



# Reflections on *Self Portrait*, by Eddy Aigbe

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EDDY AIGBE is best known for his bold, textured and abstracted portraits. These paintings combine symbolism, colour and line, to express matters that affect our human psyche.

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*Self Portrait* © Eddy Aigbe, used with permission.



Holiness and pastoral relationships together constitute an invitation to consider an individual with great care and in this article I invite you to consider Eddy Aigbe's *Self Portrait* with attention and attentiveness, as if he were someone with whom you will have a pastoral encounter.

If we are to form good pastoral relationships we must see well and take time to gaze and notice. As we gaze at this self-portrait we may be tempted to turn away, for what we are offered is a challenging stare and all too often we are uncomfortable when faced with such a regard. It is only when we look really carefully, however, that we can start to know an individual.

As we look attentively now at this portrait, we notice its variety of colour and tone, we notice the contrast between head and hand, our eyes begin to explore. We see the cool blues of the head contrasted with the warmer yellows and browns of the hand. As we gaze, we begin to appreciate the detail and recognise the care with which this portrait is painted. We see individual brushstrokes, we notice the play of light and shadow, we look at the detail of eye, nose, ear, mouth and hand. Just as the artist has taken great care with this image, so too God has taken great care with the creation of each individual (Ps 139). It is just such care that we need to take as we approach an individual, for in pastoral relationships time to notice is important. Relationships cannot be rushed, and yet frequently time is the one thing lacking.

Let us now consider this picture in a little more detail. This is a self-portrait and yet half the face is covered by a hand. So what does this hand tell us, for even without words the position of the hand reveals something? Perhaps we are reminded that no one reveals all of themselves to another, and in our pastoral relationships we should not seek to know all. Or perhaps this hand may be an indication of weariness – I have seen much of the world and I am tired of looking. I have seen too much and can bear no more. In order to protect myself and maintain my resilience I need to withdraw, to take a step back, to present only a partial picture. Whatever the reason for the shielding hand, we are required to accept what is being offered, respect whatever defences and boundaries are put up and recognise that relationships are built on trust, trust that needs to be earned by us through our care and respect for the other.

As we look more closely at this shielding hand, we may notice the signs of wear, this hand has worked, but we may also notice the warmth of its colours, in marked contrast to the cool colours of the head. Perhaps this mirrors the emotional health of the individual, meeting the world with warmth and an

outward appearance of well-being, while holding in the mind a sense of distance and detachment.

So let our gaze be drawn to the head itself, the lustrous cool blue suggesting a certain withdrawal, a sense of not offering everything to the viewer. The lips are sealed. This person is not ready to talk, and this can lead to frustration on our part as we seek to build a relationship. What is he not telling us? Why is he hiding? Why does he not trust us? When silence is offered, we must be prepared to accept it, to treasure it and to ponder in our hearts what this might mean.

In this half self-portrait we have one ear and one eye. This one ear reminds us not only that we should listen very carefully, with both ears, but also that our interlocutor may not be listening fully, or may selectively hear what we say. We must be prepared for and accepting of this behaviour, acknowledging how frustrating we may find that, and then placing our frustration to one side, for our frustration has no place in this relationship.

Finally we come to the one eye: the one eye that looks at us with challenge and courage and shows depth and possible suffering. This eye cannot be avoided, but is not a comfortable experience. So it is in life when another gazes at us, we do not like to be stared at. We feel the danger, experience a vulnerability as we wonder what they see in us that we may be trying to hide, or of which we may feel ashamed. Such a gaze is uncomfortable and our gaze within a pastoral relationship needs to be tempered by this knowledge. We are here to see, but not to threaten or challenge (or at least not in the initial stages of building a pastoral relationship). We will want patiently to explore and discover what may lie behind the challenge.

Having looked in detail, we step back and look again at the whole. We begin to consider what life history this individual may choose to share with us. In pastoral care we may be privileged to hear a life story that has never been told. Frustratingly we may also find ourselves in a situation where the story is withheld and we will need to consider what it is about us that hinders the telling. We may need to work patiently, to look carefully and to ask gently the questions which will enable us to see truly who this person is. Building such a relationship is time-consuming and can be quite frustrating, but this gaze challenges us to take the time, to overcome the defiance and defensiveness, to sit with the challenge and not to be discouraged.

We have one further and significant perspective to bring to this pastoral encounter. By virtue of our faith we seek to build a pastoral relationship in line

with Christ's mandate to love one another (Jn 13:34–35 and 15:12, 17) and as a reflection of the love we know from God in Christ. We look with the eyes of faith and reflect on how our faith colours our approach.

Here is someone whom we believe is made in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and is loved by God, just as we are loved, and is known by God, just as we are known (Ps 139:1–2, 13, 15). Our approach must reflect this, laying aside any prejudices or preconceptions, remembering constantly that in Christ we are all equal (Rom 10:12), and that as we attend to this person we attend to Christ himself (Mt 25:45). His gaze may question us. Are we willing to live with his possible unwillingness to share all? Can we care for him well? Can we be trusted to show him love in all circumstances? Can we be trusted to bear his burden? Can we bear his pain? Can we, indeed, be as Christ to him?

We may view this person in the light of other Scriptures, perhaps ascribing to him words from the psalms, eg Psalm 13 or 88, or other Scripture may come to mind. The more we gaze upon him, the more we learn about him, the more readily we will find Scripture to support us as we seek to understand and love him.

However we approach the building of a pastoral relationship, we bring to this conversation our love of God, our belief in God's love for all and our understanding of Christ's many teachings about our care for others. We cannot be faithful to Christ if we do not approach each person we encounter as Christ himself.

As we prepare to leave this portrait, this encounter, it is appropriate to remember that this is a self-portrait, and as we look we are also challenged to confront ourselves. What impact has this encounter had on our own spiritual life and growth? What have the feelings and thoughts engendered by this meeting taught us about ourselves and our relationship with God and God's people? How close are we to loving one another as Christ has loved us? How close are we to reflecting truly and constantly God's love for us and the world?

This self-portrait is a challenge to us, to consider carefully our pastoral relationships, to devote ourselves with great care to this work and to learn from such pastoral encounters how we too may experience spiritual growth.

## Postscript from the Editor

Gillian Houghton's reflection for this journal was based on her response to Eddy Aigbe's painting. Eddy has provided the following interpretive paragraph giving a narrative context for his self-portrait:

My self-portrait was an intense study and expression of a depressive state in my life. The entire production process was profoundly therapeutic and was inspired by the need to seek an artistic means to heal a self-destructive condition. The large orange hand is a spiritual reference of God's healing and protective power. Protecting my vulnerable and fragile side, keeping me together while I was being healed. The exposed side of my face depicts what others saw (or what I wanted people to see). It still helps me both mentally and spiritually, till this day. It is a powerful testament to God's strength and importance in our lives, giving us the assurance that '... We shall overcome'.

How does Eddy's narrative enhance your understanding of his self-portrait, and of Gillian's reflection?