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What is the function of art in religious education?

The image educates where reason never reaches. With the desperation of our need, we must uninhibit and learn to use the language of the spirit.

by Dorothea Blom

Excerpts from a paper originally published by the Religious Education Committee of Friends General Conference. [undated -- given to the Philadelphia YM Library in 1977]

Both secular and religious training still emphasize the factual, literal side of life. They labor on the assumption that you train the intellect and the memory. If you pour in enough facts of the kind you think important, you "educate" a person. Much religious education gets bogged down in reducing Biblical material and concepts of God and the spirit to mere facts. Great effort goes into either trying to establish literal understanding or in rationalizing or explaining away what can't be "believed."

Whether "liberal" or "conservative," religious education often suffers the same malaise, the malaise of culture itself. The approach in the last few generations has bred many atheists. What is more, it has alienated many deeply religious and creative people from religious institutions. Albert Einstein insisted that pure science, art and religion all come from the same source. Paul Tillich says the new religious feeling of recent generations has tended to come outside of religious institutions, much of it in the best of modern art.

In most of history the major function of art has been to serve religion. Instinctively (when instinct is not discredited), humankind recognized art as a powerful educator of the depth and breadth of man, that measure in him "where words come from." The image educates where reason never reaches. With the desperation of our need, we must uninhibit and learn to use the language of the spirit. . . .

When Quakers rejected the arts in the 17th century, they swept aside much that was shallow and frivolous. Even religious art was mere illustration, confined to a portrayal of measurable objects in measurable space. Quakerism acted upon the same wisdom as the Hebrews three thousand years before, when these spiritual ancestors of ours rejected the figurative arts. On either side of them, in Egypt and Assyria, they saw the figurative arts serving decadence and glorifying ruler

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worship. For a hundred years now, modern art movements have rejected the community standard of art--lthough not art itself. They have struggled valiantly for more adequate visual languages, often failing, sometimes succeeding.

Quakerism's traditional disassociation with art puts it in a favored position for reclaiming art for religious purposes. Quakers, generally, have not equated the spirit and the Divine with sentimental and thin-blooded art. Quakerism is based on the assumption that the Divine may be known first-hand. Two most persistent symbols of religious reality, "the inner light" and "that of God in every man", stress the depths of man where new life comes through. Friends in London in the 1920s pioneered in giving several pages of their new *Faith and Practice* to the function of art in the religious life. Yet those pages never suggested bringing art into the Meeting for Worship. Quakerism has the advantage of never having been saddled with choice of art of one person or one generation, and we should keep this advantage. It gives far more freedom to grow with and in art.

Our greatest problem in incorporating art in our First Day Schools is one we share with the culture in general, religious and secular. Few teachers have a vital and growing relation to art. Art is like music: it asks much exposure and much open-ness, a gradual building of sensibility, a deepening trust of responses. Again, the very nature of Quakerism is favorable to this condition. Disadvantage can be transformed into adventure. .Quakers do not idolize authority. Quakers, more readily than many others, can be honest with children on the matter.

The teacher can say in effect:

"Our society specialized in building all sorts of wonderful things as well as some dangerous ones; while doing it we forgot a great deal about ourselves. We came to think that things that we can measure and weigh were more real than our feelings and our atti tudes about one another and our attitudes about the world.

"Now we need to re-discover these very important parts of life we forgot. Art has generally been the teacher in these matters, and we are going to explore what art can do. We need to because it will help us to know how best to use all the things we have inven ted. It will help us to like ourselves better, and therefore to like other people better. It will help us discover how alive life is. It will teach us how to love life better.

"You see, we discover that God isn't only long ago in Bible times or what other people talk about. We know God is speaking to us all the time in a sign language of the world He made, awakening new life in us with His language. I have to learn with you, because most people today, even adults, have to become like children and learn from the beginning."

In the teacher's favor is the human endowment for communication with art. The challenge lies in un-inhibiting what already exists. This profound longing deep within a person, this yearning to find a connection with life from one's depths: art is a link for making this connection.

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For communication with art helps us to see. Unless the artist in us functions readily—as it did for Jesus, St. Francis and George Fox, for instance— we actually *see* very little in life. We recognize, we identify, we evaluate: we see what we remember, usually distorting what we see to fit the pattern of memory. Ordinarily, we see with scales of habit on our eyes. Art teaches us, as Blake puts it, to see *through*, not *with* the eyes. We see from a depth within us, and therefore see the depths in things. Clive Bell said that art grasps the universal within the particular. This implies, not Pantheism, but the world as the language of God, wooing the human race, awakening that of Himself within persons.

The great artist may reject traditional concepts of God. Usually he isn't interested in concepts. He may, in effect, be like Jung when asked if he believed in God. He laughed at the question and responded: "Believe in God! I don't have to *believe* in God any more than I need to *believe* in the ground I stand on. I know it's there."

Dorothea Blom (1911-1991) was a member of Purchase MM (NYYM). She taught adult courses in art history and art appreciation at various places, including Pendle Hill, and wrote 7 Pendle Hill pamphlets on art-related subjects.

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