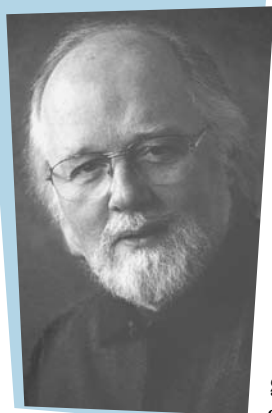


The nineteenth century American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a piece titled “Self Reliance”. In a context I can’t recall I stumbled on this essay in my late teens. The essay has merit and at the time I found it had a certain appeal as an invitation away from conformity and encouragement to a confidence that would be undaunted by the everyday challenges of life. This memory came to mind as I have been thinking about waiting, weakness and vulnerability as gospel virtues. These virtues pose a challenge to the prevailing themes of modern life; ambition, power and individualism. In our fast-paced technological world self-reliance seems both relevant and necessary. But something gets lost in the mix. What easily slips out of sight is community, relationship and our need for one another.

Emerson was an advocate for a bold individualism. This echoes the Romantic idea that set the individual on a pedestal. Nowhere is this idea more pronounced than among artists: the writer, the painter, the poet, the actor all seeking to live out their unique qualities as “creatives”. Yet it is common to read of the inner anxieties, conflicts, fears and brokenness in the lives of artists. In a little book titled *Art and Fear* (review page two) we are given a glimpse into some



with an idea, a theme or a technique. And both the artist and that which they engage require room to move. I once heard author

of the “perils and rewards of artmaking”. It is suggested that “art is like beginning a sentence before you know its ending.” (p.20) Artists are not alone in the work they do. They engage with words, stone, the body, or



Adoration of the Magi
by Giotto Di Bondone, 1304-06
Courtesy of www.giottodibondone.org

P.D. James speak to this. She was asked what she was going to do with one of her characters in her next book. In her response she made it clear that she did not have full control over her characters – she needed to wait to see what they would do. Artists are called to live with a good measure of uncertainty. It is this lack of control and predictability that invites the artist to a place of waiting, weakness and vulnerability.

We are inclined to believe that human dignity rests on what we can achieve. Activity is the measure of life. The great poet John Milton was troubled by the onset of his blindness. He lamented how he would no longer be able to engage his gift of writing; “... to serve therewith his Maker and present a true account...”. Despite this fear he was able to conclude his sonnet with the words “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

It has been observed that there is a close link between loving and waiting. “Where

love is, action is destined to pass into passion: working into waiting.” (W. A. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*) The culture of the “instant” is a sham and traps us on the surface of life. All who love know something of the call to wait, not least the artist who wrestles into being some new artistic form. Though skill and training are important for the artist they are most likely to flourish when they are not the focus. Dependency and humility are more valuable to the creative process than pedigree and power. And so it is from a place of weakness that the creative gift can do its magic.

Vulnerability too seems inevitable for the artist. A work of art is deeply personal – capturing something of the inner life of the artist. It carries a mix of idea, emotion and personal interpretation put into the open for others to see, to evaluate and respond. This is surely a place of vulnerability which may be accompanied by fear, covered by arrogance or something in between.

It may be obvious by now that the characteristics I have pointed to in relation to art also show up in the context of Advent and in the biblical account of the gospel. Waiting, weakness and vulnerability are all counter-intuitive as options for contemporary life. But they are integral to the biblical call to faithfulness. Advent is a time of waiting where we are to turn our attention less to tasks to be done than to promises to be received. The strong claim that the Word became flesh and “tabernacled” among us is at the same time a story of weakness and vulnerability – the babe of Bethlehem. If one surveys the Pantheon of the gods – it is evident that power and self interest prevail. A dramatically different account of divinity

continued on page 4

Books

Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking

David Bayles & Ted Orland; The Image – Continuum Press, 2008. (118 pgs)

This little book was first published in 1993 and has been through 20 printings. It is a book for artists and of value for those who know artists. Making art is not as easy as we sometimes assume and Bayles and Orland explore some of the reasons why Artmaking is such a challenge. The artist they contend needs to find and follow their own voice and this presupposes a good measure of self-acceptance and a sense of calling.

The authors are concerned about those who quit making art. To stop doing art is acceptable and probably needed from time to time. “Quitting means not starting again – and art is all about starting again.” (p.10) “Making art is dangerous and revealing. Making art precipitates self-doubt, stirring deep waters that lay between what you know you should be, and what you fear you might be.” (p.13) Uncertainty is integral to the artist’s craft. The brush on the canvas, those opening words, that beginning gesture – the artist is never sure where they will lead. “Uncertainty is the essential, inevitable and all-pervasive companion to your desire to make art.” (p.21)

Fears of artmaking come in two kinds for the artist, fears about themselves and fears about their reception by others. A chapter is devoted to each of these. In the first they discuss pretending – thinking you don’t really have the talent, perfection – here is where the artist fails to grasp that art is a human activity and the limitations of our humanity will find their way into our art. Because art calls for an audience the artist lives with the risk of being misunderstood, of work not being acceptable and of generating disapproval. Then follows a chapter on the practicalities of how to find your work – that is to get it done with all that may distract you.

The book concludes with chapters on engaging the outside world – getting your art out there; the academic world and its value in shaping and preparing the artist and a chapter on how concepts play into the making of art. The final chapter speaks about

the human voice. Here the authors underline how artwork is ordinary work, but it is hard work, work that requires commitment and willingness to live with uncertainty.

This is a book filled with insights and plenty to encourage artists and assist them on the journey of self-understanding.

Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue

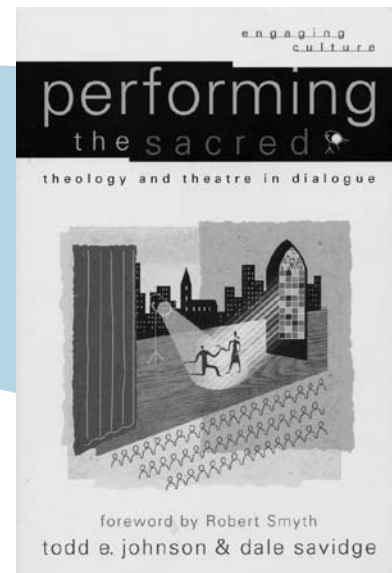
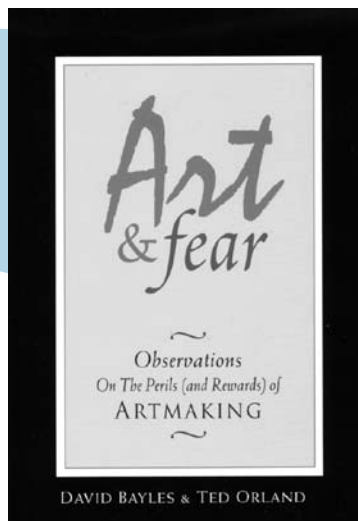
Todd E. Johnson & Dale Savidge, Baker Academic, 2009. (147 pgs)

In current conversations about faith and art, drama often gets less attention than music and visual art.

This new book by Johnson and Savidge should help to change this. What we have

in this context that he engages the theme of incarnation, community and presence. He makes this suggestion; “Live theatre, ... of all the arts, may best approximate the incarnational character of our God because of its combination of narrative and performance qualities.” (p.58) He points to the intimacy of real time live performance to explore the notion of presence and make the connection with human experience of divine presence – or the idea of sacramentality. He contends that the *live* is superior to the *virtual*. Johnson has an entire chapter on live theatre in a virtual world which is worth the price of the book.

Savidge takes up the last two chapters, the first about being an artist in the theatre and the second on being an audience in the the-



here is neither a “how to” book nor a simple review of the history of religion and theatre. The authors’ clear intent is to probe deeply into the meaning of theatre and to bring the theatre experience into dialogue with theology. Common elements of these two areas are incarnation, community and presence. The authors do not write the various chapters together but each in turn takes on a topic. In the opening chapter Savidge points to the interesting connection between ritual and theatre and explores that connection at length. He makes the obvious link between theatre and what happens in our churches on Sunday morning.

With the history set out in the first chapter Johnson takes up the intriguing topic of “the theology of the theatrical process”. It is

atre – the first about work the second about play. Theatre is an interpretive art – distinct from “creative art” which invites the actor to engage a story or character. This is no easy task and can be the source of conflict for the Christian actor. In the chapter on audience Savidge upholds the value of attending theatre and even of influencing what happens on stage – something one cannot do while watching a performance on television.

The conclusion of the book consists of a dialogue between theatre (Savidge) and theology (Johnson). This is a book with plenty of insights on the links between theatre and the Christian faith. Both authors bring a wealth of experience to the conversation throughout the book and leave the reader wanting to get to the theatre. ■

Protestants and Catholics – Arts Focus

Two quite diverse religious communities have expressed intent to give more attention to the arts. Just recently Ravi Zacharias International Ministries has expressed its commitment to give more attention to the arts. It is their view that Christians need to be more intentional about stewardship of culture. They are alert to the reality that an entertainment narrative is shaping culture and that alternatives are needed. Noting that art informs us about our human condition and is a window onto our values they see the arts as an important site for Christian engagement. Two panel discussions are available on the RZIM website www.rzim.org. The podcasts are under the title *Redeeming the Arts* and took place November 1, and 7, 2009. It is interesting to note that goodness, beauty and truth were key themes in these panel conversations. These are themes more common among those of Catholic persuasion than among Protestants.

The other religious community is the Roman Catholic Church. No stranger to art this community took up a fresh initiative when the Pope invited 500 artists to come to the Sistine Chapel on November 21st 2009. About 260 artists attended, representing a diversity of the arts and a spectrum from deep faith to no faith. This event was 45 years from a similar initiative by Pope Paul VI who apologized for the church's attitude towards artists, and 10 years since the publication of Pope John Paul II's widely read *Letter to Artists*. As you can read in the Pope's remarks there is a great emphasis on "beauty" a focus deeply ingrained in Catholic sensibilities. Protestants are hesitant about this kind of "veneration" of beauty. We offer here some of the text of Pope Benedict's address to artists.

"The profound bond between beauty and hope was the essential content of the evocative Message that Paul VI addressed to artists at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on 8 December 1965: "To all of you," he proclaimed solemnly, "the Church of the Council declares through our lips: if you are friends of true art, you are our friends!" And he added: "This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart, and is that precious

fruit which resists the erosion of time, which unites generations and enables them to be one in admiration. And all this through the work of your hands... Remember that you are the custodians of beauty in the world."

Unfortunately, the present time is marked, not only by negative elements in the social and economic sphere, but also by a weakening of hope, by a certain lack of confidence in human relationships, which gives rise to increasing signs of resignation, aggression and despair. The world in which we live runs the risk of being altered beyond recognition because of unwise human actions which, instead of cultivating its beauty, unscrupulously exploit its resources for the advantage of a few and not infrequently disfigure the marvels of nature.

*Remember that you are the
custodians of beauty in the world*
Pope Paul VI

What is capable of restoring enthusiasm and confidence, what can encourage the human spirit to rediscover its path, to raise its eyes to the horizon, to dream of a life worthy of its vocation – if not beauty? Dear friends, as artists you know well that the experience of beauty, beauty that is authentic, not merely transient or artificial, is by no means a supplementary or secondary factor in our search for meaning and happiness; the experience of beauty does not remove us from reality, on the contrary, it leads to a direct encounter with the daily reality of our lives, liberating it from darkness, transfiguring it, making it radiant and beautiful.

...Dostoevsky's words that I am about to quote are bold and paradoxical, but they invite reflection. He says this: "Man can live without science, he can live without bread, but without beauty he could no longer live, because there would no longer be anything to do to the world. The whole secret is here, the whole of history is here." The painter Georges Braque echoes this sentiment: "Art is meant to disturb, science reassures." Beauty pulls us up short, but in so doing it reminds us of our final destiny, it sets us

back on our path, fills us with new hope, gives us the courage to live to the full the unique gift of life. The quest for beauty that I am describing here is clearly not about escaping into the irrational or into mere aestheticism.

Too often, though, the beauty that is thrust upon us is illusory and deceitful, superficial and blinding, leaving the onlooker dazed; instead of bringing him out of himself and opening him up to horizons of true freedom as it draws him aloft, it imprisons him within himself and further enslaves him, depriving him of hope and joy.. It is a seductive but hypocritical beauty that rekindles desire, the will to power, to possess, and to dominate others, it is a beauty which soon turns into its opposite, taking on the guise of indecency, transgression or gratuitous provocation. Authentic beauty, however, unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond.

...Art, in all its forms, at the point where it encounters the great questions of our existence, the fundamental themes that give life its meaning, can take on a religious quality, thereby turning into a path of profound inner reflection and spirituality.. This close proximity, this harmony between the journey of faith and the artist's path is attested by countless artworks that are based upon the personalities, the stories, the symbols of that immense deposit of "figures" – in the broad sense – namely the Bible, the Sacred Scriptures. The great biblical narratives, themes, images and parables have inspired innumerable masterpieces in every sector of the arts, just as they have spoken to the hearts of believers in every generation through the works of craftsmanship and folk art, that are no less eloquent and evocative.

Dear artists, ... You are the custodians of beauty: thanks to your talent, you have the opportunity to speak to the heart of humanity, to touch individual and collective sensibilities, to call forth dreams and hopes, to broaden the horizons of knowledge and of human engagement. ... Through your art, you yourselves are to be heralds and witnesses of hope for humanity! And do not be afraid to approach the first and last source of beauty, to enter into dialogue with believers, with those who, like yourselves, consider that they are pilgrims in this world and in history towards infinite Beauty!" ■

The Power of Confessional Song



I remember hearing the music of James Taylor for the first time. I was just a teenager. Surprised that I'd never heard of him before, a friend of mine played me Taylor's first radio hit, *Fire*

and *Rain*. As a conservative preacher's son restricted to a diet of Petra, Silverwind and gospel quartets I couldn't believe my ears. There was so much personality to that song. I became a huge fan and slowly followed the pathway onward to Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, Bruce Cockburn, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Van Morrison and Neil Young. I had discovered the confessional songwriters – writers that wrote songs as confessions of their own experiences; gut-wrenching testimonies of their own unique lives, narratives characterized by deep-seated vulnerability, and honest expressions framed in thoughtful poetry.

American singer-songwriter David Wilcox described the shift in music during this time period using the analogy of a set of pottery bought from an artisan vs. department store dishes. Prior to the 1960s, people pined for music that was perfect, or to use his analogy, people were looking for dishes that were brand-name and without human blemish; manufactured on an assembly line so that every piece was exactly the same. But something happened in the 1960s – many people began to desire more authentic music. They longed to experience music that bore the imperfections and character of an individual artist. The artist's own humanity became a part of each song – like *Fire and Rain*, as referenced above, where James Taylor expresses his struggle with drug addiction.

While I was drawn to the tradition of the confessional songwriters in the past, I have to ask whether this thread of authenticity is still alive in the music produced today. Does honesty and personal vulnerability still speak most powerfully to people? Are we still wanting music with the beautiful blemishes

of humanity or has there been a shift back to the “department store” versions of music?

In the end, I think the challenge rests on the shoulders of artists. Pursuing the human ‘pottery-version’ of art rather than the ‘department store model’ takes sacrifice and the risk that what is authentic may not be as marketable. But this discussion is not new – each artist must navigate through the fire and rain of life, work and honesty. And hopefully, like the confessional songwriters of the 60s and 70s, artists can find a voice that resonates with people. And maybe even earn them a living along the way.

By Dale Nikkel – www.dalenikkel.com ■



Looking For Christmas

Ali Matthews won the Seasonal Album of the Year award at the 31st annual Gospel Music Association Covenant Awards in Calgary on October 23rd. The award was for her most recent CD, *Looking For Christmas*. This Imago project CD is available at www.alimatthews.com

Waiting, weakness and vulnerability *continued from page 1*

is expressed in the gospel story – it is one of weakness and self – giving.

I am struck by how waiting, weakness and vulnerability seem to reach to the heart of our humanity and tell us something of who we are and how we are to live. Perhaps it is not surprising that the two deeply human engagements of art and religious faith are best shaped by the presence of these three themes. Each in its own way may be uncomfortable for us – but each has the potential to enrich, strengthen and mature us in ways we might never have imagined.

At this year end I am once again grateful

Stone by Stone

Nine talks on art and faith, on four DVDs with a Study Guide, featuring Colin Harbinson

This recently released collection of lectures by seasoned pioneer in the arts and faith conversation Colin Harbinson, will be a useful resource for generating the important discussion about the church, the artist and the culture. Simply laid out in nine talks of about 25 minutes each this set of DVDs will provide a good opportunity for probing key themes around the arts and faith. Themes covered include: “The Arts, Imagination and the Christian Story; Artistic Calling,



Community and the Church; Discipleship of the Artist; The Language of the Arts; and A Transforming Vision. The set includes a study guide which will be very valuable for small group engagement with

these themes. Artists and those interested in the arts may benefit from this series and find it useful for drawing others into the conversation on a subject which is gaining renewed attention around the globe.

This series is available at www.intervarsity.org/store

for the good things that have transpired in the work of Imago in 2009: special events, personal meetings with artists, and making possible new creative initiatives. To all who support this work through your generous financial gifts I remain most grateful. I trust that we can count on your continued support and that new supporters will join us in the coming months.

John Franklin, *Executive Director*
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