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### ***I. Imaged in the Divine Image: Reflections on Imagination and Creativity***

Scripture tells us we were created in the image of God, the *Imago Dei*. What kind of image, we wonder. Maybe like a symbol. Maybe like a shadow. Maybe like a reflection. Star stuff?<sup>1</sup>

—Catherine Kapikian

In the beginning, when God was *creating*... In our sacred text, the primary act ascribed to the divine agent reveals divinity first and foremost as *Creator*. We catch a glimpse of the First Artist in conversation with this new creation as She steps back from her cosmic canvas and declares that which has been bodied forth as good. As the poetic myth of generativity in Genesis unfolds, the story goes on to reveal that humankind is uniquely, specially and specifically created in the “image and likeness”<sup>2</sup> of the Universal Artist of the universe... and indeed, it was *very* good. Like liturgical artist Catherine Kapikian, we too are left to wonder just what kind of image this is; to wonder what kind of image in which we are made, the essence of likeness which is somehow revealed and/or reflected in and through us. For we are not merely created, but are privileged image of Image.

While theologians through the millennia have grappled with the meaning of this divine imprint which we bear, Kapikian boldly asserts that “we, the children of God, bearers of the divine image, are endowed genetically with a capacity to respond creatively.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we are overly familiar with a God who created, but seldom do we

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Kapikian, *Art in Service of the Sacred* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006) 89.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:26-27

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Kapikian, *Art in Service of the Sacred*, 89.

credit creativity and imagination as divine attributes, as practices of the Holy. But as David Wolpert so plainly puts it, “creativity is a sign that God is God.”<sup>4</sup> Even when God names God’s self the Great I AM—YHWH—“Yahweh” can be translated as “he who causes to be” or “he who creates” or “he who brings into existence.”<sup>5</sup> The name of the Holy One eludes static fixity and exudes abundant creativeness at its core: birthing, potentiality and bringing into being are central to God’s identity! Our God is a God of newness, of new things, who simultaneously makes all things new—a constant theme which is repeated over and over throughout the scriptures. Made in the likeness of the Maker of all things, we are not only creatures who make things, but we are creatures of gratuitous making and generative newness; creatures of boundless imagination and endless creativity. Created in the image of the Creator—*Imago Dei*—humanity is inherently created to create.

In an essay entitled “Art and Sacrament,” British poet and philosopher David Jones stated that “the artist is not... ‘out on a limb,’ but the activity of art, far from being a branch of activity, is truncal: the tree of man... is involved, is of its nature, in that [artistic] activity.”<sup>6</sup> For Jones, to be human is by definition to be *human-as-artist*: there can be no separation of body and soul from this innate activity of imaging and making. We are “hopelessly entangled,” he wrote, with the Arts, sign and sacrament at every turn.<sup>7</sup> If we begin from the understanding that image making is an intrinsic part of what it means to be human, then our capacity to be imagining beings is the inseverable “ligament” which

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3:14

<sup>6</sup> David Jones, “Art and Sacrament” *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959) 175-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

joins us to God: imagination, creativity and artistry are the connectivity which bridge and bind divinity and humanity.<sup>8</sup>

As a visual artist, creativity begins in the sacred recesses of my innermost being. To be an artist is to be a contemplative prayer. To create is a mystifying, chaotic and sometimes tumultuous process that can never fully be articulated or mapped, defined or contained. For me, the “mighty blaze” in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen that ordained the work of all Creation *is* creativity, whose fire burns without end.<sup>9</sup> Imagination and the activities of creativity are the meeting place of humanity and divinity in which both are revealed. The creative process, then, is an intimate place of meeting Mystery. As it connects us to the presence and power of Life in and around us, creativity becomes a spiritual practice of prayer. God is present in humanity, present within us, infused within the entire Creation which breathes I AM: look, listen, taste, smell... and behold I AM. Imagination and the creative process as prayer foster communion between Creator, creator and Creation; Maker, maker and materiality. And as we tilt ourselves to experience, hear and see God in the world around us, there is a unity of Spirit, spirit and sensory perception.

In the words of Julian of Norwich, “I can never have love or rest or true happiness; until, that is, I am so attached to [God] that there can be no created thing between God and me.”<sup>10</sup> Paul Tillich asserts that knowledge of communion is not cognitive knowledge; “the artist is nearer to it than any other, but communion is even more than artistic participation.”<sup>11</sup> The prayer of the artist is union that seeks ultimate Communion. When

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>9</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Holy Spirit as Sapientia* translation by B. Newman

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (New York, Paulist Press, 1978), 130.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich, “Art and Society” 16.

a sense of communion has been experienced, the prayer of creativity/creation of the artist offers something akin to ecstatic vision. Shakespeare expressed the artist as visionary, vaulting into the heavens: “The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven; and as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.”<sup>12</sup> Art envisions as it incarnates; the artist via the corporeal activity becomes engrossed in dialogue with the heavenly. Prayer is commonly described in terms of a dialogue or conversation with the Holy. In the dialectic between myself and God, all that transpires in the creative effort is personal doxology which has the potential to echo with divine oracles, allowing the Creator to speak in the first-person through the work of my mind and hands, soul and body.

The self as artist is seer beyond sight, prophetic visionary to whom glimmers of epiphanic truths are revealed. In a seminar on art as healing, painter E.J. Gold expressed: “A good artist—an artist with wisdom—does not just express the self, but is amazed as *The Artist* moves through you and puts something in front of you at which to be amazed and astonished.” The artist within me is both prophetic dreamer of dreams and shamanic communicator with the wholly/Holy Other. In essence, the creative process as prayer both evokes the divine other and leads me to a deeper knowing of the self. Both self and deity are revealed, and in the revelation of art as prayer both are simultaneously rendered the known *as* unknown. The artist as creator is simultaneously the artist as mystic.

Author Madeleine L’Engle in writing on the creative process uses mystical terms to describe the experience of the artist. She writes: “artists have always been drawn to the wild, wide elements they cannot control or understand... To be an artist means to

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<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 5

approach the light, and that means to let go of our control, to allow our whole selves to be placed with absolute faith in that which is greater than we are.”<sup>13</sup> To be an artist is to learn to let go... of self... of all images... and perhaps even to let go of conceptions of “God.” Just as Evagrius asks, “do you not think that if you wish to [both] see the One who is above every concept and perception and to converse with him, you should cast away from yourself every impassioned mental concept,”<sup>14</sup> the artist as image-maker must in essence risk leaving image behind—leaving all—in the prayer that is creativity; and perhaps in doing so, this is the prayer that brings us to the “perfect place of God.”<sup>15</sup>

The many images of knowingness, whether in the mind’s eye or on the canvas, continually point to the overpowering unknowingness, to that which transcends our finitude. Perhaps it’s in the overwhelming and overpowering multiplicity of images—the intense overloading of the visual which brings us to a “light” of blazing glory that won’t hold form and moves beyond image—where we are able catch a glimpse of ourselves “at home” in the divine. Meister Eckhart wrote that

God created all things in such a way that they are not outside himself, as ignorant people falsely imagine. Rather, all creatures flow outward, but nonetheless remain within God. God created all things this way: not that they might stand outside of God, nor alongside God, nor beyond God, but that they might come into God and receive God and dwell in God...

Who is God? What is God? ...Isness. Isness is God. Where there is isness, there is God. Creation is the giving of isness from God.<sup>16</sup>

It is the seductive voice from within that leads me into the fog of continuous conversion, the cloud of unknowing; the imaging that un-images in order to Imagine, to re-image, to

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<sup>13</sup> Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Colorado Springs: WaterBook Press 2006) 191.

<sup>14</sup> Evagrius of Ponticus, *On Prayer*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Fox, *Meditations With Meister Eckhart* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1983) 12

transform. In the darkness of the creative process, in the heart of my self, the ground of my being is (re)discovered—the Ground of Being itself.

To be an artist is to be a burning bush. To stand as an artist within the creative process is to stand in a space of encounter where the finite strives to touch infinite; where the temporal seeks to taste eternal; where the embodied strains to embrace transcendent. Through a prayer of contemplative creativity, artists body forth beauty as they embody and incarnate truth. As prophetic visionaries, our work is both proclamatory, revelatory, and calls the community into action. As mid-wives in the cycle of endless generativity, we have the ability to sow seeds of imagination which germinate secretly. As mystic seers, we can bring the worshiper to the edge of mystery. The prayer of creativity given by the artist may help bring about the awareness and skill of noticing the Holy into daily life, the intimacy of the Infinite-Within; a foretaste of the face-to-face Encounter which is still to come, when our eyes will truly see. The prayer of the artist is offered in hopes of reorienting the worshiping community to loving attention toward the most basic character of our relationship to God—that all life is from and lives within God. The work of the creative process as life-giving awareness of Life bears witness to the Living Word, the One through whom all things came into being; the Word “Let there be...” which once unleashed into all eternity does not return to God empty.<sup>17</sup> Both the church and the artist share in common a search for ways to speak the truth, to mediate a sense of the sacred, to incarnate mystery and make it visible. Clearly, church and the imaginative artist live in dire need of one another.

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<sup>17</sup> John 1:1-3, Isaiah 55:11

## ***II. Imaged in the Image: Created to Create The 2009 Convocation Logo***

The primary image in this year's Fellowship of United Methodists in Music and Worship Arts convocation logo is that of the Holy Spirit as dynamic dove. Just as the quivering Spirit of God hovered upon the face of the waters at Creation's birth, the dove is blue to represent the amniotic waters of the bubbling and burbling fount of Life. The image of the indwelling Spirit is present as the artist *inspires*, breathes and drinks from the fountain of the well of Life; *aspires* in the soaring anticipation of what will be/come; and *conspires* with the both spirit-bodied self and Spirit. The logo depicts the Spirit in the abstract as if it were a painter's palette, with infinite possibilities in the raw materials to be mixed and stirred. Sparked with tongues of fire, the "paint" on the palette suggests profiled faces, the many hues of humanity burning with the imaginative, expressive and multivocal Spirit of Pentecost. While the logo represents my reflections on what it means to be *Imago Dei*, I invite others to look and see alternative visions and to interpret it imaginatively.