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The Big Picture is produced by the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge, a nonprofit academic research centre whose vision is to foster Christian scholarship and public theology, rooted in spirituality and practised in community, for the glory of God and the flourishing of the church and world.

We regularly produce publications and various resources, and host webinars and other events, all aimed at exploring answers to the question: How then should we live? For more see our website, kirbylaingcentre.co.uk.

The Big Picture magazine seeks to: (1) Educate, inform and inspire readers about public theology, (2) Ground our work in Scripture, (3) Embody with creativity, through art, poetry, music, the written word, etc., the big picture vision of the gospel, (4) Connect with good practice wherever it is found, and (5) Build community locally and globally with our friends and partners actively represented in the magazine.

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COVER ARTWORK

Timothy van Vuuren's *Limited Space* is a seemingly playful image of the results of our voracious use of space and resources. There is an element of menace in the painting, however, provoking us to consider the consequences of crafting our lives and creating in opposition to God's mandate: the quaint conglomeration of structures constitute a tsunami that is poised to destroy what lies ahead of it – and itself.

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Kaffie Fassett, *Seed Packets* fabric quilt (detail)

A Case for Craft

by Dave Beldman

“And the Lord has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and in knowledge ...” Surely this is referring to a prophet, or a priest – maybe a judge, an apostle or some other kind of leader. Actually, this is referring to Bezalel, one of the two named craftsmen in Exodus 31 whom God set aside for the crafting of the tabernacle. We typically associate the Spirit’s empowerment for things like preaching the truth, gaining insight, producing faith, helping to pray or doing extraordinary deeds. The Old Testament rarely narrates people being filled with the Holy Spirit so it’s intriguing that God pours out his Spirit, wisdom and knowledge for the purpose of “craftsmanship,” metal work, masonry and wood sculpting (vv. 31-33), engraving, embroidery, weaving and design (v. 35), not to mention the ability “to teach” others their craft.

This issue of *The Big Picture* magazine and the next are devoted to the theme of “craft” – yes, two issues, in part because the response to this theme has been overwhelming. We have a veritable feast of contributions touching on many kinds and aspects of craft. In this issue alone, you will read articles on organ playing, photography, Japanese wooden boat building, mosaics, furniture making, the blues, a sunflower maze and more.

What is craft after all? First, as a noun, craft can be something you can make or hold in your hand – crafts are often made with love and given away as presents. (I can’t count how many times I’ve made with and received from my kids crafts of various sorts – I would put a recent mosaic project I did with my two daughters in this category.) Second, “craft” can be used as a collective

noun – something like skill or trade. There seems to be a revival today of *craft* in this sense. Third, as an adjective, “craft” is often used to set a thing apart as made with care, skill, time, and quality materials, in contrast to cheap, mass-produced, inferior alternatives. Think here of *craft* beer, or *craft* furniture, or *craft* textiles. Fourth, “craft” is a verb used for making something with skill and care. In this sense one might craft a sentence, a business proposal, a musical composition or a piece of furniture.

As a theme for *TBP* 08 (and 09), we editors are especially interested in the third use of “craft” – as a collective noun – as well as the act of crafting things (as a verb). In a certain sense to be human is to be a craftsperson. (Do not overlook Lauren Mulford’s beautiful piece on parenting as crafting.) But what are we crafting, and to what end? I noticed an intriguing thread running

through several contributions in this issue, namely that committing to the craft of something does something to us. Kristin Tovar, for example, explains a phenomenon that Peter Korn discusses (see Craig Bartholomew’s review): as she was sharpening her skill in photography, she found her heart being crafted and her outlook being reformed. Jason Fischer makes the bold (and compelling) claim that craft is a spiritual discipline and even has the potential to restore our humanity!

There may be many reasons for the strong response to this theme of craft. Avid readers of *TBP* understand the significant value of creation as a gift of God and an object of his redemptive work. As image-bearers we are interested in craft because God is the cosmic craftsman. We hope you enjoy this issue of *TBP*, carefully and lovingly crafted by the editorial team and contributors to the magazine.

Dave Beldman is an editor of The Big Picture magazine.



Photo: Dave Beldman, Family project



August Macke, *Woman Writing*

Upon Submission

by Sara Osborne

My words lay bare before you –
Void of power, vain attempts at
speaking true.
My description? Pale comparison,
Blunted brushstrokes of a kingdom far from view.

My poetry fails at pleasure –
Futile grasping, drought in barren, thirsty land.
My final offering, poor:
Creation blighted by a lowly sinner's hand.

Still moved, you move within me,
Speak creation to this creature's ear.
I hear you clear – but dimly –
Train the instrument; Help me – Lord, be near.

If I am sub-creator,
Let your image be the one they see,
If I be molder, maker,
Let your artistry guide every word in me.

Calm the voice of deprecation,
Hush the omnipresent voice of fear,
Give me only holy meditation,
Living Word, meet me here.

Guard my heart from boastful erring,
From false diffidence exchanged for pride
In its void, place faith unwav'ring;
Living Word – in me, reside.

As I submit my craft to others,
My fragile words – these lumps of clay –
I gladly lay my name down
Taking up yours, in the Way.

May it be an act of worship,
A small rebellion against sin and death –
A spark of divine image-bearing,
God within me – life and breath.

Let praise fly upward,
from my heart, my pen – my depth –
Echoes of Creator
Purest pleasure, deep desire most deeply met.

Sara Osborne is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Classical Education at the College of the Ozarks and the author of Reading for the Long Run (CiRCE Press, 2023).

5 REASONS WHY Art MATTERS

(whether it has a capital A or not)

by Nigel Halliday



In Western culture “art” usually comes with at least an implied capital A and points to a narrow range of activities: painting and sculpture, music and ballet, literature and theatre. We may debate whether some other activities – architecture, photography, pottery – can be admitted to the category, but this still accepts a concept of “art” as narrow, limited, specialised.

But, as Nicholas Wolterstorff points out in *Art in Action* ([Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 6), this way of thinking dates back only to the Enlightenment. Before then, if music was in a category with anything, it would

be with mathematics; and up to the Renaissance, no one would bracket painting and sculpture, where people got their hands dirty, with the noble activities of poetry and philosophy.

Art with a capital A has sadly marginalized the arts in daily life. The Enlightenment, with its love of reductivist definitions, came to define *real* art as something to be appreciated only aesthetically, not serving any practical use. Art in its purest form was literally *useless*.¹ And as the appreciation of art tended to revolve around cultured education and money, most people had to get on without it, and did so. Meanwhile, the Artist, with a capital A, took on a special role with quasi-prophetic powers. Everything they did tended to be described as a “masterpiece,” as if Rembrandt or Tracey Emin never had an off-day, and their works are shown in church-like galleries, worshipped in reverent silence and awe.

The Bible offers a completely different way of thinking about the arts which brings them back into the orbit of every one of us in everyday life. The starting point is not “art” but creativity. We are made in God’s image to be, among other things, creative – *all of us*.² Rather than



August Macke, *Colour Wheel*

1. Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011) 14–15.

2. See Graham Birtwistle, “Art and the Arts,” in *Art in question: London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity* 1984, ed. T. Dean and D. Porter (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987), 15–27.

thinking of art in terms of a league table with painting, sculpture or music at the top, and origami, lace making and flower arranging locked in a battle to avoid relegation, we can picture something more akin to a wheel, in which creativity is the hub and all art forms radiate from it as spokes.

This is not to suggest that all are equal in every respect – my fifth reason below will sing the praises of the “Fine Arts.” But it recognizes a prior truth: that we are all made to be creative, and human creativity takes many important and valuable forms in enhancing the richness to our lives.

1. God has made us to be creators

When we say that God has made us to be creative, the distinction is often hastily added that God created *ex nihilo*, whereas we create out of what God has already made. This is obviously true, but the distinction may be overegged. In our creativity the Lord himself has encouraged us to imagine and make new things, ones he has not made. God himself was interested to see what Adam would name the animals, a task presumably involving insight and creative imagination (Gen 2:19); and as Francis Schaeffer points out in *Art and the Bible* ([London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973], 14), God ordains that the decoration of the priestly garments to be worn in his tabernacle should include blue pomegranates, a combination he had omitted from the natural order (Ex 28:33).

Not all of us are a Rembrandt or a Mozart, but God has made each of us to be creative. Our creativity can be entirely unserious, such as doodling, whittling a stick or making daisy-chains. And it does not have to be divorced from utility: we can use our creativity in how we dress, speak, cook, decorate our homes or arrange our window boxes.

Art, in the basic sense of creativity, is not an activity for gifted specialists, nor a luxury added onto life for those wealthy enough to have the time and leisure to enjoy it, but it is intrinsic to every human life. It is important to remind ourselves of this, to pay attention to the gifts God

has given us with which to add to and enrich the delights of his world.

2. The arts and crafts help us pay attention to the world

Crafts invite us to take an interest in the world God has made. They encourage us to be present to our everyday experience: to notice colours and colour combinations, to pay attention to textures and shapes, to explore and celebrate different materials, and to imagine how to use them to make new things. This is also true of the fine arts, discussed below. Whatever else pictorial artists do, they help us to see the world around us: those who draw and paint will notice things in the everyday and draw our attention to them by depicting and framing them.

For part of his career, my friend, Peter Smith, made woodcuts of the London underground system – not the trains and tracks, but the passageways and staircases, parts of the system that normally we pass through as quickly as possible, taking in as little as we can. But Peter’s woodcuts invite you to slow down and notice your environment, the shape of the tunnels, the clothes of your fellow commuters. And after a while I found myself in the underground system seeing it as “a Pete Smith.”

I wonder if this is part of how we “subdue the earth,” especially in overcoming the sense of alienation we experience because of the fall. As art helps us to notice and to look, it helps us to be more at ease with our surroundings.

3. The arts and crafts are an expression of love

God is love, and therefore we should expect to find love shot through all his creation. The arts and crafts involve an often-unconscious expression of love, a kind of unconditional appreciation. To spend your time making a tapestry, sewing clothes, crafting a sentence, is to say, “I care about this. This is valuable. This is worth the devotion of my time and attention, and worth your attention.”

Aksel Johannessen, *Bakers*



Peter S. Smith, *Leaving*





Adam Dirks and workshop, Prayer nut with case

In a downstairs gallery of the Wallace Collection in London is a wonderful collection of mediaeval carvings in wood and in ivory. I have often stood and looked for a long time at these, not just wondering at the skill of the artist, but enjoying the warmth of the humanity that said that this was a worthwhile thing to make.

Conversely, some years ago I saw the work named *Hell* by Jake and Dinos Chapman. It consisted of small-scale but extensive models of battlefields, covered with bodies made from toy soldiers, each intricately wounded, many disfigured. I felt it to be a genuinely horrible work. One might even call it perverse, because the only expression I could find to describe how it had been made was “with love” – that dedicated care and attention we give to things we value, but here devoted to unmitigated suffering and horror.

Another aspect of the way love permeates the arts and crafts is that we want to share them. From the youngest children who proudly show us their drawings to the craft maker or artist showing their work on the local Art Trail, we want to share our creations with others. Indeed, we often struggle to evaluate our creations until someone else has seen them. As Ellis Potter observes: “Relationship precedes identity” (3 *Theories of Everything* [Destinée Media, 2012], 54). So with the arts, the work needs to be seen to take on its true character.

4. Beauty is a powerful apologetic for the gospel

But then beauty is a subject of its own. From very different parts of the philosophical world, Calvin Seerveld (in *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves*: [Carlisle: Piquant, 2000], 106ff) and Roger Scruton (2–3) both warn against a glib embrace of beauty in art, since beauty can be deeply corrupt. That famous, non-biblical trinity of goodness, truth and beauty is one we need to be wary of: not everything that looks beautiful is necessarily good and true. Never-

theless, beauty is a major factor in our enjoyment of art and craft, and it is, I believe, a powerful apologetic for the Christian gospel.

Our experience of beauty is predicated on difference: we perceive beauty in something that is other than ourselves, something that presents itself to our attention.³ But, as Ellis Potter observes, and Christopher Watkin has recently reinforced in his *Biblical Critical Theory* ([Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022], chapter 1), difference is a major problem for most systems of thought except Christianity.

All religions and philosophies, Potter argues, are monist, dualist or trinitarian. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, pantheism, atheism, all at root see reality as being, or tending towards, oneness. Taoism and Confucianism see reality as dualist, an eternal struggle between two equal and opposing forces, which in perfect balance would resolve to oneness.

The biblical explanation of reality is quite different. It explains that reality is made by God who is himself a trinity, three distinct persons linked in perfect loving unity: diversity in unity underpins the nature of the created order. It is only the trinitarian explanation that really accounts for our lived reality, for personhood and relationality, for difference which is real and good.

In a monist universe, it is hard to see how novelty comes about, and particularly why it would be celebrated in art and craft, since it fosters difference. But in the trinitarian explanation of reality, where diversity exists within unity because love encompasses all, the multiplication of new things through the arts and crafts makes perfect sense and is something to be enjoyed.

Where human creativity points to the truth of the Bible, how much more does beauty. For beauty is essentially relational: it involves an encounter between the perceiver and something outside themselves. Indeed, Roger Scruton suggests it is a two-way encounter: like mutual gift giving, the object offers itself to us, and we in turn

3. We may appreciate things in ourselves that others find beautiful, but we do not attend to them with the intentional contemplative enjoyment that we direct to things we ourselves find beautiful. The exception to this might be Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection, but this is universally agreed to be a sign of disorder.





Józef Rapacki, *Dawn (A Daybreak)*

we live in but is in any case sharply demarcated from it by the frame, and to imaginatively engage with what we are shown there.

The fine arts are a reminder that we live with an unseen reality, involving truth, meaning and morality. Many

give it our focused attention. He compares our enjoyment of beauty to our enjoyment of being with friends: pleasure mixed with *curiosity* to understand more about the other (Scruton, 26).

And beauty is not just an I-Thou relationship: it also implies a three-way relationship. Although we may disagree on matters of taste, our judgements of beauty imply something objectively real in the object of our attention, which we assume that others can agree on. We can enjoy a rainbow or a sunset on its own, but if our loved ones are indoors, we are very likely to encourage them to come out and enjoy it too. We can enjoy the beauty of a painting on our own, but if we are in company, we are likely to discuss it together.

5. Fine Art is a distinctively Christian form of creativity

What is often called “Fine Art” seems to be a uniquely Christian contribution to world culture. It is noticeably absent from, or even actively forbidden, by other cultures. Arising out of the tradition of Byzantine icons, the Western practice of image-making, especially in painting and sculpture, invites us to meditate on our deepest values and commitments.⁴ Artists use a variety of aesthetic components, such as composition and balance, light and shade, hard or soft lines, degrees of realism or obvious artificiality, in order to steer our contemplation, but we are left with a degree of latitude to meditate on the meanings and implications of the work.

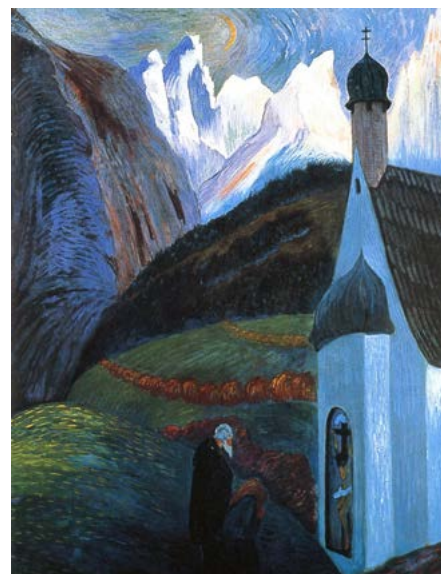
In his work on literary realism *Mimesis* ([Princeton University Press, 1968]; see e.g., 49), Erich Auerbach compares biblical narratives to those of Greek myths, and shows how the biblical ones are constructed in such a way as to invite readers to inhabit the story, because it deals with matters that directly impact their own lives. In the same way, the Western fine art tradition produces images that directly address the viewer, inviting us to step into a world that may or may not resemble the world

works of art engage directly with matters of faith and value, through depictions of biblical events or historical or mythological scenes. But even a simple landscape or a domestic interior is a recognition of value, that we are not surrounded by meaningless stuff, as would be the case if atheism were correct, but by a created order that evokes responses that go far beyond the physical.

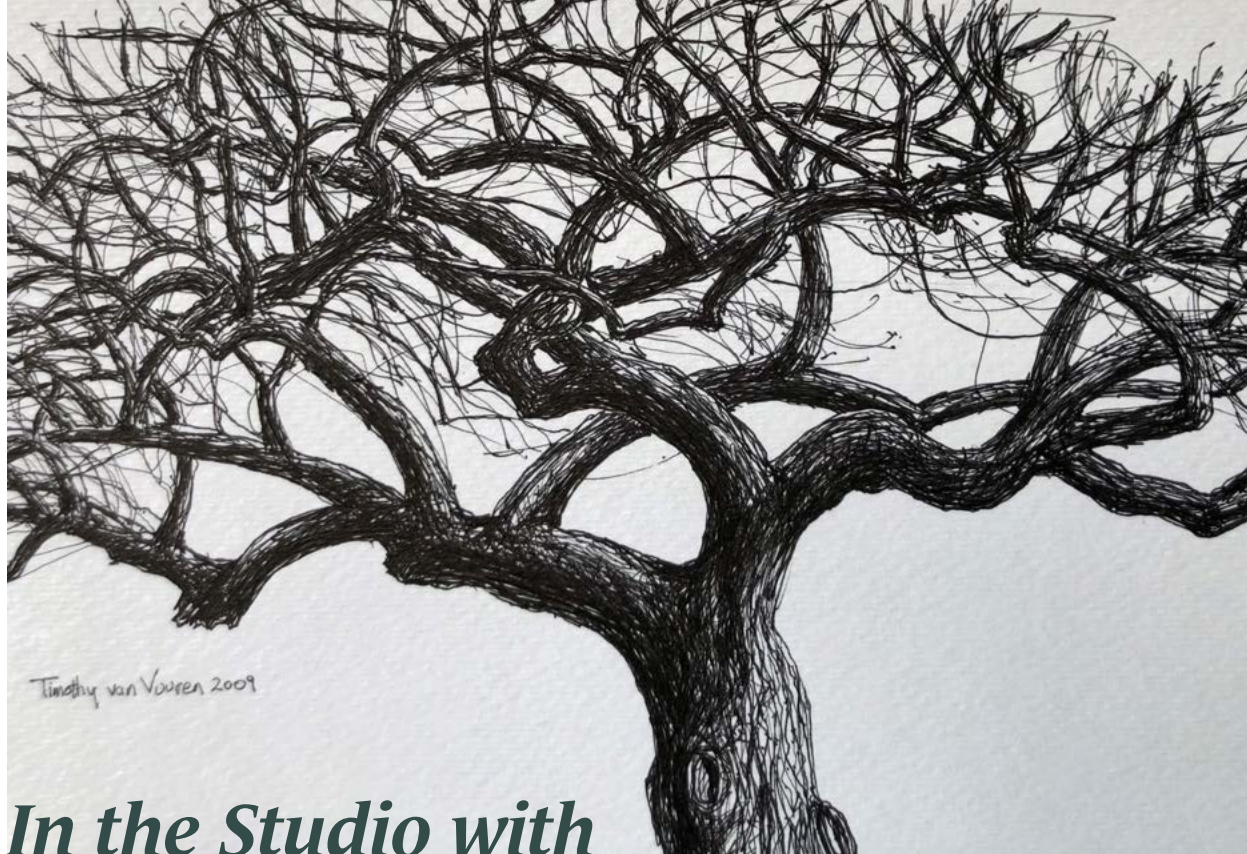
Fine art, arising from a Christian trinitarian understanding of reality, celebrates imagination and novelty, confident that engagement with our deepest values is not just a matter of law keeping or definition by words, but engagement with the whole self through reflection and worship. It has been an interesting feature of our culture to watch how art, having been put on a pedestal by the Enlightenment as a path to transcendence but unable to fulfil that role, has toyed with ugliness or indifference, and attempted to dismantle the boundaries between art and life. The frame is seen as a constraint against freedom, the highest value of the Enlightenment, but the result of such “freedom” is essentially monist – losing distinctions between art and daily life, and making things less rich and interesting, not more so.

The biblical understanding of the arts and crafts, however, encourages an enrichment of life through a celebration of what God has made, and of who he has made us to be, and helps to bring us together through creativity, beauty and reflection.

Dr Nigel Halliday, an Associate Fellow of the KLC, is a retired pastor and Bible teacher who has now returned to his first love of art history. He is currently researching the influence of the Reformation on the later work of Michelangelo.



4. I am here following Hans Rookmaaker. See the opening chapters to his *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1970) and my “Rookmaaker’s Theory of Art” in *The Big Picture* 03 (Hilary 2022), 13–16.



In the Studio with Timothy van Vuuren

In conversation with Istine Rodseth Swart, the award-winning ceramist and multi-faceted artist Timothy van Vuuren, from Johannesburg, South Africa, shares aspects of his life's journey in art.

Istine Rodseth Swart: Your love for art in general and enthusiastic pursuit of several art forms has extended over decades and is a major part of who you are. When did you become aware of your artistic gifting, and that it needed to be expressed so diversely?

Tim van Vuuren: I have enjoyed drawing since I was at school. At the age of twenty-five I started drawing seriously, which I did for a year before starting to paint. My first efforts were amateurish, but with guidance from some professional artists my work slowly improved. Some of these artists are Gert Swart, Walter Hayn and the late Tony Strickland. Originally, I worked from drawings done in plein air or from my own photographs.

IRS: How do you accommodate your interest in and pursuit of the rather unusual combination of making pottery, drawing, painting and flower arranging?

TvV: I spent thirty-five years working in the financial services industry before retiring to pursue art full time. During this period, it was difficult to find time to make

art. However, because drawing is an immediate form of art, I drew whenever I had a moment and now have several drawing books of drawings apart from many other drawings on sheets of paper. Some of these drawings done in the last 45 years I still use today in my art.

I made time to paint at night and on occasion would paint late into the night. I also wanted to work with clay, so I started learning pottery at Sevendooone Pottery in Pinetown. After several years, having studied all aspects of ceramics, I purchased a wheel and an electric kiln and set up a studio at home.

In 2008 we moved to Underberg where we further developed a wonderful garden that came with the house we bought. There my love for flowers and arranging



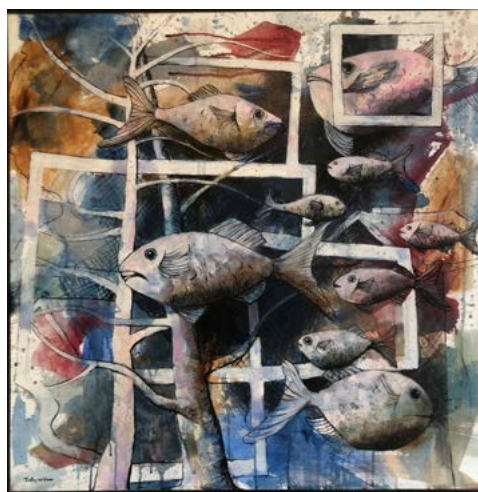
The Secret Garden (Photo: Robyn Davie Photography)

them grew. I joined the Underberg Garden Club in spite of being one of a handful of men in a group of 100 per monthly meeting. Although only an occasional gardener, I love gardens and there I learnt more about them: about trees and vegetables, growing and caring for flowers, as well as flower arranging.

IRS: Themes recur in your pottery, drawing and paintings: trees, houses, fish, for example. What lies behind your preoccupation with these themes?



From my Window
(Ceramic vessel)



From my Window (Painting)
(Photo: Robyn Dawie Photography)

TvV: I love landscape paintings, particularly if they include trees and some human presence in the form of villages, towns, buildings, suburbia, etc. The sleek shape and freedom of movement that fish have has always intrigued me. As far as ceramics are concerned, I made one-off decorative pieces often using the similar images or themes as I used in painting and vice versa.

IRS: You have not only created artworks, but have shared your expertise, have played a role in associations and have been a student throughout your artistic journey: teaching, serving on committees and in associations and attending classes. How did you benefit from these activities



From my Window
(Drawing)



Completeness
(Photo: Robyn Dawie Photography)

and what are some of your most significant and rewarding experiences and affiliations?

TvV: I learnt a great deal from all these activities, but especially from teaching drawing, painting and ceramics. I started my students on drawing and concentrated on capturing the forms of objects, primarily using hatching,

before going on to teaching all aspects of painting. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of drawing to an artist. It is vital to use drawings to formalize your subject; in fact, I think drawing is the lifeblood of an artist.

In addition to making and teaching ceramics, I was a member of Ceramics SA for many years and had the privilege of serving as the chairperson of the KwaZulu-Natal region for two years.

IRS: Wherever you resided you have been active in your community, and your church family, in particular, has benefitted from your artistic talents. Tell us something about your involvement in your church communities.

TvV: Apart from being involved in regular church activities, I started doing flower arrangements at our church in 1997 when we moved to Hillcrest and continued to do so at churches in Underberg, Howick and now Johannesburg where I am the only man on the flower roster.

I was a congregant in the Pinetown church where Craig Bartholomew served as a young pastor. It was an enriching experience to be part of the Christian Worldview Network



The Red Maze (detail)

that he initiated and to benefit from his commitment to artists and the arts. I took part in the arts festivals and CWN conferences that were arranged at that

time and contributed to the original *The Big Picture* that Craig started.

IRS: You have always had a lively interest in books and a curiosity about the work of other artists: past and present, local and international. How would you describe the role of books in your life, and are there any artists that have influenced your work significantly?

TvV: There are many artists and art books that have inspired me to be more creative. Some of the art and artists on Instagram have also been a constant inspiration. If I had to single out one book it would be *Landscape Painting Now*, subtitled *Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism*, by Barry Schwabsky (Distributed Art Publishers, 2019). This book covers realism and abstract landscape painting from the 20th century and includes work done in the 21st century. The most interesting chapter for me is titled “Constructed Realities.” I realized that from the 1980s I had occasionally made up my own landscapes. I suppose these paintings *are* constructed realities. Craig might remember *The Red Maze* dated 1983 and exhibited at the arts festival at Christ Church in Pinetown. But then most contemporary artists create their own reality, a myriad of styles, from realism to abstract. Look at Gert Swart’s sculptures: his own wonderfully creative reality, for which he is now using some brilliant colour combinations.

IRS: Making art is in many respects a solitary pursuit, but as we have seen, you were and are involved with friends, fellow artists and art groups. How do you balance the solitary and social aspects of your artistic life?

TvV: I agree that making art is a solitary pursuit. However, I have attended many pottery/ceramic workshops given by brilliant and successful ceramicists. These workshops have been an invaluable learning process for

me. At the Howick Arts Society (HARTS), I did a workshop on drawing. One does learn much from workshops, but ultimately one makes art on one’s own. This requires self-discipline, and I think most artists are self-motivated to be creative.

IRS: Clearly you have always had a very strong motivation and drive to practise art since you continued to do so alongside your career in finance before retirement. How did you find time to create art, especially different forms of art, while working and taking care of your family?

TvV: This was difficult at times and frustrating. In my business I would be on my way to a client, sometimes looking at an inspiring landscape but not having the time to stop. So many landscape paintings were only made in my mind and never became a reality. Maybe this led me to creating my own realities for painting and pottery purposes. One has to make time to be creative.

More recently after moving house four times in three years I decided to concentrate only on painting. Logistically carting a kiln around that weighs the same as a piano became onerous, hence becoming one of the factors that led me to selling all my pottery equipment to one of my students.

IRS: What difference does being a Christian make to the way in which you create artworks and operate within the art world.

TvV: Firstly, I have to say that if one has any creative gifts or talents, they are always God given. There are many verses in Scripture alluding to this fact (e.g., Ex 31:1–6). So, I believe we should be in prayer about our artworks and seek God’s wisdom in the creative process. There could be some controversial subjects in the creative process, but we should strive to be God honouring with our creations. We should be living a life dedicated to our Lord and God.

Istine Rodseth Swart is an administrator for the KLC. Unless otherwise specified, all artworks and photographs by Tim van Vuuren (Instagram: @timothyvanvuuren, email: timothyjvv@gmail.com).





The Ethics of Craft

An Engagement with Peter Korn's *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters: The Education of a Craftsman* (London: Vintage, 2013)

by Craig G. Bartholomew

If we consider the effect, we shall see there the pattern of human life. Every artisan aims to produce a work that is beautiful, useful, and enduring; and only when it possesses these three qualities is the work highly valued and acceptable.

– St Bonaventure, *Works of St Bonaventure: On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*

Some years ago, I discovered the delights of craft and ended up doing several jewellery courses at an academic jewellery department in South Africa, a stained-glass course in Canada, etc. Ever since, I have enjoyed crafting as an activity that balances my cerebral work as an ac-



Charles Sprague Pearce,
The Arab Jeweller



Reuven Rubin, *The Flute Player*

ademic. I doubt I am alone in this. Amidst our (post)-industrialised consumer culture, a hunger is evident for the process of crafting and for hand-crafted products.

Nearly as far back as we go craft has always existed (cf. Gen

4:20–22), but it became differentiated from art during the Renaissance and moved into strong focus as such in reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Central figures in this respect were John Ruskin (1819–1900) and William Morris (1834–1896), founders of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Korn (35) notes that “Ruskin and Morris welded the ideas of the applied arts, the vernacular, and the politics of work into a theory of production intended to counteract the evils of industrial capitalism.” Alas, their workshops could only survive by making products for the wealthy and the movement was dealt a fatal blow by World War I. However, their ideas did not die, and Korn (31) points out that some fifty years later their narrative fed into the emergence of the studio craft movement, *his* craft movement. The revival of craft is thus relatively new; Korn estimates that at a major craft show in New York in 1978 he was only one of six full-time furniture makers out of 500 exhibitors.

Korn's book is exquisite, as befits a book about craft. Including photographs and drawings, it weaves deeply personal narrative into profound reflection on craft, its renaissance, and how it relates to our humanity, into a wonderful whole, moving between Korn's move from carpentry to furniture making, to philosophical and ethical reflections on why we are attracted to craft and what is going on in such making.

Korn's personal narrative

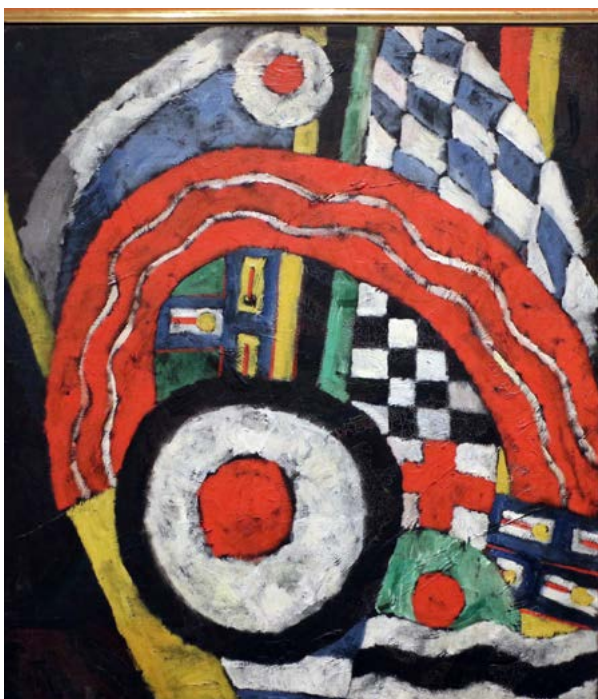
Korn was born in 1951 of Jewish parentage. He explicitly describes himself as “not religious” but, as I will explain below, the language of his book indicates that this is not as straightforward as he suggests. He describes his development as one from the surface of life to its depth. Of his move to Nantucket at the

end of his student years he notes, “We were all looking for accurate maps of the world, my friends and I” (19). Korn got work in carpentry and then a day came when he decided to make a cradle for friends expecting their first child: “After three days of intense focus, cold, and solitude, the cradle is complete – a miraculous birth in its own right. I have somehow transformed benign intent into a beautiful, functional object. This is my moment on the road to Damascus. I am overtaken by a most unexpected passion” (28). This passion shapes the rest of his life.

Korn went on to become a furniture maker and teacher, survived two bouts of Hodgkin’s disease in his twenties and forties, and ended up setting up the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine, of which he is a former Executive Director. Along the way he discovered his capacity for administration and writing, a product of which is this book. Indeed, Korn combines the roles of expert practitioner, profound thinker and excellent writer, a rare, but most welcome, combination.

He first contracted cancer at age 27, at a time when chemotherapy was in its early days, hence the harrowing description of his treatment. Intriguingly, he sees this profound suffering as pivotal in his development: prior to the cancer he was “a want-generating machine” (70). Now, however, “Without the distraction of wanting I became alive to the moment, and the moment was incomparable.... Cancer had spun the kaleidoscope and the bits and pieces were rearranging themselves in new patterns” (70). Significantly the section following this narrative in his book is titled “Finding My Voice”; freed of constant wants, he was able to develop an aesthetic of his own.

Korn’s father lamented the fact that he developed a vocation that did not involve the mind, but Korn finds that what he loves about craft is that it involves the heart,



the head, and the hand: “To engineer a joint that was sufficiently strong and durable, I had to understand wood strength, wood movement, grain direction, and properties of adhesives” (50). He notes the integrality of craft: “There is a deep centeredness in trusting one’s hands, mind, and imagination to work as a single, well-tuned instrument, a centeredness that touches upon the very essence of fulfillment” (53). For all that the craftsman brings to the task, one’s work is subject to the test of reality (55) which must be understood and known well.

In his thirties, Korn was confronted with the tension between idealism and financial survival, a tension that confronts many creative vocations. His writing on commerce and art is mature and well thought through, including reflections on the positive roles that vendors can play (149–50) and an engagement with Lewis Hyde’s extraordinary work, *The Gift*, which our KLC Arts Hub has discussed in several meetings. In dialogue with Hyde, Korn elaborates on the economy of the gift or the gift economy:

Creative inspiration becomes a gift because some artists experience it as a form of grace visited upon them from outside. Once received, this gift is nurtured by the inner gift of the artist, the creative genius with which he was endowed at birth. Next the artist shares his work with others – a third gift that creates a cycle of gifts, a gift economy. When the artist lets go of his work, he becomes an empty vessel, open to inspiration all over again. The more he is able to give, the more he is able to receive. (157)

Why Craft?

Korn reflects deeply on why he and others are so drawn to craft. His surprising answer is that folk like himself are not just trying to produce craft objects but are striving through craft towards the shape of the good life. For Korn, in retrospect, he was thinking by means



Photo and cabinet by Jason Fischer

of materials and tools towards objects that would reveal the nature of the good life. “In short, in making a straightforward desk I utilized a language of materiality that was simultaneously visual, tactile, stylistic, spiritual, functional, and political to *design* my way to a vision of the good life” (59).

How exactly does this process work? Korn agrees with Pirsig,¹ Sennett,² and Crawford³ that the aspiration for *quality* is the key to a good life, and this is precisely what we find in the crafts. Korn’s example in this respect rings true for us consumers of mass-produced furniture. He points out that for a simple cabinet door to stay flat and to remain this way, the choice of timber is crucial, and expertise and care is required at each stage in the production process. A good craftsman thus aspires to hard-won quality in their work, and quality is the/a key to the good life. Modern life, furthermore, easily distances us from the visceral, material nature of earthly reality, and thus is deficient in feeding what Korn delightfully – and insightfully – refers to as the “earthly nature of our spiritual appetites.” Through concentrated engagement with the materiality of the world, craft thus allows for a more authentic human life.

Korn’s language in terms of craft’s value is surprisingly strong; it provides for nothing less than the *transformation* of the crafter. To see how this is the case we need to attend to Korn’s remarkable exploration of craft and worldview.

Craft and Worldview

What astonishes me in Korn’s book is how clearly he connects craft with what I call “worldview”⁴; generally, his preferred term is “mental maps.” Korn rightly points out that a piece of furniture embodies a view of life or worldview: aesthetically, it conveys impressions – what the Canadian aesthetician Calvin Seerveld calls its allusive quality – which evoke meaning, meaning which is, for example, if well-made, in contradiction with consumerism (58–9). In a wonderful turn of phrase, Korn states that furniture “describes the life to be lived around it” (62). He asserts that “If I seem to be equating products with ideas, it is because every manmade object embodies the worldview from which it originates” (151). This

1. Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Bantam New Age, 1974).

2. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (Yale UP, 2008).

3. Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (Penguin, 2009).

4. See Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).



Marsden Hartley, *Ship*

is true of a loaf of bread and a vacuum cleaner: “Craft objects and manufactured products objectify complexly layered sets of ideas about how the world is constituted and how we think we should live in it” (152).

Part of Korn’s, and of any crafter’s, maturing is coming to this realization. When Korn chose to become a furniture maker he was “acting on an unexamined worldview that was very much the product of my historical moment” (95). Maturing involves becoming aware of this worldview and engaging critically with it. Chapter 10 of Korn’s book is titled “Mapping a Craftsman’s Mind.” He traces his awareness of worldview back to his being mugged on a beach in Acapulco during his student days. The aloneness and vulnerability of this experience somehow awoke him to the particularity and limits of his own perspective. He had been aware that *others* had blinders, but “It was only the framework of my own mental cage that remained invisible, much as the walls of an aquarium must be invisible to the tropical fish within – until a mugging smacked my nose hard against the glass” (108). The mugging “shocked my mental map into closer alignment with the actuality of things” (119).

Korn does not call it this, but he articulates a view of worldview in a *critical realist* tradition. Reality, as with his mugging, resists being twisted into just any shape, but at the same time the way we interpret and live is significantly shaped by the worldviews we bring to reality. He follows Peter Senge in naming such frameworks mental maps,⁵ which fuse a great diversity of elements into a single template which we place over the complex universe in order to comprehend it.

5. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, 2nd ed. (London: Random House, 2006).



Else Berg, *Circus with Guitar*

Korn points out that we *all have such maps*, but it is their very ubiquitousness that results in their often going unnoticed. “Every person on the planet navigates his life according to a singular, fluid, highly complex mental map that determines his goals, strategies, and tactics, his ideas of selfhood and truth, and his normative and aberrational behaviors – not his drives necessarily, but how he interprets and chooses to act upon them” (109). Indeed, the possession of such maps is what makes humans distinctive: “Mankind’s defining characteristic is the construction of narratives that explain who we are and how the world works” (126; cf. 160ff).

From where, according to Korn, do we get our mental maps? From the materials at hand (110) so that for each person his or her mental map is “ladled out of a cultural stew particular to his time and place” (111). Religious narratives are the most obvious type of narrative that address such needs but so too do secular systems. Korn identifies the following *structural components* in our worldviews: context (the bigger picture including the question of origins), belonging (being part of a social order), order (trust in the predictability of events in our physical and social worlds), meaning (the sense that

our actions and thoughts are significant in a “larger plan” [118]), hierarchy (knowing our place in an order), and respect (viewing ourselves positively in the narratives of others).

Craft and Transformation

An intriguing aspect of Korn’s view of craft is that he not only sees craft as embodying and emerging out of a worldview, but also as transformative. When writing a personal mission statement, he found that the words he used to describe his goals as a furniture maker – “integrity, simplicity, and grace” – described precisely the sort of person he wanted to develop into through his crafting. He refers to this as a second epiphany: “For the past decade I had been imagining that my goal was to make furniture that expressed certain values. Now I saw that what I had really wanted all along was to cultivate these same qualities within myself” (102). He concludes that the primary motivation for creative work is self-transformation (see 102–4).

At the same time, Korn is aware that achieving expertise in a craft is not the same thing as being virtuous (cf. 124–25). Korn’s honest personal narrative itself reveals repeated occasions where his devotion to craft was damaging to his relationships with women. His tragic example of a life in which expertise and virtue – or having things together – are out of kilter is that of the father of contemporary ceramics, Peter Voulkos. “Peter Voulkos was a master craftsman, but master of his own demons he was not” (166). As much as Korn affirms the goal of craft as “integrity, simplicity, and grace,” there is a tension in his thought in that he recognizes that one may be the very best craftsman without having one’s life together. The result is that his book ends on an ambivalent note: “Let me be clear: people who are creatively engaged are not necessarily happier, more fully realized human beings than the rest of us” (166). His final sentence en-

capsulates this tension: “Finding creative passion that governs your life may be a curse as well as a blessing, but I would not trade it for anything else I know” (167).

Part 2 of this article will follow in TBP 09.

Craig Bartholomew is the Director of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology.



Left: Else Berg, *A Potter*

Right: Peter Voulkos, *Siguirilla*

by Kristin Tovar

In 2012, I began to open my eyes. I let curiosity get the better of me. I sought to keep my head up and my eyes open, expectant to find beauty and uniqueness in the world around me. I knew my trusted companion would be my camera, and I captured what I saw through it as proof. The photos began to add up. The snowball effect was in play when I realized in how many new ways I saw the city because of a dedicated choice to find the good. My sense of wonder grew with my new perspective and way of capturing what I saw. I was hungry to learn



more about the history of each person and place I came across. There was a desire to find depth and dimension in a world that had felt 2D before. The experiment of using photography to change how I saw where I

lived took root in me, and it was as if the words of a book came to life on a stage. I had welcomed something in me that became a permanent part of who I am. Once you begin to see in 3D you never want to go back to 2D.

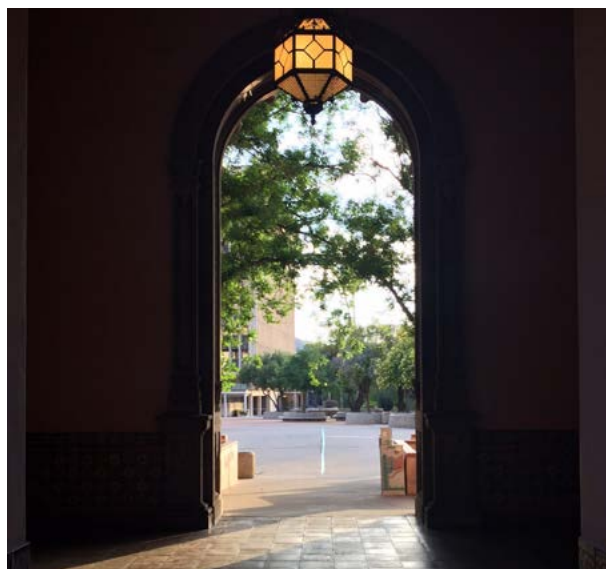
There are many ways of pairing actions with the internal changes we institute. For me, it was taking photos. I had been on Instagram for over a year before I started an account for this personal experiment in gratitude, and I was already mesmerized by the tiny squares and the ability to share them. As a child, I constantly took pho-

tos, whether with disposable cameras or incredible gifts from my grandparents, or by purchasing the latest technology as a means to express myself. One of my favourite

classes in high school was photography, at a time when we still had film cameras and a darkroom. Our teacher taught us that the word “photography” comes from the combination of two Greek words: φωτός (phōtós) meaning “light” and γραφή (graphē) meaning to paint or draw with light. I have also heard photography defined as “writing with light,” which fits my journey well as I sought to use photos to write a new story.

In photography, light enters the camera, and the photographer chooses the amount to let in using the aperture, dialling up or down to accommodate the light in the environment, as the amount of exposure to light can drastically change the final image. A pinhole camera, also known as camera obscura or “dark chamber,” explains this concept. It is the simplest and cheapest way to build a camera and also relatively easy to make, often by creating a hole with a small, sharp object in a piece of aluminium foil and attaching it to a light-tight box. The more effort put into keeping the light out, the better – sometimes achieved by taping the box with heavy-duty tape or painting the inside black. Ultimately, the size of the pinhole determines the exposure of the photographic paper to the light, which in turn makes the image into something our eyes and brains recognize. It is truly the art of writing with light.

At some point in my journey, I made the conscious decision to change the way I thought and talked about



where I live to reflect gratitude. Even before I became fully convinced of my positive feelings for where I live and decided to stay put, I knew I would have difficulty progressing on this journey if I didn't draw a line in the sand and choose a new path forward. As I took photos as a way to gather "reasons" I could love this place, I was also doing the internal work that would actually begin to create change. Looking back, it seems impossible and like a kind of magic, but it really was the small, quiet moments that made all the difference. It became easier and easier to catch myself in negative talk and complaining as I got used to hitting that line in the sand. Our thoughts and words have an incredible way of illuminating what is inside us. Many mental repetitions conditioned my mind and, eventually, my heart into a new perspective. Choosing what my eye focused on, let in the light in a particular way that gave me exactly the new view I needed.

When I began designing my first retail store, I knew I wanted to harness the power of storytelling through photography. I had taken hundreds of photos by then, and as a result, there is an eight-by-eight-foot artwork that showcases over three hundred images celebrating where I live. When people come into the store, they are delighted to find an image of the place where they shared their last cup of coffee with a friend, the park they visited for a picnic, or the food cart where they got their first Sonoran hot dog. The collection of photos reminds people of the places they take pride in and whose continued existence they want to ensure: a task bigger than themselves or even for one lifetime. It reminds them that along with the memories of the past, there is also the possibility of cultivating a new perspective simply by using fresh eyes.



Many tools in photography assist a photographer in shaping the perspective with which the viewer sees the final product. From subject distance and framing, to light exposure, to different lenses, all these tools work together to capture a moment. At the dawn of photography, it was impossible to see the results of an image captured on film instantaneously, but now, with the help of technology, we see results instantly on a screen. We can make quick changes and adjustments, check for eyes



caught mid-blink, and zoom in and out as needed. We have more control now than ever on sharing a perspective through the lens of a camera.

Fewer than 200 years have passed since the birth of photography as we know it today, and in that time there have been great advancements. We now have the ability to capture images in a split second on our phones and digital cameras and the storage capacity to keep every single one. Whether we need all those photos is a topic for another day. Besides the technical elements, what makes a good photo today is the same as for all those yesterdays; something caught someone's eye that they believe is worthy of existing beyond the moment. Whether family photos or photos of great events in history and sports, they are things we do not want to forget. We rely on them to both remind us and propel us forward. As the human eye captures images just like a camera does, the art of photography makes it possible for us to carry those moments into the future and so, in the future, to recall our past.

Kristin Tovar is the founder of the movement (and shop) Why I Love Where I Live, originating from her ventures in photography. For more information visit www.whyilove-whereilive.com or Instagram: @whyilovewhereilive. Photographs by the author.

Whatever your Hand Finds to Do

by Brianna Siegrist

We are clearing out the barn this week, my family and I. When I married into the family and saw the big weathered building full of “antiques” left behind by four generations, I had different ideas of what I’d find. I thought antiques were hand-hewn cedar chests containing a lock of hair and a ribbon-tied baklava of yellowed love notes. I pictured things that had been tenderly created and cared for, but forgotten. Instead, I inherited a hayloft full of chainsaw parts, broken lawnmowers, bent bicycles and business records. In clearing out, we are sorting: for the auction; the scrap; the burn pile. The burn pile is the largest.

We live in an unprecedented era of “things.” Before the Industrial Revolution, what we owned was likely created by human hands: clothes, furniture, tools, toys. Goods cost more money because they cost more in human time, and so when they required great skill, effort or length of time, they were more valuable and more carefully tended. Then came the factories. Machines allowed faster, less tedious “creation” of almost anything you needed – or wanted. Things got cheaper – in price and quality.

When my husband’s grandparents were married, they were gifted a few handmade pieces, but they largely filled their home with what was new, fashionable, affordable and available in the ’60s – pressboard furniture, plasticware. As they had been raised with depression-era sensibilities, these new mass-produced items were considered worthy of the same care and value as the high-quality items that had been in their childhood homes.

The time came for Grandma and Grandpa to disperse their estate, but their children had already filled their own homes. When we committed to caring for them, we didn’t realise it included their acquisitions. We dusted the things in the farmhouse; we are sorting the things in the barn. We’ve prayed for direction and wisdom: that we would know how to honour them and yet not be buried under piles of clutter.

I am an artist. I paint; I draw. While living on the family farm and raising my children, I’ve used my art to bless my family, community and church. I’ve often thought about Proverbs 22:29 – “Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; He will not stand before unknown men.” It seemed to me a promise – if I diligently apply myself to my craft, my work will eventually be valuable to others. It is – and it isn’t. On the one hand, I produce things I’m proud of, even that impress other people, but on the other hand, the over-supply of machine-produced art means that my hand-crafted items aren’t in high demand.

A few years ago, I produced a series of hand-lettered hymn lyrics over flowers. It felt meaningful to combine watercolour and calligraphy with purposeful words. I wanted to create art that would encourage people in their faith and bless them with courage and hope. The series sold dimly. In the gallery people admired and photographed them for social media, but they didn’t buy them. A few months later, I noticed that my local Dollar Store was selling similar prints at a twentieth of the price of my original art. I brought mine home in a cardboard box.

Ask any knitter whether her craft is financially lucrative. Or quilter. Or woodworker. Those who create art, music or poetry are often seen as hobbyists, even



when highly competent. The world doesn't need many pairs of lovingly stitched lace gloves. So, what is an artist to do? How do we continue to work at our craft in a world where it has so little value? I have often prayed for wisdom to find a way to provide for our family with my talent and skill.

Before we began the barn clean-out, we sold the cows. These 140 acres once housed about fifty milk cows, enough to provide a living for a family of seven. But milk prices have plateaued, and legislation favours mega-dairies of thousands of nameless cattle owned by a syndicate of men who have never had mud on their boots. Things are changing in the agricultural world. My husband's Red Angus cattle, while beautiful and healthy and the product of much labour and care, were not producing enough for themselves or our family.

"What will we do with the land?" we asked each other. If the fields were left without grazing or mowing, they'd quickly go to shrub and thistle. My husband suggested putting in a corn maze to make a little money that first year without the cows.

It would have been easy to discourage him. How often had we worked at something on our little farm and had little to no community interest? But the Lord God is a God of hope – of new mercies every morning. And the Spirit inside us is encouraging, full of strategy and inspiration. An idea bubbled up inside me. "What about a sunflower maze?" I asked. It would be unique. We looked

out at the quiet green grass beside the barn, and I could almost see it full of happy yellow blooms nodding in the wind, the people browsing and being refreshed and revived. "Let's do it," he said, and we did.

With not much more than his rusty tractor and my acrylic paints, we made it happen. We ploughed and sowed the seed and prayed for rain. I painted signs with butterflies and bees for people to find. We mowed the winding paths and put up a tent at the entrance. When the flowers started blooming, people came. Children, families, friends. Some were neighbours; some drove from an hour away. In two weeks, more than two thousand people came out to wander in our countryside.

They didn't come to buy beef or paintings – but we had finally offered things that were vitally attractive – life, beauty and joy.

We are cleaning out the barn – the one with the giant sunflower mural. The auctioneer is on the schedule. The sunflowers in the field are turned toward the sky, just about to burst open for a second season of wondering at

God's creation. My paintings will live on in the backgrounds of people's selfies. My husband and I walk hand in hand along the path and marvel at the enthusiastic turnout of our community.

The spirit of God in us inspires us to work with our hands – for the good of the earth and its people. Even if the economy has shifted, and people don't want things as much, they still need love, encouragement and hope. In every generation and economic climate, we must lean

on him to know what to put our hands to, whether cleaning out unneeded clutter or building something new and needed. And we also trust that while we work for him, he doesn't only use us to bless others, but we are blessed ourselves.

Brianna Siegrist (briannasiegrist.com) has lived twelve years on the home farm, homeschooling and homesteading and learning to live with three generations. Photographs by the author.





THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING HANDY

by Ian Barth

Photo: Markus Spiske

people. Why do they care? What makes them different?

Handy people are outliers these days. Having an extensive practical skill set is completely unnecessary in most of the world. Why bother turning the hide of that roadkill deer into a pair of leather boots? Who cares? We do care, though, at some level. We sense the loss of value in the cheap goods we are ad-

There is a consensus that all creative endeavours fall somewhere on the spectrum between art and craft. On the one extreme is the avant-garde artist, who has enormous inspiration but limited technical ability, making a sculpture out of bicycle parts, bananas and motor oil; on the other the tent-peg maker who uses the same materials, techniques and tools as her mother and grandmother stretching back over millennia, laboriously crafting an outdated product that a machine could do much better in much less time. There is, obviously, a place for both, and of course most art involves a huge amount of practice, skill and ability, while successful craft is immeasurably enhanced if the person making it has a sense of beauty. This piece is really about neither. It's a hymn to the idea of being handy.

There are some people who can walk past a mural, a bench, or a patio, and stop and look at how it was made, and think, "Yeah, I could do something like this, let me give it a go." They are not trying to create a work of art nor master a particular craft, they simply relish the challenge of making something they have not made before. You probably know somebody like this. You are in some new place with them and they are forever stopping to point at a building or a foot bridge saying, "Look at the way those beams come together. I wonder why they did that?" and then climbing up or peering underneath to get a better look. Most of us laugh at the way they behave but it's respectful laughter. We wonder what drives these

dicted to buying online. We're frustrated by our lack of ability to assemble flat pack furniture, or hang a picture, or fix a leaky faucet. It could be argued that our lack of handiness is a contributor to a general sense of malaise in much of Western society. We're incredibly reluctant to attempt anything we have not been trained to do, we lack the basic skills that were common a few decades ago, and we don't know where to start. We like to box ourselves into comfortable stereotypes.

Interestingly, there seems to be something of an international movement to counter this by creating open access work spaces, some as part of larger organisations like Makerspace and Repair Café, some as stand-alone, locally supported workshops. Ironically it has never been easier to find out how to build a boat, fix a coffee maker or make a pulse jet engine. There is a vast array of online forums and YouTube channels on everything from carpentry to wine making; lots of people are more than keen to share their knowledge or trade ideas. For all that, though, it does seem a little niche, more about retirees finding creative things to do than the massive grassroots resurgence that it ought to be.

There are some people who claim that practical skills are beyond their abilities; you probably know someone like this as well. It's often expressed with just perceptible middlebrow overtones, as though being able to plaster a hole in the wall is something best left to tradesmen, as though the inability to drive a straight nail is an in-

Helen Denerley, Sculpture in the garden at Cambo, Scotland.



Burringgurrah, Aboriginal Community

dication of cleverness. Simply closing one's mind to the possibility of practical aptitude, though, is narrow and self-restrictive. It leads to a lack of curiosity about how things work and why they work which not only reinforces ineptitude but impoverishes the senses. Obviously, there are plenty of jobs – such as electrical repair – that need to be performed by trained technicians, but if you can at least imagine becoming a tree surgeon, the appreciation of watching one at work is taken to another level. You can see yourself going up the tree with climbing spikes, a chainsaw dangling from your belt. You can sense what it must feel like to straddle a limb while cutting a 100 kg chunk off the front of it, almost feel the tree

they see raw material. That beer keg discarded on the roadside could be turned into a charcoal grill. That pile of old concrete blocks would make a lovely retaining wall in the back garden. It might be possible to cut a platter out of that lump of gypsum. The old chainsaw would make an amazing power assist on a bicycle. Broken things are a great opportunity for a self-guided lesson on how they work. If the loo is not flushing take a look in the tank; it's probably a simple mechanical failure. How hard could this possibly be?

At a time where the pace of technological advancement is increasing almost uncontrollably it is striking that we continue to feel that nothing works the way it

should. We all moan about the broken office window that is still not fixed, the lack of parking spaces, hospital waiting lists, the ever more life-threatening potholes on the village high street, the general ineptitude of the government. Is there a link between building your own bookshelf and your mobile provider sorting out the phone signal coverage? Maybe there is. Maybe the problem is us. Maybe the problem is that we have collectively allowed ourselves to be robbed of the agency of being handy.



Photo: Dave Beldman, Beldman family project

snap back beneath you as the piece cuts free and drops to the ground.

Perhaps being handy is above all a mindset, a default attitude of curiosity about the way things work in the physical world around us. Like any other discipline it improves with practice; starting from scratch involves using almost-forgotten brain pathways and muscles that have been allowed to atrophy. It involves a lot of false starts, a lot of failure, and the lurking dread of humiliating and catastrophic embarrassment. Once started, though, you will find it incredibly addictive. The act of doing stuff, that combination of brain and hand in figuring out what to do and then doing it gives a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction unlike anything else. It's a massive boost of creativity and confidence that feels better than exercise or diet or meditation and it changes a person's perception of the world; you become one of the people who does things rather than one of those who waits for them to be done.

People in the habit of making stuff are alive to possibilities. They tend to get a hungry look in their eye when

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Cello Player, Rosh Haayin music town (PikiWiki Israel)



Mosaic Moments

by Megan Greenwood

December 2020: I locked my car, greeted the nearby car guard, and made my way for the first time to Irene Village Mall in Centurion, South Africa. Passing a merry-go-round, a colourfully patterned fountain greeted me. Behind it, I noticed a statue comprising four hoofed legs and the udder of an upside-down cow protruding out of the ground. *Did the sculptor know about cow-tipping, the purported pastime of sneaking up to unsuspecting sleeping, standing cows and turning them over?* I mused. If so, this was a refreshing take on this urban legend.

I stopped by the mall's bathroom, seeing the cow theme continue: cheerful cows danced across the wall by the bathroom entrance. On subsequent trips to this mall, I noted its logo – a silhouetted, frolicking cow frozen in mid-jump. I also saw other whimsical objects, such as Henry-Moore-like sheep and horse sculptures just the

right height and shape for kids to jump on for a ride. *Perhaps this place could have been named the Moo Mall, I pondered, given its light-hearted inclusion of cows and farm animals.*

Contemplating further, the cow theme made sense – most likely it was paying homage to Irene Farm, a nearby dairy farm with over 120 years of history. I wondered what the creative process behind its playful homage was.

1960s – 1990s: Renato Giovitto and Vera Valli Lurani grew up less than five kilometres apart near the foothills of the Italian Alps, yet their paths only crossed as young adults. By age 12, Vera was helping her father in Lestans' fields to support her family. For her and other young women in this village, prospects were to become childminders or housecleaners. Born in Castelnovo Del Friuli, Renato attended four years at the *Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli* training as a mosaic artisan. In 1958, he made his way to the southern tip of Africa in search of better prospects than in post-war Europe, bringing his specialisation in mosaics made from natural stones and *smalti* with him. On a return trip to Italy, Renato met his future wife, Vera. For two years they corresponded via letters, as Vera saved up to join Renato – back in South Africa – to be wed. Eventually, on July 7, 1964, she arrived in Durban. They married two days later.

Already a painter, Vera's natural artistic inclination began to be expressed through mosaics, after Renato introduced her to the craft. In 1967, the Giovittos and their infant daughter relocated to Pretoria when Renato was offered a construction supervision job. What began as Vera helping with a few small mosaic commissions when necessary, eventually expanded into a thriving mosaic business with its own premises built in 1980. Since then, Mosaic Arts has created a plethora of mosaics, wonderfully celebrated in *Mosaics Made in Africa* and *Mosaic Arts Retrospective 2013 to 2019*.

In 1993, after qualifying as an architect, Marina, the Giovitto's second and youngest daughter, discerned God's invitation to her to participate in running the family business. In August 1995, on a return trip from installing a mosaic, her father passed away in a car accident from which Marina emerged unscathed. Although only 25 years old, drawing on "true Friulano traditions of hard work and perseverance" (Marina G. Ehlers, *Mosaics Made in Africa* [Mosaic Arts CC, 2013], 12), Marina assumed the role of artistic director and co-owner of the family business, alongside her mom.



Irene Mall: Designer shopping bag cow;
Peering cow mosaic pond floor



Holy Family mosaic mural, Mater Dolorosa Church, Kensington, Johannesburg

fort of making coffee at night, it might as well be the “real deal.” Subsequently, I learned of her Italian heritage and that when she wasn’t rock climbing or hiking with her family, hosting MCSA club events, or taking care of her three children, she was running Mosaic Arts. She invited me to visit their workshop. My interest piqued, I set up a time for a looksee.

March 2023: I scanned *The Big Picture*’s website, noting the upcoming theme: **Issue 08: Craft.**

Hmmm.... I noted the date on my calendar. In some crevice of my brain, I began mulling over the theme.

Merriam Webster.com defines “craft” as:

- to make or produce with care, skill, or ingenuity
- skill in planning, making, or executing: dexterity
- an occupation, trade, or activity requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill.

Writing, I mused, is a craft. Phrasing a sentence can preoccupy me. It takes care and deliberation. Like the process of chipping and carving away at wood, shavings falling to the ground, scattered around the sculptor, so too a pile of discarded alphabet letters and phrases lie abandoned in the drafts before a final one is crafted out of a blank Word document. But did I want to write about the craft of writing?

25 April 2023: I entered the venue hosting the Mountain Club of South Africa’s (MCSA) club events. I’d come for the New Members talk which preceded the regular club event. Via email, the club administrator had told me to find Marina when I arrived. It was easy to guess who she was. Only two females were present: one seated – clearly, also a prospective club member – the other setting out mugs and snacks. This was Marina. She greeted me warmly and offered me filter coffee, explaining how they had decided if you’re going to go to the ef-

27 June 2023: “Café is ready,” called Vera, Marina’s 81-year-old mother, in Italian. She’d returned to work after attending her weekly Pilates class. Marina ushered me from one workroom of Mosaic Arts into its kitchen area. Handmade cloth doilies hung cheerfully beside a stove. On a table was a warm pot of freshly made coffee, two dark blue, short espresso cups and some biscuits. The mosaic countertop was one of many mosaic pieces that I had been admiring that morning. Drinking the warm brew, I continued to soak in the environment, Marina’s stories, and the legacy of her family’s craftsmanship.

Truth be told, I am a novice when it comes to mosaics. Guided by Marina’s expertise, I learned of their beneficial intersection of aesthetic appeal and durability. Their resistance to mould, stains and mildew means they can be embedded in places like bathrooms, subway areas and outdoor spaces, without concern for deterioration. (Ancient Graeco-Roman mosaics testify to their longevity!) Wandering through the workshop, Marina drew my attention to completed pieces and ones in progress. She shared snippets of stories about clients and how she translates their concepts and hopes into mosaic while maintaining artistic integrity. She loves the strategic and creative designing process, while staff members thrive on cutting the pieces. Her mom’s artistic eye helps to refine the careful shading of colours that are distinctive to Mosaic Arts’ craftsmanship.

Mosaic Arts’ installations are literally embedded in all types of public and private spaces, as far flung as Halekulani Resort’s pool on Honolulu Island and a diamond shop in New York, to closer to home, including in a Lebanese church in Johannesburg, in private and public schools like the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, and in various malls – including the Irene Village Mall. Between nibbling on my biscuit and dunking it in strong coffee, a lightbulb went off: I’d seen some of Mosaic Arts’ work in my everyday life without realising it! I was



Mandala pool mosaic under construction

surprised and amused at myself; although I'd noticed the happy cows and the fountain, I'd not clicked that they were *mosaics*!

7 July 2023 05:13 am: "Hi Marina, how are you? A random q: If I get my act together I hope to write a piece for the publication called *The Big Picture*. The theme is on craft. I wondered about writing sth about you/your mosaics. In principle, would you be ok with this? I may have to confirm some details for accuracy. And, I'd send you the draft before submitting it."

05:17am: "Hi Megan I would be honoured! I can give you lots of pretty visuals too."

22 July 2023: It was getting late. I pulled myself away from the book that Marina had given me. Paging through *Mosaics Made in Africa* felt like eating dessert after a satisfying meal. Earlier today, Marina had shared how Irene Village Mall was one of many malls owned by a group who believed in integrating art into malls. It gives malls character. The durability of mosaics makes them particularly suitable. Not only had Mosaic Arts provided mosaics for Irene Village Mall, but its dragonflies adorned another, and it is currently creating an installation in another mall the group owns. This mosaic celebrates the indigenous beauty of southern Africa, integrating a landscape of aloes and hornbills in flight.

For Irene Village Mall, Mosaic Arts had been asked to provide cows, with scant additional information. Marina reflected on how she has learned to trust the designers and the process, even when little is known at the outset. As things unfold, there's a sense of resonances that emerge and can be followed. Trust overflows in other facets of the way she runs the business. It shows up in the surprises of who walks through the door, the type of work requested, and the provision and stories that come from

the requests. She and her team lean into the unknown, pioneering ventures like figuring out how to replicate the curvature in a Botswanan banknote and its fine details for a larger-than-life rendition of the bill. Building on years of her parents' foundations, threads of trust have woven together the abundance of craftsmanship that has emerged.

24 July 2023: Why did I not realise that they were *mosaics* at the mall? Was I moving too quickly to notice? Did I get distracted by the cow theme, so that I paid less attention to each. particular. cut. piece. of. colour as well as the *overall image* displayed? I've asked myself this repeatedly.

I can't help but draw parallels between my inattentiveness and my (in)ability to notice God's presence in my everyday spaces. In swimming pools, foyers, school entrances, hotels and bathrooms, mosaics bear witness to life that passes by, framing and beautifying it. They endure. So too does God's witnessing presence remain, whether I have eyes to see. And, like the expert craftsmanship of a mosaic artisan, so too does God intentionally keep picking up pieces of colourful, broken lives, before carefully placing them together in splendid display.

Megan Greenwood (www.mgcoaching.org) enjoys accompanying people as they discover how to live more deeply from their core. For more about Mosaic Arts, visit www.mosaicarts.co.za and Instagram: [mosaic_arts_pretoria](https://www.instagram.com/mosaic_arts_pretoria). Photographs by Marina Ehlers, unless specified otherwise.



Makie Maokene, Tumelo Mabusela and Caroline Matjeke working on the mural for the Ridgeview Shopping Centre, Johannesburg



The Music of Mission¹

Psalm 96:10–13:

A New Song that Transforms the Old World

by Chris Wright



Cassandra Miller, *The Cello Song*

In our first reflection on Psalm 96 (*TBP* 06), we saw how verses 1–3 call on worshippers to sing a **new song that refreshes the old words**. Words that had been part of the old songs of Israel for centuries –

1. The heading is borrowed from a fine article by W. Creighton Marlowe, “Music of Missions: Themes of Cross-Cultural Outreach in the Psalms,” in *Missiology* 26 (1998), 445–456.

the name, salvation, glory and mighty deeds of Yahweh – were envisaged as a new song to be sung among new peoples in all the earth. Then in our second reflection (*TBP* 07), we heard the central section, verses 4–9, singing a **new song that displaces the old gods**. They cannot stay around when the new song is being sung, as the worship of all nations, to the LORD, to Yahweh, the one true living God revealed in Israel.

At verse 10 we reach the climax of the psalm, with the proclamation that some other psalms put right up front. “Say among the nations, *the LORD reigns*.” Here now is the essential content of the new song. It is the proclamations among the nations of the good news that the LORD reigns, that Yahweh has always been, is now, and always will be the king of the universe. Yahweh reigns. And that’s to be said and sung and celebrated not just in the temple in Jerusalem, but among all the nations. Almost a thousand years before Jesus came preaching this on the streets of Galilee, here we have the announcement of the good news of the kingdom of God – good news for all the earth.

The rest of the psalm (vv. 10b–13) goes on to describe what this reign of God will be like, by “undescribing” the world as we know it (if “undescibe” is a word; and if not, it should be!). The psalm calls on our imagination (as good poetry and song often do), and invites us with the eyes of faith to visualize a transformed world. And that indeed is also the motivating imagination of mission. Mission not only looks *back* to the old, original truths of the gospel (vv. 1–3); mission not only looks *around* at the nations and summons them to worship the only true and living God (vv. 4–9); mission also ultimately looks *forward* and draws us into a future which transcends the present world in which we live (vv. 10–13). Let us sing, then, **this new song that transforms the old world**.

Verses 10–13 portray three features of this new world order under the reign of God.

a) It will be a world of reliability.

“The world is firmly established, it cannot be



Kevin Ledo, *Léonard Cohen*

moved” (10b). That is a reminder, of course, of the stability and consistency of the world as God originally created it. But it’s not how the world feels today. The world in which we live (and indeed the world the psalmist lived in too), is a world of instability, chaos and despair, in which things seem anything but stable. Whether you look at the world of nations, the so-called international order (which seems about as disordered as you could imagine), or at the natural world, where we are beset with unpredictability and climate chaos, there seems to be nothing we can take for certain and rely on. And it gets scary, whether we think of rogue states or rogue viruses, or global debt or global warming, virtual realities, artificial intelligence and deep fakes – things seem out of control. Léonard Cohen sounded prophetic when he sang about things sliding in all directions, such that we simply can’t measure anything anymore.

That’s true, isn’t it? That’s the world in which we live. But our psalmist calls us to sing a song which celebrates in advance the inversion of that. By the transforming power of God we anticipate a new and reliable world order that will be dictated not by any human government but ultimately only by the reign of God.

b) It will be a world of righteousness.

“He will judge the peoples with equity” (v. 10c). “He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness” (v. 13). Equity, righteousness, faithfulness – core values of the reign of God. And once again we have to say our world certainly isn’t like that either. Ours is a world of unfairness, injustice, lies and violence. And so was the world of the psalmist (as many of the psalms complain). But he calls us to be singing already about the justice of the kingdom of God. For when God comes he will “judge the earth” – that is, he will put things right for good and all.

“If I by the finger of God cast out demons,” Jesus said, “then *the kingdom of God is among you*.” Jesus came not only announcing but inaugurating the reign of God. Yes, but like a mustard seed, he explained. The mustard seeds



Elisha Ben Yitzhak, *The Melody of Jerusalem*

of people who, having entered the kingdom of God by submitting to Jesus Christ as Lord and King, are committed to its values, standards and demands. People who live their lives according to a different song and a different rhythm. People who seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, people who hunger and thirst for justice. People who pray “Let it come, your kingdom,” and who behave and work as if they meant it and longed for it. For in such people the kingdom of God, with its equity, righteousness and faithfulness, is already at work in the world.

c) It will be a world of rejoicing.

The psalm ends with three verses (11–13) that are an explosion of jubilation in all creation – a great “Ode to Joy” (if you can get Léonard Cohen and Beethoven into the same article, it’s probably fairly balanced ...). The whole of creation is summoned to rejoice before God.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.

But again, “rejoicing” is not the first word that comes to mind when we think of what the world is like now. Our world is an ocean of sorrow and pain and tears and such an inestimable quantity of suffering that we just can’t get our heads or our hearts around it. Can we watch the news sometimes without profound grief and tears? And we can only see a fraction of



Joseph Karl Stieler, *Beethoven*

the world's suffering. What is it like *for God* to know the pain of every human heart in this world, every family shattered by war, every child maimed or orphaned, every woman raped ...? And it's not only the horrendous pile of human suffering, but God hears the mourning and the sighing of creation itself. "The earth moans," said Hosea (4:3). "The creation groans," said Paul (Rom 8:22), largely because of the violence, destruction and pollution that we inflict on it. That's our world.

Yes, says the psalmist, but God is coming to judge the earth, that is, to put things right. That's what the word means in Hebrew, not just negative punishment (though it includes that) but finally putting all things right. There will be a mighty *rectification* for the whole earth and its inhabitants. And when God comes to put things right then all of creation will rejoice – as Paul also anticipates in Romans 8.

Some years ago, our three older children told us (now that they are all grown up they probably thought it was safe to do so), about a game they used to play when they were very little. When we were somewhere else in the house, they would go into the front room and do everything they weren't allowed to do. They would jump up and down on the sofa and throw the cushions around at each other ... until one of them shouted out "Mummy's coming!" And then they all had to sit down very still, and the last one to sit down was "out." "Let's play Mummy's coming!" they would say, apparently. Because you see, there will be joy or judgement depending on who's doing what when she opens the door. Just a children's game, but you see the point I'm making. What does it mean for us to believe and affirm that *God is coming*? That's how the Bible ends – with the words of Jesus, "Yes, I am coming soon."

And when God comes to put things right, *the whole of creation will rejoice*. This is a song for the whole creation. And so is our mission. Mission proclaims a new world

under the reign of God, and calls upon us to sing and celebrate it in advance. "Hope is hearing the music of the future. Faith is dancing to it today," said Rubem Alves, a Brazilian theologian. That's the kind of hope and faith Psalm 96 celebrates and generates.

So, in our three studies on Psalm 96, we've seen that Christian mission is like going out to sing a new song among the nations and inviting them to join in. It's a new song that rekindles the truth of the old words, of God's salvation, and brings their truth to new singers. And Christian mission sings a new song that challenges and displaces the old gods and idolatries (even when they've crept back into the church), and loosens their grip on

people's hearts and homes and lives. And Christian mission sings a new song that celebrates in advance the transformation of this old world into the kingdom of our God and his Christ.

Is that the song people hear humming in your life, and echoing from your church? Are we performing the music of mission in these challenging, attractive and hope-filled keys? It shouldn't only be at Christmas that we sing Isaac Watts's wonderful hymn,



René Cheng, *Joy – Collage of Life*

based on Psalms 96 and 98.

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her king.
Let every heart, [every human heart], prepare him
room
and heaven and nature sing.
"Sing to the Lord a new song, all the earth."

Rev Dr Chris Wright is Global Ambassador of Langham Partnership (www.langham.org), the author of many books including commentaries on Exodus, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Lamentations and Ezekiel, and is a Senior Research Fellow of the KLC.



Chasing the Wind, Chasing the Song

by Daniel G. Reid

A fresh breeze blows out of the north. The forty-year-old diesel engine chugs its rhythmic beat as I head out from the marina. I turn the sailboat into the wind. Scrambling forward over the cabin, I winch the mainsail up the thirty-foot mast. I secure the halyard to its cleat. Quickly, back to the tiller, I reset the boat into the wind, and from the cockpit I winch the foresail halyard until the jib is set, then cleat it securely. I cut the engine. The sails ruffle, then fill with a crack. The jib-sheet block creaks. And a sweet quiet descends as the boat heels, and the water laps and burbles along the hull. We plough a furrow out into the bay while snow-capped peaks frame the horizons. In those moments I slip into an experience shared by mariners over thousands of years.

My dad introduced me to boats. A few years after we arrived in Japan in 1953, his relief from the pressure of missionary work was to go down to the sea. First it was a sailboat on Tokyo Bay. Then a little runabout with an outboard engine. And finally, a traditional Japanese wooden fishing boat, built and kept in a little fishing village on Sagami Bay.

I recall the boat-building shop in the village of Hamamoroiso. Barely one hundred yards from the beach we enter the domain of a father and son boat-building enterprise. There is room to build one boat at a time. Specialized boat-building saws, chisels and planes – neatly sharpened, well worn – are the signature of the trade. Wood shavings as thin as parchment snake and coil on

the dirt floor. There is one electric saw. A rude intrusion of modernity, it had required the missing half of one of the old man's fingers. Otherwise, tradition rules in this shop. For the craft of Japanese boat building extends back hundreds of years, with elements borrowed from China and honed to Japanese perfection.

Most of the fishing boats winched up on the sands of Hamamoroiso had been built in this shop. The boat trade was integral to the convivial life and economy of the village. The fishermen tending their nets offshore, the women diving for abalone and sea urchins, they and their ancestors, all had depended on the skills of generations of these village boat builders.

But as a teenage American boy, I had little notion of the stream of tradition we were floating in, we with our forty-horsepower Evinrude outboard. But I now marvel



Yamaguchiya Tobei, *Abalone Divers off the Coast of Ise*



Our traditional wooden fishing boat, kept on the beach of Hamamoroiso

at it all. And I am surprised to recall snatches of a Japanese sea shanty I first heard sung by a boat crew on Sagami Bay.

Until very recently I lived in a seaside town on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula, on the

shore of the Salish Sea. It is well populated with sailors, boat builders and riggers, some of them deeply accomplished and widely known in boat-building circles. The teeming boatyard holds a mix of pleasure and working boats. Alaskan fishing vessels of up to three hundred tons are plucked from the water and set "on the hard" for maintenance, repairs and refurbishing. A good number are older wooden vessels, kept in service. The old work of steaming planks and pounding oakum into seams still goes on. Wooden boats can be maintained for a century and more. And here the trade is kept alive. At the north end of town, the skills of wooden boat building are practised and taught in a community boat centre. A few miles down the bay, a school of wooden boat building sustains the trade. From fishing Alaskan waters to sailing our local bay, a well-built boat matters.

The town hosts an annual Wooden Boat Festival, with wooden boats of all descriptions coming from around the Pacific Northwest. People flock to this festival, both to admire and to learn how to build, maintain and sail wooden boats. Seminars abound, old salts and young adventurers mingle, and dreams of boats and voyages take hold. The old traditions still hold their grip.

A few years ago, an American boat builder, who had apprenticed under the last remaining Japanese wooden boat builders, was invited to the Wooden Boat Festival. I showed him a picture of our wooden boat of the 1960s, winched up on the sands of Hamamoroiso. From him I've learned more about the craft of Japanese wooden boat building.¹ And I am grateful for my youthful brush with those village tradents of boat-building wisdom. From the choice of tree, to the favoured cuts of wood, to the precise joints and mortises, and the specialized tools and measuring instruments, it is a practical wisdom embodied in the builders and extended to the objects of

their attention. So cunning is the craft of Japanese boat building that the seams between planks are not caulked, but cut and fitted precisely so that they are watertight at the joints.

The old boat builders do not lecture their apprentices, nor do they invite questions. They do not package their cisterns of boat-building wisdom into lesson plans. The disciples are to be silent, to watch closely, to do as they are told, no matter how menial the task. Gradually, processes and subtle secrets are revealed through demonstration and keen observation. Skills are embodied through practice. Craft is ingrained in habit. This same cultural pedagogy may be seen in the documentary film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. The sushi apprentice takes some two hundred tries before he earns the master's nod. He has finally done the egg (*tamago*) right. And he weeps.

Three generations before me travelled by wooden boats of East Asian design and build. In 1936 my mother, her parents, and younger siblings took to a Chinese coastal junk as they fled from Japanese imperial forces. In the 1890s and beyond, my great grandparents and grandfather travelled up and down China's Grand Canal in wooden boats. And in those years they saw the last of the celebrated imperial rice fleet moving up the Grand Canal, banners flying, sails billowing in the spring breeze as they annually processed northward to Peking. All of these wooden boats were made by builders of great skill, their trade passed down in streams of tradition. For China moved on boats. And my ancestors were debtors to that boat-building tradition.

The Gospels portray fishermen and their wooden boats on the Sea of Galilee. Peter and his fellow fishermen are boatmen. They know how to work with the forces of wind and water, with the grain of creation. Their Teacher is an upland artisan from Nazareth, with a keen eye for stem and keel, futtocks and planking. Somewhere off the Gospel page – in Capernaum or Bethsaida or Magdala – boat builders of local renown are practising their trade. The boats of the Gospels are transport, livelihood, and more: A figure of the church, bearers of the Word, crucibles of faith, passages through the storm.



1. See Douglas Brooks, *Japanese Wooden Boatbuilding* (Warren, CT: Floating World Editions, 2015). His YouTube seminar on the craft of Japanese boat building is richly instructive: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0BxVEKq92E>.



Katsushika Hokusai,
*The Great Wave off
Kanagawa*

from China in 1921,
my missionary
great-grandfather
closes a letter to
churches in Amer-
ica:

I have been
writing this un-
der some draw-
backs; I am on
an itinerant trip.
All day we have
been out on a

large lake, twenty by forty miles, fighting against a heavy head wind. All this afternoon, the men have been rowing hard to make a harbor before dark. The boat is a little cockle shell of a thing and is being tossed about like a chip – a word in your ear – I shall be glad and feel much easier when we cast anchor inside the breakwater which I see a half mile off to our starboard.

The Japanese artist Hokusai's print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, is a global icon. Three boats and their terrified crews are dwarfed by a monstrous rogue wave breaking high and framing Mount Fuji in the distance. Mountain and sea, two archetypes in the metaphysical topography of East Asia, overpower the human subjects and their craft. The towering wave arches over them, clawing like a dragon. Cypress and cedar, hewn from mountainsides and shaped into boats, are suspended in perilous tumult. And Mount Fuji, the sacred mountain, hovers on the horizon in serene symmetry.

Also from the nineteenth century, a print by Utagawa Kuniyoshi has the Buddhist monk Nichiren standing in the bow of a boat overshadowed by a towering wave. With hands extended and robes flying in the wind, Nichiren commands the sea, while boatmen and passengers scream in terror. In the background, a mountain stands in dark and brooding witness.

In another time and place we encounter a wooden boat in peril on the Sea of Galilee. The wind shrieks, the wooden vessel descends into the troughs of mounting, foam-capped waves. The best of Galilean boat building is thrust to its margins, and the crew cries out. It is the craftsman from Nazareth who stills the storm. And on the northern horizon, snow-crowned Mount Hermon, storied in Israel's imagination – "Tabor and Hermon rejoice in thy name!" (Hos 14:5) – looks on.

Hamamoroiso and the waters of Sagami Bay, where we plied our wooden boat, looked out on that same view of Mount Fuji as Hokusai's print. Our boat was a smaller version of those portrayed. We were fair-weather sailors, taking to the sea for its pleasure. I recall no anxious moments on Sagami Bay. But

I think of that "little cockle shell of a thing," its wood hewn from the mountains of Shandong, its boat-building tradition and skills passed down through generations, and how much it all mattered. Bobbing, tossing over the long fetch of wind-churned waves, the boat finally reached its snug harbour. It bore the gospel across the lake. The Word was planted. And it still flourishes today.

Today we live in a world increasingly removed from hewn wood, hand saws and traditions of the past. Even the late-model cars we now drive are increasingly inured from the tune-ups and probing wrenches of shade-tree mechanics. My sailboat's old Volvo marine diesel engine was a relic of the 1970s. I could learn its ways, reach into its oily bowels, and elicit a satisfying huffing-chuffing response to my novice efforts. The sailboat was not wooden but fibreglass – I shamefully admit – but at least it was hand-laid fibreglass, a "plastic classic" in the generations of late-twentieth-century boat production. From rudder to rigging, it was a recognizable extension of thousands of years of sailing. A materialized conversation and ar-

gument within its stream of craft and tradition.

A recent article in *The Washington Post* tells how some Silicon Valley tech



Utagawa Kuniyoshi,
*In the waves at Kakuda
en route to Sado Island*

workers are finding gratification in crafts such as woodworking. Inhabitants of the corporate ethos of “move fast and break things,” of clicking keyboards, silicon chips and blue-lit screens, they are learning the deeper gratification of finding themselves in woodworking, in glassblowing, in pottery making. In the San Francisco area, woodworking shops are springing up. One couple, investing their spare time in woodworking, is making the dining-room table “we’re going to die with.” And in Japan, there is renewed interest in the traditional craft of wooden boat building. The human need to work with our hands, to create, to alter, to tangibly shape natural materials into things beautiful and useful runs deep. Beneath the pixilated scrim of modernity lies a human impulse and yearning that will not be denied.

In *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford tells of organ makers in Virginia. They are deeply conscious of working in a tradition reaching back hundreds of years, and their own work is in conversation with their forebears. Whatever their innovations, they are a sustained argument with their tradition. It drives them to ask, “What will the results of my actions be four hundred years from now?” An arresting question in our consumer-driven, throw-away society of “model years” and planned obsolescence.

Japanese traditional wooden boat building inhabits an animistic spiritual tradition, Shintoism. That world is suffused with *kami*, spiritual forces, gods. And in this context, the craft of Japanese boat building emerges as a public theology of sorts. In an important sense it is far more akin to the Christian tradition than the atomized and spiritually denuded world of modern materialism. At its launching a boat is ceremonially consecrated, and the deities of mountain and of sea are addressed. Artisan and craft, wood and water, transport and navigation are suffused with spiritual meaning. It is rooted in a particular understanding of the spiritual dimensions of the natural world.

For Christians there are not many gods but one triune God, creator of heaven and earth, of mountain and sea. And that which God creates is not finished, as if it were an object nakedly suspended in space and time, independent of its creator. The incarnate Son of God, the woodworker from Nazareth, who from a wooden fishing boat commands the wind and waves to cease, holds fast the wooden boat in its sinuous grain. For in him all things are held together. The extension of the human mind through hands and tools and wood is a creative and spiritual extension of our own God-created being, and thus – in a real sense – an extension of God’s creative



Christ Calming the Storm, Gračanica Monastery fresco

act. The one who shaped wood in Nazareth puts his signature on this work.

As Peter Leithart puts it, “Mind comes to its perfection as mind not by isolating itself in its own *cogito*, but by reaching beyond itself into the external world and accepting the outer world into itself.” We are not locked in the prison of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” “We discover ourselves in extending beyond ourselves.”² And that extension includes the material of the world around us. That world beyond our head is created and sustained by the Creator God, and we enter into that divine creativity. For “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom 11:36). God sings the world into being and sustains it with his song.

Among the forgotten spiritual and theological resources in our Christian tradition are the prayers for mariners facing storms at sea. These are found in old editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. For in a gale, piety surges. But we must also recover the tradition of blessings of craftspeople, of St Brendan, the patron saint of builders of coracles, and clippers, and cockle shells. For in the high gale of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, we must catch the tune of the Creator and sing along.

Dan Reid, Associate Fellow of the KLC, retired academic and IVP Academic reference book editor; sailor and lover of wooden boats, is currently writing a book on Protestant missionary work in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century China, based on his family’s experiences.

2. Peter J. Leithart, *Creator: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, forthcoming 2023), 253. Cited from uncorrected page proofs.



Henry Ossawa Tanner,
Study of Two Hands

Handmade RESISTANCE

by Jason Fischer

There's a resistance growing in the woodworking world. In reality it's always been there, and I have only recently begun to listen. It's led by men and women who, with chisel and mallet in hand, are chopping away in defiance against the industrial machine. They speak about the value of handmade furniture built in quiet shops adorned with hand tools and littered with wood shavings. These aren't just shops, they are sanctuaries because, for these craftspeople, something sacred happens there. They understand that working with our hands is a way to recapture something that appears to be disappearing in the Western world.

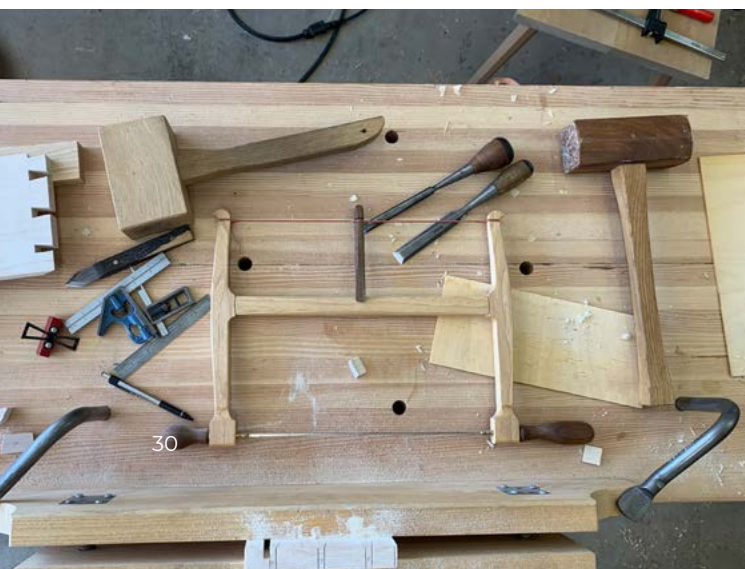
I do not have to spend time here explaining the challenges we face with consumerism that is fuelled by large corporations driven by the bottom line. We know it because it's all around us. We are regularly harassed by planned obsolescence. It mocks us as we struggle to assemble the particle board entertainment centre that will no doubt find its way to the trash heap soon enough. The real kicker is that we are never more pleased to toss it when the time comes because it was never really ours to begin with. We have been reduced to the role of consumer.

One of the voices leading this resistance is Christopher Schwarz, a self-proclaimed "anarchist," but not in the "let's wreak havoc" sense. In his *The Anarchist's Design Book*, ([Covington,

KY: Lost Art Press LLC, 2016], vii), Schwarz argues that our culture has been ruined by mass-manufacturing where things need to be replaced regularly. He writes, "Anarchism in this context is a tendency to build rather than buy, to create rather than consume. You can call it self-sufficiency or DIY. But when you make something that does not have to be replaced in a few years, you throw a monkey wrench into a society fueled by a retro-grade cycle" (vii). In other words, making furniture goes against the culture of consumerism where nothing lasts or stays in fashion for very long. I agree with him, which is one of the reasons why I am committed to woodworking.

But there's more. Schwarz goes on to say that handmade furniture is "necessary" in the sense that we have to make things – anything – to preserve both the craft and our humanity. The history of civilization and woodworking are the same. Making things makes you human" (viii). He is getting at something very important. We are all driven by a longing to find our true humanity. He is expressing the reality that being human is something that can be lost but also restored.

I don't know where Christopher Schwarz is with regard to faith and Jesus but this is an important part of the gospel and what Jesus came to do: restore all things, not the least of which the humanity of humans. The gospel is clear that we cannot do this on our own. We need the reconciling and restoring work of Christ at the cross and resurrection. But the Bible continually invites us to follow Jesus and play a part in the restoration. Christians have been talking about spiritual disciplines as a way to press into a life in Christ for a long time. They speak of prayer, solitude



Benchtop

Low-back chair



and fasting to name a few, as ways to live out our identity as humans created new in Christ. Some have even spoken of such practices as acts of defiance against powers that are intent on destroying and dehumanising us. I would like to add “making something with your hands” to the list of spiritual practices because the resistance isn’t merely against the industrial machine, it is against the powers of evil behind our cultural idols.

I believe we were made to make. Look at children! They are constantly making things with anything they can get their hands on. It’s how we learn and grow. Remember the toys we played with when we were kids? There’s a reason LEGO is one of the most popular of all time.

I grew up in a house where working with our hands was normal. I was nine years old when my dad gave me my first saw. It’s a coping saw with a deep “U” shape. The frame is black with a red handle and I still have it. Now, in my mid-forties, I continue to develop my skills as a woodworker. In recent years I have especially enjoyed my foray into the use of hand tools. Yes, electric tools like table saws get the job done quickly, but as I have delved deeper into woodworking, I’m learning that the craft is not just about making a usable piece of furniture as quickly as possible. Hand tools put me even closer to the work. There’s nothing like the feel and sound of a razor-sharp hand plane gliding across the surface of a board. Planing wood, cutting and fitting joints by hand demands more from me than my power tools and because of that the practice is formational. Not only am I developing the particular skills and hand-eye coordination required, I’m learning things like patience, how to enjoy the process, and coping with failure. My definition of perfection has changed as I discover idiosyncrasies that come with handmade furniture. Is a piece perfect because its surfaces are glassy smooth and every angle is within a half-degree or is a thing perfect when it bears the marks of its maker?

The point is that I am discovering a surprising product of working with my hands. It’s shaping me. It connects me with something deep within, a longing to return to work that gives me a sense of vitality and purpose. I am not denouncing a desk job. I have one, and good,



Kumiko cabinet

God-honouring work happens at desks. But I have experienced a yearning to work with my hands that I cannot ignore. When God placed his human creation in the garden, he placed them there to work, to sweat and get their hands filthy. When God spoke to his people through the prophet Isaiah, he promised them restoration by saying,

No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands. (Isa 65:22 NIV)

A return to truly living as the humans God made us to be includes the work of our hands and the freedom to enjoy it. As people who are being reconciled to God through Jesus and living here and now as his new humanity let us display the goodness of God by making stuff with our hands. One of the things I found interesting during the pandemic lockdown of 2020 was how many people found new hobbies. I think this happened for reasons greater than just boredom. I think that, when given the time, we desperately want to make things. I’ve focused on the merits of woodworking but there is so much more we can try. Bake cookies, paint, crochet, sculpt, learn an instrument, sew, garden ... you get the idea. In so doing we are recapturing a piece of what it is to be human. Join the resistance!

Jason Fischer lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife and three adult kids, and is a pastor of Heritage Church. Carpentry and photographs by the author.



Dovetail and chisel



Dovetail close up



Christ Pantocrator, Church of St Alexander Nevsky, Belgrade

PREACHING THE BIBLE
FOR ALL ITS WORTH:

Isaiah

The book of Isaiah has held a central place in the life of the church from the beginning. The apostles grounded their testimony in Isaiah by citing or alluding to it nearly 600 times, from the virgin birth (Matt 1:21; Isa 7:14) to the hope of a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1; Isa 65:25). In light of this, St Jerome says: “Within [Isaiah] is contained all the Holy Scriptures.”¹ Indeed, the book of Isaiah came to be called the Fifth Gospel by the ancient church. Today, it is not uncommon for Isaiah to feature during Advent or Holy Week, with readings and sermons on passages about the coming king (Isa 9:1–7; 11:1–9) or the suffering servant (52:13–53:12).

Although the importance of Isaiah lingers in the church’s memory, many hide away from the daunting task of preaching through Isaiah. Consequently, the church is deprived of many of the flavours that the book has to offer. Picking and choosing only the messianic texts from Isaiah is like picking the chocolate chips out of a chocolate chip cookie. God means for these messianic texts to be savoured as part of the cookie of Isaiah. The flour of Isaiah is the pattern of divine judgement and restoration. Its salt is indictments against God’s people for injustice, pride, idolatry, drunkenness and misplaced trust. Its butter is the concern for Zion that holds the book together. Its sugar is the hymns of praise and worship. Its vanilla is the distinct emphasis upon God as the Holy One. Once we taste the chocolate chips of messianic hope as part of the cookie, the combination is so wonderful that you and your people will never want to just eat morsels in isolation again.

1. St Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah: Including St. Jerome’s Translation of Origen’s Homilies 1–9 on Isaiah*, trans. T. P. Scheck (New York: Newman, 2015), 68.

Whether or not you like this cookie analogy, the point is that Isaiah has far more to offer than a few isolated messianic promises. Imagine how Isaiah can summon forth by God’s Spirit a church attuned to our God who acts in judgement and restoration, who confronts and seeks justice, humility, worship and trust, who is holy, holy, holy, and who redeems and forgives. Isaiah is a book worth preaching.

Before mentioning some helpful resources for the preacher, here are some considerations to ponder:

1. Will we preach verse by verse and chapter by chapter through Isaiah? If so, is it better to do this over 66 consecutive weeks or to alternate preaching from Isaiah with a NT book? For example, 12 weeks on Isaiah 1–12, 7 weeks on Matthew 1–7, and then Isaiah 13–27. The makeup of your congregation and the mission of the church will impact this.
2. What about choosing representative passages in each section of the book? For instance, you might encourage individuals or small groups to read through Isaiah 1–5, but you might preach only on one or two selected passages (e.g. 1:2–20 and 2:1–5) before moving on to representative passages in Isaiah 6–12 (e.g., chapters 6 and 11:1–10).

Here is a survey of resources on Isaiah which might help you decide what to invest in: we are under no illusion that you will own or read all of the following.

Prophecy. When preaching on Isaiah, it is essential to grasp how prophecy works. Although Walter Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) and Abraham Heschel’s *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) remain useful, M. Daniel Carroll R.’s *The Lord Roars: Recovering the Prophetic Voice for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022) repackages the best of Brueggemann and Heschel and invites us to experience the prophetic word through powerful examples from Isaiah, Amos and Micah.



Thematic Studies.

For a better grasp of the big picture of Isaiah, check out two books by Andrew Abernethy. In *The Book of Isaiah and God's Kingdom* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), part of

the New Studies in Biblical Theology series, Abernethy uses the framework of God's kingdom to capture how the major sections of the book focus on God's rule as king and how God establishes his kingdom through the work of lead agents (king, servant and anointed Messiah), resulting in a kingdom community in a new Zion and a new creation. The appendix includes a programme for a preaching series on Isaiah. *Discovering Isaiah: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021) helpfully traces the metanarrative of Isaiah and several major themes from across the book: holiness, Zion, messianic king, suffering servant and justice.

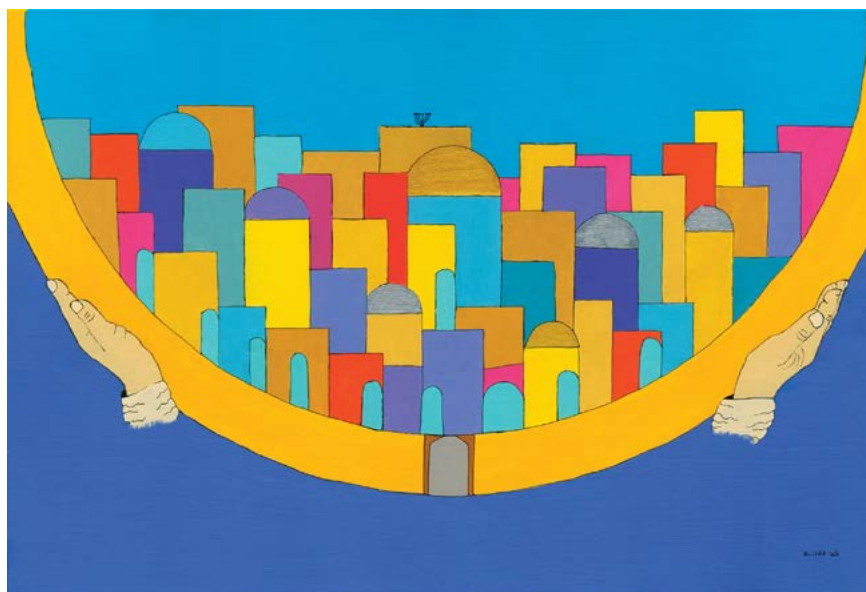
Contemporary Commentaries. What commentaries give a detailed explanation of each passage without losing the forest for the trees? If you can afford them, look no further than John Oswalt's two volumes on Isaiah in the New International Commentary on the OT series: *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For a one-volume commentary, consider John Oswalt, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) or Paul Wegner, *Isaiah*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021). These commentaries hit the sweet spot of providing some detail while not losing a sense for the flow of the passage in the book.

For the more detailed end of the spectrum, the works by Willem Beuken on chapters 28–39 and Jan Koole on chapters 40–66 in the Historical Commentary on the OT are a treasure trove of interpretive insights. Additionally, nothing rivals the attention to Hebrew and critical scholarship in the volumes on Isaiah by Hugh Williamson on chapters 1–12 and John Goldingay (with David Payne) on chapters 40–55 and 56–66 in the International Critical Commentary (T&T Clark). For the end of the spectrum that prioritizes the bigger picture, consider Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, Bible Speaks

Today (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996) or Jenni Williams, *The Kingdom of Our God: A Theological Commentary on Isaiah* (London: SCM, 2019).

Ancient Commentaries. Tremendous insight can come from hearing how others across history have interpreted Isaiah. John F. A. Sawyer's *Isaiah Through the Centuries* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2018) integrates commentary from across the centuries in a chapter-by-chapter commentary. An affordable and helpful commentary from the early church is Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. Jonathan J. Armstrong (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013). From the Middle Ages, the commentary by Thomas Aquinas is available free [online](#). Calvin's commentaries on Isaiah are unrivalled in their integration of grammatical-historical exegesis, biblical theology and pastoral considerations. They are available free in the [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#) and can be purchased in hard copy.

Although preaching through Isaiah can be daunting and resources are helpful, never neglect the careful study of the Scripture itself. Perhaps God has given us challenging books like Isaiah to remind us that we depend on him to instruct us and that there is much beyond our grasp, leading us to deeper and deeper worship and dependence on him. As Andrew Abernethy recently put it, "God has given us a Bible that is for the hungry – for those desperate enough to depend on him for provision and who will exert great mental energy or endure seasons of dullness to eventually taste some honey" (*Savoring Scripture* [Downers Grove: IVP, 2022], xvi, italics original). Even if you cannot explain everything in a passage, you can trust that the Lord will enable you to taste enough honey to invite your people to taste the same.



Elisha Ben Yitzhak, *Jerusalem in God's Hands*

Books as Sacred Sites

by Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen

Extensive research is available on the origins, content and language of early Christian manuscripts. However, not much information is readily available on how these manuscripts were assembled and bound into what eventually became the “books” of the New Testament. A number of book historians agree that very little is known about bookbinding structures used until the early Middle Ages. This is because the original bindings were often dismantled and discarded by researchers and historians so the text could be photographed, documented and studied; sometimes the loose pages were even sold at various markets. While Christian texts clearly survived, the actual bindings dating to the first two centuries AD do not seem to exist. As a Christian who makes artists’ books, I kept asking: what did the earliest Christian books look like?

However, this article is not about the history of bookbinding; neither will it delve into any theological issues, but it focuses on my question. The Coptic Christians bound their texts from ca. AD 400 using a decorative chain stitch to link one quire to another. Wooden boards were then added as covers and the whole covered with leather. The front cover was decorated with leather tooling and often gemstones and precious metals were added.

Is it possible that the format chosen by the early Chris-

tians, namely the *caudex* or codex (or book) format, derived from the antique Roman wooden wax tablets? These tablets consisted of a set of small wooden boards covered with wax. Notes such as personal notes, accounts, receipts and even legal information were written into its surface using a stylus. Once the information was redundant, the surface could be smoothed over and re-used. A number of these waxed, wooden sheets were bound to form a *caudex* or codex either by lacing leather thongs through holes along the one edge or inserting metal rings, resulting in a book-like structure. The Romans also used *pugillares membranei* or parchment notebooks. These were small and used for personal notes. Our current-day books derive from the codex form.

Whether the early Christian codex derived from the wooden waxed tablets or the smaller *pugillares* is not clear. What did become clear was that the early Christians chose the codex format not only to distinguish between their sacred texts and those of the Jews, but also from other secular texts, which were, like Jewish texts, also written on scrolls. Jewish sacred texts, along with secular and literary texts of the antique period, were

written on papyrus or parchment sheets which had been pasted together into long strips and rolled up into scrolls. While scrolls were often wound around a central cylindrical core, to be read either by winding it horizontally or vertically, the Jewish Torah used two cylinders to access the text from the beginning or the end: one cylinder is rolled to release the text to be read while the other winds up the text already read.

According to Larry Hurtado and Chris Keith in “Writing and Book Production in the Helle-

nistic and Roman Periods,”¹ the codex format was also not widely used for literary texts until the fourth century AD. The standard form for books was scrolls which



Unknown artist, Pompeian woman with wax tablet and stylus (Fresco)

1. James C. Paget and Joachim Schaper, eds., *The New Cambridge History of the Bible. Volume 1: From the Beginnings to 600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).



could easily be made, while making a codex required a specific skill, knowledge, and preparation and planning of the pages. For the early Christians to choose this format was therefore significant. Hurtado and Keith note that some of the earliest fragments of Christian codices date



Nag Hammadi texts,
Apocryphon of John

to the mid-second century AD, and that these scriptural texts in codex format therefore differed radically from all other liturgical texts which were written in scroll form. Many of the earliest Christian texts on papyrus contain a vertical row of punctures down a central fold, indicating where the original binding was done, and that these texts were not written in scroll form. This clearly indicates that for the early Christians, the choice of the codex for the Bible indicated its holy and sacred identity.

Hurtado and Keith conclude that the preference for the codex format was not based on the practical advantage of a small, compact item which could easily be transported. Some biblical codices were quite large, making them cumbersome to use while travelling. This choice had centred on a specific, Christian identity, a conclusion supported by another important point which Hurtado and Keith raise, namely that unlike non-biblical codices, the biblical codex had wide margins and fewer lines with “generously sized” writing. The text appeared to be written with “little concern to make the maximum use of the writing space.” No skimping was suitable for a holy text! Also, Hurtado and Keith note that these earliest Christian codices were written in a “legible and practised hand,” unlike the “elegant pagan literary rolls of the time, and also in some early Jewish copies of biblical texts.” Hurtado and Keith conclude from this that, although the early Christians did not have professional calligraphers among them, they did not want non-Christians to write up or copy their sacred texts. The scroll and the codex, therefore, co-existed for at least the first four centuries AD but the codex gradually became the dominant form of binding books. Eventually, Judaism accepted the codex structure for its religious texts.

Regardless of how interesting and significant this information is, for me the central question remains. Looking at the bindings of the Gnostic texts found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, some indication was given: these early codices were written on papyrus and bound as single or



Coptic Psalter (Sahidic), Upper cover

double quires into papyrus or leather covers with flaps and thongs at the top, bottom and front to tie it all up. But the Nag Hammadi codices are dated to the third and fourth centuries AD, leaving the question of the earliest Christians bound texts unanswered.

The leather thongs on three sides of the Nag Hammadi codices offered a possible answer, allowing my imagination to conjure up some basic binding possibilities: single sheets were compiled, wrapped and tied up in a parchment or papyrus cover. Thongs along the open ends: top, bottom, and fore-edge, were tied to secure the contents of this “folder.” Alternatively, single sheets were compiled and probably loosely tied along the left edge, so that they could function like the pages of a book, following the example of Roman wax tablets. Loose sheets could also be folded, trimmed and bound along the centre. Following the Nag Hammadi codices, quires might have been sewn into leather covers, retaining the practice of tying everything together along the open ends to prevent losses. However, for me, this mystery continues, but the fact that the early Christians wanted to distinguish their Bibles from texts generated by a secular world, eventually resulted in the wonderful world of printing, binding and reading books. That makes each book a potentially sacred site.

Estelle is a retired art historian and paper conservator. She undertakes conservation work from home and makes artists' books, often with a Christian theme.



Anatomy of a Translation: Poetry of Shevchenko

Taras Shevchenko,
Near Kaniv, Ukraine

by Peter Fedynsky

More than 1200 monuments to Taras Shevchenko across Ukraine and at least 125 around the world attest to the poet's continued relevance and popularity among Ukrainians. A translator's challenge is to convey the beauty and significance of Shevchenko's poetry into another language, though none shares identical linguistic and cultural codes. The poet's rendition of the widely recognized psalm below is a simple example.

Excerpt from "Imitation of Psalm 11":

"... For my shackled people,
For the poor, the destitute ... I'll exalt
Those mute and lowly slaves!
And beside them as a sentry
I will place the word.
And your thoughts and speech will wither
Just like trampled grass."
Your lofty words, O Lord,
Resemble silver, forged, struck,
And seven times refined by fire in a furnace.
Spread Your holy words
All throughout the world.

The excerpt above highlights his belief in the power of words and also the challenges of translation apart from language. A subtle nuance of this verse is the psalm number, which differs between faiths, beginning with the 9th. It would be Psalm 12 in the King James Bible. It's a minor detail but a myriad of them creates the gulf between languages and cultures.

Context is needed to fully appreciate Shevchenko: who, to a non-Ukrainian, was Kotliarevsky? What is a third rooster? A kobzar? Chumák? The Hetmanate? The rivers Alta, Trubailo and others? The fact that they are little known internationally can be partly attributed to

Russian censors, who intentionally hid Ukraine from the world for centuries. My translation provides numerous footnotes to help understand the poems.

Shevchenko was born a serf in 1814 on the right bank of Ukraine's Dnipro River. His father was a so-called *chumak* who transported goods by oxcart. Today, he might have been a lorry driver. His hardworking mother was responsible for nine children and field work for the serf owner. She died when Taras was nine. Before his death two years later, the father took his son on a few trips, which gave the young Shevchenko a dawning awareness of life beyond village confines. The orphan's owner,

Pavel Engelhardt, took him into his manor as a servant. Engelhardt, the illegitimate son of Russian General Vasily Engelhardt, inherited his father's serfs. When Shevchenko was 15, Pavel Engelhardt moved to Vilno, today's Vilnius, and brought Taras along. A local Polish girlfriend made him better realize his bondage; she was free to do as she pleased, he was someone's commodity.

The future poet's 16-month

stay in Vilno also coincided with the Polish Uprising of 1830–31, which prompted Engelhardt to move again, this time to St Petersburg, but not before Shevchenko witnessed part of the armed Polish struggle for independence. Shevchenko biographer Pavlo Zaitsev suggests that the national implications of the rebellion would not have escaped his attention. In other words, if Poles could fight for their freedom, why not Ukrainians?

In the imperial capital, Shevchenko's artistic abilities drew the attention of several Ukrainian and Russian intellectuals who organized an art auction to raise funds to purchase his freedom in 1838. Fast forward through



Vasyl Sedliar, illustration
of "The Caucasus"



Vasyl Sedliar, illustration of
"The Princess"

And the mounds so dear to me
Are plundered by the Muscovite ...
Let him plunder, dig them up
What he seeks is not his own,
And meanwhile, let the turncoats grow
To help the Muscovite keep house,

And to strip the tattered shirt
From off their mother's back.
Help them, brutes,
To rack your mother.

The plundered mound
Is dug in quarters.
What is it they were looking for?
What did the old folks hide? –
Ah, if only,
If only they would find what's hidden,
Children would not weep, nor would mother worry.

Another poem from *The Three Years* series is "The Testament," Shevchenko's clarion call for Ukrainian freedom:

When I die, then bury me
Atop a mound
Amid the steppe's expanse
In my beloved Ukraine,
So I may see
The great broad fields,
The Dnipro and the cliffs,
So I may hear the river roar.
When it carries hostile blood
From Ukraine into the azure sea ...
I'll then forsake
The fields and hills –
I'll leave it all,
Taking wing to pray
To God Himself ... till
Then I know not God.
Bury me, rise up,
And break your chains
Then sprinkle liberty
With hostile wicked blood.
And in a great new family,
A family of the free,
Forget not to remember me
With a kind and gentle word.

The last line of "The Testament," *Незлим тихим словом*, is one of the poet's most difficult to convey in

his fine education in the St Petersburg Academy of Arts to the first two of his three trips to Ukraine that covered astounding distances. He crisscrossed the Ukrainian heartland on an axis roughly 525 miles from the northwest to the southeast and 425 miles northeast to southwest. His first trip as a 29-year-old yielded a series of etchings featuring quotidian slices of Ukrainian life. He also began a series of poems known as *The Three Years*, which he completed on his second trip from 1845 to 1847 as an artist on an imperial archaeological expedition. Shevchenko, already a well-known poet, was a welcome guest in wealthy manors and peasant huts alike. His dawning boyhood awareness developed into intimate familiarity with Ukraine and Ukrainians. Not only did he produce a painted record of what he saw, he also poeticized Ukrainian folklore, customs, songs and aspirations of serfs. In addition, he studied dozens of ancient burial mounds. The word mound appears more than 100 times in his poetry collection, *The Kobzar* (*The Minstrel*). A mound connotes not only the place where ancestors rest, but is also a symbol of Ukrainian historical and cultural continuity as each succeeding generation is buried above forebears.

A poem titled "Plundered Mound" has remained relevant since he wrote it in 1843. Ninety years later, it was one of many verses in a new *Kobzar* edition illustrated by artist Vasyl Sedliar. He was executed for substituting Soviet goons for the poet's czarist overlords. And today, as Russian troops target Ukrainian civilians, blow up infrastructure, including dams, and force millions to seek shelter abroad, Shevchenko's "Plundered Mound" still resonates.

... My sons do foreign work
In distant foreign lands.
The Dnipro, my dear brother,
Running dry, abandons me,





Taras Shevchenko,
*Chumaks Amid Burial
Mounds* (cropped)

English for several reasons, among them the untranslatable

word “*незлим*.” The term joins the words “not” and “bad.” Writing both together is more gracious. If English had this word, it would be spelled “*notbad*” and would be perceived in a subdued key. In its absence, the translator must choose between literal and smooth. The mere “not bad” would be too brusque; a compromise is “kind.”

Another reason involves the adjective *muxum*, which means quiet. But using it would create a distracting alliteration: kind and quiet. The word “gentle,” instead, introduces a shade of meaning not as precise as quiet, but it is more soothing than the guttural “k” alliteration. The next challenge is the ablative case. Ukrainian shares it with Latin but not English, which relies on prepositions or word order to convey similar content. In Ukrainian, the ablative makes the preposition redundant and allows “with” to be implied in any word. This makes for terser writing.

English has a rich vocabulary to refine meaning but few diminutives. In Ukrainian, there are frequently several, not only for nouns, but also for adjectives and adverbs. For instance, it is impossible to convey in English the verve of Shevchenko’s penultimate word in *The Kobzar* – *veselenko*. For lack of a better one, I chose cheerfully. If that’s all the poet wanted to say, he would have selected the root word *veselo*, though he could have written *veselesenko*, but that would have been overkill. *Veselenko* best conveys the *sans souci* of a man facing death and writing his last poem to express his love of life and wish for more. *Veselenko* qualifies the word sing, i.e., he and his muse will cheerfully sing in the afterlife. Life is good, it will go on, not just cheerfully, but ... well ... *veselenko*. It can’t be translated.

Shevchenko brims with alliteration and assonance that harmonize an already melodious language. For example, in his poem “The Slave” he writes: “*Знову* (again) *забіліла* (whitened) *зима* (winter) *біла* (white).” Shevchenko’s string of “z” sounds can be partly substituted in English with “w” – White winter whitened all, again. The poet carries the alliteration to the next line. “*За зимою* (after winter) *зазеленіла* (turned green) *весна Божа* (God’s spring).” Here, this translator’s luck ran out. I rendered the second line as “After winter came God’s spring and greenery.” The meaning is preserved but not the lyricism.

Shevchenko also relies heavily on syntactical inversion, which is endlessly flexible in Ukrainian. For example, the inverted word order for the phrase *Мої там сльози*

пролились from the poem “If You Gentlemen But Knew”

sounds loftier than what one might ordinarily say. There are 24 combinations of those words in Ukrainian, all of which make sense. Not so in English. The original word order in English translation: “My there tears shed,” is gibberish. In addition, Shevchenko often uses the passive voice to underscore his emphasis on fate, which victimized millions of Ukrainians through their accident of birth into serfdom. English tends toward the active voice.

Shevchenko used complicated and shifting metres, which I did not attempt to duplicate. To match his rhythms and rhymes would be a Herculean task, perhaps more difficult than translating the King James Bible, which took seven years and 47 scholars and theologians to complete. I settled for anapest throughout to convey what Shevchenko said, not how he said it. Some of his words are neologisms from Church Slavonic, whose flavour is impossible to convey without resorting to Middle English vocabulary, which has lost currency. Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholic Christians were attuned to the ancient language, which they heard in Eastern Rite church services.

As a foundational text, Shevchenko’s *Kobzar* has played an important role in galvanizing the Ukrainian identity and in the development of Ukrainian literature and language. The book’s compelling poetry and simple but soaring eloquence are considered timeless meditations about beauty and brutality, the meek and the mighty, fame and fortune, love and lust, religion and morality, but above all about hope and justice.

Shevchenko belongs in the company of such global giants of world literature as Byron, Goethe, Mickiewicz and Pushkin. But his native Ukrainian language, culture, history and geography had long been either denigrated as inferior or even prohibited by a hostile neighbour who used and continues to use brutal force in an attempt to subjugate Ukraine, her wealth and her people. Shevchenko did not countenance it, nor do Ukrainians today as they continue the struggle for liberty embodied by their revered national poet long after his death in 1861.

Peter Fedynsky’s 2013 translation of The Kobzar is the first ever complete rendition of Shevchenko’s poetry in English (available on Amazon and Goodreads). Fedynsky was an international broadcaster with the Ukrainian and English Services of the Voice of America from 1978 through 2013.



The Long March of God:

MINING THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF JOURNALISM

by Jenny Taylor

That the present would not be what it is, were it not for the past seems obvious to popular historian Tom Holland who wrote a now famous book, *Dominion*, about it. And it should be obvious to Christians too, were it not for the dearth of historical knowledge.

Christians see the world as belonging to God, the creator of the universe, and author of our lives. Thy kingdom come, we pray; but do we know how far we've come or what we owe the Bible for so much that we take for granted?

We live in a culture that is now mostly ignorant of the biblical facts of life. We fail to teach the history the Bible gave rise to. Instead, we laud "progress" as though it were self-generating. Instead of resolution, we have progressivism, a politics of nowhere that assumes whatever is new is good. To revile the past and the "dead, white males" associated with it has become a strange social goal. So, it comes as a surprise, even for the historically-minded, to discover just how much of our world was shaped by our Christian forebears, and the Bible that motivated them.

This article forms a companion piece to Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's about the production of books. In exploring why early Christians adopted the codex format for their Scriptures and liturgy, that article concluded thus: "... the fact that the early Christians wanted to distinguish their Bibles from texts generated by a secular world, eventually resulted in the wonderful world of printing, binding and reading books." Pause there and think: the huge labour of books owes its origins to a sacred impulse. One estimate by PricewaterhouseCoopers reckons that the global book industry is today worth about \$115 billion.¹ Without the church and its passion

1. "The Global Book Publishing Industry: Worth An Estimated \$115 Billion Annually." Accessed July 31, 2023. <https://www.tagari.com>.

Charles Emmanuel Biset,
Still Life with Books,
a Letter and a Tulip

for the holy text, we would still be using cumbersome scrolls.

This takes us millennia further back than even the Reformation that ushered in Bible printing, the first mass-produced consumer item. Upon its foundations rose the whole capitalist edifice and the nation state, if Benedict Anderson's argument in his book, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), is to be believed. But what is far less well known is much of the work I have been researching: the origins

of discourse, and what emerged with it, namely journalism and the political system it spawned.

As a society, we do not accept that our actions have consequences. We have lost a sense of the linkage between our moral and spiritual instincts and the actions and activities that result. We believe we can act as we like, or not act at all, and the world will go on its merry way: That we can act as we like, and the world owes us a living if bad things happen as a result. That's in part because so many people have been lifted out of grinding poverty and the lack of choices it entails, that we as middle-class citizens rarely need our noses rubbing in the fallout of our own decisions. Yet I meet such people week by week at church: those that have fallen through the cracks into a kind of living hell from which they cannot rescue themselves. They believe the postmodern lie, which is the very air we breathe and tries to convince us that *nothing matters*.

Their stories are unbelievable, almost unbearable to listen to: of behavioural vagrancy, sexual profligacy, mind-numbing violence and exploitation, degradation of unimaginable voraciousness. And that's in just one random town. This is the world in which Jesus is at home, thank God, and it should overwhelm us with gratitude to



learn from history about how God rescues and blesses, through our use of the Bible, and how it fashions a world in which we might thrive.

My research over the past four years for the book *Saving Journalism* has had to go right back almost into pre-history to understand the roots of our culture, carried as it is in our discourse. Just for starters: the invention of Hebrew. Seth Sanders sustains the astonishing argument, from previously unmined epigraphic data, that the alphabet was deliberately used not just to transmit royal oracles, as with other scripts, but as “a vehicle of political symbolism and self-representation.”² Under the impulse of “something that happened” on Mount Sinai, history, law and prophecy all erupted. Until this moment, no people had been addressed as “you.” Yet here suddenly in the Near Eastern Semitic world, were scribes and prophets developing a written language by which to communicate the very words and thoughts, not of the king, but of God himself to his people. The result is what we have today: the Hebrew Bible, or as we know it, the Old Testament. This research came out in 2009, greeted ecstatically as “a revolution in scholarship.”

Secondly, literary critic Erich Auerbach compounds for us the import of this research with his magnum opus on the power of the narrative contained both within the ancient Hebrew text, and also in the Gospel of Luke. In *Mimesis* ([New York: Doubleday, 1957], 170), he discusses the representations of reality contained in the stories of Abraham and Peter the fisherman. He takes us on a breathtaking *tour d’horizon* of classical literature in which he leaves us in no doubt that what we have therein is unique for the future of Western civilization.

Auerbach compares Homer’s handling of the epic story of Odysseus’s return home to the island of Ithaca after two decades of wanderings, with the way the Hebrew Bible’s authors handle the call of Abraham to take his only son Isaac up Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there. Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier (17). The patriarchs on the other hand have undergone a formation “because God has chosen them to be examples.”

To stress again, this idea of development is “entirely foreign to Homer” or the other writers of antiquity. Such

a concept sets up an overwhelming suspense that is not

2. Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press: 2011), back cover.



merely stylistic, the artifice of a teller of great legends, but is the very story itself. The absoluteness of this belief – that God is working his purposes out in the very stuff of life of those who attempt to respond to him – gives rise to certain specific literary possibilities unknown before.

One of those possibilities is the mining of lowly character because in it might be contained the purposes of God. There is not the space to go into this in detail, but Peter’s transformation in the courtyard after his betrayal of Jesus, challenged by a lowly serving girl, overturns the extant genres of comedy and tragedy. And it justifies almost the whole of literature thereafter, not least being contemporary reportage and the validation of public opinion.

The form which it was given was one of such immediacy that its like does not exist anywhere else in ancient literature (45). Auerbach believed that no single passage exists in any antique history where direct discourse like that of the servant girl was employed like this – “in a brief, direct dialogue” (46). In short, Peter exists in literature at all because he is loved by Christ, the second person of the Trinity, whose Passion changed the whole world. Reports of it are contained in a book, bound and printed thanks to that same religious impulse.

Language created a people – God’s people; first the Hebrews then the Christians through whom God’s story is worked out. It was not the other way around. People did not simply “create language” for its usefulness. It had not happened, and would not have happened without that religious impulse. And so it has gone on throughout history: that wherever the Bible is translated into the vernacular, there a people is raised up from abjection and



Imre Ámos, *Double Portrait*



Wycliffe Bible, John's Gospel

getic Reformation pamphleteering. It was Tyndale's beautiful translation of the New Testament with its remarkable cadences and memorable phrasing that gave Britain a language for ordinary folk. This readied its readers to become the target market for news because it democratised communication.

And on the back of that came oppositional government, dependent as it was on a literate populace. The innovation which oppositional politics rested upon was the creation of "popular opinion" disseminated through newspapers. Whereas politics had so often been subject to demagoguery and sloganeering, rather, this public opinion was directed by the establishment of an independent journalism that knew how to assert itself against the government. It made critical commentary and public opposition against the government "part of the normal state of affairs."⁴ The press in 1792 was for the first time established as an organ genuinely engaged on behalf of the public in critical debate: "as the fourth estate" (*Transformations*, 60). And this became a model for the world.

It is no coincidence that as Bible reading suffers attrition in the West, so does democracy ... and the journalism that it spawned. But that is another story.

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ignorance to take its place at the forefront of history. As with the Germans after Luther's translation of the Bible into the demotic; so with the English after first Wycliffe and then, under Luther's influence, Tyndale.

In India it was the Northamptonshire cobbler William Carey who gave the common people their own languages in writing and translated their Scriptures so they could think religiously for themselves and work out what was true and what was false. And in China, it was missionaries from London who set up the first printing presses and according to the first republican president, Sun Yat-sen, fathered the Republic with its promise of freedom. "The Republican movement began on the day when Robert Morrison set foot on the soil of China" said missionary-educated Sun Yat-sen with revolutionary optimism.³ Sadly, the religious impetus that spawned it was regarded as dispensable by first the Confucian intelligentsia who inherited the new world of vernacular literature and newspapers, then the Communist atheists who took over from them. Today China ranks second from bottom out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index.

My third point is this: that that same impetus resulted in journalism, the discourse for a people. This was clearly manifest in Europe with the advent of newspapers whose pioneers from Milton to Defoe to William T. Stead were nearly all Christian Dissenters. Newspapers developed on the back of Luther's Bible and his ener-



Anton Faistauer, *Woman Reading*



Juan Gris, *Ghosts*

3. Xiantao Zhang, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press: The Influence of the Protestant Missionary Press in Late Qing China* (London: Routledge, 2007), 35.

4. Habermas, *Transformations*, 60, citing K. Kluxen, *Das Problem Der Politischen Opposition* (Munchen, 1956), 187.



Crafting Hearts

by Lauren Mulford

The crafting of hearts and souls is the primary function of any Christian. Often called *discipleship*, we see it in Christ's departing words in Matthew 28:19–20 to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to do all that Christ commands. And what is that command? In Christ's own words, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on ... 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'" (Matt 22:37–39 NIV).

My primary craft then is to disciple my children as there is no neighbour as close as them and therefore no greater calling than to craft their hearts for God. Cultivating a heart for Christ is a craft of divine calling and spiritual necessity. If a mother isn't setting herself to show love and respect to God by and through her love and respect for her children, then she is leaving that to some other source. Every individual will be disciplined. By

what and for what is initiated by one's parents.

It is with great love and respect for God then that I share my life with my children. I want to leave them with great memories of their childhood. I heard once that for every negative remark a child hears, it takes ten positive remarks to undo that damage. (Quite possibly someone made this up, but it feels right.) The first way I demonstrate my love and respect for my children is by being quick to forgive and quick to apologize. Too often parents don't respect their children enough to give an apology when the Bible speaks of loving each other and outdoing one another in honour (Rom 12:10).

Another way that I try to reiterate this love for my children is not catechism-specific. Rather, by making my presence enjoyable to my children, my hope is that they will easily find God's presence enjoyable. If they can ask me anything, then hopefully they will be able to ask God their Father for anything. If they receive love and affirmation rather than cynicism and sarcasm from me, then hopefully one day they will see that as a reflection of the Father and know that he will not try to twist their requests or neglect their needs. When I enjoy the presence of God and share that presence with my children, they will naturally find God's presence enjoyable. My hope is that they will see the *Fatherhood* of God as something to be enjoyed and desired rather than to be avoided.

To craft my children's hearts, I try to connect their creativity to camaraderie and a strong familial base. I want my children to want to do things with the family, not to regard always doing everything as a family as a forced chore. I'm not trying to ensure they "stay in line" but rather that they are enjoying life responsibly and, while they're young, in the safety of their family. I do that by trying to make their home life more amazing than the life they find in the world. The only way I know how to



do that is by anchoring our relationship in loving God and loving the neighbour.

Crafting children's hearts doesn't need to look super-spiritual. With my children, we enjoy going to garage sales. We find some old piece of junk, take it home, clean it and remake it. Think of the possibilities of conversation in taking someone's leftovers and redeeming them. Other fun activities we do include painting pages of old novels with watercolours. We collect stickers with cool designs and pithy statements. We read Calvin & Hobbes comics together. We watch Disney's *Frozen* by request of my one-year-old every day while the rest of us complain about the plot holes, but then we all sing every song (even my oldest) at the top of our lungs. We watch the wildlife around our yard and marvel at its quirkiness and resourcefulness. I give spontaneous compliments and make sure that I specifically seek out a child just to tell them something neat randomly, instead of only when I need them to do something.

By sharing my hobbies with my children, I open my life to them and they start to see my heart. My heart is for them out of an overflow of my heart for God. I let them walk in on my business meetings and overhear my discussions. I answer their philosophical questions (although I do wish they'd start asking them before 9pm). We play Mario Party and let the little ones team up with the older ones. We go for walks and discuss everything that enters their minds. When I seek out a space and

time to be by myself and they seek me out, I welcome their presence (but I do wish they'd wait until *after* I have left the bathroom). My children walk into my library and see that I value books and knowledge, which has taught them to value books and knowledge. When I don't do this perfectly, which is daily, I correct myself in front of them and seek their forgiveness. I reiterate that, as a poster we made and placed at the top of the stairs states: "You are loved! You have value! The world is better because you were born. Our family is better with you in it."

I create home videos that highlight each child as well as us as a family. When they see themselves being praised for being themselves, and when I edit the videos to show their best side, they realize their value. When the family comes together and asks to watch the video with a specific child, they share in each other's successes. We often sit around and speak praises for each person. I'll say to one child, "What is something you love about your brother?" And we go through each child, each taking a turn to say what they love about the others. By sharing my life with my children, and by having them share their lives with each other, their hearts are being crafted to reflect God even in a fundamental way that transcends being able to answer catechism questions or Bible trivia (which we still do but usually they quiz me!). They are learning to love by learning that they are loved.

In essence, crafting hearts for God means giving him our hearts, not just our superficial obedience or apparent acquiescence. If any craft is to be of lasting importance there must be at its core a heart for Christ.

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Interior of St Wilfrid's

Crafting a Response to Life

by Marit Greenwood

Each of us enters life without significant awareness of what this means or how to engage with it. We find we breathe; we find we are alive. How we respond to this varies tremendously, but to some extent we are all engaged in crafting our way through this circumstance. The perspective from which I share my conversation with Izak Rohan Crafford is that of a personal description by Rohan of how he has crafted and continues to craft his path through the singular circumstance of being alive.

Rohan is a very proper young man: upright in character, specific in his word choice when communicating, frequently clad in trousers, shirt, blazer and tie (even as a modern-day university student). A man of swift gait and resonant voice. He is an assistant lecturer in German literature at the University of Pretoria and is currently studying for a Master's degree in the same field. His research focuses on the role and function of the blind figures in two 20th-century texts, within the context of the tradition of the literary "blind figure." He is also involved in the university mentorship programme and is delighted that his mentee is studying theology.

For our conversation, we met at St Wilfrid's Anglican Church in Hillcrest, Pretoria. Rohan and I, parishioners there, have grown a friendship of shared faith, interest in music (I learn from him), poetry, nature and a fondness for "painting" with words.

What I most keenly associate with Rohan is his love for, and engagement with, music. When asked about his early exposure to it, he explained that, in a departure from the genre of music typically enjoyed by his family, his mom bought a disc of music by Johan Sebastian Bach for him to listen to as a baby, which he "evidently enjoyed." He vaguely remembers being about three or four years old and still "liking it very much." Around this age, Rohan was given a children's piano keyboard which gave

him great pleasure: "Experimenting on it ... trying to learn melodies.... I didn't do very impressive things, certainly not, but I *did* enjoy myself," he added. These memories linked to music are amongst Rohan's earliest. Perhaps the life crafting had begun?

He initially was allowed to begin playing the recorder at school, but not the piano. According to one of the teachers

there, his hands were apparently "somehow inadequate." In the school environment he was exposed to classical music – people around him were playing the piano; a music teacher whose classroom was near his (during the foundation phase of his schooling), played Rachmaninov, Beethoven, Mozart. "I was terribly afraid of her, by the way, simply because she could play so well," Rohan admitted. Piano lessons only began when he was eight years old although his teacher ("a lovely lady") must have found him somewhat uncooperative: "I didn't like practising and found the playing of the prescribed terribly restrictive." He was a member of the recorder ensemble and as of age twelve, a boy treble in the school choir. "It was always great fun to sing higher than the girls," he commented, adding: "Caused some bullying to occur. But no matter." At age fourteen Rohan learned from his choir master "a lot of foundational knowledge necessary for the understanding of music," including musical theory and the various orchestral instruments which the master brought to class for him to handle and try playing. "That was simply wonderful and contributed to my eventual appreciation of the organ."



Gentile da Fabriano, *Music, Playing the Organ* (Fresco)



Left: Rohan (and Dixie); Right: The organ

cation, but certainly not the end of his engagement particularly with classical music. Exploring and “entering into it” has continued unabated, fuelled mainly by doing “an awful amount of research” to find out what he lacks in knowledge regarding any musical matter. His crafting of his musical expression has continued ebulliently as well, particularly after joining the Anglican church, “having a grasp of musical theory when I improvise or compose” Rohan noted, thanks to his choir master. Thus, an aspect of Rohan’s life crafting employed skills gained from his school education.

Rohan virtually breathes music. He is the organist at St Wilfrid’s, and plays the piano here, sometimes playing both alternately during the same church service. Both instruments in this building have severe limitations, and his capacity to coax splendid music from them is impressive. Hymns, and his compositions and improvisations, are filed in his prodigious memory. This memory is, in my opinion, an impressive grace from God towards Rohan.

Rohan is blind.

“What I mostly do is simply memorise my music,” he explained. This process includes thoughtful consideration of the “shape and form” of a piece, and regularly practising it once committed to memory. Listening to Rohan describe this prompted me to think of this approach as a skilled craft of its own, honed to serve his needs effectively. Recalling the basic theme of a hymn, possibly even memorizing its text,

Because of timetable clashes, Rohan had to forgo music as a school subject after grade 9, which marked the end of his formal musical edu-

he does much on the other two instruments, with great enjoyment.) For Rohan there is something almost sacramental about engaging with these instruments, “Something dear ... that relieves you” he added, pensively. A way of “channelling my experiences ... and thoughts into sound,” referring in particular to his penchant for improvising. He elaborated, describing the piano as “taking our burdens upon itself and converting that into something beautiful ... Is that not somewhat similar to Christ?” He likened the piano, “a raw instrument” to Jesus’ humanity up to his passion and death; the organ, more “complex, majestically airy, rich in a mysteriously fulgent glory,” to the ascended Christ, with the promise of his return.

When asked about his faith, Rohan indicated that “the Christian faith was at no point in time foreign” to him and he described having a “lively faith” as a young child. However, his internal compass continued to point him towards an expression of faith that was liturgically rich. This had been fed by, for example, listening during his high school days to Bach’s *Das Orgelbüchlein*: “I remember the *longing* awakened by that music” he added. That longing was to be in a place of worship where such music was present, there being, for Rohan, a close connection between that kind of music and the presence of God. As a university student, he also listened to Anglican choral music, particularly in choral Evensong streamed live during the coronavirus lockdown. Eventually he began attending the services of this little St Wilfrid’s Anglican



Church near the university. It was a homecoming. Some two years later he is now a lay minister here along with being a church warden, organist and a regular reader.

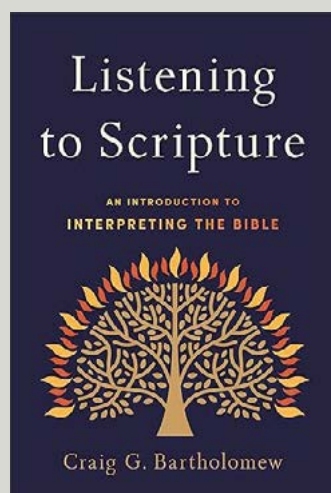
Changing gear, I asked what Rohan views as his biggest life challenge. He answered “Sin – not faithfully showing the light of Christ.” As a sighted person, I was humbled by this, as I anticipated an answer along the lines of having to negotiate life with blindness. To *that* point he said he does not make his blindness the core of his thinking about life. Challenges there are, but “God has given me gifts to use to his glory, so use them I will.” Once a challenge has been faced, it will “*not* be forgotten, but *filed away*.” His great advancement as a student and a lecturer have shown him that his blindness will not hold him back.

Equally unexpected was his response to what it is that brings him greatest joy. Having settled after a while on “exultation,” as the most fitting word, Rohan described that for him it is most profoundly present “in the love we are taught by Christ.” By this he means that which occurs when one assists someone, and not by accompa-

nying a church soloist on organ or piano, as I suggested, but rather by supporting those in difficulty. “A sacrificial giving, as did Jesus.” This brought Rohan to refer to the Eucharist, central to his faith, modelling a way of life for him. From his tone of voice, I recognized that Rohan had shared deeply, personally during our conversation.

Towards the end of our time together he mentioned that one of the first Latin words he learned is rendered in English as “fulgent: shining brightly/radiant.” (Despite his impeccable accent and command of English, he is not English. He has learnt Latin and German, but his home language is Afrikaans.) After our conversation had ended, I remained thoughtful about that word, “fulgent.” Reflecting on our interaction, I recognize a certain liveliness in the way in which Rohan engages with life; crafts his life in response to God. That liveliness has a brightness about it, indeed, an effulgence.

Marit Greenwood is an artist who is drawn to contemplative spirituality. Photographs by the author.



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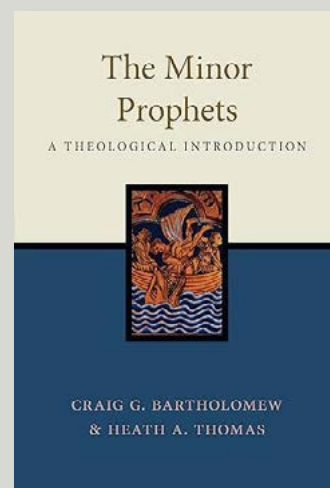
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GORDON McCONVILLE, professor emeritus of Old Testament at the University of Gloucestershire

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Meditation on a Winter Ritual

by Michael J. Rhodes

Wolves interrupted my workout today. The pack's howls penetrated the white noise of whatever theology podcast was happening in my headphones. I heard them, but they did not stop me in my tracks. No, for five or six paces I carried on, tried to ignore them, because, after all, "those can't be wolves, not real ones, not interrupting *my* run, not in *this* city park. No wolves to worry about here." Even when I realized I was just on the other side of the Memphis Zoo, my first thought was for the recordings that run over the loudspeakers near their exhibit. I've been fooled by them before, mind you. No reason to risk missing my lecture.

The last time, the *first* time, was different.

I was sleeping in a two-man tent pitched in the middle of a vast empty snowfield under a full moon frozen in place by the winter's frost. My college friend, Christian, was beside me, and we were swapping stories with my cousin Ben who was in the tent beside ours. The wolf pack silenced us, silenced everything, stopped the world for however many seconds they filled the night with their lonely, longing cries.

Nobody spoke.

And then, without any prior planning or communication, we howled back, back into the black, star-saturated sky, back with voices lifted in fear and in longing, back towards that lonely pack lost somewhere along the Canadian border.

When you have as much Alzheimers in your family tree as I do, you tend to meditate on memory, knowing that no experience is so cen-

tral that you can't lose it. But I'd wager a flask of whiskey and a couple of fireside cigars on this: when my memories finally fade, the wolf-song under that starlit snowfield will be one of the last to go.

And yet I nearly missed them today, even when they were close enough to cut through my iPhone's endless noise. In the end, their lingering longing must have resonated with my memory of

Montana just enough to cause me to stop, to turn aside, like Moses going to look at this strange sight, to stand on tiptoes and look through the chain-link fence, where six snow-white wolves filled a city block with their soul-shattering sound, to discover that I, too, was standing on holy ground.

When it comes to hunting for the holy, the pilgrimages help. I stumbled into those early ones. It was simple enough for us college kids to spend a few nights in the woods every New Year, nights we'd have spent out late and irresponsible of others in any case. Now, twenty years later, there are wives who send us off, and children we worry we may be neglecting while we're away. We fight for these evenings now, fight for the dark nights spent shivering in some three-walled wooden shelter in the Appalachians, waiting for the sun to come up, providing what warmth it will.

When I think of this trip in July, or even on the first cold night of September, my heart shrinks back from it. I'm out of shape, worse than last year. And it was so, so cold. Then one day a searing November sunset seeps through black silhouettes of trees traced against the icy sky. That is when it comes. The world rises up, a priest at evening prayer, declaring: *The glory of the Lord shall*





be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. That sunset calls me back, back into the wilderness, back into the company of men a year older than we were at last hike, back into the rhythm of boots on hard ground, and God willing, the crunch of snow.

Perhaps this is the point of our pilgrimages. We go to ensure we never lose the wildness that lurks in, with, and under us, a wildness often out of view but constantly present. After all, snakes shed skins in my garden, a bald eagle soared past my son's kite in a Memphis park, and foxes haunt the suburbs near the house where I grew up. Surely the wild is in this place and we did not know it! Or wouldn't have, if our brief sojourns in the wilderness hadn't trained us to claim it when it came.

Our three-day hike makes each outside day holy.

This holy wildness demands a focused attention, a concentration incompatible with the frenetic pace of what we so often call, without any awareness of irony, the "real world." My personal Zoom room and pocket-sized supercomputer help me churn out data at ever-increasing speeds. I can accomplish any number of tasks, but fail to enter any particular place or moment. At the end of all my work accomplishments, I cannot remember the colour of my office walls, I do not recall any of my 6,435 Facebook friends' addresses, and I do not know anything

about the soil or trees or animal life that still, somehow, share space with the streets that take me to work.

But the wild will not embrace us on these terms. We will slow down or we will find we have not been there at all. To hold the brown trout in your hands you must learn to read the river, to spot the pileated woodpecker it helps to recognize its rapid-fire *cuk-cuk-cuk-cuk-cuk-cuk* call. And for the last nineteen winters I have grown, subtly and without fanfare, more competent in finding warmth amidst falling mountain temperatures: fill up the empty spaces of your sleeping bag with dry clothes, keep hiking until almost nightfall, don't layer up too much during the day (nothing is colder when you stop than your sweat), and as soon as you do stop hiking, put on every piece of clothing you've got. It's as if Mother Nature posted an orange warning sign beside each of her doorways: PAY ATTENTION. You can ignore the advice, of course, but there is nearly always a fine.

Like every good pilgrimage, there are moments out there when past and present rush together, the scattered moments of our lives drawn into "the still point of the turning world," the place where there is only *God*, and God's world, and the memories of your most clear-eyed encounters with it all, and the people who were there with you at the time. So we keep going back, back to that pile of Appalachian stone, raised in memorial to remind us that we arrived at mountain streams we did not dig and three-walled shelters we did not build, that

Yahweh rescued us from such an array of slaveries we can scarcely attempt to name them and brought us into this land. Not by works, mind. It is the gift of God.

A few years back we woke before dawn because we couldn't sleep from all the shivering. We crested the first hill as the sun rose





on the other side. The light spilled over the edge of the mountain and filled all the ice that clung to every tree in the forest until the whole world was filled to overflowing with it. Annie Dillard saw the “tree with lights in it,” the one the blind girl healed by surgery said she saw the moment she walked into the garden and looked on the world for the first time.

We did not see the tree.

We saw *the forest*.

A forest on fire, every branch flinging the flames back towards the frozen sky, the trees of the field clapping their hands in the church-bell clanging of branch upon branch, and the mountain filled with the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the seas. We ate cereal bars and drank the last of the whiskey and kept walking to keep the cold out. But on that mountain, we ate and drank beneath the sapphire pavement under the very feet of the Almighty.

Like our ancestors, we were grateful to have survived the encounter.

Yet there is pressure on us, despite our pilgrimages. I almost missed the wolves; perhaps Moses almost turned away from the fiery spectacle and stuck with sheep. And what of afterwards? He saw the bush engulfed in divine fire, yet not consumed. But what happened next? In the long, lonely journey back to Egypt, or later, when the people complained nearly every step of the way, did he wonder? Did he consider how much heat stroke could make you see? Did he ponder the potential danger of taking liberation strategies from shrubberies?

Or did every quiet campfire become a sacramental flicker of the flame of the Lord, every smouldering candle a pillar of fire worth following? When he left the dark, smoky holiness of the tabernacle, did the lamp lit in his own tent send him trembling to his knees before the hidden holiness here, there, everywhere?

It's a wonder Moses ever had the audacity to put his sandals back on.

For all I know, he didn't. For all I know, he left his shoes at the mountain of God, and danced barefoot across a world hot with divine presence, a world burning, but not consumed. For all I know, Israel's long trek through the wilderness took even longer because their leader kept leaving the trail, turning aside to see great sights, kept hunting for hidden

glory.

I do know this: Israel camped out next to the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, and still managed to forget to take their sandals off. I very nearly ran past wolves, even when they interrupted my urban exercise. Forget Moses for a moment. Even after our eyebrows have been scorched off, most of us, most of the time, forget the fire.

Which is why, twenty years into this makeshift winter ritual, I'm going back on pilgrimage, back to the wilderness, even if just for a weekend. It's why the coldest day of the year makes me long for a backpack on my shoulders, the crunch of frost under my feet, and a glimpse of the sun setting fire to the forest as it sets. It's why, shivering in a sleeping bag on a winter night in the Smoky Mountains more than a century after they were hunted to extinction there, I'll lie awake, listening for the wolves.

Michael Rhodes is the OT lecturer at Carey Baptist College, Auckland, New Zealand; the author of Just Discipleship: Biblical Justice in an Unjust World (IVP Academic, 2023) and an Associate Fellow of the KLC. Photographs by the author. This essay is dedicated to the Option 105 ... for everything.





The Blue Note:

Crafting the Cries of Humanity

by Justin McLendon

Writing in the *New York Times*, Emily Rueb understands that “everyone loves the blues. Some people just don’t know it yet.”¹ By blues, of course, Rueb is referring to blues music, which is currently experiencing a modern renaissance as international artists explore this genre’s diverse application and broad appeal. Without sounding too presumptuous, I tend to agree that everyone loves blues music, even if some don’t know it yet! I was born and raised in Mississippi, home of the Delta Blues, a place where steeped churches and juke joints form for their disciples the necessary liturgies of worship and lament. In fact, the domain of blues lyrics often speaks far beyond the territorial limitations of religious affiliation. Anyone familiar with blues music recognizes the normalcy of singing about your baby leaving you for another man in one verse, only to find respite in subsequent verses from an appeal to a Saviour who has borne humanity’s pain. If blues music teaches us anything, it’s that we need corridors to channel our multi-faceted

1. Emily S. Rueb, “Singing the Blues All Over,” in *New York Times* (August 10, 2007). <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/10/travel/escapes/10Ahead.html>.

Olga Rozanova, *Blue on Tin*

emotions, from the apex of existential happiness to the misery of the deepest pit where our only song is lamentation. Within the blues, there is something distinctly human about the emotive power and raw expression this musical genre evokes.

But blues music is much more than any one artist’s organic expression, especially when we consider one of the tools blues artists use to craft their music. The “blue note” is one such tool, and this term broadly describes a distinctive melodic ornamentation that adds a unique touch of the soul and emotion to situate a song’s lyrics. Several years ago, I visited a local guitar store near my home, and I don’t mind admitting that I view these visits as an excuse to play guitars I’ll never purchase (or be able to afford!). Another gentleman was sitting in the corner, playing standard 12-bar blues on a beautiful Fender Telecaster. I grabbed a Gibson hollow body and played an impromptu chord progression, and he dutifully joined in, rummaging his fingers across the guitar neck like a seasoned professional. When I later mentioned his usage of the blue note, he smiled and said, “Ah yes, those are the ‘worried notes’ I can’t do without.”

From its genesis, blues artists employed these “worried notes” to infuse intense emotions and express hardships, struggles and the joys of life alongside the painful imagery contained within the lyrics. I’ve learned that employing a blue note is a subtle deviation from the traditional Western musical scale, where artists introduce a flattened or bent third, fifth or seventh note. A prominent example is B. B. King’s, “The Thrill is Gone,” where the “King of the Blues” incorporates the lower third to create a sense of sadness and longing. This pitch bending gives the blue note its distinct melancholic and expressive qualities, evoking through instrumentation (often a guitar) the sounds that conspire with lyrics to elevate a sense of longing, sorrow and passion.

Over the years the blue note has transcended the boundaries of the blues genre and found its way into jazz, rock, soul and popular music. Artists like B. B. King, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters and Stevie Ray Vaughan have used the blue note to great effect, shaping the sound and direction of modern music. Its expressive power has made it a staple in countless iconic guitar solos, vocal



Harald Giersing,
A Woman in Front of a Guitar

Takehisa Yumeji, *Blue Kimono*



performances and instrumental improvisations. Beyond its impact on individual artists, the blue note has become a recognizable symbol of the blues genre, a musical language that directly speaks to the soul. Its presence in various genres serves as a reminder of the enduring legacy of blues and its profound influence on the evolution of modern music.

Inspired by Mississippi blues artists, a few years ago I decided to learn blues scales. For any guitarist already accustomed to playing major and minor pentatonic scales, this task isn't too burdensome. In practice sessions I discovered that incorporating blue notes in some sense begs for more, for the artist to satisfy the blue note's cry with the beauty or satisfaction of the next note. Said differently, as I learned blues scales it didn't take long to notice that the blue note left in isolation is off-putting and incomplete. In this sense, employing the blue note allows artists to bridge the gap between the major and minor tonalities, crafting a touch of dissonance that creates tension, pulling the listener's heartstrings in a call and response manner. Typically, the blue note is introduced by bending the pitch of a note slightly downward or inflecting it with a "cry" or "wail" effect. In terms of craft, the blue note provides musicians with a palette of expressive possibilities. By incorporating these flattened or lowered notes, musicians can manipulate the tonal landscape of a song, emphasizing specific emotions or moments within the music. When I think of how blues artists craft their music to face the challenges of life, I can't help but think through some of the connections to the Christian life.

In *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press, 2007), Charles Taylor delves into the concept of "lived experience" as a fundamental aspect of understanding the secularization of society. For Taylor, an attribute of our age is the default



Henry Fitch Taylor,
Figure with Guitar II

setting to prioritize the lived experience, which refers to the subjective, personal encounters and interpretations of individuals within their everyday lives. This concept encompasses the diverse array

of beliefs, values and practices that shape human existence and contribute to the formation of individual identities. It is without question that the blues genre provides a musical landscape for subjective experiences to be recognized and evaluated. As a Christian theologian, I'm aware that one indelible feature of our humanity is the creaturely apprehension that our lives are often in disarray, wrecked by sin's pervasive presence in and among us. And in the throes of sin's misery and devastation upon humanity (and all that exists), Christians have the courage to explore our circumstances *and* our hope. As Patrick Miller once observed, "The mind and heart of God are vulnerable to the pleas *and the arguments* of human creatures."² I think of this reality often, especially when listening to blues artists craft these arguments in the plain language of human emotion and struggle. Whether it's Blind Willie Johnson's, "Lord I Just Can't Keep from Crying Sometimes," or Serbian-born blues artist Ana Popović's album, *Comfort to the Soul*, I am convinced that we really do love the blues, even if we don't know it yet.³



Juan Gris, *Guitar on a Table*

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2. Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 126. Emphasis in original.

3. Many of these themes are addressed in my forthcoming book, *Theology and the Blues*, to be published within the Theology and Pop Culture Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic).



To Whistle Back

Maryke van Velden writes on an exhibition she curated, which was hosted by the Oude Leeskamer Gallery in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

The image of a young Albie Sachs¹ pacing up and down a solitary cell, whistling to some stranger, has stuck with me for years since the first time I'd discovered his story in a BBC podcast. As a daily prison ritual (1963), Sachs and a (then) unknown detainee whistled to one another the main theme of the Largo movement from Dvořák's "New World Symphony." Their wordless communication was both creative protest and a means of solidarity.

Upon realizing that the following exhibition at Oude Leeskamer coincided with the season of Lent and Easter (2023), this story that emanates hope for reconciliation from a desolate place, once again haunted me. So there we were at the end of November 2022: three curators jamming to find harmonizing chords between the political and the religious. The prevalent, yet loaded, theme of "Reconciliation" surfaced as key. "Reconciliation? Isn't that topic like 'done' in South Africa?" a friend remarks a couple of months later, after having visited the show. "Sure!" It's fair to ask what more there is to say about this contested term. But this is also exactly the challenge: hasn't "The Crucifixion" been "done" to the point of boredom? Easter together with Christmas are the two most difficult sermon topics. This is common knowledge for anyone who has grown up in a pastor's home. As Christian and as curator my curiosity is as much in WHAT the gospel tells us, as in HOW it is told.

"To Whistle Back" brought together the work of thir-

teen South African artists, some contemporary and some who have passed on. Unique for a show in a contemporary art space and therefore rather special, is that each of these artists confesses to the Christian faith. A curatorial decision, of course. However, what I found most poignant throughout the planning process was an awareness of a representation of our broad socioeconomic spectrum among these artists, and the unique voice that each of them contributed from their experiences of faith. For one artist we bought and couriered art-making materials as he had lost all his existing artworks to arson and was left destitute. For another, an in-person meeting was set up to fill out agreement forms, due to linguistic and technological barriers. At the same time insurance was arranged for works worth six digits and masses of paperwork done to secure a loan from the incredible art collection of the Constitutional Court. If the body of the church, according to the book of Corinthians, is made of many parts, then this group of artists is analogous to just that.

Lent is a time of barrenness. A desert stint. A time during which Christians retract and acknowledge the brokenness of this world we live in. Since the start of this exhibition, 2023 has, for many in my inner circle, brought about drastic and traumatic changes: cancer diagnoses, failed relationships, unemployment, a limb amputation, retirement, loss of funding, sudden premature death ... the type of existential crossroads that leaves one at a loss for words. And searching for hope.

What strikes me about the hopeful whistling between the inmates of two bleak prison cells sixty years ago is the components of ritual and a call for communion, decades before restoration revealed itself. These senses of ritual and of communion emerge in several of the artworks that were featured in "To Whistle Back." As a response to his empathetic concern of shanty town inhabitants during the Covid-19 lockdown, Walter Hayn starts a meditative drawing that leads to the representation of an impenetrable church structure in his *Church of the Dispossessed*. An image which encourages a questioning of

1. Now a renowned South African anti-apartheid activist, writer, lawyer and former judge.





Ydi Coetsee, *VGK Brigade, Maitland (close up)*
(VGK: Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk, SA)

It is not that I imagine any of these artworks to possess some transcendental quality that would wipe out

the ideological barriers we might be erecting and who it is we exclude from our communities.

As a means of processing the insurmountable inequality and impact of corruption in our country, Franli Meintjes employs a repetitive piercing technique of needle through wool. Her tactile work, *Our Prayer*, represents the digital sound waves produced when singing the Xhosa hymn, “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika,” (“God bless Africa”): a repetition that stretches over six metres.

Bonnie Ntshalintshali renders the Old Testament characters of Joseph and Elijah in her distinctively spir-

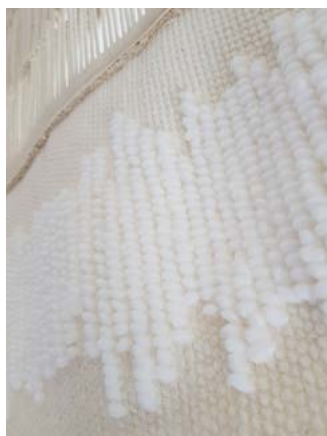
the pain or confusion or solitude that the tides of (this) life are guaranteed to throw upon us. But, in a liturgical manner, I am convinced that art breathes into our imagination (and dogma!) to reawaken truth and to restore. Art tells the gospel in a new tongue.

As aptly stated in his essay “Holy Beauty,” John W. De Gruchy writes: “[A]rt has the potential to change both our personal and corporate consciousness and perception, challenging perceived reality and enabling us to remember what was best in the past even as it evokes fresh images that serve transformation in the present. This it does through its ability to evoke imagination and wonder, causing us to pause and reflect and thereby opening up the possibility of changing our perception and ultimately our lives.”

May the tune we whistle be a confident echo of what we hope for but cannot see.

“To Whistle Back” was shown at the Oude Leeskamer Gallery, Stellenbosch, from 2 February to 22 March 2023, in collaboration with 40 Stones. Joseph Buys, Ydi Coetsee Carstens, Paul Greenway, Jonathan Griffiths, Walter Hayn, Leonard Matsoso, Franli Meintjes, Ntobeko Mjijwa, Bonnie Ntshalintshali, Odous, Sophie Peters, Chris Soal and Maryke van Velden participated. Professor John De Gruchy’s opening address, “Fynart as a Means of Grace,” can be read in the Kerkbode column about the exhibition (09/02/2023).

Maryke van Velden is an artist and curator based in the Cape, South Africa. (See TBP 04.)



ited style and paradoxically bright colours. What did Ntshalintshali, an artist who had lived with HIV at a time when stigma about the disease was rife, grasp about God’s care and provision under trying circumstances, and in unexpected ways? Included were Paul Greenway’s wrenching stop-frame animation documenting his three-day-long digging of a grave for a pauper (*EA 61: Mayfield Cemetery*, 2012), Ydi Coetsee’s painting that acknowledges the unsung heroes from the Uniting Reformed Church’s brigade





Obscurity

by R. Lucas Stamps

Heinrich Hoerle, *Worker (Self-portrait in Front of Trees and Chimneys)*; *Factory Worker*

the best-selling *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford highlights the work of pipe-organ builders, an elite cadre of craftsmen who find their individuality by submitting to a centuries-old tradition. Their work is slow and meticulous. It doesn't make any headlines. But it will last for generations.

Contemporary Christians, however, are often allergic to obscurity. We want our work and our spirituality to be recognized and celebrated. I once heard Donald Miller, the best-selling author of *Blue Like Jazz*, explain why he stopped posting about

Craig Bartholomew, who has been a friend and mentor to many of us younger Christian scholars, often repeats the admonition: “pursue obscurity.” It is not enough simply to accept obscurity, if it happens to be our lot. Rather, there is virtue in positively pursuing obscurity, in seeking anonymity and non-recognition. I have thought a lot about this proverbial advice over the years. In fact, it has become a kind of life code for me, even if it often remains more aspirational than actual. I think about it especially in terms of our Lord's warning in the Sermon not to practise our “righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them,” but rather to practise our spiritual disciplines – fasting and praying and almsgiving – in secret, where only our Father can see and reward (Matt 6:1–18). Jesus often exhorts us with this countercultural demand: to take the lowest place rather than the place of honour (Luke 14:7–11), to lose our lives rather than save them (Matt 16:25), to serve rather than be served (Matt 20:28). Comfort with obscurity is one important test of genuine Christian discipleship.

Those who would pursue a craft must be especially comfortable with obscurity. The long hours it takes to develop a particular skill drive away the constant need for attention. The craftsman must be at home with the silence and solitude of his shop or studio. The demand to be constantly recognized is antithetical to the pursuit of deep and meaningful work. The craftsman often works in anonymity, with only his mentors as his companions. In *The World Beyond Your Head*, the excellent sequel to

his faith on social media by appealing to Jesus' teaching on practising our righteousness in secret. I know Miller's work was controversial at the time, and I am not passing judgement on it, nor on his subsequent work in the self-help and business marketing space, but his response always stuck with me. It still gives me pause every time I have tweeted or written about my faith in public.

But perhaps the pursuit of obscurity need not be taken in such absolute terms. There are some things, after all, that are *not* meant to be obscure, but to be shouted from the rooftops, namely, the public proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the demand it places upon the world. Further, some Christians are called to the public ministry of the word, through preaching, teaching or writing. To pursue obscurity need not mean literal radio silence or social media deletion or monastic retreat (though it may for some). To pursue obscurity is simply to resist the magnetic pull of self-promotion and platform building and “influence” that plagues so much of contemporary culture, including contemporary Christian culture.

In any event, with



Photo: Marit Greenwood, Organ pipes, St Wilfrid's Church, Pretoria

his help I finally tracked down Craig's source for the admonition. It comes from Sister Wendy Beckett, a British religious, who ironically became something of a celebrity in the 1990s through her television documentaries on the history of art. The relevant quotation is from her writings on prayer. After reflecting on the ways that prayer places us, helpless and exposed, before the presence of God, Beckett writes,

Normally, as we grow older, we become progressively skilled in coping with life. In most departments, we acquire techniques on which we can fall back when interest and attention wilt. It is part of maturity that there is always some reserve we can tap. But this is not so in prayer. It is the only human activity that depends totally and solely on its intrinsic truth. We are there before God, or rather, to the degree that we are there before God, we are exposed to all that He is, and He can neither deceive nor be deceived. It is not that we want to deceive, whether God or anybody else, but with other people we cannot help our human condition of obscurity. We are not wholly there for them, nor they for us. We are simply not able to be so. Nor should we be. No human occasion calls for our total presence, even were it within our power to offer it. But prayer calls for it. Prayer is prayer if we want it to be.

Sister Wendy's larger point is about how prayer fully exposes us before the presence of God, but the kernel of the proverb on pursuing obscurity is found in the line, "Nor should we be. No human occasion calls for our total presence, even were it within our power to offer it." Obscurity, some prudential veiling of our deepest selves, is unavoidable and even advisable, according to Sister Wendy. Wisdom requires that some "reserve" be kept on tap in our relationships with others. This is not, as I understand it, an argument against honesty and authenticity in our closest relationships; far less is it an excuse for duplicity or dissembling. Instead, it is simply an acknowledgment that our true selves lie open, not to others, nor even to ourselves, but only to God. "You are closer to me than I am to myself," St Augustine prayed.

Authenticity does not require us to be fully present to everyone all of the time. Again, to be clear, we should not hide our sin, but rather our virtue. The better part of righteousness lies, as our Lord reminded us, precisely in its hiddenness and secrecy before our heavenly Father.

The quest to be fully present to everyone all of the time is, of course, only amplified by social media. We can't let a single thought go un-Tweeted, a single experience un-Instagrammed, or a single life update un-Facebooked. The internet, as the prophet Bo Burnham reminds us, offers "a little bit of everything all of the time." And it perpetually invites us to become our own content creators and publicists. But at what cost? What is lost in this perpetual need to be seen, this constant pull toward public exposure, this chasing of personal platforms? Is it really so hard to discern the ways that our souls shrivel



Roger Wagner,
Sister Wendy Beckett (study)



Mother Teresa statue

when their doors never close for craft and contemplation? Surely there is wisdom in resisting what Robert Cardinal Sarah calls the dictatorship of noise. Surely there is wisdom in keeping some reserve on tap, as Sister Wendy reminds us. Surely there is wisdom in accepting and even seeking obscurity and preserving those most intimate moments for our shops and cells rather than our social media timelines.

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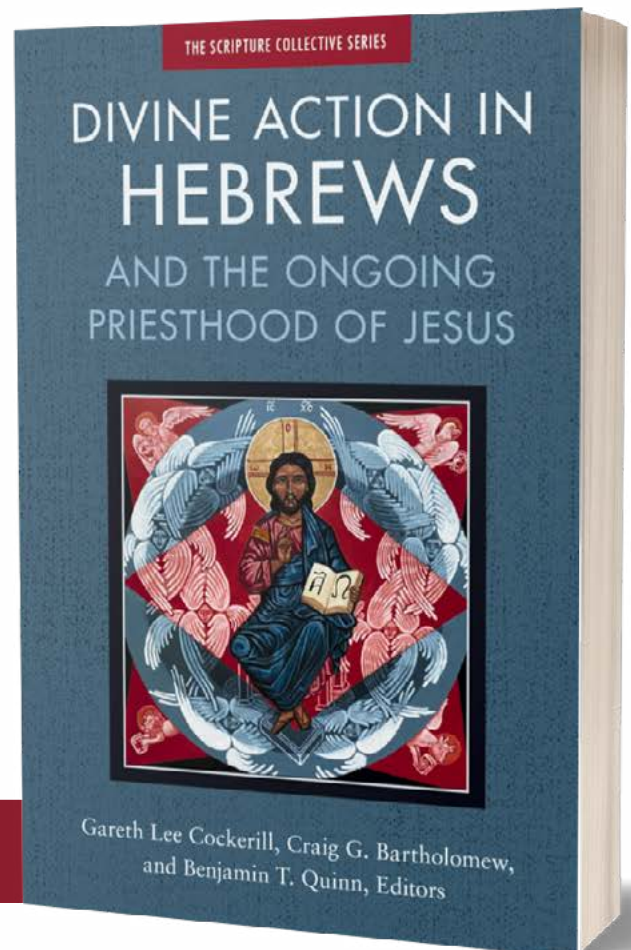
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