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Windows of the Soul

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gire, Ken.

Windows of the soul : experiencing God in new ways / Ken Gire.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-20397-1 (hardcover)

1. Soul. 2. Experience (Religion) 3. Spiritual life—Christianity. I. Title.

BT741.2.G57 1996

248.2-dc 20

96-46899

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Cover design: *Jeff Gifford*

Cover photography: *Jupiterimages*

Interior design: *Beth Shagene*

Printed in the United States of America

A PRAYER BEFORE WRITING

*To speak of the soul with certainty seems a child's boast.
Who can know for certain what is there in our innermost being?
Who can know for certain what isn't?
And if we can't plumb the depths of our own being,
 how can we begin to fathom You, O God?
To write of such things is like a child who runs through the surf,
 kicking up a lot of spray
 yet knowing so little of the sea.
With a child's vocabulary I approach a subject too deep for
 words.
Is it a child's attempt to sound very grown up?
 Talkative and very sure of himself.
Or is it a child's step toward growing up?
 Tentative and unsure.
I don't know.
Maybe something of both.
Whatever the reason, Lord, watch over that child
 and over the words he has gathered
 like so many broken shells along the shore.
Please smooth the edges of those that are sharp
 and let them find hands that will treasure them
 even in their brokenness.*

CONTENTS



Introduction | 11

PART 1

Windows of the Soul | 15

Pausing at the Window | 27

Something in the Window | 39

Longings of the Soul | 47

Opening the Window | 55

PART 2

Windows of Vocation | 65

Windows of Stories | 77

Windows of Art | 87

Windows of the Wilderness | 101

Windows of Poetry | 115

Windows of Movies | 125

Windows of Memory | 141

Windows of Dreams | 155

Windows of Writing | 171

Windows of Scripture | 185

Windows of Humanity | 193

Windows of Tears | 207

Windows of Depression | 215

Windows of Nature | 223

Conclusion | 235

INTRODUCTION



IT HARDLY SEEMS POSSIBLE TO TALK ABOUT THE SOUL WITHOUT IN some way talking about God. Something like a tour guide taking you through St. Peter's Cathedral, pointing out the intricate design of the architecture, the polished craftsmanship of the woodwork, and the painstaking artistry of the stained glass, all the while never mentioning why the cathedral was built in the first place.

It is, I suppose, possible to speak of the soul without speaking of God, just as it is possible to tour a cathedral without stopping to worship. Most of us, though, have taken that tour. And for most of us, it's not enough.

The pursuit of self is what most of us have been doing for much of our lives, even our spiritual lives. But the self is a cul-de-sac, and eventually we end up where we started. Footsore and just as frustrated, just as unfulfilled. Feeling we're a failure, or worse, a fraud.

The pursuit of soul, if soul is all we're pursuing, is not much different. It's a longer walk down a nicer street, but the street is still a cul-de-sac, and in the end, regardless how invigorating the walk, it doesn't lead beyond the neighborhood of who we are.

Most of us, though, have grown a little tired of the neighborhood and all the back-and-forth trips we've taken there. We long for something more than a routine walk around the religious block.

We long for the companionship of God.

We long for the assurance that we are not taking this journey alone. That He is walking with us and talking with us and intimately involved in our lives.

We have all had moments when we've experienced something of that intimacy. Moments we can't quite explain, yet can't explain away. Moments when God has touched our lives like a soft hand of morning sun reaching through our bedroom window, brushing over our eyes, and waking us to something eternal.

At some of these windows, what we see offers simply a moment of insight, making us slower to judge and quicker to show understanding. At a few of them, though, what we see offers a word spoken to the very depths of who we are. It may be a word to rouse us from sleep and ready us for our life's journey. It may be a word to warn us of a precipice or guide us to a place of rest. It may be a word telling us who we are and why we are here and what is required of us at this particular juncture of our journey.

Or, in a startling sun-drenched moment of grace, it may be a word telling us something we have longed all of our lives to hear—a word from God—a word so precious it would be worth the most arduous of climbs to hear the least audible of its echoes.

Windows of the soul is where we hear those words.
And where the journey begins.

WINDOWS of the SOUL



*A glass window stands before us.
We raise our eyes and see the glass; we note its quality,
and observe its defects; we speculate on its composition.
Or we look straight through it on the great prospect
of land and sea and sky beyond.*

BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD
“Some Thoughts on Predestination”

GOD STRETCHED OUT THE HEAVENS, STIPPLING THE NIGHT WITH impressionistic stars. He set the sun to the rhythm of the day, the moon to the rhythm of the month, the seasons to the rhythm of the year. He blew wind through reedy marshes and beat drums of distant thunder. He formed a likeness of Himself from a lump of clay and into it breathed life. He crafted a counterpart to complete the likeness, joining the two halves and placing them center stage in His creation where there was a temptation and a fall, a great loss and a great hiding. God searched for the hiding couple, reaching to pick them up, dust them off, draw them near. Though they hardly knew it at the time. After them, He searched for their children and for their children's children. And afterward wrote stories of His search.

In doing all this, God gave us art, music, sculpture, drama, and literature. He gave them as footpaths to lead us out of our hiding places and as signposts to lead us along in our search for what was lost.

Shaped from something of earth and something of heaven, we were torn between two worlds. A part of us wanted to hide. A part of us wanted to search. With half-remembered words still legible in our hearts and faintly sketched images still visible in our souls, some of us stepped out of hiding and started our search.

Though we hardly knew where to look.

We painted to see if what was lost was in the picture.

We composed to hear if what was lost was in the music. We sculpted to find if what was lost was in the stone. We wrote to discover if what was lost was in the story.

Through art and music and stories we searched for what was missing from our lives.

Though at times we hardly knew it.

Though at times we could hardly keep from knowing it.

The German poet Rilke tells of one of those times in a fable where the sculpting hands of Michelangelo “tore at the stone as at a grave, in which a faint dying voice is flickering. ‘Michelangelo,’ cried God in dread, ‘who is in the stone?’ Michelangelo listened; his hands were trembling. Then he answered in a muffled voice: ‘Thou, my God, who else? But I cannot reach Thee.’”

We reach for God in many ways. Through our sculptures and our scriptures. Through our pictures and our prayers. Through our writing and our worship. And through them He reaches for us.

His search begins with something said. Ours begins with something heard. His begins with something shown. Ours, with something seen. Our search for God and His search for us meet at windows in our everyday experience.

These are the windows of the soul.

In a sense, it is something like spiritual disciplines for the spiritually undisciplined. In another sense, it is the most rigorous of disciplines—the discipline of awareness. For we must always be looking and listening if we are to see the windows and hear what is being spoken to us through them.

But we must learn to look with more than just our eyes and listen with more than just our ears, for the sounds are sometimes faint and the sights sometimes far away. We must be aware, at all times and in all places, because windows are everywhere, and at any time we may find one.

Or one may find us.



Though we will hardly know it . . . unless we are searching for Him who for so long has been searching for us.

When we look long enough at a scene from a movie, a page from a book, a person from across the room, and when we look deeply enough, those moments framed in our minds grow transparent. Everywhere we look, there are pictures that are not really pictures but windows. If only we have eyes to see beyond the paint. If we look closely, we can see something beyond the two dimensions within the frame, something beyond the ordinary colors brushed across the canvas of our everyday lives.

What do we see in those windows? What do we see of who we are, or once were, or one day might become? What do we see of our neighbor living down the street or our neighbor living *on* the street? What do we see about God?

Windows of the soul is a way of seeing that begins with respect. The way we show respect is to give it a second look, a look not of the eyes but of the heart. But so often we don't give something a second look because we don't think there is anything there to see.

To respect something is to understand that there is something there to see, that it is not all surface, that something lies beneath the surface, something that has the power to change the way we think or feel, something that may prove so profound a revelation as to change not only how we look at our lives but how we live them.

Jesus lived His life that way, seeing beyond the pictures of the widow at Nain and the woman at the well, of the tax collector in the tree and the thief on the cross, of the rich man and Lazarus.

He was constantly looking beyond the two dimensions of the full-sized portraits framed before him. Beyond the widow's

tears for her dead son, Jesus saw how much she needed that son to fill the hole left by her deceased husband. Beyond the Samaritan woman's veil, He saw the five marriages that had failed, and beyond that, the emptiness in her life that grew bigger with each divorce. Beyond the power and wealth of Zacchaeus, He saw a small man with a big hole in his heart that all the power and wealth in the world couldn't fill. Beyond the sores of Lazarus, He saw a soul of eternal worth. Beyond the clothes of the rich man, He saw a soul in rags.

Seeing windows of the soul was the way Jesus lived His life and the way He taught His disciples to live theirs. One of those lessons came at the Temple treasury. The treasury was located in the Court of the Women, a place of worship set aside for them because they were restricted from worshiping with the men. Twelve trumpet-shaped receptacles were located there so both groups could have equal access.

When large donations of coins clinked into those receptacles, it turned heads, and the heads took note. Treasury officials kept good mental records of the top donors, making sure they were shown the proper respect, greeted deferentially in the streets, seated preferentially in the synagogues. Lesser donors went unnoticed.

But not today. Not by Jesus anyway. He frames the following picture of what He sees.



A widow in worn-out clothes shuffles by and gives as her offering a couple of copper coins. The tiny coins, together worth only a fraction of a cent, drop into the coffer without sound or spectacle. And she shuffles away.



A few drab brush strokes; that's all there is to the picture. But that's enough for Jesus. He looks beneath its freshly painted

surface and calls His disciples to make sure they see this window of the soul.

“I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”



The widow had nothing to live on and no one to look after her. Her concern wasn't a mortgage payment; it was her next meal. That's why the offering was so extraordinary. The fraction of a cent represented the focus of her life. It represented not only her faithfulness in helping to provide for God's work but also her faith in God to provide for her. It was a beautiful picture, but a picture only Jesus and His disciples saw. The eyes of everyone else were attracted to more public displays.

Someone once said that the spiritual significance of something is in inverse proportion to the publicity surrounding it. A publicized event, like a parade, is more spectacular than it is significant. And that is true even if the parade is a religious one.

“When you give to the needy,” Jesus said, “do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

If such things as art galleries exist in heaven, certainly the picture of the widow's offering is hanging there in a prominent place, for it was one of those secret acts of devotion that Christ referred to, something sacred that the Father saw and treasured.

“To sense the sacred,” said Abraham Heschel, “is to sense

what is dear to God.” The Temple, which for so long had been a sacred place, had become a streetside gallery of religious display. Lost behind the clutter of ornately framed gestures was a pencil sketch of a poor widow’s soul. Not until Jesus pulled it out and put a frame around it did the disciples even realize it was there. Once they did, though, they sensed it was a sacred picture, revealing to them a window and showing them what was dear to God.



How does a person learn to see like that, to look beyond the rags of a widow to the riches of her heart, to see in the everyday moments of life something of eternal worth?

We learn from the artists, from those who work in paint or words or musical notes, from those who have eyes that see and ears that hear and hearts that feel deeply and passionately about all that is sacred and dear to God.

To learn to see the way an artist sees takes time. A long time, in my case. There is a story behind the picture in the front of this book that tells something of the process. It is a Norman Rockwell, titled *Girl at the Mirror*. It first appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine on March 6, 1954.

I was four.

If my mother had a copy lying around the house, I never saw it, or if I did, I never gave it a second look. And if by chance I gave it a second look, I never gave it a second thought. What I looked at in those days was Saturday morning cartoons, not the *Saturday Evening Post*. What I thought about was Roy Rogers, not Norman Rockwell. *Gunsmoke*, not *Girl at the Mirror*.

A lot has changed in forty years.

I have forgotten the cartoons and the cowboys and the gun-fights. But not the *Girl at the Mirror*.

I first saw a print of the picture years ago. I looked at it

as I looked at most things back then, seeing what use I could make of it. I could put it over the sofa my wife's grandmother had given us. The greens would match the fabric, almost, and blend with the sculptured avocado carpet. Give the apartment a homier look.

But that was just a thought, and I never gave it a second one.

Did you, when you first saw it in the front of the book? If you skipped over it, as I once did, go back and look again. Let's look at it together, and together we'll try to look beyond the paint.

The painting seems to be saying something, revealing something. But what?

I look. I listen. I ask questions.

The room in the picture is mostly dark. Why? The mirror is propped up by a chair. Why? Is this the girl's room, her parents' room, a bathroom? An attic maybe? The lighting probably wouldn't be very good in an attic. And if there were a mirror there, it probably wouldn't be hanging on a wall but leaning against something, a box or a chair. Yes, I think it is an attic.

But why is the girl looking at a mirror in the attic and not at a mirror, say, in the bathroom or the bedroom or the hall? Is she hiding? If so, from whom? Is she afraid? If so, of what?

I look closer. Lipstick on the floor, opened. Is it hers? Her mother's? A brush and a comb and, what is that behind them—a hand-held mirror?

She has a magazine on her lap. Opened to a picture of a woman. Dark hair. Like hers. Who is it? A mother, a teacher? Actress, I think. Yes. Maureen? No. Rosalind Russell? No, Jane ... Jane Russell. That's it. Film star.

The girl is barefoot and wearing a slip. Did she go to the attic to play dress-up and then see the magazine? Or did she bring the magazine with her? A doll lies off to the side, in a heap. Was it there already, or did she bring it with her? Did

she toss it to the floor, consciously, or did it slip from her hand, unconsciously, as she propped up the mirror?

She sits close to that mirror. What does she see? What does she think about what she sees? Why are her arms drawn in? And her hands. Why are they held where they are and the way they are? Why isn't she posing? Or smiling? What all is going on behind those dark eyes in the mirror?



There is something about this girl, this girl whose arms are held close and whose hands are curled inward like the petals of a flower. She is somewhere between bud and blossom. Somewhere between her last doll and her first date. Somewhere between dressing up and growing up.

And there is something sad about that.

Something of that sadness is in her face, in her eyes. Can you see it? There is also something of shyness. Maybe that's why she's in the attic. And there are quiet, unspoken fears coming from those dark eyes that seem to make the attic even darker. Can you sense it?

What is she afraid of? And why?

The girl is at a threshold in her life, standing on very tentative legs, now sitting. She knows it is a threshold she will have to cross, but she's hesitant, unsure. Her body is tugging at her, pulling her through the door, but something inside is pulling her back.

She's wondering, I think, about a lot of things. Wondering what lies ahead. Wondering what, besides the doll, she will have to leave behind. Wondering if she'll make it as a grown-up, if she'll be accepted into that world. Wondering how she'll turn out, what she'll look like. Will her face be a magazine face, someday? Or will it forever be the face in the mirror?

She wonders.



What do you feel when you see her sitting there in front of that mirror, with her doll forgotten on the floor? Tenderness? Compassion? Understanding? And where do those feelings lead? Don't you want to sit down beside her, put your arm around her, tell her a story of when you were her age and the thoughts you had then, the fears you had then?

There is something about this girl, something about her that is about all of us. For all of us go through life from one threshold to another. And at those thresholds, most of us stand on very tentative legs, wanting to take a step, but we're hesitant, unsure. We wonder what lies ahead? And what has to be left behind in getting there?

In moving to a new house, we have to say good-bye to the old neighborhood, old friends, old memories. In going off to college, we have to leave our home and family behind. In getting married, we have to shed something of our independence. In starting a career, we have to leave behind college and those special times, those special friends, that cloistered sense of security. In starting a family, we have to close the chapter on the relatively uncomplicated, uninterrupted life we had as a childless couple. In getting a promotion, we have to leave behind a job we love, maybe, or a city we love, or a state. In our children going off to college or to careers or to start families of their own, something is left behind when they leave, something precious, something we and they can come back to only in stories and scrapbooks. In retiring, we bid a final farewell to our livelihood, and though our friends at work remain our friends, a dimension of those friendships is also left behind.

We go from threshold to threshold with something pulling us forward and something pulling us back. We sit in front of a mirror, tentative, hesitant, unsure.

How does God feel about us when He sees us at one of

those thresholds, sitting in front of one of those mirrors? Does He feel less tenderness than we felt for the girl at the mirror? What is He wanting to tell us at those very insecure, very fearful times? “Grow up. Get a grip. Get up and get on with your life.” Is that what He’s wanting to say?

Or is He wanting to sit beside us, put an arm around our waist, and tell us a story of the thresholds His own son had to step across, at Bethlehem, at the Jordan River, and at Gethsemane? Times when His son also felt something pulling Him forward and something pulling Him back. Times when He also was tentative, unsure, and yes, even afraid.

There have been many thresholds in my own life, and doubtless there will be many more. Some have been easier to cross than others, and on some I just sat there, feeling very alone and very afraid. Looking back, though, I don’t think I was alone. I think God was sitting beside me. And I think, or hope anyway, that He felt something for me that was more tender, more compassionate, and more understanding than what I felt for that girl in the mirror.

That is why the picture is for me a window of the soul.
And that is why I can’t forget it.

A PRAYER FOR AWARENESS

Thank You, O God,

*For seeing beyond the surface of my life
to the child sitting at the mirror.*

*Thank You for sitting down beside me,
putting Your arm around me,
and speaking to me with such tenderness,
such compassion, and such understanding.*

*Help me to be aware of the pictures in my life
that are everywhere around me and at all times
showing me something I need to see,
telling me something I need to hear,
offering me something I need to receive.*

*Help me look beyond the surface of those pictures to see
windows.*

*Give me eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to receive
what You are offering me through those windows,
that I might sense what is dear to You
so that it might become what is dear to me ...*