

Hand Made: Going Deeper on your Journey with God

Week 3: At the Potter's House

Jeremiah 18: 1-6 (NIV)

"This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 'Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.' So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said: 'Can I not do with you, house of Israel, as this potter does?' declares the Lord. Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel."

Can you begin to imagine the potter's house, the potter's workshop? Methods for hand-throwing pots have changed surprisingly little in thousands of years. Perhaps there is a noise as the wheel turns, a smell of wet clay, pots sitting on shelves in different stages of completion. The potter bends over the wheel, his fingers thick with clay. Take time to let this picture form in your imagination. Can you see the potter's hands?

Bernard Leach, who is regarded as the father of British studio pottery, has said the potter is one of few occupations where a person using head, heart and hand, their whole self.

You might take a moment to recall anything from the session about potters and how they describe their work which you felt drawn to notice. This potter is engaged in a dynamic process, which a material which feels alive, which changes. Flaws are not always a problem, they lead to new challenges and ultimately more interesting work.

What might be going on for the potter at this moment? Does he or she have an idea, a desire for what they want to make? Is there a negotiation going on between the master craftsman and their material?

What is going on in you as you watch this scene? Notice your feelings without judging them, remember there are no right or wrong feelings.

Would you like to talk to the potter, at his or her wheel, about anything which has come up for you in this reflection?

Perhaps you are the clay, in the potter's hands, and you have something to say. What would you like to say to the potter? Don't forget to wait in the silence, and allow it to become a conversation.



Potters talking about clay

Frances Priest

"Clay is really unforgiving in lots of ways, and it's definitely a conversation. When I'm teaching, one of the most important things I try to impart to people is that you're having a conversation with something that's alive and has very strong opinions. It's about engaging in that conversation. But what's also interesting is that it's also engaging in conversation with you, it's not like one direction, it's responding to your body, and I think the fact that it can mirror what's happening in your body is really interesting as well."

DES Talks podcast, 25th May 2025

Frances Palmer

"I love the texture of the clay. I love the feeling of it rising up into a shape that I thought of in my brain, and yet at the same time I let it go and see what it does for itself."

Holly Macdonald

"Working with clay creates a feeling of connectedness — quite literally — through physical engagement. There is a tension between the plastic and earth-bound nature of clay and my desire to control it. It is a collaborative effort between the maker and the clay and other ceramic materials being used to get the work to where you want it to be."

Andrei Davidoff

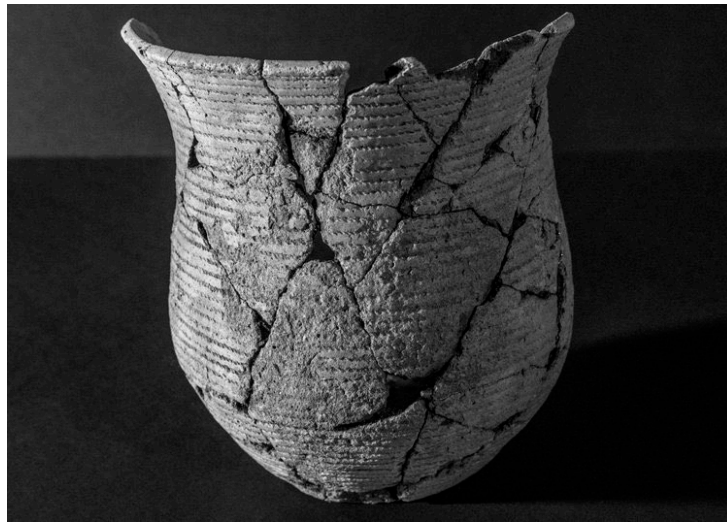
"You'd think that after so many failures and misfires your heart would become a bit more guarded; yet every dunted plate, cracked handle and fractured sculpture is still a little cardiac moment."

Anna-Karina

"I find it hard to articulate what I want to say or how I feel... My art, I feel, communicates for me. As the maker, my breath and spirit are worked into the clay itself, all the examination of my consciousness and observations are unconsciously imbued into the individual pieces."

All from Clay: Contemporary Ceramic Artisans
by Amber Creswell Bell, Thames & Hudson, 2016





The Story in the Fragments

This Chalcolithic clay pot (2560-2290 BC) was found in Kilmartin Glen in Argyll in 2005. Archaeologists managed to recover almost every broken piece and put it together like a complex, intricate, prehistoric jigsaw puzzle. When the pieces had been put together it was possible to see the beauty and craftsmanship in the object, understand something of why it was made and the community in which it was made. The pot and its story are now in the Kilmartin Museum.

You might like to try a prayer exercise where you look at the “fragments” of your own story. Don’t worry about making a linear account, just assemble the pieces you are drawn to notice — write them down, use art materials, or collage words and pictures from newspapers or magazines. Once you have the fragments, arrange them as you feel drawn to, don’t overthink it. Then sit, prayerfully, with what you have made. Notice what story might be emerging from the fragments.

Edmund de Waal of his work as a potter

I make porcelain. I make my objects out of porcelain. I sit at my wheel. It is low and I am tall. I hunch. There is a ziggurat of balls of porcelain clay to my left, a waiting pile of ware boards to my right, a small bucket of water, a sponge, a knife, and a bamboo rib shaped like a hand axe in front of me. I have a cloth on my lap to wipe my hands. There is music. I pick up a ball and throw it into the centre of the wheel. Today, like yesterday and like tomorrow, I am making nothing grander than a cylinder. Barely a vessel, more a sketch of a pot, an inside and a straight profile, the merest impression of my hand and then my impressed seal. All those iterative movements of arm, wrist and hand, time after time after time. I am making a series of volumes, contained spaces: each vessel is a breath, and I am counting time.

I turn, and there are my boards of porcelain vessels, still damp. They gleam softly. And then I ask myself, which story shall I tell? What is tellable and what is untellable? What do I pick up and where do I put it down?

From the artist’s statement in *Edmund de Waal* published by Phaidon in 2017, published on www.artspace.com