



Thumbprint in the Clay: Divine Marks of Beauty, Order and Grace

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A Northwest Morning, Early

As yet the sun is below the horizon, but pale, lemon-colored light is filling the sky like a bowl. I glimpse it through our bedroom's skylight. I stir under the sheets and wonder about getting up. At length, a finger of low winter sun stirs me into wakefulness, and an almost instant response rises to my mind. In my gown and slippers I go downstairs. It is the air, ambient with the smell of coffee brewing, that has invited me into this day.

From our kitchen window I have a view of Bellingham Bay, its water gleaming up at us from below our hill. It seems to be viewing me just as I am seeing it, a sort of mutual inspection. Watching that glancing light on the water speaks to me of how reciprocal perception enriches life. But within the house other intrigues call me strongly.

It's not just the coffee, already brewed by my ever-earlier-rising husband. Nearer at hand, on the wall opposite the window, is a double row of wooden pegs, twenty in all, each holding a mug as if grabbing a friend by the elbow and saying, firmly, *Hang on tight, this is where you belong.*

The mugs don't match; they are not meant to match. Their diversity is part of their aesthetic appeal. There are sixteen of them, each so individually itself and yet finding its perfect resting place in the company of others. A little community of blues and greens and aquamarines and a touch of earth brown in one, not only useful but beautiful to me; they enhance the color schemes throughout our living space. I grab one, cross the kitchen to the coffee pot and pour, adding half and half and sweetener to my taste.

Aah, the perfect start to any day. The possibilities are endless. I have a new poem going, a dentist appointment, a gift to buy for a friend's wedding. Church choir practice in the evening. But it's my morning cup that gets me in gear.

Somehow, the satisfaction of really good coffee is enhanced by the beauty of the coffee mug. And all around my house, on shelves and window sills and pegs, I have what I regard as a fabulous collection of hand-thrown pottery – mugs, but also fruit bowls, salad bowls and jugs, a small curved tray, a planter with its flowering occupant, each formed with its own subtle earth tint or glazed jewel tone. Each makes its use appealing, whether for serving, storing, holding, pouring. Or just looking at with enjoyment. These days, when guests arrive, I invite them to choose from the rack a mug for coffee or tea, and their choice tells me something about them and their preferences. The tea bags themselves – English breakfast, Earl Grey, peppermint, chamomile, chai, ginger – wait on the counter in a sage-green pottery casserole dish with a cover that I bought at a flea market years ago.

Each of these pieces of kilned earth has a history. Back in the sixties in Illinois we had a family



BOOK EXCERPT

"Luci Shaw is a friend, seasoned soul and wise 'lady of letters' who writes 'from the edge of the known world.' Her inspired, enlightened, well-crafted essays guide us toward recognizing the marks of the maker in everyday life as she illustrates on each page how to take 'a long, loving look at the real' and find God there."

— **Dick Staub**, author,
broadcaster and founder of
The Kindlings

friend who was a skilled potter. Richey made for us a hundred mugs with the name SHAW in raised letters on the side, each to be given to any bookseller who placed a significant order. (This was while we had our own independent publishing company and went to the annual trade show to publicize our authors and sell our books.) The mugs, with different colored glazes, were popular bonuses, and we had some brisk sales as a result. I still have a couple of those mugs, one brown, one deep blue. My children each have their own — reminders of when the family would drive to Denver or Texas or Chicago for the booksellers' conventions.

I love every member of this earthen family, the look of them, as well as the feel of the shape and texture as I hold each in my hands. Their familiarity is part of their charm. This morning I am comforted and motivated for the day's work as I breathe in the caffeinated aroma rising in the morning from a favorite mug (though it's hard to pick one; they're all my favorites!).

Each piece, whether it's a mug, a mixing bowl, a milk pitcher, a vase, a turkey platter, a serving dish, is the result of combining earth and human eye and muscle with individual design, skill and intense heat. Some of these treasures are hand built, some shaped on the potter's wheel, many bearing the thumbprint signatures of the potters themselves or their names or logos scrawled on the mug handle or the bowl base. Having that personal identifying mark makes a piece of pottery memorable to me. It's as if the maker is proclaiming his unique identity, saying, "Don't forget! I impressed this mark in the clay before firing to let you know it is authentically my artifact, and it will always be personal, from me to you."

In the 1950s, in an effort to relieve the academic pressures of college term papers, I enrolled in a ceramics class. I produced some primitive bowls and vases on the wheel, and that introductory process triggered my fascination with the art. I remember the cool, damp, firm slabs of clay we were given and the wonderful messiness that went into the process of building a pot. I can still almost feel the water-moistened clay and slip on my fingers as the wheel revolved. Manipulating clay on the wheel is absorbing and sensuously fascinating. Its immediacy and fluidity satisfied the crafts person in me; under the hand and fingers, and with sustained pressure as the potter's wheel turned, something shapeless and almost embryonic rose into a recognizable shape.

As the object takes form with glazes and decorative incisions and is finally placed in the kiln for firing, the excitement grows. Will the completed piece fulfill my expectations? Or will it crack when I remove it from the heat of the kiln and allow it to cool?

Perhaps God, the original artist of the universe, looks at each of us, his human creations, the work of his loving artist hands and heart, with the same intense anticipation. We are living proof of the Creator's skill, and we hope we bring him not only usefulness but gratification!

— Taken from chapter one, "Coffee Mugs"



AUTHOR BIO



Luci Shaw, author of *Thumbprint in the Clay: Divine Marks of Beauty, Order and Grace*

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"I hope my readers will learn never to take natural and human beauty and glory for granted, but to see in it a reflection of divine love and an Artist God. I long for my readers to be liberated into a wider and deeper relationship with our environment as a reflection of God's nature and creativity."

"Luci Shaw is a treasure."

Luci Shaw is a poet, essayist, lecturer and writer-in-residence at Regent College, Vancouver. Widely anthologized, her writing has appeared in numerous literary and religious journals, and she has coauthored three books with Madeleine L'Engle. A founding member of the Chrysostom Society of Christian Writers, Shaw is the author of ten volumes of poetry and other titles such as *Adventure of Ascent*, *Breath for the Bones: Art, Imagination & Spirit*, *Harvesting Fog*, *Scape*, *Water My Soul: Cultivating the Interior Life* and *The Crime of Living Cautiously*.

Shaw's latest book is *Thumbprint in the Clay: Divine Marks of Beauty, Order and Grace*. "The themes and ideas for this book came to me piecemeal over several years," writes Shaw. "As a poet and lover of nature and wilderness I had always recognized patterns and purpose in the creation and design of our planet and beyond in the universe itself. I had also seen the lives of many people touched by God, both in Scripture and in personal experience, marking them in specific ways for special roles in God's kingdom. Once I became alert to this idea of beauty and design in nature and humanity, I found further and further evidence to demonstrate and write about it."

Bret Lott, author of *Letters and Life*, writes, "Luci Shaw is a treasure, and *Thumbprint in the Clay* shows us yet again precisely why: this book is wise beyond measure, the writing beautiful beyond compare, and its heart a reflection of the one true God. We see the evidence of Christ everywhere around us, and yet we seem determined at times to overlook his proof. This meditation allows us to pause, ponder and bring close to our hearts the fact of God's design, his love and his purpose for our own lives. This is a beautiful, ruminative and necessary book."

Shaw is a frequent retreat facilitator and leads writing workshops in church and university settings. She has lectured in North America and abroad on topics such as art and spirituality, the Christian imagination, poetry writing and journal writing as an aid to artistic and spiritual growth. She is poetry editor and a contributing editor of the quarterly journal *Radix* that celebrates art, literature, music, psychology, science and the media. She is also poetry and fiction editor of *Crux*, an academic journal published quarterly by Regent College. In 2013 she received the Denise Levertov Award for Creative Writing from Seattle Pacific University and *Image*, and her papers are preserved in the Luci Shaw Collection at Wheaton College's Buswell Library.

Shaw lives in Bellingham, Washington, with her husband, John Hoyte.