LIKE BEANS AND RICE

by Alan Steinberg

After twenty-five years as a production potter, Alan Steinberg is now focusing on one-of-a-kind works and teaching classes and workshops. He hikes, gardens... and writes. He can be reached at:
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"I am not someone who writes." That was a lie I told myself for more than twenty-five years, the visible scar of a wound inflicted by a fierce college poetry professor intent on defending the gates of academic professional excellence. My long history of weekly bicycle trips to and from the local library with baskets of books came to a crashing halt. In the ensuing decades I neither read nor wrote for pleasure, especially poetry. The pen was mighty enough merely to pay the bills.

And yet our stories always seek a way to be told, and so I soon encountered the world of clay thanks to a void in my senior year schedule. I was shortly to join a small group of clay guerrillas, leaping down into the below-ground window wells of the college ceramic studio late at night, opening the bars that guarded the windows, and working into the wee hours, while a strategically placed sheet of cardboard over the window kept our presence secret. I slept little that year, sometimes in lecture classes, spending endless unnoticed hours on the wheel.

Nine years later, having accumulated additional skill, I quit a tenured elementary school teaching position to take my shot at earning a living by the work of my hands. All during that time there were occasional teachers and stacks of books and magazines, as well as other struggling potters, to help me through the inevitable rough spots. In the end, it was the clay itself and the process of working through my own body that were my primary teachers.

Sometime in the late seventies I stumbled upon *Finding One's Way with Clay* by Paulus Berensohn, in which he shared his feelings about having his work labeled "therapy" rather than "art." He writes:

> I began to relax about this when I discovered that the root of the word "therapy" is to "cure." To cure, not in the sense of making well something that is sick, but to cure in the sense of to ripen. To ripen as the seed ripens into the fruit, as the child ripens into the adult, as our voice ripens into our song.[1]

There it was, in plain English: the work that had swallowed me alive had been my therapy, my ripening. I began to look at what my hands had wrought as a language, as real as

spoken or written language, a communication first and foremost from my self to myself. It was a silent language that bypassed my intellectual brain, speaking straight from and to the emotional center of my "mind," smack-dab in the center of my chest.

Verbal language, and its somewhat visual cousin, written language, are strongly cognitive in quality, critical for the formation of concepts. The language of touch is associated with the heart, and our verbal language bows to that truth. When we are moved emotionally, we say we feel "touched." Humans vary as to which of their senses is their dominant mode of experiencing the world.[2] Visually dominant learners say, "I see your point." An auditory-dominant learner might remark, "I hear what you are saying." A former U.S. president, possibly touch-dominant, was often known to say "I feel your pain."

Born a Libra, I strive for balance in my work and life. The armor I'd built against reading and writing began to crack in the spring of 1998 as I hiked twenty miles into the depths of Escalante Canyon in southeast Utah, with a group of men I had known for many years. I soon found myself deep in a side canyon under a steep overhanging shelf, where I chose to sit and fast for four days and nights while contemplating the meaning of life (mine especially), and praying for a vision. From my "power spot" I had a close-up view of 300 million years of sedimentary deposits, mostly sandstone, but here and there were clay-based deposits that had been eroded by the relatively rapid action of the river. Exploring the shelf I found petroglyphs on a wall above my head, made by former residents, presumably Anasazi, a thousand years earlier. Images of snakes, birds, antelope, the ever-present flute player Kokopelli, and human hands were scratched into the stone.

When I returned home to Vermont my work began to change. I began to design and carve clay stamps of an alphabet of symbols representing an extinct and forgotten civilization, and pressed them into unglazed clay. Many of the pieces were left out in the rain for a period to undergo some erosion before I rescued and fired them. I cruised second-hand shops looking for old typefaces, and purchased rubber stamp kits from an office supply outlet with which to stamp various quotes into clay. Glancing through an issue of National Geographic in a dentist's waiting room, I saw a snippet of an old Chinese women's language called Nu Shu, a woman-only language on the verge of extinction, and had a rubber stamp made of it.

Platter, *2006. Stoneware, porcelain, and sawdust. 18 x 20 in. Photograph by Peter Wrenn*

In the nineties I also began to teach workshops here and there. At the Vermont Clay Studio I was given a video of Paulus lecturing there exactly one year earlier. As he recited poems from memory, as much a dance as a recitation, chills went down my spine. The nightstand beside my bed began to pile high with the poems of Mary Oliver, Rilke, and Rumi. One night I opened a book at random and found these words:

> "And it was at that age... Poetry arrived
> in search of me. I don't know, I don't
> know where
> it came from, from winter or a river.
> I don't know how or when,
> no they were not voices, they were not
> words, nor silence,
> but from a street I was summoned, ...[3]
>
> — from "Poetry" by Pablo Neruda

The gates to a long-locked castle had been ripped from their hinges. I was reading again... but not writing.

In 1999, Fred Taylor, who teaches nature writing and poetry therapy at Antioch and Vermont Colleges, joined my longstanding men's group. One day, grabbing pad and pencil, I nervously tagged along with a small group of would-be writers on a trek he led to Pisgah State Forest. Fred guided us through a series of gentle and safe exercises designed to loosen up our writing muscles and help us excavate word images from the landscape around us. Everywhere I turned, those images of an outer landscape reflected back images of inscape. Like the forms I fashioned in clay, the images I arranged on paper were metaphors for the form I was and my place in a larger world. I sat for a long time by the edge of a remote beaver pond before attempting to write. At first the words trickled onto the page; gradually the flow became steadier, and suddenly acres of watery words, long held back, rushed out through the disintegrating dam, washing an edifice of sticks, mud and fear headlong downstream and sweeping away a self-destructive story that no longer served me.

Fred and I began to co-facilitate nature workshops that invited participants to respond in clay and on paper to poetry, ritual, mythology, stories and the landscape itself. That one picture may be worth a thousand words is a well-worn cliché; that a picture, or in our case a sculpture, may gain from a few well-chosen words may be less familiar. The senses of sight, sound, and touch complement each other, conveying a knowing of life that none of them can offer alone. Once touch and sound held a higher place in the scheme of things than they do today. For our visually dominant culture, clay and writing – especially poetry, with its need to be spoken aloud – are like beans and rice: while nutritious alone, together they are a complete protein, truly a healing, medicinal combination. This is not news. The old myths, medicinal prescriptions, historical accounts, even accounts receivable were being scratched into clay at least 3,500 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia, now Iraq, long before the Egyptians invented papyrus.

While I am no longer "someone who does not write," I do not claim any particular facility in the medium – not that it matters. As Martín Prechtel has observed, "where its peaches fall is none of the peach tree's business." [4] Some time ago, *The Sun*, a magazine that is to writing as STUDIO POTTER is to clay, devoted an entire issue to the difficulty of the writer's art, including an entire page of short quotes from famous writers on the subject. This, from Anne Lamott, was my favorite:

> I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. [5]

It has been said in many ways that we teach what we need to learn. While I have been known to stare at blank pages for long periods of time, I rarely suffer from "potters block." Now and then I observe that participants in workshops, while responding in clay to an exercise, do get stuck. I often advise them to "take more clay," knowing that the larger the amount, the more the task becomes one of body rather than brain, and the less their fears will hold power over them. The practice of writing what Julia Cameron calls "morning pages,"[6] where one simply writes three pages every day without stopping, uninterrupted by one's inner editor, has been my "more clay." In evidence I humbly and gratefully submit these words.

NOTES

1. Berensohn, Paulus. *Finding One's Way with Clay.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 146.
2. Elgin, Suzette Haden. *Try to Feel It My Way: New Help for Touch Dominant People and Those Who Care About Them.* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1997), 4.
3. Neruda, Pablo. *The Essential Neruda.* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004), 97.
4. Statement made at a workshop in Middlebury, Vermont, February 2006.
5. Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life.* (New York: Andover Books, 1994), 21.
6. Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity.* (New York: Putnam, 1992), 9.