



Master Potter

You need a kiln! Tony, my ceramic sculptor friend was steering me into clay. I was already selling a few sculptures in other, less enduring media and had already produced a few ceramic pieces. It seemed like the next logical step. So I did my research and ordered a ceramic kiln—a high temperature oven that solidifies clay.

The kiln is relatively easy to operate. All the complicated temperature adjustments and kiln-sitting of the past have been replaced by programmable electronics. What can go wrong? Many, many, many things.

The inside of a kiln is both hellish and glorious. Heat in excess of 2,000 degrees does far more than bake clay—it actually transforms particulate silica and other elements of fragile, dried clay into something completely new and enduring.

But the heat of a kiln also creates huge stresses in clay objects. Trapped moisture can turn to explosive steam, straining hidden flaws, causing objects to crack or shatter.

My first experiences with the kiln were both delightful and catastrophic. Being thrifty, I made some tiles from a block of clay left over from years ago, but I couldn't remember its firing temperature. I fired the tiles much too hot. The result was something like large, melted, volcanic chocolate chip cookies (which ruined some of the shelves in my kiln).

I was deeply depressed for about five minutes. Then I saw their potential, splashed some glaze on them, refired them, cut them out with a tile saw, hung them on the wall of our front porch and called them art. I've received several compliments, thanks to my lack of skill.

One larger sculpture looked great—until I fired it. A weakness or air pocket in the clay caused a quarter of the figurine to shatter in the kiln. Again, I was depressed for several minutes. Not to be thwarted, I used ceramic putty to patch it together. I ground off the rough edges, painted it with automotive

enamel, and it ended up in a gallery.

I'm too cheap to throw away perfectly bad clay. But there's another angle. I've seen too many accidents yield really cool art. And that's a good thing—because even the best potter (or ceramic sculptor) can't be 100 percent sure there won't be some flaws among the many variables involved in the process.

You've probably read Bible passages that talk about God as the Master Potter and us as the clay. Sometimes we read into these passages the idea that God is sculpting perfect little Christians on an assembly line. As we move down the conveyor belt of life, he grinds off rough edges and polishes us until we are paragons of godly character, at which time we flit off to our eternal reward.

Meanwhile, over in a dark corner of God's workshop is a scrapheap of ugly, misshapen, broken vessels that didn't pan out for God. Periodically, he angrily hurls them into the everlasting, fiery torture of his hell-kiln. I won't go any further because this doesn't comport with reality, the Bible, logic or the nature of God as I understand him.

I'm not sure about the theological correctness of this, but I think that God's kiln is the world. Of course, we forget that life in the kiln is not the goal—it's the process that we all have to live through. Yet God's method of working his clay is radically different than my method.

To begin with, he gets in the kiln with his clay, enduring the stresses and explosions along with us. Sure, from appearances it may seem that some of us are destined for the scrapheap. But God's fire is not there to destroy—it's there to transform. In the end, His cleansing and purifying fire (1 Peter 1:7) transforms our fragile, flawed, broken shapes into magnificent works of his art, each one totally unique, yet reflecting the image of Jesus.

If only my kiln worked like the Master Potter's. □

—Monte Wolverton