

Sample Copy from
Clay In The Potter's Hands
By Diana Pavlac Glyer
all content (c) by Diana Pavlac Glyer
Please do not reproduce in any form,
without direct permission of author.

5. Centering

The potter spins the potter's wheel, applies water, and centers the clay.

When I am working with students, they are always looking for shortcuts. But mastering a creative art takes time, and the beginning steps may be tedious and frustrating: the painter stretches canvas, the pianist practices scales, the dancer repeats a step or a turn, the photographer memorizes aperture tables. The one part in the process that causes my students the most frustration is the time it takes to center the clay. It's not that hard. It just takes a really long time.

Once the clay is attached to the wheel, the potter spins it. Most potters use electric wheels. The speed of the wheel is controlled by a pedal that looks just like the gas pedal in your car. As the pedal is pressed, the wheel spins faster or slower, depending on the kind of work the potter is doing. Some potters prefer kick wheels or treadle wheels, non-electric wheels that are powered and controlled by the movements of the potter's feet.

The process of making a pot on the potter's wheel is called *throwing*. It is a funny term, but it has a long history in our language. The idea of throwing, or a throw, is the idea of shaping something as it turns. It is the turning or spinning of the wheel, the centrifugal force, that the potter uses to shape a lump of clay into a cup, vase, or bowl.

But first the clay must be centered; that is to say, every part and every aspect of it must be lined up with the very heart of the wheel.

When the lump of clay first starts to spin, it is obviously off-center—it is oddly shaped, it wobbles to and fro, it follows its own path, it is headed in many directions all at the same time.

The potter takes a little water to moisten his or her hands, then presses them against the spinning clay, pushing the clay closer to the *wheel head*, smoothing uneven places, pressing bumpy edges. The potter uses just enough pressure to center all parts of the clay. If the clay is stiff or the lump is large, it may take quite a bit of pressure to make the clay obey.

It may also take a surprisingly long time. And when you are watching a potter work on this step, it looks like nothing much is happening. I know that clay can't speak, but I've often thought that if it could, it would definitely express impatience at this point

in the process: “Aren’t we done yet? Can’t we move on? Isn’t this right yet? Can’t we do something different now? Haven’t we been doing this long enough? Didn’t you just do that a minute ago? Are you sure we’re getting anywhere?”

Centering takes time. But it is absolutely critical that every aspect of the clay is lined up. One small wobble now will spell disaster later—it won’t affect the shape of things for the moment, but it will bump the whole pot out of kilter if it is not lined up right now. All of the clay must be centered. Like a machine with no added parts. Like a runner with no wasted motions. Like a symphony with no unnecessary notes. Like a gymnast perfectly controlled down to the tips of her fingers and her toes.

This idea of being centered is a powerful one for me, for my life is very busy, and I confess that unless I am very, very careful, I go running off in all directions. I have yet to master what it means to live in the absolute center, in the Great Shalom, in the peace of God. The Hebrew word *Shalom* is a powerful word meaning absolute tranquility. It means doing things with natural ease, not with frantic force or fearful striving. It means responding to life’s challenges with a sense of creativity and optimism and resilience. It is a sense in my body and soul of well-being, safety, harmony, vibrant health. To be at ease, inside and out. Shalom. Aligned.

While Shalom includes all of this, the root of the word is wholeness. When Jesus instructs us to be perfect, he means we are to be whole, mature, grown-up, living in the fullness of all that God intends for us. Shalom. Complete.

When I think about the rich meaning of the word Shalom, I am tempted to get overwhelmed all over again. All of this seems more than I can bear, and it threatens to set me to more fretting and striving. Isn’t it ironic: remind me of the gift of Shalom, and I am tempted to write “get some Shalom” on my to-do list right after “do the laundry” and “buy eggs and milk.”

But then I remember the powerful promise of Philippians 1:6a: “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.” God began it. God will complete it. It’s not supposed to be on my to-do list. It’s already on his. Shalom is the peaceful fruit of God’s initiative, God’s labor, God’s faithfulness, and not my own. That wobbly, bumpy, misshapen lump of clay *rests* under the skill of the potter’s hands, and as a result it becomes smooth, solid, and centered. And so it is with my soul.

And I realize that the key to becoming more like that lump of clay is to take the issue of obedience seriously. Putting aside my will, my desires, my timetables, my agendas, my selfish indulgences, and lining up with the will of God. My center aligned with his center.

And that means that God is the one who sets the agenda and calls the shots. As we have seen so far, the image of the potter and the clay gives us a clear picture of God’s tenderness, intimacy, and sensitivity. But it also gives us a clear picture of God’s sovereignty. The potter always has absolute control over the clay.

In Jeremiah 18, the Lord says to the prophet, “Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” Jeremiah obeys: “So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel” (vs. 2-3).

As Jeremiah watches, something goes wrong: “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” (vs. 4).

“Then the word of the Lord came to me: ‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?’ declares the Lord. ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel’ ” (vs. 5).

Good clay is quiet, responsive, it does not argue or fight. It recognizes the wisdom of the potter, the good purpose of the potter. This sounds really good, and it makes perfect sense. But it is difficult for us, all of us, to keep our hearts still and peaceful. It is hard to hold on in faith as God shapes us as seems best to him. It is hard to stay centered.

Impatient and headstrong, we take control and we try to change things around to suit ourselves. In Isaiah 29:16, the prophet rebukes Israel, saying “You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘He did not make me’? Can the pot say of the potter, ‘He knows nothing’ ?”

Can the pot say that? That lump of clay? No. It cannot complain, criticize, or accuse. But we can. And we do.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Is there an area right now, today, where you are arguing with God? Make peace with him about it.

Now get specific: what changes do you need to make in your life so that the Great Shalom, the peace of God, is an ever-increasing part of your daily life?

Prayer:

Forgive me, Lord, for the times I’ve gotten things upside down and tried to tell you how things should be done. I confess that I am willful and selfish. I like to call the shots, make the decisions, set the agenda for how things will be done. I even try to get you to line up with my plans and show up on my timetable. Forgive me. Lord, today I say “no” to my way, and “yes” to yours. And in the days to come, remake me from the inside out so that day by day my center lines up with your center, and I live in greater measure according to your plan. Amen.