

Memorial Minute for Arthur Coffman Wolfe
November 2, 1930 – December 28, 2017

Art grew up in a very Presbyterian family that regularly attended church during his youth in Tenafly, New Jersey, and during summers in Cold-water and Benzonia, Michigan, where the family attended the Congregational Church because there was no Presbyterian option. Art's paternal great grandparents were Presbyterians who left teaching at Spingler Institute in New York City to begin another women's seminary in Montclair, New Jersey; his grandfather taught at Presbyterian Park College in Parkville, Missouri; one uncle was a Presbyterian missionary in Yucatan and another, especially revered, was a Presbyterian medical missionary in French Cameroon. In addition, Art was frequently with his father's cousins, who became or married Presbyterian ministers. Later his younger brother also pursued the ministry, mostly academically. This explains the problems Art faced when, from at least the time of his mid-teens, he increasingly questioned his family beliefs. During college his weekly letters to his parents often included his developing religious thoughts, which conflicted with their rigid faith. Art kept on trying to convince them to think more broadly, but his mother was particularly resistant and extremely upset when Art questioned his belief in God. To his parents' credit, they were considered radical activists, did lots of work for the UN, and provided hospitality to Norman Cousins, the Enrico Fermis, and many others, particularly physicists concerned with the effects of nuclear energy.

About to be drafted and knowing that his local draft board would not permit him alternative service, Art had to decide whether to go to prison for years, certainly more than the two required for military service, or to do his military service as a conscientious objector. Even the latter was unacceptable to his mother, especially. As the oldest child in his family, Art was always a diligent, cooperative son who tried to please his parents, so this was a particularly difficult time for him.

Art and I (Shirley) had separately discovered that the Oberlin Friends Meeting Quakers matched our beliefs. We had been good friends for only a brief time before Art wanted to finalize his major decision about the draft. I agreed to accompany him for an afternoon with Quaker Dorothy Kinsey. I would deem this the most intense period of Art's spiritual growth. He was also concerned to decide upon his philosophy of life before graduation from Oberlin. There were ongoing discussions with a close group of students who shared his concerns. Most were involved with the YMCA, for which Art held many roles, among them representing college Y's for nine states. He was also influenced by AFSC summer programs, during which he stuffed miles of sausages for Armour's during a Students in Industry program in Chicago when he joined the AFL and learned about back-of-the-yard laborers and unions. Another summer involved basic patient care in a mental hospital in Logansport, Indiana, during an AFSC program. Eventually, after a graduate year at Earlham College, Art served as a conscientious objector in the U.S. Army Medical Corps.

At Earlham, Art made lifelong friends among the students; one of them, Max Heirich, was with us when we spoke our Quaker vows to one another during our mostly Quaker wedding in a Congregational Church in Kirtland, Ohio. By the next morning we had arrived in Ann Arbor, in time for Friends meeting in Lane Hall; we were on our way west, where we became active in the Tacoma Friends Meeting. Fall 1955 found us back in Ann Arbor as grad students and regular Meeting attenders and part of its active youth group. At the Meeting's recently purchased house on Hill Street we scraped plaster from basement rooms and cleaned out debris. During the next four years, in Micronesia, we became members of Wider Quaker Fellowship and were acquainted with peace church activists spread over tiny islands in an area as large as the USA. Much later we became part of meetings in the Bonn/Cologne area, in Berkeley, in Adelaide, Australia, and in Manitou, Michigan Preparatory Meeting.

In fall 1960, we returned to Ann Arbor and the Meeting with our young daughters and resided for four years in UM's North Campus Family Housing. This pleased the Dunhams, who lived nearby. In 1952 Arthur Dunham had met with Art in hope of mentoring him to a degree in social work. Dan and Dorothy Kinsey were neighbors, and Janet and Ken Southwood and children arrived from Malaysia. By 1962 Walt and Nina Scheider and Murray and Mary Evans had moved in, along with some others who came to Friends Meeting from North Campus.

Art was immediately attracted to the Meeting Co-op, for which he was adviser from 1961 to '64. He managed to combine his academic studies with many hours devoted to the needs of the Co-op residents and became well acquainted with them for over a decade. A fire in a resident's room, started when a curtain blew against a bare lightbulb, caused some major disruption but thankfully no injuries. In 1965 Art began to share his adviser role with a Student Life Advisory Council, which he convened in 1969-70.

Art served on the Property Committee from 1974 to '84 and on the Finance Committee for at least 35 years, including some as convener.

At some point and continuing through last spring, he became responsible for the Meeting's insurance, always seeking the most Quakerly and affordable.

From 1989 to '92 Art was on the Nominating Committee, and from 1997 to 2000 on the Personnel Committee. He was Representative to the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund from 2012; the NCPTF was initiated in 1970-1971 at the home of David Bassett, who first met with Art and Fran Eliot to begin developing the proposal.

Art served on the Jackson Social Welfare Committee for over 25 years from 1991, always meeting with Representatives of the Unitarian/ Universalist Congregation to appropriate funds to support First Amendment Rights. It was Eldon Hamm's assistance to the Jacksons that inspired this fund.

Art enjoyed his work and connections with area AFSC projects, particularly with Barbara Cartwright, Ralph Kerman, Homer Chance, and the Moultons.

In 1980, when Shirley was asked to serve on Ministry and Counsel, she suggested that she should become a member of Meeting to do that. This surprised Friends, who assumed that she and Art had formally joined years earlier. Shirley wanted Art and her to join together, but Art felt that he was not sufficiently "mystical." After considerable thought and encouragement, both of us joined the Meeting on January 18, 1981.

Our oldest child, Nancy, recalled that, when the membership clearness committee came to our home, she anticipated a grilling on our religious beliefs, but the committee, including Mabel Hamm, merely wanted to provide a joyful, long-delayed welcome.

In the early 1970s or earlier, the Meeting compiled lists of members and attenders by neighborhood, hoping that they would get together for friendship and to discuss their social and religious concerns. Amazingly, our Burns Park Fellowship Group, whose core members included the Bassetts, Minks, Hefners, and Wolfes, continued to meet every third Sunday evening until about 2010, when deaths and departures depleted the group. Near the beginning Cynthia Kerman tried and failed to get the group to focus on an agenda, but its longevity was likely because it provided a space for relaxed and free discussion among trusted friends.

Always physically active, Art was still playing tennis at age 85 just prior to being diagnosed with metastatic prostate cancer. His loving family took turns helping with his care during months of challenging health issues. In November he wrote a final farewell to friends around the world, sharing his hopes for a more just and peaceful world. A memorial celebration was held at the Ann Arbor Friends Meetinghouse on April 21, and another will be held at Crystal Lake on August 11.