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# Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

Divine Radiance: Keeping Faith with Beauty



#### COVER ART

Makoto Fujimura  
*Golden Sea*, 2011  
Mineral pigments and gold on kumohada, 30 x 64 in.  
Collection of Roberta and Howard Ahmanson

#### BACK COVER ART

A Taize service, Marquand Chapel,  
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## Divine Radiance: Keeping Faith with Beauty





# From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling  
The Reverend Henry L. Slack  
Dean of Yale Divinity School  
& Lillian Claus Professor  
of New Testament

Christians recognize that the beauty of nature points us to the Ultimate Reality beyond. Beauty is vital to our experience of God in worship as well. For those who come from low-church traditions, there is an appreciation for the way that beauty is expressed in the language of scripture, in the words of a homily, or in the power of music. For those from a high-church tradition, beauty can be openly celebrated.

It is also important theologically. Hans Urs von Balthasar devoted the first seven volumes of his 16-volume systematic theology to theological aesthetics. In one of the most famous lines in the whole set, he wrote: “Before the beautiful – no, not really *before* but *within* the beautiful – the whole person quivers. He not only ‘finds’ the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.” Whether we come from a high-church or a low-church tradition, all Christians value beauty.

At the same time, different interpretations of the second commandment in the Ten Commandments have led both Jews and Christians to impose some limits on art. Second Temple Jews beginning in the second century BCE and continuing into the second century CE only permitted geometrical designs. However, in subsequent centuries they covered the floors of their synagogues with beautiful mosaics that even included the zodiac.

Christians are no different. From Tertullian’s stern perspective in *On Idolatry* to the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries and on to the Reformers’ reactions to art in Catholic churches, Christians have regulated artistic limits. Those earlier disagreements among Christians are still vividly evident. A churchgoer can see and experience the contrasting theologies by walking into a simple but beautiful New England Congregational church and then into an elaborate and vaulting Catholic basilica. The former has a horizontal axis, the latter a vertical axis. The former encourages

abstract contemplation through its simplicity, the latter reflection through visual media. Beauty is in both, but its expression varies.

The complicated role of aesthetics in Christianity is not unique in the history of ideas. Plato celebrated beauty as the greatest good in the *Symposium*, yet warned against poetry as a form of attractive deception in *Republic*. Specialists in Plato have struggled to explain the philosopher’s different stances, just as Christians have strained to formulate an aesthetics that extends beyond confessional lines.

This issue of *Reflections* is intended to help us think through the value of art and beauty in various venues of faith in the 21st century and see its many applications. The essays take a measure of the role of art and music in a local church. They challenge us to reflect on the power and use of poetry not only for personal edification but for use in worship. They analyze the understanding of beauty in Kant, von Balthasar, and Jonathan Edwards. And they engage with the architectural significance of modern church structures. I hope that you find these essays as helpful and encouraging as I have.

Beauty provokes awe and wonder in us. Though we admire the creativity and skill of the artists, this beauty and creativity is really a reflection of the perfection and creative powers of God. Beauty enables us to experience the Creator God who exists beyond space and time of the sense-perceptible world we inhabit, whether we experience that beauty through our eyes, our ears, or multiple senses. Johann Sebastian Bach was right to sign his cantatas *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, not only to express his intent in composing each choral work, but to capture our reaction to the experience of hearing it.

I want to say a special word of appreciation for the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, whose partnership allows us to engage the dynamics of faith and the arts in remarkable ways every day. This *Reflections* issue is infused with its presence. My thanks go to ISM Director Martin Jean for financial support that allows us to provide color art reproduction throughout this Spring issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gregory E. Sterling". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first and last names being more prominent.

Gregory E. Sterling  
Dean

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# Churchgoing



By Peter S. Hawkins

*When I was a little boy, about eight, I began to frequent churches on my own – a habit that has remained with me all my life. In the beginning I did so unbeknownst to my parents, who would not have approved of my crossing big city streets or prowling around deserted buildings. But back then the church doors in Flushing, Queens, were always open and children lived “free range.” I had license to roam.*

I started with the First Presbyterian Church on Barclay Avenue, where my mother worked as a secretary and where I had an excuse to show up for no reason. The building was plain and white both inside and out. The only thing that caught the eye – on the wall above the choir loft and central pulpit – was a round window in stained glass with an image imitating the famous Heinrich Hofmann 1880 painting of Christ in Gethsemane: Jesus caught in profile, wrapped in a blue cloak, his praying hands extended on a conveniently placed rock.

## Seeking and Thirsting

I roamed farther afield. Around the corner from Presbyterian austerity was St. John’s Episcopal and its little bit of country-parish England: red carpet, brass eagle lectern, stained glass windows, and a side altar which someone had decided was the perfect spot for raising African violets under a grow light. Far more impressive was St. Andrew Avellino on 158th Street: cavernous, bristling with side altars, confessionals, and statuary, and host to an image of the Virgin Mary that was said to weep. It was there that my friends made their first communions, the boys in white suits and the girls gotten up like little brides.

On the other end of the spectrum from St. Andrew’s was the Quaker Meeting House on Northern Boulevard: wood benches, clear paned windows, and deep quiet. Sometimes, if I was alone, I tested the places I visited: I stepped into a lectern or pulpit, prowled around the altar, made a reverberant sound

to hear the echo – a clap, an “Amen!” – as if I were activating Philip Larkin’s poem, “Church Going,” decades before I would read it: “Once I am sure there’s nothing going on/I step inside letting the door thud shut.”

What was I looking for on these expeditions? For Larkin, it was “A serious house on serious earth .../In whose blent air all our compulsions meet/Are recognised and robed as destinies.”

Needless to say, I could not have understood such a formulation at the time, let alone recorded it.

Yet a longing for a “serious house,” a place where mystery was at home, makes perfect sense to me as I look back now. Given my subsequent vocation as a divinity school professor of religion and the arts, it would be gratifying to imagine that even

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## Did I go to church the way other people went to art museums or concerts or poetry readings?

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at eight I was looking for God in whatever house of the Lord I walked into. The child was father to the man! Or, to quote the psalmist (42:1–2), as the hart panting for the water-brooks, so did my soul thirst for the living God.

Maybe I did thirst for God. If I remember correctly, there were acts of piety in my visits: When I entered a church, I could kneel and say the Lord’s Prayer. In St. Andrews, people lighted candles: For a dime, I could too.

But if truth can be told (60 years after the fact), I went church hopping not because I was looking for God but because I was looking for beauty. In my urban world I was cut off from nature and lived in a modest neighborhood of brick apartment houses. Church was the one place where I could find architecture, color, decoration, imagery, flowers (in winter!), and an atmosphere that courted mystery. Each of the sanctuaries I visited had something to offer anyone who opened the door. They were places set up for wonder.

In later years I sometimes worried that my religion might be a cover for aesthetic experience. Did I go to church the way other people went to art museums or concerts or poetry readings?

### Access to Wonder

To be sure, I could turn to Psalm 27:4, “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple” (KJV). But that was the psalmist: What if *my* search was more about beauty than about the Lord? For instance, did I choose my parish because of the building and the music? Did I cherish the sonorous prose of the Elizabethan liturgy – “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee” – but actually care a great deal less about offering myself as a sacrifice? I was drawn to the beauty of holiness, but what about being holy myself, with all the suffering and hard work that goes with the territory?

Then one night my beloved Greenwich Village parish church burned down. It happened between Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday in Lent: dust to dust, ashes to ashes. The remarkable new “Mozartian” organ was gone, as were the recently restored Anglo-Catholic gimcrack and 19th-century windows. Only a marble altar survived the flames, as it had the wrecking ball that brought down its earlier church home in 1918, when it was decided that a street needed to be widened and an 1803 church was in the way. Beauty’s lease hath all too short a date.

The loss was terrible, but when the bereft congregation gathered on Sunday in the school gymnasium – an improvised altar set up under a basketball hoop – I realized that holiness did not depend upon beauty: The people gathered and the rite celebrated were the only temple we needed that morning. Like Jacob at Bethel, a few well-placed rocks would do: “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:17).

But of course that’s not the end of it. The beauty of architecture and ambiance, of music and lan-

guage, give us access to wonder – which, as I intuited as a child, is one of the places where God dwells. For some people the Lord’s temple is found in the natural world, over which the Holy Spirit (as Gerard Manley Hopkins saw) “broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.” For others, a building reveals what cannot be contained, a chorus raises the roof beyond what we thought possible, and a line almost expresses the inexpressible. All of which is to say: Beauty is worth looking for, not only as an end in itself but because of the door it can open and the places to which it can lead.

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*Peter S. Hawkins is Professor of Religion and Literature at YDS. His books and essays range in theme from scripture to Dante to modern fiction. He is the author of Undiscovered Country: Imagining the World to Come (Seabury, 2009), Dante: A Brief History (Blackwell, 2006), and other books.*

### MUSIC MAYBE By Christian Wiman

Too many elegies elevating sadness  
to a kind of sad religion:

one wants in the end just once to befriend  
one’s own loneliness,

to make of the ache of inwardness –

something,

music maybe,

or even just believing in it,  
and summer,

and the long room alone  
where the child

chances on a bee  
banging against the glass

like an attack of happiness.

# Art and Whimsy in God's House



By Cheryl Cornish

*I was in a hurry when they caught me off guard, sitting together on a bench in a hallway corner. A serious eye glance would have meant a conversation or possibly a pastoral follow-up, and I really didn't have time. Only as I passed by later that afternoon could I give a careful look. They weren't real! They were figures of young adults very skillfully designed from straw, dressed in shabby coats and worn-out shoes that spoke of need in the cold December air.*

I had asked one of our church members, a talented artist, to create nativity figures, and suddenly here they were – Jose and Maria. Finding them in our hallway forced me to admit that I was more like the innkeepers of the Christmas story than Magi or shepherds. I had not made room in my schedule for these two weary travelers that day.

I watched others in the hallway do a double take, followed by a penetrating stare, then a smile of recognition. Jose and Maria moved, each week of the

The Christmas story had become alive for us through these figures of Jose and Maria, casting all of us into different roles, wittingly or not. I was the busy innkeeper. Others were bemused spectators. Some responded generously to these strangers in our building. Others were suspicious. No one, however, could question that the Advent work of a gifted artist in our congregation had involved each of us in a new and profound way.

## Becoming Our Own Artists

Nearly a decade ago, when our congregation moved from a traditional sanctuary (with pews for about 150 people, pulpit, and front altar) to a large former televangelism center, we faced many obstacles. As the 200 or so of us gathered on Sunday mornings to worship, we literally could not see each other in the 6,500-square-foot auditorium, with its 1,000 seats arranged theater-style for TV broadcast. The raised pulpit was nearly half a city block away from the first row. Surrounded by carpet, paint, and electronics, we lost access to natural elements – tile, stone, wood, sunlight. We knew we had to change the worship space in order to make it work for our purposes.

But to change it, we realized we had to change, too. We would not be able to make this imposing building a true spiritual home without putting our mark on it. And to do that, we had to understand ourselves and our mission with new clarity.

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## Would these conversations have taken place without the sanctuary space and art to guide us? I doubt it!

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Advent season, closer and closer to the sanctuary. Maria appeared to be pregnant by Week Two. It was obvious by Week Three.

On the last Sunday of Advent, Jose and Maria sat among the congregation. During a children's sermon, we heard of the journey of this young couple, struggling to find shelter where the baby could be delivered. The children sat close enough to detect that the figures were not real. Some of the adults, sitting further away, were still confused. I received several emails that week. "Shouldn't we have a baby shower for that young couple?" one asked. Another wondered where she could send a financial contribution to help them. There was an inquiry about immigration status.





### First Congregational's Season of Creation celebration, with banners

In congregational dialogue that extended over a year, we talked with fresh intensity about the power of the gospel in our lives. Three priorities emerged: to live simply and reject consumerism, welcome the stranger, and work for peace and justice.

Could we find creative ways to express this discernment in our new worship and mission space? Our budget limited our ability to commission sanctuary art. Quite simply, we had to become the artists we needed.

#### **Be Not Afraid**

We learned to take risks in our huge, intimidating space and not be afraid of mistakes. We agreed that no one should offer a creative idea if they feared criticism or censorship. We listened to each other's ideas and practiced compassion when well-intentioned designs didn't turn out right. Fabric didn't always hang the way we envisioned it. Something that seemed dynamic on paper didn't translate into a three-dimensional space very well. Humility and tolerance became part of our artistic adventure.

We learned to pay attention to our environment, trusting that God would give us the resources we needed for our new church space. When a church member saw a downtown hotel discarding old linens in a dumpster, she called. These sheets were sewn together, painted, and used many times over in our sanctuary art.

One of our large stage backdrops came from recycled plastic bags. Fused together, these bags made a colorful design. We learned never to throw away paper that could be recycled and fashioned into bright confetti, papier mâché designs, or textured paper for orders of worship and church sta-

tionary. Large bare tree branches could be gathered to embody the wilderness experiences of Advent or Lent. Wire and colorful duct tape created whimsical human-shaped figures that became part of our congregation during the Pentecost season – some of them sitting among us, others dancing, playing instruments, or posing as children on swings floating above our heads. Mosquito netting, foam core, colorful beans, wallpaper ... these become ways that God speaks to us out of everyday materials at hand.

Our focus was the sanctuary, but we found quickly that many people accessed our building through the main hallways and offices. Could that space, too, be used to share the gospel? Soon the front porch of the church, the yard, the hallways themselves became vehicles for sharing our theology.

#### **Peace Tent and Ticker Tape**

In the days leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, our congregation's Advent witness included images of peace projected onto the exterior of our building each night. We created a "Peace Tent" inside, and tiles were painted by church members with messages of peace. A ticker tape – made from rolls of adding-machine tape, with quotes about peace – guided people through the entire building, top to bottom, as part of a peace journey.

Inspired by our efforts, neighbors started bringing objects that testified to their desire for peace. They would leave signs and written prayers on our church steps, grateful for the church's witness to the desires of their heart. Our Advent witness became a Lenten witness, as a large wooden cross covered with photographs of Iraqi children was placed in our church yard.

Sympathetic local citizens saw this art as the reclamation of protest space. Several significant marches for peace and other justice issues began on these steps. We were pleased to see the wider community experience a sense of welcome and “home” on our church porch. It had become “holy ground” for many, whether or not they would call themselves Christian believers.

### **Unpredictable Blessings**

Our congregation’s visual art effort has sharpened our questions about our faith and ministry. At a recent staff meeting, we asked, “What does our space communicate about our understandings of God?” One staffer answered, “I often feel surprised ... I am reminded that I can’t predict the blessings that a day will bring.”

Another said the art spoke to her of humor and whimsy as a legitimate part of the life of faith, in contrast to her more authoritarian religious upbringing.

“I feel benevolence,” another said: The creativity and care present in the art speaks of a compassionate, intimate God.

This dialogue reminded us how significantly the visual messages of worship and art communicate our theology. So we continue to ask questions: Are

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### **Soon the front porch of the church, the yard, the hallways themselves became vehicles for sharing our theology.**

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we being hospitable? Do strangers feel a sense of wonder, joy, and benevolence when they enter our space? Do they experience the sense of delight and surprise of gospel life?

One of our justice ministries, “Freedom Journey,” invites students to come to Memphis, where they study the struggles of prisoners and listen to their experiences, as well as LGBTQ activists, environmental advocates, and others. Participants seek their own growth as advocates for peace and justice. During a concluding exercise, they select a piece of art from our hallways that speaks to them about how the journey has changed them. Amazing testimonies and revelations are shared – and we realize that the visual images in our church building have transformative power.

During another busy day in our church, I introduce myself to a man standing outside the sanctuary. He’s with a labor union, stationed in the hallway so he can guide folks to a room where a press conference will take place. I tell him that our congregation is supporting the call to “Fast from Fast Food”

in favor of higher wages for fast food workers. He looks intrigued. “Would you like to step into the sanctuary?” I ask.

He hesitates. But when he walks in, the surprise on his face is visible. “Wow! This is beautiful!” he says, staring at the hundreds of colorful paper stars that create a ceiling canopy. In the season of Epiphany, I explain, we celebrate the star that guided the Wise Men to the manger – and the way we celebrate God’s guidance in our own lives.

### **The Conversation Turns**

From there, conversation turns to the communion table, designed to look like a large kitchen table. “We share this bread together here at the table as a community, and then” – I point to the many racks of food pushed to the side of the sanctuary, ready for distribution after worship – “500 families will be welcomed in here soon. They come for the groceries, but also want to be in this space and among this community. Many worship with us now.”

Later that week, a group of young nurses from Denmark, in town for medical training, spend an hour studying the “Stations of the Cross” on display in the sanctuary. The “Stations” link Jesus’ last days to the experience of mental illness. They are fascinated by this reinterpretation and start talking about the struggles faced by friends, patients, and family members they know who live with mental illness.

They walk the sanctuary labyrinth and talk about what it means to have God at the center of life. A baptismal font, designed to look like a leaf-filled tree, stands at the center of this labyrinth. We talk about baptism as a beginning, a journey, a source of life and connection. One nurse tells me about a tree in the yard of her childhood home that always offered her shelter. God’s love is like that, she reflects.

Would these conversations have taken place without the sanctuary space and art to guide us? I doubt it! Our ministry of art brings its own grace, inspiring our congregation to grow in new ways as we pursue gospel life together.

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*The Rev. Cheryl Cornish M.Div. '83 has been minister of First Congregational Church UCC in Memphis since 1988, transforming the church into a growing, progressive voice in the city. In 2008, she was awarded by YDS for Distinction in Congregational Ministry. She currently serves on the YDS Alumni Board. In 2012, First Congregational was a participant in the annual Congregations Project hosted by the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.*

# Make It Swing

## *An Interview with Dwight Andrews*



*The accomplishments of Dwight Andrews M.Div. '77, M.Phil. '83, Ph.D. '93 cover the worlds of jazz, church, seminary, Broadway, and TV soundtracks.*

*He is senior minister of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Atlanta and associate professor of music theory and African American music at Emory University. He has served as pastor of the Black Church at Yale and as resident music director at the Yale Repertory Theater. He collaborated with the late playwright August Wilson, serving as music director for the Broadway productions of Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, and other plays. As a composer, his film credits include PBS Hollywood's The Old Settler, Louis Massiah's documentary W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices, and HBO's Miss Evers' Boys. He has been a multi-instrumentalist sideman on over 25 jazz albums. He has written on the future of race and the church. He is now completing a book on the spirituality of jazz giants John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, Sun Ra, Dave Brubeck, Albert Ayler, and Yusef Lateef.*

**REFLECTIONS:** *The relationship between churches and artists, belief and creativity is often complicated. Why?*

**DWIGHT ANDREWS:** Today there is a tension between the individual's creative voice and the needs of institutions to control its expression. For centuries, the church was a powerful authority over how art was to be used to tell its story. Artists these days aren't as willing to be constrained by the church or any other authority. They want their work to be driven by their own personal vision of faith.

This challenge to the status quo is also one of the reasons behind the dramatic rise of non-denom-

inational churches in America. New perspectives on autonomy, power, authority, economics, and the very understanding of "church" reflect major shifts in our culture. The explosion of megachurches and so-called "prosperity gospel" ministries also mirror these shifts.

The worship and music experience as well as the commerce of church music is affected. The demise of the denominational hymnal suggests that a key method of binding a particular faith community and tradition together no longer has the same influence. Musicians, supported by new technologies for dis-

semination and reproduction of their music, want to create their own songs about Jesus. As you can see, the tension between artist and church is both fascinating and problematic.

**REFLECTIONS:** *You're dissolving that tension in your own church, with jazz.*

**ANDREWS:** Well, yes and no. We're actually trying to do several things at once. First, we are trying to affirm the spiritual capacity of jazz and its worth to the worship experience. Second, we are pushing back against the internalized racist assumptions about jazz as the "devil's music" that continue to plague our community and the world. Third, we are asserting the value of the individual creative voice in the context of the community, not in opposition to it.

In a sense, jazz always requires and encourages your individual contribution – but it is always in the context of the collective. Much in the same way that the spirituals and the blues come out of the collective African American experience. This is of course not unique to the black experience. Bach used folk melodies.

So many jazz musicians and jazz lovers have joined our church in recent years that we have now made it a principal expression in our worship service, alongside but not in lieu of the anthems, the traditional hymns, and gospel song. On third Sundays we even feature jazz as the primary musical style, and it has been very well received. We are attempting to dissolve many different tensions by bringing jazz into congregational worship.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Why does it succeed?*

**ANDREWS:** More than anything, it's the swing. We're bringing swing into the service – that feeling and rhythm. And that's bringing us back to the early church practice of involving all the senses – your taste, smell, sight, hearing ... and now your toes. With swing, you can snap your fingers and tap your toes and these immediate tactile responses allow you to participate in the improvisational moment – a moment that one can experience and accept that the music moment will come and go and never be heard again. I think this affirmation of being "in the moment" is one of the most powerful liberating and enlivening aspects of jazz's potential in worship.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Is there a theology at work in jazz performance?*

**ANDREWS:** Improvisation, at its best, represents a fundamental willingness to "let it all go." Your practice, discipline, preparation, and study are all a prologue to invite the "in-spiring" of one's inspiration to have its way with you. If there is a theology of

jazz, it is in the acknowledgement that God is the provider of the inspiration and that we entrust our preparation and ourselves to God so that something important might happen. It's what we preach and pray about, trusting God "in the moment." Our trust in the unknown is precisely because of our trust in the "Knower." This is the theology of improvisation and its applications extend far beyond the practice of jazz.

You hear this type of trust in John Coltrane's late music, which I am writing about now. He is searching for something beyond what he already knows. He said himself that he was trying to get himself out of the way so he could become a vessel of beauty,

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**We're bringing swing into the service – that feeling and rhythm. And that's bringing us back to the early church practice of involving all the senses – your taste, smell, sight, hearing, and now your toes.**

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a vessel of the Holy Spirit. In the music he made before he died, he's speaking in "musical tongues." You might say he did what prophets do: leave behind the safe and familiar and move toward something outside of one's self. Prophets always show a new way, but not everyone is able or willing to follow.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Will Coltrane save the church?*

**ANDREWS:** Only faith and grace can save us. But the church can and must do a better job of being relevant in a world that feels the church is unnecessary and out of touch. Today if someone wants to meditate, he or she takes a yoga class. If someone feels compelled to do service, he goes online and selects an activity that suits his schedule and interests. If someone is seeking a spiritual experience, there are many options that don't involve a church. The prophetic voice and responsibility of the church need constant self-critique, clarity, and a unwavering commitment to Christ's message of love and mercy that is not mediated by the exigencies of the day. I believe at the heart of a relevant church is community and a sense of common purpose. The church has not been rigorous in its study of what community means or should mean in the 21st century. Such an understanding will inform virtually every aspect of a faith community, including worship, art, and music.

**REFLECTIONS:** *We need more beauty in worship?*

**ANDREWS:** Yes, we need more beauty in every aspect of our lives, but for me, art is not the same as

beauty. Art is an incisive expression of one's creative impulses. Art should be human and honest, and that belongs in church. In the 20th century, the human carnage of two world wars forced artists to give up the old idea that everything they create should be beautiful. Picasso, Stravinsky, Gertrude Stein ... They asked: What should art be in a world of such brokenness? I believe we are invited to ask that same question in the 21st century: What should our music in church sound like in such a world as this one, broken by divisions of class, commerce, race, poverty, technology, the erosion of families and communities? Human expression should be heard in church – not through a karaoke machine or technological filters, but in ways that acknowledge the world as it is and as it could be. The worship experience should engage all of our senses and allow for our improvisatory impulses.

**REFLECTIONS:** *What would such a church look and sound like?*

**ANDREWS:** The church should sound like the community it reflects. This rather simple response is of course more complicated than it appears. If for example we seek an inclusive, ethnically and culturally diverse faith community, then we must grapple with what such an aspiration means. No church can

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**If there is a theology of jazz, it is in the acknowledgement that God is the provider of the inspiration and that we entrust our preparation and ourselves to God so that something important might happen.**

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be all things to all people at once, but the lines of division represented in the sound of Sunday morning worship throughout this country invite a second look. We live in an age where our assumptions about what it means to be a black church or a white church or a rich church or poor church simply cannot contain the ways we now self-identify. The opportunity for people of goodwill is to ask: "What does the beloved community look like?" Our answer will then reveal what it should sound like.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Has music always been a religious force for you?*

**ANDREWS:** No. My thinking about this has evolved considerably in the last decade or so. My early interest in the church and Christian ministry was driven by my sense of its potential and power as an agent for social change. I was drawn to the social jus-

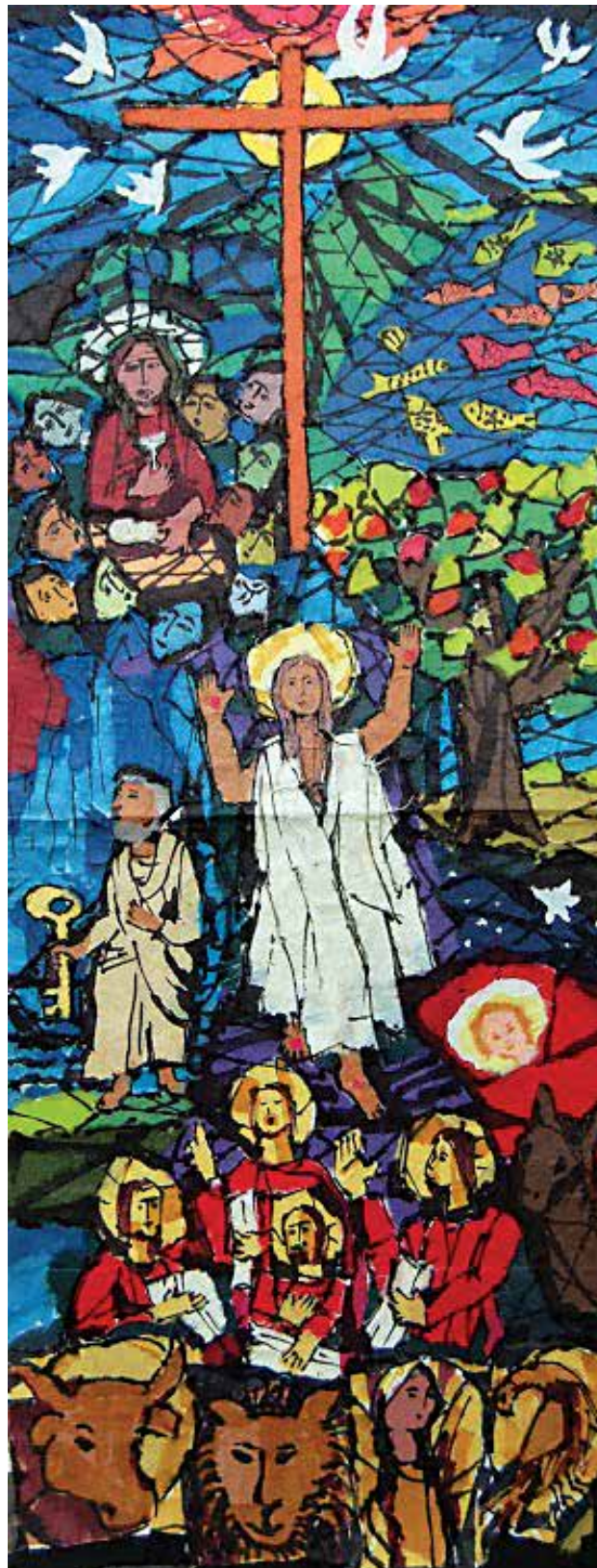
tice and human rights activism of the 1960s and 70s and frankly had little sense of how my musical background might figure into my sense of calling. My sense of spirituality and Jesus was equally ill-formed, but by the grace of God, I have come a long way. Frankly, music was my way of replenishing myself. What I didn't see then was the music's capacity to heal. For years, my task as a musician was to try to play the notes right and do it with honesty. Then I started meeting people at church who said, "Those notes you played made me cry." It has become clearer to me over the years that musical expression, faith, worship, witness, and healing can and must be a part of that "network of mutuality" that Dr. King spoke of so eloquently. I feel unfettered, freer now than ever before.

## LET THE WOUNDS BLEED

By Elizabeth Carothers Herron

Let the wounds bleed  
away their salt and sadness  
till there is nothing left  
of grief or hidden hurt  
not one failure  
cast outside the circle  
of forgiveness. Sun  
pours over the dry weeds  
the thistle  
the rusty twisted barbed wire  
and the chassis  
of the abandoned pick-up  
and the wild rose  
growing through the broken  
windshield. Warm  
and without judgment  
light falls  
into my cupped hands.





# The Necessity of Beauty



By Thomas Troeger

*There is a sadness to a religious faith that fails to embrace the role of beauty in giving witness to God through music and poetry. It is the sadness of a church that fears beauty will be “a wayward impulse,” leading us astray from God. Such fear has shaped the belief and practice of many Christians through the centuries. As Don Saliers observes: “Christian theology has shown a long and studied ambivalence toward human aesthetic capacities, especially toward relationships between art and religious faith.”<sup>1</sup>*

This ambivalence stretches across the centuries from Augustine who oscillates between his love of music and his fear that its beauty will entice him from God, to Aquinas who insists that preachers and teachers “should not be involved in singing lest they neglect greater things,”<sup>2</sup> to the influential contemporary homiletician David Buttrick, who counsels preachers,

Be concerned for craft. Not art, but craft. There have been books on “the art of preaching.” Skip them. Preaching is a craft to be learned like carpentry or cooking. Ego-driven self-expression is not what’s wanted. We can live without polished sermons, the kind that draw admiration from listeners. A good sermon moves in the minds of listeners like their own thoughts. They are not aware of your sermon as separate from their hearing. They certainly don’t give a hoot for aesthetic considerations; neither should you. Instead, you will study homiletic craft ...<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between “art” and “craft” is a modern one, and Buttrick sets them too sharply against one another when in fact they are closely related. The Oxford English Dictionary points out that “art and craft were formerly synonymous and had a nearly parallel sense-development, though they diverge in their leading modern senses.”<sup>4</sup> Hence an earlier writer on homiletics implores preachers to perfect their art: “It is just such art as this that we ask of the preacher... that he shall take diligent heed to do what he has to do as well as he can.”<sup>5</sup>

We need to consider some of the reasons that preachers and congregations may initially be skeptical of preaching that evokes art and wonder. Perhaps the greatest and historically most persistent fear is that beauty will displace God, that it will become

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**We live in an age where beauty has been commercialized and degraded. Beauty is reduced to being young, fit, rich, and glamorous.**

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an idol, and religion will be reduced to what brings pleasure to the senses. Not having a theologically informed aesthetic amplifies this fear:

*The lack of a theology of beauty, both of beauty in general and of divine beauty in particular, follows in part from fear and suspicion of the question, expressed in pejorative terms like “aestheticism” and “elitism.”... Even those who have widened their concept of beauty to include moral and spiritual beauty have often failed to relate these to natural and artistic beauty, and so have tended to depreciate the latter as being transitory or as restricted to what is bodily.<sup>6</sup>*

The fear that artistic beauty might entice us from the true worship of God is not entirely unreasonable. Yes, we have the potential to abuse the gift of artistic beauty, but that is equally true of all the gifts that God has given us. Sin can warp anything, even the noblest divine gifts, and if we dismiss a gift on the

basis that it might lead us to sin, then we will be paralyzed and unable to use any gift. But they also can be used to the glory of God.

### **Beauty as Countercultural**

There are also pastoral and ethical reasons for using artistic beauty to draw us to the beauty of God. We live in an age where beauty has been commercialized and degraded. I think here of “the beautiful people” or “the beautiful life.” Beauty is reduced to being young, fit, rich, and glamorous. It is a lifestyle of extravagant consumption that is environmentally disastrous and often personally destructive. In light of this culturally diminished vision of beauty, the eternal beauty of self-giving love that pours from the heart of God needs compelling expression to awaken the holiest and healthiest capacities of the human creature. Using the beauty of art to draw us to the beauty of God thus supplies a countercultural vision of what it means to be beautiful people and to lead a beautiful life.

The countercultural vision of beauty includes a prophetic perspective that employs beauty in nurturing justice and peace: “The beautiful serves transformation by supplying images that contradict the inhuman, and thus provide alternative transforming images to those of oppression. We are, in a profound sense, redeemed by such beauty, for art does not simply mirror reality but challenges its destructive and alienating tendencies, making up what is lacking and anticipating future possibilities.”<sup>7</sup> As Fred Craddock has reminded us:

*The power of a revolution resides in the spirit that approaches life aesthetically. The great champions of the Social Gospel application of the message of Jesus and the prophets to the industrial, social, and economic problems of America were people who looked at those problems with aesthetic sensitivity. The poetic spirit of Washington Gladden was violated by injustice and economic imbalance; the ugliness and stench of poverty and disease stirred to action beauty-loving Walter Rauschenbusch. And those now involved in the church's struggle against injustice would do well not to permit the aesthetic dimensions of the problems to be dismissed in the name of “stark realism.” The social crises of our time are, among other things, conflicts of harmony and noise, symmetry and distortion, poetry and prose, beauty and ugliness, fragrance and stench.*<sup>8</sup>

Preachers can employ the beauty of creative art in their sermons to remind congregations that God gave us the gift of creativity to use in ways that reflect rather than distort the image of our Creator. The creation and performance of poetry, music, and other arts are a means of continually renewing

our awareness of being made in the image of God. When the church forgets this, it risks “what Claudel called ‘the tragedy of a starved imagination,’ ”<sup>9</sup> and consequently diminishes the vitality of its spiritual life. This is doubly tragic when people live in a world that is already brutalizing them with ugliness.

P.T. Forsyth uses the image of “drought” to describe the spiritual barrenness of a church that is without art. He is “insistent that faith without a sense of beauty, or a religion severed from imagina-

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### **An unimaginative and aesthetically starved faith not only diminishes God, it also diminishes us.**

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tion and ‘over-engrossment with public and practical affairs,’ leaves us with a drought in our own souls. It no longer evokes a sense of wonder. Art, in fact, is ‘not a luxury’ but a necessity of human nature.”<sup>10</sup>

No wonder, then, that the starved imagination of the church and the resultant drought in the soul have driven many people from the community of faith. They do not find the church to be an environment hospitable to the divine gift of creativity that is self-evident in their common life.

### **The Heart's Longing**

In a world filled with terrors, the heart longs for a vision of divine beauty, and when the church fails to attend to beauty, the life of faith often becomes grim and onerous. We distort the image of God in ourselves and in our understanding of God's character, often concentrating on the power and might of God to the neglect of other divine attributes. An unimaginative and aesthetically starved faith not only diminishes God, it also diminishes us. We are no longer all that God made us to be. “Extract from a person's life a healthy portion of songs and flowers and you have reduced to something less than human ‘the creature the Lord God has made to have dominion over land and sea.’ This issue involved here is no less than the nature of humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

The necessity of beauty becomes even more apparent when we see it in the context of the whole human community coming to terms with a global economy, a pluralism of cultures, and an ecological crisis. We are engaged in “a battle between vast destructive systems which feed on sameness, uniformity and power, and the fragile diversity of the human species as we struggle to evolve, not according to some evolutionary myth of progress, but according to that innate desire within our species to make meaning, to imagine worlds, to create beauty, even in the midst of violence and destruction.”<sup>12</sup> We

need preaching that contributes to the strenuous work of making meaning, imagining worlds, and creating beauty.

So when our sermons use the enduring beauty of excellent art, we are doing something far greater than prettifying our preaching. We are meeting an essential need of the soul. We are reaffirming Christ's magnificent retort to the tempter: " 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

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*Thomas Troeger, the J. Edward and Ruth Cox Lantz Professor of Christian Communication at Yale Divinity School, will retire in May after a nearly 40-year teaching career. He has written some 20 books in the fields of preaching and worship. He is also a flutist and a poet whose work appears in the hymnals of most denominations. He is dually ordained as an Episcopal priest and a Presbyterian minister. This article is adapted with permission from Wonder Reborn: Preaching on Hymns, Music and Poetry (University of Oxford Press, 2010).*

## Notes

- 1 Don E. Saliers, "Liturgical Aesthetics: The Travail of Christian Worship" in Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates, eds., *Arts, Theology and the Church: New Intersections* (Pilgrim Press, 2005), p. 181.
- 2 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 39, Religion and Worship (2a2ae. 80-91), ed. Kevin D. O'Rourke O.P. (Blackfriars, 1964), p. 251.
- 3 David G. Buttrick, "Side Thoughts on Preaching for Those Who Must Stammer God's Unnamed Name" in William J. Carl III, *Best Advice: Wisdom on Ministry from 30 Leading Pastors and Preachers* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 35.
- 4 J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Simpson, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, vol. 3 (Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 1104.
- 5 H. Rogers writing in 1840 as quoted in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 657.
- 6 Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction To Theological Aesthetics*, Second Edition (SCM Press, 2002), pp. 18-19.
- 7 John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 199-200.
- 8 Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, Revised and with New Sermons (Chalice Press, 2001), p. 72.
- 9 Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, p. 171.
- 10 de Gruchy, *Christianity*, p. 71. He is quoting P. T. Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1905), p. 7.
- 11 Craddock, *As One*, p. 71.
- 12 Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (Orbis Books, 2007), p. 75.

Not all beauty succumbs to time.

Oh, yes –  
I know  
the blooms of spring,  
summer's effulgence,  
the flames of autumn –  
all flare, fade and die.

But there is a beauty that  
deepens, spreads and persists  
in time  
and past time:

I have glimpsed it  
and it has detained my glance,  
till I can hardly look  
for the shining of it:  
the beauty I saw in the bud  
when you were young,  
now in full bloom  
but instead of fading  
deepening,  
deepening toward the mother  
who brings forth all things.

Here, take these autumn flowers,  
place them in the sun  
before the frost comes tonight,  
and while the delight of momentary color  
plays in your eyes,  
I will glimpse  
what the descending cold  
can never touch.





I grew up around much talk about “vocation.” The word was short-hand for religious vocation and meant surrendering your individuality to the service of God. The idea of being subsumed in the Absolute

always appealed to me. But I didn’t enter religious life. I became a visual artist. To me the practice of art is a search for an experience of God.

Art is one path towards experiencing the Absolute. Beauty of color, form, and composition are ways in which the Absolute manifests itself. When we experience visual beauty, our soul expands into joy. And joy is a signifier of God’s presence.

In art as in religious belief, the possibility of doubt and self-doubt is always nearby. There is no certainty in the practice of art, no guarantee that a lifetime of creative struggle will yield the beautiful and profound work you are hoping to achieve. It is like seeking God. You may be a lifelong believer and yet feel you know God only by hearsay. Despite

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### In art as in religious belief, the possibility of doubt and self-doubt is always nearby.

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the uncertainty of the goal, the religiously minded yearn to live a God-intoxicated life. The artist wants to lose herself in the practice of art.

As Tennessee Williams once said, when you begin as an artist, art is a form of vanity – but in the end, art is a humiliation. That is, you can love the physical mechanics of practicing art – in my case, wielding the paintbrush – only to discover you have to struggle and search and think and agonize to find a distinctive creative voice. When the distinctive voice finally comes, it comes not because the artist understands the mechanics of painting (brushwork techniques, color theory, composition, et al.). The distinctive voice comes unexpectedly and unheralded in flashes of intuition in which the artist suddenly sees how to move her work forward into unanticipated beauty. These intuitive flashes are the artist’s form of grace. We do not merit grace by struggling with our artistic medium. It is the free gift of God.

For years, I lost contact with the religious aspect of my creative practice. I thought of my own work in narrow terms of aesthetic problems to be solved. This attitude changed when my mother’s health began to fail and she had to spend time in nursing homes. She asked me to bring a couple of my paintings and hang them in her room so she could

look at them when she was too tired to do anything else. I brought a painting of irises to remind her of our spring garden, and a painting of our back yard in autumn. Over and over my mother told me how much peace she felt looking at these paintings and reliving happy memories.

Her reaction was a revelation. I had become habituated to the current attitude that art is a jargon-ridden, profit-oriented commodity produced to satisfy fashionable aesthetics. My mother’s comments refocused my thinking. I realized anew that artists create to make manifest the transcendent experience of beauty. My mother’s sense of peace and joy declared the power of beauty to bring emotional healing.

I started looking for ways to help others contemplate beauty as a form of physical or spiritual relief. When I learned that a local hospital was placing artworks in hallways and rooms so they would be accessible to patients and family members, I was eager to donate a painting. It now hangs in the ER waiting room. I sincerely hope that looking at it has brought peace and comfort to people in a hard place.

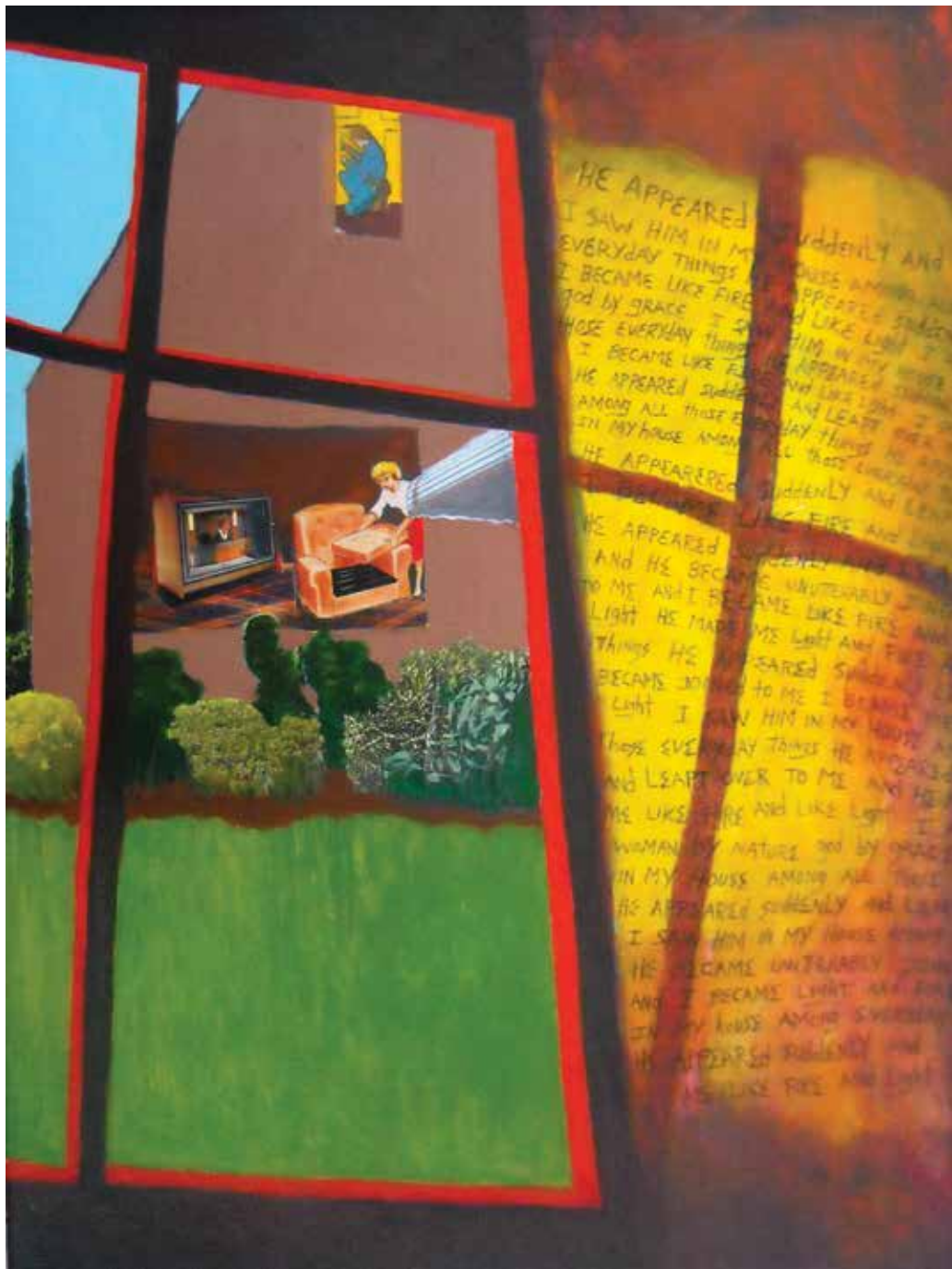
Lately I have taught art in libraries and adult education centers, reaching people who can’t afford or are too intimidated to enroll in formal college art courses. I help people acquire technical skills so they can create personally meaningful images. Many of them create images relating to their memories and their past. They are learning to interpret and make sense of their lives – learning the healing qualities of art.

Art and Christianity have taken divergent paths for centuries. But I think visual art can still assist personal devotional practice. Art is one of the masks God wears to appear to humankind. Here I submit an example of my own work (see opposite page): an ordinary house with two people engaged in everyday activities. But scrawled over one wall is a quotation from a 6th-century mystic. The words are difficult to decipher; I arranged the mystic’s sentences into fragments capable of several interpretations, and the house walls are drenched in red, symbolic of fire and blood. With this piece, “I Saw Him in My House,” I intend to suggest that every experience of God is ambiguous.

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*Alacia Stubbs M.Div. '75 currently lives in Queens, NY. See her work at [alaciastubbs.crevado.com](http://alaciastubbs.crevado.com).*





HE APPEARED

I SAW HIM IN MY HOUSE  
EVERYDAY THINGS  
I BECAME LIKE FIRE  
BOD BY GRACE I SAW  
THOSE EVERYDAY THINGS  
I BECAME LIKE FIRE  
HE APPEARED  
AMONG ALL THOSE  
IN MY HOUSE  
HE APPEARED  
HE APPEARED  
AND HE BECAME  
TO ME AND I BECAME  
LIGHT HE MADE ME  
THINGS HE  
BECAME  
LIGHT I SAW HIM  
THOSE EVERYDAY THINGS  
AND LEAPT OVER TO ME  
ME LIKE FIRE AND LIKE  
WOMAN BY NATURE  
IN MY HOUSE  
HE APPEARED  
I SAW HIM IN MY HOUSE  
HE BECAME  
AND I BECAME  
IN MY HOUSE  
HE APPEARED  
HE LIKE FIRE AND LIGHT

Neither music,  
fame, nor wealth,  
not even poetry itself,  
could provide consolation  
for life's brevity,  
or the fact that *King Lear*  
is a mere eighty pages long and comes to an end,  
and for the thought that one might suffer greatly  
on account of a rebellious child.

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My love for you  
is what's magnificent,  
but I, you, and the others,  
most likely,  
are ordinary people.

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My poem  
goes beyond poetry  
because you  
exist  
beyond the realm of women.

---

And so  
it has taken me  
all of sixty years  
to understand  
that water is the finest drink,  
and bread the most delicious food,  
and that art is worthless  
unless it plants  
a measure of splendor in people's hearts.

---

After we die,  
and the weary heart  
has lowered its final eyelid  
on all that we've done,  
and on all that we've long for,  
on all that we've dreamt of,  
all we've desired  
or felt,  
hate will be  
the first thing  
to putrefy  
within us.

# The Gospel of Mark Out Loud



By Bert Marshall

“A journey on foot cannot be repeated, just as a story cannot be recited, only retold.”

— Robert Bringhurst

*I've been telling the whole Gospel of Mark in performance from memory for 11 years now. I've told the story in church sanctuaries and basements; in college dorm lounges and performance spaces; in a Pentecostal church in Pennsylvania and a gazebo overlooking a beautiful New Hampshire lake (a thunderstorm rolled in during the Passion Narrative). I've told it before conservative and liberal congregations, in urban and rural settings, in at least two dozen states.*

Many hearers have offered testimonials of profound astonishment. Others have exited without saying a word. Some have walked out in the middle of the performance. A couple of clergy colleagues suggested it was too long and I should cut out some parts.

Audiences have reacted with standing ovations or with stunned silence. One of the most electric performances of them all was in front of the smallest crowd — a group of seven students and their religion dean at a liberal arts college in western Massachusetts. The small interfaith chapel was pulsating with Spirit and we sat in a circle on the floor for an hour afterward, deep in conversation.

I committed the Gospel of Mark to memory during a three-month sabbatical in 2003. The project was a natural extension of years of doing scripture texts from memory in worship, my abiding inter-

(co-taught by Richard Ward and Peter Hawkins). My working translations were the NRSV, the Scholars Version, and Richmond Lattimore. I blended those versions into one that I call my own. I dedicated myself to telling the story anywhere I could get a hearing and an honorarium. I set up a website. I sent out emails to friends and colleagues. Inquiries and requests came in. Soon I added some music and drumming to the story, also a little audience participation. Over the years I have received more than enough encouragement to keep it going.

## A Living Story

I am not a New Testament scholar. I keep a small library of books about Mark, about storytelling, the performance of texts — Lord, Havelock, Kelber, Horsley, Foley, Gerhardsson, Rhoades, Kermode, Wire, Ong, Bringhurst, and others. I deeply admire their work. Except for Rhoades, none of them, to my knowledge, has ever told the Gospel from memory. There aren't many of us active tellers of the Gospel of Mark. But we have something that ought to be of interest to the academic study of oral tradition as it relates to Mark — the living story itself, in performance and in our memories.

A living story has sound, and it has listeners. The number of listeners can significantly affect the telling. The story embodies very different energies

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**There are forces outside the storyteller's control that sometimes converge upon the performance space — a clap of thunder during the crucifixion scene (this has happened to me more than once).**

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est in biblical storytelling and oral traditions, seeing Mark performed live once, and an outstanding “Performance of Biblical Texts” course I took at YDS

in the presence of 300 listeners, as opposed to 30. Their alertness and receptivity matter. So does the space in which the story is told. Forces outside the storyteller's control sometimes converge upon the performance space – a clap of thunder during the crucifixion scene (this has happened to me more than once), calls of "Amen!" from listeners, as well as laughter, weeping, children fussing, a cell phone ringing, a furnace kicking on. All of these become part of that particular performance of the Gospel of Mark, and will be remembered and incorporated in the recounting of the story by audience members. All of these factors make nonsense of any insistent notion about a rigid, unchanging, official interpretation of *the* Gospel of Mark.

### Sound Advice

Sound overpowers and often obliterates the punctuation devices of English translation on the page. "*Watch out for the scholars, [COMMA] who like to walk around in long robes, and be treated with respect in the marketplaces ...*" (Mark 12:38). The reader quite naturally pauses at the comma after "scholars" (scribes), which strongly implies "watch out for *all* the scholars." But there is no comma there in the Greek manuscripts. Spoken as written, it says, "Watch out for the scholars who like to walk around in long robes." No pause after scholars: Watch out for *those* scholars who do that, not all of them. Try it. The elimination of a single comma changes the sentence dramatically.

Gestures, a turn of the head, a wave of the arm, facial expressions, bodily movements, movement around the performance space – I use all of these storytelling devices. Where the story says Jesus shouted or yelled, I shout or yell. Someone objected to that once. He said afterward that he couldn't imagine Jesus yelling like that. I asked him how I should portray Jesus yelling without actually yelling. He couldn't say for sure, but it just didn't sit right with him. It seemed "out of character" (his words) that Jesus would be yelling at anyone. But he does, and the demons yell at him, and they cry out loudly when they leave. Later, Jesus cries out loudly from the cross with his last departing breath. The Gospel of Mark out loud is unsettling, provocative, strange.

Speaking the story of Mark demands that myriad other decisions be made concerning vocalization and interpretation: volume, inflection, pitch, emphasis, crescendo, decrescendo, attitude. Is an episode meant to be sarcastic, serious, or confrontational?

### Daring to Laugh

What about humor? In Mark, a man brings his demon-possessed son to be healed. The disciples cannot do it. Jesus scolds them severely and asks that the boy be brought to him. The demon throws the child to the ground and he goes into a seizure (9:14-29), rolling about and foaming at the mouth. Jesus says to the father: "*How long has this been happening?*" and they proceed to have a brief conversation while the boy continues to writhe on the

ground in front of them. This strikes me as quite funny. The child is in the throes of a full seizure and Jesus wants to discuss it, wants to know how long it's been happening, and then challenges the father about his trust level: "*What do you mean, if I'm able?*" Audiences almost always laugh here. Audiences also laugh in several episodes where Jesus scolds his disciples for their unwavering lack of comprehension: "*Are you as dimwitted as they are?*" "*What goes into a person from outside goes in not through the heart, but through the stomach, and goes out in the outhouse (that way all foods are purified).*" Laughter. "*How many loaves have*



Bert Marshall performing the Gospel of Mark in New York City

you got?” (especially the second time around with the 4,000 and the seven loaves). Duh! Laughter.

Chapter 13 puzzled me for years until I was finally able to hear it differently. In its written form, it comes off as a dire warning from Jesus about the coming destruction of temple/city/country/world. He speaks of the impending danger to his disciples and followers and to the general populace. It can be read or spoken in ominous threatening tones. It can be heard as a foreshadowing – or a report – of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. This way of reading is certainly justified. But as a storyteller, I have to make decisions about how it should be spoken aloud, and it wasn't working as a sharply spoken warning. Now I hear it as a lament, and I've chosen to speak this section in hushed tones of sadness, perhaps regret, even as a hallucinatory rant of disorientation or sorrow. I have the audience stand up for this, and I circulate throughout the performance space speaking these lines directly into people's faces at close range. Their faces register visible anguish, deep concern, worry, sadness, discomfort at my close proximity. Many people seem genuinely shocked by these words spoken aloud.

### **Silence and Exhilaration**

I feel a wave of terror every time I stand up to begin the Gospel of Mark: “*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Messiah!*” How will I ever get through this? Will I find my way this time? What if I get lost? What are they thinking out there? What am I thinking? Is it memory that carries me? I tell people that I try to inhabit the story, and that it inhabits me. Is that

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**Where the story says Jesus shouted or yelled, I shout or yell. Someone objected to that once.**

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what memory is? I can feel the presence of the story around me and within me. It seems to inhabit all the space between me and the listeners. Then my initial terror dissipates as the story begins to take shape and voice. And in the midst of the story's own terror – those jarring final scenes – I experience a strange exhilaration.

A living story includes silences – those spaces between spoken words, between thoughts, between episodes, human pauses not indicated in the ancient Greek manuscripts. A brief pause can set the stage for a sudden epiphany. Pauses between episodes, or after someone speaks, sharply focus what is being said or just been said. The story lives and breathes in these spaces and silences, gathering force for the return of the sound.

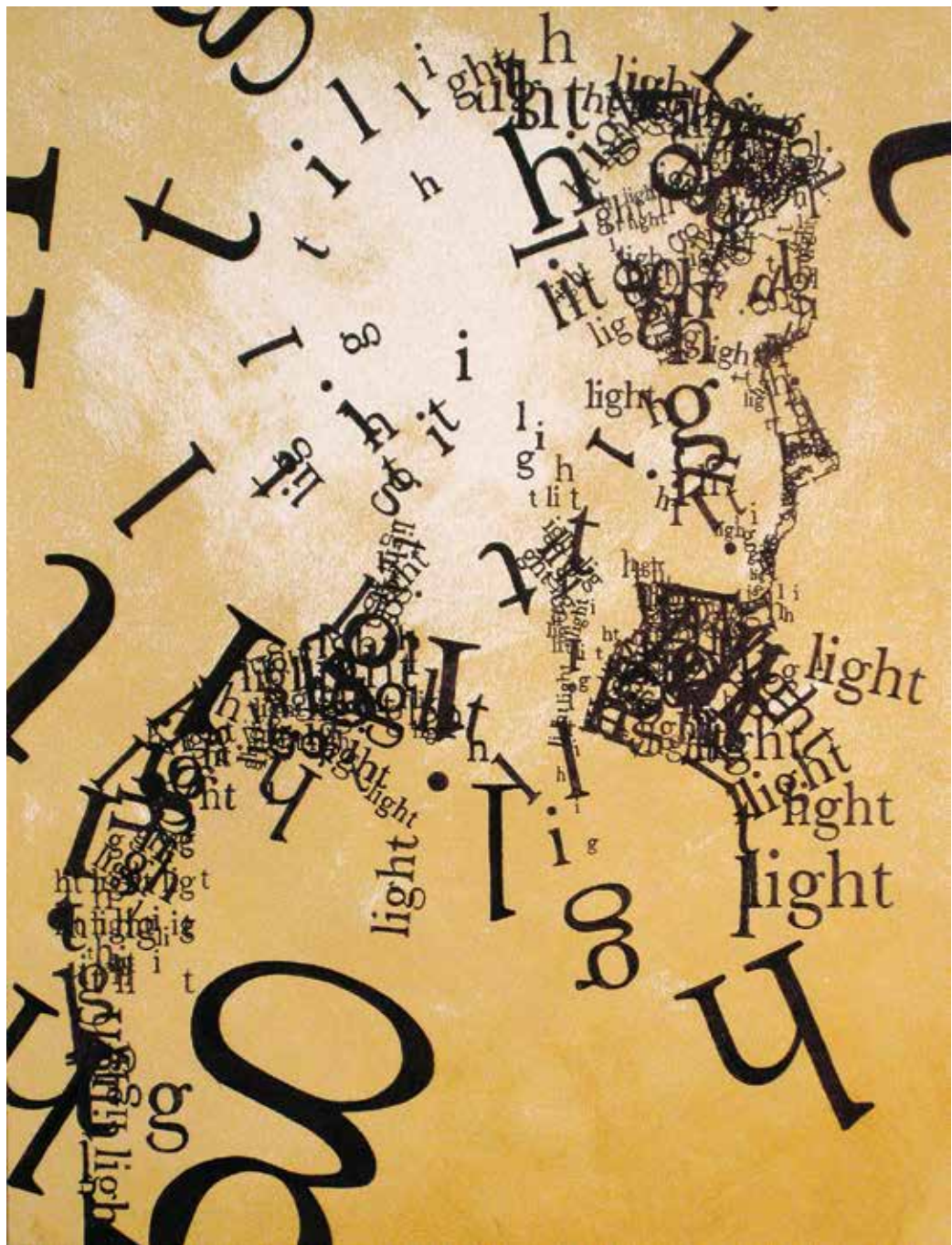
The most powerful and most poignant silence in the Gospel of Mark comes at the end, at verse 8 of Chapter 16. I maintain that if you have not heard the whole Gospel of Mark told aloud straight through, and have not experienced directly the sudden plunge into the abyss of silence at the end, you have not *heard* the Gospel of Mark. In that shocking silence the story makes itself manifest and burns itself into the minds and hearts of its listeners. And while there is no way to prove what the “original” ending of Mark might have been, there is little doubt that ending at 16:8 is by far the best story ending. It is, in fact, one of the best storytelling endings I've ever encountered. I say, “*So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid! ... because ...*”

Pause, walk out of the room, count slowly to ten, walk back in. With very few exceptions, the silence at the end of the story has become the silence of the listeners' immediate experience. To move from sound to no sound – suddenly, wrenchingly – is to be transported into a story space beyond rational understanding. It is palpable yet indescribable. It is a realm outside the familiar senses, a place of enlightenment, a clearing of light in a forest of primordial darkness, a foreign land. We have travelled far from “*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Messiah ...*” – or perhaps only now just arrived into its presence.

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Early Christian writers worried about the corrosive power of idols, not only upon individuals who sought out painted or carved images of pagan gods for religious reasons, but on those who inadvertently encountered them as they went about daily life.

Tertullian of Carthage urged caution against the snare of idolatry, even for innocent bystanders. He believed that a demonic power might actually radiate from certain inanimate objects and infect a heedless spectator.

Most modern thinkers probably don't attribute that degree of agency to visual images, yet in our media-saturated environment we may underestimate the influence of the things we admit, subliminally or intentionally, into our field of vision.

St. Augustine distinguished three elements of the act of seeing. First was the thing seen, which had some kind of prior existence. Second was the act of seeing itself – the reciprocal activity of subject and object. Third was the viewer's conscious choice to sustain the gaze and be affected by it (*On the Trinity*, Book 11, chapters 1-6). The actual experience of sight, he believed, was conditioned by the viewer's state of mind or objective. In brief, he believed that the external image is sought by the eye, impresses itself on the mind, and impinges on the soul. But the state of the soul also affects what and how a person sees. A propensity toward violence, covetousness, or lust will direct the gaze and influence its effects, just as a predisposition toward love and compassion will reap different results.

Augustine's argument – that what we see, and seek to see, profoundly shapes our values and changes our attitudes – seems obviously true, but perhaps is something we do not seriously consider.

We can be accidental viewers, bombarded with uninvited and random images, from things that pop up on our iPhone screens, advertisements along our streets, or events that suddenly unfold in front of us and which our eyes happen to catch. Or we can be captive viewers – in classes, in church, or during television commercial breaks.

Other times we are more discerning viewers, choosing what we see and giving our studied attention or supplying critical judgments. This is the way we typically approach works of art. But if Augustine is right, whether or not we are deliberate and selective about what we look at, the impact of our gaze depends upon our disposition.

This suggests new relevance to a long-standing Catholic admonition – that we should maintain custody of our eyes. This advice – old-fashioned as it may sound – presumes that our ethical formation is influenced by our viewing habits.

Meanwhile, the object itself is not neutral. Objects have a certain kind of independence, with power to change our experience of the world for good or ill. This is, of course, true for works of art. They can challenge us, comfort us, edify us, or upset us. We may be baffled by them, instructed by them, or enchanted by them. Some, however, can be abusive, deluding, or harmful.

The outcome of such encounters will be different for each viewer, and may also change from instance to instance. Visual images produce particular responses, just as stories or sermons may provoke certain reactions. They may be edifying, inspirational, or emotionally affecting. Some provoke action,

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**If we make a case for alertly using our eyes to see, we must also make a case for the need, occasionally, to avert our gaze and turn away.**

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some soothe, some disturb. Others foster hateful or abusive behaviors, reinforce prejudices, fuel greed, feed resentments, or prompt self-loathing.

Augustine asserts that these varied effects arise from the inclination of viewers to see – or seek – those images that mirror the state of their souls. By extension, specifically seeking out inspiring, beautiful or challenging images should train and transform our souls towards pursuing what is worthy and uplifting.

If we make a case for alertly using our eyes to see, we must also make a case for the need, occasionally, to avert our gaze and turn away. Not from sights that are true though potentially distressing, but rather from those that can harm others and us. Those early Christians who worried about idolatry were not, I argue, worried about the dangers of art per se as about the dangers of these deceitful and destructive images – the false gods that seduce our eyes away from what is honest, morally elevating, and spiritually nourishing. If we are what we eat, we also reflect what we see. The things we look at enter us and change us for good or ill, so let us maintain custody of our eyes.

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*Art historian Robin Jensen will join the faculty of Notre Dame in the fall after many years at Vanderbilt, where she taught the history of Christian art and worship. Her books include *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism* (Brill, 2011), *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity* (Baker Academic, 2012), and *Understanding Early Christian Art* (Routledge, 2000). She was a contributing editor and essayist to *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (Yale, 2008).*

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As a poet and memoirist, Christian Wiman writes of grace and oblivion, outrage and acceptance, illness and grace again. Born in West Texas, he was editor of *Poetry* magazine for a decade before coming to Yale Divinity

School in 2013 as a Senior Lecturer in Religion and Literature at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. He is the author of the books of poetry *Once in the West: Poems* (FSG, 2014) and *Every Riven Thing* (FSG, 2010) and the memoir *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (FSG, 2013).

**REFLECTIONS:** *This semester, you are team-teaching a course called “Poetry for Ministry.” Are worship and preaching more receptive to poetic language and image today?*

**CHRISTIAN WIMAN:** Yes, this is a new course that I designed with Maggi Dawn, the dean of Marquand Chapel. She has a lot of experience with actual parish ministry, plus she’s a great lover of poetry, so it’s been ideal from my perspective.

The people I tend to encounter – students at YDS and elsewhere, ministers and scholars around the country – certainly seem to be open to the link between poetry and preaching. I recently did a retreat with Eugene Peterson and he basically said that you couldn’t preach effectively without an understanding of poetry and metaphorical thought, since so much of the Bible is after all in poetry. The trick is to know one’s audience, and in my experience ministers are usually very adept at this.

**REFLECTIONS:** *It seems we’re in a time when the very word religion looks unappealing to many people. If we are in a post-denominational, even post-doctrinal period, should poetry take on a bigger role in the spiritual life? Can poetry (past and present) to do the work of theology?*

**WIMAN:** I think of poetry as closer to a primary spiritual experience rather than a secondary one. Religion is solidly secondary. It’s what one does with an experience of otherness, of God. Theology is part of religion. I consider myself religious, and I seem to be obsessed with theology, so clearly poetry is not an exhaustive spiritual resource for me. I’m all for collisions of disciplines – it’s one thing I particularly love about being at the ISM – but there is a reason why they are disciplines.

Perhaps what I am saying is that poetry can do theological work within an individual consciousness, but I don’t think it can do that work institutionally or culturally.

**REFLECTIONS:** *You’ve said we can know God only indirectly and by metaphor. Yet on the American scene, much about Christian faith gets wrapped in the rhetoric of certitude. Given our utilitarian streak and iconoclastic Protestant heritage, many remain ambivalent or wary about beauty in the life of faith. Can poetry disarm (or reform) our twitchy, politicized religious culture?*

**WIMAN:** Nope. I don’t think poetry works en masse like that (see above). Also, the religious and political currents at work in American culture are larger and more intractable than a dollop of art can correct.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Is Christian poetry moving in a certain direction these days? Can it be characterized? Does it reflect the preoccupations of our time?*

**WIMAN:** I don’t think there’s any such thing as “Christian poetry.” Or if there is, we should all be mercilessly stamping it out.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Who are you reading these days?*

**WIMAN:** Probably the most interesting book I’ve read lately (and the most salient, given what we have discussed above) is Tomas Halik’s *Patience With God*. Halik, a Catholic priest who was an adviser to Vaclav Havel, argues that what looks to be a diminishment of faith in Western culture might actually be seen as a strength; that the encroachment of intellectual atheism might be a useful corrective and example; that any belief that creates distance from fellow humans is ultimately satanic. Maybe “satanic” is my word.

I have also been greatly instructed by the work of the Italian Catholic theologian and philosopher, Gianni Vattimo. For some of the same reasons.

As for poets, I recently read straight through the *Collected Poems* of Jack Gilbert, the first half of which is stark and beautiful and probably permanent work. Also some translations of the Russian poet Elena Shvarts done by Sasha Dugdale, which I highly recommend.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Is being at Yale Divinity School altering your own thinking and writing about belief?*

**WIMAN:** I certainly hope so. I’m around people whose work and lives I admire a great deal – students and faculty – and I find many of my ideas and assumptions challenged daily. This seems to me a very healthy thing to have at this point in my life.

God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made  
sing his being simply by being  
the thing it is:  
stone and tree and sky,  
man who sees and sings and wonders why

God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,  
means a storm of peace.  
Think of the atoms inside the stone.  
Think of the man who sits alone  
trying to will himself into a stillness where

God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made  
there is given one shade  
shaped exactly to the thing itself:  
under the tree a darker tree;  
under the man the only man to see

God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made  
the things that bring him near,  
made the mind that makes him go.  
A part of what man knows,  
apart from what man knows,

God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.



# Craft and Theology in the Workshop



By Geoffrey Keating

*My earliest memory of Yale Divinity is sitting in a pew in a stripped down Marquand Chapel. It was the first chapel service of Fall 2001, and my first, shortly before Marquand was closed for renovation. I was struck by the simple beauty of the space.*

As a Catholic I was used to more: more statues, more art, more spectacle. But the starkness was stirring. The space was flooded with natural light as Academic Dean David Bartlett offered a memorable reflection from the high pulpit on the nature of proclaiming the word.

Two years passed, books were read, exams taken, friendships formed, and the chapel renovation completed. Gathering again in that space in Spring 2003 with the other students, I was struck anew. But this time brought a deeper sense of awe, built on the interlocking sense of community I had come to know. I knew the people who were cantors during regular worship. I understood the history of this campus

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## **The challenge of shaping a theological idea or hymn or prayer is not so different from the endeavor of woodworking.**

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at the top of the hill. I had touched the brick and plaster in the bell tower during a clandestine, late night excursion. All this helped me see beyond the simple beauty of the high arched windows and into the soul of the space.

I took that memory with me – an awakening to the many dimensions of beauty – as I forged a vocation as a furniture maker. The challenge of shaping a theological idea or hymn or prayer – the interplay of solitude and community, ethical ideals and coherence – is not so different from the endeavor of woodworking.

In my work, beginning a piece is often the most difficult. It's not simply a matter of forming an idea,

a shape with a nice sense of proportion that then somewhere down the road becomes tangible. Conceiving a pleasing but original shape is hard enough. What compounds the difficulty is that the design must interact with sound structural methods as well as the material itself.

## **A Journey of Patience**

I often spend an entire day sorting through material, small pieces of leftover scrap or large slabs of walnut that have been leaning in the corner for years. Which pieces of wood should be used for which project? I may have to practice new or unorthodox methods of joinery to suit the design. I must consider how all this will affect the aesthetics and the structural integrity of the piece. It is not a journey for the impatient.

On the surface this seems a solitary pursuit. The mental image that drew me to the craft was that of the woodworker, meticulously planing boards by hand late into the night. However, I now see that designing and making furniture are never undertaken alone. It is an act of participation – in tested and honored practices of a craft, in an industry that includes workers of all sorts around the world, in longstanding elements of design that consider proportion, balance, ornamentation, and ergonomics.

If a client compliments my work, a chair for instance, I don't boldly conclude I've created something definitively beautiful. I don't think the client is simply stating it is visually appealing. That would be a dangerously reduced understanding of beauty that ignores all that goes into the chair. What makes it beautiful in the eyes of the client is that the chair points to something else: to the labor of love that went into it, to a tradition of craft that stands behind



the piece, to the respectful use of the material, to the honoring of balance and proportion.

### Chapel Epiphanies

The architectural lines of Marquand that I experienced many years ago – the high windows, the pillars and ceiling, the lovely interplay of muted colors – represented to me a new sense of beauty. Yet it did not terminate there. I could see that the space served as a conduit through which the goodness and care of all those who helped construct the chapel itself and the community who worshiped there could be experienced.

I regard what I do as a woodworker as a down-to-earth version of this idea of beauty, something I aim for daily in my work. Beauty is not true beauty

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### The moment I begin to use materials that were harvested unethically is the moment the chair ceases to be beautiful.

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because it glitters, because it catches our eye. It is not a matter of mere taste. Something is beautiful because it participates in something that is true, and therefore that is good.

There's no standardized or formulaic way to make the experience of beauty happen. The participatory nature of beauty is fluid. The boundaries can be pushed, challenged, and reshaped. Indeed, the participation can be false or idolatrous, and the iconoclasm of Calvin or the postmoderns can be a necessary corrective.

The same is true in my own craft. There are many ways to design and build a chair that may be considered beautiful, but the moment I begin to use materials that were harvested unethically is the moment the chair ceases to be beautiful no matter

**It's easy to love a deer**

**But try to care about bugs and scrawny trees**

**Love the puddle of lukewarm water**

**From last week's rain.**

**Leave the mountains alone for now.**

**Also the clear lakes surrounded by pines.**

**People are lined up to admire them.**

**Get close to the things that slide away in the dark.**

**Be grateful even for the boredom**

**That sometimes seems to involve the whole world.**

**Think of the frost**

**That will crack our bones eventually.**

how lovely or pleasing the shape.

To behold the truly beautiful, be it a painting or a chair or a liturgy, is to become a participant in the truth and goodness that it conveys. Those first moments in Marquand, the space and all that the aesthetics of it conveyed, opened a new door on beauty. It was enlarged by the classes I took with Margaret Farley, by conversations I had with authors both living and dead about their texts, and by meals in the refectory, the rhythms of daily chapel, and my exposure to those who pursued the craft of ministry or teaching.

All these invited me to participate in a vision of beauty I wouldn't have known, one I was able to take with me.

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*Geoffrey Keating M.A.R. '03 is a fifth-generation furniture maker whose grandfathers built churches and monasteries throughout the southwestern United States. He is now based in Colorado Springs, CO. See [geoffreykeating.com](http://geoffreykeating.com).*



Geoffrey Keating photo by Sean Sheridan (see [seansheridan.com](http://seansheridan.com))



Robert A. Lisak

I suppose we might take consolation from the fact that there have always been worship wars.

As long as humans have recorded the history of sacred music, they have recorded the battles around it. In the Middle Ages, disagreements flared around which language to use in liturgical music, and which melodies. Should it be the ones we grew up with, or those that Rome is trying to force on us? By the Renaissance, some of these melodies became subsumed by counterpoint that was abstruse to some ears.

Fast forward 200 years: Should not the pure, unhindered human voice be the sole instrument of Christian worship? What of these radicals who would include the pipe, the viol, the trumpet in church? To some, this would be akin to a Dionysian ritual!

And we all know of Bach's critics. Too many notes! Too complex! Too unnatural! It's the simple sweet melodic line we yearn for, not more of this dense counterpoint. Music that reflects nature is what's wanted now (ca. 1730).

So many strong opinions over the centuries – it is hardly surprising the trend continues today.

People's need for music is powerful and varied, and so are the wars waged over what kind of music should shape the liturgy and be valued by the faithful. Depending on historical circumstances, on who was in charge and held the pen at the time, and on whose political voice mattered, very different musical theologies held sway.

Our hyper-connected global world and pseudo-egalitarian ethic make access to music infinitely easier than in days gone by. By walking from one club to the next, by tuning in our radios or MP3 players, we have ways to hear more music in an evening than poor Mozart might have heard in his entire short life.

Shall it be Bach or Brahms, hymns or hip-hop? Palestrina or pop? We human beings "mean" through the music we make. We give voice to our deepest visions of the world through sounds born deep inside us, as though part of our DNA.

I can recall at an early age being drawn, even mesmerized, by certain sounds – whether a piece from an old music primer, or Bach for beginners, or a carol sung by heart in my school Christmas pageant. I can remember the time of day and season when I made some of this music. Who knows what physiological or psychological predilections set my ears toward it? I can only remember my pulse racing as I listened and my chest swelling with excitement.

Theology, desire, art, meaning: These are surely all bound up with one another. Even conflicted Augustine knew that our restless hearts sometimes find rest in the praises we sing. But different hearts rest differently with different sounds, or so Daniel Levitin tells us (in his 2006 book *This Is Your Brain On Music*), proffering that musical tastes begin to form already in the womb. No wonder that people who sit in the same pew at church on Sunday clash over what hymn or song gets sung.

If we're to live peacefully together, if we're to learn about each other's whole selves, then we need to develop a rhetoric of meaning around music. Not simply "I like this" or "I don't like this." We need to notice the associations that music holds for us, the ways in which sounds play on our imagination, the ways music forms demographic groups or community identities, and the ways we feel when we hear it.

Perhaps when we hear a Palestrina motet, we can imagine ourselves part of a perfect communion of singers interlinked in some massive, beautiful structure. Perhaps that jazz riff from the blues saxophonist gives voice to the ecstatic experience of encountering God. Perhaps we sense desolation in James MacMillan's *Seven Last Words From the Cross*. Or the folk ballad with its easily repeated refrain is just the genial nudge we need to enter a song that requires no rehearsal and to which all are invited.

Our churches need spaces to hear and reflect on each other's music, and no better boundary-breaker exists than singing each other's song. Sometimes, the liturgy can be this space, but in some communities, worship is just too delicate. This, at least, we know: Music is not merely notes on the page, it is something that we *do*, and the doing must be done hospitably.

If we could note more alertly our own perspectives when we are confronted by sounds, and explain them, critique them, and celebrate them, then perhaps we could do the same when we encounter someone who sings quite a different song than ours. Perhaps then, we will truly hear the choir of angels singing the inexpressible beauty of a God who is worthy of all praise by the *whole* creation.

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# Ambassadors of Divine Glory



By Cyril O'Regan

*Throughout its long history, theology has certainly seemed more comfortable understanding itself through its claim to truth or goodness than to beauty.*

It is not that the connection between theology and beauty has never been notarized. One simply has to recall the early Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and the Dionysian tradition. Yet beginning with Tertullian, and proceeding through the iconoclasm controversy and on to the Reformation, faith in the cross made it difficult to think of theology and beauty as anything other than bitter rivals.

## Beauty as Divine Speech

Of course, throughout the long histories of Catholic, Orthodox, and even Protestant theologies there have been internal corrections. The Catholic theologian Matthias Scheeben might represent a corrective within the late 19th-century form of neo-Scholasticism. In the Reform tradition no theologian showed a greater openness to beauty than Jonathan Edwards, without in the slightest succumbing to the emerging temptation to elevate beauty while essentially dethroning God.

Twentieth-century theology indeed represents a high point when it comes to articulating the linkages between theology and beauty. Probably the two theologians who have most grandly articulated the connection are Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sergius Bulgakov, with the former proving to be the generous orchestrator of the very best reflection of the entire theological tradition. In his seven-volume

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**Mike never knew how grateful I was for his Mozart, or how much healing as well as teaching occurred in the dark.**

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*The Glory of the Lord*, the Swiss Catholic's theology considers Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, the medieval theologians, and, of course, Dante, but also opens us to the reflections of Bulgakov, Soloviev,

and Barth. In the case of the latter, Balthasar takes particular delight in a theologian who considered Mozart's music to be a form of divine, eschatological speech.

I will return to Balthasar, but here I wish only to take advantage of the Mozart reference, which brings me back to my childhood in Ireland spent in public housing on the outskirts of Limerick City, its damp misery made famous by Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes*. Amid the poverty, unemployment, huge families, problems with drink, unwanted pregnancies, and incarceration of males, there were enough examples of dignity in poverty to prevent hopelessness from being inevitable.

## Mostly Mozart

Some things had a kind of redeeming ridiculousness: The very first person in the neighborhood to go to middle school was found worthy of the appellation of "professor." But the most indelible memory, because this got played out week after week, was the weekend behavior of the 20-something loner who lived next to us.

Let's call him Mike. Mike was a construction worker who worked Tuesday to Friday, and religiously at 4 p.m. on Friday he would begin the bender that would guarantee that he would miss work on Monday. But also equally without fail, after the pubs closed on Saturday night he would play classical music, sometimes opera, most often Mozart.

Through the thin walls, I could hear the music compete with the trailing off of arguments of the last of the pub revelers out on the street. I would mark the moment that aggression gave way to pointlessness, and the music would seed the night with something beyond itself. I suppose I did take in the sadness of the scene, and considered the sound of Mozart a plaint against a life that was too

much or too little. Yet I also regarded the music as a small act of heroism, Mike's declaration of hope that beauty could and maybe ultimately would win out over the ugliness that enveloped a person and seeped into the soul.

Mozart spoke not only to but for one in one's loneliness. Mike wasn't my only childhood inspiration, but he was one of them, and it made me ask why was it that the Catholicism that saturated our public lives was not the vehicle of the promise of divine speech. Surely Catholicism could and should be able to mend lives, and mend them all the way down

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**I regarded the music as a small act of heroism, Mike's declaration of hope that beauty would win out over the ugliness that seeps into the soul.**

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and across so that we might see a pattern to it all, the shine in things, to feel that one has been loved and can love, to sense that we have been given the impossible power to forgive others and ourselves.

**Defaced on the Cross**

Mike's Mozart made the darkness luminous, and in the morning the cramped and jammed rooms of my family's house seemed less burdened, more open. In high school I began to learn that literature, poetry in particular, could serve the same purpose. The poets came and went – Blake and Shelley, Yeats and Eliot, Mandelstam and Akhmatova, Milosz, Hölderlin, Rilke, Benn, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Char, Neruda and Paz, Hughes and Heaney. All of them provided a music of here, the music of what passes and ties together the scattering of time and the implosion of space. They contained a signature of that divine music I shared vicariously with Mike next door, through the walls that separated and joined us together.

It was hard not to recall the haunting line of Dylan Thomas when he spoke of the walls "thin as a wren's bone." Compacted in this image was the extremity of vulnerability, solidarity, and something like the mystery of vicariousness, and it was equally hard not to bring to mind the defaced one who on the cross was and is and will forever be that form for me and for others of love broken and shared.

The appreciation of the grace-like features of literature never left me, even when it became clearer that literature presented the ever-present danger of becoming the carrier of the promise of redemption and thereby enacting a form of usurpation whereby

the image replaced the Image, who alone can save us from the ugliness that leaks in and the ugliness we produce.

Mike never knew how grateful I was for his Mozart, or how much healing as well as teaching occurred in the dark. More than all the books I subsequently read and pondered, he demonstrated that the beauty disclosed in any form of art provides more than temporary relief from ugliness and more than a cultural patina in which to gild a wounded life. It was and is a sign of a sign and an image of an image.

And this leads me back to the Mozart pondered by Barth and Balthasar, their conviction that at the very least in the christologically figured *The Magic Flute*, art and the beauty it renders is transitioning into a witness of the glory of God in Christ who dies on the cross and who goes down to the utter inarticulacy of Sheol. For all his talk of theological aesthetics, Balthasar insists that the glory of the cross is the point at which the ugliness of our individual and communal lives is transfigured.

Since Dostoyevsky, Russian religious thinkers have pondered a proposition that threatens to overpower them: Beauty will save the world. At the same time, whether in Soloviev, Bulgakov, or Solzhenitsyn – and its crossover into the theology of Rowan Williams – it has not ceded to its default secular interpretation. The beauty that saves comes in the

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**Since Dostoyevsky, Russian religious thinkers have pondered a proposition that threatens to overpower them: Beauty will save the world.**

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night and may not be recognized when it comes, because it has not forgotten the traces of the ugliness overcome. The glory of the cross requires a cleansing of perception that only love and grace provide. If it does that, it also enables us to see that all forms of beauty are ambassadors of divine glory and analogies of that truly eschatological gaiety that transfigures all dread.

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Beckett said about Joyce: "His writing is not about something; it is that something itself." This is what I want to say about the power of poetry in theological reflection.

I write poetry myself, though it is not very good, and it is purely for my own satisfaction. Sometimes I write poetry because there is something I want to understand, especially something about God, and writing a poem seems the best way to approach it even though I know that it will in the end remain beyond my understanding.

I think this is because poetry, when it works, not only speaks truth *about* its subject matter but encapsulates it or re-presents it or manifests it.

This is a hard thought, and I will try to explain it by appealing to an even harder text: Kant's reflections in the third *Critique* on the nature of beauty. My take on this is my own, not the consensus of Kant scholarship.

In particular, Kant says, "Beauty is the symbol of morality." (5: 351-54). The morality he has in mind is the morality that gives us the highest good as our end or goal, where the highest good is the union of happiness and virtue for everyone. But we human beings do not have the power to bring this about, and in order for the moral life to be rationally stable, we have to secure belief in the real possibility of this highest good by positing the existence of an Author of Nature who is also the Commander of the Moral Law, and who can hold these two things (happiness and virtue) together. Kant is here translating the biblical idea from Psalm 85 that Justice and Peace will kiss each other.

The beauty Kant has in mind is sensory beauty, where this allows the free play of our two faculties of imagination and understanding. Our imagination collects together all the sensory information provided by the beautiful object, and the understanding gives us the idea of a unity in it that expresses a rule that cannot be stated in words or concepts (and so is free), but nonetheless tells us that nothing is missing and nothing can be added without loss. When I say something is beautiful, I say that my two faculties are playing freely in this way, and that the object deserves to occasion this free play in everyone.

So what does it mean to say that this beauty is a symbol of this morality? Symbols are not merely arbitrarily associated in the way that Mark's coat might be associated with Mark and bring Mark to my mind in his absence. Rather, there is a real similarity between the symbol and what it symbolizes. There is a unity in what Kant calls the "ethical commonwealth" in which we all live virtuously and happily together, and this unity is made possible by the

union in God's will of natural law and moral law. But there is also a unity in the beautiful object, and this unity too is beyond our understanding and control. Kant thinks the successful genius is someone who receives this unstateable rule, and by perseverance

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**We are not merely rational beings but creatures of sense and creatures of need, and our intellects need our senses in order to have even meager access to the highest ideas.**

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finds a way to manifest it in a painting, or a sonata, or a poem, even without knowing just how this is accomplished.

We are not merely rational beings but creatures of sense and creatures of need, and our intellects need our senses in order to have even meager access to the highest ideas. So we have sensory beauty as a vehicle for apprehending our final end.

This is how poetry, which Kant thought the highest of the arts, gives us something which is not so much *about* our human destination as it encapsulates or re-presents or manifests in a sensory vehicle what that destination is. So when I read

*and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion*

there is no way to *state* in prose what this means. I can gesture by saying "sacrifice" and "glory." But really the only way to say it is the way Hopkins says it.\*

*What* he is saying gives us a picture in sound and sense of what we are for, of the whole point of our lives as followers of Christ our Lord. The words' beauty is in Kant's term a symbol of the very thing that they bring so powerfully to our minds, the unstateable goodness of God who is Lord both of nature and of our will. The ember breaks open at the end of the fire and the heart breaks open in service to others. Not only do the words signify, but their beauty symbolizes. By saying these words and loving them we worship that God.

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\* from "The Windover," by Gerard Manley Hopkins





# Seeking God's Splendor: Thoughts on Art and Faith

*Can beauty be a way to God? How can art deepen the church's impact? Is art a neglected topic in today's congregational world? Is beauty in the life of faith a luxury ... or a necessity? Such questions animate this Spring issue of Reflections, and we've invited answers from several Yale Divinity School students who have a commitment to the arts. Their replies suggest approaches that will shape future relationships between religion and art. Most of the YDS students featured here are dually enrolled in the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, an interdisciplinary graduate center that educates leaders to engage the sacred through music, worship, and the arts. Located at Sterling Divinity Quadrangle, the ISM operates in partnership with YDS, the Yale School of Music, and other academic units at Yale. (See [ism.yale.edu](http://ism.yale.edu))*

## What the World Needs Now

By Megan Mitchell



In a world of immense suffering, is art a luxury, limited to those with the time and resources to spare? Beauty doesn't feed people, doesn't stop wars. What does it do?

I have stood in opulently glorious churches, both enraptured by their beauty yet sick with the awareness that histories of hypocrisy and exploitation lurk beneath the glittering surfaces. In less extreme ways, all churches today face the dilemma of how to allocate resources: "Should we tune the organ, commission a sculpture for the altar, or keep up the foreign missions fund?"

For Christians trying to follow the example of Christ and the early church by caring for the poor and living simply, a focus on art can seem self-serving. The urgent needs of the world force artists of faith to ask what truly matters in each note, paint stroke, or stanza.

Yet my conviction is that art goes beyond luxury. Art and beauty address the human need for hope. For me, hope is functionally inseparable from beauty, for beauty is a reminder that there is, in the words of Abraham Heschel, "meaning beyond absurdity."

Beauty helps me believe that divine good does prevail. Seeking to bring the Kingdom of God to earth includes restoring the beauty that is present in creation – and adding to it.

Facilitating public murals in the U.S., Africa, and Haiti, I have come to see the process of collaboration itself as art. The effort of people making a mural together involves creative problem-solving and communication. Participants must learn to voice their own opinions but also be willing to make sacrifices for the unity of the whole. Art-making is metaphorically linked to other life-building processes – and helps people tap into the transformative resources already present within themselves.

I saw this happen last summer in neighborhoods of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens, where I worked with Groundswell, an organization that employs high-school and college-age youth to create murals in their communities that respond to social justice issues they face. I saw these young artists take a new kind of ownership of their neighborhoods and histories and develop new ideas for their futures.

Art is about making space – both physical and mental – for listening, searching, and expressing. Art cultivates the ability to imagine a future and so transcend the present moment. This is inherently hopeful.

In her poem "Upstream," Mary Oliver writes, "attention is the beginning of devotion." Art gives us the space for attention, which looks quite a lot like prayer. That's what the world needs now: space to take

**Art goes beyond luxury. Art and beauty address the human need for hope. For me, hope is inseparable from beauty.**

notice of each other, our own souls, and the still small voice of the Lord who calls but will not force us to hear if we do not desire to listen.

To give hope to the hurting, the church must be invested in the question of what is truly beautiful – both in the work we create and the way we create.

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*Megan Mitchell will graduate in May with an M.A.R. in religion and the arts. She earned a B.A. in Community Art and Missions from Wheaton College.*

## God at the Gallery

*By Jeremy Hamilton-Arnold*



If ever I forget art's capacity for transcendence, I simply return to work. My place of employment is a sacred treasury – the Yale University Art Gallery.

There I can rely upon some giants of Western Modernism: Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Rothko. All have given the world paintings that inspire near-universal adoration, and all have expressed, through both pigment and the written word, spiritual motivations for their art. Knowing their intentions, I am keen to look in their daubs and hues for evidence of divinity.

I find the sacred wading in the art of many other greats at the museum too, regardless of the artist's "spiritual" stance. To me, the sacred resides in the congress of colors in Helen Frankenthaler's canvas, in the powerful gaze of Kerry James Marshall's painted artist, in the dingy soft glow of light in Joseph Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge*. The sacred is felt in the serious humor of Duchamp, the hopeful lament of Anselm Kiefer, and the daring of Picasso.

Divinity (of course!) abounds in the devotion and innovation of the early European icon-painters. The sacral motivations of religious individuals and communities beyond the West are abundant in the museum as well – around virtually every corner.

I'm not alone in this experience. Religious groups come into the Gallery all the time. They seek the religiously motivated and motivating – the ancient synagogue tiles from Dura Europos, the Islamic miniature paintings from northern India, the Bodhisatva Guanyin from China, the Baga D'mba mask from Guinea.

Even those who do not come to "see God" still venerate their favorite artists and works. They uplift the art museum space as "sacred," comporting themselves with religious-like postures. They hush and clasp their hands before dimly lit images. The works seem to elicit awe and reverence.

Ultimately, however, I see the divine most clearly not in the works themselves, but in the budding curiosity and unfurling excitement of young visitors – the people I lead on teaching tours throughout the museum. In their expressed wonder before Bierstadt's *Yosemite Valley*, *Glacier Point Trail* and their imaginative narrations at seeing Hopper's *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*, I see the sacred.

For you who seek to bring art to your religious communities, I encourage you to find ways to display art on the walls of your place of worship (reproductions are an option!). Support local artists. Encourage creativity among your own congregants.

I especially urge you to bring your community to the art: Visit (repeatedly) your local art museums and galleries. Once there, find something new; spend more time with fewer works; leave the labels until the very end; converse with one another; ask difficult questions; sketch in silence; linger as long as you are able with a work you find boring, irksome, or downright ugly – and do the same with a work you love. Few spaces can match the power of art museums, those revered storehouses of the sacred.

**Visit (repeatedly) your local art museums and galleries. Once there, find something new; spend more time with fewer works; leave the labels until the very end.**

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*Jeremy Hamilton-Arnold plans to graduate next year as an M.A.R. in religion and the visual arts and material culture. He has a B.A. from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, TX., and an M.A. from Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA.*

## Re-envisioning the Story

By Meredith Jane Day



One Saturday last December in New York City, I sat in a circle with an intimate group of 20 souls preparing for Advent. At an early-20th century Episcopal retreat center on the Upper East Side, we spent nearly eight hours together in a wood-carved library, hearing only the faintest of horn honks from the frantic taxi drivers on Park Avenue.

Our curator for the day showed us photographs of famous paintings from the nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art while we methodically spent time in silence, wonder, and discussion of the pieces. I still remember the way Caravaggio's "Holy Family" glowed in the afternoon light. Something about Mary's penetrating black eyes and young Jesus' crucifix-like posture engulfed me in empathy for their future pain.

The room was full of brilliant seminarians, clergy, and academics, but it was the art that gave us something we could not have offered on our own. It provided a spiritual avenue for confronting our humanity, at the same time assuring us of a mysterious glory within.

A few weeks later, I found myself in a much different place – near the stage of the candlelit Bluebird Cafe in Nashville, TN. I sat with a table of friends (Jack Daniel included) to watch a round of four local songwriters play some of their most treasured music. When Lori McKenna sang her first song, the air in the room turned electric, and the space was transformed. A few songs went by before Barry Dean gripped the audience with a new tune:

*Now my heart is falling apart like a confession  
My prayers are making a church out of this room  
My tears, salt of the past and sweet redemption  
I've been standing like a mountain  
I was just waiting to be moved.\*\**

I managed to break away from the enchantment long enough to scan the room to see that every eye was salty, but clear. It was grace, I think – the kind that can't quite be articulated for fear that, in doing so, something might be left behind.

When human beings, as creations of God, create or encounter the creativity of others, something full circle happens. We suddenly occupy a holy space that connects us to our humanity and yet is permeated by God's glorious and merciful presence.

Whether it takes place in church, a retreat center in NYC, or a bar in Nashville doesn't seem to matter so much. It is the way the Spirit moves through art that grips me most tightly. No matter the kind of art, it provides a way forward during this often oversaturated, overstated, and unimaginative moment in the American church. Art can serve as a means to re-translate and re-envision the story of faith and redemption for this world.

Thanks be to (this creative) God.

**Art provides a way forward during this often oversaturated, overstated, and unimaginative moment.**

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Meredith Jane Day has a background in singing/songwriting, poetry, theatre creative writing, and theology/arts integration. She will graduate this spring with an M.Div. degree and is a member of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. For more information see [Meredithjaneday.com](http://Meredithjaneday.com) or tweet her @mereday.

\*\* Barry Dean, Natalie Hemby, and Sean McConnell, "Waiting to Be Moved," Creative Nation Publishing, Nashville, 2014.

## Glimpsing the Light

By Tyler Gathro



By the time I was six years old I knew I wanted to be an artist. I devoted myself to art-making with a concentrated ardor, while simultaneously growing in my Mormon Christian faith. My spirituality became the very center of my life, around which art revolved.

In 2009, after serving for two years as a full-time missionary to the people of Los Angeles, I returned to my studies at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York City to continue my passion as an artist.

However, after two years of strengthening families, helping people overcome addictions and get jobs, doing community service, and being a direct influence for good in people's lives, creating art seemed pointless. A dead Damien Hirst tiger shark in formaldehyde or an Andy Warhol can of soup will not save the soul of anyone today or tomorrow. I struggled to understand the spiritual role of art and how it could be of any real use when millions around the world were suffering and needed peace and a helping hand.

I sought guidance from God. I fasted and prayed for weeks, wanting to know what to do and how to proceed as a self-declared artist. Around this time I had profound experiences and received revelation regarding the subject, and yet it would be futile to attempt to explain the unexplainable. However, one thing is for sure – I have learned that the visual impacts the spiritual.

With this knowledge, I began to create work that would visually express and capture the spiritual experiences I had and the revelation I had received. It was both a spiritual process for myself and a hope that this art could bring spiritual experiences for others.

**I fasted and prayed for weeks, wanting to know what to do and how to proceed as a self-declared artist.**

You see ... it is as if there is a world of ideal beauty, and between it and me hangs only a veil. Often that veil hangs motionless, until that beautiful moment when the wind blows and the curtain flutters aside. It is then that I catch a glimpse of the celestial world beyond – only a glimpse – but in that moment when all my physical senses seem to be turned off, my hair stands on end while a transcendent feeling flows through me, lifting me off the ground and filling me with light.

These glimpses of light and the creation of this artwork have enriched my Christian faith and brought me closer to God. This is what elevates me in life and drives me to seek the ideal.

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*Jacksonville native Tyler Gathro will graduate next year with an M.A.R. in religion and the visual arts and material culture. He holds a Bachelors of Fine Art from the Cooper Union School of Art in New York City. A devout Mormon, he is looking forward to marrying his fiancé this summer and working as an artist and photographer post-graduation.*

## **Don't Forget Your Cane**

*By Mark Koyama*

*Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.*

*– St. Augustine*



Monday morning I'm up and out before daybreak to be sure to beat the Hartford traffic as I head south from western Massachusetts to my weekday abode in Bellamy Hall at YDS. From that moment on, my doings are governed by the myriad imperatives of Prospect Street – the humming precincts of Sterling Quad, with its lectures

and worship services, seminars and colloquia, discussion sections, intersections and collisions.

Friday, late, I shove the week's laundry in the backseat of my '97 Nissan (along with a capricious assortment of tomes liturgical), and hightail-it north into the Massachusetts hilltowns where, at length, I will turn with a sigh of relief onto Greenfield Road. The boys are asleep, but my wife is still up. She is pleased to see me. In my absence, the compost has been fermenting and the cat boxes have taken a decided turn for the worse.

**I search for language that quietly insists on telling of the twofold love of God and neighbor.**

The word "commute" comes from the Latin *commutare*, which combines *com* ("altogether") and *mutare* ("to change"). Yes, I *commute* between two worlds, but I try to mitigate the "*altogether*" bit. One hundred miles may separate the storied halls of Yale Divinity School from the child-begrimed walls of my circa-1875 farmhouse, and an even greater gulf may divide the ambient discourses of my two *sitz im leben*. Nevertheless I insist that the two worlds do, and indeed, *must* inform each other if I am to succeed in my earnest hope to throw a stole over my shoulders and process down the center aisle as an ordained minister of the Christian faith.



Each world is too full of delicate wonder to be deprived of the other.

During the last two years of my mother's life, I was her healthcare advocate, her caretaker and finally, her nurse. At that time, a phrase often came out of my mouth:

*"Don't forget your cane ..."*

These words remain with me today, not for their practical application, but for their spiritual frankness – their quiet insistence that love governs. Good theology – the habit of mind behind good Christian ministry – follows from a *Don't Forget Your Cane* biblical hermeneutic.

The same principle applies when I write sonnets. I search for language that quietly insists on telling of the twofold love of God and neighbor.

### A Sonnet for An Old Farmhouse at Bedtime

And when, at last, the boys begin to snore  
I head downstairs, turn off the kitchen light,  
Make sure the dog's been let in for the night  
And throw the deadbolt on the mudroom door.  
There's a local squirrel who makes offshore  
Deposits in our ceiling, out of sight  
Of the cats, who flick their tails left to right  
Like irk'd Egyptian goddesses of war.  
Shuffling round in my pajama vestments,  
I settle all these final farmhouse cares –  
These fitful little bedtime sacraments.  
And lying down, I hear the closing prayers  
Performed by those unwitting penitents –  
The dog's long claws click-clicking up the stairs.

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Mark Koyama M.Div. '15 studied Buddhism at Bates College, has an M.A. from Union Theological Seminary and an M.F.A. in fiction from UMass-Amherst. He plans to become a United Church of Christ minister.

### The World's Collective Spirit

By Yolanda Richard



When I ponder my ancestral material memory, I think of Islamic etchings in the sand of Hispaniola, clay pots fashioned by dark hands dewed with labor's sweat, cosmic ancestral symbols weaved over and under Catholic crosses, Protestant hymnals drumming to the beat of audible spirit, West African dress that reminds us where we were birthed: In-between cultures.

As a Haitian American woman, my intersectional identity was only obliquely echoed when I navigated the halls of the usual "well-curated" gallery. Leisurely walks through such spaces typically consigned me to African Art collections and modern pieces depicting the black body and traditional renditions of the black experience. My journey to a deeper love for material culture of all traditions had a rough start.

I entered the world of visual art filled with curiosity, seeking models for engaging material culture that resonated with me. Instead, I was met with the many clichés of the art world. I encountered visitors who commodified their gallery experience as intellectual capital, a way to reinforce their own elitism. I witnessed people approach famous works with vague intimidation or over-excitement, stirred by awareness of the work's monetary value, not the work's aesthetic beauty or radical message.

I became privy to the dissonance between gallery culture and an authentic engagement with the art. For a while, I simply mimicked the cadences of "gallery goers." Hands glued behind the back, backs crooked forward, curved necks attempting at angles to see *"everything"* – the frame, the paint, the cracks in the panel, the exposed fibers of the canvas, the second layer of varnish that makes you cringe, and finally the label.

**Sadly, the impression persists  
that one must know about art  
before one can engage with it.**

This experience eerily translated into a monolithic construction of history. It felt flattened, devoid of faith. Sadly, the impression persists that one must know about art before one can engage with it. Or we expect curators and docents to draw interpretive lines for us. And when they don't, we are left feeling cheated or confused. Overall, gallery spaces felt more like an intellectual exercise than an exercise of the soul.

I needed a new lens.

In my final year at YDS an internship at the Yale Chaplain's Office allowed me to explore interfaith conversation within the context of art. I began organizing small group interfaith discussions in front of religious pieces at the Yale Art Gallery. These campus dialogues gave me a new intercultural perspective – weaving me into the cloth of the fabric of human history, making my engagement with art an exercise of my mind, my heart, and my soul.

I began listening – to the story of the work encased in its visual presentation, historical setting, and the artist's intent. I began questioning – the curator, the artist, and myself. I began learning – how to linger with the art for more than a few seconds and challenge my inclination to generalize whole collections unfamiliar to me. I began conversing – through time, culture, and faith.

Art is the human story of how we have connected with God and imagined the world around us. It is the preservation of the world's collective spirit in all of its complexity. Interfaith dialogue and art have allowed me to stretch my gaze, connecting me to those beyond a society's ostensible barriers.

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*Yolanda Richard graduates with an M.Div. in May. She has served as a Wurtele Gallery Teacher at the Yale University Art Gallery for the past three years, teaching K-12 students from original works of art. After graduation, Yolanda will serve as the Earl Hall Chaplaincy Fellow at Columbia University, focusing on interfaith dialogue among undergraduates.*

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## Rejecting the “Beautiful”

*By Joshua Sullivan*



Step into a gallery or the museum, and a familiar response (at least from my Christian parents) is soon heard: “How is *that* art?” or “I could do that!” or “Well, that’s just offensive!”

The two worlds of “fine arts” and “church” have loomed large as stout opponents in my life. Both make demands on my intellectual and spiritual outlook.

The artist's role as “questioner” and “critic,” I thought, would bar me from ever playing a part in a Christian community. Likewise I feared that being a “confessional” Lutheran would strip me of my credentials as an artist. Yet this dichotomy between fine

artist and person of faith is a false one. As a Christian and an artist, I am fascinated by the tension between individual and community. I am interested in the range of non-linguistic communication that visual works can achieve.

It would be foolish to attempt to define the entire range of contemporary fine arts, but I venture to say that much of it now has far more to do with critical cultural dialogue and the material qualities and substances of art than any Platonic or Enlightenment-style quest for the “beautiful.” Churches could

take a lesson from this modern insight. Churches hastily turn away from contemporary fine art because of a hostility to art that isn't “beautiful” by some traditional definition.

But a church's visual culture itself is not outside a working notion of “fine art” – all production of visual materials in *any* given community is art. It is a Christian community's responsibility to take ownership of its visual cultures (be it architecture, carpet color, stained glass, or Sunday school crafts). Taking ownership means understanding the reasons it decided on such visual material. It means giving it prominence as a mode of group intelligibility rather than as objects of “beauty.” An “amateur” piece of artwork produced by a church and a nihilistic piece of work hung in a gallery are on equal footing as modes or vehicles of communication.

The plethora of visual matter in the Christian community's life – the graphic design of Sunday bulletins, the sanctuary's architecture, that mainstay portrait of Jesus from the 60s in the church lounge, the little cotton ball lambs made by the preschool kids – *are not* outside the purview of the fine arts, regardless of their “beauty” or “ugliness.” The church is not off the hook!

Philip Guston's paintings are “ugly” on purpose. Marina Abramović's performance works are antagonistic and transgressive. Jenny Holtzer's installations are terse and scathing. What these and other

**The dichotomy between fine artist and person of faith is a false one. As a Christian and an artist, I am fascinated by the tension between individual and community.**



artists have, and what perhaps the church often lacks, is a razor-sharp grasp of the milieus they are communicating in and about.

Christian communities can take heart by rejecting the “beautiful” as an end in itself. Beauty, like God, will show up when and if it chooses. Visual culture, whether in the gallery or the sanctuary, is about a dialectical relationship between a creator and a community of viewers, not the reign of a pre-existing idea of beauty.

As Karl Barth noted in his *Church Dogmatics*, “God may speak to us through Russian communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to [God] if [God] really does so.”

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*A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, Joshua Sullivan will receive an M.Div. degree from YDS in 2016. Experienced as a painter, musician, and conceptual artist, he was Visual Arts Minister at Marquand Chapel this year. He is pursuing ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*

## Beauty Begets Beauty

By Jon Seals



I heard it said once that we don't truly remember an event, place, or person – rather, we only remember the ways in which we remembered them the last time they were recalled. Our memories become copies of copies, and with each recollection comes a loss in clarity and accuracy. As a visual artist, I've given a lot of fearful thought to that fragile, degenerative condition: we are only as good as our last memory. Or so I thought.

My recent quest through the literary epic tradition has taught me different. (Important to me was the YDS course “Human Image: Classical and Biblical Traditions,” taught by Peter Hawkins.) From *Gilgamesh* to Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Dante's *Inferno*, epics reveal themselves to be expansive re-imaginings of what it means to be human in relation to others and to a divine being. Through their revelatory example, I've learned the truth that all of life is a collage of sorts – an experience of recollection not degenerative but regenerative.

In her 1999 book *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry wrote that “beauty brings copies of itself into being,” so that beauty begets beauty. She quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein, “When the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.” Clearly this finds expression in the evolution of the epic. Instead of eclipsing or deteriorating the layer beneath, new versions of the epic build on one another, through twists and turns in fresh and interesting ways, revealing the vast complexity of human experience. With each new edition, the epic tradition is enlarged.

What of those big themes of the epic journey – sorrow, pain, and death? I know only a bit of suffering, but it is real and I am learning through it. I had my own descent or *katabasis* when I was brought low by the death of my brother. In my encounter with his death, I have learned some things crucial to being alive – mostly that faith, art, and others are the only things worth living for. Each of these is knit together and eternal. I am beginning to think of my art as less my own and more as an extension of others around me. Somewhere in the transaction of involving myself creatively with the lives of others I learn more of the presence and character of God.

My art is not a distraction or an entertainment. It is my way through. When I relinquish control of the materials I'm using and allow the spirit of creation to channel through me after intense bouts of struggle, the work produces a powerful catharsis. To achieve this outcome, both the inhale of my doing and the exhale of my giving in are necessary. In many of my drawings I leave behind *pentimenti* – *repentances* in Italian – as I work, evidence of where I have been on the paper or canvas, so that I can see the process of building up, adjusting, and making both mistakes and corrections as I go along. *Pentimenti* keep me honest.

One of the alluring qualities of epic literature is that it can be at once local and global, deeply personal and vastly communal. Whether I work with paint, graphite, collaged paper, or other materials, this is my aspiration too.

**I am beginning to think of my art as less my own and more as an extension of others around me.**

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*Jon Seals has an M.F.A. degree in painting from Savannah College of Art and Design, and worked for seven years as chair of the visual art department at a college prep school in Clearwater, FL. His artwork has been widely exhibited. He graduates from YDS in May with an M.A.R. in religion and the visual arts and material culture, with dual enrollment at the ISM.*

## The Eros Divine

By Timothy D. Cahill



Beauty is vain, says Proverbs. Beauty is truth, says Keats. To begin, I make my own list of likenesses: Of beauty as order, as harmony, as clarity. Of beauty as vigor and compassion, justice and faith. Of beauty as mystery. Beauty as grace. But my aim is not to define beauty. I want to stand in its vastness.

To the reasonable mind, my claims are outlandish. The Enlightenment settled the question long ago, drawing a distinction between the tame allure of the “beautiful” and the bracing wildness of the “sublime.” (Yeats undid this when he wrote of “a terrible beauty,” but no matter.) In the middle of the last century, painter Barnett Newman became the voice of our age when he declared, “The impulse of modern art is the desire to destroy beauty.” He was speaking on behalf of the masters who had blazed his trail, from Manet to Picasso, and of his own avant-garde confrères (Pollack, de Kooning, et. al.), and too, for waves of future MFAs. But suspicion of beauty is not restricted to artists alone. We sing of purple mountain majesties, but the churchy sentimentalities of *America the Beautiful* (the lyrics were first published in a weekly called *The Congregationalist*) cannot resist modernity’s ironic derision. There is something grandiose about beauty that rubs against the American grain. My working-class relations rarely used the word, preferring the leveling action of the banal: A grand vista was “nice,” a starry night “pretty,” a comely face “good-looking.”

As compensation, from the chromium brightness of Cold War-era cars to the brushed aluminum of the Apple Store, America domesticated beauty to a cash crop of glamor. (What is more unbeautiful than *Project Runway*?) In 1949, Barnett Newman sought to destroy beauty; by the 1960s, Andy Warhol just laughed at it. Who can speak of beauty today without some frisson of self-consciousness?

So where do I come off with my pretensions? I am not as interested in what beauty is as what it does.

Beauty sparks desire. Observe how everything that debases us is devoid of beauty. Blight in its indifference, greed in its cruelty, vengeance in its blindness – all undercut aspiration and disorder appetite. Yet something of virtue sticks to the beautiful. As

Plato and Dante both knew, even carnal lusts may point toward nobler instincts. Base impulses are unexamined expressions of the soul’s instinct for wholeness. Beauty is the juice of the good – the illuminating desire, the eros divine. It always points in the same direction, toward love-in-action.

Beauty cannot feed the hungry, prevent disease, cure injustice. Cynics rightly observe it does not stop the carnage of war. Yet as modernist critiques become more threadbare, we better understand beauty’s necessity. Destroy the beautiful and our humanity erodes too. Compassion, generosity, praise all atrophy, and by slow degrees a capacity for the suffering of others increases. Our eyes, actions, and ideals affirm one truth. Before we made beauty, beauty made us.

**Destroy the beautiful and our humanity erodes too. Compassion, praise, generosity all atrophy, and by slow degrees a capacity for the suffering of others increases.**

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*Timothy D. Cahill is a cultural journalist and commentator. He was formerly arts correspondent and photography critic for The Christian Science Monitor, and is a past Fellow with the PEW National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University. In 2008, he founded a non-profit initiative to engage contemporary art with values of compassion ethics. He is enrolled at the ISM and Yale Divinity School (M.A.R. in religion and the arts, 2016).*

## Spiritual Alchemistries

By Robbie Pennoyer



As a native New Yorker from a religious-but-not-spiritual family, I enjoyed an unremarkable religious upbringing. What shattered familiar molds and made God credible was my artistic exposure. As a boy, I spent five years singing in the children’s chorus of the Metropolitan Opera. Most days, after school (and frequently during it), I’d leave my classroom, cross Central Park, and get to work making music with some of the world’s greatest musicians. Onstage at the Met, performing in a production of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, I experienced the first of those unexpected, overwhelming moments when the

world’s capacity for beauty, love, and goodness seemed so ripe and so real that it could only be a sign of the givenness of our existence and a hint of its giver.



But if my musical experience suggested a spiritual dimension to the universe, it was poetry that rescued my faith in it from disillusion, a kind of Death by Church. There seemed an unbridgeable gulf between what I'd experienced at the Met and what I was experiencing in the church of my youth. My church's vocabulary of faith seemed full of stale words, cheapened by overuse and calcified by overconfidence about what they meant. (I'd blame adolescent obstinacy for my resistance to many formulations of faith expressed in church, but age hasn't cured me. I remain allergic to certitude and find it, in most forms, morally suspect and aesthetically stifling.)

After leaving home to attend an Episcopal boarding school, I discovered in *The Book of Common Prayer* words I didn't quite understand arranged in cadences of stunning musicality, and the combination of sound and sense made for a strange alchemy: The ineffable opacity of God lifted, or seemed to, if only for brief moments. Such was poetry's effect on me, and it wasn't long before I was regularly turning to literary accounts of belief and unbelief that matched my experiences and made my halting faith feel less lonely.

W. H. Auden called poetry "the clear expression of mixed feeling." That ability to hold together dissonant meanings, intuitions, and beliefs has allowed poetry to give expression to my faith – and to enrich it. My time at Yale and in the ISM has affirmed what I'd learned by accident – that music can point us towards God; that poetry can revivify our tired language of faith; and that beauty can express and reveal the wondrous love of God.

**I discovered in *The Book of Common Prayer* words arranged in cadences of stunning musicality, and the combination of sound and sense made for a strange alchemy.**

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*Robbie Pennoyer grew up singing in the children's chorus of the Metropolitan Opera and juggling in Central Park. He has an English degree from Harvard, where he composed musical comedies and co-founded S.T.A.G.E., an after-school theater program for inner-city children. He graduates with an M.Div. next year and is pursuing Episcopal ordination.*



# Beauty Born of Grief



By Paul Palumbo

*"Pastor, it feels like people are coming to us to die!" Of course that is true on a number of levels. In our adult catechumenate program, people learn to know and love Jesus and to pick up their cross and follow him. Dying to our selves is a central tenet of the Christian faith.*

But Lord, have mercy! For a long stretch of time, our little congregation was facing the death of so many. The last of our charter members were lingering at death's door, while too many people so young and so alive faced a slow, difficult decline in the wake of chemotherapy and radiation.

At one point, three women in the prime of life were facing cancer. Two of them had come through the adult catechumenate and been recently baptized. When the cancers hit, the catechumenate group simply morphed into a loyal cadre that could accompany people in their struggle to survive.

In the case of one of the women, the catechist and I went to the hospital to console her and her family after her surgical ordeal. With us standing at her bedside, this newly baptized child of God said,

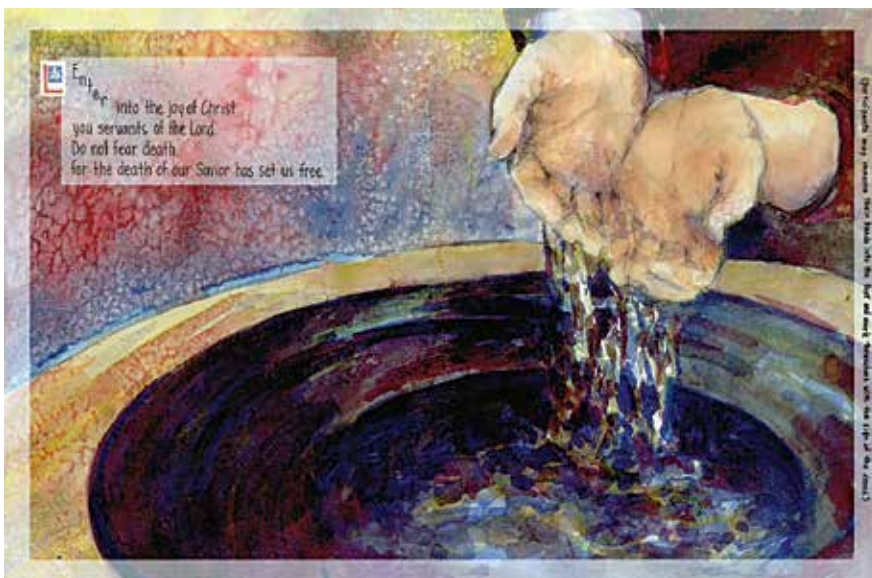
"You were the two people who were at my side when I was baptized. It is always death and life, isn't it?"

Her story, and that of the others, began a new way of being for our congregation. The ministry of accompaniment was born, and we continue to accompany people who are sick and facing death. For some years now, we have assembled a group of mostly church members who go to visit the dying, the sick, and the elderly. One of our company put it well when he said, "I'm completely afraid of being with people who are dying. So I know I have to go to them."

## An Idea is Born

This honest expression of fear, and the "Amen's" it evoked from others, sparked a conversation about why people are afraid to visit nursing homes, sickbeds, and the like. Along with having to face mortality, people are reluctant to go into such situations for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. "Should I talk about death? Do I touch the person I am visiting? Should I pray? What do I pray?" People who would like to bear witness to Jesus in the face of mortality do not always have what they need to do so.

From these experiences came the idea of creating a liturgy for the visitation of the dying. Of course, pastors have liturgies at their disposal in their occasional service books,



A page from the church's Liturgy for the Visitation of the Dying. Watercolor by Wendy Schramm.

but we wanted to create something that was accessible to anyone and also was touched with a beauty born out of our congregational grief and solidarity.

For several months our group of eight or nine met to gather materials for such a liturgy. Our musician wrote musical pieces, others selected prayers and blessings, while still others wrote material and edited. We chose Psalms by asking members for those they found most meaningful and reassuring.

### **Death and Transfiguration**

Meanwhile, one member happily noticed that reading certain children's books to the elderly was a source of great delight to them. This helped shape our thinking that the liturgy should be not only meaningful in its words but visually beautiful.

We believe that truth and beauty rooted in a particular congregation can communicate to the wider church. While compiling the liturgy, we enlisted local artist Wendy Schramm to join our meetings and apply her watercolor craft to our work. Our church has a room dedicated to art, with painting, batik, a loom for weaving, and whatever else an artist might bring. Wendy spent her time in the art room and outdoors, painting and praying over the liturgy, painting the frame for each piece.

Restful and comforting beauty was her goal. Yet not every piece of the liturgy is restful, nor of course is every moment of dying. There are stark pieces in the liturgy that she matched in visual art. Restful,

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**If the church dedicated itself to accompanying the dying well, the world would know where to come to die and to live in the beauty of extravagant love.**

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stark, reassuring: It is all beautiful. As the Akathist of Thanksgiving proclaims, "All true beauty draws the soul to You."

And this is the point. Beauty is at the heart of the Christian faith. As Alexander Schmemmann points out in *For the Life of the World*, "Beauty is never 'necessary,' 'functional,' or 'useful.' And when, expecting someone whom we love, we put a beautiful tablecloth on the table and decorate it with candles and flowers, we do all this not out of necessity, but out of love."

To me, the liturgy makes clear that this beauty is an expression of *extravagant* love. It is extravagant love precisely for people in whom the world would never consider investing such extravagance — people who are dying, who are not going to be around to appreciate it for long. We who follow Jesus use

this and all kinds of beauty to express the love of God to the least among us.

It might sound like a fool's errand to create such a work of beauty for dying people. But I also believe this: If the church dedicated itself to just one thing, to accompanying the dying well, it would not be wrapped up in anxiety about whether the church itself was going to survive. It would have no time for such anxiety and it would not need to worry anyway. The world would know where to come to die and to live in the beauty of extravagant love.

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*The Rev. Paul Palumbo is pastor of Lake Chelan Lutheran Church in Chelan, WA. In 2012, he and a team from his church participated in the Congregational Project of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. During the week-long intensive there, in consultation with other participant congregations, Lake Chelan church members further developed their Liturgy for the Visitation of the Dying.*

### **"SHEPHERD ME FROM DEATH INTO LIFE"**

In the last weeks of her husband's life, Sandy cared for him, cleaned him, emptied his vomit bowls, and kept vigil as he died at home. During that difficult time, she received a small token of beauty from Lake Chelan Lutheran Church: a painted card with the words of the refrain, "Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life."

It became a lifeline for her. She put that card on the table where she could see it every time she went to empty the bowl or to get a glass of ice chips for her dying husband. It steadied her with the reminder to give her fears to God. Cards like that have become an element of the Liturgy for the Visitation of the Dying that we share with church members and others.

When her husband died, we anointed his body and sang that same refrain as we made the cross on his forehead, lips, eyes, and heart. More reassurance.

Now that she is a widow and her financial future is not clear, she keeps that card in her checkbook. It is a constant reminder to wait for God to guide her beyond her wants and fears, into life: a small token of beauty.

— Paul Palumbo

# Written in the Stars



By Felicity Harley-McGowan

*One Sunday afternoon in February, as a snowstorm rapidly descended upon Manhattan, I darted through Grand Central Terminal in an effort to catch my train. The floors were already slippery, and as I navigated both crowds and puddles, it was hard to remain upright. On entering the vast main concourse, I saw a pair of feet, standing directly in my path.*

As I prepared to skirt them, I noticed their battered shoes: The feet were barely protected from the weather, and around their ankles lapped the long damp shreds of torn trousers. I looked up to see to whom these feet belonged: a young man, oblivious to the bustle around us. His head was tilted backwards, his eyes wide, and his mouth slightly agape. Like so many visitors to New York, he was utterly transfixed by the celestial mural arching high above him.

Yet this wasn't a tourist; this man lived on the city's streets.

The "power" of the image has become something of a cliché. In a society awash with images, their very ubiquity means that many become lost: We simply cannot process the vast number we encounter in different media, day by day.

## Sacred Collisions

Grand Central Terminal has been described as a living temple to New York's illustrious past. As both train station and sanctuary, however, it embodies what can be achieved in the creation of beauty and functionality. With this dual role, it is not unlike the medieval cathedral – a place where the marketplace collided with the sacred, and where Christianity was at the vanguard of providing the kind of transformative experience that train stations, libraries, or museums (the new temples) now furnish.

Yet the roots of this role can be traced to the earliest Christian churches. Witnessing a young man respond with his whole body to the interior space of a train station, and to a mural within that

space, caused me to reflect on just how savvy some early Christians were about the use of images in the ancient church. In fact, various leaders of early Christian communities thought carefully and often strategically about the functions of images, rather than regarding images as idle, as mere decoration.

Across the Mediterranean basin in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries, Christian communities created their own spaces for meeting, prayer, and worship. Most of these have been destroyed; some survive in the literary record, or exist in fragments; others re-

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**Witnessing a young man respond to the interior space of Grand Central Terminal caused me to reflect on just how savvy some early Christians were about the use of images in the ancient church.**

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main intact. Piecing this evidence together, we know that many of the spaces were carefully decorated with images, and the ceilings and apses of some of the earliest purpose-built churches were painted blue to resemble the heavenly realm.

To be sure, such early Christian evocations of the heavens did not have the complexity of the zodiac mural that stretches across the barrel-vaulted ceiling at Grand Central. That mural, created in 1912 by French artist Paul César Helleu and Australian-born Charles Basing, depicts the signs of the zodiac from October to March. For months, the artists hunted for the exact shade of blue-green for the sky in order





**The constellation dome at Grand Central Terminal**

to emulate the color seen over Greece and Southern Italy. They consulted an astronomer to ensure the correct placing of familiar constellations, as well as the ecliptic, equator, and Milky Way.

### **Cosmic Canopy**

Even without such astronomical precision, early Christian portrayals of the night sky were similarly evocative. One example dates from the 3rd century, when a Christian community in the ancient town of Dura Europos, in modern Syria, set about remodeling a house for their use and converted one room into a space for baptism.

For this room, the community devised a cycle of images that would cover the walls. Drawn from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, these images underscored the theological significance of the sac-

rament of baptism; they also defined the space as sacred (and they can be seen today, preserved at the Yale Art Gallery). The focal point of the room was a large font, framed by thick columns that supported a canopy, the underside of which was painted blue and speckled with white stars. Here, beneath this canopy, initiates were immersed.

They may not have looked up to behold something as extravagant as the 2,500 gold leaf stars that a commuter sees dispersed across the Grand Central mural; but there is no doubt that as they were immersed in the life-giving waters, the impact of the painted sky canopy that arched above their own heads was equally profound. Was humanity in 3rd-century Syria so different from humanity in the early 1900s, or today?

As I watched the star-gazing Manhattanite in February, I was also reminded of the early Christian poet and bishop Paulinus of Nola. In the 4th and 5th centuries, Christians were no longer adapting modest houses for worship but building great halls, with ceilings fit to look up at in awe. Paulinus advocated the use of images to create inspiring spaces in which to honor God, as well as instruct the faithful and the unconverted alike in the beliefs core to Christianity.

### Ancient Firmaments

Paulinus had renounced a senatorial career in favor of a Christian ascetic and philanthropic life, and settled at Nola, in Campania, Italy, where he embarked on a number of building projects, renovating older churches, and building new ones. He believed that painted images within a church could prove so inspiring that on taking time to observe them, a person's mind would be turned from hunger or worldly vices to God – they would be transported.

Besides depicting scenes from the Bible, Paulinus' lavishly appointed churches contained poetic inscriptions he had composed. These could be read aloud to illiterate visitors as they entered the sacred space. For the apse high above the main altar in one of his Nolan churches, Paulinus commissioned a mural that would similarly evoke the heavenly realm. Yet there he inserted not simply stars, but Christ himself, ruler of the cosmos. Paulinus was convinced that any person who stood beneath such a canopy would be utterly transformed by what he found and receptive to hear God's call.

The images he so passionately commissioned and championed were not idle. In his mind, they would quite literally feed those who took the trouble to bend their neck backwards, took time to consider.

### Taking Time to Look Up

Walking to my train that day in February, I felt that I had witnessed just this. A man had come seeking one kind of shelter from the storm but had found another – not in a roof, or even food or clothes, but in a space whose majestic proportions and detailed rendering of the cosmos had indeed transported him out of the present moment. It was as though he had stepped out of 5th-century Italy.

As new technologies for creating, sharing, and viewing images evolve, so will civic spaces. In different architectural forms, they will surely address practical needs; but some will also serve the unchanging human need for inspiration and beauty. As we work to equip the church for its mission in this millennium, the urging of early Christian writers to produce images that are not idle is worth returning

to. Like Paulinus and the Christians at Dura, we know that if we take time to look, we can be changed.

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*Felicity Harley-McGowan, a Lecturer at Yale Divinity School, is a specialist in early Christian and medieval art. Before coming to YDS last year, she taught at the University of Melbourne. She is preparing a monograph on the earliest images of crucifixion and co-editing (with Henry Maguire) a volume on the life and scholarship of Ernst Kitzinger.*

## SCRAMBLED EGGS AND WHISKEY

By Hayden Carruth

Scrambled eggs and whiskey  
in the false-dawn light. Chicago,  
a sweet town, bleak, God knows,  
but sweet. Sometimes. And  
weren't we fine tonight?  
When Hank set up that limping  
treble roll behind me  
my horn just growled and I  
thought my heart would burst.  
And Brad M. pressing with the  
soft stick, and Joe-Anne  
singing low. Here we are now  
in the White Tower, leaning  
on one another, too tired  
to go home. But don't say a word,  
don't tell a soul, they wouldn't  
understand, they couldn't, never  
in a million years, how fine,  
how magnificent we were  
in that old club tonight.



A transcontinental flight is a purgatorial place for a 10-year-old boy, and not all of my energy had been purged by the time we landed in San Diego. The rest of my allotted boyhood energy for the day was spent smashing acorns under foot during the two-minute walk from car to hotel. My glee was uncontrollable as I hopped along the concrete sidewalk, crunching acorns through the balmy darkness of the summer night.

But when I woke the next morning, the soul-satisfying San Diego sunshine did little to quell my horror when I beheld a sidewalk littered with the crushed and mangled forms, not of acorns, but of colorful little snails. Dozens of geometrically perfect spirals lay destroyed on the ground, the result of my unwitting violence, which brought on a sense of guilt that has lasted for over a decade.

When I crushed those snails, I felt as though I had perpetrated not some boyish triviality but some cosmic misdeed that would require great penance

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**Jonathan Edwards quelled my concerns that beauty necessarily meant idolatry, temptation, or distraction. He gave the world back to me.**

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to be rectified. I did not know why I suddenly cared so much about the snails. It was Jonathan Edwards who explained to me why I thought the destruction of those snails was a cosmic act.

For Edwards, the entirety of creation, from the grandest to the most trivial, is suffused with beauty: It is all the created expression of an infinitely beautiful God. In his *Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards writes, “For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory.” Creation is not accidentally beautiful, but is beautiful precisely because God intends it to point to himself as the source of its beauty.

This was a troubling yet enticing thought to me, a low-church Protestant. It troubled me because where Edwards saw the beauty of nature, I saw the possibility of temptation and distraction. Yet it enticed me because I could recount memories of sunrises, birdsong, mountain peaks, freckles on the face of a lover — all these natural beauties that

caused me, inexplicably, to love God more, though I could not explain why.

Jonathan Edwards explained to me my own experiences. He quelled my concerns that beauty necessarily meant idolatry, temptation, or distraction. Jonathan Edwards gave the world back to me. He showed me that every experience of beauty was God communicating to me a reflection of the divine beauty.

Therefore, to revel in the beauty of liturgy, or the natural world, the starry heavens, a holy soul, or even in the harmonious arrangement of human society is to enjoy — as in a mirror, dimly — the beauty of God. It is to hear faint echoes of the angelic chorus wafting down from the New Jerusalem. Like an artist desiring to delight her beloved by crafting beautiful works, so also God is, in the beauty of creation, wooing us to Himself. Nature, like scripture, is typological: It points beyond itself to Jesus, the lover of our souls — which brings me back to that snail.

For Edwards, this beauty is most fully realized when God unfolds it before our eyes through the infusion of grace. The result of that infusion, which Christians have traditionally called regeneration, is to see Christ and his beauty throughout all the world, even in the small things, like snails and worms.

Edwards’ notebook on *Images of Divine Things* contains my favorite passage in his entire corpus. The passage declares beauty, not tragedy, has the final word in God’s world, and even the tragedy of crushed snails shall finally give way to redemption: “The silkworm is a remarkable type of Christ, which, when it dies, yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing. Christ became a worm for our sakes, and by his death finished that righteousness with which believers are clothed, and thereby procured that we should be clothed with robes of glory.”

Edwards’ vision of the world is that of a love letter from the divine author, the lover of our souls, inviting us to enjoy his creation and calling us to see through the prism of created beauty the refulgent glory of a beautiful Jesus.

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*Justin Hawkins graduates from Yale Divinity School in May with an M.A.R., concentrating in philosophical theology. After graduation he plans to remain in New Haven doing research with the Rivendell Institute at Yale University, working in campus ministry through Trinity Baptist Church, where he is a member, and to continue tutoring and acting as headmaster of Grace Academy, a classical Christian school in New Haven. He has a B.A. in government from Georgetown University.*





# The Gaze of Holiness



By Edmund Ryder

*Compared to a photograph or painting, visual memory is very tenuous. The beloved features of an absent parent, child, or longed-for friend become increasingly vague. Given the current ubiquity of the selfie and other types of photography, it is difficult to imagine what it was like living in an age before forms of mechanical representation.*

Portraiture created before the advent of photography must have had a special visceral impact, due to its comparative rarity, and particularly when the subject matter was sacred personages, in other words, icons. Icons continue to evoke in us many questions. What is their function? Why do they look the way they do? What justifies their use?

## Visual Theology

In the Orthodox Church, icons (the Greek word can simply mean an “image”) are not decorative objects: They are essential aspects of religious experience. Icons have liturgical functions. They are used for corporate and private prayer and serve didactic purposes. Precise definitions guide the manner in which icons are created or “written.” For icons are read: They are visual “texts” permeated with the essentials of Christian theology. These factors have much to do with an icon’s seemingly alien appearance.

Icons purport to exhibit the true effigy of the figure portrayed. Therefore the artist’s personal creativity and innovations are of little import. This accounts for their repetitive quality; they are supposed to duplicate earlier, canonical examples. The Renaissance artist Filippo Lippi’s practice of using his beloved mistress Lucrezia as the model for the Madonna would not be acceptable practice for an icon, as the resulting work would bear no relationship to its subject and hence could never be a “true” icon.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is a form of portraiture, an icon’s function is not simply to bear a mere physical con-

sonance with its subject, but also to evoke “his eternal glorified face.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, some visual correspondence between the figure represented and the icon was necessary in order to be deemed legitimate, together with an identifying inscription – even when the subject is obviously Christ or his Mother, the Theotokos.

## Folk Art?

Even today, for both aesthetic and theological reasons, the acceptance of icons is not universal. Icons display a severe visual otherness that disturbs some viewers. To eyes accustomed to the tender and swooning saints of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, an icon’s lack of verisimilitude, narrative, and perspectively articulated space relegate them

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**Icons are material reminders that we too are called to be participants in this divine light.**

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to a type of dour folk art. Nevertheless, the paring away of unnecessary elements contributes to an icon’s unique beauty and hypnotic power.

The solemnity of an iconic representation gives it a meditative stillness, compelling the viewer to enter into a different space, a contemplative silence. The encounter with an icon conjures the words of Psalm 30: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” Although the viewer is seemingly the only active



participant, the one “looking,” it is also the viewer’s duty to become a reflection of the sacred individual represented, to actively become a participant in the process of *theosis*, or divinization, to become an image of the divine, to also be “seen” as the sacred reflection or counterpart of the icon.

### Brilliant With Light

The close connection between viewer and the viewed is demonstrated in the encounter between Saint Seraphim of Sarov, the noted 19th-century exemplar of the Hesychastic tradition of prayer in Russia, and his interviewer Nikolai Motovilov. At one point in their conversation, Motovilov declares his inability to gaze at the saint’s face, because it is brilliant with light. To which Father Seraphim replies: “Don’t be alarmed, your Excellence! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am.”<sup>3</sup> Icons are material reminders that we too are called to be participants in this divine light. They encourage us to imitate those exemplars who have succeeded in the spiritual struggle to attain it.

The principles for the veneration of icons were outlined by the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), although controversy continued until 843. The theological justifications focused on lofty intellectual

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**The icon is created out of material things: wood, pigment, plaster. Yet it reveals how matter can transcend its own limitations and achieve sanctity.**

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ideas, emphasizing the differences between the worship due to God alone and the veneration offered to the image of God, or his saints, and arguing that the veneration given to the icon reverts to the prototype represented.

Passions animated the discourse too. The council noted that seeing the icon evokes the memory and love for the person portrayed, and urged to approach an icon with *epipithesis*, a word that describes the lover’s “longing” for the beloved.

### Newspaper Encounters

Recently in *The New York Times* there appeared a photo of a weeping woman clutching the photograph of two young men shown side-by-side, who died during the current war in Iraq. The photograph was decked with flowers and was being kissed by another female figure, perhaps their mother. What was that woman attempting to do? Honor paper and chemical residues? No, she sought to preserve the



Renovation of an icon

connection between herself and those loved ones, severed by death. This powerful motivation for connection, for regaining lost presence, is a strong aspect of icon veneration.

The icon (also the photograph) is created out of material things: wood, pigment, plaster. Yet an icon displays how matter can transcend its own limitations and achieve sanctity. The supreme example of this transformation takes place in church, where the worshiper faces a wall of icons, the iconostasis. Through this wall the priest emerges to share the Eucharist with the worshiper. At that moment, it is as though an icon of Christ is liberated from its material limitations, and the communicant and Christ merge and become one.

How, though, was it possible to justify the representation of Christ? In the centuries when the church was grappling with who Christ was – God, man, a man adopted by God – a question emerged.

Who exactly is represented in an icon of Christ? Can the divinity of Christ be shown in an icon, or do icons merely display a likeness of Christ's human, physical body?

The church had decreed at the Council of Chalcedon (451) that Christ was fully human and fully divine simultaneously in every atom of his being. Therefore, to represent the historical Christ meant that both sides of his nature were always present, and were reflected in the image. In later discourse, iconophile authors often used the term "*perigra-  
phein*"—to "encircle" or "circumscribe"—to explain the incarnation of Christ as God housed or encircled in a human body.

### "Behold a Miracle"

If it was acceptable to represent Christ, then it was deemed legitimate to represent his mother as well, for she was the container of the uncontainable God. By representing Mary with Christ, incarnational theology was reaffirmed, and such metaphors as Christ taking his flesh from his mother could be subtly taught. The obscuring of sacred matter behind veils is a metaphor that alludes to the incarnation of Christ. Pope Leo I wrote that Christ's divinity was hidden by a "veil" of human flesh.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, when one looks at an icon, it is one's sacred family that one beholds. One knows their history from the Bible, liturgy, and sermons. These recollections add immeasurably to an encounter with an icon. An icon serves as a meditation on material reality, which can be transformed and sanctified. An epigram by Byzantine poet Manuel Philes (c. 1275-1350), describing an icon of the Archangel Michael, captures the great paradox of mere matter representing something spiritually immaterial:

*"When art paints an imitation of bodies, the painting and the thing represented have the same nature. For it is nothing new to paint matter with matter. But whenever it represents the mind and burning fire, and encompasses both spirit and light with brief outline, behold a miracle, oh stranger, and marvel at the art!"*<sup>5</sup>

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Edmund C. Ryder, *Lecturer in Christian Art and Architecture at Yale Divinity School, focuses his research on the late Byzantine period. He received his doctorate from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts in 2007.*

### Notes

- 1 G. Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. 1 (Penguin Classics, 1987), p. 218.
- 2 L. Ouspensky & V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press), p. 39.

- 3 N. Motovilov, *On Acquisition of the Holy Spirit*, posted as "Saint Seraphim of Sarov's Conversation with Nicholas Motovilov" at <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx>.
- 4 J. D. Sieger, "Visual Metaphor as Theology: Leo the Great's Sermons on the Incarnation and the Arch Mosaics at S. Maria Maggiore," *Gesta*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1987), p. 85.
- 5 E. Miller, ed. *Manuelis Philae Carmina. Ex codicibus Escorialensibus, Florentinis, Parisinis, et Vaticanis*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1855-57), p. 36.

### BY THE WINDOW

By Nathan Spoon

Thou | turgid swirl, in which all is possible  
and nothing is possible and nothing is  
impossible. Where the salvaged word re-

sonates | boreal semblance overspread  
pervading | Beyond the desk window rain  
trundles leaves. By trimmed | lamplight,

the terror the awe of pages tilled or  
marred. | Place of the mind: convolved  
citadel | eddying with omens. By Thy

goodness the burst of the lilac bush | Large  
stone sealing the snakepit. My | bulwark.



# The Sacred Today



By Karla Cavarra Britton

*What do we consider sacred today? How do we express it in built form? How do we address these questions within our own religious traditions? How do we address these questions within the pluralism of the public sphere?*

The difficulties are acute. To re-address such foundational questions is, however, critical for both architects and religious communities in the current cultural climate, where religious buildings often have such significant impact on the built environment. One thinks of recently constructed state mosques in the Middle East, contemporary cathedrals in North American cities, or even the small house churches of Communist China.

The need for such interdisciplinary conversation is especially evident – and it is uniquely possible – where schools of divinity and architecture exist side by side, as they do at Yale. Across a range of aca-

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**In this more individualistic and pluralistic age, there is an underlying ambivalence about what religious buildings can communicate.**

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demic disciplines, in fact, there is increasing recognition that religious conviction, or at least the search for recognizable patterns of meaning, persists as a potent force in contemporary life. Law, medicine, and environmental studies are all examining how religion is shaping cultural and personal identities in surprisingly complex ways.

## **A “Post-Secular Age”**

We may therefore now be entering into a new paradigmatic moment of engagement with the relationship between matter and spirit, and therefore between architecture and religious thought.

One reason is: We may be more open than previous generations in our acknowledgment of modern life’s religious roots. Following Jürgen Habermas,

we recognize today that in spite of the homogenizing forces of globalization, the distinctiveness fostered by religious commitments seems only to have strengthened in recent decades. This has called into question what Habermas terms the secularization hypothesis – that increasing material wealth and modernization would necessarily diminish the role of religious identity.

Indeed, Habermas now speaks of a “post-secular age” in which political and social movements are powerfully shaped by religious conviction, in part as a means of resistance to the ubiquity of market capitalism. In light of these changed circumstances, Habermas argues that the idea of secularization has to be nuanced to take into account the continuing influence of religious convictions in social discourse, albeit at a more individualized level.<sup>1</sup> In the case of religious buildings, this requires a reformulation of what sacred spaces are, and how they are conceived.

## **City of God**

Since late Roman times in the West, ecclesiastical form has traditionally emanated from the shared cultural narrative of Augustine’s concept of the *ci-vitas dei* – an intermingling of historical reality with spatial metaphor in the conception of two cities. This framework provided a cosmological synthesis for human history, guaranteeing its ultimate meaning and providing a stable communal vision for patrons, artists, and architects seeking to evoke the promise of the heavenly city.

Today, we can no longer assume such a commonly held ideal, neither within Christian tradition nor certainly within a pluralistic society that emphasizes the priority of the individual rather than a unify-



ing experience of the sacred. How, then, is one to build a religiously meaningful work of architecture?

The Catalan architect Rafael Moneo has expressed this dilemma well. Reflecting on his own approach to these questions in building the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, commissioned in 2006, he wrote,

*What are the architectural implications of this shift from an understanding of the world as the civitas dei to a perception of religion as an individual, private matter? This change implies that an architect of a church cannot appeal to society as a whole, but rather quite the opposite: Society is actually asking the architect to take the risk of offering others his vision of what constitutes a sacred space.*<sup>2</sup>

Moneo's perspective suggests a framework for the challenges of the production of ecclesiastical form. In this more individualistic and pluralistic age, there is an underlying ambivalence about what

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**The architect today is actually asked by society “to take the risk of offering others his [or her] vision of what constitutes sacred space.”**

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religious buildings can communicate. Such ambivalence establishes the parameters within which the contemporary architect of sacred works must seek to maneuver. Without a foundational meta-narrative, there is no assurance that a built form can convey a cohesive communal vision of humanity's relationship to God. Thus, rather than conceiving of the religious building as capable of speaking from a center of reference drawn from the perennial beliefs and commitments of ecclesial communities, the architect today is actually asked by society “to take the risk of offering others his [or her] vision of what constitutes sacred space.”<sup>3</sup>

### **“We Belong to the Future”**

Mies van der Rohe, the heroic master of a universal and modernist architectural language, was particularly engaged in the question of what architecture is and how it might reasonably relate to a world that increasingly crowds out the life of the spirit. Mies sought to understand how “the art of building” reflected modern questions of the nature of beauty, art, and the human spirit. As Mies famously put it, “For what is right and significant for any era – including the new era – is this: to give the spirit the opportunity for existence.”

Mies found guidance in the work of the Jesuit priest and theologian Romano Guardini. In particular, Guardini's *Letters from Lake Como* of 1927 expressed a worldview that sought a path through the struggles and paradoxes of the modern world. Guardini was especially helpful to Mies in articulating how a search for transcendent values could be aligned with an embrace of experimentation and advancement:

*We belong to the future. We must put ourselves into it, each one at his station. We must not plant ourselves against the new and attempt to retain a beautiful world, one that must perish. Nor must we try to build, with creative fantasy, a new one that claims to be immune to the ravages of becoming. We have to formulate the nascent. But that we can only do if we honestly say yes to it; yet with incorruptible heart we have to retain our awareness of all that is destructive and inhuman in it. Our time is given to us as a soil on which we stand and as a task we have to master.*<sup>4</sup>

Guardini's challenge still stands as a reminder to those who wrestle with questions of the sacred and its expression in built form – and who confront the risk that one is required to take not only to design, but even to consider the question of what sacred means today.

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*Karla Cavarra Britton teaches at the Yale School of Architecture, and has previously taught in the Religion and Arts concentration for the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. She has written books on modern architecture and is editor of Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture (Yale, 2010)*

### **Notes**

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, “The Resurgence of Religion: A Challenge to the Secular Self-Understanding of Modernity,” the Castle Lectures, Yale University, October 2008.
- 2 Rafael Moneo, “Architecture as a Vehicle for Religious Experience: The Los Angeles, Cathedral” in *Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture*, edited by Karla Cavarra Britton (Yale, 2010).
- 3 Moneo, p. 159.
- 4 Romano Guardini, *Briefe vom Comer See* (Mainz, 1927), p. 93, quoted in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, trans. Mark Jarzombek (MIT Press, 1991), p. 196.





Bjorn Amundsen

### Makoto Fujimura

is an internationally recognized artist, writer, collaborator, arts advocate, and Christian thinker. (See [makotofujimura.com](http://makotofujimura.com).) His work has been shown around the world, including the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. He founded the International Arts Movement in 1992, and from 2003-09 was a presidential appointee to the National Council on the Arts. The Fujimura Institute was established in 2011. Last year he received the American Academy of Religion's "Religion and the Arts" award. He recently responded to questions from *Reflections*. His work *Golden Sea* is on the cover.

#### On whether art is a necessity to spiritual life:

**FUJIMURA:** God is profoundly gratuitous in creation. I write in my book *Culture Care*: "A Christian understanding of beauty begins with the recognition that God does not need us, or the creation. Beauty is a gratuitous gift of the creator God; it finds its source and its purpose in God's character. God, out of his gratuitous love, created a world he did not need because he is an Artist." God does not "need" us, and yet God has created us in God's Image, created us out of God's abundance.

#### On whether beauty is a neglected religious theme:

Beauty has been neglected in the modernist era, and in culture at large, including the church. As human beings, we seek more than utility, efficiency, or survival. What kind of a world do we want to live in? What should our children aspire to? Churches should be a microcosm of the Kingdom being ushered in, and should reflect the gratuitous nature of God and our internal desire for a world that liberates us from "our bondage to decay."

#### On whether beauty can "save the world," as Dostoyevsky writes in *The Idiot*:

We have to take that quote in context. Prince Myshkin in the novel is saying it more as a rhetorical question than a definitive statement. Beauty is the sister of Truth and Goodness, as von Balthasar has written. In an integrated vision for the wholeness of human thriving, yes, beauty-truth-goodness are connected intimately.



### Mary Button

is minister of visual art at First Congregational Church in Memphis, TN. (See [marybutton.com](http://marybutton.com).) There she designs and oversees an array of annual art projects that embody the congregation's mission. She has created Stations of the Cross that speak to issues of mental illness, mass incarceration, and LGBTQ equality. The daugh-

ter of a Lutheran minister, she has a B.F.A. degree in photography and imaging from New York University and an M.T.S. from Emory's Candler School of Theology. See her work on pp. 7 and 54 of this issue.

#### On the importance of art at church:

**BUTTON:** It's part of our ministry of hospitality. It makes us more welcoming. And it's a pedagogical tool. Some people are auditory learners, some are tactile learners, others are visual. We want to meet needs in ways that go beyond preaching and singing.

#### On involving church members in art-making:

It's a very bonding experience. There's intergenerational interaction. People of different abilities can take part.

#### On the place of art in theology:

Everything that hangs in the sanctuary is an expression of our love for people who come to worship with us. In the Stations of the Cross series, I believe that Jesus stands in solidarity with the outcasts and the despised. That's what I try to communicate.



### Jae-Im Kim

is associated with the first generation of Korean abstract expressionists. (See [OMSC.org](http://OMSC.org).) She is known internationally for a genial spirituality that draws on Asian dance, music, and calligraphy. In 2009, she was in the artist residency program at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, CT., and her work was featured at the Yale ISM. From Korea, she recently answered email questions from *Reflections* in translation. See her work on pp. 12 and 50.

#### On the importance of the Bible to her work:

**KIM:** Meeting my husband, who is a faithful Christian, was the point that I began to have my faith experiences. When I was teaching at Towson University as an exchange professor in 1989, I decided to transcribe the Bible. I continued after returning to Korea, and it took three years to finish. Since then, I have poured biblical content into my paintings. I started to express God's love in my paintings.

#### On the impact of visual art on belief:

Compared to merely listening to Bible verses, when one sees them in a painting the same verses linger a little longer. Focusing upon God I'm trying to paint with my whole body and soul. Seeing the Bible verses expressed in paintings helps me understand the biblical message and deepen their impression so the verses stay longer in me.

#### Of her time at Yale and OSMC:

Of course I was greatly influenced by that experience, because for ten months I was immersed in the depths of God's love.

## CREDITS

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## POETRY

**Taha Muhammad Ali** (1931-2011), born in Galilee, was a Palestinian poet and short story writer who ran a souvenir shop in Nazareth. Translated into English, his books include *Never Mind: Twenty Poems and a Story* (Ibis, 2000) and *So What: New & Selected Poems, 1971–2005* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006).

“Twigs” from *So What: New & Selected Poems, 1971–2005*. Copyright 2006 by Taha Muhammad Ali. Reprinted with permission of Copper Canyon Press.

**Hayden Carruth** (1921-1998) was born in Waterbury, CT., and had a long career as poet and critic. His book *Collected Shorter Poems 1946-1991* (Copper Canyon Press, 1992) won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

“Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey” from *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991-1995*. Copyright 1996 by Hayden Carruth. Reprinted with permission from Copper Canyon Press.

**Tom Hennen**, now retired, grew up in Minnesota and worked, among other jobs, in the wildlife section of the state Department of Natural Resources. His books include *Darkness Sticks to Everything: Collected and New Poems* (Copper Canyon Press, 2013).

“Love of Other Things” from *Darkness Sticks to Everything: Collected and New Poems* (Copper Canyon Press, 2013). Copyright 2013 by Tom Hennen. Reprinted with permission of Copper Canyon Press.

**Elizabeth Carothers Herron**, emeritus professor of arts and humanities at Sonoma State University, is the author of a collection of fiction, *While the Distance Widens*, and four poetry chapbooks. Her essays on art and ecology have appeared in *Orion* and other magazines. She works as a volunteer on wildlands projects for Landpaths and is a commissioned law enforcement chaplain.

“Let the wounds bleed” Copyright by Elizabeth Carothers Herron. Used by permission.

**Nathan Spoon** is a bookseller at Parnassus Books in Nashville, TN. His poems have appeared in *Oxford Poetry*, the anthology *What Have You Lost?* (Greenwillow, 1999, edited by Naomi Shihab Nye), and in limited-edition chapbooks.

“By the Window” Copyright by Nathan Spoon. Used by permission.

**Thomas H. Troeger**, the J. Edward and Ruth Cox Lantz Professor of Christian Communication at YDS, is an author, columnist, poet, flutist, conference leader, and ordained minister (Episcopal and Presbyterian).

“Not all beauty succumbs to time” from *God, You Made All Things for Singing: Hymn Texts, Anthems, and Poems for a New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Copyright by Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.

**Christian Wiman** is Senior Lecturer in Religion and Literature at YDS. Editor of *Poetry* magazine from 2003-13, he is the author of the books of poetry *Once in the West: Poems* (FSG, 2014) and *Every Riven Thing* (FSG, 2010) and the memoir *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (FSG, 2013).

“Every Riven Thing” from *Every Riven Thing* (FSG, 2010), and “Music Maybe” from *Once in the West* (FSG, 2014). Copyright by Christian Wiman. Reprinted with permission.



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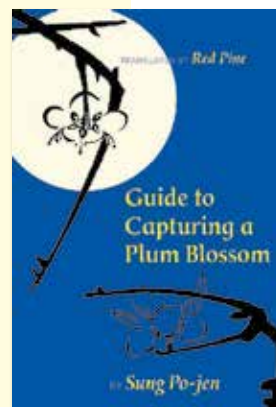
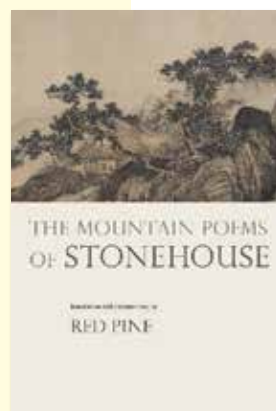
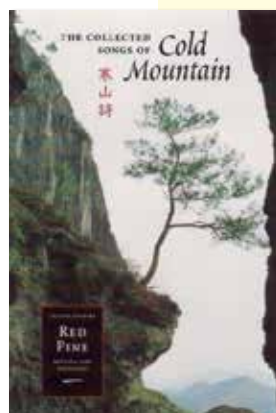
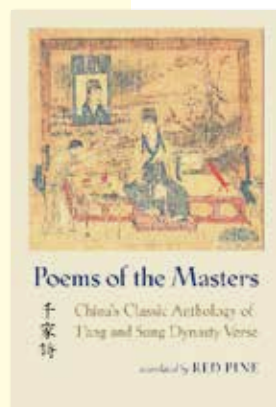
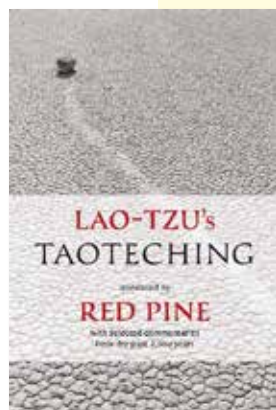
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# From the Editor: Fierce Grandeur

By Ray Waddle



It was a deft move by the adults to make sure Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741) was in the syllabus at my public high school. The sermon offered a fierce model of colonial literary rhetoric. It revealed the acute mind of a Great Awakening divine. It

did its work: It scared the hell out of us. Decades later I can still feel the original gale force of its stern language on us young readers.

Preparing this *Reflections* issue, I had to wonder if such a fearsome generational impression about faith, church, and God would have been different if we had also been exposed to Edwards' vision of divine beauty in a sermon like "God's Excellencies." It might come as a surprise to survivors of the "Sinners in the Hands" homily that the beauty – indeed the loveliness – of God was paramount to Edwards.\*\*

In his 2001 book *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, the late theologian Edward Farley writes, "I intend no hyperbole when I say that, in Edwards' interpretation of philosophical and religious themes (God, redemption, evil, human psychology and cosmology), beauty is more central and more pervasive than in any other text in the history of Christian theology."

It's no idle question to ask whether American anxiety about the future of faith would ease a bit if only people regarded the life of belief as an invitation to the grandeur of God rather than a slate of rules and regulations to follow. But the idea of the beauty of God faces formidable contemporary obstacles.

The very word "beauty" is tarnished nowadays, seen in many circles as a non-starter, elitist, a throwback to aesthetic standards that enforce the exclusion of those who aren't members of the guild or conservatory.

The drift of contemporary sensibility moves against beauty too. Something has happened in the last 40 years – new economic struggles, family difficulties, new magnitudes of loneliness, aggressiveness, and addiction. A national style has taken an ugly turn toward winner-take-all preening and random mass murder. In utilitarian USA, and often at church, beauty has to defend itself as something vital to human spirit and not just an expensive accessory.

If Jonathan Edwards is right, then beauty is a core trait of God and a needful thing to us. We could use more of it – beauty that infuses thought and faith from the inside, a refreshing glint of grandeur that connects creature and creator. To praise God is to receive something of the brilliant glory of God and reflect it back to its divine source, Edwards says. A radiant circle of care is completed and renewed.

"The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God and are refunded back again to their original," Edwards once wrote. "So that the whole is *of* God and *in* God, and *to* God, and God is the beginning, middle and end in the affair."

Last fall, in an address at the American Academy of Religion, artist Makoto Fujimura spoke to the urgency of restoring beauty to an everyday place in people's lives. He worries about the degraded relations between faith and art in a time of fear and distrust. He prays that healing will occur between faith and life, the rational and the intuitive, belief and beauty.

"I pray that out of the 'irreversible tragedies of our time' (Irish poet Micheal O'Siadhail) with the Wasteland looming before us, we will look up and know – through our uncertainties, fears and our failures of faith – that we all can experience Genesis moments, new beginnings, new paths," declared Fujimura, whose work is featured in this *Reflections* front cover.

He finds much to learn from the Gospel story about Mary of Bethany, her determination to honor Jesus by anointing him with expensive oil. The disciples protest, but her extravagant act of affection mirrors God's design – and the impulses of beauty. Fujimura advocates the pursuit of "Culture Care," the practice of generosity and creativity as an alternative to the surly, destructive habits of culture war. He enlists everyone – Christians, Jews, atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, plumbers, teachers, nurses, artists – in a new vision that makes beauty a daily expectation.

"Art is gratuitous," Fujimura said. "Art is extravagant. But so is our God. God does not need us; yet he created us out of his gratuitous love."

In this *Reflections* issue, we hope to catch intuitions and arguments that are growing more insistent against a culture of despair: Beauty is a divine excellency within reach.

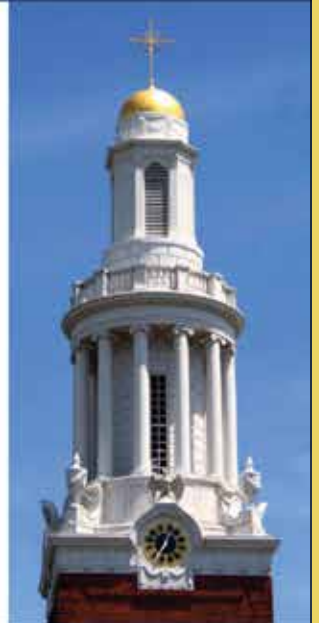
\*\* Explore Edwards' works in the vast online collection of the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University – see [edwards.yale.edu](http://edwards.yale.edu).



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