

Poetry by Committee? Try Renga!

by Shelley Krause

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I love poetry, and while I was thinking about creativity and Meeting Weekend last month, I suddenly had a brainstorm. I could teach people about renga!

The renga is an unusual, collaborative type of poem (with multiple authorship), especially popular in Japan in the late 1600s. It normally consists of 36, 50, or 100 verses (or stanzas) contributed by a “team” of poets. Each successive poet uses the immediately preceding verse as a kind of cue, and then adds his or her own verse in accordance with traditional renga rules. The syllable pattern is predetermined: a triplet with the 5-7-5 pattern is usually alternated with a couplet with 7-7, a renga always starting with a triplet and ending with a couplet. (For simplicity’s sake, English-language renga writers can decide to have all verses follow the 5-7-5 pattern.)

Like haiku, renga poetry is contemplative poetry that focuses on nature, color, season, small contrasts, and surprises. Each verse usually registers or indicates a moment, sensation, impression, or drama of a specific facet of nature. People are typically somewhat rare in these poems, and when they

The Central Philadelphia Meeting Weekend Renga

Looking up to see
the top of an old spruce
tree—
is that fog or cloud?

Grey squirrel adds
another layer to
the cloud cover.

Sprawled under branches
beside the picnic
basket—
slumber comes easy.

Dream of a blue lake
a pocket full of pine
cones
sugary sand grains.

Cool morning rain in
winter
the ducks on the lake
seem happy to be alive.

The sun is hidden;
life stirs in the breath of
wind.
birds—no bees as yet.

Beginning their search
birds sing their territory
before construction.

do appear they are likely to be “part of the picture” rather than playing a starring role. The fun of writing renga is in seeing how one person’s ideas play out when taken on by someone else. The links between one verse and the next may be surprising or subtle, funny or serious, and in a good renga—as in a good Meeting—one often feels that the whole has a kind of grand design unanticipated by the individual contributors. Read ours and see what you think!

Shelley Krause, a member of Central Philadelphia MM, has taught courses in autobiographical reading and writing and lesbian literature at Germantown Friends School.

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Scallions march forward
memory of winter past
the ocean’s wind sighs.

Salt taste of shoreline—
I can hear the tide
coming,
then drawing away.

After the run
salt taste along my lip
the ocean in her eyes.

Of memories we gave
and surrendered to sand
tripping over the
horseshoe crabs.

The snow’s receding
the sun is brightening
life begins to quicken.

Flowers awaken
I leave footprints in the
mud
I forget my coat.



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Notes of a Longtime Gamester

I do not know any dimension to contemporary spirituality that concerns me more, nor do I know any more fundamental test of authentic mysticism or prophecy than that of humor and play. The prophet or social-justice type who lacks a sense of humor is dangerous to be around, for there is a hint in that lacuna of a dualistic rather than a dialectical individual. The mystic who cannot laugh is a bogus mystic intent on using mysticism as a contemplative crutch, just as the prophet who cannot laugh is a bogus prophet using “peace and justice” as a new moralism and orthodoxy test.

—Matthew Fox: *Wrestling with the Prophets*

[Shelley Krause's renga piece](#) takes me back to the cooperative literary games which were a favorite pastime in my mother's family. Doubtless Quakers would have once considered them fatuous frivolities, distracting the creature from the pure Life and from good works, and untruthful withal. But in an age where amusements are increasingly passive, high-tech, and commodified, the spirit of true play—the kind that opens a window on what lies beyond our culture's one-dimensionality—is in dire need of preservation. My family's games have certainly played a crucial role in enabling me to keep such a window open.

Well, then: we wrote limericks, each person writing down a first line and passing the paper to next person, who wrote the next line, and so forth:

I cannot tell ceilings from stairs,
Nor rhinoceroses from bears;
When it comes to distinctions
'Twixt births and extinctions,
I gets so confused that I swears.

Another favorite was **Definitions**, in which the first person makes up a word, the second person defines it, and the third writes a poem using it.

From this evolved an all-purpose game which could be tailored to fit the players' fancy: Pass out paper and pencils, decide on subject matter and steps, and go to it. Some of our variations:

Book reviews. 1) imaginary book title; 2) author; 3) first sentence; 4) jacket blurb; 5) excerpt from review.

Recipes. 1) name of dish; 2) ingredients; 3) directions.

Election campaigns. 1) name of candidate and party; 2) office; 3) campaign slogan; 4) League of Women Voters question; 5) candidate's answer.

Advertisements. 1) name of product; 2) picture, visual ad; 3) advertising slogan; 4) irate letter from consumer; 5) same letter edited into a testimonial.

Church orders of service. 1) Name of church; 2) minister; 3) hymn; 4) opening words, 5) congregational response; 6) kiddie sermon topic; 7) adult sermon topic, 8) announcement. In another version, played at a Unitarian church supper, we just wrote down the next thing that happened in the service until we ran out of steam.

As examples I mostly remember snatches—

The Church of the Spontaneous Perception. . . . A candidate for County Solicitor obfuscating about whether counties are best solicited from left to right, top to bottom, or alphabetically. . . . A recipe with the directions “sift dry ingredients 3 times, add eggs, sift again,” and after baking, “test for doneness with vacuum cleaner hose.”

Our cooperative poetry rarely got more exalted than limericks; but one poem, composed in 1947 (fifty years ago!) has become an enduring part of the family lore. It was written by eight of my relatives, going around the circle and each contributing one *word* per turn:

Evening

Nonfunctional stars in a saffron
dome,
Oblivious, summon the wanderer
home;
And mother—functional, chiffon, or
wise—
Drowns the kittens and blatantly
lies.
Even the waspies, zooming along,
Feel despondent at evensong;
And mud turtles murmur beneath
their biers,
Huffily mourning the bygone years.
Anemones lift their lymphatic limbs
And fold their petals in silent

whims.
Jaundiced, happy, untutored, calm,
The daisies wait for the atom bomb.

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Common traits of Quaker art

by Gary Sandman

In his book **Quaker Artists** Gary Sandman shows that, the longstanding Quaker antipathy to the arts notwithstanding, there have been Quaker artists since the beginning. Here is the conclusion of his essay "A History of Quaker Art":

And what kind of art were these Quakers making over the centuries?

Shifting from engagement to withdrawal to engagement in the different periods of Friends, Quaker art has widely varied. Outwardly, then, the art doesn't seem to share anything. It's as plain as Edward Hicks's oils and as complicated as Doris Peters' acrylics. It's as virtuous as Thomas Ellwood's poetry and as wild as Ned Rorem's diaries.

Two things only does Quaker art share.

One is that much of it examines the Friends' testimonies. In 1659, Edward Burrough wrote in his poetry about the testimony of truthful living in his envoi for *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore*; in 1837 Edward Hicks painted his testimony for peace in the "Peaceable Kingdom" series; and in 1985 Susan Stark sang a testimony to simplicity in *Rainbow People*.

The other is that artists have used the silent Meeting for Worship to go deeper within themselves. They've also noted the parallel between Quaker worship and the creative process, and this has helped them to be more aware of creativity. Time and again Friendly artists have described this. Dorothea Blom did it in *The Life Journey of a Quaker Artist*, and I know it from my own experience. And for those Friends who have not retained silent worship, Quaker commitment to the personal experience of the Spirit of God serves much the same purpose.

Beyond those two things, Quaker art is wide open. It rests in every field and takes any shape.

Friends were unclear in their testimony against art for most of their history. In the Founding Period, they were so busy trying to survive as a religious body that they didn't spend much time thinking it through. In the Quietist Period they were perhaps too comfortable to be able to look into it, either. Now, in the Modern Period, with its balance of involvement and settledness, Quakers are not only prepared to thresh through the testimony against art, but they are going forward with a testimony *for* art.

We now live in a great harvest time of Quaker art. Friends have come to understand that instead of a spiritual danger to people, art can be a spiritual harmony with God.

Quaker Artists (*Kishwaukee Press, 1992*) is available from *FGC Bookstore* for \$15 plus \$3.50 shipping.

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What Stops Me?

by Skip Schiel (from a letter to a friend)

“What *stops* me?” you asked, as I wander through the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

What stops me while I wander thru the vast world of art, and what prompts me to show a particular something I’ve made, and what motivates a particular photographic project? Here are a few musings.

Love, passion, great need. For instance, the elm tree 25 feet from my bed that I’ve photographed over the past 4 years began as I came to sense the tree being somehow with me and as I was looking for something to try out some techniques on. The tree willingly stood for this. Now, reflecting on why I continue to depict that tree, and show my art to others, I begin to realize the tree is mother, wife, lover, each separately and wrapped together. Dead mother whom I miss, former wife who slept with me nearly 25 years, and lover (Louise) who I see and hold not nearly enough. I love the tree for what it could be, while trying to see it for what it is.



I choose to show certain photos because

- A. they seem fresh,
- B. they might surprise people,
- C. they do something hard well,
- D. they could be nourishing to someone,
- E. they convey a message I feel is important to impart,
- F. they’ve touched me deeply, and
- G. (occasionally) because someone I trust has said “do it!” or I need to try this photo out on an audience.

Compare this rationale for choosing which photos to show with why you speak in meeting. Why choose those particular words, at that time, in that setting?

Do you believe that some great spirit impels you to stand and open your mouth? That when you stand and open your mouth the words are formed for you by this girding, articulating, and enlightening source?

I do, without equivocation. Though I have no good idea how to explain this phenomenon. Except to claim: a message for worship is an act of opening, making ourselves vulnerable, ready for whatever lightning might strike us—and through us to be imparted as wisdom, provocation, delight for others.

Here I am at the Museum of Fine Arts, meandering thru the halls, finding myself once again before Van Gogh, or Rembrandt, or DaVinci, to name a few of my favorites. They always speak to me. I suffer with Van Gogh, radiate with light with Rembrandt, and thrill with discovery with DaVinci. Always, or mostly always, I find others, artists and works, that stop me, where I've never been stopped before, and always, usually always, I walk right by sections of the museum that once enthralled me. Why?

Partly because “As you are, so you see”, as Blake put it. We bring our experience to the sensed object, contribute our life, where relevant, to that object's appreciation. I change, continually; thus the object changes. As you can't cross the same river twice, you can never sense the same art in the same fashion twice. All in flux, all impermanent.

Same with meeting for worship: a message so rich today might tomorrow sink to the bottom of memory, lost with other messages that—if I could dredge them up—might seem platitudinous, self-serving, dumb. Including messages I've uttered.

Skip Schiel is a photographer and a member of Cambridge (MA) Monthly Meeting. He led a workshop on “What is arts ministry?” at this summer's FGC gathering.

A selection of Skip's photographs may be found on his web site, [Photography of Skip Schiel](#).

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