

Let the Little Bird Sing

by **Jennifer Elam**

Jennifer Elam's recently published essay on mysticism and mental illness, Dancing with God, includes six color reproductions of her paintings a first for a Pendle Hill pamphlet. Here is the story behind the paintings.

OVER THE PAST THREE MONTHS I have been introduced at six art shows as a Quaker "artist." I am in awe. I am awed by the mysteries in the way that God works in my life. I have never done art, yet here I am being introduced as a Quaker "artist." How did this happen?

I learned in second grade that there were those who had talent in art and those who did not. I tried to copy the flower just like the teacher told us to but I just could not do it right. I learned early that I was one of those who did not have talent in art. Instead, I focused on the academic world. Now I paint flowers and they do not look anything like the one I failed at drawing in second grade.

Before I came to Pendle Hill in 1996, I felt like I had a black brick in my chest. I could not breathe at times. I knew the feeling was about not living up to my potential, but I had no idea what was needed. After I enrolled in a class called "Explorations in Clay," I remember telling someone about that black brick and referring to it as a clay brick. Each time I made a pot that term, I felt as though a piece of clay had been pinched off from the black, clay brick. The sensation of the brick disappeared by the end of my time at Pendle Hill.

Our teacher, Sally Palmer, never gave us anything but positive feedback about our work. She seemed to value any expression of what came from inside us. Our work was not compared to anyone else's work nor to any other external standard of perfection. We were to express what was inside of us and what was inside of us was beautiful. She said that if it seemed ugly to us, it was probably not finished.

One of the most powerful exercises we did in that first "Explorations in Clay" class involved writing for seven minutes about God, Love, or any concept of a Higher Power in our lives. A poem came from the writing. We were then to take the clay and let whatever was to happen happen. My hands formed an image. I didn't know what it was. But I knew that I was not finished at the end of the assignment. I had to keep going with another ball of clay.

When class was over, I looked at the figure and it was very clear to me what it was. It was a pair of angel wings enfolding a head in despair. It was a very closed figure. The second figure was very open, as if Spirit energy were being invited in.

This assignment was the greatest experience I had ever had of feeling Spirit energy flowing through me and creating. The creation was not planned or directed by me. I did not have the skill to plan and execute the form as it came.

This experience left me with a prayer that God would work through me in that way in all of my life. I believe the mysticism project that I got involved in later that year was an answer to that prayer.

In the spring of 1997, I was first introduced to "paste papers." The medium (acrylic paint in paste) suited me. In clay class I had needed to make not just a couple of pots but I had to make a couple of hundred pots. Likewise, I had to make hundreds of paste paper paintings and am still making them. Once the creation energy was freed, the paintings poured forth. I was named "Paste Paper Queen" by fellow students.

AS THE CADBURY SCHOLAR during my second year at Pendle Hill, I collected the stories of other people's mystical experiences of God. As I collected the stories, the paintings came forth even more. Words from the stories came to be associated with the paintings. The color and depth suited the subject matter; the inexpensive cost suited my budget. In January of 1999, I had several experiences of powerful energy entering my body accompanied by wonderful healing images. They usually came in pairs, a soul image and a heart image. In one of the heart images, I saw my heart become an egg then slowly crack open. From the crack, my hands emerged. I made a series of four paintings that I entitled "Projections of a Life Reborn: Birth of a Ministry Among Quakers" to represent this experience.

During the spring of 1998, I taught art in the local prison. It was difficult to feel the oppression of that environment but once I got into the room with the women doing art, it was great. They lived in drab gray. They loved the colors in the paint and most of all they loved it when I brought the glitter. I watched many women move from a feeling of inadequacy or "I can't" to an excitement related to a feeling of "I can." They stole my heart.

In June of 1999, Pendle Hill published a pamphlet related to my writing project on mysticism. I felt quite honored because it was the first pamphlet in full-color and featured six of my paintings. The art received much attention.

That same month, the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts gave me a small grant to get the paintings framed that were featured in the Pendle Hill pamphlet. The stipulation was that I must show them. My first show was at Friends General Conference in July, 1999. As I sat waiting for my presentation about the paintings to begin, I was in awe of God's work in my life. Only a short while ago, if someone had suggested that I would be talking about my paintings to an audience, I would have been quite sure that they were mistaken.

Next I showed some of the pieces at Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in mid-July. Then I was invited to do an interest group at Baltimore Yearly Meeting in August. I asked the participants to find one that spoke to them and several beautiful poems resulted.

One very unexpected experience at both FGC and BYM was that some people wanted to buy my pictures. I was not prepared for that and just said no. In September of 1999, I had the opportunity to show forty-one of my paintings and to price them to sell if I chose to do so. I had accepted the paintings as an incredible part of my own spiritual journey but had not considered selling the products to others. It seemed like quite an implausible idea. But my friends insisted that it was an important way of sharing myself with others who get something from the pictures and have the money to buy them. Oh my! This was just a lot to fathom. Selling my art! Oh my!!!

I am learning to listen to the voice of God in its many manifestations. There are exciting directions for my life to take in service if I can just let go of my limited view and let the Largeness of God do the

leading. I am grateful for this evolution of events that has taken me to places far from anything I could have predicted or directed.

I am not ready to refer to myself as a Quaker "artist." I can express gratitude for this creative process that has opened as an expression of the work of the Spirit in my life. The image that fits is of a little bird singing and the singing gets louder with the colors of paintings.

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COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

In Memoriam: Mary Loomis Wilson

MY AUNT, FQA MEMBER MARY LOOMIS WILSON, died just before Thanksgiving at Foxdale, the Quaker retirement community in State College, PA. She was 92.

Mary (from now on I will call her Aunt Molly) joined Flushing (NY) Monthly Meeting in 1954. She subsequently belonged to meetings in Princeton (NJ), West Palm Beach (FL) and State College (PA).

She came to New York from the Midwest in the late 1920's to study painting at the Art Students' League, and continued studying there for many years. Always ready to encourage creativity in others, after her marriage she held art classes for the neighborhood children in her home on Long Island; later she worked with children at the Mercer Street Friends Center in Trenton.

She moved to Foxdale in 1990 and helped to found State College Meeting's Arts Sharing Group, whose queries have been a regular T&S feature since issue #5. She had a retrospective show at Foxdale in 1992. After that it became harder, then impossible, for her to participate in the life of the Meeting. I SUPPOSE I KNOW Aunt Molly's art better than that of any other artist. Her paintings of urban scenes and her sketchbooks filled with drawings of people on the subway have been familiar to me since childhood. From my teens I remember her books full of experiments with color done in oil crayons, and a pointillist pine tree which took all summer to paint, or so it seemed.

The setting in which I saw her most often was our extended family's summer place in Michigan. She saw to it that there were always lots of painting materials for the use of us children. The bedroom walls were papered with our artwork. Aunt Molly refused to direct us or advise us in any way, but was always encouraging. She wrote me years later:

What I don't think is kosher in teaching children's drawing and painting, is when they get rushed into adult standards and lose their creativity or lose confidence in their own way of seeing. [One should] help them open like a flower, not open them like an oyster.

When I was fourteen, and intensely into composing, Aunt Molly sent me a three-ring zipper notebook for Christmas. When I opened it, it turned out to be full of music paper twelve staves per page! My most memorable Christmas present ever.



AUNT MOLLY WAS THE OTHER QUAKER in my solidly Unitarian family. At the time she joined Friends I was a freshman at Oberlin, and sporadically attended meeting there. It made a great impression on me that Aunt Molly couldn't just join, she had to wait until they decided she was ready. I certainly got the message that membership in Friends was not a thing to be taken lightly!

I continued attending various meetings off and on over the years; when I began getting in touch with my mystical side in my late twenties, she became an important mentor and elder for me. (For those who know my "From Worship and Ministry" columns from the Central Philadelphia MM newsletter: Aunt Molly laid the groundwork for most of what I intuited there.)

In 1964 I went with her to meeting in Princeton. It was a totally silent meeting; by the end of it I was in such a state of ecstasy that the hour felt more like twenty minutes. Afterwards Aunt Molly and everybody else went around saying, "Wasn't that a good meeting?" My rational mind boggled, but I had experienced it too.

However, it was not until 1981 that I felt ready to apply for membership. When I wrote her that I was ready to take the plunge, noting that she had joined at almost the same age, she replied:

Yes, life began at 47 and is still beginning at 74. Isn't that funny? A person can keep growing at any age. The opportunities are continuing. I appreciate this dear gift of life and expect to use it. Hope not to waste it....



You know I'm happy that you want to try the Friends. I try not to count on it too much. I was a state of despair over the meaninglessness of my agnostic life when Ann Lowry said, "Mary here is at heart a Quaker"...

I'll hold you in the light. First I have to *be* in the light, which takes expectancy, will to be patient, time, doesn't come on order, doesn't necessarily happen to you when you want it to, comes sometimes when least expected....

Now I am thinking of that rug Aunt May crocheted, that stepped out and spoke to you, up at the lake. You discovered that it was a work of art that had a life of its own. I believe you'll find your spiritual home, and hope it will be with us.

About the rug: I had been reading her copy of Laurence LeShan's *How to Meditate*, and was practicing. At my feet was a small oval rug which my great-aunt had made out of old bathing suits in the 1930s. It had faded to several shades of gray. As I stared at it, the bits of gray began to dance. Enter Aunt Molly. I said, "This rug is alive." After staring at it for a while she said she saw it too. Enter her son, my cousin George. Aunt Molly: "We're having a conversation with this rug, would you care to join us?"

Everyone who knew her will remember her unique sense of humor—spontaneous, joyous, off the wall but never unkind, a sort of relishing the comedy of being human. If a person was the subject of the joke, the joke was always on *all of us*, not that person. Her humor was grounded in faith and in a fundamental acceptance of people, a sense of pervasive unity. From a 1995 letter:

Once in the past year some of us were talking at table about what is humor; sometimes it can be contrived and involve the ego, sometimes entirely spontaneous and I don't know where it comes from but it's healing (as if given to me to say) like something you describe with speaking in mtg., and it may surprise me—

At the time of her retrospective show she told me that until she was around eighty she had kept her Quakerism and her art in separate boxes. Yet the change in her art after she joined Friends is clear; it gradually becomes lighter, freer, more abstract, more joyous.

For me Aunt Molly provided living proof, over nearly fifty years, that art and Quakerism can be integrated, fused at a deep level. Had I not had her example I would not be editing *T&S*; I would not be a Quaker at all.



It strikes me with force how lucky I was. How many Friends, artists or no, can point to such a model of the integration of art and Quaker spirituality? Very few, I suspect. What has the dearth of such exemplary Quaker artists in the past meant for the Society as a whole?

Can we, as Quaker artists, have the courage to "be patterns, be examples"—to let our lives speak, as Mary Wilson's life spoke?

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Clerk's Notebook:

An Appreciation of Elizabeth Gray Vining

In her autobiography, The Quiet Pilgrimage, Vining writes of finding a direction following her husband's death in a car accident after four happy years of marriage:

In a small, cheap, paper-bound edition of Emerson's *Essays* that came my way that winter...I found a passage in "Spiritual Laws" that leapt out of the page to speak to me:

Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him. He has faculties silently inviting him thither to endless exertion. He is like a ship in a river; he runs against obstructions on every side but one; on that side all obstruction is taken away and he sweeps serenely over God's depths into an infinite sea.

My talent, I knew, was a small one, but not to be dismissed for that reason. In my early childhood I had confidently launched my little boat upon that river; now I must disentangle it from the reeds along the bank and try to reach the current once more.

by Chuck Fager, FQA Clerk

ELIZABETH GRAY VINING, who died on Eleventh Month 27 at 97, was an eminent figure among Quaker authors of the twentieth century. She was also a candid observer of many things, including both Quakerism and herself. Consider, for instance, what she wrote in 1939 for a compendium on *Contributions of the Quakers*, specifically the section on "the Arts":

This section, unfortunately, might almost be entitled: What the Friends Have Not Given. When they ruled music and decoration out of their meeting houses, the Quakers, being a consistent people, put music and art out of their lives too. So intent were they on worshiping God and helping man that they overlooked the healing and inspiring power of great music and great art....

Quakerism has produced scientists, as you would expect, for a scientist is one who gives his life to the search for truthQuakerism also produced saints, philosophers, philanthropists, reformers, prophets. Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps we should not ask for artists, too."

But it was not enough, certainly not for her. She also, by her own testimony, knew she wanted to be had to be a writer from the time she was a child. Her publishing debut came at the age of 13, with a story in *The Young Churchman*, for the princess-ly sum of \$2, and an encouragement from the editor to send more.

From then her life was marked out by four poles: her brief marriage; Japan; Quaker Philadelphia; and through it all, her writing.

Born Elizabeth Janet Gray and raised in the Germantown area of Philadelphia, she married Morgan Vining in 1929. Less than four years later, her husband was killed, and she was seriously injured, in a New York automobile accident. If her physical recovery was long, her emotional healing went on for the rest of her life. Forty years later she wrote of "the long slow assimilation of grief. Sorrow becomes a companion, a way of life. Grief and joy are opposite poles; joy and sorrow often walk hand in hand."

She had done teaching and library work when, in 1946, she was selected to be an American tutor to the crown prince of the Japanese imperial family; one of the stated requirements for the position was that the tutor be "a Christian, but not a fanatic." When Vining quotes this description later, one can see the sly grin; she spent nearly four years in this assignment.

As personally enriching as this Tokyo sojourn was, she returned to the U.S. in 1950 to discover that it had also made her something of a celebrity. "Oh, Mrs. Vining!" gushed one matron, on meeting her in Maine, "How wonderful to meet you! I have never been so close to royalty before." She published several books based on her experiences in Japan, and one of them, *Windows for the Crown Prince*, was a best-seller.

Friends report that even in her last years, around the time of her birthday a sleek diplomatic limousine would pull up at Kendal, and disgorge the Japanese ambassador, often accompanied by a large spray of sumptuous flowers, for a courtesy call on behalf of her former pupil, now the emperor.

GIVEN THAT QUAKER CONNECTIONS paved the way for her Japan, one might think Vining had one of those long Quaker pedigrees. But in fact she was a convinced Friend, who was drawn magnetically to meeting in Washington, DC after her husband's death, when her native Episcopal services proved no help. "It was the silence that drew me," she wrote, "that deep healing silence of the meeting at its best, when the search of each is intensified by the search of all....I found each Sunday just enough of acceptance, of strength, of inner serenity to carry me through the week....My searching, restless, arid heart was like a stranded boat which was lifted for a time on buoyant waters from an ocean beyond the boundaries of selfhood."

Once inside the Quaker circle, however, she steeped herself in the most Anglophilic Philadelphia-centered version of the faith, rarely straying from a circuit that included Germantown Meeting, the AFSC headquarters downtown, and Pendle Hill, with side trips to Quaker and literary locales in England and Scotland. She was a charter resident of the Kendal Quaker retirement community a few miles west of Pendle Hill, and spent the rest of her life there.

This focus turned up frequently in her work. Vining spent three years working intensively on a biography of Rufus Jones, the icon of Philadelphia Quaker culture (though himself an immigrant from New England). The book explores Jones's thought and work deeply, reverentially, and well; but from it one will get little insight into why Jones was so reviled, by so many, for so long, even decades after his death. The opposition, by Vining's time, came almost entirely from outside Philadelphia, and is thus only barely worth notice.

She also wrote about Jones's idol, John Greenleaf Whittier, a biography of William Penn, and a historical novel, *The Virginia Exiles*, about a group of Philadelphia Friends who were falsely accused of spying for the British and taken prisoner by George Washington's army during the American revolution.

She was not entirely uncritical of her adopted community, however. Listen to the narrator from her 1967 novel, *I Roberta*, fingering the way old-time Friends had turned the plain language, originally used as a blow for equality, completely inside out: "Some Quakers have a way, which I dislike, of saying *thee* to other Quakers and *you* to outsiders. If there's a roomful of Friends and non-Friends, they'll sort it out quick as lightning, *theeing* the sheep and *youing* the goats in the same breath."

BUT IF HER RANGE OF VISION was sometimes limited, her sense of vocation was always clear: she was a writer. "I am with Book as women are with child," she once said. Besides best-sellers, among her 25 books, *Adam of the Road*, for young readers, was a Newberry Medal winner in 1943.

Yet for all her dedication, she spoke of this career late in life with an appealing modesty: "That I have never been the writer that I wanted to be has not greatly diminished my satisfaction in the work of writing. Every book has fallen short of my vision for it...There must be many people like me...not first-rate writers, but...born writers, who write because we would rather write than do anything else, because we are fulfilled while writing, because in some obscure way we feel guilty when we are not...."

As a younger member of this writer's fraternity, I smile and nod at the clear-eyed wisdom and balance of this last comment. Friends are fortunate that our contribution to the arts is much more real 60 years after she commented on the lack thereof; and Elizabeth Gray Vining's long life of creative labor is one major reason for the improvement.

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From the Quaker Arts Archive

Music and the Inner Light— a Personal Point of View

by **Raymond Dodd**

This article was originally published in the 1965 issue of Reynard, the magazine of the Quaker Fellowship of the Arts in Britain. —Ed.

IT IS ONLY TOO EASY to project one's conflicts and uncertainties on to others, accusing them of a failing or confusion which in fact is one's own particular problem. If I say that there is a considerable number of Friends and other religiously concerned people who still retain certain feelings of distrust, emotional reserve and moral caution in their approach to music, perhaps I am demonstrating precisely this kind of projection in myself. Or perhaps, and this I shall assume to be the case, there are still such people and I am simply one of them. Incidentally, there would probably be more such people if the Q.F.A. did not exist!

One accompanying feature of such reserve, born of scruples, is often that "a priori" notions or prejudices of one sort or another make an honest response to music in all its variety much more difficult to come by. Consider, for example, the following:

Simplicity, when it removes encumbering details, makes for beauty in music, in art and in living. (from *Christian Faith and Practice*, No. 434).

This reads not like art criticism but rather as an irrelevant and confusing application of a moral idea to art. Possessed of such a notion about art one might find it very hard to relate it meaningfully to certain good pieces of music. Some kinds of musical composition proceed, in fact, by a process of accumulation of detail and elaboration: for example, many sets of variations. Or consider the following:

So we return to our Conviction that, unless matters of culture are more clearly shown to be vitally related to religion, an increasing element in life will stand outside of the religious sphere, and life becomes either more and more disintegrated or wholly secularised! (from *Christian Faith and Practice*, No. 463).

But some music cannot be "*shown*" to be vitally related to religion; other music perhaps may be by, for example, its relation to a particular text. The result is that those pieces that can be "shown to be vitally related" are likely by implication to be thought better pieces than those which cannot—a point of view which leads to complete critical confusion. Let us remember however that such attempts to justify music are entirely understandable, and were probably absolutely necessary, as part of the movement in the Society and in other groups away from the 18th and 19th century attitude of disapproval of music as expressed, for example, in the 1846 Yearly Meeting Epistle which speaks of music as "unfavourable to the health of the soul" and as leading to "unprofitable and even pernicious associations, and, in some

instances, to a general indulgence in the vain amusements of the world". (Quoted in the *Oxford Companion to Music*).

WHAT APPROACH THEN CAN WE MAKE to the question of the relation of music to religion or to the inner light? Perhaps a more fruitful alternative approach would start by assuming that musical activity of all kinds is *potentially* a worthwhile contribution to people's lives. If we specify in advance that music should be or do, or make general condemnations of kinds of music, we deny critical and creative responsibility.

At this point a parallel suggests itself between the activities of the inner light in the moral sphere and of the creative and critical activities in the artistic. In each case they show themselves in particular, concrete situations rather than in the power to make rules and conceptual generalisations. Just as we normally should not judge others, because we cannot enter fully into their particular situation, so a school teacher, for example, is in no position to condemn the current "pop" music if he has no experience of it or has not genuinely tried to understand what it's all about! When he's done that he might not, in fact, be quite so wholesale in his condemnation.

In his article "Ruskin on Music", Bernard Shaw quotes this advice of Ruskin's to the young English lady; "From the beginning consider all your accomplishments as means of assistance to others". Shaw countered like this: "I earnestly advise the young ladies of England, whether enrolled in the Guild of St. George or not, to cultivate music solely for the love and need of it, and to do it in all humility of spirit, never forgetting that they are most likely inflicting all-but-unbearable annoyance on every musician within earshot, instead of 'rendering assistance to others'."

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