

## **“Seeking One Thing While Being Shadowed by Another”**

2024 National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts, at Carthage College, Kenosha

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### **KEY POINTS, in abridged narrative form**

What is the effective relationship, for Christian makers, between reaching for things above, and being stationed among things below? (Between the “sublime” and the “shabby”?)

What is a thoughtful and practical approach? Consider Adam Zagajewski’s essay, “The Shabby and the Sublime,” as a way of framing the approach. (Zagajewski, 1945-2021, was a Polish poet and essayist.)

*Shabby* refers to low things, and *sublime* refers to high things. Since at least the 17th century, “high” and “low” have been used to describe assigned values and their hierarchies for the creative works of humans. Since at least the mid-19th century, the low has been in an elevated position and the high in a descending position. Zagajewski’s essay uses *shabby* and *sublime* in tight correlation to low and high poetic styles during the modernist era.

In the broader sense of the terms, this presentation considers **our human acts of imagination and creativity and performance—of a maker’s faithful reaching—as being shadowed by the shabby and seeking the sublime. We seek the latter while being shadowed by the former.**

But let’s, please, consider our words carefully and make every effort to avoid oppositions and false choices. Are we using our words to describe qualities and styles in an attempt to clarify differences, or are we using them to mean judgments and to imply a false choice?

Using Zagajewski’s essay here are a few ideas I have about how our *reach*—balanced between the high and the low, the mysterious and the quotidian, the sublime and the shabby, the traditional and the vernacular—ought to be rightly applied.

- Let’s thoughtfully prepare ourselves for moments of illumination.
- Being full of tenderness, let’s approach situations with a wide view.
- Let’s “hold room” (I love that image!) for heroes and saints, as well as for the quotidian and its beautiful moments.
- Let’s find ways to be in proximity to what eludes words and to what is beautiful and painful.
- And, let’s understand our (maker) callings as a dialogue between the vertical and the horizontal, between what the world might call the spirit and the street.

I prefer the word *faithfulness* over the word *excellence*. *Excellence* is too often used thoughtlessly, and too often it places inappropriate emphasis on the subject and performance measures. The Old Testament uses *excellence* to describe the quality of things, and the New Testament uses the word in connection with moral character. The transition in 1 Corinthians, from the end of chapter 12 to the beginning of chapter 13, is instructive: the desire for greater gifts leads to a “more excellent way,” which is love.

So, *excellence* is right and sublime when it is aimed at the right thing (love), but if it’s aimed at the wrong thing and becomes self-preoccupied, prideful, and idolatrous, then I think that *excellence* has become thoroughly shabby.

On the other hand, *faithfulness* is more clearly or obviously about its object and about God's calling us to be true to what has been revealed to us about our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. *Faithfulness* is completely aligned with our Lutheran, Christian doctrine of vocation, that God calls us to faithfully steward our personal and material gifts, as makers, to his glory and the needs of our neighbor.

Being faithful reminds the Christian maker to place neither too much nor too little value on their work. We get in trouble if we make too much of our shabby work, and we don't honor our work if we avoid its sublime station. Our work is simultaneously shabby and sublime!

Zagajewski's spirit was generous, "holding room" for both high and low. He insisted that **art must grow out of a dialogue between the spiritual realm and the domain of our single precious moment.** While advocating for high style being of its time, he avoided its identification with a fixed idea or a particular form. Instead, high style is true, he wrote, when it has a sense of humor and modesty, and when it retains buoyancy or serenity.

He also stubbornly defended inspiration and inspired choices. And, he argued that language and its forms must be nurtured and not mocked. The better aesthetic, he wrote, is an aesthetic that's more constructive than destructive and more ecstatic than sardonic. This tension is complicated by the situation in the last two centuries: the serious, creative class have been more and more compelled to struggle between living in the empty room of their own minds and the discredited truths outside themselves.

Dorothy Sayers and Perry Glanzer are among those who have been critical of the Christian churches' response to prevailing theoretical tides. It's my opinion that confessional and biblical churches have an unfinished task, which is to help young makers in every domain break away from shabby thinking and reorient to that which can be sublime about what they study. We shouldn't relinquish such an important opportunity—to preach and teach and to stand for all truths being held captive, in genuine and meaningful ways, to the Lord of formal education.

How are we to properly view our vocations—as makers, as parishioners, and as leaders—concerning the shabby and the sublime? I speculate that we ought to acknowledge the low or shabby aspects without dismissing the high or sublime, and we ought to hold up the high or sublime aspects without disdaining the low or shabby. This enterprise, of reaching and making, holds room for both.

**Our enterprise—not the business of our reach, but the *telos*, or ultimate end, of our reach—is imperiled and fainthearted because we have acquiesced to a mostly secular impulse, aimed at material ease.** Having been devalued and marginalized, making is often positioned in terms of its relative, transactional values. We are often pressured to accept a false choice.

A recent essay, which is essentially a vocation statement, "Making as an Act of Longing and Lament," by Tish Harrison Warren, is characterized by its substantive exploration of earthly, human creation through a Christological lens. The author foregrounds Jesus' work, and his death and resurrection, to help Christian artists understand their acts of making as the embodied proclamation of the hope they have for all things being made new.

Warren describes the reach as being ordinary *and* for the *eschaton*—making aims for beauty and glory, for "rendering the eschaton present in the here and now." She gets things right about making because she puts the maker in full view of death and of the death of Jesus Christ. (Augustine's reflection in Book VII of *Confessions* was that: "the way up is the way down," and

Christians can begin to understand the divine by seeing Jesus Christ submit himself to the earthly.) Artmaking, Warren writes, is ultimately futile and incomplete, and it exposes our vulnerability, teaches us limitations, and causes us grief. “Embracing the inevitable grief inherent in the practice of ‘making’ is a way of taking up our cross and entering into the suffering and vulnerability of Jesus.”

The final, closing section of her essay is an outline for three “embodied practices.” The first practice is silence and contemplation. She proposes that “a life lived lamenting the fall and longing for the eschaton is inevitably a contemplative life.” The second practice is lament and celebration. Being full of lament and celebration shapes Christian makers and helps their work become more truthful, is her claim. The third practice is to be sacramental. Baptism and the Eucharist “hold together the tension of relentless human vulnerability and the enduring love of God.” The sacraments are effective at reminding Christian artists that they are caught in the love of God and, there, made new. The sacraments send the makers back into the world differently—they glimpse both life and death and, most important, “the hope of all things being made new.”

Finally, what does this all mean? The verses of Romans 11:33 and 12:1-2 remind us to be radically, or essentially, true to our baptismal callings as saints in a fallen world. The epistle writer encourages us to seek the sublime in everything. It seems to me that in these verses the shabby is assumed to be the context for our seeking—we are living, embodied beings in a world whose patterns and temptations cling to us. Our making and our reach should not conform to the patterns of this world, but should be tested in relation to God’s good and pleasing and perfect will. What we make and where we reach should be offered as living sacrifices, as they have been transformed by the depth and riches and wisdom and understanding of God.