

SISTER WENDY
IN CONVERSATION WITH
BILL MOYERS



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BILL MOYERS

So it is in this wondrous sense of innocence that you look at this painting without a previous fixation?

SISTER WENDY

Yeah. It's very difficult to do, because our eyes are not innocent. But we must hope to make them so. We must refuse labels and prejudices, just try to see, as a child sees.

BILL MOYERS

And a child sees how?

SISTER WENDY

A child sees innocently, a child sees what's there. It doesn't see with labels and prejudices, because it doesn't know about them. It just knows there's a thing. But, of course, the child hasn't got the capacity to respond at great depth to the thing, which we have. So, we try to get the look of the child, that sees what's really there, and the response of the adult that sees from a depth of experience and has, if they're fortunate, words in which to make that experience audible for other people.

BILL MOYERS

I'm willing to surrender, but how do I train my eye to look?

SISTER WENDY

You train it by doing it. It's like prayer: how do you learn to pray? By praying. How do you learn to look? By looking.

BILL MOYERS

Well? And seeing what?

SISTER WENDY

Looking and waiting, and going away, and coming back and looking, and waiting. And if you've done that with sufficient earnestness, and nothing happens, no flowering within you, no sudden understanding that this is something magical and mysterious that you are now in contact with, then that picture isn't meant for you. Try again in a few years' time. Go to another one.

I was just thinking the other day, looking at post cards of Vermeer, a woman standing at the window. There is nothing happening. There's nothing there. Yet these are the most beautiful images imaginable. And you can see it. I think everybody, actually, sees immediately with Vermeer. But he is a perfect example of what art is meant to be, something that completely satisfies you the more you look at it.

BILL MOYERS

What does, has art done for you, other than make you an international celebrity, which you didn't want to be? What has art *done* for you? What has art done for *you*?

SISTER WENDY

Well, I suppose it's given me enormous joy. It's also increased my capacity to accept darkness and pain, and not be too bewildered by them. It has, I hope, made me a more sensitive and alert person. The one fatal thing is to be a zombie. And I think we're all in danger of living part of our lives at zombie level. But I think art helps one to be perpetually *there*, as it were.

BILL MOYERS

"There" is?

SISTER WENDY

There, alert, constant.

BILL MOYERS

In the moment?

SISTER WENDY

Yes, in the moment, because God's coming every moment, but we're not receiving Him every moment; of course, we're not even noticing that He's coming. We're drifting through. Well, you see, in art you can't just drift: art is demanding of your attention. And I would hope that it helps me to be a more attentive person all the way.

BILL MOYERS

You said it had helped you to see into darkness and sorrow. Does art sometimes tell us things we don't want to know?

SISTER WENDY

Yes, I think that's very true. And that's why I don't like saying, "Art gives one great pleasure." Of course, it does, but it gives one great pain, too.

BILL MOYERS

You said in the book and on the air that all art that really draws us to look deeply at it is spiritual.

SISTER WENDY

Yes.

BILL MOYERS

In what sense?

SISTER WENDY

Because it's going to deepen our awareness of the things that matter. It's going to make us, to refer to what I said earlier, more a person of integrity, more true to my own essence, than I would have been without this encounter. It's like meeting a great genius; just talking, even being in the presence of such a person, you feel enriched, enlightened. You're more than you were before you had that encounter. Well, that's what painting is, appears to be offering us: encounters. Encounters with greatness.

BILL MOYERS

Is religious art synonymous with spiritual?

SISTER WENDY

No. Not at all.

BILL MOYERS

Never?

SISTER WENDY

Religious art can be spiritual. But, it can be very dull. Religious art works on an iconography. And, it works to the extent that you believe in it. If you believe in this image, then the image will remind you of your faith and it will have a religious effect.

BILL MOYERS

It is a vehicle to God, for the devout?

SISTER WENDY

Yes. Spiritual art will take you further than you knew you believed. It will take you into uncharted realms.

BILL MOYERS

Where will it take you? An example.

SISTER WENDY

The realm of your own spirit, which will be different for everybody.

BILL MOYERS

And this has happened to you?

SISTER WENDY

It could happen to anybody who dares to look seriously at great art. Paintings, sculpture, ceramic art, photography...

BILL MOYERS

... has a spiritual power to it?

SISTER WENDY

Yes.

BILL MOYERS

And that spiritual power is what?

SISTER WENDY

The spiritual power is this ability to lift us out of the confines of our ego, out of the traps that many people are in. Their relationships, their jobs, their worries, mortgages, health.

And there they go 'round in the cage. And art opens a door and takes you into something bigger than yourself, something immensely exhilarating and refreshing, so when you come back into your cage, you know that's not all there is to life.

You know what Kenneth Clark used to say. Whenever he got deeply depressed, he'd go and look at something, some great work of art. And there it was, sailing through the centuries. He didn't use these words. These are my words. Untouched by all our littleness and our anxieties. And we're taken into that, not as an escape, but as a way of coming back into our anxieties, able to put them into perspective. Art is a great means of getting perspective on all that's worrying, depressing, constricting in your life.

BILL MOYERS

What did you mean when you wrote, "All great art is spiritual"—and I think you've made that clear—"but not all art is sacred." There's a distinction between the spiritual and the sacred?

SISTER WENDY

Yes. Sacred, I think, goes deeper. Sacred is spiritual at its most profound and emphatic. Sacred, I think, is spiritual art where you know it's spiritual, whereas a lot of spiritual art, you don't know. Your spirit knows, but you don't know. You're just delighting in it. For example, we spoke of the Degas dancers. That's great art. It's spiritual art. But you'd never think that specifically.

BILL MOYERS

And what makes it spiritual?

SISTER WENDY

Because it's great, because it's taking you into something of enormous importance. The way an artist... structures his vision and makes it real to you. The colors and the light, the sheer solidity of it all. You're taken into another world, a world which intellectually, in some ways, I don't approve. But that doesn't make any difference, because it's very great art.

BILL MOYERS

Well, what did you mean when you said that sacred art is "the most intense communication of personal truth"?

SISTER WENDY

Because it's the artist's personal truth confronting your personal truth. If it's great art, if it's sacred art, the artist has managed to put their entire truth there in those images. And your truth encounters them, to the extent in which you allow it to. And so, you return to yourself enriched by an encounter with a master's vision.

BILL MOYERS

And what do you mean by "truth" here in this personal sense?

SISTER WENDY

Truth is what you're meant to be, but haven't yet perhaps become. Truth is what God made you to be, all your qualities fulfilled, no dead sections that you are afraid to work with within you, no areas of negligence that you just didn't bother to take seriously.