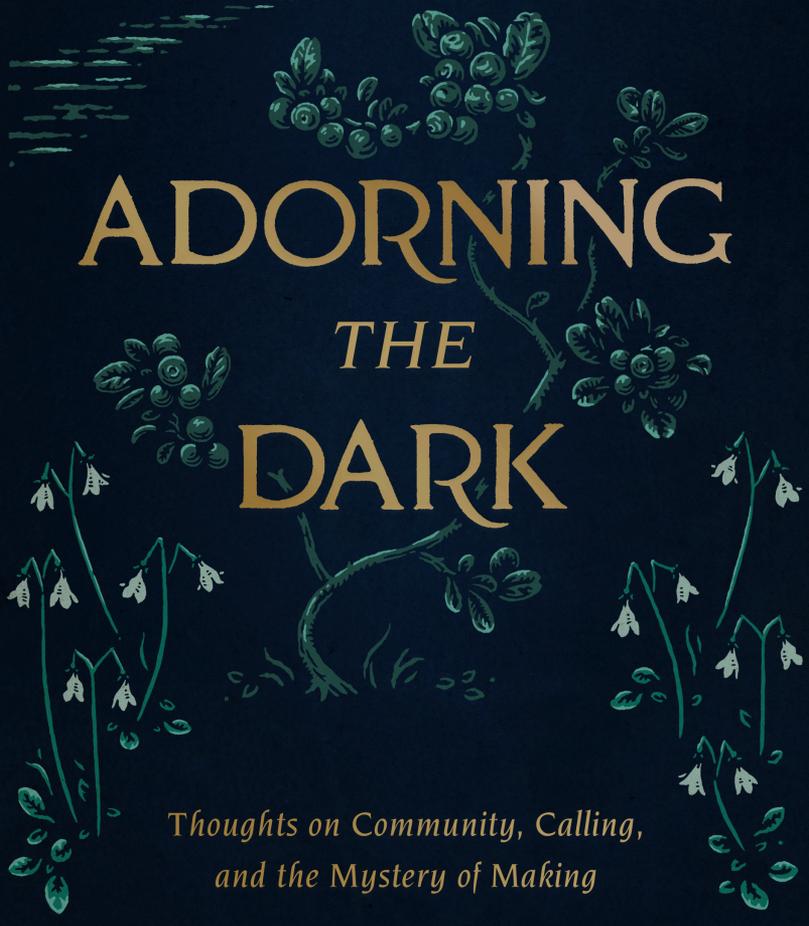


ANDREW PETERSON



ADORNING
THE
DARK



*Thoughts on Community, Calling,
and the Mystery of Making*



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CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------------|-----|
| Preface | ix |
| 1. Bach's Secret Weapon | 1 |
| 2. In the Beginning | 9 |
| 3. Scared and Sacred | 13 |
| 4. Behold the Lamb | 23 |
| 5. A Matter of Life or Death | 35 |
| 6. Longing to Belong | 49 |
| 7. The Integrated Imagination | 61 |
| 8. The Black Box | 75 |
| 9. Serving the Work | 83 |
| 10. Serving the Audience | 97 |
| 11. Selectivity | 107 |
| 12. Discipline | 115 |
| 13. Discernment | 133 |
| 14. Art Nourishes Community | 145 |
| 15. Community Nourishes Art | 163 |
| 16. Home Is Real | 175 |
| Afterword (Nuts and Bolts) | 185 |
| Acknowledgments | 193 |
| Reading List | 197 |
| About the Author | 199 |
| Also by the Author | 201 |

PREFACE

Over the years I've been asked to teach about songwriting, novel writing, creativity and the arts, and community. Sometimes it's for a conference. Sometimes it's for a school, college, or seminary—and every time I feel out of my league. Part of that is due to the fact that I know what a knucklehead I am. Part of it is because I'm a practitioner, not an academic. That means I haven't hunkered over ancient tomes in a library researching the arts; nor have I written lengthy papers on the subject under the tutelage of a professor. It means I've learned by doing, which is a nice way of saying that I learned by doing it wrong half the time.

I was nineteen when I had a head-on collision with Jesus through the music of Rich Mullins, and I gave the next twenty-six to a stumbling pursuit of a calling. (If you can add, now you know how old I am.) That calling, as I understand it, is to use whatever gifts I've been given to tell the truth as beautifully as I can. I've written a few hundred songs, played a few thousand concerts, written a handful of books, and executive produced an animated short film based on those books. Somewhere along the way I realized the writing life (and life in general) works best in the confines of a community, which led to the creation of a ministry called The Rabbit Room.

The Rabbit Room, inspired in part by the Oxford Inklings, is a gathering point for Christians with a similar calling to try and tell the truth beautifully—and part of the point is that none of us can do it alone. There's no doubt in my mind

ADORNING THE DARK

that what's shaped me and my work more than any particular talent on my part has been living out a calling in the midst of a Christ-centered community.

I don't have a PhD (I'm holding out for an honorary doctorate, thank you), and for that matter, I wasn't a very good student. This teaching thing, then, is not something I foresaw. There are days when I dream about going back to school to really dig in, to be the old guy who sits on the front row and asks all the annoying questions, but then I talk to graduate students about the papers they're writing, the research involved, the defense of their theses—and I doubt that I have it in me to do something so rigorous. As you'll see, I've spent a lot of my life following my nose, usually turning up that nose whenever I'm expected to do something I don't feel like doing. I realize this is a weakness. But it's a weakness God has redeemed again and again, one that has gotten me into a lot of trouble, the getting out of which has always led to something healing or edifying.

I'm not afraid of hard work, but I do have an aversion to work that feels like a waste of time. That means I tend to throw myself into big projects, usually a few at a time, work until my mind is jelly, and if I don't have a proper break then I'm going to have a proper breakdown.

Many, many times over the years I've told my sweet Jamie, "We just have to make it until _____, then things will calm down, I promise," and there's some truth to it. But Jamie and I both know that once things calm down, some new hare-brained idea will float to the surface of my gray matter and will start it all up again. My longsuffering manager Christie has

PREFACE

the task of talking me out of truly dumb ideas, talking me into things I don't at first see the value in, coming up with a plan for the ideas that stick, and reminding me six months later when I'm frustrated and tired that this is exactly what I wanted to do—that it was *my* idea, after all.

To not learn at least *something* of value over the last few decades of creative work would be odd, and though I don't often feel very smart, I do in fact have some strong opinions about the way things are, and those opinions are based at least in part on experience.

The first few times I was in a position of leadership at a retreat or conference I was so nervous I could hardly speak. When my dear friend Kenny Woodhull asked me to co-lead a retreat with Michael Card about fifteen years ago, I declined. Putting on a concert is one thing; I could do that. But teaching? Speaking? Leading? Clearly Kenny had the wrong guy. But he talked me into it. At the first session of that retreat, after Michael gave his brilliant introductory thoughts, it was my turn to say a few words. I stammered as I told them that I felt unqualified, but that I had to trust something George MacDonald once wrote about the inner chamber of God's heart:

As the fir-tree lifts up itself with a far different need from the need of the palm-tree, so does each man stand before God, and lift up a different humanity to the common Father. And for each God has a different response. With every man he has a secret—the secret of the new name. In every man there is a loneliness,

ADORNING THE DARK

an inner chamber of peculiar life into which God only can enter . . . a chamber into which no brother, nay, no sister can come.

From this it follows that there is a chamber also—(O God, humble and accept my speech)—a chamber in God himself, into which none can enter but the one, the individual, the peculiar man—out of which chamber that man has to bring revelation and strength for his brethren. This is that for which he was made—to reveal the secret things of the Father.¹

That is to say, you know and understand things about the heart of God that only *you* can teach. Once I was in a counseling session with my dear friend Al Andrews, working through a painful season of my childhood. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I said with a snuffle. “My brother and sisters don’t seem to carry this same pain, and we were all there at the same time, in the same house.” Al said, “If I were to interview four siblings about their childhoods, they would each describe a completely different family.” Your story, then, is yours and no one else’s. Each sunset is different, depending on where you stand. So when the voices in my head tell me I have nothing to offer, nothing interesting to say, I fight back with George MacDonald.

Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms” (John 14:2). Could it be that those rooms are inner chambers in the

1. C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology 365 Readings*, “The New Name” (Nashville, TN: HarperCollins, 2015).

PREFACE

heart of God, each of which has an individual's name on it? If this is true, and I'd like to believe it is, then all I have to do is tell about my Lord and my God. Because I know him intimately, uniquely, it may be a revelation, in a sense, of the secret things of the Father. This is part of my calling—to make known the heart of God. And because he holds a special place in his heart for me and me alone (just as he holds a special place for you), my story stands a chance to be edifying to my sisters and brothers, just as your story, your insight, your revelation of God's heart, is something the rest of us need.

In that spirit, this book is a glimpse into my own faltering journey as a songwriter, storyteller, and Christian. It's a love song, if you will, about the life God has given me.

BACH'S SECRET WEAPON

I recently had a good, long phone conversation with a singer-songwriter about that grand old subject, Getting Started in the Music Business. He's recorded an album but hasn't yet taken the leap into full-time music and was asking me for some advice on the matter.

The problem is, I don't know what kind of practical career advice to give, because what worked in my case might not (and probably won't) work for you. I loved a pretty girl in college. I also loved to make music. I was freaking out because I thought I had to choose between her and the songs, until late one night my old friend Adam said, "If God wants you to play music, dummy, you'll play music whether you're married or not." So I married the girl.

You don't need a record contract to serve God with your gifts. You don't need to move to Nashville. You just need to stay where you are, play wherever you can, and keep your eyes peeled. You never know what might happen. One of the most fortuitous meetings in my life (my old buddy Gabe Scott) happened because I said yes to a 3:00 a.m., \$40 gig at a junior high all-nighter. Gabe and I have been making music together now for more than twenty years.

But in the end, what did I do? I moved to Nashville. I got a record contract. It wasn't because I was some wildly successful indie bard, but because one guy heard my songs and believed in them enough to let me open for his band. What on earth do I know? The doors open. Walk through them.

ADORNING THE DARK

The best thing you can do is to keep your nose to the grindstone, to remember that it takes a lot of work to hone your gift into something useful, and that you have to learn to enjoy the work—especially the parts you don't enjoy. Maybe *that's* the answer to a successful career. But I know far too many hard-working, gifted singer-songwriters or authors who work their fingers to the bone and still have to moonlight at a restaurant to make ends meet. Every waiter and waitress in Nashville has a demo in their back pocket, just in case. Me, I waited tables at Olive Garden for three months before suddenly finding myself on a tour bus wondering how in the world *that* happened.

So do you wait tables? Sure. Do you make the demo CD? Maybe, but don't bother carrying it around. Do you work hard at your craft? Definitely. Do you move? Quit your day job? Marry the girl? Borrow the start-up funds? Sign the deal?

Here's what I know in a nutshell: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Early on, I didn't always seek God's Kingdom first, and Lord knows his righteousness was only on my mind for a minute or two a day max (I think I'm up to three, maybe four minutes now). That simple Scripture draws into sharp focus the only thing that will satisfy us in our desperate seeking for what it is that we think we want. We may want something harmless, but if it's out of place, if it comes before the right thing, then what's benign becomes malignant. We want the wrong thing.

So boil it all down. Chop off the fat. Get rid of the pet lizard, because you can't afford to feed it anyway. Wrench your

BACH'S SECRET WEAPON

heart away from all the things you think you need for your supposed financial security, your social status. Set fire to your expectations, your rights, and even your dreams. When all that is gone, it will be clear that the only thing you ever really had was this wild and Holy Spirit that whirls about inside you, urging you to follow where his wind blows.

If you can put aside your worry long enough to feel that wind and to walk with it at your back, it will lead you to a good land. It will remind you that righteousness means more than pious obedience; it means letting a strong, humble mercy mark your path, even when—especially when—you don't know where it's taking you. It may not take you to an easy chair in a Nashville mansion with a Grammy on the mantel; it probably won't lead you to head-turning fame, and it probably won't even lead you to a feeling that you're a righteous, Kingdom-seeking saint. Because if that's what you are you'll probably *feel* more like a sinful, desperate cur who can get out of bed each day only because you've managed once again to believe that Christ's mercy is made new every time the sun ascends. You're a sinful, desperate cur who dances for joy. Your heart is so full it must be poured out. You see the world as a dark, messy place that needs rearranging, and with all that light shooting out of your pores you're just the person to do it.

See how the questions of career choices and demo CDs and relocating diminish in light of God's Kingdom?

Sail by the stars, not the flotsam.

ADORNING THE DARK

I remember lying on my bed in high school with two cabinet speakers on either side of my head, listening to Pink Floyd's *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*, getting delightfully lost in the music and wondering how on earth this band of Brits transferred their music to two-inch tape, then to cassette, then to the record store, then to Lake Butler, Florida, to my speakers, to my ears, and finally to my adolescent noggin.

So with just a few chords under my fingers and a whole lot of ambition, not to mention the absence of enough guys in my little town to really start a band, I decided to try and figure out how to make music. I saved up four hundred bucks that I earned mowing yards and stocking shelves at the local IGA and bought a Tascam four-track recorder, a machine I was certain would revolutionize my life—not just musically but relationally, since now I would be able to prove to the girls in school that I was worth something. “You see,” I imagined myself explaining to them, “I can record four separate tracks onto just *one* cassette, which allows me to play the bass, the guitar, the drums, and sing, then mix it all together for your listening pleasure, ladies,” at which point their eyes would flutter and they would faint to the floor in a pile of crimped hair and leg warmers.

But that was just the recording gear. I also needed a studio. Enter my pal Wade Howell, also known as the Conundrum. He was a football player who was also a part-time atheist, a saxophonist, guitarist, and *Dungeon & Dragons* gamemaster. Needless to say, we were fast friends. (For the record, Wade ended up going to seminary and is now a pastor and a fine family man.) Our senior year of high school Wade's grandfather

BACH'S SECRET WEAPON

died and left him a single-wide trailer in the woods, where we set up an old drum kit and a few mics I scavenged from the church sound cabinet. After school, while Wade was at football practice, I often sped down the sandy road in my Dodge Omni to the trailer, plugged in Wade's electric guitar, and pretended I was David Gilmour or Tom Petty. Once, because my girlfriend liked Garth Brooks, I used my trusty Tascam to record the drums, piano, bass, and vocals for the song "The Dance." What I wouldn't give to know where that cassette is now.

But after the first few months with the Tascam, the magic was gone. I didn't want to just record Skynyrd songs. I wanted to make my own. But I had no idea what to sing about, and the few songs I managed to write were even worse than I thought they were at the time. I played them bashfully for my buddies, enjoying the feeling of having made something even though I was inwardly discontent. It strikes me now that I was in possession of an inner-critic even then, which agitated me. I wanted to be content with my lame songs, but I couldn't be. Whatever pride I felt was in having made something—anything at all—not necessarily in the quality of what had been made. So I shared my songs with the few friends who cared to hear them, and felt good when they liked them, but was discontent without knowing why. Not long after graduation, I joined a rock band and sold the Tascam, figuring that I'd leave recording to the experts and focus on rocking instead.

Fast-forward two years. The rocking was safely behind me. I was now in college, married, and taking serious steps with our band Planet X to record a demo. At the time, I had no idea there was such a thing as indy music. As far as we knew,

ADORNING THE DARK

the game plan was to record a demo and shop it around in Nashville. So Lou, the only guy in the band with any money, bought some gear, and we set out to record our stuff after-hours in the college practice rooms. It turned out fine enough, but it was a far cry from what it needed to be. Eventually the band broke up. I started doing my own concerts, and I realized I had enough of my own songs to record a short album. I borrowed \$3,000 from my grandma, took a Greyhound to Nashville (just like they do in the movies), was picked up at the bus station by my old roommate Mark Claassen, and spent the weekend recording my independent record *Walk*.

It was terrifying, exhilarating, and exhausting. We were in a real studio. We hardly slept. We recorded, mixed, and mastered eight songs in 2.5 days. I took the Greyhound home (a grueling twenty-six hour trip, what with all the bus stops), a twenty-two-year-old kid with a shiny, \$3,000 CD in his guitar case and not a dime to his name. We'd only been married for a year, but Jamie was all in, as she's always been. That little eight-song CD was what I sold at concerts for the next three years, and I'll be forever glad for the way it paid the rent. But the farther I got from it the more I loathed it. I became painfully embarrassed by my voice, my pitch, and my songs, because I had come to know better. I had toured with Caedmon's Call for fifty shows, which exposed me to some great music and a much better understanding of what it meant to be a songwriter. I was no longer doing the Florida church camp circuit, but was trying to make a go of a real career, and that meant I could no longer be content with my mediocre best. I had to work at it, learn to be objective, and—this is the big one—ask for help, help, help.

BACH'S SECRET WEAPON

Which brings me to that day in East Nashville, fifteen years later, when I walked into Cason Cooley's studio, a warm room strung with lights and fragrant with incense, jammed full of guitars and pianos and books, and sat down with my friends to start a new project. I looked around, thinking about all the other times I had done this very thing, marveling at how little I still knew about it. What do we do first? Do we sit around and play the songs for a day? Do we record scratch guitars? Do we pore over lyrics first? In some ways, it's like looking at a hoarder's house and wondering where to begin the cleanup. It's also like looking out at a new field, steeling your resolve to tame it, furrow it, and plant—but you know it's littered with stones and it's going to be harder than you think.

I was a grown-up. This wasn't my first rodeo. I shouldn't have felt that old fear, anxiety, or self-doubt, right? Then again, maybe I should have. As soon as you think you know what you're doing, you're in big trouble. So before we opened a single guitar case, we talked. I sat with Ben Shive, Andy Gullahorn, and Cason and told them I felt awfully unprepared. I doubted the songs. I was nervous about the musical direction the record seemed to want to take. I wondered if I was up to the task. I told them about the theme that had arisen in many of the songs: loss of innocence, the grief of growing up, the ache for the coming Kingdom, the *sehnsucht*² I experience when

2. This is a word that will come up more than once in this book, so it's worth defining. C. S. Lewis described *sehnsucht* as "inconsolable longing," and even pointed to it as a proof for the existence of God. We all feel it. We're all familiar with it on some level. What's it there for if we're just meaningless clusters of cells hurtling through

ADORNING THE DARK

I see my children on the cusp of the thousand joys and ten thousand heartaches of young-adulthood.

Then we prayed. We asked for *help*.

If you're familiar with Bach, you may know that at the bottom of his manuscripts, he wrote the initials, "S. D. G." *Soli Deo Gloria*, which means "glory to God alone." What you may not know is that at the top of his manuscripts he wrote, "Jesu Juva," which is Latin for "Jesus, help!" There's no better prayer for the beginning of an adventure. Jesus, you're the source of beauty: help us make something beautiful; Jesus, you're the Word that was with God in the beginning, the Word that made all creation: give us words and be with us in *this* beginning of *this* creation; Jesus, you're the light of the world: light our way into this mystery; Jesus, you love perfectly and with perfect humility: let this imperfect music bear your perfect love to every ear that hears it.

We said, "Amen," and opened our eyes, gazing out across the chasm between us and the completion of the project. Then I took a deep breath, opened the guitar case, and leapt.

a meaningless universe? Frederick Buechner, as far as I know, didn't use this word, but his writings describe it (and evoke it) time and again, and he consistently exhorts us to pay attention to it. Pay attention to the moments when we're crying without knowing why. It could be that the author of the great mystery of creation is whispering to you.