

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."

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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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