

## Colorful Creator

Ruth Duck

"Colorful Creator" was written for the installation of Linda J. Clark as the James R. Houghton Scholar of Sacred Music at Boston University School of Theology in October 1992. Clark was among the faculty with whom I studied for my doctorate in Theology and Worship at Boston University from 1984-1989; her class on hymnody inspired some of my best hymns (including "Womb of Life and Source of Being" and "To God Compose a Song of Joy"), as well as enlightening me about the history of congregational song. I was not able to be present for her installation, so I offered to write a hymn text as a way to participate. Clark accepted my offer and suggested the subject of worship and the arts. I asked Carlton Young, who was able to attend the event, to compose the tune. This was our first collaboration.

"Colorful Creator" is a hymn about the role of the arts in Christian life and worship. It centers around the insight that God is creative and inspires our creativity.

Each stanza portrays two images of God, often contrasting ones. The opening address ("Colorful Creator") suggests the great colorful diversity of this earth which God is ever in the process of creating, while the address "God of mystery" wonders at the awesome unfolding of life which goes beyond our words and understanding. Yet the artist who perceives deeply and gives form to that perception in color, shape, or sound can help us to glimpse the meaning and holiness hidden in the ordinary things of life.

"Harmony of ages" speaks of God as a primordial blending of sounds and voices, whereas "God of list'ning ear" portrays God as a receptive silence. This metaphor is drawn from the late theologian

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April 1999 • Vol. 50, No. 2

Nelle Morton, who called God "the hearing one" and suggested that God is "a great ear at the heart of the universe."<sup>1</sup> In my hymn, we thank the "One who Hears" for artists of sound.

Linda Clark directed a project studying the role of music in 24 New England churches surveyed in 1988; eight of the churches were also later examined through case study methods. (With many others I was involved in preliminary interviewing for the project.) A woman interviewed for the project was asked why a certain hymn is her favorite. She responded, "It sounds the way following Christ is like!"<sup>2</sup> The woman's words inspired the central thought of stanza two: music can in itself express what the Gospel "sounds like," and, when paired with words, express deep dimensions of human feeling in response to God.

God is Author of our life-stories in the sense of providing us each with unique gifts, potentials, and callings, yet (as stanza three continues) we must choose our own way, often in ambiguous circumstances. The arts of storytelling and drama can illumine these human choices by laying bare the dynamics of our living through piercing, yet subtle honesty. Thus we give thanks to God for these artists who hold a mirror to the human condition.

The hymn closes with a prayer that like our Creator, we may also create. The address "God of truth and beauty" weaves together the emphasis on honesty in the previous stanza with a new image, the Divine Poet who speaks the Word, is the Word. The words of the prayer describe an artist of faith as someone who is open to the leading and inspiration of the Spirit of holiness at work in life. This view contrasts with the idea that religious art necessarily tells biblical stories or depicts traditional sacred symbols (though sometimes it does). The Colorful Creator is mysteriously present at every moment, bringing forth what is new. This is why we can pray to share in God's creative process, for the holy is at play in all things, rejoicing in love and

truth and laboring to bring new life out of death and destruction.

"Colorful Creator" first appeared in Hope Publishing's *Supplement 1996*. It has also been published in the *Chalice Hymnal* of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and *The New Century Hymnal* of the United Church of Christ, my own denomination, as well as in the *Imagining the Word* curriculum published by United Church Press. Among my seven collaborations with Carlton Young, I especially love the tune HOUGHTON. To my ear, its gentle jazz tonalities express "echoes of the Gospel." ■

# Hymn Interpretation

Colorful Creator, God of mystery,  
thank you for the artist teaching us to see  
glimpses of the meaning of the commonplace,  
visions of the holy in each human face.

Harmony of ages, God of list'ning ear,  
thank you for composers tuning us to hear  
echoes of the Gospel in the songs we sing,  
sounds of love and longing from the deepest spring.

Author of our journey, God of near and far,  
praise for tale and drama telling who we are,  
stripping to the essence struggles of our day,  
times of change and conflict when we choose our way.

God of truth and beauty, Poet of the Word,  
may we be creators by the Spirit stirred,  
open to your presence in our joy and strife,  
vessels of the holy coursing through our life.

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<sup>1</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> Linda J. Clark, *Music in Churches* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1994), p. 25.