A Seminar exploring the importance of Art and Creativity
The Fourth World Movement Learning Co-op
Dickenson County, Virginia, USA
April 19-25, 2009

When we were growing up,
even the people with a hard life called us poor,
but one thing couldn’t be taken away from us;
our music.
When I feel sad,
I can take out the guitar
and forget about everything

William C. Phillips
Times to work, create, or paint together allow us to get to know one another without the need to use words; words that sometimes are not easy to find or share. After getting to know each other through creating, we can sit to discuss together, often over a cup of coffee, tea, or good food. Artistic creativity and sharing food and coffee together create spaces where people of different experiences and backgrounds can find a common ground to build on.

Because art has the ability to change the way we look at life and the world, the Movement in its efforts to overcome extreme poverty needs artistic expression from those living in extreme poverty as well as those from the artistic community, working as individuals and in groups, in order to express our shared humanity.

Everybody is creative in his or her own unique way and everyone can be appreciated for that creative expression. People who live in poverty are often not able to experience that creative expression.

This seminar was the culmination of my time in Appalachia and encapsulated a lot of what I experienced there. The nature of Appalachia requires that one becomes a part of the community, not just for appearance sake because people would sense the dishonesty, but there is a real necessity to share of oneself whether through church, through community action or in my case, through music.

I admit that my first steps in this regard were scary but necessary. Although I have been a musician all my life, taking my fiddle along to Rose’s Diner in McClure for the first time was pretty frightening. Nobody knew me when I first walked through the door, I didn’t know any of the songs, I had no idea how to play bluegrass fiddle, I knew nothing about the etiquette required for playing at a bluegrass jam and I was just plain awful that first time. Despite all these things, I felt extremely welcome and comfortable by the end of the session. I am a shy person deep down and I almost did not take this first step which led to many more steps and inexorably towards the seminar. It makes me think that if this was difficult enough for me as an experienced musician, even with the welcome I felt, how much more difficult, if not impossible, might this be for someone living in extreme poverty. JF

In its broadest definition, ‘culture’ includes access to knowledge, artistic practice, creativity, and history. Culture contributes to the recognition of the dignity of each person’s worth and of each person’s usefulness to society. There are two fundamental principles which are inextricably linked.

- Access, for everyone, to humanity's cultural heritage and to all forms of expression and creativity
- Recognition of the contribution of the poorest to enrich our cultural heritage with respect to their unique experience

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People think it’s enough for poor people to have a roof over their heads and a piece of bread to eat to be happy. Shelter and bread are important, but art is essential. It gives meaning to life and makes you want to continue the struggle.

In 2007 the International Movement initiated an evaluation and planning process. One thousand members in 32 countries contributed to this process both within their teams and with other teams around the world. This culminated in an international assembly entitled “Together, Renewing the Movement’s Commitments in the World” which brought together 81 participants representing 26 countries. The result was a document containing the five common commitments of the International Movement, one of which is the following:

Reaffirming that culture, art, beauty and creative expression are essential for each person and population.

Art and creativity make it possible for people of different backgrounds to build relationships. It allows individuals to develop and to feel a part of community and society. It helps people succeed by allowing them to shape their own knowledge and ways of learning and by encouraging them to seek training and skills. One woman said in a preparation gathering before the seminar: “When art and creativity are shared between people of different backgrounds in urban neighborhoods or rural areas, they are contributing fundamentally to unity and peace. They make reciprocal giving possible and shine light on the universal values of every culture.”

I learned about the power of creativity and self-expression early in my life even if I did not understand what it meant until much later. That the Movement recognizes this power as essential for everyone, artist or not, has always been important to me and an integral part of who I am as a member of the Volunteer Corps. This power can manifest itself in the smallest of ways.

A Fourth World family member told me that the first time she was at Frimhurst she was invited to take part in an artistic workshop. She didn’t really want to but the person running it insisted that she try to do something with the lump of clay sitting inertly in front of her. After stubbornly refusing his persistent encouragement for a while, she snapped, and grabbing the shaping tool she angrily stabbed at the clay repeatedly before storming off. The following day she was surprised to see the victim of her rage, newly glazed and fired and set on the wall with the simple title ‘anger’. It was at that point that she understood who the Volunteers are and what the Movement represents. JF
Art, creativity and Appalachia

From these mountains came...
The vibration of Bluegrass...
We could hear the fiddle, the Banjo, the guitar, ...
Freeing your feet to flat footing...

If rocks could talk
The creeks flow, Southern Hospitality.
They could tell you about our unique style of creativity...
Paintings, Poetry, cooking, singing, woodwork, crafts,
The quilts of our lives...

Same story, same struggle, same fight.
From Reedy Ridge to New Orleans
From Clinchco to Quebec, France
From Trammel to Belgium...

Our mother land provides us with
Marvelous things...

It’s HELENE Flowertime,...
From these mountains came...

Appalachia has a reputation nationally and internationally for its tough, resilient, and resourceful population as well as its rich cultural heritage which is expressed through music, quilting, storytelling, crochet, instrument making, woodcarving etc. Appalachia is also known as a relatively poor and underdeveloped region.

The Fourth World Movement in Appalachia was already involved in projects concerned with art and creativity. It is involved in two after school projects running creative activities with children including music, knitting, arts and crafts, cooking and more. The Fourth World Movement Learning Co-op brings together people around music, quilting computers and other creative activities.

What better place to talk about art and creativity? What better place to bring people together from different countries, cultures and backgrounds to explore these questions?

During my time in Appalachia, it always amazed me how music and other creative activities brought people from different walks of life and completely different backgrounds together. In the bluegrass jam sessions that I attended, there might be a jobless guitar player with few prospects playing next to a successful businessman with everything he needs in life. The power of art and creativity breaks down boundaries between people like little else can. What an experience!
When I am writing a song, I don’t necessarily know where it will lead or what the end product will be, I sometimes don’t even know what the song is really about until later on but little by little it becomes clear. The seminar preparation was like that, a creative process in itself which grew out of all the conversations being had leading up to the event and then with the experiences that the participants had during the event itself.

Local people were involved in the preparation of the seminar from the outset in many different ways. The Quilting Circle made a beautiful, big quilt with the seminar logo on it and several smaller quilts to give as presents to participants coming from further away. Many local artists and artisans were filmed to illustrate the rich culture and fine craftsmanship of the region, others helped organize lodging, meals and travel logistics. Various meetings took place with local people about their experience with art and creativity which contributed to the development of the content and themes of the seminar. And of course, many of the above were participants in the seminar itself.

The seminar also provided an occasion to make new friends. The Clintwood Chamber of Commerce listed the seminar in its events for the month. The Career Center principal, the culinary art teacher and other Career Center staff members went out of their way to make us feel completely at home in their student center which proved to be ideal for the evening sessions, meals and the opening and closing events. It was moving to see the teachers, the principal and his wife helping to serve the food each evening and cleaning up afterward. Kids Central Inc provided a lot of arts and crafts materials and lent tables and chairs for the week.

Others groups were involved during the seminar itself such as a short play given by a local drama group and participants being welcomed by the Mayor of Pound at their weekly bluegrass jam session.

There was also a scrapbook that was put together containing a selection of written and artistic contributions for the preparation of the seminar from people in other places. This helped local people to see how others were preparing for the seminar and many were inspired to write and produce similar contributions of their own.

I felt that it was important to prepare with as many people as possible. I did not want to be the person who chose the content of the seminar. It was not difficult to find the time and occasion to prepare with local people and I did through small meetings and interviewing people at home. I soon realized that the challenge would be to make sure that the preparation with locals and with others further a-field did not happen in isolation of one another but that there could also be cross pollination of ideas between the two groups. JF
One thing that sticks in my mind was something I was told by a homeless man in Brussels, “I used to be on the streets in Paris, I used to draw on the ground and I really tried to draw the best I could, great elaborate drawings. This way people would not think I was stupid; people would think I was somebody, not just a homeless person.

Preparation with others from elsewhere in the US and around the world was carried out through an online forum thanks to Facebook events. Many Volunteers and supporters joined the site and got involved in discussions. Discussion boards were set up according to the subject of people’s contributions and conversations were had around each topic. In order to make sure that those who were not local could interact in some way with those who were local (and who did not always have access to a computer) a Blog was created which contained minutes of preparation meetings with locals as well as other things that local people had said. In this way local people had access to what others were saying through the scrapbook and other had access to what locals were saying through the blog.

All of these tools helped to bring out the four main themes of the seminar around which the participants would meet, talk and create.

I enjoy looking for innovative solutions to difficult problems and trying to think outside the box. I also love technology. The idea of a Facebook Open Forum, Scrapbook and Blog were born out of a necessity to bring together the ideas of so many different people from so many different places. These three tools were instrumental in the success of the seminar.
For an artist is essential that you have something to say. Learning art techniques is secondary; first we must have something to express, and I believe that each person has, no matter their experience with techniques. Using art and creative ways to express what each one has to say can be very liberating. This is why it is so important that our time together motivates us to put the conditions in our and others daily lives to be creative and artistic.

Participants
The seminar hosted forty participants from Belgium, France, Switzerland, the UK, the Netherlands, Mauritius, Canada and the US. Participants included members of the Volunteer Corps, supporters, Fourth World families and others who had a particular interest or expertise in relation to the seminar.

Opening
This public opening took place at the Clinchco Career Center on Sunday April 19 and was attended by about 200 people. Many local artisans brought along and displayed their works. A community dinner was had and the upcoming seminar was presented.

Theme Teams
Participants were split into four ‘theme teams.’ which organized their own time and working methods. Tools were given to each team; spaces to sit and talk and various artistic stations including paint, clay, computers, music, quilting, weaving and creative writing.

The Themes
- Art, Creativity and personal well-being and development.
- Art, Creativity and building relationships with individuals, organizations and communities
- Art, Creativity as a tool in the fight against poverty
- Art, Creativity and bringing people together, creating unity and peace

Discovering the local area
Outings including visiting local artisans, community organizations, nature walks and bluegrass jams.

Presentations
Participants had times to present who they were and what they do, either by group or individually.

Closing
This event at the Clinchco Career Center brought together members of the community and seminar participants who presented what they did during the week.

Originally, the programme separated small group meetings and creative workshops which was overcomplicated. Initially I didn’t have any ideas how to solve this. The answer came to me watching a late night news program. A former scientist, civil servant and now successful business man explained the concept of ‘whole brain’ thinking and how it has helped him throughout his careers. This was the last piece of puzzle my subconscious needed and out popped, as if by magic, the idea of the ‘theme teams’

The fact that we didn’t tell each team how to delve into their given theme was deliberate. Society usually builds an artificial barrier between the abstract and the intellectual (left and right brains) which we are too often apt to mirror such as when having times for serious talking and times for creation. Whole brain thinking is very powerful as the sum becomes greater than the parts, neither chained in cold logic nor wandering in vague abstraction. The process was initially uncomfortable for some participants as this is not a way in which sessions are usually organized. At the end of day one, a volunteer came to see me and said ‘We don’t know what to do; you have to tell us what to do!’ It was a big leap of faith for us to give such freedom but I was supremely confident that initial misgivings would disappear and that they would start to see how the intellectual can inspire the creative and vice versa. JF
This group represented a wide range of artistic disciplines: theater, mosaic, painting, music, writing, quilting, rock painting, etc. One participant spoke of her dream to create collective mosaics and to have the time to do it. The international make up of the group was highlighted when others spoke about being involved with making mosaics in Burkina Faso, France and Brussels.

A participant from Appalachia explained how people that are poor think they can’t create and he sees it as his mission to encourage them. Another said he had an electric guitar but no money for an amplifier: “I tried to use the walls of my house to amplify the music and it worked, I had to create and find my own way.” It also means that not having the means to buy material can make someone creative. “When you don’t have anything, you have to work with anything.”

The right choice of the ‘space’ to work in is where people feel at ease. It is good to choose and make this space together as a group and to make it ‘our space.’

“What pushes people to create, especially those who have a difficult life?” One participant answered: “It sometimes needs others to help you to “get it out”, another added: “Often people are not recognized and don’t have the possibility to express themselves and to share their art.” A musician added: “Not everybody dares to ‘step in’ (for example when you have a ‘Jam Session’). They might be afraid of people with more talent.” Because of the rough reality of daily life, some artists get depressed and can’t create.

It is important that people can be proud of their culture. A young person living in the community of Trammel, Virginia spoke of how some young people there are ashamed to say where they are from. Someone else reacted that it wasn’t specific for his region, but a reality for people all over the world: “Together with a delegation of the Fourth World Movement I met, in a meeting at the UN, a man from Africa: the guy could have been from my town, he had had the same experiences.” Creativity becomes very hard when poverty keeps people trapped. To overcome this situation, personal interaction is necessary to feel recognized as a human being.
A man in the USA who was once kept as a slave was freed and worked in a shoe factory. Once retired he lived on the streets and started to paint. For his art to gain recognition it took a photographer who discovered his work and invited him to hold an exhibition. The painter gained acceptance with his support not only for his art but also for his story.

A group spent a day working on a project. One said afterwards: “It was interesting to see how people, who never met before, helped each other to realize this project of a kind of a house we decided to build in the yard. We tried to bring into practice varied aspects of creativity. During our work, while building, we first had to understand each other and find a common concept. We had to encourage each other; step back from our own ideas to ‘mix’ them with other ideas; help each other, share the happiness of a beautiful effect that appeared when we ‘just did it’; support people when they are ‘blocked’, appreciating each others’ inventiveness; discovering different approaches to the theme, creating in silence, discovering how some work more with details and others with rough structures and discovering people’s different philosophies and histories that which inspire their creativity.”

The seminar preparation was more like writing a song than organizing an event. I’m a natural whole brain thinker which can be exasperating for others as it can seem that I’m dragging my feet, uninterested, not moving fast enough, not participating in discussion or decisions and making little progress.

However, what it does mean is that my natural way of approaching a problem, question or issue is to take in as much information as possible and to let that simmer in my mind for as long as needed until the answer, almost miraculously, presents itself. It might not be the most expeditious of processes but the answer is usually the best one. I have learned to trust this way of thinking and to develop the patience to allow time for this to happen. Nevertheless, the ‘aha’ moment catches me off guard every time! JF
A Tool in the Fight Against Poverty

I lived with my aunt because my parents died when I was young. She used to quilt. I used to pick up scraps. Now I quilt. We made a quilt for New Orleans.” A participant from New Orleans explained how this quilt was used in their work with children in a poor neighborhood: “We still have the quilt you made, and use it when we do activities with the children.

A participant from Belgium said: “I’ve seen terrible things, but I couldn’t take pictures. I wondered how to show society, the government, that these situations existed. So, I started painting. People say: “I live between four gray walls, and I become gray myself”. So, I paint with a lot of colors. Life is so hard, I don’t have an answer. The only thing I can do is paint, offer beauty.” He showed us pictures of his paintings, and told the story of the people he portrayed. One of the pictures was of a woman doing crochet. He explained: “It is a long story to tell you how I met her the first time, but as a child she had been kept in a chicken coop and had not learned to relate to other people. I started visiting her regularly. In the beginning she often got angry, about what happened in the street or in a store. Because of the regular visits, little by little she became more comfortable with other people. After three years, she accepted to come when I invited her to the People’s University in Brussels. This is a place where people in poverty meet and think, with others, about their lives and society. When we came into the meeting room and she presented herself, the others clapped and at the end of the meeting the chairperson gave her an enormous bouquet of flowers. The next morning, when I visited her again, I saw the flowers lying on the floor and asked: “Don’t you like flowers?” She said: “Yes”. I looked around in the room, and realized that she had nothing to put the flowers in. So, I went outside, found a bottle, and put the flowers in it.”

In my freshman year in college we painted a mural about the Civil Rights Movement. Right now I teach children to play tennis. It is creative: starting with children who can’t hold a racquet and getting them to really play.
The group thought about how they were involved in the fight against poverty and how creativity can be a motor for change. It is necessary to understand how art can be an important tool in expressing creativity. One participant was involved in restoring houses for people who have a hard life: “With the housing groups we hope that the work that they do on folks homes will improve their living conditions....make their homes warm, safe and dry....and make them proud of their homes....We want the groups to do the best job they can do....we know they are not professionals, but we want them to take pride in the work that they do for folks they are working for and with, and that what they do looks nice.”

Everyone painted something that had been said; a mouth, representing stories they had told; an ear, for stories they had heard; a miner’s helmet, for the importance of local stories. Around these, a winding road for the journeys we take. One painted “the patchwork of my life:” using quilting patterns: “nine patch quilt”, “log cabin”, and “postage stamp.” Another painted the couple who started the anti-drugs project. Another painted Trammel because of the positive things happening in the community. Another painted a Mandala with a butterfly in the centre. It represents wholeness, openness, relationships and color in our lives and sharing our color with others. The butterfly is freedom; freedom to be, to move and to fly. The next day the group used the themes of the paintings to design a quilt with the seminar logo.

One of my ‘aha’ moments was the flexi-lunch. There just didn’t seem to be enough time in the day to fit everything in (theme team times, presentations, outings and visit etc). The idea of a flexi-lunch solved the problem by combining lunch with something else. Each day the participants could sign up for lunchtime activities. Thursday for example there was a choice of visiting a local instrument make, discovering a local free health clinic or a chance to have a go at hunting for morel mushrooms, a favourite local pastime. Lunch was scheduled over two hours to allow people time to eat or pack a lunch and to be able to take advantage of the activities. Participants were of course free to fill the time as they wished: relaxing, playing music, reading, walking, sleeping…. JF
Bringing People Together from Different Backgrounds and Experiences.

This team hoped that the benefit of bringing people together would be expressed through interaction and shared experiences. They knew that creating as a group of people from diverse backgrounds would be the challenge and getting to know one other not only through words, but also through expressions of art and creativity would be important.

A participant from France explained that she had been part of a Movement painting workshop since 1996 and a member of a singing workshop. Another worked with a project called the Maison des Savoirs (house of learning) in Brussels where they would invite people living in poverty to come to create with others. A mother and daughter from Clinchco, Virginia explained that her daughter works at a prison in the area and is planning to go to school to become a counselor for inmates at that prison. The mother told us about the community organizing she does as part of the Appalachian Woman's Alliance. She recognized many similarities between the Appalachian Woman's Alliance and the Maison des Savoirs.

The group spoke about how they incorporate creative expression in their lives. One spoke about a neighborhood in Paris where he found a café where people who live in a run-down hotel gather. He returned there regularly to make drawings of the people and gave the drawings to them. He said that he was searching for a way of moving forward with the people at the cafe through using art. He asked, “What do we do, creatively and artistically, how can that bring different people together?”

One participant said that the Movement “brings everybody together, for peace” and that: “being an international organization and able to organize international gatherings further opens and enriches an exchange of views.” One participant spoke about learning, through her participation in the seminar; to have patience for things she had never had patience for in the past, such as making a basket or quilting. Another said that she had not expected the type of loose framework that we worked in during the seminar, and that it threw her off balance the first few days.
The group worked outside on a large canvas, creating a collage using paint, magazines and pastels. To prepare, each person started drawing. Everybody passed their drawings to the person next to them who added something and around the circle the drawings went. At the end they had eight collective drawings which they transferred to the canvas. When it started raining one member of the group chose a bright yellow saying: “It’s rainy and dark outside, we need to make a bright yellow sun to bring some light.” One other explained: “We didn’t speak much together, but spent time creating and sharing what we created with one another.” Another said: “We experienced, in a certain way, the theme of the seminar: “art and creativity bringing people together from different backgrounds and experiences”.

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One participant said that she didn’t feel comfortable when asked to do something that was unfamiliar to her, like painting or quilting. The conditions would have to be right in order for her to feel at ease. “When yesterday I picked up a paintbrush I had to think of what it would be like for people like me to do something for the first time.”

Each ‘Theme Team’ had a reporter. These individuals arrived a few days prior to the seminar to learn about how the seminar would run and what their roles would be. Their purpose was the following:

- To record what the group got up to (take notes, photos etc.)
- To act as vis-à-vis with the preparation team (start of the seminar)
- To answer any questions
- To explain the process and get the group started if needed

Reporters did not take part in the work of the ‘Theme Teams.’
Building Relationships with Individuals, Communities and Organizations

The group explored “What is a good life?” They worked on a large canvas attached to the barn with acrylics and chalks. Some had never painted before. The next day they spoke about what was needed in life and why culture matters. “It’s not the years in your life but the life in your years.”

Does creativity take you to unexplored places within yourself? “Yes, it allows you to be vulnerable. In new relations we risk rejection, acceptance too. We are exposed. In college I wrote poetry and shared it with friends. They liked it. But then I couldn’t write for five years after. I realized the process allows the deepest part of oneself to emerge.”

“The biggest fear for me is to face myself, but it is through creativity that we speak of ourselves to others. When you share your drawings, colors, music etc. you really speak of yourself. You don’t lie. others can see things in you with their own sensibility. So, our creations are first of all for us, to reveal ourselves”. Talking about art as a way of relating to individuals and groups, we first must always start with the art in ourselves. “We cannot avoid ourselves.”

Someone who attends the Learning Co-op explains what it means for her to have a place like this in the community: “I met the team at Binns Counts in 2002 and fell in love. They showed me things I wanted to do... I was there to learn in every class. The team wanted us to help and participate in any way we could. My mother is sick and I had other things I could have been doing, but they wanted us to help them as well. It means so much to our community. We’re not poor, but they have enriched our lives.” Another person added: “What is poor, is it money...? I was ignorant of computers and now I can turn them on and
There is a general attitude that rural people are not considered as smart as city people, but this is proven to be wrong time and again. “In the military, you find out fast that there is no such thing as a dumb country boy”. People who live in regions or neighborhoods with bad reputations are sometimes seen as stupid or violent. In Toronto, there was a lot of negative publicity about a neighborhood where one of the participants paints. The area was portrayed as violent. A twelve year old girl who lived there asked him: “Are you afraid to come to my neighborhood?” Stereotyping people and neighborhoods prevents people from meeting one another. The teasing or humiliation associated with accents can lead people loose their accent in an attempt to try and fit in. But this can engender frustration within us and towards others. “But, could anger also be a source of artistic expression? We all want to feel comfortable about being around others.” Someone added; “The inner beauty is what counts for me”, and another: “I don't care what others think, I have to be myself.” One of the participants who hardly ever traveled explained: “I’ve never visited other countries and I had a stereotype about what people elsewhere would be like. But here meeting people from different countries, I see that we have similar backgrounds, some of the culture and

I never dreamed I had a talent. Until I came up on the Mountain. I saw many people from different countries. They had traveled near and far.

Across the ocean, through valleys, rivers and the countryside. There I found my myriad of talents. Each superior to me. Space to expand. Space to be.

- BUT -

Open minds. Open hearts. Learn to trust. Trust ourselves. Trust others. Your note, your color is awaited. By the symphony of the world.

“My kids don’t want to make quilts like I do and my grandma did. Our elders, especially in rural areas, have practical knowledge, like how to grow food, but the knowledge, like artistic quilting, is not always recognized by younger generations. Does the older person always have to be the one to teach the younger one? Younger generations will have different ways of expressing themselves and one wondered: “Why not have kids to teach what they know to older people, use our creativity to help kids to become teachers. Older people think it’s a young people’s world and younger people think there is nothing out there for them!”

Local people were amazing. Many of the participants stayed with local people for the week or in accommodation provided free of charge. Each day, many local participants arrived with cakes and snacks for the day. We got the most amazing welcome at the town of Pound bluegrass jam. I introduced everyone and where they came from. Local people, being always friendly and curious, welcomed everyone with open arms and a million questions. Mayor Jackie (the diminutive and soft spoken septuagenarian town administrator) addressed the crowd at the end to say, with tears in her eyes, that it had really been a privilege to welcome everyone to her small town. JF
There is an attempt to impose norms on art and creative expression. These narrow, rigid norms impede free expression. "I get more energy when I see someone who is not in that 'normal range'". It's the same for intelligence. Some intelligence tests do not reveal the range of people's abilities. On the other hand these tests sometimes reveal forms of intelligence that we had not been aware of in ourselves or others.

There is a fear of rejection when we choose to show our talents. Some are not comfortable saying, "I am a painter," because it sounds like bragging. But it also devalues someone to say, "I paint a little bit." Someone asked: "How can we get over comparing ourselves or imposing standards on ourselves? Creativity or talent is different with each person. But we don't want to "fail" for something that is important to us. It's not right to compare. If we dig into our soul and our heart, it's ours, there's no need to compare." Someone else reacted: "I know there is something wrong if people say it's beautiful or not beautiful. It is what we give of ourselves which is important."

"My best music is when I am in my den alone. Something comes up that I can't replicate. Is it vanity or fear that keeps me from trying to recapture that creation in front of others? Fear of rejection might keep me from playing this created piece in front of others." Someone added: "Seeing or hearing other people's work gives me inspiration and plants seeds." Another said, "I want to pass the love I put into a quilt on to someone else."

"In my country, when I was with people that had a very hard life, they didn't care what I wore, but they were more like: 'Will you stay with us?' What does it mean to stay with very poor people? I am here at this seminar to better understand this." Another person reacted: "It's interacting with people that is good. When I talk to others and take part in what their life is, I forget... And when you're sensitive to others emotions, they will open up to you." One spoke of the time involved in being with people, paying attention to them, to what they say. "In a way you forget about yourself, or..., you find yourself!"

Poetry and artwork in different forms can enable people who don't feel valued to see themselves differently. "There are incredible transformations when kids see that they have something of value to offer. Fairness and recognition is what kids want. The kids getting D's and F's need our attention." An example was given of people who are retired and feel useless which leads to the question: "How to whet people's appetites for the arts?" Some of the group continued discussing this question while others were playing the fiddle and the saxophone.
“Sometimes people are trapped into trying to prove by doing what others think they should do. That’s the opposite of freedom! This seminar is also about ‘to be true, No games’. Very poor families tell us: “don’t play games.” I like to be dependent on others to help me see what is true or not.” One said: “Why do we do things for the less fortunate? Is it for a ‘thank you’ or just because it needs to be done and it’s in our heart?” Someone from Appalachia explains: “We prepared a lot for this session and before we said we don’t want thanks, but we appreciate it when it happens. The people here in the neighborhood also want to give. A relationship is asking them to give as well. That’s equality.”

“In music, if you take just one instrument it can be beautiful, but it can also be dull. Then when you put another instrument—the drums, bones or a dobro, it becomes even more beautiful...in poetry, it’s a collection of sentences and when it comes together you get that overall picture... with Art it’s the same. We need lots of color to express ourselves.” During this session when we create together it’s the same, one explained: “I’ve liked the collective part of this process, someone throws a thought out and then we agree...it’s an agreeable process.”

Local people have many skills, but it is difficult to develop them and become professional. “The area is impoverished and it is not easy for artists here to sell craft work to locals. People look at it and figure they can make it themselves at home!” Art may also be seen as something not directly useful, even though creativity is everywhere: “Our generation in Appalachia (50+) had to use their imagination. We never bought toys, we had to invent games. Even now, we don’t have plumbers or electricians nearby so we have to try to fix things ourselves. People have to invent what they need.” Someone spoke about efforts being made in the region to address the economic and social importance of art: “To boost the economy we have started museums in the region, crafts centers and organized musical events. Music attracts and brings people together. But the places are too dispersed and we can’t always make a go of it.”

So many moments and little space to elaborate: Playing music at Rex’s house, built with his own hands and still half finished, with a builder in the group worriedly eyeing the floor supports when the dancing began and the house started shaking. An inexorable hour of uphill trekking finishing in the view on the left (with an amazing cave halfway up). Impromptu jam sessions with a hodgepodge of instruments and styles. Dancing with students from the special ed class of the career centre. Eating a second dinner on Friday night at the Nicklesville bluegrass jam (my leaving party). Chocolate dipped strawberries from a wood-turner. Fantastic evening meals at the Career Centre.
Is it possible to evaluate or put conclusions to an event such as this or indeed to any similar gathering?

We can read what the participants said, we can look at the photos of the week to get a sense of the atmosphere, we can look at the objects that they created but this only tells us a part of the story. The true evaluation and conclusions for the seminar are within each of the participants and differ from person to person. It is impossible to say what each person took away for themselves, the shared experiences, the projects that will be born in part from the week.

If we are to create a new, just society, then art and culture must have a role, as always, in the evolution of that society. In fact I really think that Art and creativity is the common way for everybody to be and to live “fully” his own live and openly in the community with the others.

Jason French, Seminar coordinator.