

# The Holiness of Beauty, or Why Imagination Matters

by Otilie Stafford

*“A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect:  
The man or Woman who is not one of these  
is not a Christian.”*

—William Blake

Imagine a world where all variety and color have disappeared, a world where it is not possible to watch the earliest gold of spring turn into rich green, where there are no flowers, no irregular mountains and hills, no inletted shoreline, a world where trees are uniform and identical, a world with nothing to rest the eye, delight the imagination, fill the viewer with wonder and surprise.

Imagine a world where language is only “newspeak” and committee reports, where no sense of power or imagery or complex symbolism or emotional impact can be put into words, a world where it is not possible to “articulate sweet sounds together.”

Imagine a world where sounds are only noise, never music, where the “spontaneous particulars of sound” have no ordering effect on a period of time, where the journey of the mind and emotions that takes place when the listener enters into the great work of music can never occur.

Imagine a world where there are no graceful motions, no birds gliding and “rebuffing the big wind,” no delicate sweep of willow branches, no autumn leaf drifting in a fluttering ballet to the ground, no proud tilt to a lovely chin, no hands and arms held out in welcome. Imagine a world where *everything* is unpleasant, ugly, unvaried,

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expected, uniform—a world with no aesthetic experience possible.

Such a world would be the appropriate geography for a modern *Divine Comedy*, but in such a world a *Divine Comedy* could not be written, for the beauty of the poetry and the interpretive structure that gave meaning to Dante’s vision of hell would have no language to express them. None of us would want to live in such a world. Certainly, the vision of life contained in the biblical pictures of a splendid and redeemed world are antithetical to such a world. It is a world without beauty, without imagination and, therefore, if our religious writers and philosophers can be believed, a world without any way to express or understand truth and goodness.

There is a short film entitled *Chromophobia* in which the black and white forces of uniformity and inflexibility are at war with the forces of differentiation and of color. One by one flowers are killed, balloons and circus tents are replaced by identical straight poles and uniform angular buildings, until the whole world has become colorless and as unsurprising as a telephone directory. But it lasts only temporarily. A flower does somehow grow. A child, delighted by the flower, breaks out of the ranks of marching children and flies a balloon again; someone paints his unidentifiable house with stripes and polka dots, and soon the world is again an exuberance of color and changing forms and joy.

It is in our most deeply rooted instincts as creatures of a creative God to imagine, to construct, to rise above our environments and to change them, to order them, to delight in their endless variety. Writers and artists of all kinds have been both evidence and affirmers of man’s ability to create as his most basic human instinct. Many have expressed the belief that the

human spirit's participating in the creative is evidence of man's being the creature of a creative God. They suggest that such participation is itself a form of worship, and that worship is the spontaneous reaction to the fact that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God." These ideas are expressed in such varied forms as the following three.

First, a part of a poem by Wallace Stevens:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,  
For a moment, the first idea. . . It satisfies  
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,  
To an immaculate end. We move between  
these points;

From that ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration

Of what we feel from what we think, of  
thought

Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.<sup>1</sup>

Next, a passage from Alfred North Whitehead:

The order of the world is no accident. There is nothing actual which could be actual without some measure of order. The religious insight is the grasp of this truth: That the order of the world, the depth of reality of the world, the value of the world in its whole and in its parts, the beauty of the world, the zest of life, the peace of life, and the mastery of evil, are bound together—not accidentally, but by reason of this truth: that the universe exhibits a creativity with infinite freedom, and a realm of forms with infinite possibilities; but that this creativity and these forms are together impotent to achieve actuality apart from the completed ideal harmony, which is God.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, a strophe from the Old Testament:

Let Israel be glad in his Maker,  
let the sons of Zion rejoice in their King!  
Let them praise his name with dancing,  
making melody to him with timbrel and lyre.

Suggested in all of these passages is the belief that worship involves experience and expressions

quite apart from the practical, utilitarian, rational expressions of our ordinary life. It grows out of a consciousness that God is a creator; that as his creatures, created in His image, we share in the creative potential; that creation is a "pure power," to be responded to with meditation, with joy. As Giles B. Gunn notes,<sup>3</sup> it calls forth the feeling of Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, who watched the deep pool at the center of the whirling maelstrom during a tornado in the Atlantic, and found "a mute center of calm and joy."<sup>4</sup>

This kind of experience, whether it is found in the contemplation of an El Greco, the careful notation of the exact shades of blue in the delphinium, the physicist's observation as he looks into his spectroscope—whatever creates the experience—is the aesthetic in operation. It is whatever frees us from the materialistic, the practical, the self-absorbed, the expected, and allows us to burst into a world both harmonious and self-contained, where we see coherent visions of life's truths and respond with mind and feeling.

For the most part our lives are lived haphazardly without a sense of structure or of order. We fill our troubled days and sleepless nights with worries about our children's schoolwork, our unpaid bills, our car repairs, our political involvements small or great, our jealousies and ambitions and disappointments. We are parts of institutions that crumble and decay, living chaotic lives that rush us along without time for consideration or meditation or care. We see a world around us in which, as Yeats described it,

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon world.

And we feel the pressures of the society turning us into an extension of our electric typewriters, our computers, into "fine specimens of hypermagical ultraomnipotence," into parts of a robot world. All institutions of our modern world seem to be pushing us in this direction — the church included. We have omitted beauty from the set of values we pursue, and so we educate our minds, strengthen our bodies, and leave our emotions immature and disordered.

But He whose spirit moved upon the face of the chaotic waters and divided darkness from light has made man as a creature who is not just

a statistic, or a norm, or an economic unit, but who can respond to beauty. And the divine command is to restructure our world, to “sing a new song,” to put something new and fresh into our daily experience, to transfigure our experience by imagining a restored world of perfect beauty and shaping our lives by that vision. The Christian doctrine of man implies that a part of every person’s nature is his creativity, his ability to produce something fresh and different from the ordinary, to break through the crust of the familiar and to be original. Worship on the seventh day particularly should remind us weekly of that doctrine, because it is a reminder

*“If our culture makes it impossible for us to dance before the Lord, perhaps we can find ways in which we do more than sit and doze.”*

of the creation, a promise of recreation, and is, therefore, an affirmation of this part of our natures. The aesthetic experience, and the arts as the most powerful conveyors of this experience, belong in the church as a profound revelation of man’s nature as a creature of God and a response to his understanding of his Creator.

The Seventh-day Adventist church has spent much effort to understand and put into action each person’s need for a body that can testify to God’s presence in our physical experience. The church has spent much effort to understand and interpret doctrine, has spent much effort to educate the minds of its youth because it sees the importance of a thoughtful and trained membership. The church has stressed moral purity and ethical responsibility for its members. Truth and goodness are not argued about. But the aesthetic development of its members has been shockingly neglected. There seems to be a feeling that this is a luxury that cannot be afforded, a triviality that cannot be included in the serious life, a secular realm for which dedicated Christians have no time.

But art is essential to the church. Without it, the church risks being weakened in many ways.

Art draws men together into communities of shared experience. Analysis and intellectual pursuits tend to isolate and alienate, with each individual on his own island and around him the

“unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.” Worshippers singing a great hymn with attention to words and music, a group of worshippers within the defined space of a well-planned church building, an audience whose emotions parallel one another’s as they watch a beautifully done film, have all been a part of something greater than any single one of them—an experience that unifies.

Elie Wiesel, in *One Generation After*, describes a Hasidic wedding celebration, the celebrators shaken by memories, threatened by tears, each individual lost in his own experience and memories, until Professor Abraham Heschel, who was present

... takes the initiative by turning toward the guests: “What! Don’t you people know how to dance?”

The Hasidim ask for nothing better. Quickly they move tables and benches out of the way. No sooner has a circle been formed than a powerful song rises from the entire congregation; a rapid torrential song, full of rhythm and fire, a dizzying call to fervor, a song so vital it imposes its mark on the earth. They dance, hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, their faces aflame, their hearts filled with joy. The circle gets larger and smaller in turn. The dancers part, come close again, lose and rediscover each other; they become one with the song, they become song.

Song has won a victory over silence and solitude: we exist for each other as well as for ourselves. And so we sing to cover the noise of all those years reverberating in our memories. And also to show our ancestors: Look, the chain has not been broken. We take up the same song ten times, a hundred times, so as not to leave it, so as not to leave each other. . . Louder, faster! May the song become dance, and motion become song. May joy come to orphans and their friends, a joy at once ancestral and personal, violent and serene, a joy that announces and is part of creation.<sup>5</sup>

The modern experience described here is a reminder of the ancestral experience described over and over again in the Psalms, which frequently move from personal emotion into com-

munal experience, the beauty of poetry, the music of the performed poem, the shared emotion of the music, words, perhaps dance, drawing the congregation together and uniting them, in a way that individuals listening to a sermon in the separate walled-off cubicles of the colonial churches could not experience. Seldom do our church services deliberately plan to give the congregation such an experience. It is almost as though we fear it. Does the church really intend to separate its members so that communal warmth cannot be felt?

A church neglects art at the risk of disunity and fragmentation.

A church neglects art at the risk of becoming crass, materialistic, even violent. For the arts are the refiners of the emotions, the educators of the sensibilities, the sensitizers of the perceptions. They give, more than any other kind of experience, the feeling that there is a genuine value in the whole creation, that God's revelations move through the *whole* of our experience. Cast aside this concept, leave each person searching for some disembodied Nirvana as an escape from the world around him, and subjectivity is everything. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," is the message of Christianity that gives us the sense of the redemptive entering into human life. Such a sense fills the world and its creatures with joy. A religious viewpoint that sees theological questions as separate from or antithetical to art and literature, that may even view art and literature as carnal and evil, would have had no part in the songs and dances and celebration of the returned Prodigal Son, but would have been found outside the banquet hall with the elder brother, frowning at what seemed to him a waste of money, time and attention. Within the Adventist church, there seems to be an especially sharp battle between those who see only the solemn as worthwhile, and those who would celebrate the promised redemption of the world through joyous expression. In this battle, as the book of *Revelation* clearly shows, it is song, motion and beauty that will win out over solemnity and austerity.

The maturing of the emotional responses, the development of compassion and understanding, the sensitizing of perception, which are the work of art, are necessary if the church is not to

become rigid, judgmental, given over to practical matters, evaluating by economic and material standards, allowing Right and Wrong to replace Good and Evil.

And, finally, the church rejects the arts at the risk of losing its ability to understand what the revelation of God truly is. For we respond to His revelation in the powerful language of the poetry and prose in the Bible, in the imagery and symbolism of its writing, particularly that of its great prophets and poets who burned the minds of their hearers with flaming imagery. We find a revelation of God in the sense of the possible order and harmony we see in all that is beautiful—whether it be found in the natural beauty of the world around us or in the *fictive* beauty of the artifact.

Churches these days debate whether or not to spend money on stained glass windows when there are illiteracy, unemployment, hunger, violence and disease two blocks away. One church recently dismantled its lovely old historical pipe organ and installed a cheap electronic

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organ because the money saved could be used for youth work within the church. Judged by monetary standards, such actions seem justified. We Adventists have consistently refused to invest vast sums of money in church buildings that are rich in stained glass, murals, sculpture, expensive organs, or other “luxuries.” But who is to evaluate the soul-stirrings, the fleeting perceptions of divine majesty in a moment of time, the sense of being lifted out of oneself, the sense of the peace and the calm of a Sabbath time, the ability to lose one’s troubles in the harmony of the work, the encouragement of freedom and human response—and for how many people—that are being sacrificed for the apparent saving

of money, even of money that might be invested in a practical and worthwhile cause?

If we choose to save money on the construction of buildings, we might at least give more careful attention to those things that don't cost anything but thought and effort: the quality of worship in our services, the environment that we give our children and young people that might encourage their imaginative and emotional maturing, the richness of the symbols and imagery and unifying parables. These shape our lives, whether we wish or not. And if we do not ensure the richness and meaning of the imagery that affects our lives, they will be supplied by Kojak, Anacin and Archie Bunker.

The Seventh-day Adventist church has almost entirely ignored this fact. Perhaps some of the observable drift to the secular, the materialistic, or the mystical is a result of this. Perhaps our overwhelming concern with right act and wrong act, our intense absorption in intricacies of doctrine, have left us with a thinness of spirit—with much knowledge but little power.

Why could not at least one of our colleges or universities have a department of religion and the arts? Why could not a workshop in the arts and the church be planned and held, rotating, perhaps, among our colleges, and available to ministers and others interested in the area? Perhaps opening up the subjects in which worship and art interact would produce some fresh approaches to liturgy, to church architecture, even to sermon style. We need to face the implications in today's subjective approach to the arts, and the fragmentation that such an approach causes. We need to discuss ways in which people are affected by the physical environment the church provides them, and what to do about it. We need to understand the purpose of music used in worship. We need to bring worshippers more centrally into the worship experience. If our culture makes it impossible for us to dance before the Lord, perhaps we can find ways in which we do more than sit and doze.

The object of such a study should be a fresh approach to worship, and an approach that expresses Adventist beliefs, traditions and hopes. Our worship has been mostly an assortment of liturgical features borrowed from other churches.

We have a common Christian belief, certainly, and common ways of worshipping are not inappropriate. But Adventist beliefs might give us a changed liturgical structure. We must respond to the injunction to sing a new song.

Constantly freshened expressions of belief are necessary in each age and in each church. T. S. Eliot wrote:

The soul of Man must quicken to creation.  
 Out of the formless stone, when the artist  
     unites himself with stone,  
 Spring always new forms of life, from the soul  
     of man that is joined to the soul of stone;  
 Out of the meaningless practical shapes of all  
     that is living or lifeless,  
 Joined with the artist's eye, new life, new  
     form, new colour.  
 Out of the sea of sound the life of music,  
 Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the  
     sleep and hail of verbal imprecisions,  
 Approximate thoughts and feelings, words  
     that have taken the place of thoughts  
     and feelings,  
 There spring the perfect order of speech, and  
     the beauty of incantation.<sup>6</sup>

What the church does, what the church says, how the church worships, how it responds to human experiences, are the most important of questions to the Christian. The church cannot be merely ordinary. It cannot be chained like other institutions to consequence and causality. It cannot be merely utilitarian. If it is to be a powerful channel of an experience that moves and changes us, it must be as extraordinary and as rich in its message as possible. The arts are not the only forces that can move the church in this direction, but they are very important forces. They can be used as vehicles to transport us to a desired kind of church and to a valuable kind of religious experience.

In an article in *Religion in Life*, Woodrow Geier wrote:

What is the nature of the church? We have to decide. The church may be a fallout shelter for tired and droopy spirits who want to evade the world with its terror, its pain, its surprises, its joy. Or the church may be the body of Christ, the extension of the incarnation, a center of freedom and reconciliation, where God's love of the creation is celebrated, where people refuse to turn their

backs upon the world, where the contagion of the gospel is shed abroad, and where Christians can sing because they are compelled by grace to celebrate life's grandeur and transcend its evil and its hurt.

If the church is this kind of place, it can appropriate the arts as a means of sharing in the work of the Creator and as a way to celebrate the goodness of the creation. The arts can help us see ourselves and our human situation. As a report on our inner world, they can prompt us to an openness to ideas and expose us to interpretations of man that are today being debated. The arts are thus one means through which the church itself may be challenged to recover its own depth.<sup>7</sup>

Imagine a world where everything is varied and beautiful and new, where the Sabbath rings slowly in the pebbles of the holy streams, and where, inside the city, the sons of Zion rejoice in their King and the luminous streets are filled with song.

Imagine a world where language is clear and honest, where image and symbol and parable coincide exactly with reality, where words do not break down under emotion, but are filled with "an Elixir, an excitation, a pure power."

Imagine a world where song has won a final victory over silence and solemnity, where music is motion and motion music, and both move about a center of serenity and joy.

Imagine a world where the redeemed, in perfect freedom and perfect harmony, are themselves a part of the beauty of the holiness about the throne of God.

Such a world speaks with power to our

imaginations. We recognize it at once as our lost homeland, our hope for the future, our strong conviction of what should be. It is *only* through the arts that such an imagined world can be communicated. Surely, a church that believes its purpose is to call men to a home in that world ought to use every means possible to make it real to men's hearts and imaginations. But where in our church do we find the great poet, the great artist, the great architect, or the great musician encouraged to speak of his Christian belief through his art and craft? There will be no great Adventist artists until our educational system places as much emphasis on literature as on accounting or chemistry, as much emphasis on music as on computer programming, and as much emphasis on art and architecture as on homiletics.

Then perhaps in song and in words, in architecture and in music, in sculpture and in landscape gardening, in liturgy and in the words of the preacher, the church may, even in this imperfect world, join together in that great song of praise to the Creator with the morning stars and the other Sons of God.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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