

## [DESERTMUM](#)

pursuing discipleship through the haze of early parenthood

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Where can our children find God in the 21st century? (Interview with author Ann Clifford)

Those of you who follow me on social media may have noticed that I'm taking part in a blog tour this week for a stunning art book, "[Where is God in our 21st century world?](#)", recently published by [Instant Apostle](#).

Artists entering the [Chaiya Art Awards 2018](#) were asked to respond to this question, and the results are showcased in this beautiful coffee-table book. All faiths and none are represented, and insightful commentary is provided throughout the book by author Ann Clifford.



I've really enjoyed looking through this book (full review coming on Friday!), and was delighted to have the chance to catch up with [Ann Clifford](#) to find out more about the book, and especially how we can use it as parents seeking to widen our children's faith experience.

**Welcome, Ann! Congratulations on such a beautiful, thought-provoking book. I found your words a perfect complement to the images. Tell us a bit about your background and how this book came about.**

Katrina Moss (founder, Chaiya Art Awards) and I have been friends for 35 years. We have had many adventures together: the one about the ugly sisters; the Cannes Film Festival; the feature film to name a few.

My passion to encourage Christians to be involved in the arts began many years ago. For ten years I ran an initiative which brought artists from many disciplines together. My own discipline at the time was writing plays, acting and theatre directing.

When Kat came to me with the idea of Chaiya I wanted to do everything in my power to support her. The idea for the book evolved and of course having just had my first book published ([Time to Live: The Beginners Guide to Saying Goodbye](#)), I was wonderfully placed to help make it happen and am grateful to Instant Apostle for creating and publishing it so beautifully.

I am so proud of Kat for the vision of this initiative and feel privileged to outwork it with her. There will be another competition and art exhibition in 2020.



*Ann and Katrina at the exhibition launch*



**I imagine it's hard for you to choose a favourite piece of art from the book – but was there one section which was particularly enjoyable to look at and/or write?**

My heart is so full of gratitude to the artists that are featured. Their passion is for all to see. The spiritual content of the work is undeniable and it is thrilling. I think *Suffering and Death* struck a deep chord as it resonated with what I had just written and it contains one of my favourite (amongst many favourite) pictures, *The Suspense of Living on the Edge* by Ashar.

'The suspense of living on the edge' by ashar

**Ann, you're a mother and a grandmother, and you've worked as a special needs teacher. In your experience with children, how do you think art can open up their understanding of the world?**

Low self-worth is the killer in our children. When reading and writing are a struggle, the arts can redeem so much in them and bring success.

I directed *The Wizard of Oz* in a primary school with Year 6s. As my heart is for special needs I used unexpected children in the main roles. One child found reading so difficult but he had stage presence so I cast him in a main part. Learning the role took him hours his father told me, but he was absolutely determined to do it. He was brilliant.

I taught visual art for a year to a class. The mess was unimaginable but it was a joy. A parent came to me at the end of term and said his daughter had been captivated by my Picasso classes.

When she told him he went upstairs to his loft and brought down a dusty book on Picasso he and her mother (who had sadly died) had bought together. Father and daughter then sat together enjoying chatting about all the pictures of the painter's work and of course talked about her mum as well. He left and I cried.



Detail from 'Pathways' by Karen Weatherbee

**When I heard about this book, I was hoping that Mister (9) would be 'old enough' to access it.**

**In reality, when I first looked at it, I happened to have my Meerkat (4) and Missy (7) climbing all over me! I was amazed that they were not only engaged by the images, but had some very thoughtful comments and questions about them.**

**I shouldn't have been surprised really, should I?**

Art is like music. It reaches places that other things cannot.

When my daughter was about eight I took her to what is now the Tate Britain. She had her sketch book and pencil in case. I thought I would start with David Hockney as his pictures are accessible. The Splash, the figure in the shower.

She sat on the floor and drew them. We moved onto Degas and the Little Dancer but it didn't do much for her.

The powerful and huge Jacob wrestling with the Angel by Epstein was instantly riveting, again she dropped to the floor and drew. This is how the visit went.

We walked past some paintings by Joan Miro and she stopped and laughed. I don't think I've laughed at a painting much. I looked again and saw the fun.

If we ask children what they see I guarantee it will open our eyes. That is the beauty of visual art. Images are part of their lives now as never before. This is why I feel it so incredibly important to allow space for faith-filled visual art to be created and exhibited.

Children are so wonderfully open and without boundaries and their world has much to give us. There isn't anything on the market like this book. It is a great opportunity to talk about many important things together.



**One image which my children found particularly provocative was Maxwell Rushton's 'Left Out', in which a homeless person sitting at the side of the path is wrapped in a bin bag.**

**They related to this scene as, sadly, walking past a homeless person is a fairly regular event for them (and of course I get the innocent and loudly-voiced "WHY'S THAT MAN SITTING BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD, MUMMY?" when we're clearly within earshot of the man in question).**

**We were able to chat through the idea of value and rubbish, precious and worthless, wondering what makes us special or important in the first place.**

What I loved about the artworks in the exhibition is that some were immediate, authentic and emotional, so we could relate to them easily. Some were more challenging but so worth exploring.

Some of us can find art scary. We wonder what we are 'supposed' to think or feel. To start with we need to be ourselves and trust ourselves. It is okay to feel what we feel.

'Left out' by Maxwell Rushton

Different people will see different things. Sounds to me like your children had a fab conversation with you that will make both you and them think.

I remember my son still in primary school noticing homeless people and having conversations with him about it. One day I found him emptying his moneybox into a plastic bag. When I asked him why, he said it was to give to the homeless man sitting on the main road of our village.

Everything in me wanted to say 'don't give him everything'. I shut my mouth and went with him as he gave it away. Who says children can't teach us things?



'Scarred' by Rachel Ho

**In an earlier section of the book you write:**

***"Many artists desire to contribute into a hurting world. They do not necessarily bring actual food. They may have little money to give, but they can bring beauty... We human beings cannot survive on ashes – the 'things' and 'stuff' of our consumer society: horror, abuse, degradation, isolation, sickness, objectification. Or social media with its poisoned ashes of language that defame and destroy the chosen offender. The murmur of electronic clutter, while essential, overtakes and dulls. We need food that empowers, food that causes us to lift our eyes beyond the material, beyond the constant soundscape; we need beauty."***

**Children, similarly, cannot contribute 'actual food' to a hurting world. They have few monetary resources, and their lack of independence limits what they can contribute in terms of voluntary work. But in many ways they too bring the beauty you write about. What's your experience of this?**

My grandson Judah is now twenty months old. I have watched the untrammelled joy he brings into my husband's life.

My husband is the General Director of the Evangelical Alliance and there is always so much going on. Positive, wonderful things, but his head gets full and tired.

Little Judah is such a happy giving child that his very presence and gorgeous smile banishes everything except the present moment.

We have a large painting by Dinah Roe-Kendall of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple which Judah loves. The painting is not only beautiful, it also worships God twenty four hours per day whether someone looks at it or not. I love having it in my home: the power of a faith-filled painting.



'God' by Trevor Attwood

**Our children are more influenced by more sources than ever before – not only friends and teachers, but books, TV, the unlimited 'voices' screaming at them from YouTube, and – eventually – social media. Where can they find God in all of this?**

Firstly I think put as much of God in them as you can from the moment you first hold them. Pray over them, cover them with prayer daily.

What you put into them, and their acceptance of God, will become their plumb line of choice in the future even if they could never articulate it. Many children have no deep plumb line, indeed many adults as well, but that's another story.

The early years are crucial – give them the time you can. When most of us have to work it is difficult and demanding as the last thing you want to do is give even more.

Ask God to expand you, grow you. Give, give and give again. Love, love and love again. No-one will see most of what you do, except that God will see everything and He is no person's debtor.

I thought when the children went to secondary school that's when we would be having deep discussions, but they start much younger!



'I keep God handy in my little box' by Mike Fryer

**That's great advice – thank you! Finally, what is your hope for those who read this book?**

I have three hopes:

1. That artists will be encouraged in their making to express spirituality and be emboldened and encouraged to do so.
2. That faith is given space in the visual arts as we search for meaning, relevance and hope.
3. That all sorts of people would look at the work and grow a fresh delight in and understanding of the importance and relevance of art in our culture.

I would like to leave a quote from the end of the book as part of my answer.

*“This is about allowing ourselves the freedom to search for and expect ‘magic’ again. It is about walking into a hidden place and experiencing the feel of a fur coat on our face. As our eyes adjust, the light of a lamp reveals glinting snow. We walk through the wardrobe, our feet crunch, and before us lie stone animals, mysteries, things to explore. Excitement mounts.*

*The artists featured in this book stepped through a wardrobe, they discovered the snow, heard its crunch underfoot. They invite you to join them.*

*Spring is coming.”*