

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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All That Has Breath

Jeff Gladstone

Dordt College, jeff.gladstone@dordt.edu

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All That Has Breath

Abstract

"Outwardly we grinned and hooted for the day's technological success, but inwardly we knew the day had delivered to us a richer treasure."

Posting about technology and aesthetics from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/all-that-has-breath/>

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in things

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All That Has Breath

Jeff Gladstone

When I was in first grade in 1967, the uniform testimony of boys was “I hate girls,” but I had a crush on Liz Marty. A first-grader’s crush can be a powerful thing, and one day during story-time as we were all seated in a bunch on the floor, this very shy six-year-old bravely leaned over and kissed the hem of Liz’s skirt. Unfortunately for me, Matt Douglas was both a witness and a loud-mouth, so he instantly announced to the whole class what I had done. Fortunately for me, Mrs. Bordman understood little boys and girls and expertly defused the tension (and some of my embarrassment) with her opinion: “Well, I think it’s sweet.”

So, there you have it: a brave confession... and, for the purposes of this essay, evidence that our outward selves and our inward selves do not always tell the same story. While the outward declaration of six-year-old boys might be, “I hate girls,” clearly the inward truth is more complex. Could it be that a similarly disingenuous relationship exists between technology and aesthetics? Could it be that, compelled by our culturally-ingrained tendency toward pragmatism, reductionism, and bravado, we outwardly praise the clever functioning and data-described achievements of our technological creations, yet inwardly we sense that there is, or ought to be, something more to it than that—something more soul-stirring and more consistent with the good stuff of which we’re made, and more reflective of the beauty of our Maker?

I find that I use the word “cool” too often in my engineering lectures. Finite element analysis is “cool.” Derivation of the Euler buckling equation is “cool.” This and that feature in the CAD software is “cool.” I describe as “really cool” the Atlas V solid rocket boosters that a bunch of us worked together to design back in the early 2000s. But I have not been brave enough to try to capture in a lecture what I really mean by “cool” and that it means something deeper—some kind of richly satisfying interaction of

technical tools with beauty and wonder and awe. It is more than “cool” to sense that, like Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire*, “when I run, I feel His pleasure.” It was more than “cool” to gather with my partners-in-creation in bleachers a couple of miles from the launch pad to watch our rocket climb to space for the first time. To feel the chest-thumping crackle of the solid rocket boosters, their arc-shaped, orbit-bound trail left behind in the pale blue Florida evening sky. To sense the camaraderie of friends bound together in love for one another—were we brave enough to admit it—and in gratitude to our Creator for this day to live and to celebrate those years of labors, setbacks, arguments, and successes. Outwardly we grinned and hooted for the day’s technological success, but inwardly we knew the day had delivered to us a richer treasure.

When I was in second grade in 1968, NASA boosted the first humans out of earth’s orbit and into the moon’s orbit. During that December flight, Apollo 8 astronauts James Lovell and Frank Borman were put on the spot by Mission Control to “do something appropriate” on Christmas Eve for their earthling television audience.¹ Putting aside the temptation to say something cute—perhaps a re-written version of “Jingle Bells”—these two extraordinarily talented and technologically trained men instinctively reached instead for wonder and beauty, expressed in words given by the author of wonder and beauty:

“...for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you:

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light...
...And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear,” and it was so.
And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters He called the Seas. And God saw that it was good.’

And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas – and God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth.”

And with that brief message, the technology of the moment was upstaged by the beauty of the moment. Or perhaps it wasn’t upstaged. Perhaps it was brought to fullness. Perhaps technology was brought to the fullness that God intended all along. The creature that figured out how to build hardware that would fly to the moon is the same creature that figured out how to make the harp and lyre and strings and pipe—for all that has breath might praise the Lord.

So, let us do our technology well, and let us infuse it with, and use it for, a beauty and wonder and awe that is reflective of our King and His Kingdom. And when the calculating is done, let's be a little less shy about gazing with thankful and affectionate eyes along the lines of the shapes we have made and the paths that our spaceships trace across the blue Florida skies and the patterns that our harvesters carve over the rolling Iowa hills. Let's be brave... for Matt Douglas knows not of what he speaks.

FOOTNOTES

1. PBS Nova, "Apollo's Daring Mission," December 26, 2018.