

Let the Little Bird Sing

by Jennifer Elam

Jennifer Elam's recently published essay on mysticism and mental illness, Dancing with God, includes six color reproductions of her paintings a first for a Pendle Hill pamphlet. Here is the story behind the paintings.

OVER THE PAST THREE MONTHS I have been introduced at six art shows as a Quaker "artist." I am in awe. I am awed by the mysteries in the way that God works in my life. I have never done art, yet here I am being introduced as a Quaker "artist." How did this happen?

I learned in second grade that there were those who had talent in art and those who did not. I tried to copy the flower just like the teacher told us to but I just could not do it right. I learned early that I was one of those who did not have talent in art. Instead, I focused on the academic world. Now I paint flowers and they do not look anything like the one I failed at drawing in second grade.

Before I came to Pendle Hill in 1996, I felt like I had a black brick in my chest. I could not breathe at times. I knew the feeling was about not living up to my potential, but I had no idea what was needed. After I enrolled in a class called "Explorations in Clay," I remember telling someone about that black brick and referring to it as a clay brick. Each time I made a pot that term, I felt as though a piece of clay had been pinched off from the black, clay brick. The sensation of the brick disappeared by the end of my time at Pendle Hill.

Our teacher, Sally Palmer, never gave us anything but positive feedback about our work. She seemed to value any expression of what came from inside us. Our work was not compared to anyone else's work nor to any other external standard of perfection. We were to express what was inside of us and what was inside of us was beautiful. She said that if it seemed ugly to us, it was probably not finished.

One of the most powerful exercises we did in that first "Explorations in Clay" class involved writing for seven minutes about God, Love, or any concept of a Higher Power in our lives. A poem came from the writing. We were then to take the clay and let whatever was to happen happen. My hands formed an image. I didn't know what it was. But I knew that I was not finished at the end of the assignment. I had to keep going with another ball of clay.

When class was over, I looked at the figure and it was very clear to me what it was. It was a pair of angel wings enfolding a head in despair. It was a very closed figure. The second figure was very open, as if Spirit energy were being invited in.

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #16, Winter 1999-2000

This assignment was the greatest experience I had ever had of feeling Spirit energy flowing through me and creating. The creation was not planned or directed by me. I did not have the skill to plan and execute the form as it came.

This experience left me with a prayer that God would work through me in that way in all of my life. I believe the mysticism project that I got involved in later that year was an answer to that prayer.

In the spring of 1997, I was first introduced to "paste papers." The medium (acrylic paint in paste) suited me. In clay class I had needed to make not just a couple of pots but I had to make a couple of hundred pots. Likewise, I had to make hundreds of paste paper paintings and am still making them. Once the creation energy was freed, the paintings poured forth. I was named "Paste Paper Queen" by fellow students.

AS THE CADBURY SCHOLAR during my second year at Pendle Hill, I collected the stories of other people's mystical experiences of God. As I collected the stories, the paintings came forth even more. Words from the stories came to be associated with the paintings. The color and depth suited the subject matter; the inexpensive cost suited my budget. In January of 1999, I had several experiences of powerful energy entering my body accompanied by wonderful healing images. They usually came in pairs, a soul image and a heart image. In one of the heart images, I saw my heart become an egg then slowly crack open. From the crack, my hands emerged. I made a series of four paintings that I entitled "Projections of a Life Reborn: Birth of a Ministry Among Quakers" to represent this experience.

During the spring of 1998, I taught art in the local prison. It was difficult to feel the oppression of that environment but once I got into the room with the women doing art, it was great. They lived in drab gray. They loved the colors in the paint and most of all they loved it when I brought the glitter. I watched many women move from a feeling of inadequacy or "I can't" to an excitement related to a feeling of "I can." They stole my heart.

In June of 1999, Pendle Hill published a pamphlet related to my writing project on mysticism. I felt quite honored because it was the first pamphlet in full-color and featured six of my paintings. The art received much attention.

That same month, the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts gave me a small grant to get the paintings framed that were featured in the Pendle Hill pamphlet. The stipulation was that I must show them. My first show was at Friends General Conference in July, 1999. As I sat waiting for my presentation about the paintings to begin, I was in awe of God's work in my life. Only a short while ago, if someone had suggested that I would be talking about my paintings to an audience, I would have been quite sure that they were mistaken.

Next I showed some of the pieces at Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in mid-July. Then I was invited to do an interest group at Baltimore Yearly Meeting in August. I asked the participants to find one that spoke to them and several beautiful poems resulted.

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #16, Winter 1999-2000

One very unexpected experience at both FGC and BYM was that some people wanted to buy my pictures. I was not prepared for that and just said no. In September of 1999, I had the opportunity to show forty-one of my paintings and to price them to sell if I chose to do so. I had accepted the paintings as an incredible part of my own spiritual journey but had not considered selling the products to others. It seemed like quite an implausible idea. But my friends insisted that it was an important way of sharing myself with others who get something from the pictures and have the money to buy them. Oh my! This was just a lot to fathom. Selling my art! Oh my!!!

I am learning to listen to the voice of God in its many manifestations. There are exciting directions for my life to take in service if I can just let go of my limited view and let the Largeness of God do the leading. I am grateful for this evolution of events that has taken me to places far from anything I could have predicted or directed.

I am not ready to refer to myself as a Quaker "artist." I can express gratitude for this creative process that has opened as an expression of the work of the Spirit in my life. The image that fits is of a little bird singing and the singing gets louder with the colors of paintings.

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA..

This page added August 2001