



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

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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?

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