REFLECTION

God-as-Potter, Creativity, and a Theology of Art-Making

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> *We exercise great freedom in who God is now permitted to be among us.*
>
> –Walter Brueggemann[1]

I

Two personal anecdotes point out the purpose of this essay. Every Sunday of my childhood my family attended a progressive Mennonite church that formed my initial understandings of the positive role of women in the life of the church. It was the 1980s, and inclusive language symbolized this congregation's commitment to equality between men and women in the life of the church. On many pages of our homemade songbook male pronouns and phrases were crossed out and hand-scrawled inclusive alternatives filled the margins. We sang these alternatives with conviction and consistency. I grew up with a vivid and visual assumption that God was not (just) a "he." Having come of age in this context, I take this active work of reimagining and developing images for God to be a vital task for Christian theology.

In 2011 I was approached by a church institution about a fundraising dinner planned with the theme "Shaped by God." The organizers were looking for a potter to create a visual display inspired by verses in Jeremiah 18: "'Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?' says the Lord. 'Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand.'" I was asked to contribute some handmade pottery, broken shards, and raw pots in process. Probably most church-going potters have received a similar

[1] Walter Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Imagination of Walter Brueggemann." Interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, American Public Media, December 22, 2011. http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/prophetic-imagination/transcript.shtml

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invitation at some time. Many are asked to throw pots on a potter's wheel during worship as a lively illustration of the story from Jeremiah. However, worship planners rarely stop to ask deeper theological questions about how God is or is not like a potter, or about how human beings are or are not like clay. The appropriateness of the metaphor is usually presumed to be self-evident.

As these anecdotes show, I have come to take seriously the complexity of metaphorical language about God. Sallie McFague charts a path for what I consider one of the most urgent and relevant theological tasks of our time:

> A metaphor is a word or phrase used *in*appropriately [original emphasis]. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another: the arm of a chair, war as a chess game, God the father.... it is an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar.... Metaphor always has the character of "is" and "is not": an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition.... It is precisely the patchwork, potpourri character of the Hebraic and Christian Scriptures with their rich flood of images, stories, and themes – some interweaving and mutually supportive, and others disparate, presenting alternative possibilities – that gives Christian theologians "authority" to experiment.[2]

This "'authority' to experiment" with metaphors and language about God is perhaps the most important theological task for the 21st century. My recent years of pastoral ministry have only bolstered my opinion in this regard. Week in and week out I stand before a congregation groping for words that mediate between their world and the world of the Bible. We all live in a time of rapidly changing information, technology, and scientific discovery, not to mention unprecedented devastation by human hands. In the midst of this, many churches have presumed the goal of their ritual life to be the preservation of ancient metaphors. Instead, I experience people longing for new images, metaphors, and rituals to discover God present in the world they live in today.

[2] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 44.

In this essay I hope to contribute to this sacred task of re-imagining. I propose that interdisciplinary dabbling with educational theory and artists' experiences alongside biblical studies and theology – a sort of midrashic treatment of the text – opens fresh understanding and deeper meaning within metaphoric language. What follows is informed as much by my own work as a potter and the input of other potters as it is by formal theology and biblical studies. The inherent dabbling quality of this experimenting comes with some risk, but there is nothing left to be done but to dabble boldly – and be willing to humbly recant when proven the fool!

I intend to show that by both paying attention to the details of the Jeremiah story and exploring the creative potential of the central metaphor – while at the same time considering modern-day artists' experiences of the ceramic process – we can find important images of God. What I offer are three angles of conversation with the story, reflecting my experience of the text shaped most significantly by my own training and practices as a potter. My hope is that these three angles not only open deeper insight into the possibilities of the God-as-potter metaphor, but serve as a model for interdisciplinary re-imagining and creating of images for the divine relevant to people of faith and the life of the church in this century.

II

The orienting point for this exercise, Jeremiah 18:1-11, has become a cherished story for me, and a compelling metaphor for God. On the one hand, its frequent misunderstanding, or at least its downplayed complexity, exposes the church's tendency to read metaphorical language about the divine too narrowly. On the other, since I am a potter, I see rich layers of meaning in the story ripe for further theological reflection. We can begin to grasp this richness by first reading the story the way I read it as a potter.

The episode may have unfolded something like this. It began with a call to the prophet: "Come, let us go down to the potter's house." Jeremiah is one of the Bible's vivid characters. He was eccentric, did things his own way, and had some laughable moments – including being thrown into a pit, buying a junk piece of land that everyone knew would only be ransacked by the Babylonians, and wearing a yoke around town. But his actions invariably discomfited people, because in some strange way they revealed what was

true about their world.

So, Jeremiah walked down to the potter's "house." In Jeremiah's day making pots took a lot of space. Under the cover of a cave, tent, or tree, the potter likely would have been working in a modest space with only a wheel, a jug of water, a few scattered tools, and maybe a couple of shelves to set wet pots on. Nearby would have been a pit for treading raw clay to mix it with the right amount of water and to work out as many impurities as possible. Surrounding this, I picture piles and piles of pots. Some of these piles were fired and finished wares waiting to sell at market. But also needed was an area for pots to dry in the sun and for a heap of broken pots and shards. Somewhere in the middle of all this would be at least a pit, and perhaps a brick structure, serving as a kiln where a huge mound of pots would be fired at once. Adjacent to the kiln were stacks of firewood, or dried dung when wood was scarce, stockpiled for the next firing. In a city like Jerusalem, perhaps these areas and tasks were a bit more specialized and centralized as a whole guild of potters likely worked shoulder to shoulder with adjacent shops.

I suspect this was what Jeremiah walked into, a vast yard where the endless piles of pots spoke immediately of both the potter's production and of his failure, experimentation, and much sweat equity. Maybe on another day the potter would have been carting clay up from the riverbeds. Or, on a firing day, dark smoke would have curled up from the 2,000-degree kiln. But on the day recorded in the text, Jeremiah found the potter working diligently at the wheel.

Given what is described, the potter worked on a "fast" wheel (this tool features a flywheel at the base, connected by an axle to another wheel that holds the clay and sits at a comfortable working level). The potter had to kick the flywheel methodically with one foot to make the wheel head spin at a good speed for working the clay. This method was one of the technological advances of the period, and has remained in continuous use for thousands of years.

I picture a scene I have witnessed hundreds of times: while kicking the wheel with one foot, the potter grabbed a lump of clay, dropped it nearly on center in the middle of the wheel and began working it up and down with both hands. Then suddenly in one quick, fluid motion he pushed the clay

into a perfectly rounded mound in the center of the wheel, opened a small hole in the middle with his thumbs, and began pushing the walls of the pot upward. With three or four more pulls, and both hands working in tandem on the inside and outside of the growing cylinder, he stretched the clay as tall as it could get. In the potter's hands, the clay cylinder still appeared sturdy, but perhaps Jeremiah knew that the slightest slip of a finger in the wrong direction could tumble the clay back down to a formless blob.

Many who have watched this activity, whether trained as potters or not, feel a touch of magic in it. It happens with such quickness and ease of movement – the clay, potter, and wheel all work as one machine for a moment – that it seems more like a performance, a dance that can scarcely be captured with words or a snapshot.

Then, just as the prophet caught his breath, the potter started shaping the cylinder into a discernible form. Perhaps the potter continued by rocking back in his seat for a brief second, sizing up the still-spinning tower, kicked the wheel a time or two more, and then leaned in to stretch the pot into shape. This one, a cylinder so tall he could barely reach his arm in all the way to the bottom, gradually got rounded out to the form of a large water jar. After smoothing the outside surface of the bulbous jar, the potter swiftly cut a cord underneath the pot to separate it from the wheel head. He lifted it from the wheel, and set it in the dirt beside the wheel to dry a bit before adding a handle.

We can picture Jeremiah watching for an hour or so as the potter created a series of six or eight of these large jars. Some took form as swiftly and effortlessly as the first. With others, the potter's hands revealed a chunk of hard clay or a bit of gravel that slipped through in the prepared clay and left a hole in the wall of the pot. Or, playing to his audience, the potter stretched the walls of the jar a bit too far, trying to make a more magnificent form than the soft clay allowed. With surprisingly little frustration, he took a breath and began kneading the lump of mushy clay right on the wheel head to be reused. Jeremiah likely noticed how effortlessly the potter recovered from such a failure and kept working.

How much did Jeremiah know about the process? I have a hunch he knew more than just what he saw that day. Perhaps he understood that the process of adding a handle might spoil a jar or two, that some forms might

be cast aside because they were not shapely enough to meet the potter's discriminating standards, and that some inevitably would not survive the precarious process of firing where the tenuous mud became (again somewhat miraculously) stone-like. Perhaps he knew that the potter chose to work with a creative level of risk which would likely mean some pots could result in a pile of shards.

On that day, the process of the potter's art struck the prophet as a profound metaphor for the activity of God in the world. He surmised that God's creative relationship with humanity was something like the potter's creative relationship to the clay. God worked ceaselessly for the well-being of humanity but some people fell short of God's best intentions. Jeremiah saw in the beautiful forms of freshly thrown clay jars an image akin to the beauty of people who act righteously. The potter who critiqued the aesthetic value of his own pots was quick to cherish some or rework others. Likewise, God was critiquing the moral value of divinely created humanity and was quick to act dramatically in judgment where people failed to act justly.

III

I fell in love with working with clay long before I fell in love with doing theology in any rigorous way, and long before I ever stumbled across the story from Jeremiah. When I first discovered this biblical, theological metaphor employing an analogy from the ceramic process, it resonated with my experience and communicated special meaning. However, I have discovered in conversation with friends and colleagues that, for many, the story has contributed to narrow interpretations of God. It smacks of too much pre-determinism, depicts a heavy-handed God who displays little compassion, and confines God to an overly simple anthropomorphic caricature that fails to do justice to the mystery of the divine reality. A careless reading of the text may indeed lead to such a theological viewpoint, but this is a misunderstanding of the primary analogy featured in the story.

To begin, I must take stock of the basic analogy recorded in Jeremiah 18. At first glance, we could easily take the God-as-potter metaphor to fit the stereotype of an Old Testament deity who is vengeful and retributive, emotionally indifferent, and in whose hands people are nothing but putty

waiting to be shaped. Certainly the story's closing warning is dreadful: "Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you." Potter Dick Lehman explains how casual readers can arrive at a serious misapprehension here: "People assume they know a lot about pottery . . . from Jeremiah. They jump to theological certainty; they think Jeremiah was a technical manual for pottery-making, but [this text] is not a complete metaphor for God."[3] An important step toward a deeper reading is to acknowledge there is much to the ceramic process, and therefore to the metaphor, that is not visible on the surface of the text.

I will return to that issue shortly, but the text itself also offers clues of more layers of relationship. Many of the Old Testament texts using the cluster of Hebrew words related to pottery (*ysr*) offer a theological picture of God "shaping" history according to "a kind of predestination."[4] While this is true of Jeremiah 18, the text does suggest a more nuanced relationship between God and humanity than the stereotype noted above. As Walter Brueggemann points out, "the metaphor of potter and clay leads us to expect an unambiguous assertion of Yahweh's sovereignty. The argument that follows, however, is much more subtle."[5]

To follow Brueggemann's thinking, we must pay careful attention to the details of the text in vv. 7-10, which uses an if/if/then sequence to depict the relationship: *If* I (God) say this . . . but *if* a nation does that . . . *then* I (God) will change my mind. "The 'then' expresses Yahweh's readiness to act in new ways in response to Israel's new behavior. In both sequences the first 'if' is God's initial decision either to plant or to pluck up. The second 'if' celebrates Israel's freedom. Israel is not fated but can act in new ways."[6]

Brueggemann's observation begins to show the complexity of the God/human relationship depicted in the chapter. Further, we might better

[3] Dick Lehman, telephone interview with the author, January 19, 2006. An internationally recognized potter and author on ceramics, Lehman pursued theological studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary for several years.

[4] B. Otzen, "*Yasar, yeser, sur, sir, sura*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 264.

[5] Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1-25*, Pt. 1 of 2, *International Theological Commentary*, vol. 24 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160.

[6] Ibid., 161.

understand this complexity by learning something about how potters see their relationship to their clay. As will soon become clear, the potter's work is not simply to manipulate inanimate, lifeless clay. Instead, it depends on a transactional, intimate relationship.

In my experience, potters rarely think of their material as just mud to be manipulated. All clay embodies a long history before it ever reaches the workshop. Clay particles evolve during a painstakingly long geological process of grinding, wearing, sorting, and shifting, along with mixing with all kinds of decaying organic matter, that results in diverse kinds of clay[7] – some stretchy and plastic, some gritty and durable, some a pale gray hue, some a rich red – that are more or less suitable for certain methods of pot-making and various kinds of ceramic products.

Potters must be aware of this profound story, at some level, and take advantage of the wide variety of physical properties of different clay bodies in order to work appropriately with the material. This requires knowledge of, and respect for, the clay. As many a novice potter will attest, clay seems to take on a life of its own. Potters translate this respect and awe into a relationship with their material that becomes personal; they engage in a give-and-take relationship with it, shaping and manipulating it. But they also respond to the material intuitively, acknowledge its specific character, learn from it – and ultimately have only so much power over it. As the relationship deepens, it takes on a quasi-spiritual character. Perhaps Jeremiah realized this millennia ago. Certainly modern potters have.

> Pinching slowly, we know clay *slow* and *savour* [sic] in our sensitive hands. Our connection with it deepens: from I-it to I-thou, as Martin Buber suggests. From a consciousness of praise for what clay will allow us to do with her, we ripen into a consciousness of who she is, of the story she carries: from our expressiveness to receiving hers [original emphasis].[8]

Paulus Berensohn shows the weight of this valuable relationship for the potter. Other ceramic artists make similar claims about their process that,

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[7] See Daniel Rhodes, *Clay and Glazes for the Potter*, 3rd ed., revised and expanded by Robin Hopper (Iola, WI: Krause, 2000), 26.

[8] Paulus Berensohn, *Finding One's Way With Clay: Creating Pinched Pottery and Working with Colored Clays*, 25th anniversary ed. (Dallas: Biscuit Books, 1997), 159.

when read against Jeremiah 18, point out an understanding of the potter-clay relationship that is a more nuanced and perhaps more appropriate metaphor of the God-human relationship. One artist says, "Now, as I confront the clay, I am also confronting myself. I try to pay attention to how the clay feels; I listen to my clay, as I want it to cooperate with me at each stage of creation. . . . In a transactional relationship, two or more organisms make contact and communicate. When they disengage and part, both are changed in some way."[9] Thus, the potter is not *immutable* (just as God in the Old Testament is willing to change in response to engagement with humanity).

Also, the potter is not *all-powerful* in regards to the clay, contrary to how I have almost always heard Jeremiah interpreted. The specific character of the material limits how one can manipulate it. Says M.C. Richards:

> You can do very many things with [clay], push this way and pull that, squeeze and roll and attach and pinch and hollow and pile. But you can't do everything with it. You can go only so far, and then the clay resists.... And so it is with persons. You can do very many things with us: push us together and pull us apart and squeeze us and roll us flat, empty us out and fill us up. You can surround us with influences, but there comes a point when you can do no more. The person resists, in one way or another.... His own will becomes active.[10]

The experiences and testimonies of other potters mirror my own journey with clay. This journey and their voices lead me to contend the God-as-potter metaphor described by the prophet is an I-Thou, relational image characterized by intimacy and reciprocity that affects growth and change for both the clay and the divine potter.

IV

Sallie McFague contends that theological metaphors have an "is" and "is not" character. This is true of Jeremiah's God-as-potter image as well,

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[9] Martin Astor, "Psychology of Mud," in *Ceramics Monthly* 44:8 (1996): 102.

[10] M.C. Richards, *Centering: In Pottery, Poetry and the Person*, 25th anniversary ed., with foreword by Matthew Fox (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1989), 19.

and we can do justice to it only by clarifying the "is not" character of the metaphor. Gordon Kaufman's work indirectly points out some of the ways theologians presume God is not like a potter. Most important, he cautions, even exhorts, against the tradition's tendency to anthropomorphize God. Thus, my second angle for reading the text invites scrutiny for the sake of opening the metaphor's possibilities. Kaufman states provocatively that "it is no longer possible . . . to connect in an intelligible way today's scientific, cosmological and evolutionary understandings of the origins of the universe and the emergence of life (including human life and history) with a conception of God constructed in the traditional anthropomorphic terms."[11] This would seem to rule out the God-as-potter metaphor. But if we can treat both Kaufman's theology and the biblical text somewhat playfully, I find something compelling emerges when we hold the two side-by-side.

Kaufman argues that postmodern theology should turn away from personal images of God, and emphasize the mystery and unknowable character of the divine. To this end, he sets forth the idea of God as "serendipitous creativity" instead of divine creator (i.e., potter). He articulates a definition of creativity that is common if not universal (note where I have added emphasis):

> The idea of creativity, however (in contrast with the notion of a creator) – *the idea of the coming into being through time of the previously nonexistent, the new, the novel* – continues to have considerable plausibility today; indeed it is bound up with the very belief that our cosmos is an evolutionary one in which new orders of reality come into being in the course of exceedingly complex temporal developments.[12]

Kaufman adds nuance to this definition by emphasizing a quality of creativity that is very important to his theological construction – the quality of serendipity. To clarify what he means by serendipity, again note my emphasis in this statement of his:

[11] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning … Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 53. Kaufman, who died in 2011, indicated that in retrospect much of his theological work had been moving toward this conclusion. See 107-27.
[12] Ibid., 55.

> There is a serendipitous feature in all creativity: *more happens than one would have expected, given previously prevailing circumstances, indeed, more than might have seemed possible*.... The most foundational kind of creativity for us today, therefore, appears to be that exemplified in the evolution of the cosmos and of life, rather than that displayed in human purposive activity. Though we can describe the evolutionary model with some precision, it in no way overcomes the most profound mystery at the root of all that is: Why is there something, not nothing? Why – and how – can the new actually come into being in the course of time?[13]

Thus, when Kaufman speaks of serendipitous creativity, we should take him to be stressing qualities of *newness/novelty* and *unexpectedly more*.

Creativity abounds. In fact, considering the humble origins of the universe, this abundance of the new and novel is highly unlikely, unexpected, and unexplainable. To argue that a personal agent called God is directing or coercing this abundant creativity is simplistic. But to argue that God is somewhere in the midst of such creativity, of such tipping points, helps make sense of the world. Such an image of God is hard to pin down – for Kaufman, intentionally so. In my view, the best we can do is hint at where, who, or what God is. God attends to, participates in, persuades, catalyses, or simply *is* the tipping point where "the present order gives way to a new better-adapted order."[14]

Now it may be quite a leap from this excursus back to Jeremiah. For we must look long and hard through Kaufman's work to find any conversation about the arts, despite all his talk of creativity, let alone any attention to pottery and what it might have to do with God. So I may be embarking on too loose a reading of his perspective. But indulging the "authority to experiment," I want to play with the pottery-making metaphor in light of Kaufman's notion of serendipitous creativity. One tactic for undercutting overly narrow readings of the Jeremiah text is to shift vantage points on the story entirely – something like rotating it 90 degrees. Again, this is like midrash, but we do this too infrequently.

[13] Ibid., 56-57.

[14] Ibid., 91.

Consider such questions as these: Where *is* God in the story? The prophet, one day, found God in the image of the potter. But might God be in the mysterious process of creating new and beautiful forms? Or in the challenging work of turning dry clay to vitreous stone in the kiln? Granted, now we move afield from what we find in the written text. But the questions are worth asking for the sake of a better understanding of metaphors about clay.

For example, I suggest that the process of wood-firing pots is an appropriate analogy for Kaufman's metaphor of divine serendipitous creativity. Pots fired in this way have wildly dynamic surfaces ranging from crusty gray and brown to glassy green and blue. Unlike some other more controlled and precise glazing and firing processes, wood-firing, with the resulting ashy glaze, is imprecise, and the potter allows the whim of the kiln atmosphere to primarily determine the final surface decorations of the pots. An experienced wood-firer can manipulate the kiln atmosphere by using particular kinds of wood for fuel (different species of wood produce different colors of melted ash), varying the length of firing (typically anywhere from 24 hours to 15 days), making pots from clay specifically suited to the process, regulating air flow to foster either a smoky or a clean atmosphere, or arranging the pots in the kiln to push the airflow and ash deposits into one place or another. Even so, this control is limited. The potter cannot determine the specific surface results or the subtle characteristics that differentiate a beautiful pot from a bland, uninspired, or even broken one. Some factors, such as the weather during the firing (barometric pressure affects the kiln atmosphere), are completely beyond the potter's control.

However, the relatively elusive, unpredictable work of the kiln firing is exactly what draws some potters to employ this process. One has said he thought he was not taking enough risks unless he was willing to lose as many as half the pots he put in the firing! This attitude he called "calculated carelessness."[15] Dick Lehman puts into words how I have experienced this process (note how he spiritualizes it):

> It is this *improbable and unlikely blend* of biology, chemistry,

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[15]These notions come from a potter, Shiro Tsujimura, whose work I encountered years ago. I have long since lost track of exactly where I found these ideas and phrases, though they did come from articles about Tsujimura.

> physics, and intentionality that leads me to a sense of reverence concerning these wood-fired forms. The arbitrary quality of the flames and the fuel sources create never-to-be-repeated surfaces that are rich with clues, hints, and information to the inquiring spirit…. I believe that one can never really *make* wood fired pottery and sculpture. One can only work alongside the trees and the clay and the flames … and with the *others who are working with you* … to *receive* the gifts of the kiln with awe and appreciation … gifts of mystery and magic.[16]

This description of wood-firing is like the kind of serendipitous creativity Kaufman upholds as a metaphor for God. A potter can work hard to establish an atmosphere where desirable results are more likely to occur, or perhaps knows how to avoid situations where such results would be impossible. But in the end, the potter can neither say exactly how or why a particular pot turned out as it did, nor dictate such results. Thus, the chance results of a natural ash glaze surface created by the atmosphere of a wood kiln – where happy accidents can lead to new aesthetic categories – is perhaps like the way God is present in the cosmic, evolutionary, biohistorical trajectory of the universe. Might Jeremiah have had some inkling of this, given his visits to the potter's house?

V

When readers of the Jeremiah story focus too narrowly on their assumptions about how God is like a potter, they can easily miss one of its most valuable lessons. For me, the value of the story comes when we look at what is going on for the prophet, an angle usually overlooked. In the text, God tells Jeremiah, "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words" (v. 2). God does not send him to the temple, the desert, or even the royal palace. Instead of a religious institutional setting, the prophet finds theological insight by venturing into the workspace of a craftsman – an artist's studio. Further, he does not find his insight by gazing at finished masterpieces but by observing a creative process. In fact, his theological

[16] Dick Lehman, "Speaking the Language of the Soul" (2003). Available from www.dicklehman.com/html/writing. Accessed 23 August 2011. Emphasis added.

metaphor relies on watching the potter shaping vessels, critically analyzing their quality and reworking areas that need further attention. It depends on recounting the whole process, not just the finished product. The story invites us to appreciate the possibility of discovering theological insight not only in obvious or prescribed venues but in myriad creative and even unlikely situations. (Consider all the people who have come to know something about God by a serene walk in the woods or by losing themselves in a symphony performance.)

Theology of the academy can and should result not only from traditional scholarly activities such as research, writing, lectures and debates, but from activities that acknowledge a multiplicity of experiences, ways of learning, and intelligences that all serve a properly full knowledge of the complexity of the divine. This in fact is a time-honored approach in theology, but one that I urge us to revisit and take seriously in our discourse. My goal here is not to supplant the academy but to remind it of the theological assets of an array of disciplines and activities. From the earliest days of the church there have been streams of theology based more in experience than in rational discourse. As well, we can cite examples of modern theology shaped by the arts, beginning with Paul Tillich nearly a century ago. The image of God speaking in the midst of the potter's house is a vivid reminder of the varied ways theological understanding develops.

There are at least two distinct, if intersecting, ways the work of theology can be better informed by reintegrating experiential modes of learning and knowing. With the first I again admit to dabbling beyond my realm of expertise; what follows is more musing than attempting to prove. Before seminary I taught ceramics for several years – just long enough to bear witness to the transformative, world-altering possibilities when students create with their hands, not just learn with their heads. Educational theorist Howard Gardner explains what I saw intuitively, namely that people have multiple ways of knowing, what he calls "multiple intelligences." This concept, he notes, "grew out of [the] belief and observations that there are various ways in which we as human beings come to know something and that learning involves the engagement of a variety of these capacities we possess . . . all people are alike in that they have these intelligences."[17] What has this to do

[17] John M. Bracke and Karen B. Tye, *Teaching the Bible in the Church* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003),

with theology? My hunch is that if there are various ways humans come to know something, then it stands to reason there are various ways they come to know about God, i.e., various ways they do theology.

Two of Gardner's seven intelligence categories show particularly how art-making, such as working with clay, fosters certain kinds of knowledge. First, spatial intelligence (sometimes named as visual-spatial) is vital to artistic creativity: "Certain other intellectual competences, such as facility in the control of fine motor movement, contribute as well; but the *sine qua non* of graphic artistry inheres in the spatial realm."[18] Much of how Gardner describes this category has to do with art-making. But one element specifically might inform the intersection between art-making and theology, given that it echoes McFague's statement about the importance of understanding metaphor for theological development: "A final facet of spatial intelligence grows out of the resemblances that may exist across two seemingly disparate forms, or, for that matter, across two seemingly remote domains of experience. In my view, *that metaphoric ability to discern similarities across diverse domains derives in many instances from a manifestation of spatial intelligence* [emphasis added]."[19]

Gardner strikes on a key concept here. Artistic skills such as crafting coherent compositions and accurately representing real-life objects and images with a particular medium are closely related to abilities to form and understand metaphors or to transform one's reality toward a vision of something new. If I may leap into theological terms, a person's ability to comprehend metaphors (God is like this . . .), new or old, or to envision "a new heaven and a new earth," is directly related to visual-spatial abilities that can be fostered and developed through participation in art-viewing and art-making activities.

Another of Gardner's intelligence categories serves a similar purpose: bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, which involves motor skills. In explaining this concept, Gardner focuses mainly on such areas as dance, athletic prowess, and acting. But this category also includes "those individuals – like artisans, ballplayers, and instrumentalists – who are able to manipulate objects with

35-36, summarizing the educational theory of Howard Gardner.

[18] Ibid., 196.

[19] Ibid., 176.

finesse."[20] Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, in addition to spatial intelligence, is a prime factor in art-making, especially with regard to craftsmanship like pottery-making.

This view of multiple intelligences impacts my concept of what theology can be. For, if theology, at least in some forms as advocated here, is an imaginative and metaphorical enterprise requiring creative vision, then the activities of art-making open different ways of knowing that are unattainable simply through "thinking" processes. Interestingly, Kaufman, who at first seems the quintessential rational thinker, appreciates how knowledge acquired through art-making will differ from, and can inform, other theological activities:

> In [the arts], certain traditions of insight, skill and practice are transmitted and appropriated to help equip budding artists to create *the new*.... If we think of the arts primarily as traditions that are produced and carried on by artists/creators rather than traditions produced primarily *for consumers* (viewers, hearers), a somewhat different perspective comes into view [original emphases]. Instead of drawing on literature, painting, and music largely for illustrations to enhance our historical and theological teaching, what we would seek to learn from the history and practice of these and other arts would be the ways in which traditions can be appropriated *for the purpose of acting creatively in the world* [emphasis added].[21]

To speak of opening the theological task to more experiential realms invites a turn toward spirituality as well. Further, not only can art-making lead to unique kinds of knowledge, such experiential activities can also open mental/emotional spaces that nurture unique ways of knowing (about) God.

In my experience as a teacher and practitioner, making art can be like the Celtic notion of a "thin space"[22] where boundaries dissolve between

[20] Ibid., 207.

[21] Gordon D. Kaufman, "Theology, the Arts, and Theological Education," in *Theological Education* 31, no. 1 (1994): 18.

[22] I came to know this term through a reference by Marcus Borg: "Celtic Christianity speaks of 'thin places.' The metaphor has its home in a vision of reality that affirms that reality has at

ordinary and extraordinary, sacred and profane, human and divine. In this thin place, when people creatively engage and shape materials with their own hands, they experience the world and the divine differently than they do in other aspects of their everyday lives. M.C. Richards speaks of this reality when working with clay.

> Experiences of the plastic clay and the firing of the ware carried more than commonplace values. Joy resonated deep within me, and it has stirred these thoughts only slowly to the surface. I have come to feel that we live in a universe of spirit, which materializes and de-materializes grandly; all things seem to me to live, and all acts to contain meaning deeper than matter-of-fact.... This seems to me to be a dialogue of the visible and the invisible to which our ears are attuned.[23]

My understanding of this has been shaped by the practices of iconographers. Icon painters use prayer, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines to create a sacred context for their creative work, setting it apart from everyday life. With this approach, they serve a kind of priestly function, where creating liturgical artwork is much like mediating sacraments to a congregation. "In this context, the icon painter [has] to be a 'transformed person in order to be able to present in his work a transfigured being and a transfigured universe.' The artist does not design images, but unveils what is already there. . . . Consequently, the character and deportment of the painter [are] extremely significant."[24] Peter Pearson, an Episcopal priest, icon painter, and teacher, states how he employs such disciplines, particularly attending to his intentions and inner spiritual state when painting:

> I have made thousands of people and situations part of the icons I've painted by imagining them as individual brush strokes,

least two layers or levels or dimensions: the visible world of our ordinary experience, and the sacred, understood not only as the source of everything but also as a presence interpenetrating everything. In 'thin places' the boundary between the two levels becomes soft and permeable, the veil becomes diaphanous and sometimes lifts." See Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 250.

[23] Richards, 19.

[24] Deborah J. Haynes, *The Vocation of the Artist* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 82.

> painting them into the icon. At other times, I've been so involved in the process of painting that I've not been aware of anything else and been surprised to discover that hours had passed. These are experiences of timelessness, of the eternal now. I've come to understand these as experiences of the Kingdom of God.[25]

Pearson's observations take note of how a painter can create sacred space by intentionally infusing the creative work with prayerful meaning. But they also acknowledge that such time does not have to be rigidly defined; when one approaches the artistic task with a prayerful heart, a divine spark can break through regardless of one's thoughts, or lack thereof, in the moment.

Such examples show how art-making can work as a spiritual discipline, creating a thin place where the artist comes close to God and therefore comes to know God, "[overcoming] separateness and alienation by a knowing that *is* loving," as Parker Palmer says.[26] Such activity – or discipline or practice – surely bears theological importance. If we allow it to do so, as Kaufman suggests, then the creative and imaginative theological knowledge derived from art-making can orient and transform theological understanding. I believe that in the process of such creativity, in that thin place, glimpses of God and of "a new heaven and a new earth" break through mundane everyday life.

VI

I have suggested that we read the analogy of God-as-potter depicted in Jeremiah 18 with creativity and depth. By approaching the text from different angles I have tried to show that the central metaphor itself is not as straightforward as often presumed, that it takes on more richness when its "is not" qualities are mined for more insight, and that changing viewpoints to see what happens for the prophet in the story is inherently valuable. I dared to dabble across disciplines in search of a method more like midrash, approaching the story presuming there is more to it than meets the eye.

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[25] Peter Pearson, *A Brush with God: An Icon Workbook* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005), 11.

[26] Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 8-9.

As a potter, I have a vested interest in the metaphor and images discussed here. But as my opening anecdotes hint, I take this exploration to be a model of a much broader enterprise. Let me indicate two paths forward from the conversation that I hope I have engaged. First, Kaufman is right to say the creative work of artists is valuable not so much for its illustrative qualities but because the ways artists learn and work could inform and open up theological processes. Others before me have undeniably begun this work in the last several decades, but there is much fodder here for new understanding, and vast space to bring artistic intelligences to bear on the biblical text.

Second, the task of opening and creating theological metaphors cannot be simply the work of professional theologians in the academy. Pastors as theologians must be willing to do this work from the pulpit in front of live, and hopefully lively, people. There in the congregational context we will learn with immediacy and clarity if our notions of God have anything worthwhile to do with real life. Sadly, too many of our images of God have reified into crusty shells of what they once were. May this conversation lead us to exercise great freedom in picturing who God is permitted to be among us.

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