

# Old Turtle

by Douglas Wood • Illustrated by Cheng-Khee Chee  
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Reviewed by  
Marjie Van Gunten

Since the inception of Orff Schulwerk, teachers have dabbled in or near the realm of the spirit. Carl Orff believed that elemental music (Orff Schulwerk), consisting of word, movement and musical play, awakened and developed the powers of the human spirit. He called it the “humus” of the spirit, without which we face the danger of spiritual erosion (*The Schulwerk*, 1976). In 1991, Brigitte Warner, in *Orff-Schulwerk: Applications for the Classroom*, wrote that in post-World War II Germany, the Schulwerk was a means of regeneration for music education; it served to restore a positive sense of heritage and culture and helped reverse the effects of “spiritual erosion.” Old Turtle is a parable that explores the diversity of thinking about spirituality, humankind, religious differences and tolerance. If the subject of God is absolutely verboten at your school, then perhaps you cannot use this exquisitely portrayed and illustrated treatment of the variety of God-concepts. It acknowledges the atheist stance, tends toward a theistic one, yet it does not describe any particular religion. Rather it explores the religious questioning we find in our world. If the subject of religious diversity can be explored, and if the notion of how people’s ideas of God are intertwined with their self-understanding and worldview can be examined, then this book can offer an intermediate-through-adult-aged person a truly exquisite initiation into many deep theological probes and constructs through the simplicity of the short, easy to read-aloud tale and the beauty of superb watercolor illustrations.

A reading of this parable may lead you and your students to ask some explicit and probing questions: Why is it that each of the different animals—in different habitats—defines God so differently? Was there a time when creatures, rocks and hills, wind and water and trees could communicate? Can they today? What role did/do humans play in defining God for all the earth? What happens when they began to argue about their opinions? What great catastrophe does the author suggest arises due to arguing about God? Why did the old turtle smile at the end of the story? If the

word “God” was changed to “Good” or “Goodness,” would the message of the story change? For teacher-artists and their students, the story is ripe with opportunities for exploration of movement and instrumental accompaniment for the different creatures in their habitats; the arguing; the Old Turtle’s entrance and his pleas; the thunder; the entrance of humanity; humanity’s arguing and its outcome; the final resolution. Be sure to share this book with your art teachers. If they haven’t seen it yet, they will be amazed at the watercolor technique and the beauty of the images.

