

The Writer's Corner

Finding Your Own Chapel: Encountering the Divine through Creative Self-Expression

WRITING CENTER
NEWSLETTER
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Edited by Rachel Hungerford, Emma Spronk, & Liz Zimmerman

Letter from the Editors

Every Tuesday at 3 PM, the tutors of the Writing Center have their weekly meeting. Someone leads a devotional, we eat snacks, ask questions, and share experiences of the week. On the day when we were trying to come up with a theme for this newsletter, Ellen Diehl had led a devotional that she called “finding your chapel.” She talked about how the Tuesday/Thursday chapels can feel uncomfortable and inaccessible at times; they doesn’t always touch the difficulties and stressors of the day. But she said that when she attends her dance class, she can lose her anxiety and tension and feel closer to God. Dance, for her, is a kind of worship. We wanted to follow that theme in this newsletter—that worship doesn’t always have to look like singing praise songs or reciting creeds. In this issue, you’ll see how some of our tutors get closer to God through their own creative expres-

sion or interpretation. Some people see God in the world’s natural beauty; others see His reflection in great literature or music. We hope you enjoy these different takes on feeling and being worshipful—no matter what that looks like to you.

-Rachel Hungerford, co-editor

Rachel Hungerford is a sophomore English major and co-editor of this issue. She is from New Holland, PA and enjoys creative writing, singing musical theatre songs, and watching a good TV show (The Good Place is her current favorite). When she’s not in the writing center, you can usually find her at the Harbor House, the College Honors Program’s on-campus special interest house.





Hannah Beirsto is a senior English major and would be a film minor if Messiah had a minor for film. She loves essays, creative writing, and long walks on the beach.

Saving Time

They say if you want to get close to God, get close to nature. I don't always like listening to *them*, but my personal research has proven conclusively that fresh air clears a dull brain. So I went outside. Mostly, I knew the sun was about to set. And with daylight savings time creeping upon us like a cold blanket around the sky, I knew I would regret taking natural Vitamin D for granted.

Unfortunately, it was cold. Colder than it'd been the week before, when I'd unconsciously deceived myself that fall and winter might leave us alone this year. Or they'd at the very least be kind. My ears are weak little cretins, and immediately froze five steps out of the front door. I could stuff my hands into my torn windbreaker pockets, but my favorite beanie had been missing for over a week now. *Finding that would be an act of God*, I mused.

I walked down the road, down to the chilly Breeches, looking for God on the swinging bridge.

I found a family with two young children instead, taking pictures in their pastel coats. We shared the bridge awkwardly, or at least, I did. I flipped through Canvas on my phone, hoping I wasn't intruding, reminding myself that burning through my data was defeating the purpose of being in nature. They reminded me of being little, when my parents would take us hiking at the falls in our rain coats and baseball caps. Back when the cold rarely affected me, and God was in every tree root.

"I walked down the road, down to the chilly Breeches, looking for God on the swinging bridge."

I stared into the river, like I would at home. All rivers are ultimately the same, in my opinion; just wa-

ter and rocks. Some are better at watching sticks float in than others, my childhood neighborhood's gentle river still being the best. Why did I even come here? If God was at the breeches, I couldn't hear him over the chattering children, or the weight of my phone back in my coat pocket.

The mother was moving down the bridge to get a different picture angle, so I took my chance to escape the rushing sound of cold water entirely. I walked around the river, praying, deciding I was as physically close to God as I was gonna get. The setting sun cast sharp lines over the silhouetted sports fields.

With my ears red against the wind, I soaked in the sun, wishing I had taken every opportunity I could to bask in its presence. *No, don't think about then*, I stilled, settling into my skin, getting closer to the real. The gentle inhale and exhale of the present, of God.

Feeling adequately refreshed, I was ready to go back inside, instinctively checking my phone. The clock told me I hadn't been out for even fifteen minutes.



A Glimpse of His Back

I'll just say it: I don't seek God on the proverbial mountaintop. I come from a fairly nature-oriented family, so I think I've gotten the full outdoor experience — I've traveled by canoe, gotten my fishing line tangled in the algae-infested reservoir by my house, and hiked most of the mountains in the Adirondack Fire Tower Challenge (while falling into a few streams along the way). I've skied, snow-shoed, berry-picked, moon-chased, and sought out constellations through the smoke of a summer campfire. But while I adore — and certainly believe — the idea that “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1), I have to admit that nature isn't my place of meditation. Instead of considering the hand that created it, I busy myself swatting mosquitoes and chasing after the person ahead of me on the trail. The outdoor world becomes a distraction.

So when we chose “finding your chapel” as the theme for this semester's newsletter, I genuinely considered opting out, because the most obvious place for worship outside the church has never felt particularly profound to me. But as I've immersed myself in my senior year here at Messiah, I find myself returning again and again to what I consider my own personal mountaintop: the story.

While researching for a project, I recently stumbled across the tale of a man named Agamemnon — and yes, for my fellow mythology buffs, he led the Achaean forces in the famed Trojan War. As so often happened in these stories, he fell out of favor with one of the more wrathful deities of the pantheon, the goddess Artemis, who stalled the winds to prevent him from sailing into battle. A prophet warned Agamemnon that he could only appease Artemis by sacrificing his youngest daughter, a beautiful young girl named Iphigenia. After the father's initial resistance, he gave in, walked his daughter to the altar in the guise of offering her as a bride, and brought out a knife. However, in some versions of this myth, Agamemnon's willingness so impressed Artemis that she stayed his hand and provided a deer as sacrifice in Iphigenia's place. Of course, as anyone who's familiar with the Trojan War can certainly attest, Agamemnon falls far short as a suitable role model. But in reading that

myth, I found a reflection of Abraham and Isaac, and the Lord who provided a sacrifice for his faithful son (Genesis 22:1-13).

Especially in the past year, I've fallen in love with stories like this one, tales that reflect God in the most unlikely places. He can be found anywhere — in the world-altering flood from The Epic of Gilgamesh which echoes Genesis, even in the modern fan theories that claim Harry Potter is a Christ-type in The Deathly Hallows. It's what Tim Keller refers to as “common grace” — all of humankind's ability to do things well, in ways that demonstrate the glory of God, whether or not those people persist in relationship with Him. I believe that the heavens do declare the glory of God — or, as the atheistic Hazel explains in John Green's *The Fault in our Stars*, that “the universe wants to be noticed.” We as artists, as storytellers and book-writers and speakers and painters and creators, all act as part of God's creation, and in that, we reflect the One who made us. Whenever we successfully portray the world around us, we will declare His truths — whether intentionally or not.

I “find my chapel” in stories like Agamemnon's, in seeking out reflections of God's truth. These are the moments in which I cannot help but whisper, “What an amazing God You are.” Of course, the reflections themselves are not worth worship — they are, after all, the creation of sinful human hands and tongues. But they are capable of directing my eyes back to the One they represent, of pushing me back into the Word for fear that I might miss a reflection of God if I cannot recognize it. Even if, like Moses, I can only catch a glimpse of His back, I find my chapel in seeking that glimpse.



Lydia Leigh Wittman is a senior English major with a minor in Classical, Medieval and Renaissance Studies. She grew up in Wallingford, Connecticut, and she enjoys reading fantasy novels, knitting colorful hats, and collecting rings. Home is a long drive away, so she's currently very excited to return to her pets — a sweet border collie named Kate and a little black kitten named Toothless.



Natalie Vermulen is a senior English writing major with a French minor, and her specialties are MLA, academic writing (research papers!), and any creative writing as well. She is a lover of words, music, and learning & telling people's stories.

A Reason to Sing

“All of my life
In every season
You are still God
I have a reason to sing
I have a reason to worship.”
--"Desert Song" by Hillsong

Music has always been one of my favorite things. Ever since I was young, I've been a singer—in talent shows, at church, and especially around the house. Wherever I am, I surround myself with music. As I've grown, I've realized that music is also the way I feel most connected to God. Sometimes a worship song will wash over me and I'll feel God in the lyrics and the melody, more than in any spoken word. I can't contain my emotions, but I also don't feel the need when I'm experiencing God's presence with me.

I am in the Gospel Choir at Messiah, which is always a heart-filling time. I often find myself immersed in the music—the repetition of the lyrics, the pulsing energy behind the melody, the deep soul-cries to God. Near the end of last semester we did a joint concert with a few other Gospel Choirs, and our director invited anyone who wanted to join to come up on stage with us. We sang a worshipful song called “Hosanna” that really got me every time I sang it. It's a simple song, not too many lyrics, but really beautiful:

“Hosanna in the highest,
let our King be lifted up,
Hosanna.”

The melody was slow and meditative, and there was a lot of power in singing these words to the Lord.

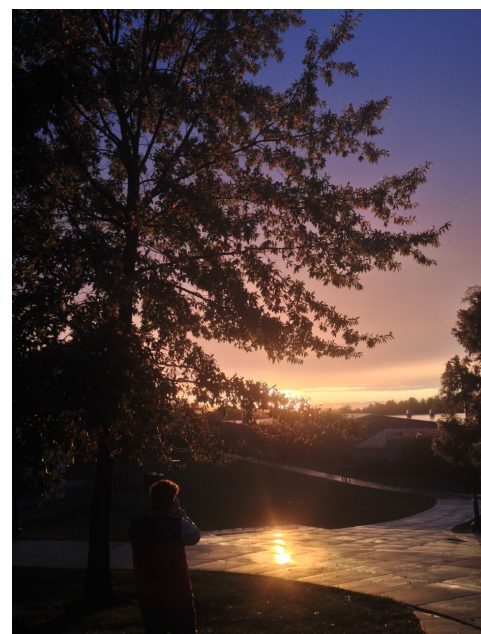
As we sang the words over and over, I was pushing my voice and just kind of letting go in praise. Unsurprisingly, my voice cracked pretty badly while I was singing. But in that moment, I also got a beautiful little glimpse of what

Heaven is going to look like: all these people praising the Lord together. And in Heaven, I'll be able to *praise the Lord forever with a voice that will never give out*. My voice will never strain, never crack, never give out in Heaven. I'll be able to sing to the Lord in unending praise! And in that moment, I got really excited for the day when that becomes my eternity.

But this unending worship can also be my present. I came across a psalm the other day that beautifully expresses the connection between God and music: “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me” (Psalm 13:5-6). I sing because I cannot do otherwise—the Lord is so worthy of praise.

“This unending worship can also be my present.”

God's love is the best, truest love we could ever experience; it never fails, and never leaves us. Music is a reminder of that for me. It allows me to feel God's presence, and to pour out praise for who He is and what He's done. For all of His goodness, for His power and sovereignty, for how He sustains and guides and cares for me, for how He loves me—I *have a reason to sing*.



Why Do I Create?

There I was, slouched over my theology textbook, trying to get the next day's reading out of the way, when a word on the page caught my eye—*Tolkien*. Being the incurable LOTR fanatic that I am, I suddenly found renewed interest in my reading. I was elated to find that not only was the next paragraph about Tolkien, but it mentioned one of his greatest contributions to modern thought—the theology of sub-creation.

Sub-creation is the idea that humans love to create because God is the ultimate Creator and we were made in God's image. In his work *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien states: "We make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker." Tolkien also explains this idea in poem form:

"Man, sub-creator, the refracted light
Through whom is splintered from a single
White
To many hues and endlessly combined
In living shapes that move from mind to
mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we
filled
With elves and goblins, though we dared to
build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
And sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our
right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we're
made" [emphasis added].

In this metaphor, Tolkien compares God's creation

to white light, which encompasses the full spectrum of colors. Then he says that human sub-creation is like refractions of that light. We take inspiration from what we see around us and create new variations and expressions. For example, a photographer takes a picture of natural beauty, but adds her own touch to it by how she angles the camera and what she focuses on. My own attempts at creations are often inspired by things around me: I've written poems prompted by seeing thickly falling snow, by remembering how hot sand feels under my feet, by chomping a fresh tomato. God's masterpieces--the places, animals, clouds, smells, and quirky people around us--provide infinite inspiration for our imaginations. Just as there are endless hues that can be taken from the spectrum of light, there are endless new things that we can make, that are not really new but are variations and expansions on what God has previously made.

Creation is an activity that is intrinsic to human nature, something we do every day. While most restrict the definition of "sub-creation" to the ability to create fantasy worlds or meaningful narratives, I believe that Tolkien's basic premise is even more far-reaching. As a writer, I do love fantasy stories, but the drive to create can take many other amazing forms. One other mode of creation that I particularly love is singing. In Messi-



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Riddle Me This:

It belongs to you, but other people use it more than you do. What is it?

Find the answer on the last page.

Why Do I Create? (cont'd)

ah's Women's Ensemble we know we aren't perfect (I definitely don't practice enough) but there's something so fulfilling about taking the notes on the page and using our voices to create beautiful melodies. I also love being in Acclamation Dance Ministry, especially getting to improvise to worship music, moving my body to my own inner rhythm as a prayer to God.

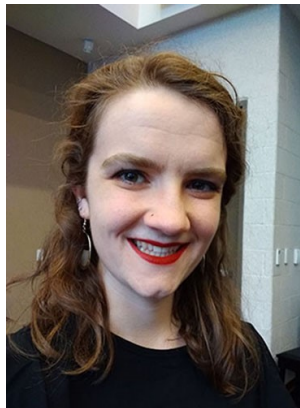
But creation doesn't have to take the form of traditional art forms! My roommates and I invented a contest called "The Great Lottie Food Art Competition." It's what it sounds like: we have fifteen minutes to choose our food in Lottie and arrange it in the most appetizing or creative way on our plates. The product definitely is not top tier culinary art, but there's something so fun about just experimenting and making new things. It's not only me, look around you and you'll see everywhere people pursuing this drive to create—from choreography at the Acclamation worship night, to the all-terrain wheelchairs designed in the Collab, to the Spring Break Wilderness trips crafted by Adventure Ed majors, to

decorations on your dorm room door, to the cookies you make with your friends on Friday night—everywhere humans are making meaningful things.

Not only is creating a God-given ability, but the act of making is something that can draw us closer to God. In enjoying the work of ours and others' hands we are fulfilling an intrinsic purpose of our being. We are participating with God in creating. He made this wonderful world and allows us the gift of enriching it, whether that be enriching it with well-made lesson plans or a heart-rending clarinet solo or a new hearing aid design or some really good homemade mac and cheese.

So this week I challenge you to look around and notice where you see people creating. I challenge you to take notice when you are creating something, no matter how mundane or unimportant it seems. Remember who it was who gave you this wonderful ability to make new things, and let yourself enjoy doing what God made you to do.





Lydia Peibly is a junior English major with a Secondary Teaching Certification and a minor in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Lydia hopes to one day be fluent in both Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. She loves anything and everything creative, whether it be the visual arts, performing arts, writing, or literature. She is also very passionate about social justice, and annually participates in Dressember to help raise awareness and money to end human trafficking.

The God of Small Things

So many people articulate a sense of fulfillment, peace, and joy when they express themselves, especially through an “artistic” or “creative” media. For musicians, the chaotic noise of the outside world fades away when they pick up their instrument; painters find solace from their hectic schedules when they return to their canvas. Yet, these people often lack the language to connect that serenity back to the divine, to the idea that in creating we emulate a creator. Our ability to create stems from our *imago Dei*. However, when I began to think about how I personally use self-expression as a means to access the divine, the idea becomes slightly more muddled. There is no one mode of self-expression through

which I exclusively or most notably commune with God. There is not one singular act that I turn toward in order to access the divine. Instead of one overarching activity, I tend to find God in a million little pockets of goodness. And I usually find Them when I’m not looking.

I find God in the miniscule details of a painting or drawing, in the delicate presence, yet colossal importance, of a single eyelash or wrinkle. I find God in momentary harmony, in a single crescendo or concordant stanza. I find God in a single line of a poem, in the perfect adjective or juxtaposition of ideas. I find God in the very word “juxtaposition.” I find God in the small things.

Unlike God, I can’t create on a massive scale. Or what is massive for me is miniscule for Them. But like God, I can create on a minute scale. I cannot create a mountain, but I can capture its beauty on a canvas; I cannot create consciousness, but I can record it on a page. I was created in the *imago Dei*, my very existence captures the beauty of God’s creation, captures God Himself. But I can further capture Their beauty in my own ability to create, whether it be through song, painting, writing, or other media. And it’s in the tiny details of both my and Their creation that I tangibly feel connected to Them.

I think this is because the perfect little details are what remind me that God really cares. So many people tend to fixate on the fact that God is all-powerful, all-knowing. And it is comforting to know we have that power on our side. But I take comfort in the fact that God created the entire universe, and They didn’t stop at good enough. They didn’t stop with oceans and forests; they gave us gurgling creeks and majestic oak trees; they gave us tiny dew droplets on veined leaves.



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About the Writing Center

The Writing Center is a free service that hopes to help students become better writers. Our tutors are trained peers, selected for our own writing ability, and we work in one-on-one sessions that are tailored to each student's needs. We are not an editing service; rather, we work individually with students to help them write and revise their own papers. This means that the Writing Center is open to anyone, whether you're new to college writing and stuck on your first assignment or a senior English major who just wants a second opinion on your analytical essay. This also means that we accept papers at any stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to final revisions. No matter what you're writing, we're here to help!



Scheduling a Session:

To schedule a session with one of our Writing Center tutors, log into Falconlink and select the tab entitled: "Learning Center/Writing Center Appointments."

Online Service:

If you are a commuter, graduate student, or your paper is longer than 7 pages, email us to find out more about our online tutoring service!

Answer to riddle on page 5: your name.

