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The Soul of Desire: Discovering the Neuroscience of Beauty, Longing, and Community

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The follow-up to psychiatrist Curt Thompson’s notable work, *The Soul of Shame* (2015), *The Soul of Desire* speaks not so much to shame which mars the soul, but to the community and lived commitments that heal it. Weaving together theology, Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB), and narrative, Thompson offers a vision for creating beauty out of shame and trauma. Thompson anchors the book in Psalm 27:4, using the words “dwell, gaze,” and “inquire” from this scripture to structure the application of his foundational concepts of desire and longing, beauty and imagination, trauma, and shame.

The first three chapters wed beauty and desire together as both central longings and callings of the human heart. True to Thompson’s earlier works, *The Soul of Desire* does not shy away from the concept of shame, but rather invites the reader to look beyond the seeming final reality the context of shame creates and towards a new, beautiful, and embodied creation (p. 52). To do this, Thompson begins several narratives, introducing characters from his own psychotherapy practice, detailing the issue and/or circumstance which brought these specific people to his office. Thompson does not complete these stories until later chapters but invites the reader to identify with the experience of thwarted realization of longing. The metaphorical table thus laid, Thompson then turns, framing the “problem of desire” (p. 27), as a call for the reader to pay attention to the rich longing which saturates life and acts as a clue to our calling if only we will pay attention (p. 25). The first three chapters delve into attachment theory (pp. 18–22; 46–50), IPNB (pp. 23–28; 37–40), integration and disintegration (pp. 28–38; 51–53), and an introductory theology of joy and beauty (pp. 41–46).
Section two, comprised of chapters four-six, begins with the question posed by a client of Thompson’s: “why can’t you just fix me?” (p. 70). Thompson shares details of the client’s situation concluding, “We are people of grief” (p. 71). Indeed, Thompson reflects, “Evil seeks to devour beauty at every turn, and it does so by wielding the traumatic experience of shame as its primary weapon . . . it intends to annihilate beauty and tempts us to do the same in our response to shame and fear” (pp. 52, 72). Though Thompson devotes significant space in these chapters to grief, trauma, and shame, he notes it is these experiences which form the fertile soil of new creation (p. 73). How, exactly, a new, beautiful, and longed-for creation can spring from places of desolation are the focus of the third and final section of the book.

Using the psalmist’s entreaty to dwell, gaze, and inquire (27:4), Thompson introduces the reader to the transforming power of the confessional community, committed to seeing the inherent beauty within each individual and calling forth the new creation Christ is making in and through that community. Thompson refers to this communal calling forth as “looking at what we do not yet see” (p. 113). He expands: “Human flourishing, then, is about our being able to imagine in embodied form the new creation, the new works of art, that God is creating in, through, and with us” (p. 116). Noting how embodied experiences of shame and trauma shrink our imaginations, Thompson gives confessional communities which will stay in places of grief long enough to see beauty emerge significant import: “Being joyfully known enables our imaginations to expand” (p. 116). Indeed, Thompson describes this work of joyful knowing anchored in biblical narrative as what it means to co-labor with Christ to “bring new creation” (p. 115). The movements of this co-labor are dwelling, which Thompson describes as remaining present through discomfort—ours and others’—gazing or seeing the image of God and the promise of new life in the other, and inquiring, described as “telling our stories more truly” (p. 91).

Thompson’s characteristic style weaves together poetic narrative, generous reference to art, both musical and visual, scripture, and clinical psychology. His style is warm, winsome, and inviting, beckoning the reader into
previously unexplored connections between these genres. In Thompson’s capable hands, for example, “the cellist of Sarajevo” becomes a four-word reference to what is both possible and required for new creation to spring forth from devastation. Referencing the cellist of Sarajevo, Thompson states, “The transformational power of gazing and being gazed upon with intention in the very presence of our hideousness becomes the solid ground on which the community stands, creating beauty in the middle of bomb craters” (p. 164). While indispensable reading for those in helping professions, The Soul of Desire provides an accessible invitation to all who experience shame and trauma to dwell, gaze, and inquire, and in so doing, be transformed.

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