

Go Greenbelt

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by Charles Strohmer

I plopped down on a grassy knoll in the West of England among thousands sitting quietly, rain threatening, as the Communion service got underway ? a prophetic drama calling for a jubilee from the chains that bind us to the structural injustices of our societies. The Archbishop of Canterbury was leading a prayer.

Later that day, I fought back tears while absorbing the art of a poignant exhibit entitled ?The F Word? ? a gallery of photographs and short stories from former adversaries in the Middle East conflict. Through the miracle of grace they had been reconciled. Now instead of violence they were offering each other, and us, moving images of forgiveness.

The next day I presented a seminar called ?Is Christian Publishing Still Christian??. answered some tough questions afterward, and then perused the 80-page Festival Guide to locate where Ched Meyers was speaking on ?Gospel Discernment in the Apocalypse of War.?

I hung out with some English friends at Pru's Cafe next to the vast book tent and afterward meandered the narrow lanes of the crowded festival site to an open area where I took in a sunset concert of classical music ? a departure from the amped-up Christian rock pouring forth from noon to nearly dawn on several stages.Greenbelt is a safe environment for stimulating conversation, thoughtful meditation, and playful enjoyment.

These few sights and sounds don't begin to describe the Greenbelt Arts Festival, a four day creative experience that hits you with such ongoing verve, imagination, and potential that no one can possibly take it all in. Heart on sleeve, this is quite a change for me, bragging up art done by Christians. I'll even confess lingering weariness toward much art today that is called Christian. As someone who works in a branch of the arts called writing, I ought to be a little more charitable. After all, even some of my own published work now needs a good edit.

Still, I get upset when I see art, whether done by Christians or not, that breaks the Creator's laws for aesthetic expression, or art that preaches when it ought to suggest and to invite, or offer a sabbath even. Or art that serves Mammon, a sin hotly rebuked by Amos, who rejects outright the art of a culture that does not care about the poor and about injustice (Amos 5:23-6:7).

I also feel pretty dejected sometimes when I want to share with this or that Christian about the exciting awakening I've had through a work of art ? perhaps about my sin, or a cool insight about life ? but I don't say anything because to them the art will seem too controversial, or taboo, or even pagan. So they never hear about the stunning experience I had about accusations during a performance of Henry Miller's *The Crucible* that left me speechless. I don't let on that *NYPD Blue* was for a time my favorite TV drama because, especially during its first years, God, moral dilemmas, recovery, and even Christian ministers were treated with more intelligence than anything I've ever seen on TV. And I still haven't figured out how to share that I couldn't take my eyes off Rodin's little known masterwork *The Myth of Danaide* when I stood in its presence, because the art was breaking my heart, speaking to me of the never-ending despair of the soul without Christ.

Greenbelt solves all this for me, and more. From its humble beginnings on a pig farm in Suffolk, England in 1974 ? the dream of bricklayers, used car dealers, farmers, actors, musicians, and theologians ? Greenbelt has grown into a living, breathing organism of passionate Christian conviction and creativity. Within a decade, 20,000 people were camping out for the four-day event in the scenic rolling hills at its new home in the Midlands. Today, the festival has become part music/art celebration, part youth festival, part social campaign and political jubilee, part development activism, part worshiping weekend. And all theater. Its substance and charisma includes an impressive range of seminars, speakers from around the globe, and a huge, rich and imaginative children's program that is a culture in itself.

But Greenbelt's road less traveled has at times been misunderstood and resisted by traditional Christianity. ?That's been the edge

against which we've struggled philosophically and creatively to sharpen our ideas and get where we are,? Steve Shaw, a festival co-founder, told me. ?People have even questioned if Greenbelt was Christian, like when we began inviting guest speakers who weren't really kosher. But we did that to give Christians a chance to be up against their critics, and so that both sides could sort out what they really believed. But the struggles have created a real sense of freedom. People feel comfortable being themselves around others who won't judge them, and they're drawn by the challenge of the speakers and the festival's integration of the gospel into all of life.?

For me, Greenbelt is a safe environment for stimulating conversation, thoughtful meditation, and playful enjoyment. It draws from many compass points to stay freshly redemptive, continually reshaping itself in its attempts to follow what Christ is already doing in our world. The festival runs end of August every year. Check it out at www.greenbelt.org.uk. (Guest columnist Charles Strohmer is the author of seven books ? and a fan of British Christianity.)

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