

# Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #13, Spring 1999

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## Fiction and Spiritual Truth

by **John Miller**  
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Writing down stories has a way of freeing us from the rigid illusions of mere ideas.

When I gave my reasons for joining The Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts, I mentioned that I was spending all my creative energy now writing stories, which may sound odd for someone who has spent thirty years teaching philosophy and theology. Subsequently, Esther Mürer asked if I would write a piece on this for *Types and Shadows*.

I discovered early in my teaching of undergraduates that I needed to use stories to make vivid and important the ideas that philosophical and religious texts put forth. For example, when I explained Tillich's concept of a demonic faith by showing students how a preliminary and finite faith was raised to an ultimate status in Nazism and McCarthyism, Tillich's idea became vivid to them. It was the story that did it. But if I merely positioned Tillich in the history of ideas, comparing and contrasting his definition of faith and its distortions with other definitions, it remained lame. The meaning of an idea for most people becomes clear when they see it in dramatic action.

At the same time, I was finding that some texts had a much more profound impact on my own life than others; Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* more than Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *The Journal of John Woolman* more than Barclay's *Apology*, for examples out of long list I could give. The dramas themselves seemed to convey meanings not fully explainable with ideas.

Later in my career, after I had come to teach at the Earlham School of Religion, I discovered a similar thing from the other end while teaching a course called Comprehensive Seminar.

In this course students in their last semester must solve problems presented to them. Each problem is a dramatic, conflict-oriented crisis that the teacher designs for a particular student. For example, a student wanting to enter retreat work with young people discovers in her crisis-problem an attempted suicide at a camp miles from immediate help; another wanting to work in religious publishing faces a Board of Directors that demands she reject a very good book from a gay author; a man wishing to pastor a rural Church finds the Clerk of Overseers, who is also a father of three children, arrested for growing marihuana among his rows of corn.

As the teacher of the course, I had to write up each individually created problem in a realistic and dramatic fashion. Each was an incomplete, one-page short story. The student had to enter the story and then complete it by describing how he or she would respond to its crisis.

Writing these energized me spiritually and emotionally. The attempt to bring truth, spiritual discernment, moral choice and realism together worked at a depth of integration that the traditional theology class rarely approached. This discovery dovetailed with the many experiences I had had using stories to help people understand abstract ideas, but then surprisingly shoved me forward to ask seriously what this meant for my own work. I came to see that I needed to write stories as the next phase in my own journey.

Many motivations exist for a person to write stories. I think of two major ones.

Some people may want to write them as a spiritual exercise. They might take episodes from their past that produce strong feelings in them and write these out as semi-autobiographical short stories, in which they try to capture in action and dialogue what the episodes mean for them. The person's aim here would not be to describe literally an event, but to show—by inventing details where necessary—the meaning the person feels in the memory of the incident. As the meaning of the past becomes clearer, especially its repeating spiritual core, so also the meaning of the present and possibly the Divine lure into the future. These would be private stories for a private journal.

My purpose in writing stories, however, is not this first one. Other people, like myself, cannot satisfy what lures them inwardly without writing stories for others to read. Writing is an act of communication or a response to the Divine urge to create a thing of beauty. Personal experience informs the creation of these fictions, but the focus of attention is on the story itself and what it wants to be.

When I'm working on a story and it begins to come alive, it feels like a gift being given to me that I must then offer to others, much the way it feels when a message comes in Meeting for Worship that I must stand and offer. From my conversations with other writers, I think this must be a common experience. The effort to put into story what is experienced in the depths has the potential to blossom into art. Art evokes discovery and can draw those who contemplate it into a deeper spiritual journey.

I would like to see more Quakers writing stories. It is a way of showing the Quaker experience of life without proselytizing. In fiction, we can tell the stories of fictitious people with complete and total honesty, and let our readers take from these works of art what is there for them.

Indeed, in writing fiction, we may well discover for the first time what we ourselves really understand is true about life. Writing down stories has a way of freeing us from the rigid illusions of mere ideas. The Indian poet Tagore once wrote, "Truth in her dress finds facts too tight. In fiction, she moves with ease."

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COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

## One Hundred Years Ago

*I shall not believe that the arts are finally accepted by our Society until we can claim at least one masterpiece, fostered by us, by our discriminating love and knowledgeable enthusiasm I need hardly say that I do not expect it to bear the label "Quaker" or even "religious" art; it may, indeed, if it is the bearer of new vision, be deplored as "irreligious."* —Ormerod Greenwood (1978)

In 1895 Friends of London Yearly Meeting held a Conference at Manchester, to reflect on the state of the Society. As a byproduct it produced two landmark statements on Friends' relation to the arts.

Thomas Hodgkin, reacting to such *fin-de-siècle* currents as impressionism and naturalism:

For human conduct and human happiness, it is far safer to ignore Art altogether, than it is to accept her as the sole guide and arbiter of human life.... Now Art threatens to become Religion in another sense, obliterating all the old landmarks of morality, and deciding by herself, and with reference to artistic considerations alone, what is fitting and becoming in human life. "Everything," so runs the present doctrine, "which *is*, is worthy of being copied by the artist. Untruth in art is the one unpardonable sin...." Under the influence of these new doctrines...painting becomes indecent, fiction filthy, and the drama...a school of vice....

William Charles Braithwaite:

It needs to be recognised that our Society has not escaped the tendency to narrow down spiritual action to certain prescribed ways as a substitute for the reality of the spiritual life....Friends have until recent years repressed all taste for the Fine Arts. These, at their greatest, always contain some revelation of the Spirit of God, which is in the fullest harmony with our spiritual faith....The "fulness of the whole earth is His glory", and we mar the beauty of this message by every limitation we set upon it.

Meanwhile in the same year Leo Tolstoy—whose religious views were very much in harmony with those of Friends—wrote a letter to the *London Times* about the persecution of the Doukhobors, a Russian pacifist sect. The name, which means "spirit fighters", was originally a derogatory label by which the Russian Orthodox authorities accused them of being at war with the Spirit; but they proudly embraced it as conveying that they fought with spiritual, not outward, weapons.

Their plight struck a chord with British Friends, who responded by forming a committee to help the Doukhobors emigrate to Canada. Encouraged, Tolstoy finished up a long-abandoned novel to help finance the project.

The novel, *Resurrection*, concerns a nobleman who, while serving on a jury in a prostitute's trial for murder, recognizes her as a servant girl he had seduced and abandoned in his youth. Feeling responsible, he accompanies her to Siberia, witnesses the horrors of the Russian penal system, and undergoes a spiritual rebirth as a result.

*Resurrection* was censored in Russia; a full Russian version was published by the London Quaker firm Headley Bros. in 1901, and translated into many languages, the proceeds going to the Friends Doukhobor Committee. But the subject matter proved a great embarrassment to Friends. The committee minuted that the novel was "unsuitable for general reading;" and the clerk, John Bellows, declaring that the Society of Friends ought not to accept proceeds from "a smutty book," refunded the money out of his own pocket.

Tolstoy responded in English: "...when I wrote the book I abhorred with all my heart the lust and to express this abhorrence was one of the chief aims of the book."

I haven't begun to unpack the implications of this incident, but it illustrates some perennial tensions:

By "unsuitable for general reading" did the committee mean that art should not deal with the shadow? In that case, what room is left for prophecy—and for risk-taking?

Can the community support art which is in advance of the general leading? If so, how can it help artists discern when they are outrunning their own guides (as opposed to the community's)?

Care for the integrity of means and ends is a vital witness. Care for integrity of form and content in a work of art is equally vital. How do these two kinds of integrity intersect? How do they conflict? How can they inform each other? What kind of translation is needed?

#### SOURCES:

##### **Greenwood quote:**

Guest editorial, *Reynard*, No. 32 (Summer 1978) p. 5.

##### **Hodgkin quote:**

Ormerod Greenwood, *Signs of Life: Art and Religious Experience* (Swarthmore Lecture 1978) p. 19.

##### **Braithwaite quote:**

Frederick J. Nicholson, *Quakers and the Arts* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1968) p. 96.

##### **Tolstoy incident:**

Rosemary Edmonds, Translator's introduction to Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection* (Penguin, 1966) p. 6-7

Richenda Scott, *The Quakers in Russia* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964) p.137-9;

George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 138-9.

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*From our Western Sister Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts:*

"The Truth Will Out!"

**by Marybeth Webster**

**Reprinted from *Friends Bulletin*  
(Pacific YM), January 1999**

*Graphic, right: "Living in a  
Refugee Camp", woodcut by  
Trudy Myrrh Reagan*



The truth will out! While schools are cutting out the arts as "frills," Art is crying to be used and cherished in the Society of Friends. Grassroots examples of the inspiring expressions of creative vitality are showing up, faltering, rising again, growing stronger...

""Living in a Refugee Camp" by Trudy Myrrh Reagan"

Using the "Mother" FQA as a model, a movement is afoot to create a Western "Sister" FQA.

Grass Valley, CA has a women's art collective that gave art exhibits in a nearby barn/studio for three Fall Quarterlies. They sent a traveling exhibit to Chico Meeting, and to AFSC's Pasadena gallery. A viewer told them of FQA. They were invited by FQA to show at FGC last summer.

A sign-up sheet for interested artists at Pacific YM in August gleaned 20 names. Several responded to a poll indicating interest in meeting together to share work, to do art together, to help each other and find ways to deepen and nurture artistic outreach and restoring the Arts Worship Time where poets, storytellers, dancers, authors, musicians enact the spiritual / creative link.

At a visionary Interest Group October 17 at Fall Quarter, we spoke to the queries:

- How does being a Quaker impact your artmaking?
- How would an association of Friends in the Arts support you, your work, your spirit?

## **Responses**

"I abuse myself with the old Quaker attitudes toward art as frivolous. I'm not feeding the poor. Conflict of interest—I'm feeding me! How do I justify what I have to charge for my woodwork?"

It would be so useful to have a forum that feels art is not anti-Quaker. I have to work hard on my spirituality in order to be true to my art."

"We need a group who does something, brings it forth. Many would be interested if they knew about it."

"I'd like a place to show our art to each other, to encourage children—my son is an artist—to be part of putting together shows, maybe on an annual basis. There's a part inside me that tries to discourage me from doing art (my family's attitude). An art group would strengthen me."

"It's hard to sell your work for what it's worth. Old voices say art is a hard taskmaster. The same creative spirit that rises up in worship is the same in my studio—the same quieting, centering, allowing the Spirit to flow."

"There was a 25-year gap between being a youngster painting madly and the finding my way back with *The Artist's Way*. The two times I've danced in Meeting I was being encouraged to express my message for worship in movement. It would be helpful to have a group of people who would offer encouragement. Everything around us is pushing art down, trivializing it."

"My mother probably had our same artistic gush. She clawed her way into computer design, made velvet rose wreaths at home. She had to put food on the table. It was inspiring to see her do even a little. She got cancer, couldn't work, made stuffed animals for craft fairs, got press notice. The message: this is fabulous, joyous work but if it's looking good, you die. It's taking a long time to accept that I'm an artist. It's a challenge to wake up every day and say 'I'm an artist'. To spend the time and do the work, you use Quaker attributes of focus, discipline, acceptance of who you are, getting the 'me' out of the way."

This small Interest Group dreamed of joining together to publicly articulate the spiritual connections we find in our art, of becoming Traveling Friends under concern to share art, of creating Pacific YM exhibits and performances to include all ages, of experiential interest groups at every Friends Gathering. As way opens, we aspire to show our colors, sing out.

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