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The Making of Beautiful Things: A Review of Adorning the Dark

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The Making of Beautiful Things: A Review of Adorning the Dark

Abstract

"With a sacramental view of the world, we are pointed toward deeper creational truths that are accessible to all humans."

Posting about the book *Adorning the Dark* 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/the-making-of-beautiful-things-a-review-of-adorning-the-dark/>

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Comments

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The Making of Beautiful Things: A Review of *Adorning the Dark*

Channon Visscher

October 5, 2021

Title: *Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community, Calling, and the Mystery of Making*

Author: Andrew Peterson

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In a broken world, the presence of persisting beauty is not merely ornamental, but a matter of life and death. ¹ In his 2017 book, *Culture Care*, Makoto Fujimura explores the essential role of “feeding our culture’s soul” with creativity and generosity: “In order to make culture inhabitable,” Fujimura writes, “we must all choose to give away beauty gratuitously.”

This is perhaps an apt description of the life and work of singer-songwriter and author, Andrew Peterson. In his recent book, *Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community, Calling, and the Mystery of Making*, Peterson explores what it means to *make* beautiful things at the intersection of creativity and faith, inspiration and discipline, vocation and community.

Adorning the Dark is best described as an organized collection of personal reflections: part memoir and part writing advice. Above all, it is a work of encouragement for those seeking to make (or for those seeking to find) beauty in a broken world or through seasons of exile. The book walks us through Peterson’s “own faltering journey as a songwriter, storyteller, and Christian” (xiii), as part of a calling to “use whatever gifts I’ve been given to tell the truth as beautifully as I can” (ix). Listeners and readers who first discovered Peterson’s work from different directions—whether in concert during the *Behold the Lamb of God* advent tour, through well-known songs he’s written (*Is He Worthy?*), or his *Wingfeather Saga* series of books—will find a reflective behind-the-scenes look at Andrew’s journey as a singer-songwriter, author, and maker in search of good things. These stories range from the early yet passing thrill of being able to buy his first recording equipment, to working as a Nashville waiter trying to score a gig, to the simple joy of homemade maple syrup.

Throughout this semi-autobiographical tour, Peterson explores numerous key principles that must play a role in the work of making, including selectivity, discipline, discernment, and the relationship between artist and audience. Moreover, out of this collection of reflections, we can identify and further explore some broader themes that emerge from the storytelling woven throughout the book.

The first is that the work of creation must take place in **community**. Community plays a key role in supporting and receiving the things that we make, and in our calling to be co-creators of truth and beauty. Thus, while the book places an emphasis on makers—authors and musicians in particular—Peterson notes that we are *all* creative, because we all bear the image of a God we call Creator. Consistent with Fujimura’s vision above is the recognition that just as art nourishes community (Chapter 14), community nourishes art (Chapter 15). This led Peterson in 2008 to create the Rabbit Room, a ministry that cultivates a Christ-centered community through art, music, and story. As Andrew notes early in his career, “I had to work at it, learn to be objective, and—this is the big one—ask for help, help, help.”

The second major theme is the importance of **place**—that we are called to live faithfully wherever we find ourselves. Peterson notes that the “Christian’s calling, in part, is to proclaim God’s dominion in every corner of the world” (18). For the Reformed reader, this is evocative of Kuyper’s “every square inch.” But in our (correct) emphasis on the *cosmic* implications of this call, it is often easy for us to neglect those square inches in our own little corners of the world: as Peterson puts it, “dedicating to God the world within our reach” (18).

This is a vision of our place in the world that is *sacramental*. Quoting Wendell Berry, Peterson reminds us that “there are no unsacred places, only sacred places and desecrated places” (17). Wherever we might be found, then, is not *merely* a place waiting for our *real* vocation to begin, but an opportunity to live faithfully in our pursuit of truth and beauty. As Peterson puts it (while describing his move to something of a fixer-upper), “wherever you are, you might as well go ahead and pull up the carpet. Make it beautiful, even if you can’t afford it. Let your imagination run wild” (54).² In a broken world, or a time of exile (Jer. 29), even as we wait for “everything sad to become untrue,”³ we can tend and keep and make something beautiful in our little corner of the world.

Indeed, this also represents an important shift in how we think about **vocation**—not as unlocking some secret formula that represents our own personal pathway to future success, but as living faithfully in our current time, place, and circumstances, however and wherever we are found. Reflecting on his own call to a career in music, Peterson writes “You don’t need a record contract to serve God with your gifts. You don’t need to move to Nashville. You just need to stay where you are, play wherever you can, and keep your eyes peeled. You never know what might happen” (1). Are we waiting for something to happen, or are we living this out faithfully, here and now?

The final main theme *story*, and these sixteen chapters, are each full of stories from Peterson's own journey, exploring different aspects of the creative processes. Peterson's writing throughout the book is both personal and generous, drawing from his own experience but with numerous connections and pointers to the works of others (including J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Rich Mullins) and examples that demonstrate the central role of relationships and community in the work and play of making new things.

Adorning the Dark explores the mystery of the ways in which stories, and especially the "old stories" resonate: why are we drawn to Tolkien or Lewis? What is the relationship between the things that we "create" and "discover"? Along the way, Peterson explores the problem of "Christian art," which is too often "didactic, or manipulative, or merely pragmatic." Instead, quoting Madeline L'Engle, Peterson notes that there is a sense in which "art that's good, true, and beautiful is Christian art, no matter what the artists believes" (84).

With a sacramental view of the world, we are pointed toward deeper creational truths that are accessible to all humans. This is the shared joy that comes through the making (and discovering) of beautiful things.

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1. A Matter of Life and Death is the title of Chapter 5 in *Adorning the Dark*
 2. In the opening chapter of *Culture Care*, Makoto Fujimura relates a story about his wife buying flowers at a time they couldn't afford it. Her reply: "*We need to feed our souls, too.*"
 3. from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King*.