



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

In Memoriam: Mary Loomis Wilson

MY AUNT, FQA MEMBER MARY LOOMIS WILSON, died just before Thanksgiving at Foxdale, the Quaker retirement community in State College, PA. She was 92.

Mary (from now on I will call her Aunt Molly) joined Flushing (NY) Monthly Meeting in 1954. She subsequently belonged to meetings in Princeton (NJ), West Palm Beach (FL) and State College (PA).



She came to New York from the Midwest in the late 1920's to study painting at the Art Students' League, and continued studying there for many years. Always ready to encourage creativity in others, after her marriage she held art classes for the neighborhood children in her home on Long Island; later she worked with children at the Mercer Street Friends Center in Trenton.

She moved to Foxdale in 1990 and helped to found State College Meeting's Arts Sharing Group, whose queries have been a regular T&S feature since issue #5. She had a retrospective show at Foxdale in 1992. After that it became harder, then impossible, for her to participate in the life of the Meeting. I SUPPOSE I KNOW Aunt Molly's art better than that of any other artist. Her paintings of urban scenes and her sketchbooks filled with drawings of people on the subway have been familiar to me since childhood. From my teens I remember her books full of experiments with color done in oil crayons, and a pointillist pine tree which took all summer to paint, or so it seemed.

The setting in which I saw her most often was our extended family's summer place in Michigan. She saw to it that there were always lots of painting materials for the use of us children. The bedroom walls were papered with our artwork. Aunt Molly refused to direct us or advise us in any way, but was always encouraging. She wrote me years later:

What I don't think is kosher in teaching children's drawing and painting, is when they get rushed into adult standards and lose their creativity or lose confidence in their own way of seeing. [One should] help them open like a flower, not open them like an oyster.

Types & Shadows

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When I was fourteen, and intensely into composing, Aunt Molly sent me a three-ring zipper notebook for Christmas. When I opened it, it turned out to be full of music paper twelve staves per page! My most memorable Christmas present ever.

AUNT MOLLY WAS THE OTHER QUAKER in my solidly Unitarian family. At the time she joined Friends I was a freshman at Oberlin, and sporadically attended meeting there. It made a great impression on me that Aunt Molly couldn't just join, she had to wait until they decided she was ready. I certainly got the message that membership in Friends was not a thing to be taken lightly!

I continued attending various meetings off and on over the years; when I began getting in touch with my mystical side in my late twenties, she became an important mentor and elder for me. (For those who know my "From Worship and Ministry" columns from the Central Philadelphia MM newsletter: Aunt Molly laid the groundwork for most of what I intuited there.)

In 1964 I went with her to meeting in Princeton. It was a totally silent meeting; by the end of it I was in such a state of ecstasy that the hour felt more like twenty minutes. Afterwards Aunt Molly and everybody else went around saying, "Wasn't that a good meeting?" My rational mind boggled, but I had experienced it too.

However, it was not until 1981 that I felt ready to apply for membership. When I wrote her that I was ready to take the plunge, noting that she had joined at almost the same age, she replied:

Yes, life began at 47 and is still beginning at 74. Isn't that funny? A person can keep growing at any age. The opportunities are continuing. I appreciate this dear gift of life and expect to use it.

Hope not to waste it....



You know I'm happy that you want to try the Friends. I try not to count on it too much. I was a state of despair over the meaninglessness of my agnostic life when Ann Lowry said, "Mary here is at heart a Quaker"...

I'll hold you in the light. First I have to *be* in the light, which takes expectancy, will to be patient, time, doesn't come on order, doesn't necessarily happen to you when you want it to, comes sometimes when least expected....

Now I am thinking of that rug Aunt May crocheted, that stepped out and spoke to you,

up at the lake. You discovered that it was a work of art that had a life of its own. I believe you'll find your spiritual home, and hope it will be with us.

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About the rug: I had been reading her copy of Laurence LeShan's *How to Meditate*, and was practicing. At my feet was a small oval rug which my great-aunt had made out of old bathing suits in the 1930s. It had faded to several shades of gray. As I stared at it, the bits of gray began to dance. Enter Aunt Molly. I said, "This rug is alive." After staring at it for a while she said she saw it too. Enter her son, my cousin George. Aunt Molly: "We're having a conversation with this rug, would you care to join us?"

Everyone who knew her will remember her unique sense of humor—spontaneous, joyous, off the wall but never unkind, a sort of relishing the comedy of being human. If a person was the subject of the joke, the joke was always on *all of us*, not that person. Her humor was grounded in faith and in a fundamental acceptance of people, a sense of pervasive unity. From a 1995 letter:

Once in the past year some of us were talking at table about what is humor; sometimes it can be contrived and involve the ego, sometimes entirely spontaneous and I don't know where it comes from but it's healing (as if given to me to say) like something you describe with speaking in mtg., and it may surprise me—

At the time of her retrospective show she told me that until she was around eighty she had kept her Quakerism and her art in separate boxes. Yet the change in her art after she joined Friends is clear; it gradually becomes lighter, freer, more abstract, more joyous.

For me Aunt Molly provided living proof, over nearly fifty years, that art and Quakerism can be integrated, fused at a deep level. Had I not had her example I would not be editing *T&S*; I would not be a Quaker at all.



It strikes me with force how lucky I was. How many Friends, artists or no, can point to such a model of the integration of art and Quaker spirituality? Very few, I suspect. What has the dearth of such exemplary Quaker artists in the past meant for the Society as a whole?

Can we, as Quaker artists, have the courage to "be patterns, be examples"—to let our lives speak, as Mary Wilson's life spoke?

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