

SOUNDBYTE: "These days, everyone wants John Lennon's sunglasses, accent and swagger, but no one is prepared to take their clothes off and stand naked like he did in his songs." — Bono

BEHIND THE SCENES: MORE FROM BONO & FRIENDS ON THE PSALMS

May 13, 2016 by Scott Calhoun



David Taylor, Bono, Jan and Eugene Peterson at Flathead Lake, Montana. Photo by Taylor Martyn

As I talked with David Taylor, assistant professor of theology and culture at Fuller Seminary and director of Fuller's Brehm Texas, for my preview of the film he made for Fuller Studio, **Bono & Eugene Peterson: The Psalms**, he kept coming back to friendship and honesty, themes he thought were woven through the whole project. The film would not have happened, Taylor said, without the help of friends. And as Bono, Peterson and Taylor all said in their own ways, the Psalms challenge us with their honesty. Taylor also mentioned that after their initial filming in Montana, Bono asked to meet again in New York City to continue the conversation. Naturally, I wanted to come back to that and ask Taylor what else Bono had on his mind. I also reached out to those friends who helped Taylor from behind the scenes--Charlie Peacock, Nathan Clarke and Makoto Fujimura--to ask about their roles in making this film. Keeping in mind, too, that the film is a work of art about artists who strive for honesty, I asked them to share how they have been influenced by Bono and Peterson.

With A Little Help From My Friends

In October 2014, Taylor received his inspiration. He approached Charlie Peacock, legendary musician, producer, and Grammy and Dove Award-winning artist -- and friend of Bono's -- to ask for advice and help. As Taylor explained in his **Brehm Center conversation** with Nate Ridson, Peacock thought it was 50/50 that Bono would be up for having a public conversation with Eugene Peterson about the Psalms, and he offered to contact Bono. Of course, Bono and Peterson said yes and we now have the film, but Taylor told me, "It goes without saying, we wouldn't have a project if Charlie had not generously offered to make the introduction."

I asked Peacock why he thought it was worth a shot. "The Psalms have been a thread through Bono's entire musical career and it's a fact that he values Eugene Peterson and [his book] *The Message*," Peacock said. "Given those two things alone, it just made sense to imagine that Bono would likely want to do it. The scheduling was the bigger question."

After several attempts to find a time when Bono and Peterson could meet, it turned out that right in the middle of U2's rehearsals for its impending Innocence + Experience tour was a good time for Bono. He left rehearsals in Vancouver to fly to Montana on April 19, 2015, intending to fly back to Vancouver that same day. Taylor said that after some off-camera greetings and private conversations between Bono and Peterson, they only had an hour for the on-camera conversation. Taylor said, "I spent a third of the time asking them questions about their friendship over the years. That left only 40 minutes for us to talk about the Psalms. We barely scratched the surface." The final cut of the film was a little under 22 minutes.

Taylor asked his friend Nathan Clarke of **Fourth Line Films** to direct the film because Taylor admired his previous short-documentary storytelling work. Also, Clarke is a U2 fan.

"My first memory of U2 was in the mid '80s about when I was in fourth grade. My parents were pretty particular about what music we did and didn't listen to (which meant mostly Amy Grant). I remember my older brother making the case for U2 based on songs like 'Sunday Bloody Sunday' and '40.' Shortly after that his bedroom was pasted with a number of U2 posters. I then remember seeing the Live At Red Rocks film. I had never seen a musician do what Bono did in the sequence with the white flag. It was all kind of mind boggling in its sincerity and its lack of pretentious 'rock-n-roll-ness.' Those two memories have really stuck with me."

As a U2 fan and filmmaker, Clarke prepared for this project by watching Davis Guggenheim's *From The Sky Down* and listening to a lot of U2's music. Later, while still working on the project, he caught the Innocence + Experience tour at Madison Square Garden and called it "quite a transcendent moment for me. Sure the music was great, but I was really taken by how they brought us into the narrative that they wove throughout the concert."

Clarke and his crew arrived at Flathead Lake, Montana, a day before the shoot to get the lay of the land and spend some time with the Petersons.

"Beyond addressing the technical questions we had, this time was so important to creating a comfortable vibe not just for the Petersons, but for us," Clarke said. "You are always a little wary when you invade someone's house like this. We moved quite a bit of furniture but Jan and Eugene were more than accommodating and this really put us at ease. I hope it also helped them relax just a little bit."



Moving furniture in the Petersons' home. Photo courtesy Fourth Line Films.

In the film, that sense of ease comes through in the scene where Eugene makes coffee and Jan bakes cookies to prepare for their guest. "There is a comfort in those moments that, to me, are my favorite shots in the film," Clarke said.

Clarke told me his and cinematographer John Harrison's main motivation was to capture the essence of a relationship for this film.

"The aesthetic was all about their relationship. The conversation about the Psalms was a noble means to an end. It's not that the Psalms didn't matter, but we knew that if this conversation was going to work, it would be because Bono and Eugene were comfortable speaking like the friends they were. We also decided to use a 2.35 aspect ratio. I like this aspect ratio when you have wide landscapes but also when you have two people in the frame. It gives them each their own space. And when there's just one in the frame, there is so much open space that it really allows the image to breathe. We didn't just want to draw people into the content of their conversation, but into the moment as well. Film and video can do a good job of communicating emotion and feeling – the less tangible things that, in my opinion, are more memorable. The beauty of that place (both the Peterson home and Flathead Lake) so defined my emotional experience of the shoot that it felt necessary to include those moments."



The Fourth Line Films crew: Nathan Clarke, John Harrison and Chris Payne (l-r). Photo courtesy Fourth Line Films.

After Bono had left to return to Vancouver, Taylor, Clarke and the crew packed up and returned home. A few days later, Taylor got a note from Bono, "requesting that we do a follow-up interview," he said. "Bono felt that we had more things to talk about and I knew that we did too, so I was grateful and pleased to hear that we'd have a second chance to plumb the Psalter."

That second interview took place July 29, 2015, at the International Arts Movement gallery in mid-Manhattan.

"Knowing that Bono had a special appreciation for visual art, I wanted to see if we could find a gallery in which the conversation took place. I called my friend Makoto Fujimura and asked for his advice," Taylor said. As the founder of the IAM and a member of the board of directors, the internationally renowned artist and writer Fujimura offered the space.

Fujimura, a longtime fan of U2, told me he has played U2's music in his studio as he's worked and is thankful that the band has been "an oasis of sanity in the desert of popular culture for a long time." When Bono arrived for the interview, Fujimura showed his painting "Splendor-Ghost" to him. "Bono really liked the painting, and I am glad that he felt comfortable in our space as it became one of the last events there before we closed the gallery," Fujimura said.

"The whole thing felt rather providential for me," Taylor reflected. "A beautiful space, connected to a remarkable artist, run by a hospitable group of artists, a mere handful of blocks from where Bono would be staying. It was perfect."



At the International Arts Movement Gallery: Joshua Stratton-Rayner, Deborah Fung, Makoto Fujimura, Bono, David Taylor and Heidi Duncan (l-r) pose in front of Fujimura's "Splendor-Ghost." Courtesy of the Ty, Clayton and Lydia Fujimura Trust. Photo by John Harrison.

"More Things To Talk About"

Taylor's two meetings with Bono left him thinking Bono was "frightfully intelligent when it came to the matter of the Psalms. He is a serious student of them -- their history, their poetry, their themes, their various uses. I was thoroughly impressed." Knowing Taylor is an associate professor of theology and culture at Fuller Seminary, I asked him what impressed him so much.

"During our conversation in Montana, he anticipated where I would be going with a certain line of questions. I mentioned the pattern of praise and lament psalms at one point, to which he interjected, with a chuckle: 'Orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Guess which one I'm good at!' Those three terms, as you probably already know, come from language that biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann coined in his research on the Psalms. That terminology isn't exactly common knowledge. I was amazed not only at the fact that he was familiar with the terms, but also at the careful manner in which he handled them."

When they met again in July, "it was patently evident Bono had more to say," Taylor remarked.

"Prior to our chat in New York City, I learned that he had spent the early morning re-reading the Psalms alongside various biblical commentaries and notes that he himself has taken on particular Psalms. I also found out that he had spent some time with a friend in a lively exchange about the Psalms, to get ready for our conversation. By the time I got him in the early afternoon, he was buzzing with excitement about certain themes related to the psalms of ascent, that section in the Psalter that runs from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. Bono felt that there was something significant, not just for the Christian or the pilgrim (per the context of the Psalter) but also for the artist, in the themes that emerged in this collection of 15 psalms. The themes include a concern for peace, protection, cities, mercy, thanks, security, laughter, hubris, rage, tears, humility, searching, unity, blessing and so on. Bono had something to say about each of these themes. It was striking to see how his reading the Psalms involved a scholarly, personal and artistic lens. Aware of the near-constant demands on his time, I was impressed with how seriously he took our conversation, not least because of his longstanding care for Holy Scripture. I sincerely appreciated that kind of preparation and attention."

The rest of the conversation in New York City came back to themes they had talked about with Peterson in Montana, Taylor said. They explored their understanding of the relationship between the arts, on the one hand, and the experiences of suffering, growing older, mortality and death, on the other hand. "It was a fascinating part of our conversation, it goes without saying," Taylor admitted.

Honesty

In Taylor and Clarke's film, as Peterson and Bono discussed the role of honesty in life and art, especially when Peterson talked about not wanting to escape from or avoid real-world problems, I was reminded of how he ended a conversation with me in 2006, when [we talked about U2's music](#). I had asked all my questions and thought we might be finished, but then I asked Peterson if he wanted to offer any more comments. He did, and he wanted to talk about honesty.

"Let me just throw in one more thing. When I was listening to the music you sent me, I thought that with some of the music I grew up on -- Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, all those people -- when I compare Bono and U2 -- the way they're singing and the lyrics -- it seems so much more honest. All that Frank Sinatra crowd, they weren't telling the truth, they were just spinning fantasies. There's something very refreshing about U2. It's honest music. There's an honesty and that's why I think the word prophetic is accurate for them. They are not saying things that people want to hear to make them escape from their ordinary lives. They push us back into the conditions in which we have to live."

Bono's comments in the film about honesty and the sometimes lack thereof in the lives and art of Christians fueled -- apropos Bono -- about a week's worth of Internet responses, primarily from fans of Christian music championing songs that they thought met the criteria of "honest."

What Bono said was this:

"I'm talking about dishonesty, that I find a lot of in Christian art. ...I would love if this conversation ... would inspire people who are writing these beautiful voices and writing these beautiful gospel songs [to] write a song about their bad marriage, write a song about, you know, how they're pissed off at the government, because that's what God wants from you: the truth. ...Why I'm suspicious of Christians is because of this lack of realism, and I'd love to see more of that, in art and in life and in music."

The online reactions culminated, one could say, in [Contemporary Christian Music magazine](#) asking singer-songwriter Andrew Peterson (no relation to Eugene) to weigh in on the matter after Peterson tweeted, "I get where Bono is coming from, but the fact is, there's TONS of honest Christian art. It just isn't mainstream." For CCM magazine, Peterson elaborated with an even-tempered defense of artists he knows while lamenting that "[t]he problem, you see, isn't that Christian artists lack honesty. It's that the masses seem to prefer something else, and that something else casts a long shadow." Still, Peterson asserted, "It's clear that Bono, for whom I have a lot of respect, is shooting from the hip, and while it's tempting to criticize and parse every word he's saying ... [i]t's important to keep the context in mind, and to recognize the spirit of what he's saying."

The spirit of the Psalms prompting Bono to ask for more honesty in Christian art, and from the artists themselves, is a hip-shot Bono's loaded and launched before, most notably in his 1999 Introduction to Selections From The Book Of Psalms, in his 2006 Leadership Summit interview with Willow Creek's Bill Hybels, and in his 2013 interview with Focus on the Family's Jim Daly. Also, although he hasn't made public comments that are archived and searchable about the subject, I would think Bono's been surveying the contemporary Christian music scene and talking about wanting more honesty from Christian artists since the early 1980s, when U2 intentionally navigated a course away from being labeled a contemporary Christian music act itself.

Taylor noted he could see how U2 has followed a career path that intersects with the worlds of Johnny Cash and Beyoncé, as seemingly diverse as they are, but who are, in fact, "part of a musical tradition with explicit tethers to church music, social ties to a particular religious subculture and lyrical allusions to the biblical narrative."

For Peacock, he told me he is aware of having the benefit of U2 and Eugene Peterson in his life when he reads the Psalms: "I think I do approach the Psalms differently due to the Bono/Eugene influence. Both men have emphasized the honesty and grittiness of the songs and the place lament has in human experience. To shake your fist at God and ask why is evidence of the presence of grace. I think both these characters get this and live it."

As Clarke worked on the film, he heard in Bono's comments an admonition to consider the Psalms as a model for art-making, which he said "gave him language for things he intuitively felt." He also picked up on the value of exploration:

"Listening to Eugene talk about some of the origins of his translation work, just starting with a few Psalms written for specific people was really helpful. He had no idea this would turn into The Message. I think we constantly need to be reminded in creative work to not assume the ending that's in your mind is a given. The journey of creating often reveals new paths that need to be explored. In fact one thing I might say about the work of both Bono and Peterson is that they are interested in exploring and experiencing, not explaining. I hope this film is a testament to that."

In Fujimura's estimation, "Bono has created a new category of being a servant rock star/activist that is unusual, and without equal in my mind. Perhaps Georges Rouault is similar in his influence over Modernist Parisian culture. Eugene's work is a work of a poet exegeting Scripture, and Bono is carrying that prophetic work into popular culture. They are both 'north stars' for me."

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