

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #15, Fall1999

The Screwdisk E-Mail

Excerpts from an online correspondence transcribed by Skip Mendler

*It has been more than fifty years since C. S. Lewis published his spiritual classic *The Screwtape Letters*. That work purports to be the correspondence sent by Screwtape, a senior devil, to his nephew Wormwood concerning the proper methods for leading a soul astray. Much has changed since those days, and much is new—nuclear weapons, the Internet, the roles of men and women—but much has remained the same. Hence the present work, which seeks to bring Lewis' timeless theme into this time, the last gasp of a millennium. —S. M.*

Introduction

Not long after "l'affaire Mitnick," in which a hacker was discovered to have secreted pirated files into other people's Internet accounts, I was checking through my holdings to be sure that there had been no tampering with my files. I found that indeed, some other files had been added to my home directory, apparently without the system administrators noticing. There was an unfamiliar directory title: "SCRWDSK", and a collection of files in that directory with filenames of the form "SCRDSK01.TXT".

I opened the files, and discovered text that had been heavily encrypted by a method that I had not seen before.... The headers seemed to be variants on standard IP headers—indeed, one header referred, not to IP, but to something called IMP—an Infernet Messaging Procedure. Yes, it said "Infernet," not "Internet"; this text appeared consistently in each file, and a vague sense of unease began to form in my heart as I examined the headers more closely. Instead of mailer daemons, the headers mentioned mailer demons, with names like Asphodel and Scabpicker. The subject lines that emerged bore topics like "Re: Using Politics as a Distraction from Spiritual Matters," or "Good Techniques for Inflaming Imagined Injustices." And the "From:" line said:

screwdisk@ninthcircle.hades.inf

The bodies of the messages were, as I have stated, harder to crack. Indeed, I am continuing to work on them. As I piece completed texts together, I will post them to this site....

The Screwdisk E-Mail, 1

Subject: Keeping him online--and on the hook

My dear Scumbucket,

Your last report raises some interesting questions about your patient's involvement in cyberspace. If he is just sitting in his apartment typing away, you ask, how can we get him to commit the sorts of crimes that will assure his eventual descent to the house of Our Infernal Father?

I sympathize with your situation, my little dumpling. I remember how, as a tempter-in-training myself, I fantasized endlessly about leading my prey into sins of incalculable import, having him cause suffering to thousands, indulging his basest desires... Like you, I was engrossed by the tales of our successes in the Dark Ages, the Crusades, the great wars. It took me some time to realize a few basic truths that make our present methodology so reliably successful.

You must always remember that **we are the default.** if he does nothing about his internal life, he will almost surely be ours. It is not necessary to bring about great mortal sins in your prey; indeed, sometimes that is the worst thing to do. We have lost incalculable numbers of souls by leading them into such morasses of sin that they see no way out for themselves and turn in desperation to our Enemy—who always seems to pull them out and grant them forgiveness! (How disgustingly generous.) No, it is far better to just make sure that he does not pay attention to such matters at all, for if he turns his attention neither "inward" or "upward", then our task will be simplicity itself.

So, your patient in his room with his computer may not be raping and pillaging in real life, but you can certainly encourage him to try out those behaviors in cyberspace! The effect on his soul will be similar, although not identical—and furthermore, his adventures, being imaginary, will be free of any trace of guilt or remorse that might prove troublesome later.

We are also finding that there is indeed quite a bit to be said for the theories of Wastedump and others, who maintained that increased isolation and insulation of humans from each other may be more productive than some of the mass-psychology techniques we have been utilizing in recent generations. Keep them apart and let them think they are connected. Your friend in his apartment will have limited real contact with his fellow beings which means that his feelings about them will be that much easier to control....

As ever, your doting great-uncle,
Screwdisk

The Screwdisk E-Mail, 10
Subject: writer's block

My dear Scumbucket,

Oh yes, the creative ones can be the hardest. Unpredictable, likely to see through our stratagems, very very difficult to manage. For this reason, we try to minimize their numbers—but somehow or another, despite our best efforts to date, that pernicious spark still manages to peep out in the most unlikely circumstances.

But there are ways to deal with them. For example—you may not be able to control the occurrence of creativity, but you can help to ensure that it never amounts to anything. I find the following scenario handy: say your subject is taking a long drive. His mind wanders, as it will, and the Enemy may sneak in the occasional seed of an idea that, if followed up on, could be detrimental to our purposes—say, an essay, a poem, a song, or some way to address a problem in his life. If you can't stop the creative process at this point by misdirection or distraction, or by bringing up an unpleasant memory or an unrelated fantasy, go ahead and let the process go. He could compose the whole thing, play out the whole scenario, right there in his car—just be sure that he hasn't brought a pencil along, or that he doesn't remember where it is.

Then, when he reemerges from his reverie into everyday life, let the normal hubbub that we have built into the environment work for you. Keep him hopping from one crisis to the other, and every once in a while let him remember this much—that he has something **really important** to attend to, if only he could rid himself of these constant annoyances and get himself together. Cultivate the resentment that will follow naturally, that he is not being allowed to pursue his Muse, or have the time he needs to himself to do this really good thing (whatever it was) that he had had in mind. He may even be provoked to alienating friends and family, just to try and get a few moments for himself so that he can recapture that germ of an idea, get himself organized. We will not let him steal the time from his workplace (be sure that workplace pressures, and the manager's surveillance, increase at times like this), so it must be stolen from either his family or the Enemy. Let him, perhaps, decide that instead of going to church some Sunday morning, he will try to worship via the creative process or some such nonsense. Then, once he has pulled away from everything, and has himself all ready **then** shut the door.

At this point, despair is only a few simple steps away. More on this another time.

As ever,
Screwdisk

Skip Mendler is a member of North Branch Monthly Meeting, Philadelphia YM. When not online, on the mat, or in his cubicle, Skip may be found in transit, in clown garb, at the microphone, on the carpet, behind schedule, over his head, in cahoots—or, every once in a while, at center.

The collection from which these excerpts are taken may be found on Skip's web site, [This Friend's Electric](#).

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #15, Fall 1999



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

A Ministry of Uselessness

The artist must serenely defend his right to be completely useless. —Thomas Merton

Elsewhere in this issue Chuck Fager reflects on the feeling, common among Quaker artists, that their art must somehow be "useful" in order to justify the time spent making it. For many this demand goes against the grain and results in work which is less than it could be, if not in total paralysis.

Usefulness as a criterion of artistic worth has become widespread among Friends at large in the last century or so; it seems to be a sort of compromise in which the arts are at last grudgingly admitted—so long as they don't get in the way of good works. For example, Extract 6 of London Yearly Meeting's 1925 *Christian Practice* counsels that the arts

need to be subordinated to the service of the Highest, and sometimes in that service they must be given up....We would not narrow unduly for any of our members the opportunities for sharing in the joys and activities of life, but in the midst of all we must hold fast the thought of God's Kingdom, of which we are called to be part, and which we have to make real to others by our lives.

Paradoxically, Friends have never had trouble encouraging peace actions which, viewed in terms of their measurable "results", are often quixotic at best. And indeed I have found much understanding for my artistic leadings among those great-souled Quaker peace activists who have persevered for decades in faithfulness, for whom "success" has long since ceased to be a consideration. It is therefore not surprising to find the British pacifist and friend of Gandhi, Horace Alexander, going to the heart of what is wrong with the 1925 statement:

Where [Extract 6] might well be amended is in the implied suggestion that some men may be called to abandon art in the interest of some other service to God and man, but never the reverse. It may be that some Friend will be called to abandon his painting in order to identify himself with the people of Africa. But it may be that another is doing right when he resigns from certain important committees in order to devote himself more completely to his art.... The "good" is often the enemy of the "best"; but we must not conclude that the "best" is necessarily to be identified with moral reform, while creative art is merely "the good". [Letter to *The Friend*, 30 July 1954]

Then there is the question of what is meant by "usefulness." There are of course many avenues for service in which the arts can play a role; a number of inspiring examples have been described in the pages of *T&S*, and I hope there will be many more. It is important, though, that such service spring from a true leading. If it merely reflects a need to justify one's existence in the eyes of Friends, show that one "belongs to the club," the fruits will be diminished accordingly.

I fear, however, that where the arts are concerned, many Friends think of "usefulness" in a propagandistic way: Does it glorify the Society of Friends? Does it support our favorite myths

about our past? Does it reinforce the currently fashionable shibboleths (whatever they may be)? In short, does it help us maintain a collective self-image of our own "usefulness"?

I am troubled by a feeling that, by making our art "useful" in this second sense, we risk mendacity. And the demand that our art be "useful" is part of the falsehood, insofar as it makes an external standard more important than the integrity of the work. That is like going to meeting determined to give a prepared message whether one is truly called to do so or not.

Art begins with listening, with receiving. Blessed are the poor in spirit. It is only out of our poverty that we can begin to hope that our "useless" art will nourish souls, kindle the creative spark in others, feed those who hunger for beauty and truth. Only through faithfully serving the integrity of the work can we offer the captives of our fragmented, one-dimensional world glimpses of unity and perfection.

Have the courage of your uselessness. Trust that your faithful obedience to the Spirit's leadings is pleasing to God. That courage and that trust will imbue your art with a sorely-needed message of courage, faith and hope. Then uselessness truly becomes a ministry.

Query:

Horace Alexander notes that "the good" is often the enemy of "the best." What does this mean to you? Which is your art, and why? Which do you hope it to be?

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page added August 2001

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #15, Fall 1999

Clerk's Journal

A Quaker Art Pilgrimage

by **Chuck Fager, FQA Clerk**

What makes a Quaker artist?

This question was on my mind one warm morning last April as I drove to Williamsburg, Virginia to visit the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, where the largest Edward Hicks exhibit ever assembled was on display.

Just the range of the exhibit is impressive: fully half of all his extant Peaceable Kingdom paintings, arranged and analyzed chronologically from their beginnings in about 1818 to the last, on which his son had to do the final touches after Hicks's death in 1849; plus his magnificent late farm scenes, and the wonderful Noah's Ark. Did I mention the signs, his eyeglasses, and the biographical video?

Forgive my enthusiasm, but I'm a big Edward Hicks fan, and I loved every minute there. Up in the gift shop, they had the expected tote bags, posters and tee shirts but also the unexpected: very well-done plush figures of the Lion and the Leopard, complete with their striking facial expressions; yes, I spent a bundle there, and still lament the fact that the stuffed animal series evidently does not include the Lamb.

I'll leave the visual analysis of Hicks's work to others more qualified; besides the images, the fine curatorial work by Carolyn Weekley brought out how deeply this body of creativity was shaped some might say deformed by Hicks's Quakerism.

Indeed, throughout his life Hicks struggled with, and against, his irresistible urges to paint. Late in life he wrote of himself: "My constitutional nature has presented formidable obstacles to the attainment of that truly desirable character, a consistent and exemplary member of the Religious Society of Friends; one of which is an excessive fondness for painting, a trade to which I was brought up."

If he was unsparing of himself, he was equally harsh about visual arts, of which he wrote acidly that, "If the Christian world was in the real spirit of Christ, I do not believe there would be such a thing as a fine painter in Christendom." Painting pictures, he declared, "appears clearly to me to be one of those trifling, insignificant arts, which has never been of any substantial advantage to mankind." He called it "the inseparable companion of voluptuousness and pride," adding that "it

has presaged the downfall of empires and kingdoms; and in my view stands now enrolled among the premonitory symptoms of the rapid decline of the American Republic."

The Peaceable Kingdom theme itself represented something of a compromise outcome of this ambivalence: it was biblical and perhaps thereby useful as a form of visual religious education. It also evidently helped him cope with the lasting trauma of the 1827 Separation. Hicks gave away most of the paintings, or used what little money they brought in to help finance his extensive travels in the ministry. Indeed, it was as a minister that he was known in his lifetime; thousands of people came to his memorial meeting, drawn by his renown as a preacher.

I commend this exhibit to any Friend interested in how Quakers have labored with themselves over the arts. The collection will be leaving Williamsburg shortly, headed for Philadelphia. From there it will travel, over the next two years, to Denver and San Francisco. Don't miss it!

This close exposure to Hicks's paintings came back to me several times during this past summer, while visiting Quaker artists of various sorts. At the Friends General Conference Gathering in Kalamazoo, Michigan, FQA again recreated the Lemonade Gallery, this time as an official part of the Gathering program. More than a dozen artists took part, in media ranging from quilts to photography, sculpture, beaded hangings, and various kinds of paintings and drawings. The Gallery was, I think we can say in all modesty, a substantial success, and seems on the way to becoming an annual fixture at the Gathering.

One feature at the Gallery was a set of 30 quotes about art from Quaker history, taken from Esther Mürer's larger collection. These were printed on gray card stock, and dispersed throughout the display in chronological order, beginning with George Fox. We intended them as conversation pieces, and since at least a third of them were more or less virulent denunciations of the arts amid which they were hung, the ploy seemed to work. There is much food for thought in this series, which we hope to see more widely disseminated, as a means of helping Friends come to terms with Quakerism's very mixed legacy of attitudes about the arts.

We also invited the artists to talk about their work, and several did. In these talks, Hicks's doubts were echoed in real time: I was struck by how reluctant some were to claim an artistic vocation. Take, for example, Jack Mongar of Millersville, PA, whose carved and polished wood pieces were favorites of our visitors. He repeatedly, even vehemently insisted that "I am not an artist," despite the presence of a table full of striking evidence to the contrary. Like Edward Hicks, Jack who said he was instead a retired scientist told of having difficulty being recognized for such "useless" activity, never mind accepting money for his pieces.

Nevertheless, because people kept wanting to buy them (four of the six pieces at the Gallery were sold), he finally set up a small gallery and sells the pieces but he insists that the buyers make the checks out, not to him but to a local hospice. This makes the pieces "useful," as fundraisers for a good cause. How Quaker!

Very similar attitudes cropped up at Baltimore Yearly Meeting in August, when a new Quaker artist, Jennifer Elam, discussed some of her recent paintings in an interest group. Jennifer, who was trained as a psychologist, is the author of a new Pendle Hill pamphlet, "Dancing With God," in which she describes a project that began as straight research into the relation of mystical religious experience and mental illness. However, as she was collecting and categorizing about ninety case studies, mostly of Friends, she found herself drawn to begin making a large number of brilliantly colored, often highly evocative paintings. She had no training as a visual artist, but was encouraged by the staff at Pendle Hill to follow her impulses.

Now Jennifer faces a series of issues she says she never expected to: people are exclaiming at the beauty and depth of her work; they want her to explain it; a few even want to buy it. What is this about? Does this make her an artist? Where is all this headed? Wonderful but daunting questions.

Finally in this summer travelogue, I want to mention a visit to a place where Quakers have their attitudes about one form of art very much in order: It's Friends Music Camp, which gathered again on the campus of Olney Friends School in Barnesville, Ohio for four weeks of intensive, dedicated music study, practice and performance. The site presents a paradox, in that Olney is creation of Conservative Friends, who have hung on longest to the ancient Quaker resistance to art. But while the camp maintains an unmistakable Quaker atmosphere—daily worship, business meetings, even committees—there's no dithering over the value of music to the spirit on the part of Director Peg Champney, her staff, or the threescore-odd campers. All concerned make it, play it, and enjoy it.

I've been visiting the camp each summer for a decade now, and earned my keep by reading stories to the campers. *My* stories, I might add; I go there to practice my writer's art. For each of the last several summers, I've made it a goal to have a new story to read, as well as the ones they call out to hear again (there is a high proportion of return campers).

This time I had a new Quaker ghost story, about a Vietnam era draft resister who is visited in prison by the wandering shade of a German Friend, who faced the Nazi draft a generation earlier, and well, maybe you can read it for yourself. I mention it here as a way of acknowledging that I, too, share some of the uncertainties that stretch from Jennifer Elam and Jack Mongar back to Edward Hicks and even earlier.

Most of my stories, whether I like it or not, have a clear pedagogical subtext; I guess I feel the same need to make them "useful," in this case as purveyors of snippets of Quaker history and struggle. Maybe that's one reason I like Edward Hicks so much I feel a kinship with him. I know it's part of what makes being in FQA so rewarding.

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page added August 2001

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #15, Fall 1999

THE FQA BOARD AT WORK. . . .

Chats? Business Meetings Online?

by **Esther Mürer**

The FQA Board has been experimenting with holding sessions online.

Our membership is international. Yet our shoestring budget makes it impracticable for members living more than a few hours' driving distance apart to attend board meetings. This means that, however much we wish it were otherwise, in practice decisions are currently made by a small group from Philadelphia YM. What to do?



In hopes of finding a solution, I put a chat room on my web site, "Quakers and the Arts Historical Sourcebook" Click on "FQA Chatroom and Message Board."

So far we have had three practice sessions. Alfred Muma in British Columbia joined us for one session, giving us hope that we can learn how to involve members at a distance. While we are a long way from making weighty decisions online, our experience may be helpful to other groups besides FQA. Here are some things we've learned so far:

Even without the inevitable technical glitches, online meetings are just as hard to schedule as live ones. Some people only have computers at work, some only at home, there are time-zone differences to consider, etc.

The way a chat room works is: you type a message in a slot at the bottom of the screen, press "Send", and the message appears in the chat window preceded by your login name ("Esther says: ...").

This can result in a jumble of disconnected messages, so we tried to work out an orderly procedure. We use "Over" to indicate that we have finished our message. We use "CP" (clerk please) to signal our wish to speak. The clerk responds ("Esther?") as a signal to go ahead. Then we type in our message, which can take quite a while. We have discovered that the process is admirably suited for worshipful waiting!

As for minutes: There is no way to copy and paste text from the chat screen; when the last person logs off, the text is gone forever. The recording clerk can take minutes in longhand, or open a word-processing window and switch back and forth. Notes must be taken before the recording clerk logs off at the end.

Our sessions generally begin with the clerk asking those present to suggest agenda items. Nothing very weighty, and in a session lasting an hour or two, we have yet to do justice to more than one or two items.

Lengthy reports are not practical, both because of the time needed to type them, and because messages in the chat room window seem to be limited to about six lines each. Reports should be e- mailed to participants in advance. (Sorry, we have no light on how to get people to read them in advance.)

It will take more practice and more experimenting before we feel ready to try substituting online meetings for live ones. Still, the chatroom should be useful for threshing sessions, committee meetings and the like. It opens up a number of possibilities:

- Farflung members could serve on FQA committees without being board members.
- Members wishing to discuss a concern with members of the board may ask us to set up a chat session.
- And, of course, if anybody wants to talk about their *art*, the chatroom seems well suited for worship sharing. If you would like to try this, email me for directions, and to reserve a time.

We plan to host a series of practice chats for any FQA'ers who are willing and able to join. I will be sending out notices about times to our email list.

I have just put up a **message board** on the same page. It is as yet untried, but I aim to post some queries to serve as beginning threads. You can post messages there, including feedback and questions.

Another small step in our ongoing attempts to help Quaker artists communicate. May it bear fruit.

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

[T&S Archive](#) | [FQA Home Page](#) | [Join FQA](#)

This page added August 2001