Creativity

[[NOTES: draft ready for YM review 1/30/2008
[[All new to NPYM’s Faith & Practice]]

(See also Recreation, Simplicity, Integrity)

Friends’ attitudes toward creativity (“bringing something into existence, producing something through imaginative skill”) have changed substantively over time, from outright rejection of the creative arts to uneasy acceptance to joyous embrace.

Although they appreciated skilled work and fine craftsmanship of many kinds, early Friends distrusted and rejected the literary, visual, and performing arts. Strongly influenced by Puritan thought, Friends often condemned arts and recreation together: reading fiction or looking at paintings could lead people into idleness and self-indulgence and going to concerts or plays opened the door for debauchery; concert halls, theaters, taverns, and brothels were linked together in Puritan society.

Early Friends saw [the arts] as carnal and self-intoxicating. Indulgence in sensory gratification, “vain imaginings” and useless ornamentation were distractions from attending to the pure Life. It was untruthful to tell a story that never happened, paint an imaginary scene, play a role on the stage, or sing songs (including psalms) expressing what one did not feel. (Esther Greenleaf Mürer, Beyond Uneasy Tolerance, 2000)

Early Friends were also wary of the creative impulse itself because it redirected one’s energy and focus away from God toward the work of one’s own mind and hands. This attitude began to shift to cautious tolerance in the mid-nineteenth century, when Quakers gradually began to give up their separatism and “peculiar” customs to mingle with the rest of society.

Today, most Friends see the creative impulse as part of being human and acknowledge creative talent as a gift from God, finding deep connection with their Creator as they create. Creativity is not limited to literature, music, and the other visual or performing arts, but comes in many forms. Friends have long appreciated the strong creative element in many practical crafts (for instance, cooking, gardening, woodworking). Creativity has a role in many fields: engineering, science, mathematics, computer programming, teaching, and design.

At its best, creative activity is not a distraction or an obstruction, but is a path into the Light. Creativity can in fact be a form of worship and witness, a leading and a calling, a way of speaking out of the Silence.

Quotations

Praise the Lord!
Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

... Let them praise his name with dancing,
Making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

Psalm 149:1, 3
My observation of human nature and the different things that affect it frequently leads me to regret that we as a Society so wholly give up delighting the ear by sound. Surely He who formed the ear and the heart would not have given these tastes and powers without some purpose for them.

Elizabeth Fry, 1833

It needs to be recognized that our Society has not escaped the tendency to narrow down spiritual action to certain prescribed ways as a substitute for the reality of the spiritual life. For example, while Friends have been among the pioneers of modern science they have, until recent years, repressed all taste for the Fine Arts. These, at their greatest, always contain some revelation of the Spirit of God, which is in the fullest harmony with our spiritual faith. In the fields of music, art, and literature, as in others, Friends may witness to the glory of God and advance that glory by their service.

William Charles Braithwaite, 1895

I feel that the creation of poetry is not unlike the upsurging of words in a Quaker meeting. First, heart and mind must be prepared - and the emotional and mental preparation for art is something which few non-artists realise. Then there is the waiting, perhaps for months, because poetry cannot be forced: it is an act of imagination, not of will ... and then at last comes the moment of certainty, accompanied usually by some physical action, and the words begin to flow.

Clive Sansom, 1965

The Holy Spirit can indeed restore us to health (or stimulate us to work well) through the medium of music as well as prayer or antibiotics! And why, indeed, should I be surprised that this is so? Creativity is the gift that we were given on the eighth day of creation. In naming and re-making the world we are co-workers with God, and whether we are making a garden or a meal, a painting or a piece of furniture or a computer program, we are sharing in an ongoing act of creation through which the world is constantly re-made.

Jo Farrow, 1994

Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing;
It sounds an echo in my soul:
How can I keep from singing?

#245, American gospel hymn, Worship in Song: A Friends Hymnal, 1996

In the way I view the world and my work, creation is a gift and a blessing. It comes from the Life-Giver, so our response as creators is to create something that is life-giving.


Advices

Exercise of creative gifts can be a spiritual discipline, requiring time, focus, patience, trust, love, and openness to the Presence. Like all other spiritual disciplines, creative expression carries the potential for spiritual transformation. In creative endeavors as in all else, Friends are advised to mind the Light and to take care not to outrun their Guide.

Many Friends are endowed with creative gifts; they are encouraged to develop and exercise them with awe and gratitude under the leading of the Spirit. All Friends are
encouraged to acknowledge and cherish the creative gifts of members and attenders in their Meetings.

Friends are reminded of the spiritual danger of either idolizing or belittling their artistic gifts or accomplishments. In a culture that glorifies individual achievement and worldly success, Friends are advised to “keep low” and avoid self-indulgence and pride as they follow their creative leadings, remembering that creative gifts should be a benefit to the community, not just to the artist.

Queries

Do we exercise our creativity in humility and gratitude to the Creator who makes our work possible? Do we recognize creation as a sacred act and creative ability as a gift from God?

How do we use our creative gifts to bring beauty, healing, and joy into others’ lives? To reflect the glory of creation? To work toward the Peaceable Kingdom?

Within our Meeting communities, how do we recognize and encourage Friends in the proper exercise of their varied creative gifts?

In encouraging each other, are we careful to acknowledge God’s role in guiding our faithful, fallible efforts?

As human creators, do we stay in right relationship with our Creator? Do we seek to lead, or do we follow?