

## Queries for Artists

by the Arts Sharing Group  
of State College (PA) Monthly Meeting

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The questions presented here were published piecemeal in *Types & Shadows* over a space of three years beginning with issue #5 (Spring 1997). The lead article for that issue was Jill Powers' description of the State College [Arts Sharing Group](#). In it she explains that questions (or "queries") are written in an ongoing way by members of the group to form a basis for worship-sharing during meetings. The host for the meeting is encouraged to offer questions relating to what he or she is currently struggling with. Creating "queries" is seen as an organic part of process by which Quaker artists support each other.

Thus these questions are part of a work in progress. They are presented in sequence as they were published in *Types & Shadows*. No further attempt has been made to condense or organize them.

NOTE: In Quaker tradition, queries are questions for communal self-examination with reference to corporately agreed-on standards. These questions are not true queries in that sense. We use the word more loosely to mean a set of questions devised for our own encouragement, for consciousness-raising among Friends at large, and as a basis for discussion or worship-sharing.

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1.

When you begin a piece, where does the idea come from?

What are your sources of inspiration?

Are you open to making intuitive changes as the work progresses?

Do you listen for the still small voice as you work?

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2.

Do you have a working ritual, practices that you use to begin working?

How do they help you to tune into a creative mood?

Do they help you to overcome blocks or fears which inhibit your work?

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3.

Do you have moments while creating that correspond to your experience of the Inner Light during meeting for worship?

Do you feel that your work is guided or aided by the Inner Light?

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4.

Which part of your psyche do you try to express in your work?

Do you present your best qualities, your best self?

Is your work intellectual, spiritual, emotional, or is it a totality?

Is your work cathartic, a release of negative, dark impulses?

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5.

What value do you put on a finished piece of work?

Is it a byproduct of the creative process? A gift to be freely given to others? A commercial product? A treasure?

Is it food for your creative spirit? A humbling reminder of your present level of ability?

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6.

Have you ever had prolonged dry spells in your work, or periods where you have felt out of touch with your creative self?

Did you make a special effort to regain your former level of creativity, or did you allow things to take their course?

Did you learn anything from the experience?

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7.

Have you discovered hidden themes in your work that have gradually emerged as your work evolved?

Are these themes the expression of an inner voice?

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8.

How do you know when a body of work has come to an end, or when a working process has outlived its usefulness?

Do you make an intuitive decision to start afresh?

Can you tell objectively when your work has begun to become stale?

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9.

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?

Do you welcome a breakthrough or sudden development in your work?

Does it appear foreign; are you uncomfortable with it at first?

Do you recognize it immediately, or does it appear to be a new anomaly?

Is the arrival of a startling new development similar to the experience of receiving an embarrassing or difficult message during meeting for worship?

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10.

To what extent is your work a form of autobiography?

Do you draw your themes (directly or indirectly) from your past or from your present situation?

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11.

What role do you have, and did you have, within your family as an artist, writer, or musician?

How do your parents, siblings, children, or other relatives see your art?

What assumptions do they make about it, and about you?

Are you supported, tolerated, ignored, celebrated, misunderstood?

Do you share your work with them?

How much have you been influenced by their opinions?

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12.

Who were your mentors, and does their teaching still influence your work?

Have you ever felt the need to sever your connection to your mentors to establish your individuality?

Have you ever felt moved to honor or extend the work and teaching of a mentor?

What artists in your field were early influences and why?

Do you feel that there were others from a different discipline that were important influences?

Who was the most influential person in your development as an artist, and what would you say to this person today in thanking them?

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13.

What is your favorite medium with which to work, your favorite instrument to play, your favorite genre within which to write?

Does your choice of a creative form reflect upon your personality in any way?

Do the distinctive qualities of your "instrument" correspond to idiosyncracies in your character?

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14.

Do you have an internal censor?

Do you forbid yourself to communicate certain ideas to others?

Are these restrictions based on genuine moral concerns, on fear of what others may think, or on reconceived notions of what is decent and proper?

How do you decide what to share and what to withhold?

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15.

Do you have an overriding sense of craftsmanship or standard of perfection in your work?

How has this changed over time?

Have you had struggles in allowing a piece to change and take you in an unforeseen direction?

Does your sense of what feels right, your standard, bring you satisfaction or hardship?

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16.

What comforts do you find for yourself to ease the difficulties and frustrations of making your work?

What are your sources of strength that sustain and renew you as you continue to make your work?

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17.

How important is physical technique in the making of your work?

Is mastery of technique a worthwhile goal?

Does it give you the freedom to work as you wish, or are unique personality traits sacrificed in the pursuit of perfection?

Does perfected technique chain you to Perfection, or does it free you to fully achieve your vision?

Do you feel your creative expression is thwarted by technical limitations or do you find new avenues in dealing with these obstacles?

Do you prefer working in a comfort zone with known methods and materials or do you walk the line between what you know and don't know?

Do new ideas come more easily with new methods and materials?

If you could know one more technique or medium what would it be?

What are you doing to learn it?

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18.

What is your relationship to spontaneity in your work?

Do you gather the raw materials needed in an ongoing way, saving the ideas, the phrases, the fragments until they are used one day?

Or do you create out of the moment and the materials on hand?

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19.

Artists sometimes "lie" in their work to tell the "truth" (Van Gogh's colors are untrue in appearance but convey the truth of his emotional state). What are some of your "lies"?

What "truth" are you trying to tell?

The painter Susan Rothenberg says that when she paints she often does the first thing that comes to mind, even when it appears foolish or awkward. How often are you willing to risk embarrassment in your work?

Are you able to sometimes discard theory and work as the Spirit moves?

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20.

When do you begin to sense that a work may be a failure?

How much time and energy do you devote to salvaging a failing piece of work?

Rouault, the painter, was said to be very reluctant to sell his paintings. He wanted to keep improving them. Where do you draw the line?

When is an art work finished enough for you to say, "No more—I've done enough"?

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21.

How much does the desire for recognition motivate your work?

Would you continue to work even if you had given up hope for fame of the most meager sort?

Would you continue even in the face of the knowledge that your work would be lost or destroyed after your death because of its lack of monetary value?

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22.

Does your work provide you spiritual and/or emotional nourishment?

Does it fulfill an inner need?

Do you see art as a privilege or a necessity?

What is your idea of *beauty* in your art form?

Is beauty a criterion of importance to you?

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23.

In what ways have you sought feedback on your work?

How do you know when you are ready to show a work in progress, or a finished piece?

What have you had to overcome in learning to receive comments from others?

Do you find yourself putting more weight on the reactions of certain people, those in roles of authority in your field, for instance?

Has your attitude about receiving feedback changed over time?

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24.

Do you look at, read, or listen to the types of work that you aspire to in your own art form?

Or do you avoid the work of others for periods of time, preferring to look only inward?

Does the work of others you admire inspire or depress you?

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25.

What are the transitions into and out of a creative state of mind like for you?

Do you find it full of tension, or painful, or do you slip into it easily, joyfully, frequently....?

What is it like for you coming out of this creative state?

Is it hard to adjust, or can you make a smooth transition?

Are your transitions influenced by the seasons, family, ambitions, other work....?

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26.

What do you do with your finished work?

Do you display it, show it to friends, give it away, perform it, sell it—right away?

Or do you hoard it, display it only at home, or rarely in public, tuck it away, plan its future?

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