

## An Arts Sharing Group

by Jill Powers, *State College (PA) Monthly Meeting*

Imagine an evening before the fire with a group of trusted friends who gather regularly to reflect on the joys and struggles of an artist's work. One of them begins by offering a query: When do you become aware that your work has taken a new direction? Does a shift occur after a sudden breakthrough, or is it the end result of a long evolutionary process?

The arts sharing group of State College Friends Meeting gathers in this way once each month in someone's living room. After the worship-sharing time, and whatever discussion it inspires, we might hear a chapter from a novel-in-progress, see a new sculpture, or listen to a song performed for the first time. The group might study a series of life drawings and hear the artist describe the challenges encountered and the decisions made along the way.

Our meetings always seem to illuminate something important about creating art. They also affirm the courage, and celebrate the craziness, of an adventure that would be more lonely, and possibly less productive, if we did not have each other.

The group began six years ago when a fiction writer in the Meeting read an article about such a group in *Friends Journal* and decided to give it a try. She joined with a musician friend to invite all the artists, writers, musicians, poets, and other creative people in the Meeting.

The arts sharing group met monthly in the library of the Friends Meetinghouse, and at first we had some difficulty in deciding how the meetings would work. Several ideas were tried before we settled into a worship-sharing format based on queries about the creative process. We also decided to start meeting in each other's homes, and this made the gatherings easier, and the connections between us much stronger and deeper.

We use a list of queries written by members over time, but more recently we share responsibility for the group by having the host for the evening have the opportunity to prepare a query based on a current issue or interest in their own life.

A writer in the group described the process in this way: "The importance of this group for me is the spiritual basis. The worship sharing allows everyone to have an uninterrupted time to speak; the quiet between speaking allows us to focus our thoughts." The deep listening that happens, both in hearing each other's response and in listening internally, often reveal aspects of our lives that we had not understood before. A musician in the group commented on his response to a query about the person who inspired him most: "I was surprised to realize that it was my high

school piano teacher, since I have had teachers who were better pianists since, but she made the difference."

Sharing our work is particularly exciting. We offer each other support and encouragement, rather than a critique. In reflecting on this emphasis, one participant expressed his appreciation for the group's focus on "the spirit behind the craft." Another described the group as "a safe and supportive environment to try out new material and get a sense of what is working and what needs work."

In this age of overspecialization it is refreshing and challenging for artists in various media to get a glimpse of the process of the other artists. It has also been valuable for all of us that the group's art sharing exists outside the traditional boundaries of academia and professions, and unencumbered by society's definition of art or artists.

In many ways the arts sharing group has become a small community within the larger community of our Meeting. The involvement of men and women, old and young, amateur and professional, as well as artists in a wide variety of media, offers a diversity of perspective that makes our meetings especially rich. The worship-sharing process puts us all on an equal basis and allows each person to speak from the heart about their experience.

Our gatherings are extremely open and flexible. Anyone from the Meeting can attend, and we also welcome people from outside the Meeting, as long as they are comfortable with the worship-sharing process. Some people attend only occasionally, while others depend on it every month over a span of years. The group includes those who are just beginning to explore an art form, those who only occasionally practice their art, and those who are professional artists.

A sculptor in the group summarized the group's meaning for him in this way: "The once-a-month meetings seem like an oasis, a time to reflect and share with others who have the common experience, the joys and frustrations of trying to make art. It serves as a motivator to have a place where others are genuinely interested in what the work means to me. It has helped me come to believe that my creative ideas are worthy of my attention, time, and effort."

From private musings to shared universal themes, from experimental works-in-progress to finished marketable work, from quiet tentative involvement to public success, the group has embraced all dimensions of creative experience. We have benefited deeply from the treasured relationships which have evolved through our sharing. We enthusiastically encourage other Meetings to consider starting an arts sharing group!

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COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

## In Memoriam: Winifred Rawlins

Winifred Rawlins, my favorite Quaker poet, died last month at the age of ninety.

I met Wini in the early 1980s, when I was a very new Friend. She used to come to Friends Center on Wednesdays to mend clothes for the AFSC, and often stopped in at the Yearly Meeting library, where I was cataloger. One Wednesday I was cataloging a book about grieving, and saw that the author had included one of Wini's poems. I hotfooted it down to the basement to show Wini my discovery. The poem was called "The Fire in the Snow." Wini told me it came out of an experience at Pendle Hill when she was Head Resident there:

I came by night where snow lay deep;  
All was transfixed in frozen sleep;  
I felt a sudden small wind blow  
And saw a fire burn in the snow,  
With tongues of crimson throb and leap.  
Who gave it life I could not know;  
Some hand had kindled its brave show;  
I felt its primal laughter steep  
My mind in happiness and keep  
Me gazing, with no will to go.  
Now as I sit and watch you weep,  
When knowledge fails and words are cheap,  
I'll make a little smoldering glow  
of tenderness, and bid it grow;  
When it begins to laugh and leap  
I'll light a fire in your snow.

I couldn't get this poem out of my mind. How could such straitness of form (only two rhyme sounds--aabba bbaab aabbab; a variety of rondel, perhaps?) contain such intensity of feeling? At that time I was always on the lookout for Quaker texts for art songs (Ned Rorem says there aren't any). So the next Wednesday I asked Wini if she'd mind if I tried setting it to music. Wini (taken aback): "Oh, my dear, of course not."

A few weeks later I performed the result for Wini and the library staff. For the record, the piano accompaniment consisted of two contrapuntal sets of parallel fourths. I don't think it was one of my more successful efforts. Wini was gracious, if bemused, and we had lunch together.

From that day on I was her devoted reader. She found poems everywhere; theology, nature, people, the news, the minutiae of daily life are all part of the Lord's dealings with Winifred Rawlins. Whatever her subject, it is transfigured.

Her first volume, *Winter Solstice*, was published when she was in her forties. Her last, *New Forest of Hope*, consists of poems written during the last two years of her life. Though her mobility was severely impaired, her ability to find poems in daily experience was not:

The vacuum cleaner's growling greets the day.  
Like prairie wolves on some cold wind-raked plain  
It howls its message to our common Sun.  
Its voice to us is noise, made by this curious toy  
Fashioned by human hands to serve our need  
Out of its atoms, with their little inner suns  
And circling cosmic dance.  
    &nbsp; p;      Far into space  
Its voice ascends: "I call from Planet Earth.  
Praise be to all that is!"  
Now it is silenced as the plug is pulled.  
Once more the rug is free of lint and dust.

The composer in me delights in her ability to enter into dialogue with poetic forms without being bound by them. Note how she captures the pulling of the plug by omitting the last two feet after "Praise be to all that is!" Her meters and rhyme schemes strike me as organic, growing out of her listening to what the poem wanted to be.

Altogether her poetry feels—and perhaps this is why she was so modest about it—like a byproduct of being attuned to the whisperings of the Inward Teacher at every moment. But attunement was inseparable from embodiment; *not to give those whispers poetic incarnation would have been unfaithful*. Her life speaks in her poetry.

It seems right to let Wini have the last word:

Sin is denying the quick murmurings of love,  
Faring on bleakly with habitual living, and forgetting  
The compassionate lifting of the curtain,  
The dear intrusion which for a fleeting moment  
Broke through the door to the dull understanding  
Like sunlight falling suddenly upon a hillside  
And gently withdrawing.  
Sin is to put aside as irrelevant  
The pure stirring of the mind which comes

Pregnant with thoughts like beautiful strange flowers  
Alien to the wintry landscape in which they uncloset;  
Alien these thoughts to the prevailing frost  
Of the mind's uncaring.  
Alien and yet familiar and precious forever,  
Speaking of all that the heart cries for its sanctuary,  
Confirming the twilight nostalgia of dreams.  
Love's pure intentions are flashing beacons of light,  
Fading and intermittent if rejected,  
But growing ever more constant to the obedient watcher,  
Guiding him to his home.

SOURCES: "The Fire in the Snow" from *Dreaming Is Now*, Golden Quill Press, 1963; "The Vacuum Cleaner's Growling" from *New Forest of Hope*, Pittenbruech Press, 1996; "Sin is Denying" from *Winter Solstice*, Island Press Cooperative, 1952. Used by permission of her executor.

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