Spa.

Beauty attracts us. That we are drawn naturally to beauty is part of the human condition. However, in the face of beauty, one can easily forget that it is truly in the eye of the beholder, and every beholder is directed by his or her culture. Every civilization, from the beginning of time, has set its own standards for what it considers beautiful. Some cultures have standards for beauty that cannot be fathomed by outsiders. Occasionally, however, a beauty-standard bridges huge cultural divides, as does the Girl from Ipanema.

Beauty standards are always in our faces—on television, on film, on music videos, in advertising, and in newspaper and magazine features (illustrated, of course) that advise us on how to be beautiful in “just five minutes a day.” Relentlessly we are reminded that our own natural beauty simply doesn’t make the grade, no matter what our age, socioeconomic status, physical condition, or where in the world we happen to live. There is always something more we can do: get a face-lift, change the color of our hair, update our make-up, lose a few pounds, put sparkly things on our fingernails, get a tattoo, work on our abs.

Generation after generation, folks who think people should know better flail away at beauty standards without success, failing to recognize that standards simply address the question of the cultural “what.” I believe they miss a far more compelling question, which is, “why.”

Every culture admires beauty because beauty has power. At its most primitive expression, beauty has sexual power. Feminine beauty holds power over males; masculine beauty holds power

over females. Helen of Troy had the face that launched a thousand ships, remember? Consider Romeo, Dr. Zhivago, Samson. There would be no stories about them were it not for the beauty of Juliet, Lara and Delilah. In Lake Wobegon, “all the women are good-looking.” Naturally all the local men know that and respond appropriately. Thousands line up every day at the Louvre to admire the enigmatically beautiful Mona Lisa. Young women pay to see and swoon over buff performers like Ricky Martin and Tom Cruise in concert and on the screen. If love makes the world go ‘round, beauty’s power surely sets it into motion. . . .

Grownups know, though, that beauty is transient, only skin deep, and oh, so, transparent. So, if asked which would they rather have, beauty or power, most adults would quickly answer “power.” But “beauty” is the correct answer, because if you have beauty, you can have both. If beauty didn’t have at least some power, it wouldn’t be quite so alluring, nor would the pursuit of it be quite so universal. While my face would never launch a thousand ships, that hasn’t stopped me from fixing my hair, putting on make-up and trying to launch one or two!

Frederick Laing captures the mysterious power of beauty in his charming story, “The Beau Catcher.” Genevieve is a teenage girl who yearns to be attractive to boys like the pretty and popular girls at school, but she doesn’t know how. She sees an ad for a cute hair ornament called “The Beau Catcher.” The ad promises the power that accompanies beauty. Genevieve buys the Beau Catcher. She puts it in her hair. She goes out, confident she is . . . gorgeous! The boys notice. They talk to her. They flirt with her. She flirts back. Exhilarated by the power of being pretty, she returns home and reaches to remove the Beau Catcher and put it in a safe place. But it is gone! Sometime during the course of the day, it has fallen out.