

A SPIRITUAL WORKOUT WITH THE REVEREND HOWARD FINSTER

It was a spring day in May, in one of the most beautiful spots in Virginia - high up in the Blue Ridge Mountains at Mountain Lake. "These are all my suits," Howard Finster said, gesturing toward the closet in the tiny apartment Virginia Tech had given him while he conducted a four-day Workout. "Brother Boo gave me the one I've got on [a russet suit of corduroy]. I wear it to do the Workouts, kindly like a professor. And this is my painting suit [plaid polyester]. And now, this one - it's my best suit [sober dark pinstripe]. My wife, Pauline, got it for me. I'm wearing suspenders with all of them, because she says they're the latest thing."

When I asked why Pauline Finster had not accompanied him to the Workout, he said, "Well, she's shy. She's like a Indian - likes to sit off by herself and stir a pot of beans."

Howard Finster is an artist who allows those around him to "pass through creation" any way they can by participating in the fertile and ecstatic process of art. He arrived prepared. In the trunk of the old white Chevy belonging to a student who had driven him, were Christmas cake tins full of beads, pennies, pieces of mirrors and tiles, trinkets for later festooning the concrete pyramid he would teach students to construct in a joyous collaboration outdoors. He also took from the car a long, battered cardboard box containing his "dimensions" - hand-drawn pounce patterns of paper - some of which were huge - he'd brought to share with everyone. They were of Jesus and people in the Bible, inventors, Presidents, Pop legends, angels and animals. In the Workout, students would be using these, cutting them out in plywood with jigsaws, then painting them with Howard's own blend of oil paints mixed with white tractor enamel to make it stretch - a highly economical invention - the product of his years of "making do" in Appalachian

poverty.

Howard Finster's Workouts are part of his spiritual outreach to students and other interested people in communities where he visits - an extension of his days of pastoring churches for forty years. He cheerfully tours colleges and universities, traveling miles away from his native Summerville, Georgia bringing his message and example, though he would prefer to stay at home.

Home includes a multi-tiered church he constructed without a blueprint - a combination church/art gallery where he still does some preaching - mostly funerals and weddings of close friends. Also on the property is a studio building and various other out-buildings and houses for his wife, children and grandchildren, many of whom are artists. There is also a four-acre theme park, Paradise Garden.

Paradise Garden is a blinding spectacle of mirrors mosaiced onto concrete walls, and small buildings and shrines. Large signs hang down where the Holy Bible is printed "verse by verse." Cut-outs in concrete of significant people: prophets, Presidents, Pop icons rise from the ground like tombstones. On this site is also a concrete snake mound, a tower made entirely of welded bicycles, and many other assemblages and constructions made from discarded TV's. In fact, everything in this "paradise" is made of junk, shaped by Howard's hands into art. Hands so large, they resemble baseball mitts, his wedding band seems buried in flesh. These big hands have healed and labored nearly a lifetime.

According to many reports, he was first called to produce sacred art while fixing a bicycle one day in the repair shop where he made his living. Dipping his finger in some white paint, he pulled it out and saw a face. He heard God say, "Paint sacred art." But I can't even draw, he thought. His first model was George Washington, copied from a dollar bill. From then on he was an artist. He embedded the tools from his bicycle and TV repair business in a walk in "paradise" to mark the event and never looked back.

On another of the walks in Paradise Garden you can find one of many of Howard's self-portraits with the testimony: "I

began painting pictures in January 1976 without any training. A person don't know what he can no [sic] unless he tryes[sic]. Trying things is the answer to find your talent." Howard Finster truly believes the written word is sacred - "more powerful than a sermon or TV," because it can be read any time by those who find it. The first art he made was for Paradise Garden so he could "preach without having to be present." Now most of those paintings have been stripped from the garden, sold to avid collectors, or housed in museums. Howard's work is in great demand. His major complaint is not being able to fill all the orders he gets.

At the Workout, Howard got everyone to gather around him, so he could do a demonstration, giving minimal instructions, then he turned everyone loose and went off by himself to work, singing. Hours later, he had gotten cold outdoors, so he retreated to his room for quiet reflection. Various pop bottles he'd fished from the trash were lined up on a card table ready to be painted. On one he began by painting the earth and sky in bright, complimentary colors of chartreuse and purple, using his hand for a brush. Then, with a delicate sable brush dipped in black paint, he found things in the emptiness. Tiny figures emerged from the void: dogs, cats, a man on horseback. Trees began to grow on the horizon. The purple sky became filled with shooting stars, angels, and what Howard calls "peeping clouds" with faces that appear to observe earth from a Heavenly perspective.

Howard Finster's presence has changed the lives of many students, art patrons; everywhere he has friends. He's been commissioned to create record album covers for bands such as the Talking Heads and R.E.M. He has cut record albums himself, spinning tales, memories of simpler times, making up songs, accompanying himself on the banjo. He does bird calls, though he doesn't know which birds they are. He had written an elaborately illustrated book about Heaven. But the most remarkable thing about him is the prolific abundance of his works, now numbering well over 6,000. Each is signed, dated and numbered, with the exact time, to the

second it was finished, conveying the subliminal message that this moment is ours to fill - that life is right now, ongoing, ever-present and challenging. Many art critics worry that numbering implies he knows when he'll stop, but for him the numbering is an acknowledgment of the infinite, not fatalism. This endless, limitless abundance reassures that creation is everpresent and always possible.

Howard Finster, the extrovert, vitally connected, generates spiritual awakening to all he touches. His aim is to "bring out the hidden man of the heart." This aim is much more generous than that of the competitive art world. Where many artists would fear appropriation, Howard uniquely gives himself away, freely. "I preach 24 hours a day from [my] heart without charge," is his motto.

"What would you have done in life had you been able to get more education?" I asked him. "I would have been a doctor," he said thoughtfully, "but," he added, "I do think there's a reason I'm not college-educated." Stripped bare of formal learning, Howard Finster demonstrates by example what a person can do, guided solely by faith.

By the end of the Workout, Howard had painted the very chair he sat on, all the pop bottles, several mountain rocks, and a metal garbage can. He had also managed to do 2 or 3 of the big plywood cutouts, and he wrote a poem to commemorate the Workout, miffed when no one would correct his folk English. The students completed the pyramid, adding a small plastic pill box, containing a dollar bill, for luck. He wrote inspirational messages and Bible verses on each person's cut-out. "Run the race of life with patience," was one in particular which lingers in my memory. At the close of our last day, after a rousing outdoor banjo sermon which moved everyone to tears, nearly a hundred brightly-painted animals and people, made by Howard and his new friends were propped in the sun to dry, standing like silent prophets, washed by holy light.

ends.

by Susan Hankla
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NOTE: This Howard Finster Workout was sponsored jointly by the Jargon Society and The Virginia Tech Art Department. An exhibition of work produced by students and Finster during the Workout was first exhibited at the Squires Gallery at Virginia Tech, then traveled to the Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts at Center-in-the-Square, where it is temporarily housed. If you would like to have the exhibit come to your area, contact Ray Kass, c/o Department of Art, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA 24061, for further information.

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Born in 1951. Since 1973 has been a traveling poet-in-the-schools in Virginia, through the AIE program, sponsored by the Virginia Commission on the Arts. She is also an exhibiting visual artist, and has published many essays and articles on Contemporary American Folk Art, including co-editing Sermons In Paint, an in depth catalogue on the work of visionary Howard Finster, Appalachian folk artist. She has published two chapbooks of poetry. The most recent, I Am Running Home, published by Burning Deck Press in 1979, gained mention in the Pushcart Prize V, Best of the Small Presses. Mill Mountain Press published her first chapbook of poetry in 1975. Her poems have appeared in Artemis, Boys and Girls Grow Up, Burning Deck Anthology, Film Journal, Gargoyle, Hollins Critic, Intro 5, Laurel Review, Mill Mountain Review, New Virginia Review, Open Places, Permanent Press, Poetry Northwest, Richmond Arts Magazine, Richmond Quarterly Review, and Southern Poetry Review. Her fiction has been published in Commonwealth, Michigan Quarterly Review, and is in American Signatures (Nine New American Writers), an anthology published by a Danish small press, Kaleidoscope; New Virginia Review (September '86), and Fiction '86 (by Gargoyle). A graduate of Hollins College and Brown University, where she took her M.A. in creative writing, she was a finalist in the 1985 Virginia Prize for Fiction, sponsored by the VCA and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, where she was just recently a fellow. +1987