

OF DEVICES, FOCAL PRACTICES, AND MYSTERY

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[O]ur principal difficulty is not technology itself but our inability to differentiate between the central practices that we wish to preserve because they bring meaning and grace and those spheres of life for which efficiency and cost-benefit analysis properly ought to reign.

But such reform cannot be easy. Because we are not just making choices about particular technologies but rather about the overall shape of our lives, the kind of discernment called for is particularly demanding.

Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*¹

I am a liturgist and media producer. I have spent the last decade considering the intersection of worship and media art and helping local church leaders use media art in ways appropriate to their liturgical tradition and community. I have published two books on the subject, but I know that the church is still at a very early stage in understanding or valuing media art as *liturgical art*.

I present workshops and give lectures on this topic to diverse groups, Protestant and Catholic. In my most recent presentation to pastors and leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I informally surveyed their use of media. Of the fifty Lutherans in the room, perhaps six people were using media as presentation technology. That is, in their worship they project lyrics and other texts against some thematic graphic background, and they may occasionally use a photograph or show a film clip. A few leaders were considering using media. Some pastors admitted they already had the media technology but really were at the early stage of figuring out how best to use it appropriately in Lutheran worship.

During sessions such as these, I implore liturgical leaders to stop approaching the use of media in worship as an issue of installing the right equipment and strategically placing media screens. I propose an alternative starting point: worship itself. "It's not about the technology," I exclaim in session after session. "It's about worship!"

At every opportunity, I encourage pastors and other church leaders to consider the potential for media art in worship to be *art* that is integral to the liturgical actions of the assembly. I set before them a vision. Rather than their incorporating media art that looks little different in style from the

PowerPoint™-based media art created by and for educational or business communication, their church might instead incorporate *liturgical media art* created by their own people who can become *liturgical media artists*. Furthermore, I always challenge pastors to consider how they can empower their own community to create media art for their worship through a process I call Communal Co-Creation. After years of thinking about the intersection of worship and media, researching actual community practices, and teaching graduate theology students and pastors about media art in worship, I have come to this conclusion: The more local the creation of the media art, the greater the spiritual fruits for the worshiping community. This has become my conviction, too. “Go local,” I plead with all who will listen. The creation and reception of liturgical media art can become an ever-deepening spiritual practice that can potentially engage the entire community.

Less often do I speak about professional media artists who are creating media for their own churches or producing for-sale media art for other churches’ worship. But I do worry about them. Are they getting scriptural, theological, liturgical, and spiritual formation? Media producers working in or for churches can find themselves becoming spiritually burned out. Over time, their media ministry—so often modeled on commercial production companies and driven by church-growth marketing goals—can become just a job.

We need to care for and spiritually nourish our professionally trained media artists, especially those media ministers on staff in large churches who are under the gun week in and week out to create media for their services. As one who has been a media producer and has owned a production company, I know about production deadlines and marketing goals. Had I gone in a different direction in my professional life, I might have become one of those on-staff media ministers, had I known such jobs existed. So, let me be clear. In my encouraging parish folk to create liturgical media art, to “go local,” I am not in any way being disdainful or dismissive of the creative work of staff media ministers—or of independent producers of media art for worship. They are my professional colleagues, people I may have worked alongside, people I might have hired for my own video productions, people I know are my sisters and brothers in Christ. (See page 57, “Portrait of a Liturgical Media Artist,” a brief portrait of a professional media artist who has come to understand his need for spiritual nourishment in order to create liturgical media art.)

In my presentations, though, few pastors to whom I speak come from large or megachurches with paid media staff. They shepherd small- to medium-sized churches. If they have used media art at all, they may have downloaded images from the Internet or purchased media-art-for-worship available online or on DVDs. I suggest they tap an alternative resource: local talent, in and outside of their membership. I always exhort church leaders to connect with local media artists, visual artists, and art educators. I urge them to reach out and to invite these talented people to create liturgical media art, to share their expertise, and to help guide the aesthetic and technical growth and development of their church volunteers (appropriately compensated, of course). I urge pastors to be discerning theologically and liturgically about what they download and buy. Not all media art purported to be for worship is appropriate to *your* community’s worship and theology, I caution.

A Puzzle

Much of the media for worship available on the Internet is stock photography and video simply repackaged for the Houses of Worship market. It is often beautiful, even stunning, but something about it leaves me unmoved. After going through scores of beautiful photos for sale and seeing similarly beautiful photos for sale on multiple vendor websites, I become satiated, disinterested.

Please don't get me wrong. I enjoy photography. I grew up on the amazing photography of *National Geographic* and am literally a Kodak kid from Rochester, New York. For more than four decades I have been a photographer. I have even been paid for my photography, although I do not claim to be a professional photographer. I value photography and admire the work of photographers. So why do these purported photography-for-worship images on the Internet leave me cold? I've known it has to do with the difference between process and product. But still my strong negative reaction has puzzled me. The photos are so beautiful! However, at an instinctual level, I find these images and their easy availability troublesome.

Only in this past year as I was teaching a course at Catholic Theological Union on Worship in a Media Culture did I find a concept to help me explain my gut reaction to for-sale media art for worship, such as stock photography and videos. Richard Gaillardetz in *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in Technological Culture* provided the clue. He introduced me to the work of Albert Borgmann, who describes part of the modern conflict as being between "technological devices" and "focal practices." Gaillardetz suggests that part of our modern spiritual conflict and liturgical challenge is likewise between technological devices and focal practices. While technological devices provide efficient and useful products, focal practices direct our energies into a creative process.

These two conceptual terms can be off-putting, but we have all experienced the contrast to which they refer. Consider the difference between tending a garden through all its seasons and simply buying cut flowers and putting them in a vase. Or between practicing a musical instrument for years and listening to recorded music on your iPod[®]. Or between creating media art for your worship and downloading it from the Internet.

With focal practices such as gardening, making music, and creating media art for worship, we expend personal effort, discipline, and much time. In an ongoing effort, we focus our energies into the creation of something, the offering of some service, or the blossoming of relationship with people or God's creation.

Technological devices require little maintenance. They save us time and effort. Given that "time is money," as the saying goes in U.S. culture, we value labor-saving tools and services that we can buy. And, let's face it, some days we simply cannot manage to do more than put a frozen dinner in the microwave and zap it. We do not have the hours necessary for planning, buying, preparing, cooking, and serving a meal. That microwave dinner, though, never satisfies in a way comparable to a home-cooked meal. In the minutes we microwave that vacuum-sealed plastic (hopefully recyclable)

dish, we remain passive and uninvolved other than to make sure we have followed the directions on the box and to wait. Perhaps while we are waiting, we are even multitasking as the frozen food spins in the microwave oven. "Provide the good without the practice," Gaillardetz explains, "and the character of the good itself changes: it becomes a mere commodity."² Technological devices are the frozen food of our life, the things we use to make our lives more convenient. They do not necessarily nourish our spirits or encourage our growth.

In contrast, focal practices and events do nourish us in multiple ways. Most importantly, they encourage what Gaillardetz calls "communion." Focal practices "invite us to abandon a largely instrumental view of our world and its inhabitants in favor of an attitude of 'communion' that draws us into attentive, respectful engagement with the larger world." This communion "finds its ultimate ground in communion with God."³ Such communion involves interactions and the building of webs of relationships. It requires careful, ongoing maintenance, at times even high maintenance. It calls us into encounter with God and God's own.

Upon reading Gaillardetz's explanation of technological devices and focal practices, I realized, "That's it!" That distinction was why I have always been uneasy and uncomfortable with for-sale media art for worship. On the other hand, I cannot dismiss all prepackaged media art for worship. It has its place, too, and may be just what a community needs for a particular service. When placed within the context of worship, the photography or videos may trigger a memory for me or suggest a mood or tone for a service. However, if I am to get anything out of their being in worship, any spiritual nutrition, I still have to expend some energy and imagination into my viewing of them and to engage the photograph or video as I would any other metaphor in the liturgy. I must practice contemplation. I need to encounter and interpret them within the context of the whole worship. I need to give my full, conscious, active participation to this liturgical act as I would to any other.

The act of reception is a key factor here. If I do not put something of myself into engaging the art, if I do not engage in the focal practice of contemplation, if I do not open myself to what I see and hear, that media art (as beautiful as it may be) can just sit there on the media screen as a pretty decoration somebody put in our communal space for worship. It may be nice, but it does not necessarily move me toward a deeper encounter with God, God's people, or the rest of God's creation. If it does, praise God! The Holy Spirit has somehow managed to catch my attention!

The Spiritual Fruits of Communal Co-Creation

No church has to incorporate media in worship any more than its worship space has to have stained glass windows. Media art is an option, not a necessity. Furthermore, the media may be as simple as a single photograph displayed via an overhead projector that serves as part of the liturgical environment (see photo pages 25–26) or as complex as a video art installation that engages the Gospel of the day (see photo page 37). If a church chooses to go this route, though, many questions need to be addressed. In my teaching, writing, and speaking about media arts in worship, I encourage church leaders and

members to engage in an ongoing communal discernment process related to the conception, creation, and integration of any media art in worship. I offer a series of critical frameworks for evaluation that proceeds in this order: (1) questions about the overall local worship context, including the specific forms of worship involved, the community's theological and liturgical tradition, and their worship space; (2) questions about the functions of media within worship; (3) questions about aesthetics associated with both liturgy and media arts; and (4) questions about issues of justice and ethics.⁴ Having reflected critically on these many aspects of media art related to their own worship situation, some members may then decide they want to try their hand at creating it. That decision has significant implications. Let's shift focus, then, and look at how the Communal Co-Creation of liturgical media art potentially affects not only those who produce it but also how other worshipers may perceive and receive it.

When local church folk create their own media art for worship, they participate in a focal practice that requires time, effort, discipline, discernment, creativity, care, engagement, spiritual reflection, collaboration, and interaction. They gain spiritually as they inevitably invest themselves deeply in meditation upon the scriptures, in reflection upon other aspects of that liturgy and the church year, and in figuring out how that all relates to daily life. When Communal Co-Creation becomes a regular part of a community's life, this focal practice becomes an ongoing spiritual practice that can bear liturgical fruit of multiple kinds.

As with any focal practice, though, this process requires ongoing tending, even at times high maintenance. This process calls upon pastors to lead and to empower other leaders who can nurture the people and the creative and spiritual process in which they are all engaged. My research in churches where local people actually do create in some way the media art incorporated into their worship convinces me that the shepherding of this process is a worthwhile investment of pastoral time and effort. After all, pastoral care, too, is a focal practice.

"Why bother?" some might question. "Why not just find the art on the Internet and leave it at that?" In discussions with people who become engaged in producing liturgical media art for their community, I often have heard them say that as a consequence they see the world with new eyes. But they are not the only ones who might end up seeing the world differently. What local co-creators do and how they do it can make a difference not only to them, but also to me as a worshiper. The liturgical media art that local members or local media artists create for worship is the product of webs of relationships, webs that directly include a thread to me. If I as a worshiper know local people in the community have put in special effort to create the media art in our liturgy, I value the art differently because I am in relationship with its producers. What's more, my experience of their liturgical media art can become a focal practice for me as I may put more of myself and my imagination into its contemplation during worship.

"Liturgies are" about connection, about being connected and making connections "to God, people, and planet; to space, time, culture, and history; to difference and otherness; to memory and expectation," writes Nathan D. Mitchell in his prologue to *Meeting Mystery*.⁵ What's at stake in the encouragement of focal practices in Communal Co-Creation of liturgical

media art? In being connected and in making connections in this process, media art can become the portal through which we just might encounter Mystery.

Consider now the story of one media artist who has evolved in his understanding of the role of media art in worship and its relationship to Mystery.

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