

Fiction and Spiritual Truth

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Writing down stories has a way of freeing us from the rigid illusions of mere ideas.

When I gave my reasons for joining The Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts, I mentioned that I was spending all my creative energy now writing stories, which may sound odd for someone who has spent thirty years teaching philosophy and theology. Subsequently, Esther Mürer asked if I would write a piece on this for *Types and Shadows*.

I discovered early in my teaching of undergraduates that I needed to use stories to make vivid and important the ideas that philosophical and religious texts put forth. For example, when I explained Tillich's concept of a demonic faith by showing students how a preliminary and finite faith was raised to an ultimate status in Nazism and McCarthyism, Tillich's idea became vivid to them. It was the story that did it. But if I merely positioned Tillich in the history of ideas, comparing and contrasting his definition of faith and its distortions with other definitions, it remained lame. The meaning of an idea for most people becomes clear when they see it in dramatic action.

At the same time, I was finding that some texts had a much more profound impact on my own life than others; Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* more than Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *The Journal of John Woolman* more than Barclay's *Apology*, for examples out of long list I could give. The dramas themselves seemed to convey meanings not fully explainable with ideas.

Later in my career, after I had come to teach at the Earlham School of Religion, I discovered a similar thing from the other end while teaching a course called Comprehensive Seminar.

In this course students in their last semester must solve problems presented to them. Each problem is a dramatic, conflict-oriented crisis that the teacher designs for a particular student. For example, a student wanting to enter retreat work with young people discovers in her crisis-problem an attempted suicide at a camp miles from immediate help; another wanting to work in religious publishing faces a Board of Directors that demands she reject a very good book from a gay author; a man wishing to pastor a rural Church finds the Clerk of Overseers, who is also a father of three children, arrested for growing marijuana among his rows of corn.

As the teacher of the course, I had to write up each individually created problem in a realistic and dramatic fashion. Each was an incomplete, one-page short story. The student had to enter the story and then complete it by describing how he or she would respond to its crisis.

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Writing these energized me spiritually and emotionally. The attempt to bring truth, spiritual discernment, moral choice and realism together worked at a depth of integration that the traditional theology class rarely approached. This discovery dovetailed with the many experiences I had had using stories to help people understand abstract ideas, but then surprisingly shoved me forward to ask seriously what this meant for my own work. I came to see that I needed to write stories as the next phase in my own journey.

Many motivations exist for a person to write stories. I think of two major ones.

Some people may want to write them as a spiritual exercise. They might take episodes from their past that produce strong feelings in them and write these out as semi-autobiographical short stories, in which they try to capture in action and dialogue what the episodes mean for them. The person's aim here would not be to describe literally an event, but to show—by inventing details where necessary—the meaning the person feels in the memory of the incident. As the meaning of the past becomes clearer, especially its repeating spiritual core, so also the meaning of the present and possibly the Divine lure into the future. These would be private stories for a private journal.

My purpose in writing stories, however, is not this first one. Other people, like myself, cannot satisfy what lures them inwardly without writing stories for others to read. Writing is an act of communication or a response to the Divine urge to create a thing of beauty. Personal experience informs the creation of these fictions, but the focus of attention is on the story itself and what it wants to be.

When I'm working on a story and it begins to come alive, it feels like a gift being given to me that I must then offer to others, much the way it feels when a message comes in Meeting for Worship that I must stand and offer. From my conversations with other writers, I think this must be a common experience. The effort to put into story what is experienced in the depths has the potential to blossom into art. Art evokes discovery and can draw those who contemplate it into a deeper spiritual journey.

I would like to see more Quakers writing stories. It is a way of showing the Quaker experience of life without proselytizing. In fiction, we can tell the stories of fictitious people with complete and total honesty, and let our readers take from these works of art what is there for them.

Indeed, in writing fiction, we may well discover for the first time what we ourselves really understand is true about life. Writing down stories has a way of freeing us from the rigid illusions of mere ideas. The Indian poet Tagore once wrote, "Truth in her dress finds facts too tight. In fiction, she moves with ease."

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