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Living in the light of your face

Joe McHugh | Sep. 25, 2012 Soul Seeing

Do you have a favorite painting or photograph or icon in your home that reminds you of what is good and beautiful and true? Chances are you have many. They are companions, soulmates, expressions of spiritual values.

In 1958 my parents bought a self-portrait of Ohio painter Emerson Burkhart. His kind face graced our living room for 30 years. He must have plugged his ears when I practiced piano, but Emerson also shared Christmas celebrations, chaperoned parties, refereed bridge games and sustained us as we planned my father's funeral in 1973.

I inherited the portrait when Mom died in 1989, and he's graced my living room ever since. Emerson has seen me through good times and bad. I feel I've grown up and am now growing old in his protective sight and with his calming smile.

I put myself in the light of his face every morning when I pray. He's become an icon of God's benevolent oversight, without which I am tempted to let selfish isolation hijack my soul. Allowing Emerson's image to remind me of how God sees me -- worthy of unconditional love and special in his sight -- also helps me see that same vision all around me. Every Sunday afternoon at Starbucks, I watch a mother bring her visually and mentally challenged adult son for a treat. I watch them hold each other's hand, she to reassure him that she's still there, and he to acknowledge her loving care. In our homes we all surround ourselves with images of parents and children, friends and family, and others whose faces illumine what is real. Who among us doesn't need the reassurance that we too are held in love, not abandoned, and never left to die?

Reassurance, however, is not the whole story behind our icons. A print of one of Robert Mapplethorpe's portraits of Tim Scott also hangs in my living room, and it gives me a clue about what comes next. Pencil thin with spiked black hair and a tattooed right arm, Tim resolutely looks straight ahead, eyes focused, right hand shielding his eyes from any glare.

Looking at this portrait warns me to keep my eyes focused away from myself, always looking for opportunities to love and serve. Or maybe I just need to protect my eyes from being blinded by the glare of selfishness, complacency or self-derision. But just as being loved leads us to love, finding places in need of love and service is made real -- incarnated -- in deeds of love and service. St. Ignatius Loyola got it right when he urged us to remember that love is shown more in works than in words.

So the story doesn't end there either. For that I turn to a print of one of David Hockney's swimming pool paintings. I see the pool sparkling with three shades of blue water from a yellow diving board. The unseen person on the board seems caught in that split second between decision and action.

One summer when I was a kid, I got tired of diving from the low board and only jumping from the high dive. Despite my fear, my goal was to dive from the high board. Our swimming coach, Mr. Pope, must have sensed this because one afternoon he followed me up the high dive, sat behind me on the board and held my ankles so I wouldn't fall. I couldn't see him, but knowing he was there gave me the courage to take a risk and dive. Actually, he gave me the push I needed to get off the board and into the water. Staring at the water wasn't enough: I had to dive in deep and come back out alive and proud.

I am learning that our ongoing creation as people of faith comes alive as we take chances and begin to live out all three activities expressed in these paintings -- being loved, discerning opportunities to incarnate love, and getting over ourselves so we can actually love. Dig a little deeper and we might even see traces of the Trinity at work in all this as creator, Word made flesh and the gracious power to act in God's own love. I can't help thinking of God's Spirit as the Mr. Pope of my soul, always encouraging but also constantly nudging me to turn the warm idea of love into the hard work of service and self-giving.

A couple of months ago I did some research and discovered that my Emerson Burkhart self-portrait is worth a good deal of money. I was momentarily tempted to sell it, but any money I might get would just feel like 30 pieces of silver. I'm convinced that Emerson needs to stay in the family and be passed along to another generation. Maybe my grandnieces will someday find safety in his sight and peace in his smile.

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