



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Art and Quaker Process

In this issue we have two pieces focusing on art as Quaker group process. Roger Aldridge writes of collaborative art activities in Sandy Spring Meeting, and [Joan Broadfield](#) describes the process of putting together the new FGC hymnal.

I was involved with the hymnal in its early stages, when we were trying to think why unprogrammed Friends need a hymnal and what would make it distinctively Quaker. Concluding that it would be as Quakerly as the process which produced it, we spent much of our time devising a framework in which Quaker process could operate. Joan, who was involved from beginning to end, tells what happened after that.

Art abounds in Quakerdom. Our social and educational gatherings commonly include cooperative games, collaborative pictures, role playing, journal writing, zen walks, singing....

When I was new to Friends I sang in a choir at the FGC Gathering. I had belonged to a Unitarian church choir, and was struck by how in a few days the Quaker group developed a sense of ensemble which it had taken the Unitarian choir years to achieve.

Then there was a Pentecost at Pendle Hill in which our singing turned into a glossolalia with joyous, abandoned improvising of harmony and then abruptly gave way to ten minutes of deep silence. And an astonishing "meeting for reading aloud" in which no one knew what anyone else had brought; we read out of the silence as led, and miraculously each piece pointed to the next, and the whole was much greater than the sum of its parts.

Here is a favorite axiom of mine: A religion is as vital as the art it generates. Our art is a mirror of our corporate spiritual state.

If this is so, then it is hardly surprising that the art which comes most naturally to Friends is cooperative, Spirit-led, and evanescent. It makes no distinction between amateur and professional. It is an art of process, not product.

The paradigm, the quintessential Quaker art form which gives rise to all the rest, is our meeting for worship. The primary aesthetic quality involved is *gatheredness*—and the deep sense of unity and richness which it brings.

This is a truth which I have known, and resisted, for years. The point of resistance is: Where does it leave the artist who has invested much in mastering a craft, whose work is often largely solitary, requiring lengthy gestation?

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This question isn't going to go away. I hereby write it on a metaphorical 3x5 card and post it on Joan Broadfield's easel of fears. Many of us have fears like that. But they shouldn't keep us from celebrating the ways in which our tradition (whatever our ancestors may have thought) is inherently art-friendly. Those ways are manifold and rich.

Many artists today are seeking ways to escape the trap of consumerism, to keep their art from being turned into commodities. Surely the unprogrammed meeting for worship is one of the least commodifiable art forms on earth. There's the old joke about marketing a series of blank tapes inviting the listener to "Worship along with [Rufus Jones, Douglas Steere, etc.]"

Might we have a word of healing and celebration to speak to artists outside Quakerdom, as well as to non-artists within? A word coming out of our tradition—of worship, group process, facing the Shadow and minding the Light together?

Veni Creator Spiritus.

To what extent is your art solitary? To what extent do you do art with others?

What are the tensions between the two?

What fears do they give rise to? How might Friends help?

What possibilities for outreach do you see in the intersection of art with Quaker process?

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