

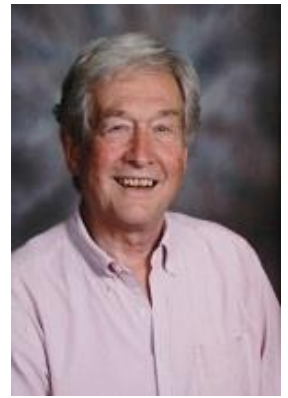
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A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING: HONOURING THE MOLECULES

- 1 The route for my walk each morning often takes me past a small industry that makes and sells popcorn and caramel corn. (That fragrance! Ah!)
- 2 One morning last Summer I noticed a modest pile of black plastic bags at curbside – it was the city's day for collecting garbage – and with them two empty ten-gallon plastic pails. They had no printing or paper labels, but they had apparently held oil or shortening for popcorn-making, because the insides of each pail were coated with a thick, viscous goo.
- 3 But what caught my eye was their gorgeous colour.
- 4 The pails were each a vibrant cerulean blue. I picked them up out of the trash and took them home to clean them.
- 5 That sunny afternoon, as I worked, sweating to remove that goo, my friend Ron stopped by.
- 6 "Whatcha doin' there?" Ron asked.
- 7 "Cleaning the oil out of these plastic pails. I trash-picked 'em." I said proudly. "Aren't they beautiful?"
- 8 "Whatcha gonna do with 'em?" he asked.
- 9 "I haven't the faintest idea." I answered. "I just think they're gorgeous."
- 10 These things are a parable, of course. I'm writing these lines to remind you that the world is "charged with the glory of God", as the poet puts it. And that gives worship leaders, and Christians generally, an agenda.
- 11 First, an agenda in worship.
- 12 Christian worship ought to be an occasion, a total experience, where people are brought into the presence of that kind of splendour the poet speaks of. It doesn't have to be, it shouldn't be, triumphalist. But simply to enter the worship space ought to inspire in worshippers a sense of "Wow!"

13 And the whole experience should engage all the senses, in a way that respects the resplendent world we've been given. We have an incarnated, sacramental faith. And that means giving honour to the "stuff" of the created world.

14 "Honouring the molecules," is how I'd put it. We don't want to be – I don't want to be – careless with the physical "stuff" we're dealing with, in worship or in life. We must never forget that how we handle the stuff of our world in our worship provides a model for how we are to handle the stuff of our world in daily life.

15 The principle is a simple one, and it's from Philippians 4:8: Ask yourself "What is worthy, out there, yearning to loosen its tongue in its maker's praise?" And then, go to work. Some cases in point:

16 Vestments, paraments, and banners often represent the largest part of the "production design" of the experience of worship, to borrow a term from movies and theatre. So they should be selected and constructed of a worthy and wonderful fabric.

17 We in the so-called "liturgical" churches have a marvellous gift to offer the "free churches" in our church year calendar, with its expressive changes of colour throughout the year in the adornment of our worship spaces.

18 But it's not simply colour alone that we're looking for. It's texture too. And this kind of care, this kind of attention to detail that I'm commending to you – it doesn't have to cost a fortune.

19 Loving care of the worship space itself is another item on our agenda. For years in my Campus Ministry incarnation, I had the virtue of an open, flexible space with plain white walls. It was ideal for experimenting with "honouring the molecules."

20 For the season of Lent one year, a team of Industrial Design students cooperated with me in providing an eye-popping east-wall photo mural.

21 Here's how: I had heard that outdoor advertisers often threw away billboard posters after their promotional dates were past. (Our wasteful society!)

22 We asked for and received, free, an un-used set of paper billboard posters advertising a chain of fast-food franchises. Pieced together of nine separate sheets of paper, our completed east-wall mural was half a billboard in size.

23 It featured an enormous full-colour close-up of a cheeseburger, with no advertising words or slogans. Tomato slices as big as wagon wheels. Sesame seeds like golf balls. You could even make out the dots of the photo-lithographic printing process.

24 Marvellous! And I like to think it recalled to undergraduate worshippers that the Holy Communion is first of all a meal.

25 (See what you're missing, those of you with traditional church buildings? Without, that is, a plain, undecorated, flexible space with unadorned white walls?)

26 In my years as Campus Pastor in Waterloo, we worshiped in the lovely little Seminary Chapel. Off the narthex in that handsome building is a striking glass-walled alcove under a bell tower that cried out, to me, to be used for other purposes than it was

then devoted to: a kind of coatroom, where seminarians flung their wraps. The then-Dean of the Chapel agreed with me that the alcove should be honoured: It was sensationally located, under the vertical axis of the bell tower and at the terminus of the horizontal axis of the campus' major footpath.

27 Together we turned it into a splendid Baptistery: the Seminary's wooden font centred in the alcove both horizontally and vertically, with chairs for private meditation or public prayer in each of the glass-walled bays of the tower supports. Lovely!

28 An update from 2022: In an effort to make the present School more hospitable to Muslims, Buddhists, Indigenous, and others, every trace of Christian iconography or symbolism has been erased, within its walls. Alas, our splendid Baptistery is now once again a clothing dump. Alas, the splendid Chapel is now a warehouse for unused chairs and tables, during the week. So it goes...

29 Finally, an idea: I'd love to see someone construct what my fevered mind imagines as an "east-wall road-kill tin can curtain." I envision someone (my old ID team?) collecting hundreds of flattened tin cans – "road-kill" empties.

30 I envision laying them out on a flat surface in a grid, and punching four holes in each flattened can, one hole at each of the compass points. Then I envision wiring them all together, edge to edge, quilt-block style, so as to construct an enormous curtain or screen. Spray-paint the whole thing gold. Or black. Or white. Or simply let the metal rust.

31 Hang the whole curtain at the east wall, behind a free-standing altar, or in the west end to honour a Baptistery. And voila! A Bertoia-type of sculptural curtain! Glorious art from cast-off garbage! Again, marvelous! (I think it should be marvellous and glorious...)

32 As in worship, so in life. It's poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who says the whole earth is "charged with the glory of God." He continues: "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."

33 I regard it as our Spirit-directed duty to acknowledge and to celebrate that glory of God wherever we stumble upon it. Says my irreverent rabbi friend: The natural world with all its splendours is nothing less than "God in drag."

34 Says another friend from Holden Village in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, reflecting on the totally unnecessary pleroma, the superabundant fullness, of God's majesty: "Here's a mountain meadow filled with wild flowers – that nobody sees! Where's the cost-effectiveness in that?"

35 Oh yes: I've found a use for my blue plastic pails. I use one to collect leaves and lawn clippings for my compost bin. And the other catches rainwater from my eaves troughs and downspout. That cerulean blue looks gorgeous next to my hunters-green rain barrel.

36 Now if I can only find a pail in purple... Hah!

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