

Comment *Who Are You?* by Alan Steinberg

“Who are you?” the director asked. The way he’d said it, I knew he meant, “Who the hell are you? We only hire famous people.” Why did I think his organization should sponsor my clay workshop, and what made me think anyone would sign up?

It was clear what would convince him I was worthy of his time. He didn’t want to hear the story of the time just before a nine-day craft fair when I opened the kiln and found that 75% of the pots had melted into a barely recognizable mass, leaving me with inadequate stock for the show. The supplier had mistakenly thrown a bag of talc into my custom-mixed clay. The lesson learned was always to test a sample from each new batch of clay before committing myself to two months worth of production.

No, my listener was more interested in what awards I had won, what grants I had received, what books I had written. I doubt he would have been moved to hear about my first year, nearly 25 years ago, as a full-time craftsperson: how, with no nest egg for support, I quit a safe, tenured teaching job on the strength of my acceptance into what was reputed to be a major wholesale show, only to come home with enough orders to feed my family for two short months, a long, cold winter looming ahead.

He wouldn’t have been moved by the decision to have my land logged to tide me over while I found my way. Nor would he have been interested in how I spent much of my spare time that winter healing the pain of feeling both rapist and rapee, going out into the woods every day with my handsaw to clean up the leftover slash. He couldn’t understand how that experience brought me, suddenly and unexpectedly, to an awareness of the relatedness of clay, art, nature and spirit.

Perhaps he might have been moved after all, but I suspect what he wanted to know was at what prestigious university did I earn an M.F.A. and with which famous people had I studied?

Please don’t get me wrong. I think the kinds of experiences an M.F.A. can provide are great, but the school of hard knocks can provide them as well, and does so in a context that surrounds them with meaning. I feel grateful for the workshops I have attended over the years, many of them with famous people, but it wasn’t their fame that made their offerings such gifts. It was how their wisdom, their ability to taste life, shone through their work or, in some cases, how they taught their students to focus on the questions that matter most.

When I think of all the experiences that brought me to where and who I am today as an artist and as a person, the year I spent making 100-gram test glazes in paper cups under the supervision of a famous potter (bless her soul) is way, way down the list. When I ask myself what it is I have to offer, the many hours I spent poring through texts on clay and glaze chemistry, trying to solve some technical problem or other, pale by comparison to the 30 seconds of an exercise from the Mythic Warrior Training in which I ran, blindfolded, toward a voice calling loudly to me from the far end of a field—a voice symbolizing all those life dreams from which I had shied out of fear, shame or guilt. I ran with every ounce of strength my body could muster, yelling to overcome the paralysis fear induces. And afterwards, I felt exhilarated, with a new sense of boundaries far wider than the ones I had lived by.

I asked myself what we need most to create the most important artworks of all—our lives, living them to the fullest. It isn’t more information or, adding up all that information, the knowledge it equals. No, it’s the sum of our life experiences (wisdom) that is most needed, yet hardest to acquire. Technique by itself, that which graduate schools excel in imparting, runs the risk of leading to boredom, followed by an unending search for new techniques. But wisdom leads to connection, to the power inherent in the materials, to our inner natures, to the natural world around us, and to our place in that world.

How does all this work? Here are two examples, much abbreviated, of clay as a wisdom catalyst in my life. Both are from workshops I attended with George Kokis, who likes to combine claywork with the study of mythology. In the first workshop, we explored myths of youth, then middle age, and finally elder myths. For the elder myth, he shared an Italian folk tale called “The Shining Fish,” a story that made real the suffering the elderly experience from loss of loved ones, health and wealth.

Of the myriad images I could have chosen to depict in clay, I chose, for reasons I could not articulate and whose meaning I certainly did not grasp, to sculpt the large prehistoric fish that the old man (our protagonist) hung over the front door, where a bright beacon of light began to shine out of its eye, out over the cliffs and out to sea so that the young sailors lost at sea could find their way home. As we talked about our work, I realized the fish symbolized the role elders can play in society when they drop their quest for

the gold, which is more appropriate to youth’s journey. This epiphany eventually steered me into the realm of teaching.

In the second, more recent workshop, we slowly worked our way through the Navajo emergence myth, a long, complicated, deeply allegorical tale. Kokis would read a short section, then we would set to work on whatever image struck us, periodically gathering together to share our discoveries. Each day, I noticed how my usual careful way of working was evolving into something more reckless.

When we arrived at the section that described the role of the twins who had taken on the job of ferrying the sun, moon and stars in an arc across the heavens, the cost for their service being that each day some creature must die, I found myself tearing fistfuls of clay from a half-ton lump in the middle of the room and pounding them into a sculpture of the twins. I then ran outside to collect sticks and jabbed them into the clay to create a funeral pyre, upon which I laid an androgynous clay figure clasping a bouquet of flowers on its chest.

Standing back, exhausted, sensing I was finished, I felt a wave of grief bubbling up from somewhere deep inside and sat there, tears streaming down my face, mourning the recent deaths of several friends.

Art, and clay in particular, has the power to draw the awareness of the collective unconscious from archetypal experience up through the vehicle of our bodies where these memories are stored and bring them into the light of consciousness. It is at this precise point that techniques and skills first become valuable—in service to the expression of a vision. What I intended to do through my workshop was to contribute to the process of putting the horse back in front of the cart.

My interview with the director illustrates a broader societal view, one that values style over substance, quick sound bytes over slower processes, credentials over experience, doing over being. Ironically, he had inadvertently asked me life’s most important question: “Who are you?”

If we can let go of our need to perform, to measure up, clay can lead us down the trail—our trail, wherever our creative urges take us—down, deeper, into a bottomless well of awe.

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