

A Maker's Pilgrimage

A Zoom retreat with Br. Aidan Owen, OHC

Quotations and Selected Bibliography

Berry, Thomas, *The Dream of the Earth*.

Guroian, Vigen, *The Fragrance of God*.

Guroian, Vigen, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

Korn, Peter, *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters*.

Langlands, Alexander, *Craëft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts*.

When I garden, earth and earthworm pass between my fingers, and I realize that I am made of the same stuff. [...] Man is a microcosm in whose flesh resonates and reverberates the pulse of the whole creation, in whose mind creation comes to consciousness, and through whose imagination and will God wants to heal and reconcile everything that sin has wounded and put in disharmony. (Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise*, 7)

We're increasingly constrained by computers and a pixelated abridgement of reality that serves only to make us blind to the truly infinite complexity of the natural world. Most critically, our physical movements have been almost entirely removed as a factor in our own existence. Now all we seem to do is push buttons. (Langlands, 11)

Isn't someone who is crafty also someone who simply has a way of doing things that is different from our own? Like the witch, the crafty so-and-so is the outsider, the non-conformist, the maverick, the renegade. Their craftiness is about bringing together all their powers to get on in the world outside of the Establishment, or perhaps even despite the Establishment. If we don't already, should we not admire craftiness a little more? (Langlands, 20)

Against a rising tide of automation and increasing digital complexity, we are becoming further divorced from the very thing that defines us: we are makers, crafters of things. When our lives once comprised an almost unbroken chain of movements and actions as we interacted physically with the material requirements of our existence, today we stare at screens and we press buttons. When we made things, we accumulated a certain kind of knowledge, we had an awareness and an understanding of how materials worked and how the human form has evolved to create from them. With the severance from this ability we're in danger of losing touch with a knowledge base that allows us to convert raw materials into useful objects, and hand-eye-head-heart-body co-ordination that furnishes us with a meaningful understanding of the materiality of our world. [...] We must never lose sight of the fact that the most

intelligently designed, the most versatile and the most complex piece of kit we have at our disposal is our own body. As John Ruskin put it in 1859, in our hands, we have “the subtlest of all machines.” (Langlands, 22-24)

It occurred to me that if we spent more time individually converting raw materials into useful objects, we might be better placed to contextualise the challenges that face a society addicted to excessive and often conspicuous consumption. Perhaps more importantly, we might be a bit happier. (Langlands, 23)

Often the most meaningful objects are the most mundane. [...] A person who has time to retrieve only one object from a burning house is more likely to stumble out of the smoke clutching a parent’s wedding ring or a family Bible passed down through the generations than his most expensive piece of electronic equipment. How do humble heirlooms and mementos attain such overriding emotional significance? They become, I would suggest, talismans that independently confirm their owners’ central narratives of personal identity. After all, to maintain the stories that constitute one’s understanding of oneself in the world is a constant struggle, not just because memory is frail, but because the world around us swarms with contrary facts and alternative viewpoints. (Korn, 66)

In the workshop, wishing just won’t make it so. The craftsman is forced to come to terms with the physical properties of materials, the mechanical properties of tools, and the real capacity and limits of his own dexterity, discipline, and imagination. In this way, craft’s materiality imposes cooperation on the sometimes discordant factions of the mind. By necessity it reconciles the desire to interpret the world in ways that emotionally gratifying with the countervailing need for accurate information to facilitate effective decision making. Thus the holistic quality of craft lies not only in engaging the whole person, but in harmonizing his understanding of himself in the world. (Korn, 56)

The simple truth is that people who engage in creative practice go into the studio first and foremost because they expect to emerge from the other end of the creative gauntlet as different people. (Korn, 103-4)

Here, I think, is the hidden miracle at the heart of the ordinary in every field of art: creative work is an experiment through which the maker seeks new ways to envision human potential, using himself as the laboratory. [...] However humbly, we are participating in the ongoing, communal project of mankind to narrate what it means to be human, how our universe works, and how we should live. (Korn, 124)

At the workbench I cannot bullshit a plank of white oak or a chisel; as mediums for thought they stubbornly ground me in the actuality of things. (Korn, 155)

Unfortunately Western religious traditions have been so occupied with redemptive healing of a flawed world that they tend to ignore creation as it is experienced in our times. Consequently one of the basic difficulties of the modern West is its division into a secular scientific community, which is concerned with creative energies, and a religious community, which is concerned with redemptive energies. So concerned are we with redemptive healing that once healed, we look to be more healed. We seldom get to our functional role within the creative intentions of the universe. (Berry, 25)

The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on. Boasting is what a boy does, who has no real effect in the world. But

craftsmanship must reckon with the infallible judgement of reality, where one's failures or shortcomings cannot be interpreted away. (*Shop Craft as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford)