

## Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community, Calling, and the Mystery of Making

By Andrew Peterson. B&H Publishing Group, 2019. 113 pages.

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*The Wingfeather Saga*. Over a dozen albums. Twenty years of *Behold the Lamb of God*. Founder of The Rabbit Room and contributor to *Every Moment Holy*. As outsiders looking in, we are tempted to think that if a secret sauce for a successful and productive life exists, Andrew Peterson has found it. Yet, Peterson sets out to show readers that there is nothing particularly special about him or anyone else who “adorns the dark.” *Adorning the Dark* is an insider’s view into the inner world of a Christian singer, songwriter, and novelist. Peterson generously provides readers with the opportunity to understand his joys and challenges as he both looks back to where he came from and looks forward to the coming kingdom.

“Why is Andrew Peterson’s book relevant for cross-cultural church planting?” we might ask. Although the author does not have expertise in missions to unreached peoples, he has a wealth of experience using

his gifts to build God's kingdom on earth. It is precisely this point—being faithful to our calling in the context of community—where cross-cultural workers relate to Peterson. Each of us on the field are massively interested in faithful kingdom building.

*Adorning the Dark*, as Peterson explains in the early chapters, is not intended to be an academic work. The book is written in short chapters like lengthy journal entries. It is a fun and easy read with plenty of illustrations and examples from Andrew's own life. The book is helpful for readers of all ages, but it could be especially helpful for a teenager or young adult. Many of the experiences that he shares are from his teenage years, making the book easy for that specific age group to relate to.

As we might expect from an experienced novelist, Andrew weaves in multiple themes and subthemes throughout. Two strands get more time on stage than the rest: Andrew's journey as a musician, and his house, called The Warren. We can think of *Adorning the Dark* as a storyteller teaching us what he has learned through his experiences. I understand the book's overarching thesis to be that the dark is adorned when we take creative projects to completion because we have brought a piece of the coming kingdom to earth.

Peterson emphasizes multiple times that "creatives" are not a special class of people (89). At one point he pauses, questioningly, at the idea of using the word "creative" as a noun. My own mission organization has a network for "creatives." Peterson is saying that there is both a broad and narrow lens when we speak of creatives. In the narrow sense, we can speak of those who make their living from jobs such as singing, writing, or painting. But in the broad sense, the art of *creating* is a common task for all of God's people. Whatever we do, we are bringing God's kingdom to earth as we use our gifts and follow his will. Peterson's primary audience is anyone who seeks to begin and complete a creative project that reflects God's glory. In the missions world, our projects might be producing scriptural content, finishing a translation, recording indigenous worship music, or any number of other endeavors.

Rather than give a chapter-by-chapter flyby, here is my attempt at distilling the book down into two parts: the dark and the adorning. What does Peterson mean by “the dark,” and what does he mean by “adorning” it? And what does community, calling, and the mystery of making have to do with it all?

## The Dark: Resistance and the Room

The first term that Peterson uses to describe the dark is “the Resistance” (yes, with a capital R). Peterson is referring to the Resistance made up of rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers over this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12) (28). There is an active spiritual force that works against God’s people as we labor as Christ’s ambassadors. This part of the dark is not adorned. Instead, this aspect of the dark hits us with doubt, despair, and lies, often at the level of our identity in Christ.

Whether we are creating businesses, Bible story sets, pottery, or churches, the Enemy wants our creation to “draw some measure of attention” to ourselves (29). The Resistance wants the things that we create to be an end in themselves instead of pointing outward to the “Ultimate Self, the Word that made the world” (29). For a missions context, how might the subtle drive to be seen as a real, hardcore missionary come up in our creations? In whatever we are creating, how are we tempted to shine the spotlight on ourselves?

The dark is not only the Resistance, but also a room. For Peterson, a dark room represents the space in which the creative process happens. In the midst of building, writing, or recording, we cannot see the completion of our work. Like professional artists or authors, some missionaries may have a lower degree of structure in life compared to a traditional nine-to-five office job. Peterson argues that this means we must generate forward momentum without the help of external structures to move us along. In this dark, God’s people can become

consumed by their deeper fears and doubts. These seem to be especially present for those who embark on a creative project, and Andrew's own self-doubts and fears are peppered throughout the book as he shares his story.

A larger project our team is working on is building a technology network within our organization. The purpose is to create a central site for teams to receive help distributing scriptural content among their target people. After the initial wave of momentum upon launching the network, we found ourselves in a dark room where fears and doubts abound. Peterson's book is an encouragement to keep going.

The dark is the Resistance and a room. It connotes both the spiritual powers that work against God's people and the metaphorical space in which we do our creating. But what does it mean to "adorn" the dark?

## Adorning: The Room and the Earth

As the dark room is adorned with completed creations, the earth is adorned with the coming kingdom. Peterson speaks at length about his marvelous garden (in the British sense) at The Warren. A friend drew up a thirty-year plan for the garden which he framed and placed on the wall by the front door. When he looks outside, he can compare what he sees with the drawing. His point is that he can understand what he needs to chop or plant *today* because the end goal is clear. From this example and others in the book, I surmise that it is important to Andrew that we live in light of what we know to be true about the end, namely, that earth will both be made new and restored in full. The BAM entrepreneur and artist must look at this "long-term plan" as they work *today* to bring heaven to earth. What we believe about the end frames our present reality and how we create within our own "gardens."

If the creative process is also like fumbling around in a dark room due to insecurities, fears, and doubts (50), adorning involves working through the creative process in community with a clear calling (hence

the subtitle). Andrew has clearly known from a young age that his calling is making music. And even apart from the cleverly titled chapters “Art Nourishes Community” and “Community Nourishes Art,” readers find Andrew constantly referring to friends, family, and mentors who brought him through difficult times. His point is that creative projects best come to completion when we are serious about involving others in the process. When we allow others to sit with us in the dark room, they can lift us up and help us keep going.

The dark room is adorned when we bring creative endeavors to completion because we have brought a piece of the coming kingdom to earth. In this sense, the darkness of the world is adorned when we take the gifts that God has given us and make new businesses, ministries, and music. We accomplish part of our calling as humans when we make beautiful things. For Andrew Peterson, this is what it means to adorn the dark.

## Reflections for Cross-Cultural Workers

### *Belonging and TCKs*

One of the more emotional sections of the book for me was Andrew describing the rootedness that his children have at their home. Our family has moved four times in the last six years. If you are a cross-cultural worker and reading this, you can likely relate. In Wendell Berry-like fashion, Peterson believes that attending to specific soil in a given place is one example of adorning the dark. And yet, he acknowledges that there will always be something missing because our true home is in a better country called Heaven. The deep longing that Andrew feels, and that I feel, is to belong. As we know, belonging is an especially difficult thing not only for us as cross-culture workers, but also for our children. Peterson’s book was a helpful reminder that although we should do our best to provide a sense of belonging for our kids, there is still a more ultimate sense of belonging that only God can provide.

## ***Community and Resiliency***

What is the adversity that you face as you build scriptural content, relationships with locals, and businesses in the country in which you serve? What is the shape of the dark room that you are stumbling around in (79)? Peterson believes that bringing others into our dark rooms is the way to move creative projects to completion. This allows people to understand our fears and walk with us through them. Whatever situation you are in, *Adorning the Dark* is a call to lean into your calling in the context of community. And as we press forward, God's world is made beautiful.

I recommend this book for cross-cultural church planters who are either seeking to begin a creative project or stuck in the middle (in the dark) of one. If a person is looking for a practical "how-to" book, I do not recommend this work. However, if a person is looking for an encouraging mentor to walk with them through their creative calling, I recommend this book as a helpful resource.

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