

Beauty at Work (Part Two)

In Part One of this series, Peter suggested that beauty is the origin and destiny of humans, and that humans are commissioned and equipped by God to create beauty. By way of a parable about seventeenth-century Swiss watchmakers, he also suggested that seeing beauty in our work is sometimes only possible if we step back to view the bigger picture. Here in Part Two, Peter suggests that we create beauty when we love.

The Bible's longest chapter is Psalm 119. It is also one of the Bible's most beautiful Psalms, written as an acrostic poem – each section begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its subject is God's 'word' (or 'laws', 'precepts', 'statutes', 'commandments'). Each one of its 176 verses describes how amazing that word is. Using carefully crafted symmetric and rhythmic verse, it celebrates the wonders of God's word.

But what strikes me about that Psalm is not only its beauty. It is also the writer's love for God's word: 'I delight in your commandments because I love them' (v. 47); 'I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold' (v. 127).

This Psalm provides, then, not only a stimulus to read God's word, study God's word, learn God's word, and

share God's word. All these things are important. But ultimately this Psalm is about loving God's word, and it is the vitality and warmth of that love on the part of its author that makes this Psalm so beautiful. Love creates beauty.

In Part One of this series, I introduced you to two of my best friends in the Bible, Bezalel and Oholiab. Here I would like to introduce you to two more. Both of them are women and both are anonymous. In fact, the first of these women may never have existed. But she is fulsomely described in a magnificent ode to a noble and capable wife, recorded in Proverbs 31.10–31. Her love for her husband, children, servants, and the poor is reflected in the business she transacts; in the long hours she works; and in the food and beautiful garments she provides for them. She is

widely regarded in her community as a model of virtue.

This may not have been the case with the second of these two anonymous women. She could even have been an adulterer, or a prostitute. She was certainly the object of sharp criticism for her apparently wasteful and socially irresponsible act of pouring a jar of very expensive perfume on Jesus' head. Yet Jesus responds with the following remarkable words: 'Leave her alone...she has done a beautiful thing' (Mark 14.6).

Here we have two women, one with a reputation for virtue and the other (most likely) for vice. Yet because of their great love, they both become effective agents of beauty. We can learn from them what we learn from the Psalmist – when we love we create beauty.



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This proposition is echoed in a synonym for beauty, which is 'lovely'. When, therefore, we are exhorted in scripture to 'think on those things that are lovely' (Philippians 4.8), we are being asked to contemplate what is beautiful. That does not necessarily mean fine art or great music; little of that would have been available to the writer of the epistle. It can simply be the beauty we find and create in our ordinary everyday work, in the apparently mundane things we do, and in the apparently ordinary colleagues, clients and customers we rub shoulders with on a regular basis.

At a recent meeting I was introduced to a builder who had a great reputation in his city for quality work. 'I love building', he said to me, 'I love every aspect of it. It's what gets me up in the morning'. I immediately thought 'now I know why this builder enjoys such a good reputation in this community'. His love for his work inspired him to do beautiful work. Our work is shaped by our love.

As a teenager, I rode around on a Japanese motorbike made by Suzuki. But a couple of decades later, it was the Japanese music learning method called Suzuki that captured my interest. Its founder, the musicologist and entrepreneur Dr Shinichi Suzuki, had a

profound experience when at the age of 24 he was listening to Mozart's clarinet quintet. It led him to conclude that the beauty of Mozart's music sprang from the composer's deep love for humanity.


For Suzuki, Mozart was as alive to life's pains as to its pleasures. But through his music, Suzuki maintained, Mozart is teaching us that whether humans experience pain or pleasure, they can always love. Inspired by this idea, Suzuki devised a radically unorthodox method for teaching children to play musical instruments that has since become a global pedagogical school.

Instead of the idea that a teacher imparts knowledge and practical technique to a child, the Suzuki method seeks a return to the original meaning of educate. This derives from the Latin *educere*, meaning to 'bring forth', or 'allow to flourish'. As teachers love their pupils, and exhibit in their pedagogy their love of music, they call out the inherent capacity for beautiful music that sits within every child, not just in those we consider to be musically 'talented'.

It is an idea reflected in the title of Dr Suzuki's influential book *Nurtured by Love*. When I first encountered this book, it immediately rang true with me, as I

had earlier been impacted by the book *Loved into Life*, by Mike Edson, a former Warden of Lee Abbey. Edson argues that, as every human life springs from the love of God, our capacity to share God's life-giving power lies in our capacity to love. We model God when we love others into life.

Since I first encountered these two books, I have witnessed countless times the nurturing power of love in the workplace. I have seen it amongst those who defuse conflict simply through the love they show in their eyes; who go out of their way to affirm the contribution made by their 'low-skilled' workers; and who implement green policy not merely due to the pressure of regulation but because of their love for nature.

In my next article in this series, I will provide another example of the beauty-creating power of love in the world of business. In the meantime, you may like to share with me an example from your own experience (my email address is below). If you do not have one, dare to start loving an aspect of your work you find hard to love; observe what beauty emerges; and then heed the apostolic exhortation above to let it fill your mind (Phil 4.8). Follow these three steps and you will have found a secret to beauty at work. 



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