

## A Potter's Perspective: The Learning Curve

### Prologue

It all begins with the touch of my hands. With them I see, hear, smell and taste: they are my eyes and ears, they are my nose and tongue. I rely on the fingers to be inclusive and precise. The palms are persuasive; their pressure is decisive and firm. The pinky will incise and the forefinger compress. The middle finger teams up with the ring finger as a paddle of sorts, carving a wider swath than either alone. And then there is the thumb. It is an appendage all its own. Standing ever ready, juxtaposed, it will deliver as none other can ever hope. These thumbs are the workhorses of the potter's soul poised as both brute and brother. Alone they can mash but in concert with family they create the poetry we have come to call art. Many would surmise the hands connect back through the wrist and the arms. But truth be told a potter's hands are hard wired directly to the center of the spirit, otherwise known, as Ch'i (Qi or ki). It is here that matter and spirit commingle and vision takes on an energy that becomes force. When I set out to chronicle my life as a potter I sat very still, braced my arms and turned my palms upward. From the outside it would seem that I was waiting for a substance from above but I can assure you this posture is for giving. It is within that all power resides and this is the pose that delivers. Like a pinwheel spinning at the center, somewhere between my navel and pubic bone, set inward just a bit, the juices start to flow outward. My mind's eye choreographs an image and my hands begin the dance; full of a rhythm, unique and simple steps, the montage takes on substance and time itself inhabits space. Revolve, rotate, there is earth and spinning. There is water and sand, there are walls and shape and bodies and feet and shoulders and moons and shining suns and fiery infernos. The past is always a part of the moment and tomorrow comes and comes and comes like a rush of electricity sparking, sparkling.

There can be no more potent a metaphor for the meaning of a life than the potter's art. We are metaphysicians in perpetual pursuit of re-creation. Like alchemists we obsess about the possibility that a small alteration might be all that separates the last lot from the kiln from that unimaginably fortuitous discovery of the secret formula for creating GOLD! Please, we must try again. From the moment the sticky earth is mooshed, smooshed, sklooged and wedged between our palms we are trying to find that oh so finite moment when the infinite is possible. In our crude way we are again at the beginning of time injecting a primal energy into a static mass to find a likeness. What remote traveler will we become as the form transforms and our trip melds into the eternal. Perhaps on the way there will be some magic and some jewels but they too shall pass as is the way of all things save the force, save the energy, save the passion; a potter's passion: the peril, the pearls, the person.

What follows are my own musings about learning. We are all on the wheel of wisdom wherein teachers become students only to resurface as younglings ourselves, full of wonder. I drink deeply from both troughs as often as possible and become enlightened and enriched in ways unimaginable when the voyage began. I speak about community and religion, family and partners, pots and money and art. But the message is in the silent eloquence of the spinning pot; trust your heart, as I have mine, and your journey will bring you to the center where balance reigns. Enjoy.

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## Apprenticeship

There is no getting around the fact that potters will work their fingers to the bone; that is if there is any bone left after the years of grinding effort kneading, mashing, thumping and pressing. It is on my mind now more than almost any other aspect of this chosen life. I want to rest. I live to relax and enjoy unhurried time. Just let me drift into a retirement so I can take a deep breath and look back. I am most content when the cycle is over. The kiln is cooling and I can let time lift me like a lazy current. Days will become night in an instant. I've napped and snacked; perhaps I've done some reading or played a bit of tennis. I am at peace and work is but a misty image in the future. It sits like a hippo submerged and substantial; all seeing and unmistakably ripe like a sated tick. It was not always like this. In my youth **Work** was a noble thought. In fact it wore a mantle of great dignity; particularly Emanuel. I speak now of laboring by hand. At the tender age of 18 I was completely unfamiliar with this activity. I had done some chore work. Taking out the garbage, cleaning my room. Occasionally I was urged to partake in some yard work. In high school the standard detention assignment was leaf raking. But Brother Emanuel was a complete stranger. I had never sustained any physical effort other than an athletic burst. And so it was with great anticipation, excitement and a fair helping of anxiety that I began life as a potter's apprentice in the shire of Cornwall in the southwest of mainland Great Britain.

On August 11, 1970 I wrote:

*And I rode back from Arthur's  
High on the hills, where  
The sea fills the shore at  
The bottom, in a beautiful  
Deep blue to match the now-blue sky above the  
Mountains that surround his  
Beautiful little cottage nestled in barley and  
Gorse.  
Good-bye to my parents at  
The pinnacle of the road just before it bent  
Away and out of view.  
I turned to walk down and they walked on  
And we scattered our tears evenly on the path- and if  
I were really poetic and profound I'd say where the tears  
Fell now a forest overgrown, but no, still a path  
And a road up and away, what  
Shed those tears was already grown, full and firm – but then  
A little nervous and  
Mostly sad. The lips  
Left quivering, with the wind howling, hard – and our hair doing dances – now  
throwing up their hands now falling to the  
Floor. It was beautiful and sad in Bray that day. And the  
Air was chilly, the colors bright, where I turned from the top*

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### *Where it bent out of sight.*

It occurs to me now that I had already served an apprenticeship of a sort. It isn't much of a stretch to compare the life of a child to the mentored experience. We are taken on with no real previous training. In fact we are basically helpless. And then one day we are let loose on a hillside to navigate alone. The irony of my particular nexus on the space-time continuum was the perilous fork in the road to the future. At this point in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century one path led straight to jungle thickets and real life tropical nightmares dressed in fatigues and a harness of backbreaking packs filled with k-rations and ammunition. I'd befriended de-limbed returning veterans, emotionally and mentally broke; heard stories of massacres and snakes falling from trees while patrolling for a ghostly enemy. Some so scarred and scared they'd committed suicide. It was counterintuitive to think that this is the choice my parents had envisioned following that early apprenticeship. My transport would take me 180 degrees from that morass and park me at Michael Cardew's Wenford Bridge Pottery in Cornwall, UK. I'd taken a few pottery classes in high school and had enjoyed a dreamy two-week stint as a paying student at a small workshop in Quebec. At a mere 5 feet 8 inches I weighed no more than 135 pounds. Why would any business hire me? For Christ's sake I was only 18! I simply couldn't comprehend it and I assumed for a long time that a mistake had been made. But to my credit I resolved to become indispensable. After all if my sisters could grow to love me why not my potting associates? This is peculiar reasoning but such are the strange workings of the mind in a far away land, light years from anything familiar. And in retrospect, this man Michael Cardew had made me feel important.

From the moment we met at the World Craft Conference held at the Royal Dublin Society there was a chemistry. It is hard to be precise about something so ethereal but in hindsight it most closely resembled love at first sight. I think we both swooned. From my perspective the person that stood before me embodied all of the virtues of western man. Dressed in a khaki safari suit he clutched a weathered leather briefcase under one arm and held a plastic cup of lager in the other. His thinning white hair offset crystal blue eyes as he stared intently,

"Are you Todd Piker?"

In front of me stood the worldly philosopher I had woven out of pure gossamer as I read about a British potter that had left post-industrial England to work in the Nigerian bush, digging his own clay and glaze materials and creating exciting, exotic woodfired stoneware. I nodded and with that admission became one of the privileged few to enter the inner sanctum of the complicated world of this 20<sup>th</sup> century artist/potter/author/CornishBard/ClassicScholar/OxfordGraduate/O.B.E. and M.B.E.

"Well I suppose you'll be coming back to Cornwall to work with me and Svend."

"Who?"

"Svend Bayer. He's 26 and is very lucky. He has found exactly what he wants to do. He is already a very good potter. I don't know how he does it. He is learning so very fast; everything seems to come so easily. It's really quite marvelous. He simply gets on with it."

"How long has he been with you?" I asked timidly

"I think it's been about a year."

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And so the scene was set as was the bar. For the next few days during the course of the conference we saw each other intermittently. Michael gave a keynote speech and I began to see what all the fuss was about. Not only was he erudite but also his wisdom and skill as a public persona provoked awe in almost all that listened. I suppose I was desperate to have some of this renaissance quality for my own. It just seemed a fit.

The stop in Ireland was a strategic choice. The scheme to become a potter's apprentice somewhere in Europe had been hatched a year earlier. After close to one hundred letters to their various workshops it became apparent that many would be in Dublin in mid August 1970 to attend the World Craft Conference. Quite a few had written back suggesting we meet there to discuss the possibility of an assistantship. Cardew was simply one in a long list of alternative sites for me to accomplish this rite de passage. I might have studied in Turkey or even North Africa. But the weight of peer opinion and the clear, powerful and personal radar from our initial encounter were overwhelmingly persuasive. In Michael's mind once we had met, there had never been any doubt that I would return to Cornwall and take up residence at Wenford Bridge Pottery as his newest apprentice. My conflict was whilst hedging my bets I had agreed to an offer to work in Scotland. It took many hours of painful introspection to convince myself that I must sign on at Wenford Bridge and turn my back on Bridge of Dee. Hidey Ho! Hadn't I just been standing on 59<sup>th</sup> street in midtown Manhattan taking part in peace marches, anti-war protests and demonstrations that would lead to evenings in jazz clubs downtown? But at some point I must have misstepped and plunged down a rabbit hole only to re-emerge in medieval times. Now I had to choose which troll would be less likely to eat me – the Cornish one or the Scottish one.

From Dublin, Ireland to St. Breward, Cornwall in the United Kingdom is a voyage from one section of middle-earth to another. One hops a slow ferry to Warrington on the west Coast of the UK and then a train straight down to Cornwall. As I looked out the window I had a strange sensation. The rat-a-tat of the rails from Warrington to Bodmin Road Station in Cornwall became a metronome; but with each tick I seemed to travel deeper into the middle ages and further back in time. I was certainly headed for a simpler place. I assumed a place of quiet, pensive passion where Art was still a visible element in everyday life. Just look at these long vistas of rolling lusciously green hills dotted now and again with small packs of sheep. The only sign of modern life was the occasional row housing built for the legions of workers needed to jump-start the industrial revolution. I knew from my courses in European History that this was the birthplace of the factory. But my overall first impressions were of a culture still organized around feudalism. A small tremor went through me as my grip on the previous world of teenage friendships, carefree summers, supermarkets and super malls began to release. I was panicked again by the absolute fact that I was walking into a world where skill was paramount and I had spent a life that included no practical training. What would happen when I woke up for the first day of work and it became clear that I was not a potter? For one fleeting second I weighed my options and (here's the irony) the image of me schlepping in lock step through the lowered door of a huge military transport on the way to Vietnam brought a great comfort because nothing could be as frightening as that!

The Wenford Bridge Pottery was the terminus on Michael Cardew's voyage as a potter. To listen to him speak there was a degree of resentment against the Nigerian

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government for exiling him back to his native England to end his illustrious career. However, as an example of his eclectic complexity, he also spoke of this as his long dreamed of setting for finishing his career. He was frank about the exhilaration he felt in his 30 years as a pioneer potter in the bush of West Africa. These are well-documented experiences working both as an independent potter (in the European studio potter mold) and as a government employee for the colonial offices of the Nigerian government. He spoke of two-year stints broken by three-month home leave that went on for much of the time he was away from England. Originally his departure was precipitated by the advent of World War II. Night blackouts made firing his large kilns impossible due to the honing potential of the white-hot exhaust gasses pouring from the chimney. To remain a potter he found a way to West Africa. Little did he know at the time that this career move would also set him down a path that he describes as, "The happiest period of my life!" I remember when I first heard this remark (he would repeat it many times over in the year I spent there). I had to cringe because it was at a family gathering. Sometimes, on occasional weekends his wife would come from London to visit. She and Michael had never divorced although he had willingly spent the last 30 years away from her (save the brief leaves he took). He always expected she would take up residence again with him at retirement. But she had established a life separate from his when it became clear that he would not be resuming their domestic lives together. She had taken their three small boys to London, become a schoolteacher and quietly raised these boys in his absence. His attitude, on the surface, was of a merchant marine. His work had precluded any real domestic involvement but he had always planned to pick up where he left off. In fact look at this wonderful home and workshop he had been building for all those years. Every leave he would bring money for another improvement so that spread across the twenty years of repairs it was now, in 1970, a charming habitat. In his mind nobody in his or her right mind would turn down the opportunity to reside in such a culturally rich setting. And then he would let fly with such an insensitive remark such as, "Life only began for me at age 50!" What could he be thinking? I felt like I should take him aside and explain to him, very slowly, that if he wanted this woman to cohabit again he would need to develop some courting skills. But at age 70 there wasn't anything he needed to know from me to straighten out his personal life. Little did I know then how truly complex the world was for an Edwardian of his proclivities? It was with this subtext that my year apprenticeship played out. Sunday night would arrive and Mariel, Michael's wife, would hobble to her car to begin the 7 hour trip back to her flat in Lonsdale (a suburb of London). He was crestfallen and often begged her to stay. She was immovable on the subject and looked relieved to leave. I know she was comforted by the presence of the apprentices because she wasn't leaving him alone. She certainly loved the man, as he her. But time had driven a wedge between them and her independence precluded her from a life as his minion. It was one thing to be blustery and moody with the apprentices but the days of sitting in awe during his monologues about Plato and Mencius, dissertations about tropical fruits or obtuse varieties of English wildflowers were behind her. Best to leave that for those needing the full picture of this man: a potter/philosopher of global reach. In August 1970 my arrival meant that Wenford Bridge Pottery had an American and a Dane as the resident apprentices. We were the latest in a list that had included Australians, French, Nigerian, South African, Ghanaian,

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Ugandan, Irish, German, Italian, Japanese, Canadian to name just some of the many internationals that had made the pilgrimage to sit at the feet of this master.

It was truly an honor to be taken into this inner sanctum. I wanted desperately to live up to the promise many of his previous students had realized. But in hindsight my startling youth and immaturity, both physical and emotional, were serious handicaps. As mentioned earlier I spent the first three months alternately pining for home or desperately depressed that I didn't have the requisite talent to achieve. Looking back I can see that part of the dilemma at first was due to the fact that my tenure as an apprentice was fortuitously paired with work being done by a man Michael himself has described as, "a force of nature". Svend Bayer, of Danish descent, raised until the age of 16 in East Africa and then sent to be educated to England, had arrived at Cardews, in his own words, "to prove to an old girlfriend that he could be a potter." I was shocked when I heard that such a prodigious talent might have lain dormant save for the petty pouting of a long vanished romantic event. To me this proved he was human after all. Because up until I found out this caveat as far as I could tell his stature as a potter had placed him on Olympus from the first week his hands had touched clay. You see, in the 40 years of my potting life I have watched innumerable potters become professionals. With the exception of Svend all have gone through a vetting stage before their true apprenticeships begin. Within this period are numerous settings where one is exposed to the material as a complete beginner. Often this is accomplished in a craft school or hobby workshop setting. The budding talent gives over their ego to the instructions given by the resident professional and mostly takes a back seat to the behavior of the clay. By this I mean many of the early works will be formless, shapeless vessels that only a mother could love. It is precisely this reason that targets mothers as recipients of early work. But as the days, weeks and months pass an accumulation of sorts happens. The stored wisdom of how clay behaves when very wet or very dry, when spinning or being coiled, while becoming leather hard and bone dry, while being fired and glazed becomes an inventory for the journeyman. My resume would include night classes at the YMHA on 92<sup>nd</sup> street; the stint with Cardew, a summer of classes in Greenwich Village at the Baldwin Pottery with Judy Baldwin. Then there were the two summers spent in Ways Mills Quebec, Canada and not to forget the forgettable semester in high school with Betty Powell at the George School. It all must be factored in and becomes an irreplaceable step in the journey to becoming a potter. For not only must we become familiar with the material we also must demonstrate a stubborn certainty that no matter how long the odds and insurmountable the obstacles our urge to make pots overwhelms the reality that this is one tough calling. However Svend Bayer breezed into Wenford Bridge Pottery at age 24 without the slightest previous experience "in clay" (as the saying goes). Within several weeks he was making accomplished work that demonstrated an exceptional understanding of form and an even more remarkable composure and poise rarely evident until many years of what I term as 'flailing' have been logged. As added evidence of his prodigy I point to the unquestionable fact that he was teaching himself much of these techniques. For when Svend arrived at Wenford Bridge Pottery Cardew was approaching his 70's and his ability to teach the fundamentals was compromised due to some arthritis and a disagreeable despair not uncommon in vigorous people that are coming to terms with their mortality. Michael was none too keen on allowing this upstart to show him up; the competitive juices were flowing and all I could do was watch. So watch I did and in

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that short year when I was resident as apprentice #2 I sat at the foot of the Sorcerer but was schooled by his apprentice. I consider this placement a remarkable opportunity and am proud that I wasn't ground into a pulp by the meeting of these Promethean talents. I made sure not to choose sides and revered them both based on merit. Svends pots were glorious, accomplished, suave, sophisticated, bold and exquisite. Michaels work was exciting, exotic and primal. Both were making what I consider to this day as 'museum quality' work. And it was Michael that imparted the passion. His work throughout his career was associated with fits of brilliance and risk taking. From the 1930's when he rekindled interest in Galena glazed slipware through his years in Africa the public associated him with an artistic vision completely unaffected by style or popular culture. His talent was raw and unfettered. Svend, although prodigious, was considered an enfant terrible; exciting in its own right but requiring the test of time to assume the master's mantle. I was naturally allied with Svend as we spent hours, days and months together in the workshop. Although it had taken some work, by the end of my time at Wenford I considered him my best friend.

Anybody that knows Svend will agree that he is a guarded man. He is not given to small talk and is capable of going long periods (maybe hours) without a single comment. In this time it is impossible to know what he is thinking because when he does speak often it will be a short comment verging on sarcasm. For instance, if I was trying to start a small project of making small beakers and had weighed out my lumps, prepared my wheel and asked him to give a demonstration the answer might well have been, "OK Mr Peckler. I see you have no problem interrupting my incredibly important work. Fine. A demo." The only hint of comedy in this for me was his use of a silly pseudonym for me. This would make me laugh and relieve the tension I felt for interfering with his morning work. Then the virtuoso performance would begin and the distraction of watching him make this mundane and routine exercise a graceful pas de deux between the clay on the potter's wheel and his entire consciousness would leave me profoundly impressed. I know my awe was palpable and, in time, he began to believe that just maybe this flyboy from the States might be as serious about the potting life as he. Getting him to trust that I was the real deal and not another one of Michael's American hippies looking to return to the land, smoke some pot and throw off the fetters of crass capitalism was a full-time job for the first few months. Part of the problem had to do with the fact that there was an element of that in me. After all I was only 18 and hadn't yet been to college. He, on the other hand, had finished a degree in Economics from Exeter University but was throwing the towel in on that profession. Becoming a potter was a very risky decision while my motives were quite the opposite. I know this was a source of irritation and it didn't help matters that Michael was a secret hippie himself. I recall that one of his most favorite books at the time was the *Original Whole Earth Catalogue*. Part of his devotion to it stemmed from the fact that his book *Pioneer Pottery* was given generous coverage. But also this was an indication to him that the counter culture in America might well be on the way to saving the world. He was the beneficiary of Peace Corps volunteers while in Nigeria and since that time had been on the lookout to bring more Americans into his inner circles. I had fit that bill and Svend was fed up with the superficiality. I was guilty before I had opened my mouth. So these first few months were a dance of sorts. Svend would try to bring out the side of me that was shallow and noncommittal and I would try to convince him of my dedication and seriousness.

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Looking back this too had a helix element to it because as I became more severe, partly to assuage his fears, he became more relaxed, mostly because it is his true nature. A watershed event in our relationship, from my perspective, was a river voyage on a raft.

Looking back now it was *Lost Boys* from *Peter Pan*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huck Finn* and *Lord of the Flies* all rolled into one. I see it all through the sepia gauze of a distant time and place but my recollection is that there had been some stormy weather and the river was running very high. Wenford Bridge Pottery is about a 5 acre tract of land that was once, in medieval times, a pub. The tap room, now the main house, is built of huge chunks of granite perhaps averaging 3 feet thick and wide and sometimes as long as 5 feet long. The house itself sits on a small road that connects St Tudy to St. Breward. Open the front door and you can be in the middle of the street in four steps. Certainly dangerous by day, at night there is a pub game played by the kids leaving the pub in St Tudy, hopping on their motorcycles and beginning the descent into the valley, past the pottery buildings at full speed and then on up to the St. Breward pub to finish off the night. My room was right above the front door and just as I would be falling asleep I'd hear in the distance the revving of a single engine and I knew the ball race had been launched. Sure enough, within minutes that drone had become a full-fledged roar as the bike picked up speed getting ready to whiz by my window and hurtle up toward St. Breward. Every time that happened I cringed at the thought of the spectacular disaster from a spinout. Bear in mind that this voyage was undertaken after many a pint had been hoisted. But thankfully that never came to pass. On the west side of the property the boundary was the River Camel. A small, meandering stream that wends its way through the north coast of the Cornish countryside going south from the pottery but finally emptying into the North Atlantic in the northern town of Wadebridge. It is possible to put in at St. Breward and kayak to Padstow (about a 10 mile trip I think) but its not a good idea unless you are very familiar with the terrain and someone knows when you put in and when you're expected out. Like all rivers there is much lore surrounding the Camel. Much of it about various historic floods. I never experienced any serious events although occasionally it would breach and the meadow leading up to it would be soggy. But there are markings at least 5 feet off the ground all around the pottery complex to indicate that the river was indeed dangerous at times. I had heard stories of a flood that had washed into the downstairs of the house and sloshed around up to the kitchen counters before receding. It was certainly a force not to be taken lightly. When Svend and I during a walk upstream had decided to launch a log and float down the river it was an exciting bit of teamwork that helped us ford what might otherwise have been an uncrossable chasm between two people from different continents and disparate life experiences. I think we spent some time thinking about building a raft; hewing it together with vines and such but that never came to pass. Rather we spent a ribald afternoon playing like little boys without a care in the world. I think we crossed a divide on this day; one that forged a friendship of equals that grew into one of the most meaningful associations of my adult life. In 1971, as I began to fashion a scheme to build a pottery workshop of my own, the key player, from a technical standpoint would be Svend. My family concurred with my assessment that to do it right we would need to bring Svend to America to help get the business off the ground. To this day, I've never regretted that decision. However, it worked out better for me than him. By the time our partnership came undone I was left with a pottery to grow into and he returned to England with a



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marriage that was on the verge of coming undone. But that is another story for someone else to tell.

Without him I might never have learned the mechanics of pot making. I have always acknowledged that it was Michael Cardew that stimulated my love of the potter's art. In Cardew I found a supporter for the kind of pot that most interested me. Into my compulsion to make pots I had woven the stipulation that these pots must occupy a place in the ritual of everyday life. I had identified these pots as the ones that were most interesting. The living rooms and museums of the post industrial world are filling up with accessories. A large pot in the corner or a deep charger posing self consciously on a coffee table has a distinctly different quality than the large pitcher or planter that comes to rest in these places. The useful pot has a history and cultural saga that authenticates the globalization being attempted by interior designers. Otherwise the work is purely visual and without merit as a work of craft. Martha Stewart has become a great champion of this ruse. Just make it look right; no one cares that 90% of the accessories are fabricated by sweatshop workers with no vested interest in their work. She has built an empire on the backs of exploitation in the third world and is pawning off quantity in the place of quality. Sad really, because in the beginning (back in the early 1970's) she would call me Christmas eve for plum pudding bowls. But she's never acknowledged her ability to tell the difference between art and crass. Indeed there are designers that will often substitute fiberglass imitations to get that 'look'. Cardew was a conscious supporter of craft as a living art. And his work always represented a profound respect for materials and tradition although often blazing new paths and aesthetics. But had Svend Bayer not been around to show me the path one follows to learn the motor skills of making pots I never would have been able to navigate out of the eddies and find open water. This kind of nuts and bolts is paid a lot of lip service but as an art form dies the missing link is the craftsmen that knew how to make it. I watched closely as Svend designed a methodical course from small and uncomplicated to gradually bigger pots. As he succeeded at one challenge he crafted a slightly more complex one to continue his self training. Making in multiples was always a part of the journey and we both learned that 'the more you make, the better you make.' In fact one of our criticisms of the Wenford experience was that it was primarily a setting for an older man winding down his career. His interest in building a larger business to satisfy greater demand had ended decades earlier. Now, the prospect of making and firing more pots simply made him tired. One of his more transparent tricks was to summon us to do some yard work when he wanted to slow things down. It would make Svend angry to be interrupted in that manner and I would hear him grumble about having to leave the workshop and behave like some kind of hired hand. Even though Cardew's kiln was considered large by studio potting standards I watched as Svend furiously sketched ideas for kilns 10 times that size on a small chalkboard commandeered from the resident grandchildren. In this way Svend was fashioning his own future as a potter and I wanted to be part of that vision. With a kiln that large there would be continuous pressure to improve productivity and proficiency. And perhaps there would be the potential to satisfy an even larger market. Even though at that point I was simply along for the ride I had faith that someday I would become a significant producer.

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### A Spiritual Endeavor

My wife, Ivelisse, and I shared our home with our two daughters, Davina and Elyse, so the house where we live is a window into our collective personalities and characters. However, the nearby studio/workshop provides a direct view into my soul exclusively. I have always considered that space a temple of sorts. Although I am a Jew, I have never been affiliated with any synagogue nor have I engaged in any regular religious activities. But if anyone should make the mistake of assuming I am without religious conviction I would produce the log of hours I have spent worshipping in my personal sanctuary. I assume conventional Judeo-Christian attitudes would not look favorably on my uniquely fashioned strategy for communing with the Forces of nature. Frankly I have grown weary of the stranglehold Christianity has on our collective conscience as a country and I would be appreciative if our elected officials were less assertive about the importance of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. In all honesty those three are complete strangers to me and many like me. But I am confident that the results of my efforts within the hallowed confines of my studio are potent proof that Air, Earth, Water and Fire deserve an equivalent awe. ***So I stand as a proud devotee of the power inherent in a life committed to realizing Nature's full potential in all of its' Glory!***

Surely this is a tall order. There is no denying that the humility I feel is largely due to the enormity of this task. A potter must forever guard against the tendency to covet achievement. There is a natural inclination to admire accomplishment and I am often exhilarated when I have reached a plateau that seemed unobtainable. But no sooner am I resting comfortably when the new horizon becomes an exciting challenge and the voyage begins again. For example, of late I have felt a strange calm within the core of my being. Upon close inspection it is as if I have passed through the disquieting stage of life when early on we are without speech. As a child struggling to be understood there is a transition period of profound struggle as we develop the skill to communicate. And so it is with the artist within us. If we persevere there comes a time when the vocabulary begins to be sufficient to form intelligible sentences. This becalming event is an extraordinary sensation. A great peace prevails and for a moment there is the startling possibility that the threshold of Nirvana has been crossed. **I do not exaggerate.** Part of this ethic is the pursuit of Heaven on Earth at all times; a conviction that waiting for an afterlife for such an experience is a clever ploy to avoid the painfully critical component of challenge. But if we are true to our inner voice the moment of arrival is simultaneous with the need for departure and the restlessness begins again. Calculus provides an analysis of this event: the arc of the circle intersects as the slope and the line of trajectory continues on beyond this the tangent point: definable only as an infinite narrowing of upper and lower limits. We can never be precise about the spot because movement, by definition, cannot be static.

There is a radio in my workspace. The team I work with generally listens to popular music on local stations. It is curious but I have noticed that my aural senses are tuned to my own inner sounds. In other words I rarely know what kind of noise is playing in the ambient background. Rather I am sensitive to inner signals the likes of my heartbeat and a meditative stream of consciousness in rhythm with the revolution of the

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potter's wheel. Each rotation becomes a mark of time; each pot but an expression of the inexorable march. But is it possible for matter to transcend its' atomic substance in this way? Perhaps this is a graphic illustration of TIME as the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension. The pot exists in height, width, and depth as well as time. I am still struggling with this concept but feel content about the potential. There is great palliative value in any activity that can be both meditation and concentration. "Throwing a pot" is such an activity. Aside from the visual magic of a piece of earth being coaxed by the careful application of isometric pressure whilst lubricated by a thin film of water there is also the compelling drama of a substance spinning like the earth itself waiting for an assertive direction from a conscious being. No wonder the great storytellers of the Bible reference potters and their trade:

Isaiah 64:8

But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our **potter**; and we all are the work of thy hand

Jeremiah 18:4

And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the **potter**: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the **potter** to make it.

Jeremiah 18:6

O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.

Romans 9:21

Hath not the **potter** power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?

"Woe to those who hide deep from the LORD their counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, 'Who sees us? Who knows us?' You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay; that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me;' or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'"? (Isaiah 29:15-16)

Indeed Genesis itself might well be referring to a potting event:

"In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up---for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground---then the LORD God formed [Heb: *yatsar*] man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath [*ruach*] of life; and man became a living being [*nephesh*]. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden [the word means "delight"], in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed." (Genesis 2:5-7)

But the potter's life as metaphor is far older than language more vast than the emptiness of the universe itself. **Please bear with me.** The spinning earth is a treasure trove of projectiles; some inorganic – stone, metal, gas; some organic – vegetable, animal. Is it serendipity that these remote travelers have woven an earthly tapestry or are larger forces orchestrating a complex medley? A potter finds the clay and brings it to the fire; but pray, from whence the potter? Are we born or made?

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### Community

When I was new to Cornwall Bridge, back in the early 1970's, I would pay a visit to the local dump. It is now a transfer station, meaning that no residual waste stays there. It is all divided up into various forms of recyclable and sold or given to the next stop on the voyage of a piece of trash. But back in the day we drove up to the top of the ever-expanding pile and simply shoveled off whatever it was we wanted to leave behind. In my case, back then, it was often an inordinate number of broken pots. The early years at Cornwall Bridge Pottery produced thousands of pounds of shards. Millions of years from now there will be evidence of my efforts. Perhaps the archeological references will read something like this:

*There are indications of the existence of a thriving ceramics enterprise. Shard collection reveals that there may have been two locations of major manufacture: on Route 7 in Cornwall Bridge and several miles down the road on Route 4 (in the vicinity of a long-defunct solid-waste Transfer station).*

The employees of this facility are on the Town payroll and generally reflect families that have been in Cornwall for many generations. Back in the 70's when I was new in town these gentlemen were the unofficial greeters. They were full of a lot of miscellaneous information such as the required length of residence to be considered a "local". I remember being informed that a 25-year minimum presence was a prerequisite for "local" status. This seemed an impossible achievement for me so I just shrugged and resigned myself to being forever a New Yorker. However, now that I've been around 35 years and raised 2 native Cornwallians the latest news is puzzling. General acceptance has been raised to 50 years and residents like me are still interlopers. Although somewhat tongue in cheek this attitude reflects a profound shift in native attitudes toward the encroachment of non-resident landownership. The ever-dwindling pool of legitimate "locals" seems part of the cost of a profound willingness to preserve the pristine condition of this little hamlet at all costs. When examined from a "cost-benefit" perspective it would appear that Cornwall, when choosing a path to its' future, is positioning itself to remain available as open-space in a world that is desperately looking for development opportunities. We have identified increased population as a short-term benefit and chosen the path of least expense by encouraging a shift in ownership to residents that spend very little time inhabiting the second home they own. In this way we achieve the maximum tax yield for the minimum provision of services. Happily property values continue to escalate...unhappily these increased values make it very difficult for the town to maintain diversity of any kind. The irony is that this very progressive community remains ethnically reminiscent of the Aryan communities of northern Europe and has become economically similar to areas of the Hamptons on Long Island. Fortunately a potter is still considered welcome. And in all honesty, for the last 36 years, civic blunders notwithstanding, I have felt embraced.

My home and workshop sit on the west side flush up against Route 7 just as the road dips on the way north into the hamlet of Cornwall Bridge, one quarter mile down the hill. Junction 4 defines the northern edge of the thriving commercial center composed of 1 grocery store, 1 hardware store, 1 rug shop, 1 package store, 1 veterinary practice, 1

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bank, 1 plumbing/electrical service business and 1 fisherman's boutique. On the periphery there is a lumberyard and a gas station with an attached convenience store. Oh, let's not forget the potter as well. My location sits just outside of the commercial zone but I am allowed to continue my mercantile behavior because I pre-date zoning. I'm sure that if someone were inclined to make my life miserable a simple phone call to the Zoning Enforcement Officer would trigger a flurry of activity to bring me into compliance. For the moment I have dodged that bullet. The town boasts less population now than during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when iron was king. In 1850, at its populous peak, there were 2051 hearty souls. Today there are approximately 1500 people. Based on an average family size of 2.93 there are just over 500 families in town. Very cozy in one sense, but as a potter making useful objects for domestic use I am afraid every household probably is saturated with my work. You see, a high-fired stoneware pot is designed to last a few millenniums. At this point I avoid trips to local tag sales in fear of seeing my mugs and bowls sold for pennies.

Perhaps you are sensing a bit of emotional conflict in my attitude about my community. I cannot hide the fact that I may well have overstayed my welcome here. Back when my kids were in the local school and we were more fully engaged as citizens and parents there came a time when it did feel like one very large family. Our relationships with our neighbors were complex in much the same way brother and sister, cousins, aunts and uncles raveled and unraveled the Gordian Knots of family life. There were ribald Halloween parties, Christmas Caroling, Pig roasts and volleyball games. It wasn't always clean fun either. I remember hash brownie affairs that took days to recover from; the present mayor hosted a party that came to be known as Jonestown. All of the 100 or so guests attending had passed out *in situ* throughout his small farm from an extremely potent mixture of grass brownies. But our kids were often the same age and their friendships got us through the rough patches. Our respective careers rose, fell separately or together. In my case many of our closest acquaintances are artist/craftsmen of one kind or another. We know carpenters, sculptors, housepainters and fine artists. There were printmakers and writers, musicians, playwrights and poets. This is the Cornwall of legend and many on the outside looking in are envious of this eclectic mix. It certainly is the group I think of as my peers and am most proud of the association. But I also know there are many in town who have found it odd that a small pottery business has been able to amass substantial real estate holdings. You see as a hedge against being shut down commercially in my primary location I purchased a building in the commercial section of West Cornwall and opened a store. I'm sure the indecipherable mumble references "family money". I rise above the fray by turning a deaf ear to the local musings. But perhaps the effort to keep a healthy distance has created a chasm. "If you would be known and not know vegetate in a village; if you would know and not be known, live in a city." (Charles Caleb Coulton, 1835). I first encountered the provincialism in 1976 when my future wife and I paid a visit to Town Hall to obtain a marriage license. The clerk filled in my ethnicity as white and my wife was categorized as black. We looked at each other and then at the Clerk and I said very calmly, "Evie is Puerto Rican. I think that would be classified as Hispanic." There was an apologetic moment and all was forgotten. But in fact, nothing was forgotten. From then on it has been etched in stone for eternity. We licked our collective wound and carried on: after all this was going to be our home whether we liked it or not; because a man with a

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compulsion to make wood-fired stoneware pots must find a large plot of land in a thickly wooded area to build the massive kiln that would redefine studio potting in North America. I can still see the bank teller giggling when she opined, "So you're going to put us on the map are you Todd?" That was in 1975. Well here's a strange fact to chew on. When the warnings of impending severe weather are issued in Albany the banner that runs at the base of all television screens in a 50-mile radius heralds the salient geographic trajectory of the gathering storm. Imbedded in the times and place names are the words "near Cornwall Bridge Pottery" and sometimes "near Cornwall Bridge Pottery Store." I suppose we've achieved a visibility of a sort. But not yet of the full variety we had set our minds on.

A small New England village is a perfect place to recede into the woodwork. A friend of the family refers to a life ethic called the 3L's – Live and Let Live. In general that is the *modus vivendi*. There are times when the isolation and remote behavior get overwhelming and I feel an urge to sell it all and move to another small town. But usually that passes with a quick reality check. Fact is that this is the way it is in small town life. It's feast or famine when it comes to attention. Fortunately when I'm in true need of compassion and companionship I can turn inward, to my nuclear family. I think that this is the safest way to navigate the fickle road of community life.

There is another, darker element of this small New England enclave. It is a recurring theme that it would be remiss to overlook. I truly am in a love-hate relationship with this pastoral paradise but feel there is ample cause for alarm as it flaunts a willingness to feign progressive conservatism of a type not seen since pre-Civil War America. Surely New Englanders, as was true of their ancestors across the pond, were appalled by the southern version of plantation slavery. But lest we forget, Connecticut had more slaves than all other New England states combined. What in God's name does this have to do with a discussion about quaint Cornwall, CT in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is with great reluctance that I point to a continuing elitism that is fundamentally opposed to enabling the American dream. Cornwall has always been a generous haven for the downtrodden, but not the poor and huddled masses. I count among my tennis buddies two infamous and successful personalities ransacked by the media and in perpetual hiding from paparazzi. Although not technically criminal their behavior besmirched their profession and undid generations of exalted legacy. Both of these millionaires are comfortably ensconced in this community; content in a paradise of like-minded neighbors willing to turn a blind eye to their deeds. After all this is a community of overachievers. Captains of industry and commerce whose ambitious pursuit of wealth has helped them amass huge portfolios of assets. Often their Cornwall residence and all the attendant trappings – pools, tennis courts, service personnel and such – are but an incidental on the list. They have fashioned lives that utilize their country retreat in the Berkshires for weekends and holidays of escape from the reminders of the grim rat race that surrounds them daily in their primary residences. Although uneasy, the alliance of native Cornwallians, many of whom trace ancestry back to Plymouth Rock, with this powerful interest group has produced zoning restrictions so exacting that even the slightest scrutiny would suggest unconstitutionally discriminatory effort. How else does one explain a population of 1500 for 55 square miles of real estate within the most densely populated megalopolis in the world? I have tried to research the loan history of our local bank to find any indication of suspected redlining (redlining is the slang term used to describe an

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illegal practice of discrimination against a particular racial group to discourage the pursuit of home ownership). But in 20 years of requesting these so-called "public" documents I have never once seen the quantified report. I suspect it would be damning and lend more credence to the fundamental purpose of these small New England villages: maintenance of an old world order wherein feudal lords dictate economic and political behavior through a complex web of power and influence flowing from a belief in entitlement.

Sometimes I drive by the town green in the picaresque setting of the original village. This section of town is now a campus of sorts: mostly elaborately renovated colonials surrounding a baseball field for toddlers, two red clay tennis courts and a soccer pitch used mostly for Ultimate Frisbee games on Sunday. There is a newly built library and a cluster of petite structures that function unobtrusively as the Town Offices. One big stone building serves as large gathering room for full town meetings. There are also two churches – Congregational and Unitarian. As a Jew you can see how I would feel somewhat remote in this setting. And there is a stinging reminder of the saddest day of my life when I was hauled into a Town Meeting to plead my case against the local Fire Department.

The First Selectman had approved a proposal to close the road in front of my store on the busiest day of the year to give the volunteers ample time to prepare for a party that evening. On paper a noble gesture but in fact a decree so debilitating economically it threatened me (and several other local merchants) with financial disaster. Had there been even a gesture to negotiate I might not have needed the purview of a meeting before the town fathers. But the Department was allied not only with the seat of government but, more importantly, one of the wealthiest people in town. A local property owner and trust fund son of the most powerful publishing name in America had donated huge amounts of money to the fire department after it had saved a majority of one of his buildings in the course of dousing a nasty fire at his furniture workshop. The largesse got him Honorary status (the only finger he lifted was to write the check). Odd that they would hold him up as a positive exemplary model rather than issue a reprimand for unsafe practices (I watched as a worker torched a tabletop to distress it during a Christmas party; I can only imagine what went on during the workday). As a result of this liaison he had become beholden to their efforts in a palpable way and when they came calling for a staging area to facilitate their Memorial Day party and parade an alliance of the paramilitary/industrial complex was formed. On the Sunday in question he would recede into anonymity while the Department overran his workshop yard and parking area with tents and hot dog stands. A little known fact - his normal business hours didn't include Sundays. I don't blame the Mayor for spinelessly (and thoughtlessly) caving in on their request to legally close the road. As Tip O'Neill inveighed, "All politics is local." When I let it be known there were other needs and considerations to address I was summarily dismissed as an interloper who was demonstrating a disinterest in the needs of the most important volunteer organization in town. After all, these men (mostly) protected life and property. How dare an inconsequential merchant question the needs, wants, desires of this powerful and purposeful group! It simply wouldn't, couldn't wash. So I strategized and huddled with my small coterie of friends and family. In the few days of agonizing about the disappearance of my rights as a citizen in town I read the statutes regarding road closure. I concocted a scheme to host a fair of my own on the following day and requested a road

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closure of my own. Of course, as I had suspected the First Selectman denied this and I forced a public hearing (easily triggered by collecting 20 names; “three cheers for Democracy!”) On the evening scheduled for the hearing, wherein everyone in town would be allowed to vent their opinions, there was no question about the ulterior motive. According to the Fire Department, in a message to all of its cadres in hearing distance, utilizing their newly purchased high-frequency intercoms (bought, by the way, with tax payer money as well as \$1000 I had donated after a fundraiser I had spearheaded the year before) – “Piker is trying to stop the Parade and Party!”. Oh boy, now I was in trouble. How did I ever get myself into this mess? Then I looked in the mirror and the penny dropped. Staring back at me was a little Jewish man. I’d grown pates that curled downward in front of my ears. A little beard encircled my face and a large brimmed black hat covered my head. I was in a small New England village a mere 100 yards from the open green where not long ago witches were held and pilloried in “dunking chairs” and ridiculed in public in yokes called stockades. I could just see all these gentile supporters gathering small bundles of kindling to bring to the meeting. Afterward I would be dragged outside and burned at the stake. A fitting end to this small-businessman who dared to put crass commercial interests before purposeful Protestant prerogatives! Oh well, there was no turning back. On a calm and seemingly normal spring evening I walked into a sadly familiar setting. My people in shtetls across the world had faced public ridicule on levels far more sinister than this so I was resigned to my fate. It wasn’t any better than I had feared. One by one people stood up to question my rights and pontificate about the sacrifices made by this hallowed group of men (mostly) as they answered their mid-winter late-night calls to attend to the towns emergencies. One by one they looked at me with loathing and conviction that people like me would be the towns undoing. In the undercurrent I heard murmurs of “greedy New Yorker” and the omnipresent exasperation about lack of “patriotism”. The furniture maker was a Vietnam Veteran and I was suspected as having dodged the draft. But the cruelest blow was that as my eyes scanned the seething crowd I saw faces of people I had felt were my friends. It hadn’t been easy for me to crack the inner circle of a town so closed and unwelcoming. But I had stayed the course and reluctance had eased. But now it was as if the curtains closed and doors slammed. I was to be shunned for eternity from this day on. The meeting ended with a sweeping edict by the Board of Zoning. The Fire Department wouldn’t need the full day as it had requested but would I agree to a 4pm closure instead of the requested noon? I was relieved that there was a way to end the evening and I quickly acquiesced. I stumbled out into the cool night and looked for a friendly face. No such luck. The few that had been on my side had evaporated quickly hoping not to be recognized as associates of mine. I was left to negotiate the now angry mob on my own. One by one they came to me, leaning in and locking eyes to get one more stab into my wounded carcass. A Pyrrhic victory for sure.

### A Potter's Epiphany



### A Potter's Perspective: The Learning Curve

I've spent a great deal of my life being both a teacher and a student. One of the most exciting moments I can remember was discovering how valuable teaching was for learning and vice versa. It certainly seems intuitive that teaching something to somebody should be a good way to reinforce one's own expertise in any given field. And so it came to pass that whilst demonstrating a particular form to one of my apprentice/assistants I realized that I too needed a teacher.

The subject of shape, and its' relationship to the art of "throwing" a pot, is generally considered a subjective pursuit. In other words, there is no manual or book of Standards that would dare identify quantitative values for dimensions that would define qualitatively a "thrown pot". Imagine giving awards for the best art made during the Impressionist era or holding a Poetry Olympics. This concept of comparative superiority in artistic effort has no place in creative endeavors so any hope of getting an easy answer to the question, "When is the shaping finished?" would be futile. But I was now consumed by this question philosophically because in a sense it is at the root of artistic endeavor. The decisions an artist makes on the journey to creation are fundamental to the finished work. And it must be assumed that any serious artist is on a lifelong quest. Therefore individual works are but indicators of the progress being made towards fulfilling the vision that compels us to continue. So the answer to the question, "When is the shaping finished?" must be personal but certainly not final. However, in the teacher/student relationship there is an unspoken responsibility for both parties to be as honest as humanly possible. The teacher must be able to honestly tell the student, "I believe you are finished." And the student must honestly be able to say, "I, too, believe the work is done." It is within this interchange that I realized the complexity of the endeavor and resolved to become as clear about the process of "shaping a pot" as possible. In this way I hoped to develop a vocabulary for my vision and enable students to trust their own.

So believe it or not the quest to understand and answer the question, "When is the shaping finished?" was fundamentally about honesty. This was a concept that I had wrestled with on and off since my decision to become a potter had first been made. As a young man of 20 I had decided that perhaps being a potter would be too difficult and that another career path might prove less problematic. So I happily embarked on a career as a journalist after taking an entry-level position at Newsweek Magazine. 1972 was a heady time in News publishing and Newsweek (owned by the Washington Post at the time) was at the center of the unfolding Watergate scandal. I was full of excitement about my affiliation and I enjoyed the prospect of being part of this historic moment. But there was a persistent nagging deep within my soul and I soon began to understand that I had some reckoning to do. You see the discomfort I was feeling was almost certainly as a result of the unwillingness to be honest about my aspirations to be a potter. And the discomfort I felt about the potter's life was fundamentally a flight from the challenge of developing the skills necessary to express the vision I felt so strongly. This is the same sensation I encountered as I struggled to understand the concept of Form and Shape. Taking a cue from my earlier struggles I took the bull by the horns and resolved to find an answer to the question, "When is the shaping finished?"

At the root of an answer to a question such as this is the feeling of satisfaction. I believe the Buddhists would refer to this as a moment of Bliss. Certainly as the shape of a pot gets closer and closer to approximating the inner vision a calm descends. And it is

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here that the root cause of comfort and despair resides. In effect we have reached a tangent point in a discrete assemblage that banishes the doubt. It is at this moment that we have attained Beauty and a quiet descends. This would prove to be a part of the answer. But I needed more explanation for the conviction I had that this expression of Beauty, although not a universal absolute, seemed enigmatically evident in a wide range of folk pots that potters, like myself, admired.

This was a moment for scrutiny because I was beginning to fashion an aesthetic that was right for me but perhaps not for others. I am particularly interested in an explanation for the powerful visceral response certain pots engender. In my case, when I see a pot that interests me there is a kind of conversation that begins. It might go as follows:

***TP: Well hello there....something about you has caused some excitement. I can tell because it is a sensation and I would like to spend some time with you because it will give me pleasure on many levels.***

***Objet d'Art (OA): At last someone that can appreciate me as more than just a vessel!***

***TP: It appears that you were made by a very skillful thrower. Your proportions are classical and fluid. Your balance is exquisite and the attention to detail thorough but not labored.***

***OA: Well that is very poetic and you are very nice to say these things. But don't forget, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder".***

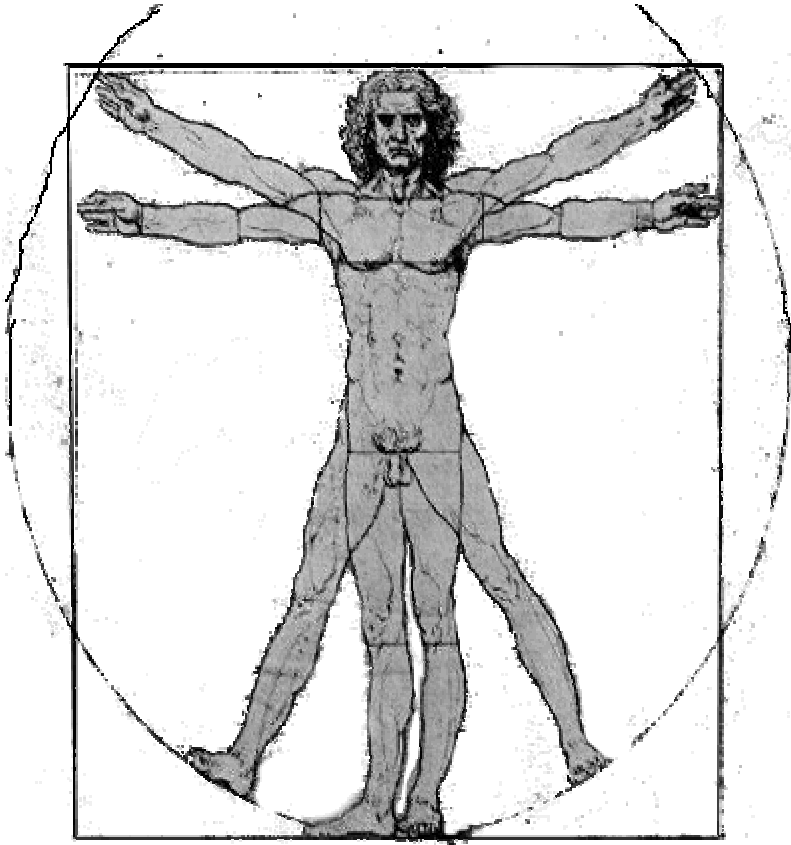
***TP: That may be true. But perhaps you can help me understand why many, in a way that transcends doubt, admire you? After all the museum has chosen to add you to their collection, your photo has been circulated by many and when potters are in your presence there is a palpable humility.***

Throughout history potter's and their work have had an anthropomorphic association:

***...the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground....(Genesis 2:5-7)***

We refer to various components of a pot with human nomenclature. There is the shoulder and the waist, the lip and the belly; the foot, the neck. So wrapped up in all of our responses to the question of "When is the shaping finished?" is a mental silhouette that has unique characteristics that vary from person to person but almost certainly are influenced by prevailing cultural norms passed from generation to generation. I did not have to search long for a possible correlation between the concept of beauty as we have come to know it in the Western world and an analysis of the human form:

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Leonardo da Vinci, study of human proportions according to Vitruvius, c.1485-1490.

*This iconic drawing illustrates Leonardo's own interpretation of Vitruvius' written account of how the ideal proportions of man, with arms and legs outstretched, would fit into the geometric forms of the square and the circle. In order to achieve a coherent solution, Leonardo chose to adjust the relationship between the circle and the square - only the centre of the circle coincides with the navel, while the centre of the square is located somewhat lower.*

*In this drawing, he corrected inconsistencies in Vitruvius' measurements of the human figure, guided by his own observations and deductions based on the study of life models. Through the precision of his own measurements, he created an image that is accepted as a true representation of Vitruvius' findings, and a perfectly credible albeit constructed image of the ideal proportions of the human figure.*

*(<http://www.universalleonardo.org/work.php?id=448&PHPSESSID=fb915b3cbf72b62dab2dfa8f016b137b>)*

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I felt a momentary euphoria when I stumbled on the idea of the Golden Mean (also referred to as the Golden Ratio, Golden Rectangle, Golden Section, The Divine Proportion, The Fibonacci Series and Phi). It was as if I had found a teacher that would tell me about beauty and that teacher was myself. In the drawing by Leonardo the human figure was encased by a circle and if there was one shape that spoke to me in a language I could understand it was the circle and the sphere. I had already been studying a pot as a stack of microscopically thin rings; the element of shape defined by the changeable diameter of each discrete ring. I had expanded this by suggesting that mechanically a pot could be compared to spiralling in structure comparable to the "Slinky Toy" I had grown up with. With sufficient information relative to my pursuit of the "divine proportion" I could immerse myself for many hours in the metaphor of the human form as proportionally perfect. I embarked on a crash course to understand the concept of the Golden Mean; like the rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, I began to scurry along a fantastic, never-ending journey of tunnels and doors.

An analysis of the Da Vinci drawing reveals a man, a rectangle and a circle. If one follows the outreach of the horizontal arms to where they intersect the rectangle this would define a square. The "divine proportion" would be the height of the square to the height of the navel is equal to the height of the rectangle to the height of the square and both of these ratios would be equivalent to Phi:

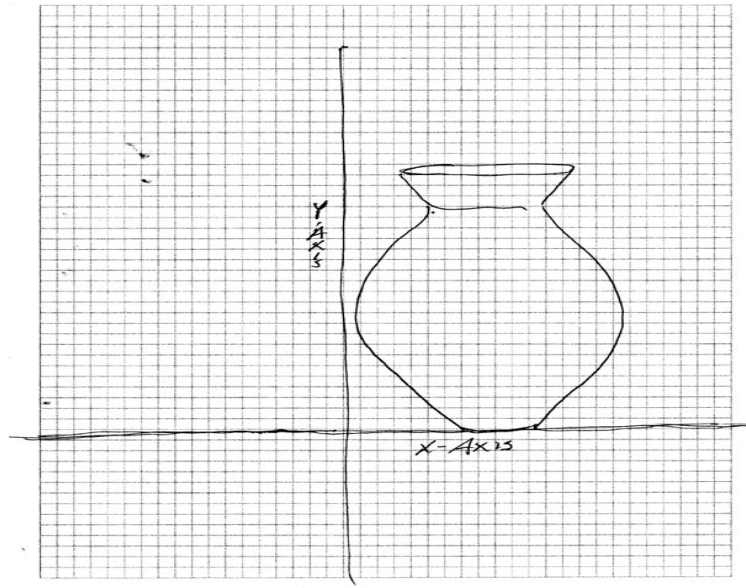
$$\frac{\text{Height of Square}}{\text{Height of Navel}} = \frac{\text{Height of Rectangle}}{\text{Height of Square}} = 1.610803...(\text{Golden Rule})$$

**What's the significance of this number? It's the "golden ratio" and, arguably, it crops up in more places in art, music and so on than any number except pi. Claude Debussy used it explicitly in his music and Le Corbusier in his architecture. There are claims the number was used by Leonardo da Vinci in the painting of the Mona Lisa, by the Greeks in building the Parthenon and by ancient Egyptians in the construction of the Great Pyramid of Khufu.**

**<http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/science/story/0,12450,875198,00.html>**

I was intrigued by another, more personal, association. If one looks at the da Vinci drawing as a circle drawn on a graph then the left side of the rectangle defines a Y-axis and the bottom would be the X-axis. Where the right hand intersects the circle would be considered a tangent point. Now that I had a tangent I knew I was in the vicinity of an abstract concept that would relate to making pots. After all pots were a stack of microscopic circles of varying radii; each one of those circles would have a definable tangent point.

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In the place of the human figure I drew the shape of a vase with a wide belly and short neck. I was relieved and delighted to see that the drawings that most interested me were those that also approximated the ratio found in the Golden Mean. It became clear that there is a cultural aesthetic, accumulated during the thousands of years that Western man has been philosophizing about Beauty. Being born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America I was predisposed to this concept of beauty and I at last had a way to address the enigma “When is the shaping finished?”

In the book *The Power of Limits* (Georgy Doczi, Shambhala) there is a formula for the celebrated Golden Section:

$$A:B=B:(A+B)$$

The author calls this a “uniquely reciprocal relationship between two unequal parts of a whole, in which the small part stands in the same proportion to the large part as the large part stands to the whole.” (p.2) The drawing above is representative of a personal inner vision that has behaved like a beacon on my own quest to satisfy the sensation of arrival pivotal on a potters journey at the wheel. So I have studied the form in relation to this theory of a classical proportion. I have noticed that the distance from the bottom of the vessel to the beginning of the neck there are 20 boxes. To satisfy the principles of the Golden Section there should be some salient and important feature at the 12<sup>th</sup> box (or more precisely 6/10ths of the way to the beginning of the neck. Coincidentally, or as Doczi would say “Dinergistically” (p.3) the widest point of the vessel approximates this position. “Dinergy” is the word coined by Doczi for a universal pattern-creating process: the union of complimentary opposities. The sun and moon, male and female, positive and negative electricity, Yin and Yang. “The two parts of the golden section’s proportions are unequal: one is smaller, the other larger.” (p.3) In taking this metaphor further I began to understand that my sensibilities were most excited when both the widest moment was

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slightly higher than the halfway point from base to neck and the volume of the pot above the halfway mark represented somewhat more than 50% of the total volume encased by the lower orb. And it was in this analysis that I began to see a need for some precision that would identify the amorphous position described by “slightly higher than halfway” or “somewhat more than 50%”. After all, to be so nebulous about something so powerful seemed at cross purposes. I began to opine about the possibility that there was some mathematical discipline that might have grown up around the fact that a series of changing values (like one would find in a spinning pot being shaped by a potter) had dynamic values that were identifiable. I thought long and hard about this and then remembered a long-lost tool I had learned in high school for defining the tangent point of a line on a graph. Many of my musings about shape have been primarily exercises in drawing to scale. Graph paper has proved of immeasurable importance. In examining the silhouette of a shape I began to realize that the shape of anything is but a collection of points so finely drawn that their overall impact is to appear as a line. This is the fundamental principle of Calculus:

*Calculus deals with change and motion and allows us to view our world as dynamic rather than just static. Calculus provides a tool for measuring change whether it is change in position, change in temperature, or change in demand (Change and Motion: Calculus Made Clear. Prof Michael Starbird. The Great Courses p.5)*

But the math that Calculus employs has a wonderful facility for allowing an ambiguity within the stricter parameters of precision. This principle is referred to as Limits and in the imagery of Georg Doczi, it is a definition that recognizes points above and points below, narrowing the space between greater and lesser in infinite increments until the final point, simply stated, is the undeniable point between two definable points. I love this kind of analysis because it fits so beautifully into the idea that a potter is forever finding the final shape by having an internal dialectic about “not enough and too much”. Bernard Leach, the famed British potter, refers to the shaping process as a dialogue between head and heart. The right hand is cerebral, situated on the outside, containing the left hand deep within the form as it rides the centrifugal forces willing to shape ever-outward. One imagines a discourse:

*Right hand (RH): That's quite enough.*

*Left hand (LH): We're not full; we're still waxing.*

*RH: I tell you the moon is full!*

*LH: It cannot be because there is not yet maximum brightness.*

*RH: Be careful, maximum brightness can blind!*

*LH: Oh you are much too cautious. Get on board and it will be glorious!*

*RH: If you're not careful you'll end up with nothing but a splat on the wheelhead.*

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This kind of exchange is typically dialectic. The synergy released is unattainable any other way. Calculus recognizes the intricacy of systems that have a multiplicity of variables yet require an analysis that is rooted in observation. A potter functions in much the same way. The process of self-teaching relies on tenets of experimentation. A theory is postulated and then tested. Information is gathered and organized. An assessment is made based on results and the process begins again. With each new effort there is an accumulating database and as the shape of an idea begins to form predictions can be made; however reliance on such prescience is risky. An artist knows that Chaos is the only certain condition; how can we satisfy both the Muse of Order and the Conductor of Cacophony? It is a delicate act to tame centrifugal force as an instrument of balance. Centering is such an effort. As a state of mind it places a limit on the infinite energy stored in a spinning lump of clay. Such restraint must be measured, steady and sensitive. The result is pure alignment. All the microscopic discs known as "clay particles" are neatly stacked, much like a deck of cards. Their energy is stored as potential in the lens of water surrounding each sliver. They lay dormant awaiting a gentle, persuasive pressure to set the magic in motion. Just as the magician lifts the corner of a deftly spread stack of 52 and triggers the waterfall of cards as they flip from left to right, so too does a well-trained potter guide the uncoiling of those tiny wafers as they defy gravity, unwinding in unison one on the other racing to create an inside and an outside as the potter cries out to be heard:

*"Careful now; too fast or you will spin into oblivion! Pay attention to my heartbeat and the rotation of the wheel. If we can synchronize then we can approach the shaping with our wits about us. After all, when it's time to change from a cylinder to a sphere we will need to understand that "shaping a pot" closely resembles "inflating a balloon". The goal is to expand in all direction together. This will require synchronicity."*

But it is impossible to be several places at once. If the inside hand is dictating the outside shape is there any hope of simulating the waxing moon, inexorably filling in all directions simultaneously? The answer is a wonderfully enigmatic, "yes and no"! Our perception is that shaping a pot requires an inside pressure outwards and an outside pressure inwards. We have spoken about the Yin and Yang, the head and heart, waxing and waning. But these are all philosophical and metaphorical concepts about shaping. The most remarkable fact about a piece of clay that has been started on the voyage to be a pot is that in the hands of a very sensitive potter the pot will make itself. The will to become a vessel is set into motion as soon as the wheel begins to spin. From this point on all of the forces of the universe are set in motion and shaping becomes a conscious process of reproducing in three dimensions a subconscious image. Certainly each point on the sphere is moving outwards centrifugally, albeit imperceptible by the naked eye. But if we agree that the eye is a poor transmitter of important imagery then it is a short leap to a comprehensive understanding that the full complement of neural receptors are at work deciding "when is the shaping finished?" The answer to this question replicates the answer to all the other important questions:

*"We are finished when it is over; not before and certainly not after."*

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### Art and Commerce

I became a potter to make beautiful things for people to use. It seemed so simple as an 18-year-old discovering Japanese tea bowls and Chinese water coolers for the first time. Growing up in late 20<sup>th</sup> century America as a child of the Long Island suburbs there was nothing remotely resembling such an ethic (or aesthetic). First and foremost, there was nothing around that anybody had made. Our homes were built by traveling laborers, invisible journeyman moving from one tract development to another. The lawns and landscaping were all the same. Each living room had a couch, a dining table, a telephone and television. Upstairs were bedrooms with non-descript beds and downstairs were basements or “playrooms”. Sometimes a ping-pong table, the more affluent had pool tables. In the backyard there was the occasional pool, more likely to be above ground; always a fence and sometimes a patio. But never would there be carved bowl at the dinner table, certainly no thrown pots anywhere. No handmade furniture or blown glass; no paintings by Mom or Dad, no knitting or homegrown food. Suburbia was for little league moms and commuter Dads. The concept of Quality was a complete stranger in the 1950's. That's the world I woke up in and it made me long for warmth I sensed but never suspected I would find in old cultures from far away lands. It wasn't until I went away to boarding school and met a girl whose grandfather was a well-known architect that I was fully exposed to the world of craft. Susie Raymond was Antonin Raymond's granddaughter. She and I had a passionate affair during the end of my junior year of high school. She was a day student. We met in the spring and suddenly I was swept into her world. I was allowed to visit her home, a thirty-minute drive to New Hope, PA on the weekends. Although primarily focused on the pubescent excitement of kissing and such I remember it played out against the background of a spectacular wood, stone and glass home overlooking the rolling hills of a gentleman's farm in Bucks County. Not only was the southern wall of the living room totally sliding glass doors encased in cedar framing but the floors were gorgeous wide planking high gloss, deep brown hardwood, the windows were covered with shoji screen, the furniture was made in a shop on sight, the fireplace was native fieldstone, the closets lined with cedar, the lighting by Isamu Noguchi and all the bowls, plates, mugs and teapots in the kitchen were exquisite examples of Japanese country pottery from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The coup de grace in my memory is a magnificent Korean vase from the Koryo Dynasty. Bulbous and slightly off-center it was as big as a 50 lb pumpkin, glazed off-white; no decoration. Simply austere but with the dignity worthy of any great museum in the world. In fact years later I would encounter a similar piece at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, nodding appreciatively as I recalled the casual company I had kept with its brother making out on a Kashmir throw rug on the floor in front of the low book shelf it stood on. Had it enhanced my life...you bet!

I also spent some very formative time at a small pottery just north of the Vermont border in Ways Mills Quebec. As a high school student I had an interest in pottery and discovered that I could enroll for a two-week course at the Rozynska Pottery and study



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with Wanda Rozynska. She and her husband Stanley (known as Buddy) had converted an old school into a number of small bedrooms. These rooms opened onto a long hallway that bisected the building and led to a common area with a huge harvest dining table smack in the middle of an open kitchen. On the other side of the hallway were a large room with many pottery wheels and a small kiln room. Wanda was the potter and Buddy managed the school. He fired the kiln, built the wheels, repaired the plumbing and kept a careful eye out for all of Wanda's needs so she could concentrate on providing the best possible experience for her students – young and old. She was a very committed potter and looked upon the parade of summer students and a series of workshops from June through August as the lion's share of income for the whole year. This allowed her many months of solitary time to pursue work that she considered her "own". Buddy was a sculptor and the two of them spent September through May creating art. At least that was the plan. I'm not sure that Buddy was as productive as Wanda in this regard and he was brutally honest about his criticisms of his work ethic. To me it appeared he worked very hard, with great discipline. But I must say I never did see him sculpt anything. Wanda, on the other hand, made pots all day long unless she was gardening. The long, wide hallway also served as a gallery for her work and it was chock-a-block full of her creations. Now and again a customer from the outside world would find their way into the building and sometimes she would sell a piece. At age 16 I had no concept of the importance of this kind of transaction. I was focused on the fantasy life I saw around me. Here one could literally roll out of bed, across the hall, onto a potter's wheel and be throwing a pot at any time of day or night. The harvest table in the kitchen looked out over the abundance of a vegetable garden in continual bloom. Cucumbers, lettuce, snow peas and tomatoes, summer squash and zucchini poured forth like a continual cornucopia. The lunch table was festooned with sliced tomatoes smothered in diced onions, stir-fried squash and snow peas, fresh corn, fresh carrots, fresh lettuce and radish. All served on sumptuous stoneware made right there. To top it off there were people from Nova Scotia, California, Montreal, New York converging for meals. And there was Buddy and Wanda with their tales from a previous bohemian life in Greenwich Village. The talk would turn from politics to art to protest to craft to gossip and around again like the spinning of a pot on a wheel. When I had sated on tea and dessert I would pick myself up and wander back to the studio and burrow into the project I had put on hold to break for lunch. The afternoons would whirr by and it was dinner. This meal might go on for hours. But whatever time it was I would end the day past midnight in the studio. I didn't know it then but here is where the groundwork was laid for my future. That experience, along with the apprenticeship I served in Cornwall, United Kingdom, burned an indelible mark into my psyche and I must have resolved to find a way to live a life like that because it is, in large measure, the life I am content to lead even now.

At what point did this elaborate fantasy of living the life of an artist require an intersection with the reality of the marketplace? The laws of economics are profound and an artist must meet a demand on some level to be able to continue creating. As I pursued my apprenticeship I was fixated on developing enough skill and efficiency to feel competent as a maker. I had no real understanding of the accounting that a small business must address. Expense and income were simply 2 expressions with no more meaning than the words clay and glaze. In fact I paid far more attention to the materials of the trade than I did to the concept of profit. Looking back I wish the term "balance" had

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influenced me to the same extent as “centering”. But here it is over 30 years since the first firing and I am still in business. From a purely technical standpoint the fundamental rules of business are violated on a daily basis in most small enterprises. The universal shortcoming is investment capital. Not only for start-up but also for research and development, increased production, facility upgrade etc. These types of infusions simply can't come out of cash-flow, they must be borrowed. Borrowing puts enormous pressure on available cash because of the cost of carrying the debt. It is a vicious cycle that a small business will generally avoid. After all a bank will not permit missed payments; this would put an immediate end to all activity. But how do they survive the pressures of depreciation, the need for innovation, the tooling-up for large orders and such? The answer is at the root of the American dream. The privilege of being your own boss generally means excruciatingly long hours, great personal sacrifice, indebtedness to extended family and a tunnel vision that makes the journey to materialize the dream a compulsion. Of the well-known rags to riches stories very few are about producing artists. The exception being entertainment artists who are able to capitalize on the demand by producing work that is distributable to the masses. Writers are of a similar pedigree but once again there is an economy of scale accessed only by contractual association with a publishing company. A painter or sculptor or potter is engaged in what manufacturer-representatives refer to as “onesy, twosey” businesses. In other words usually there isn't enough production to partner with any type of middleman. For any small business, facing a demand that exceeds productive capacity can be a nightmare. But for a business that is a labor of love “tooling up” for greater volume might well be the end of the love affair. Therefore navigating issues of scale without trading the sensitivity of an artist for the low cunning of an entrepreneur brings to mind Odysseus strapped to the mast, with wax in his crew's ears to avoid entrapment by the Siren's of Anthemoessa. On a balance sheet it is easy to see that a capital investment might well increase yield but no balance sheet will ever reveal the emotional toll that this kind of financial risk involves. When an artist, their creative drive and the inspiration that propels their productivity become less important than goals targeted by investors looking for quick financial return there is the potential for disaster. After all “you cannot make love by proxy” as my mentor Michael Cardew once said in response to a suggestion he leave the potting profession to design for mass production.

The decisions I make as a manager when selecting which pots get made in any given production cycle are based on many factors. At this point I have a good feel for the condition of inventory at my Store. There are some basic pots that I feel we should always have available. Mugs, pitchers, bowls, plates, tumblers, honeypots, casseroles, pie plates are given prominent placement and therefore need to appear fully stocked. If I determine that we are short in any of these fundamental items I will prioritize their production. Sometimes my staff will not have had sufficient training to take on certain assignments. In this case I will be responsible for making these standard items. If I feel confident that any student/assistant can meet the challenge I will generally assign them a pot that will test their skills. This is at the root of the training process and I don't like to miss an opportunity to provide them a chance to stretch their accumulating inventory of skills. This will have the added advantage of providing me an opportunity to explore ideas that I have been developing and would like to bring into three dimensions. But there will always be a part of me that prefers the role of anonymous, production potter.

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Sometimes I feel that I have worked so many years to achieve the opportunity to merely wander into the studio and sit down to make the simple, unassuming pots that represent the most basic and utilitarian fare that one thinks of when picturing a potter's work. It is the mug and bowl, plate, pitcher and tumbler that accompany us from morning through night. Being able to provide these at a reasonable price satisfies a profound calling that has compelled me as a potter from very early days. I am also keenly aware of the inventory that I maintain for my resellers. Partnering with a potter is a leap of faith. The ability to deliver in quantity at consistent levels of quality is generally beyond most potter's ability. This is due in part to the vagaries of the materials we use. Clay is notoriously difficult to standardize; so is the wood fuel and the trained manpower. In short there is ample reason to avoid the many pitfalls to which a potter is likely to fall prey. This makes producing for resale a very difficult proposition. One way I have managed to avoid many of these difficulties is by maintaining an inventory for my resellers. Once I have established a good rapport with a business that can demonstrate a continuing ability to sell my work I will try to maintain a minimum level of inventory for them so that when their need for more pots comes along we can deliver quickly and at a consistent level of quality. On paper this has proven a good idea. As long as my customer base remains modest I will be able to honor these tenets. Here is a case when "small is beautiful". Because when I am contracted to deliver bowls or plates or pitchers there is a level of quality that is expected.

Every pot I make has a story. I can trace the inspiration and the evolution of its design through a myriad of experiences. When someone buys one of my bowls they have purchased both a **vessel** and an **idea**. The **vessel** is very high-fired. It has a glaze that fits the clay body like a glove making it extremely strong and durable during the rigors of life in a kitchen. From table to sink to dishwasher to cupboard and back and forth throughout the house this bowl will do yeoman's work. It will rarely chip, and will hold the heat of a meal or the cold of a dessert for as long as necessary. The **idea** comes along as added value. Some of my small bowls are direct descendants of a northern Chinese pot that found its way into Korea and to this day functions as a soup bowl in many small restaurants. I was astonished to see that this same shape shows up as prehistoric bowl dated to 3000 b.c. in southern China. In addition there is a decorative motif that appears throughout the Pacific rim from the islands of the South Seas all the way around to vessels found in central America. I try to recreate that kind of historical pedigree for even the most humble of pots. My pitchers are inspired by country jugs from Devonshire in England. I make a bouillabaisse bowl that was similar to a pot made by my mentor Michael Cardew. His was more of a single portion, small pot. Mine will hold a full meal of shrimp, scallops, lobster and clam chowder. All you would need for a sumptuous meal would be a slab of whole wheat bread and a tall glass of white wine. You see it's more than a bowl or a mug or a pitcher. It's a way to connect with the fullness of life.

Art and Commerce have always had a link albeit awkward and strained. The artist needs funding and sources for materials; the marketplace needs innovation and productivity. An artist needs approval and appreciation; the world of commerce loves the competitive synergy this sets in motion: high risk effort attracts excess capital which leads to revolutionary product design. An artist cannot be an island. No matter how unique the vision or prodigious the ability there will be continuous intercourse with all

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matter of discipline and an artist needs to be respectful of this symbiosis, for without the marketplace there can be no vitality, only a vast and endless warehouse for dark storage.

### Kiln Calamities

For a potter it is the kiln that generates drama. The dance of producing can be very exciting but it rarely triggers the intensity of adventure, challenge anxiety and mystery attendant when the efforts of weeks and months are loaded into the kiln and taken on the journey of trial by fire. At this point a piece of clay is forever transformed. There is no going back. The plasticity gradually disappears as the moisture is removed into the ambient air. But this is not an irreversible event; crush up the piece, add water and Presto! Change-O! it's plastic and moldable again. But the chemically combined water – the H<sub>2</sub>O bound up within the clay mineral – is driven off as steam above 212 degrees F. This is an irreversible reaction and must proceed with great caution. A precipitous rise in temperature at the range when this occurs can create an explosive event. Many a kiln has been littered by the sad shards of a pot shattered into smithereens by an impatient and/or inexperienced potter hurrying the flame. The fundamental challenge is to raise the temperature in a measured way; nudging the increase steadily upward in order to avoid the thermal shock that comes from either too rapid a climb and/or decline. The most exacting fuels to control are the so-called solid fuels like peat, dung, straw, coal or wood. These require initial gasification before their energy potential is released. It is the process of turning a solid into a gas that cools the flame therefore with every new charge there will be a period of temperature decline. These are the bumps that can be disastrous if not delicately monitored. A sensitive fire-tender will stoke as the temperature rises in order to smooth the inevitable downturn as the newly burned fuel gasifies. This will minimize the potential for thermal shock. It's beginning to sound like a science and there are certainly many learned tomes from fuel professionals, full of equations and data examining chemical reactions, exothermic and endothermic behavior, and discourse concerning reduction, oxidation and delivery. To ignore these studies, or dismiss them, is perilous for a potter. Our needs are much like a sailor's: navigating a safe journey for our passengers (pots) can be done intuitively but the wisdom gleaned from previous voyages is indispensable. We'd do our charges great disservice to be dismissive of scientific advance. And those of us that become fire-starters are duty bound to learn from past errors whilst furthering the wealth of communal wisdom with anecdotal information. But even the most learned, experienced and accomplished are time again touched by the wand of mercurial fate. In my estimation it is these moments of unexpected extremes that bear analysis. The shock and despair that accompany any catastrophic event will linger for eternity. There is no need to experience it more than that single moment of initial breach. And though there would be value in a capacity to dispose of that sensation with it would go the compassion necessary for healing those newly in need. Without that defining ability we are arguably no more than savages. In the interest of communal healing I offer the following potters' anecdotes for the pantheon of wounded craftsmen so others might find strength to forge ahead.

My first firing was in September of 1974. The kiln had been built during the months of May through July. We also mixed 4000 lbs. of experimental stoneware clays

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for pot-making and approximately 10,000 pounds of refractory clay for making kiln furniture. The kiln itself was built with 8,000 bricks mortared together with several tons of local china clay that we had dug nearby and processed by hand. In all the first firing contained approximately 20,000 lbs of unfired clay. While building the kiln and kiln shed, we had renovated an old barn to serve as the pottery studio. We also built our potter's wheels. We made our own kiln shelves and brick, and managed to create hundreds of pots for the first load. In addition we had been collecting local hard-wood and soft-wood slab and edging to be used as fuel in this first firing. Being unfamiliar with the local woods and frankly naïve about the importance of dry and seasoned wood for the extremely high temperature required for a stoneware firing we did not have sufficient space to dry and age our wood. On Sept. 7, 1974 we lit the fire and attempted to fire our kiln and its 20,000 pounds of clay for the first time. After 57 hours of continuous stoking during an unexpected deluge of rain from a passing hurricane we stopped this first effort when we realized all of our remaining wood was soaking wet. During the firing we had watched in horror as pots loaded in the kiln exploded and entire stacks of brick and homemade shelving vanished in a single instant. We were exhausted and completely spent emotionally as we wandered away from the kiln in total shock. We declared this first effort a 'Failed Firing'. A few days later, after some substantial rest and recuperation we braced ourselves for the unloading of the kiln. It was not much fun. Aside from the litter due to various shelving collapses there were an overwhelming number of pots that had been cracked by excessive steam from the thousands of pounds of raw kiln furniture and clay mortar used between the newly laid bricks. However we were careful with the pots that simply needed a re-fire. In our resolve to learn from the mistakes of the first effort we planned to fire again as soon as possible and these would seed the next charge. After two months we had made enough pots for back-to-back firings. We had also collected and dried a sufficient quantity of seasoned wood. We then loaded up the kiln again and fired twice within a three-week period. Both of these firings were spectacular successes and then my partner Svend Bayer returned to England. The accumulating weight of marital problems made concentrating on the problems of our fledgling business impossible. He and his wife Jane decided to return to England to start a pottery of their own. It would be 10 years of trial and error effort before I could repeat this level of quality with any consistency.

I recently heard an absolutely spectacular kiln disaster. I wasn't in attendance at this one but the man that recounted the tale had been an expert witness at the insurance trial because he had built the kiln. Although there was an effort to pin the liability of the disaster on his construction it was clear early on that the owner had requested a specific modification that was ill advised. Even so the institution continued to request the construction change. In theory the extent of the damage was a direct result of this modification. As I understand it, the kiln was being fired to an extremely high temperature, perhaps it was approaching 2300 degrees Fahrenheit when the explosive event occurred. Fortunately there was no one near the kiln when it happened but the noise was loud enough so that those people in a neighboring room heard it and came running. What they saw was a tangled mess. The kiln was still glowing red but the door of the kiln was slightly skewed indicating all was not well on the inside. As they pried it open what they found inside almost defies description. The cart itself, that had been the

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floor of the kiln had been rotated 90 degrees and was now sitting on its edge. Of course the contents of the kiln – refractory shelving, supports and the entire load of artistic efforts – were strewn about either as shattered bits or large, rended fragments. Save for one piece, a sculpted fox whose nose was jammed between two arch bricks in the dome of the kiln. It alone remained intact, suspended like a ridiculous Christmas ornament. When the pieces of this monumental puzzle were parsed and reassembled forensically it became clear that the earlier warning about the potential weakness in design of the sand-seal concept was directly to blame for this event. It would appear that extremely hot gases escaped the firing chamber and impinged on the concrete floor that served as the solid footing for the heavy kiln walls. The metal for the track that the kiln floor and door rolled in and out on was secured to the concrete directly under the setting. The sand seal was theoretically meant to contain all the heat from the interior. However it was through this seal that the offending heat escaped. The resulting explosion was almost certainly due to the rapid release of water vapor from the impacted concrete and the continuous pressure exerted by the relentless combustion of gasses taking place at the burners positioned outside of the kiln to heat the interior of the kiln. This is an example of the unique nexus of science and art for the ceramic artist. The potential for loss of limb and property while in the pursuit of fine art is generally not associated with the artistic pursuit but beware when attempting to transform clay to stone; the energy required to make this transition, if not properly controlled, can do a heap o' damage.

The story of Naysan McIlhargey is an example of the most severe test imaginable for a young potter. After leaving me and Cornwall Bridge to establish his own workshop in Yellow Springs Ohio he chose to build a variation of the same kiln he had worked with as an apprentice here in Connecticut. This was a prudent move. It shortens the learning curve for a new business to be able to be fully productive from the first firing. It also enables a young potter to continue developing techniques that were not fully realized as their apprenticeship came to an end. It seemed such a straightforward project. The tube kiln we use is a very simple design. It is basically just two parallel walls that support a catenary arch. There are no interior walls to be constructed and in Naysan's case, there was no side door. His access to the setting chamber for the ware would be through the front or back of the tube. The one complication was building exit flues in the floor of the back of the kiln so that the exhaust gasses would pass down and under thereby enabling clear access through the back wall. But this is a minor engineering feat and doesn't complicate the building process. As Naysan started his building we were in constant communication to help facilitate the process for him. One of the shortcomings of an apprenticeship experience is that the act of building a kiln is impossible to include. Most potters have just a few kilns through a lifetime and it would be very expensive to stop production every 24 months and build another kiln. So the skills required building such a structure must either be bought (contracted from a professional kiln builder) or learned on the fly. The latter approach can be exhilarating as the project itself will require a multitude of expertises – carpentry, masonry, excavation and project management. Moving forward the exposure to these other disciplines will be of paramount importance in keeping a workshop maintained and fully functional so it is important to be engaged in as much of the kiln-building as possible. But the peril in pioneering this job is that a poorly designed and/or constructed kiln will be a millstone around the neck of a fledgling

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business. Naysan and I are both very committed and talented potters but our gift as engineers is notably absent. Had I realized that the buttressing of the kiln walls was critically important **BEFORE** the arch form is removed so that the thousands of pounds of thrust from the newly placed bricks would remain suspended I would have reminded him, "Don't pull out that arch form until you buttress the walls" or "Don't even think of building the arch forms and setting the arch bricks until you buttress the walls." I guess you see where this story is heading. Like most catastrophes this one took a very short time from start to finish. I heard about it by phone when Naysan called and told me the arch had collapsed while they were inside the kiln. I was speechless for a few moments as the enormity of the event penetrated. I needed to hear what had happened and if anyone was hurt. He said that although both he and his stepfather had been in the kiln as the bricks came down miraculously they were bruised but not seriously hurt. We tried to piece together a timeline to ascertain why the arch had collapsed. When I heard that the event took place soon after the arch form had been pulled out I asked if the walls had been buttressed. Naysan answered, "No." I needed no more information. We both knew that the work ahead would be finding the emotional energy to clean up the mess and begin the rebuilding. Any other strategy would be a squandering of the wisdom gleaned and in a way it was the only useful morsel left of the project. Turning and running was simply not an option so I focused on helping him find the inner strength to forge ahead. With Naysan this took very little effort. Within a few short minutes of conversation he saw the importance in continuing and was strategizing about how to best buttress the walls once the fallen bricks had been cleaned out. This event set him back a few weeks and now that he has had several very successful firings its' primary significance has been to demonstrate the grace this young man manages in the face of struggle.

After 32 years and 258 firings of my own kiln I recount a cautionary tale for potters that believe their expertise has surpassed the potential for extraordinary surprise from a kiln unpacking. By all indications it had been a very routine firing. The weather was just fine; very seasonable for an early September day. My labor force was adequate -- neither too few nor too many hands. The wood supply was perfectly seasoned and dry. When I arrived at the kiln at 10 pm to begin a 6 hour shift the preheat had been underway for the usual 34 hours. In that period of time the entire contents of the kiln is very dry and ready for what I refer to as "full fire". This means the stoking becomes a sustained event reaching a crescendo in 20 hours and consuming about 6 cords of hard and soft wood. My own shift finished at 4 am without incident. When Tony Arru, my assistant, took over the cones in the front of the kiln were reading almost precisely like the previous firing and the digital pyrometer that records the back chambers' progress indicated the firing was smack on schedule. I went off for my 6 hour rest feeling confident that Tony was now sufficiently trained, having been in attendance at 4 previous firings. At 10 am when I returned to resume the helm my suspicions were confirmed. All was proceeding with remarkable routine. Wood consumption was standard, cone progress was as anticipated. Had this been the intercontinental flight to New Delhi (as is often my metaphor when I first light the fire) I would probably start to think about attempting to sleep. But of course the pilot of the vessel can never really sleep. We have no autopilot controls and the kiln's voracious appetite for fuel requires continuous stoking. The fire-tender has to be very sensitive to the kilns needs. The ashpit must be stirred and

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rearranged every so often in order to keep an efficient combustion. The stoking pattern is designed to introduce wood before the peak temperature of the previous charge so that there is minimal cooling as the new batch begins combustion. In this way the inevitable dips and valleys of the climb to top temperature are flattened and the potential for thermal shock from uneven heating minimized. Once again the plane flight analogy is useful. A bumpy temperature rise when using a solid fuel is inevitable but an experienced kiln tender tries every way possible to avoid turbulence. By 12 noon the main firebox was a raging inferno. This is the ideal and most of the 30 feet of the fuselage (kiln interior) was glowing white hot. At this point all hands are on deck for the next 6 hours to nudge the temperature up to its final 2300 degree summit. There is a general frenzy as the front firebox is charged with wood and the side stoking ports are monitored. When the flame has receded enough and the atmosphere cleared small pieces of edging are slipped through brick size openings to boost temperature in the upper reaches of the kiln chamber. This ensures an even heating throughout. Through trial and error I have learned that there is a delicate balance between front stoking and side stoking. Too much of one or the other can stall the kiln indefinitely. Here is where intuitive skills are paramount and the kiln master must have the temperament of a conductor: the slab wood, like the base drum, provides a steady rhythm; brief bursts of edging-stoke creates a staccato; then a long and leisurely period of legato composition define the interstices between charges as the flame turns from soot and smoke to white-hot pure inferno. Any imprecision within this carefully orchestrated pandemonium is a sign of insensitivity and a lesser talent. At this point I think of myself as Michael Jordan Joe Torre Leonard Bernstein Mikhail Baryshnikov all rolled into one and ushered in for the finale of this 57 hour symphonic game-winning grand slam swoosh at the buzzer! And after that last piece of wood is slipped in, the ports closed and sealed there is total silence and three days of profound rest begin. The whole crew wanders off to the showers and after a brief meal we stagger off to bed to crash into the coma-like sleep that follows any event that has taken such a huge toll emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically. There is a wonderful, magical Japanese film titled UGETSU. Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. The plot surrounds the strange and exotic life of a master potter in a Japanese village. Embedded in the production is a scene of the potter's village as it falls under attack during the firing of their enormous wood-fired kiln. In panic and haste they resolve to finish the firing before heading into the hillside to hide. A frenzy of stoking begins, the kiln is raging with the final stoke. All is closed up and sealed and it is days before anyone returns to the town. Upon unloading the kiln the potter and his wife find the very best firing results they have ever had. I love the image of this peaceful community coming together to collectively protect their labor of love and deliver it into the hands of the kiln gods. Their work done they blend seamlessly into the surrounding foliage like any of Nature's other creatures. When danger has passed they quietly resume their encoded duties with a generous gift from the all-knowing Provider for their age-old pursuit of beauty. Eastern temperament is uniquely suited to a tale such as this; here in the west the potters might well have stayed to defend their kiln, unwittingly over-firing the contents in a heroic burst of Ego. But I digress...my story is the flip side of this tale. My firing was uninterrupted. In fact it was a very uneventful affair. Surely it was very hard work but when I left the kiln shed to allow for several days of cooling I had a complacent feeling that it was a job well done. In an ironic twist I had a visitor that was a



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potting enthusiast. Knowing that the kiln had been cooling for at least 48 hours I felt it would be OK to open one of the small side ports and reach in with gloved hand to take a pot out as a present. I thought to myself, a gift from the most recent charge of pots that still has residual heat left from the trial by fire is truly a high form of flattery. I put my arm all the way to my armpit into the cavernous chamber and swept back and forth with my hand in an area that I knew were several tumblers. With my fingertips I sensed I had brushed by one and returned to grab it with more authority so as to pull it out the kiln, snaking through the small port. With attendant clanging and clinking I was able to pull 2 to daylight. They were very sweet pots and had a terrific patina from being fully exposed to the flyash from the main firebox. These are potter's pots and I happily gave one to my visitor and resealed the kiln knowing that in a day or so we would be unloading the remaining 6000 lbs of fired ware. I slept like a baby that night never suspecting that almost every pot from that point on would come out of this particular firing inflicted with a rare unexplainable surface blemish so heinous as to render each pot virtually unsellable.

One by one they emerged from the cavernous cocoon. Generally the voyage from the dark of the kiln through ambient light to bright sunlight is an exhilarating progression. A pot that looks interesting in the shadows will often be even more exciting as the full range of its patina is visible. And to add insult to injury these pots in this firing, as a group in situ enshrouded in the dark of the kiln chamber, were mystifyingly normal. The colors seemed rich and I recall thinking that I must have done something right finally when choosing the precise moment to end the stoking in the front of the kiln as I transitioned to finishing the back chambers. In particular I was recounting the two sweet pots I had snaked out of the kiln the day before. But as I got closer to the setting I had a visceral uneasiness. Something was amiss. I simply couldn't put a finger on it until ironically I reached out and touched the surface. In an instant a full morality play passed before my eyes and into the deepest recess of my humanity. Here before me were thousands of pots (my children, so to speak) that were not the exquisite reflection of their appearance. En masse their affliction, although not life-threatening, predicted a future of rejection and sad lament. I was sorry for us both; the pain so deep that I became the subject of an Edvard Munch painting. In the recesses of my subconscious my hands clasped both cheeks, my eyeballs rolled upwards and a wail of complete supplication came from my very center, the place where it all begins for a potter and their pot.

In looking back to those first few days what I recognize most poignantly about my response to this event are the neatly ordered psychological responses. Having studied the Kubler-Ross stages of grief I am sensitive to the coping mechanism resident in us all when tragedy strikes. I watched as the parade of emotions - denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance - came trundling out of the paneling in my psyche. It was their appearance that convinced me of the gravity of the experience. One by one: 'maybe just a few would be so severely afflicted' DENIAL; 'I am going to throw every last pot off the back hillside and smash them into smithereens' ANGER; 'I will go and sue the clay company for the monumental mess they have made of my business and life...' BARGAINING; 'but then who will mix my clay and what will become of my livelihood' DEPRESSION; 'Given time I can move on. I will sort through the mess and stay true to my values. A potter's life is full of one challenge after another. If I quit now there can be no redemption.' ACCEPTANCE. The process of 'moving on' is fundamentally about allowing TIME to work its magic. Of course there will be remnants of the event floating

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about like flotsam and jetsam for years to come. Instead of obstacles to progress they become incidental irritations that need occasional attention. Gradually their impact will recede and the calamity itself will become a footnote in the, hopefully, much longer list of successes. I remember Michael Cardew reminding me to “believe in your rising star”. At that time I thought he was referring to a galactic success that awaited me but his words have proven more cautionary and mundane; perhaps advice for coping and more pedagogic than profound.

#### Ivelisse: My wife, my passion

There can be no life without collaboration and suggesting that the behavior of an individual, of any species, has no causal connection to others would be ridiculous. There are the obvious biologic requirements for assembling genetic material. We now know, with certainty, that the DNA helix is an exquisite French twist resident in all living forms. As a road map for deciphering many mysteries of the dance we call life it will, in time, answer questions about attraction that might have otherwise remained mysterious. But happily I will not be around when the seminal work begins to determine which chromosomal pairing on the bonded coil triggered the unrestrainable energy released as Evie and I fell in love. You see, I return to that initial instant of eye contact for the remnant heat and its residual warming. When these sensations have been reduced and quantified there is certain to be a sadly cooling effect due to scientific codification. And if you take the hot out of a potter's persuasion with it goes the purpose: **PASSION!** In truth I fell in love with pots about the same time I fell in love with Evie and the parallel aspect of those events puzzle me to this day. Although I prefer to believe the contemporaneous timing to be coincidental I have an intuitive sense that their trajectories are inextricably linked in a twisted braid every bit as complex and meaningful as the double-helix known as the dance of DNA. I have referred to these two events as both curse and blessing: In hindsight finding the very thing one wants to do for the rest of life and the person to be with at the early age of 19 is, on balance, a positive occurrence. But I was on the cusp of significant life choices that on the surface appeared to flagrantly disregard the stern warnings of convention. Now that I am a parent I can feel the anxiety and disappointment my parents must have felt as their child chose a life-path predisposed to bring financial struggle and social ostracism. The very word ‘potter’ is a synonym for poor and I had found a mate without any of the hoped for compatibilities: race, creed, color or religious persuasion.

We all have a sovereign circle of indeterminate diameter that serves our instinctive need for identity. As needed there are invisible rings that progress inward until, at the center, there is just one ring that defines a tight fit from shoulder to shoulder and extends above our head and right the way down to our feet. Some people use this ring as protection, calling it personal space and reserving it as a preserve. In my innermost circle I include another person. Evie and I occupy the same footprint; we define the same outline and have for the last 35 years. It's a wonder that we can get in there together. Although our volume footprint is similar there is little else visually that would explain the compatibility. I am an east European Jew. Many of us are scattered through the world because of the scourge of pogroms across the centuries. When I tell others about this they nod in understanding. My blond hair and light eyes would indicate the presence of

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rogue genetic material almost certainly the result of a random rape during one of the interminable sieges an untold number of generations ago. Evie is about as brown as I am beige. Her color has a beautiful, soft, almost edible, quality. And her eyes are more of the same. A product of an interbreeding herself; maybe or maybe not forced like in my family. When I told her that my father had a problem with us having children she asked, "Why?" I paused and was sickened but had to tell her, she had to know what she was marrying into, "He says our children would be mulattoes." Cringing, I was afraid I had said something so vile that it would hurt her so bad she might never talk to me again. She is in my innermost circle because of her lightness and ferocity of spirit. It both protects and propels me. She gave a moderate laugh and looked me dead in the eyes, "We're all mulattoes." She was saying this directly to him; the words passing straight through my heart, a heart she was convinced was pure, and decisively proceeding directly to him. It was her style of confrontation: respectful, deferential but precise. With a single sentence she summed up the shame that had been accumulating for generations in my family; many American families really. Often starting as terror and violation by a rapacious invader for us there was continued horror when the family passed by the burning cross on an Ohio neighbors Midwestern lawn. What could these people have done to incur such a wrath? In the instant our eyes met in this exchange we knew it was time to stop the grief so this bond has become common ground as our legacy.

Ivelisse Clemente Perez (known to all as Evie) is Puerto Rican. A multi-ethnic blend of native Taino Indian, African and Spanish, there is no way to determine the proportions. As the first generation of her family born in the United States she learned to speak English at 5 and lived up until the age of 16 in tenements and project housing in Spanish Harlem and the Bronx. At 16 she ran to the police away from a restrictive, physically and sexually abusive home environment that housed her grandmother, 3 uncles, an aunt, 1 brother and 1 sister: 7 people (when all were at home) for 3 small bedrooms and 1 small bathroom. And this was a more upscale residence. Stories about earlier homes include walkups that were often out of hot water and heat in the winter and dangling ones hands out of the bed was sure to attract nibbling rodents explaining bloody fingertips in the morning. Because it was the weekend, the police remanded her to the only facility that would guarantee her safety: Spofford Detention Center, an infamously violent house of detention for juveniles. This was purely a holding tank until a spot opened up in a locked-down home for wayward girls. Run by nuns, this catholic facility kept order through intimidation and physical beatings. Obviously not much better than the home she had fled it was her resolve to be free to define herself away from an environment of fear that made her continue the search for a more positive setting. After 6 weeks she managed to find a placement in another catholic shelter. But this time it was a moderately relaxed group home in the Bronx. It was during this point in her life that we met. I had just returned from my apprenticeship with Michael Cardew in Cornwall, England and eager to reacquaint myself with the New York scene. My younger sister Kim and I had moved to the Big city with my parents just a few years earlier. Hilary, our older sister, was already off at college in Boston and beginning her adult life. We had been enrolled at a well known private high school. I had entered as a senior she a sophomore. When I went off to England she decided the rarified setting was not for her. She wanted a more intense city experience and my parents agreed to let her attend the nearby public high school Julia Richmond High on 66<sup>th</sup> street and 2<sup>nd</sup> avenue. Back in

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the late 1960's this school was already becoming renown for its' tough, street-smart students and I know my parents were anxious about her safety. But very shortly she met Evie and they became inseparable. My father once told me that it was that friendship with Evie that allayed their fears because he could tell by the look in Evie's eyes when she looked at Kim that she would personally see that no harm came to her. Kim is two years younger than I and was my fiercest ally throughout our childhood. We were as close as siblings could be up until I was sent off to boarding school at age 14. When I came back from England Kim made it a priority to see that I was taken care of and quickly introduced me to her friend. "Wait until you meet Evie!" I was in England buried up to my elbows in clay and single-minded about a potting life when Kim showed up in the tiny hamlet of St. Breward. She'd come to visit, knowing I was very homesick for the U.S. and in particular for a girlfriend that I hoped was waiting for my return. However, several hours into the visit I found out that this old girlfriend had phoned Kim just as she was leaving to fly to the UK and asked that she convey to me her sorrow about the end of our relationship. I'm not sure what made me angrier: her rejection of me or her cowardly use of my sister as a messenger. I know the chronology of it all is confusing and I'd like to lay it out more formally. But that wouldn't be true to the nature of the time. Historically the world, and in particular the United States, was in a mad dash to throw out everything that had come before. Music, fashion, convention of all kinds was suspect. Anything that smacked of arbitrary authority and unquestioned obedience would be relegated to obsolescence. We were a culture in the grips of reinvention and really didn't have the time to be methodical. Everything seemed very messy indeed and my life, particularly my romantic life, was no exception. Evie was just what the doctor had ordered and I had my little sister Kim to thank. How easy it would be...if only I had known how to play the game. But I was a flower child and didn't really pay attention to the rules of courtship. I pretended it didn't matter but truth be told, I didn't understand how to play the game. I kid you not but at 19 years old I had never asked a girl on a formal date. Never called someone up to go to the movies or spooned on a porch waiting for the moon to be just right to plant a goodnight kiss. I'd had plenty of girlfriends but never a conventional date. Luckily Evie was studying to be a modern woman. Within a day or two of our introduction I got a phone call. "Let's go to the movies." I said, "OK, I'll tell Kim." Evie was quick, "No, she's doing something else." Finally the penny dropped for me...we were going on a date. One date led to another, and another and within a few weeks we were spending all of our time together. As I look back on the falling in love I can remember some very specific forks in the road. One huge, looming wedge was a mere 4 weeks off. I had applied to colleges while in England and been accepted at a school in Ohio. I was to start my freshman year at a small ultra-liberal Midwestern school just a mere month after meeting and falling madly in love with this city girl. What was I to do? I kept putting off the inevitable day until at long last it arrived. We had set up house in a seedy tenement apartment in Greenwich Village. The first piece of furniture we owned was a waterbed. To save money I had opted out of the frame. So the beast sat like a large blubbering, slug on the floor. It was cold and wobbly when we lay down but we were together and the thrill of living in sin was so overpowering that nothing mortal mattered. Gradually doomsday approached and I packed for my departure. We swore to stay together, and in fact we kept the Greenwich Village studio for a bit. We had no lease as it was on loan from a friend. The first

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semester at Antioch College was also my last. From October thru December I think I made three trips back to New York City. On the final one I had secured a work-study position in the mailroom of Newsweek Magazine that would keep me in New York City for the second semester. I moved into an apartment in the Yorkville section of the Upper East Side with my sister Kim. Evie was in a group home in the Bronx by this time but she spent every waking minute at our apartment. Indeed sometimes she showed up even before I awoke because we were on her route to Julia Richmond High School and she'd stop by very early in the morning and crawl into bed with me. Once again we'd found a way to be together despite the complications of life and I was happy but very restless about my future. Evie, on the other hand, was certain of one thing. She had found in my family and me the perfect companions. She loved us all – my sisters, my mother, my father and me. For her anything other than this would be a disastrous setback in her march toward independence. But I was on a voyage to adulthood and was skeptical of my precocious happiness. Although a willing participant in our commitment I kept the future as vague as possible in order to avoid anything deeper than lovers. Evie was willing to ride along for the time being and I took advantage of the opportunity to have a girlfriend but not plan a future. In retrospect a very selfish position to assume but appropriate considering our extremely young age (I was 19.5 and she had just turned 17). We certainly were neither physically nor emotionally prepared to be fully committed regardless of the indications that we had found true soul mates in one another. It would have been a disaster for me to embark on taking care of a family at that point. It would certainly have required a complete break from my self-professed desire to be a potter and an unhealthy abbreviation of an early adulthood meant for gradually coming to terms with monogamy. Against Evie's better judgment I insisted we find a way to put some distance between ourselves and find out if we were capable of being apart. Following the one work-study semester I withdrew from Antioch and enrolled as a morning student at Hunter College. In the afternoons I worked at Newsweek Magazine, promoted in a way, to the Letters Department I was beginning to feel that I might give up the strenuous potting life for a desk job a journalist. We lived as a couple in the upper eastside apartment. My sister Kim was our roommate. But the reality of our predicament just wouldn't go away. My time at Newsweek became more like incarceration with each passing month and I could no longer put my dream to be a potter on hold. In the fall of 1974 I withdrew from college (only completing the beginning of my sophomore year) moved to Connecticut and soon after Evie enrolled in Eastern New Mexico University in a tiny town near the Texas border. She loaded up her car with all her worldly possessions and drove with her cousin Barbara cross-country to a town that had never heard of Puerto Rico. We had broken up or so it seemed. We spent time with other people. We both had an extremely serious relationship with another person; someone more fitting our profiles. Her boyfriend was a big-man on campus, handsome athlete. An afro-American from Louisville, his family embraced Evie and loved her for everything she was, never for a moment suggesting she could, or should, be more. My significant other was another potter that had come to work with me and learn about woodfiring. She was very artistic, a hard working, talented craftsman. We had a great deal in common having attended the same Quaker boarding school. We also had equal amounts of education and similar cultural experiences. She was partly Jewish and totally in love with me in the same way Evie's boyfriend had fallen madly for her. And so our

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lives hobbled forward. But we stayed in touch thanks to a WATS (wide area telephone service) line that a good friend of Evie's made available to her. We talked for hours on the phone, several times a week. In this way we stayed connected and conveyed to each other and (in my case) to myself that the flame still burned. I was trying in every way I knew how to conform but my true nature was far more assertive. I became proud of my adventurous side and slowly began to feel that there was nothing wrong with love regardless of the origin and to hell with the nay Sayers. We'd just have to prove them wrong. We gradually extricated ourselves from the other relationships and by 1976 we took a stab at being together. Evie moved from New Mexico and took up residence nearby for a time. She took a job at a local lunatic asylum and in a bizarre twist of irony came to find out that she had been born in that institution. Twenty-two years earlier her mother was 15 when she became pregnant with her and was sent "upstate" to this institution because at that time it was a Home for Unwed Young Mothers. Evie's birth certificate is in the town of Wassaic, New York. The work was hard and dangerous. She would tell me of being told to hose down the residents and she befriended one particularly aggressive woman. This is a characteristic quality of Evie's: an ability to be a friend to those in need and a steadfast guardian for those who are defenseless. Surely some of this originates in a comradeship of the downtrodden. She has spent so much of her life struggling to overcome arbitrary persecution: as a Hispanic woman in a world dominated by men both white and Latin. Machismo is as much about subjugation as is the racism that drives the engine of elitism for the old boy network. Since before she could talk Evie has been wrestling to free herself from these titanic oppressors and therein lies her particular genius. No one taught her about equality or the history of civil rights. The closest thing she has had to a role model is her maternal grandmother who took in, one by one, the illegitimate children delivered to her doorstep by her own daughters, their brothers or the clients of her illegal abortion business. She was the original noble savage that ran the household with an iron fist. Her only failing a willingness to allow alpha males the right of uncontested supremacy in the refuge she lovingly built for them. It didn't matter what ignominious reputation they had on the street, in their domicile they would be the king and the girls their subjects. But Evie wouldn't stand for it and at age 16 picked up and left, never to return.

There is an element of *enfant terrible* about Evie. Although a proud Puerto Rican she has been completely disillusioned by the code that defines masculinity. She has never made any bones about the fact that it would be very unlikely for her to fall in love with any man from Spanish Harlem (or any Latin for that matter). I certainly never questioned her motives; after all I was the beneficiary of the brutally cold shoulder her father had turned when she was a very young child in need of some connection. Her mother (Lillian Garcia) isn't much more compassionate. Her first three children were raised by her mother (their grandmother-Magdalena Clemente). All dropped off as infants their only memories of her (Lillian) are as a person so self-centered and enfeebled by ignorance that she is more a subject of pity than criticism. The closest we can guess, Lillian was 15 when she had Evie. She was never gainfully employed although probably spent a significant part of her early adulthood as a prostitute, perhaps also on drugs. So the grim picture gets more grim and for me the question gets more profound: "How did this woman, Ivelisse Clemente Perez, manage to develop a personality so deep of character without the slightest hint of the conventional role models and influences so

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much touted by child psychologists and early development specialists?" This is a question worthy of close inspection. In light of her extraordinarily stable behavior and exemplary parenting skills the only explanation that satisfies across the board is that she is endowed with a specific genius that has filled in the gaps. Many others have fallen through those same chasms into snake pits of substance abuse and neuroses so profound that their lives can never be remotely normal.

Lest I paint a picture of perfection it should be noted that her one affliction bears a striking resemblance to conduct associated with compulsive/addictive behavior. She buys and consumes about 3 cases of TAB (the original diet soft drink) per week. If you do the math that adds up to 10 cans per day. Many of them drunk in their entirety the rest lay about in various stages of consumption like discarded cigarette butts (or played cellophane bags once full of heroin). Waiting to be tidied up but also a prominent display of someone in the grips of a compulsion more aggressive than agreeable. To many it is a quaint peccadillo; the conversation generally triggers astonishment that TAB even still exists. The most often heard comments are "TAB! I didn't know they even still made that. Didn't the FDA put a stop to it because of the saccharine? Wasn't it the first diet soda?" The answer to all of these is YES.YES.YES. It is so scarce now that we have to go directly to the Coca Cola Bottling Company and have the delivery truck make a stop at our house just for our order. I doubt there is another family in America that has its own delivery truck like this. Most people are willing to shop retail for their habitual needs and God forbid they ever stop making it because we may never find a way to wean her from the beverage. It would be like making someone go cold turkey from coffee; never a pretty sight. So she didn't escape Scot free from the torment of dependency so prevalent in her communal genes. This remnant is a towering beacon for those of us that love her and she will forever be queen of her domain however compromised. If you can't accept her for who she is then mind your own business; after all she isn't hurting anyone. That too is our fervent hope. This same person has also battled a smoking addiction. She stopped for the birth of our two daughters but started again after the baby years were over. However, as an example of her capacity for self-mobilization she has quit several times. This last time with the help of the patch at age 50.

I want to avoid becoming bogged down in the details of her life. It is no secret that she has carried into adulthood an assortment of weaknesses resulting from imperfect family conditions. Her grandmother, who lovingly raised her died when Evie was 20 a victim of a staph infection in the hospital. Although both her parents are still alive they have never been involved with her or her life in any way. Evie raised herself. The years on the run took their toll in her educational opportunities and she had to stop at an Associates degree. But that degree was in Early Childhood education because it was an area she loved and naturally excelled in. She has been in the daycare field for the entire 28 years of our marriage. Save for a brief stint helping to start the retail store and taking a stab at designing and making beautiful soft leather handbags for our pottery store she has worked as a teacher for pre-school kids. Her daycare experience sort of bookends the profession. First she taught in a Head Start program designed for needy and disadvantaged children and as she winds down her career she has been teaching at a very well endowed center established primarily for the children of teachers and staff at the Hotchkiss School a prestigious prep school nearby. Her time spent at the Astor Home was exciting and challenging but finally she burned out on the sadness of her charges. I

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think she saw too much of her own life in that world and found it depressing to be unable to make significant changes in their futures. I think when she realized escaping the cycle of poverty is generally as much about luck as effort she recognized this as a sign of burnout.

We have raised two magnificent daughters of our own. We parlayed every ounce of skill and wisdom into their years at home and they are bright, articulate and capable people. They also are as proud of their Mom as it is possible to be and love spending time with her, as much as she loves being with them. It's been hard to let go of those seemingly carefree years as their childhoods recede into our distant memory. Their departure into adulthood has been a profound bittersweet sadness for us both and we may never recover, as our elder years cannot replace that companionship. In fact the danger now is depression. The irony of this is that when life for Evie reached its miserable nadir, back in her early teens, there was never a sign of depression, quite the reverse. It was a stunning truth about who she was. No matter how bleak the future might have appeared she maintained a positive perspective at all times. It is as if that demeanor was preparation for the role model she would one day become and now that that dimension of her responsibilities are behind her she has mostly shed the aura and allowed herself the all too human entitlement of depression. Who can blame her; growing old sucks! But she remains the vitally radiant and beautiful girl I met so many years ago. I have only wished I could have given her more than the opportunity to walk lock step with a poor potter.

Please let me explain. I am not looking for sympathy with a statement like this. It may appear as a self-serving comment with little regard for her sensibilities and freedom of choice. So much of relationship convention deals with the concept of "providing". As the only boy in a family of three I remember my sisters commiseration that I would need a profession. In their case the future was not so oppressive in this regard. Women's liberation has accomplished a great deal that is positive. But one of the negative aspects of the progress is that now both women and men are enslaved by the prospect of an adulthood of perpetual income producing enslavement. My choice to become a potter was, in a certain sense, a subconscious rejection of enforced servitude in a job that had only one purpose: to produce a paycheck week after week after week. My father, for all of his weaknesses, had the strength to tell me over and over I should do something I wanted. This was in large measure the prevailing attitude ushered in by the progressive and forward thinking advocates of a more humane society. We must take our hats off to the first generation American immigrants that fought World War II and then returned to America with the attitude that as good as we were we still could be better. These are the heroes of the Hip generation. For all the revisionist history about their drug infatuations and obsession with free love (read sex) the core of the movement was about realizing potential. I think the message penetrated and when the time came to decide it was as if the decision was made both for me and by me. I resolved to seek a life of passion disregarding the limitations of income. I think I hung on to the thinnest thread that there was a possibility for success on many levels. But I did a poor job of researching how those limitations might impact others that I cared for so deeply. In this same way I chose my mate. After years of conflict as to whether it would be a wise choice I opted for happiness because that had substance. Being tactile I suppose one could say I could feel it and touch it and it seemed right based on the life I was choosing to lead. In hindsight there is an element of cowardice that enshrouds the realty. In the case of my relationship



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with Evie it was highly unlikely that I would be required to answer to any in-laws about my chosen profession. Just imagine for a second, if you can, a young man at a family gathering during Thanksgiving trying to explain to his girlfriends' father that being a potter had merit. It takes a very well developed and compassionate person to deliver one's child into a life of so much yearning. My sense then and to this day is that it was best I managed to steer clear of that kind of pressure. Few couples can withstand it. The expression, "life is hard enough" gets stood on its head in a way. So it is this stubbornness that Evie married into and it has only been of late as I have watched my contemporaries and friends amass huge earnings and portfolios of assets and wealth that the longing to buy her a piece of valuable jewelry has eclipsed the earlier need for fulfillment. I know she'd like that although you'd never hear it said.

There is no doubt in my mind that I did the right thing in marrying Ivelisse and making a life with her. She has given me nothing but support in all of my indulgences as an artist. She has consistently supported my refusal to compromise and urged me to stay true to my fundamental belief that a potter's rightful occupation includes making things for everyday use. As an exceptional chef (now parlayed into a catering business) she is alert to the newest pots and if she sees something that interests her she'll grab it for our home kitchen and use on the job. Little by little over the years our house has filled up with her "picks of the litter". She never tires of her choices and will not allow me to remove a pot she has previously chosen. It makes me very proud when that happens and convinces me that we are on the same wavelength in many more ways than may seem possible, considering the diversity of our backgrounds. However, at this point in our lives, we have spent far more time together than apart. I am sure that ours has not been a perfect union but I spend absolutely no time thinking how life would have been different had we chosen different mates. I simply cannot imagine a life now that didn't include her particular courage and values; and I remember with precision the excitement of our younger days. That passion of yesterday, although not quite as hot, is every bit as compelling. To this day when we kiss good-bye in the morning thinking of seeing her at the end of the day fills me with anticipation. It is that joy, that promise that gives me the energy to forge ahead regardless of the obstacles.

### **Clay is Our Lover**

We all know that only Nature can produce a true diamond. It wasn't until the Superman character came along when it became commonly known that the compression of a simple lump of coal could transform those sooty Carbon atoms into a shiny multi-faceted gem. This was an inhuman parlor trick requiring unimaginable strength. But Superman's super-human powers compressed more than substance. A feat of that magnitude transcends mere molecular rearrangement. It's not good enough to just mash those atoms like some nuclear reactor shooting them together at high speed. A geologic process involving compression takes TIME! More than we mortals can fathom: thousands, millions, billions of years sometimes. So don't try this at home and by the way, the same goes for clay.

My mentor, Michael Cardew, use to say "clay is our lover". The phrase is a gem of its own for me; I must have turned it over and over a thousand times as I admired its'

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mystery and was dazzled by the multitude of reflections every angle yields. At 19 it seemed but a small chip but now at 55 that nugget weighs-in like the Hope diamond.

Clay. The word itself comes from the Latin *glus* meaning “glue”; through German *klei* meaning “mud”; to an Indo European base of *glei-* “meaning to stick together”. From here the Old English version of *claeg* became the Middle English (and more familiar) *clei*. The word *clammy* is an adjective derived from the Middle English *clam* meaning “viscous mud”. It is here that we see the first etymological indication of the observed fact: Clay is a magical dirt. This fits the romance. It is fitting that a potter's fundamental element be a substance that dazzles the gallery. Imagine the scene: 3 million years ago; a line of wandering hunter-gatherer Homo Erectus. One hairy beast bends, trips and falls into a recently drained puddle. On getting up he/she notices the sticky, clammy, gluey substance unlike any other common soil. This early hominid is transfixed by the texture: slippery yet tenacious; slimy but clean. In getting up he/she opens a clenched fist and the dirt that would have fallen away in a crumbling cascade has stuck to his/her fingers. In fact his/her hand, now with opposing thumbs, suddenly bears a striking resemblance to the paw of old. In a panic he/she tries to separate out that indispensable thumb. In relief and awe the sacred digit is restored. In an absolute fit of ecstasy he/she turns to show this phenomenon around. A loud grunt or squeal, with widened eye as he/she bolts from one fellow traveler to the next. All are frozen with delight as the implications of this magical substance penetrate. For most the experience is but another in the continual stream of sensorial firsts. But this one hominid has potter-like tendencies. As the parade continues he/she stoops to collect more of this clammy glue. In his/her eye is the sign of glee as handful after handful are smeared from head to hairy toe, “I'm bringing some home!”

For the next 3 million or so years we have been studying this gem of Nature. Like air, it is simply too plentiful to become expensive. In fact it has more value as a payload than *in situ*. This explains why potters, in days of old, would settle where the deposits were plentiful. “Why pay a middleman?” is reputed to be an expression first uttered by a potter. Geologically speaking there are 3 clay-depositing processes: Primary, Secondary and Tertiary. Primary formation defines clays that are found where Nature created them. In other words, there is an event involving an exposure of certain stones to hot gasses that occur only deep within the earth that transform these stones into clay. If geologic forces extrude these formations close to the earth's surface and then through weathering or mining procedures this *in situ* deposit can be exploited the resulting clay is considered a primary clay. Secondary clays are classified as having been primary originally and then transported, generally by water on a journey back into the earth through the ocean. Somewhere along this twisting adventure a primary clay will settle along with other minerals of similar particle size that may or may not also be clay. These sites include lake, river and pond bottoms; swamp land and anywhere these might have been throughout the millions of years of geologic history. These clay/silt materials are referred to as secondary clay and often form the inventory used by the clay industry because the resulting inclusions are impurities that help to lower the vitrification point. Primary clays are often extremely refractory and highly resistant to deformation at very high temperatures. As a result they function well as a material for the creation of bricks and other equipment required to withstand extremely high temperatures over and over again. Secondary clays are much better suited, when coated with a glaze, to applications that

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require very smooth surfaces and can withstand the rigors of domestic life. Tertiary clay is of much less interest to potter's due to the excessive contamination it undergoes while traveling to its final resting place in the ocean. Aside from being very difficult to exploit it often contains large amounts of calcium impurities that can lead to catastrophic failure at normal firing temperatures. For the purposes of potters and their potmaking we concern ourselves mostly with the primary and secondary clays.

The ideal scenario for a potter is to step outside his/her back door and dig with a shovel on their own property and find that serendipitously the local geology has blessed them with a clay that is exactly the right composition to use without any additional additives. Generally it works the other way around. To wit, the clay that is local is suitable for a particular use and dictates the kind of ware that gets produced. Hence the growth of indigenous flowerpot traditions in many of the world's cultures. This kind of pot -- relatively low-fired -- can be made from most any clay; and as clay is plentiful this is ample explanation for the rise of ceramic traditions worldwide. We are a busy and productive breed. Pots and potters are a true testament to the natural human inclination to toil with great industry. Often, in days of old, potters were farmers in the summer and potmakers in the winter. But like most other professions there is now a marked difference between potters of pre-industrial societies and those in post-industrial societies. The former are still humble craftsmen using a local material as a resource; the latter, like myself, have artistic aspirations and have taken on clay as a lover, as Cardew would say, not merely a companion.

I was not one of the lucky ones. When I chose to settle in New England and establish my workshop in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains I knew I had made a choice to import the raw material of my trade. I was born and raised in the northeast and had a cultural affinity for the pace and attitudes found north of the Mason-Dixon line. When the decision to settle arrived there was a tract of land already in the family in northwest Connecticut. I knew well the glacial past of this region and understood that there would be no commercially available local clay that would be acceptable to produce vitrified woodfired stoneware; certainly none that would be useable as-dug. I would have to source this from the long-established clay-mining industry in the southern and Midwestern part of the country and finally settle on a blend that had as many of the preferred characteristics as possible. Even so, with the cost of shipping as an add-on it was possible to buy these clays delivered for ten cents per pound. The other material I would need in abundance was wood to fire my kilns. Thankfully there is still plenty of this in this region albeit expensive to cart.

In 1974, as I began the lifelong project of establishing a workshop the first order of business was blending and testing clays. I contacted as many companies as I could identify (much more difficult before the age of Google). I would phone and request to be patched through to the technical departments. Even at the tender age of 20 I was able to converse with these ceramic engineers. My tutelage with Cardew had enriched me with a profound respect for the chemistry of clay. I've immersed myself in the physics of its' behavior and am an eager student of the myriad facets that this gem presents. The technical departments would be more than willing to send me 50 lb. samples of their dry materials for my testing. And the first firings had many different pots made from a variety of different clays. At the end we collected all of the remaining, unused, batches

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and blended them together in what we referred to as the All American clay body. There are still pots that I see we made back then that I recall being of that vintage batch.

The process of creating and utilizing a blend of clays and other materials as a composite mix for the commercial production of a stoneware pot is ongoing. Part of the challenge in my particular case was that I'd identified that time spent loading and firing a kiln was less time spent making pots. In order to bring the cost/benefit ratio into a manageable range I'd settled on a large kiln that would only be fired 5 times per year. This meant that testing in this kiln would be impractical; or, put another way, each firing was, in essence, a test. If change was required the problem would be identified, an alteration made and the next firing a critical correction undertaken. This went on for the first 5 years (1974-1979) as I refined my techniques and gradually honed in on the mix that was most reflective of my needs – aesthetic and technical. By 1980, with the first rebuild of my kiln I was producing work that I felt represented a new plateau of capability. I'd also found a very satisfactory arrangement for the outsourcing of my clay mixing operation. This freed up an enormous amount of time for the making of pots, my true love and the most profitable activity in a potter's life.

At this point my clay body was composed of the cardinal triumvirate of 3 clays in relatively equal amounts (to offset any significant sudden compositional change) and small additions of highly controlled industrial products like silica(7%), feldspar(8%) and grog (5%). Unlike clay, these mined and/or manufactured additions are generally of guaranteed purity. But the composite mix takes on a personality of its' own and my work with Cardew has made me very sensitive to the problems that can arise. Once again, the metaphor of romance is apropos. Even under the best of circumstances, meaning that all attention lavished and great respect paid, there remains the simple fact that great love can go sour. Through no more fault than the vagaries of relationships a sad result will occur. Perhaps the heat has been applied too fast, or not fast enough. Maybe the mix has sat too long or not long enough. A premature frost or unseasoned wood has created an all too steamy atmosphere in the kiln. The result can be cracks or bloats or worse. I was taught, "Never blame it on the clay; it is your mistress and such accusatory barbs will do no good." So, the corollary is retrace your steps until you find the weakness and then make adjustments to avoid a repeat of said calamity. Playing the blame game in this romance is of no value. The clay and its components are, of course, without guile. The potter must assume sole responsibility for the deviation and alter course accordingly. In reference to my "kiln calamity" of Essay 7 there was a stark perception of wrongdoing. It was as if my clay was crying out to me in the only way it could. On each and every pot, every square inch was afflicted with gross protrusions, many of them nasty sharp and crusty like small scabs. This was a rape of a kind. A vendor somewhere in the chain of distribution, sensing the intimacy all potters assume had invaded our relationship with a startling casualness. In my usual forensic posture I began the search for answers. I scoured my kiln-firing notes for clues but, as I have written, all was routine. The charted course was precise; a proud testament to 30 years of firing experience. The fuel was the same and the weather too mild to have any impact. So I quickly eliminated all exterior sources for the failure. This left me with a single frightening theory, "The defect resided within the composite clay mix itself." I was crushed. How could my lover be so severe? In times past when an adjustment was called for the tuning process was subtle. Now, 35 years as a performing potter the time for snapped strings was long past. At most I'd

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engage in slight tuning to restore pitch: stretch taut to sharpen, a gentle turn back to eliminate the edge. But what lay before me in this failed firing echoed with such a heinous cacophony I began to question the instrument itself. And then it struck me again. I could no longer hide from the truth that this inanimate friend, my lifelong companion and intimate partner had been attacked. I had meeting after meeting with the people that had assumed responsibility for the blending. I tested and retested with singularity every component of the composite clay mix and nothing seemed amiss. I then remixed and retested the composite blend itself and in startling contrast to the failed results the revisited batch performed fully normal again. Just as I began to prepare for the eventuality that I would never know precisely what had transpired I received a phone call that another potter had suffered an event exactly similar to mine. With this opportunity to cross-check I continued the sleuthing with renewed vigor. By identifying shared components I now was convinced that human error was to blame and the quest became a crusade. I was supported in this by the opinions of two experts known in the field for their sober methodology. With their help undisputable evidence surfaced that my clay had been polluted and based on these findings and further testing I theorize that my time-tested formula had been rendered moot by the substitution of a rogue inferior medium duty grog for the carefully regulated high duty product I'd chosen with precision. I now would need to convince those that had assumed responsibility for the mixing that it was their mistake and would need their undivided attention to move beyond.

In the unspoken humility of the relationship a potter has with the clay there is no place for rancor or revenge. Further, the person(s) contracted to do the work of mixing must assume that this intimate relationship is theirs by proxy. Among other things this means if there is a failure all effort must be made to ascertain the cause. Simply throwing up one's hands in resignation and walking away is not sufficient. Due diligence must be undertaken and a good faith effort made to determine the cause; without this energy intimacy will atrophy and the love affair end. A potter's passion knows no bounds; my protective instincts were fully engaged and the more this Jobber hid behind the willingness to blame the messenger (my clay mix and its inherent frailties) the more certain I became that I would need to come to its' rescue. If no one speaks up for the clay it becomes an easy target for perversions by non-stakeholders, after all, to them it is simply mud.

In fairness to the Jobber (and in particular a certain person in his employ) there was a preliminary surge to identify a cause. Every phone call to this Customer Service person was answered and an initial strategy for testing commenced. But as I indicated in previous paragraphs there was absolutely nothing in these tests that bore even the slightest resemblance to the affliction let loose on my pots. Early on there was some suspicion that the grog addition should be closely investigated due to a puzzling notation in the mix-ticket. My Jobber keeps quite thorough records of each mix as a means of assuring quality from batch to batch. A Lot number assigned by the Mill of Purchase identifies each component of the blend. However, in the field that should have had the Lot Number for the Grog addition there was a tell-tale description that spelled the word "None". As I became more intrigued by this notation both the Jobber and myself began to suspect that the company responsible for that material should be brought in to address the potential for a corrupted material. Samples of the bad pots were sent out to the Midwestern headquarters of this company. One of the samples was a teapot. Teapots are

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made in several stages. First the body of the pot is thrown and later the spout is thrown. After drying it becomes more rigid, the spout is pared to size and then attached to the body of the pot. After this the handle is applied. This particular teapot body had been made one day with the final clay from the previous batch mixed months earlier. When the new mix arrived the spout was thrown. Then a day or so later the pot was assembled as described above. After firing this pot demonstrates that it was the specific components in the new mix wherein the failure occurred because the body of the pot is without blemish but the spout and handle (both made from the new mix) are full of the characteristic pox. When comparing the mix tickets of both batches the only glaring difference is a new Grog and this mysterious notation "None" in the field where the Lot Number usually is recorded. Because of my large kiln and infrequent firings a loss of this magnitude endangers more than my sensibilities as a potter. The economics of a small, fragile business like mine issues a shrill warning siren when the mathematics of double-entry bookkeeping becomes covered in red. The journey to assign blame and perhaps recover some losses began.

My first phone call was to my own insurance company. I had a sincere hope there was some coverage in the reams of invoices I'd paid over the years that might protect me in a loss like this. I was told that my insurance was primarily to protect me from a loss incurred by the public due to my negligence. So the obvious next step was to have a frank discussion with the company that mixed my clay. After all, they were the last people to touch my clay before I used it and there were these other nagging realities: a similar loss by another potter (as mentioned before) and the mysterious absence of a Lot Number referencing which Grog had been used. So with great regret I sat down with the owner of this establishment knowing that it would be the end of our 27 year relationship. Although he had been sympathetic with my plight he also had remained very distant, making very little effort to facilitate the sleuthing required to come to grips with the true source of my disaster. This, too, did not sit well with me. I had called him on several occasions to please come and visit my workshop to see the pots all arranged outside of the kiln. Our locations are a mere forty minutes apart; we actually both sit on the same major roadway. His trip would have required one right turn out of his driveway and one left turn into mine. Hardly an inconvenient journey. One excuse, which reverberates for me because of its callous indifference, was "I've got to go flying; I'm studying to get my pilot's license." So to this day the only visit this man has ever made to my workshop was 27 years ago, when he persuaded me that he could mix my clay for me.

### Vocation as Metaphor

Ironically the baggage I carry that is the heaviest is the choice I made to be a potter. The further away I get from the decision, made when I was about 20, the more puzzling it seems. I often conjecture that I am my own parent (father and/or mother) when the decision to be this person first manifested and wonder what may have contributed to their willingness to aid and abet this misguided career path. Let's be frank. A potter is not one of the top three. Lawyer, doctor and/or Indian Chief were the preferred titles as I grew up in the sandy suburbs of Long Island's North Shore town named Port Washington. I had an absolutely idyllic childhood, or so it seems from the distance of about 45 years. My father was an executive in a family owned manufacturing

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firm and his income in tandem with my mother's dowry made it possible to live in one of America's premier suburban locations. Although cloistered on something of a compound (my best friend in childhood writes that to this day he believes we were training Sandinistas) the full acre footprint was contiguous to a newly minted collection of tract housing replete with a local school and 50 families virtually identical to ours: two parents with household composed of working veteran fathers and stay-at-home Moms raising anywhere from 1 to 4 children. A noteworthy exception is that in my best-friends family (virtually identical in composition to mine save the fact that the youngest Piker was a girl and theirs was a boy) the Stay-At-Home Mom happened to be a pediatrician who had a home-based practice. But I digress...the premier interest as I drifted through those dreamy days of childhood was **playing**. The majority of games involved a ball and had a professional sport association that changed as the season's cycled. As we went back to school the Little League baseball season had come to a close and all equipment – bats, balls, mitts, batting helmets, etc – were stowed and football's paraphernalia – helmets, cleats, pads and footballs – became omnipresent. For the next 10 weeks all my friends and I thought about was football until late in January a large bouncing ball, shorts and sleeveless shirts appeared as Basketball became king. Within 6 weeks all of the heroics of this third sport began to fade and with the sounds and sights of spring came the return of the mighty diamond. The mitts were reclaimed, often replaced with the newer Micky Mantle autographed version or Willie Mays' five-fingered replica designed to execute his legendary basket catch and we grabbed our bats and headed for the school playground to enjoy endless homerun derby or the neighborhood favorite – a game of stickball played off the outer wall of the local, and recently built, primary school. We all attended this institution from kindergarten through sixth grade and gradually made our way out of the La Brea tar pit of a perfect childhood. We (my little group of friends) were sports lunatics, and nowhere was there an indication that the arts might figure prominently in my choice of career. But here's where my Freudian sleuthing gets methodical. Somewhere in this competitive, highly testosterone charged macho youth the seeds for a solitary pursuit of beauty was sown. Looking back I credit an extremely enlightened fifth (and subsequent Sixth) grade teacher for introducing me to the richness and variety of the world of art. The curriculum of those two years included close study of a number of great works of art. We read and performed A Midsummer Night's Dream and I acted the role of Puck (typecast because I stood less than 4 feet tall even then); we parsed the opera La Boheme and subsequently made a class trip to see it when performed in New York City. Same with Tchaikovsky's Sorcerer's Apprentice; as an added bonus we were in the first audience to see Fantasia (the feature cartoon) when Disney opened it at Radio City Music Hall in 19 62 (?). The most obtuse, but powerful, exposure was to a little known musical piece by Strauss called *Till Eulenspiegels*. We studied it as the opera and then choreographed our own ballet to accompany it. We performed it for the whole school and I remember the thrilling opening night as I pranced around in two-toned tights with my best girl-friend from across the street. These are profound childhood memories that seemed to take a back seat to my sports proclivity but my sneaking hunch is that they suited me better than the sweaty, bone-crunching life of an athlete. At the time I just didn't know it but I suspect those perplexed parents of mine were resigned that I was more Nuryev than Knute Rockne and allowed me pursuit of a passion rather than a paycheck. Now a parent twice over myself I know this moment, when a child chooses

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their career path. It requires interactive spectating rather than sideline coaching. It is a simple fact that my being a potter, for my family and me, had the seeds of both blessing and curse. The blessing of course is that choice was not necessary. This decision was made deep within my DNA and my parents were enlightened enough to know that the collateral damage of making me suppress this mighty urge would be catastrophic. The curse for us all has been sitting back and forever helping to mitigate the financial disaster that accompanies a career choice in the arts. The older I get the more compounded the effects. At times I feel like I'm hunched in a prenatal position as the walls of depreciation continuously crash all around me. Oh well...it will all be over soon.

But the journey has been mostly exhilarating and indulgent beyond most people's wildest imaginings. I hatched the scheme to establish my own workshop in long, romantic conversations with Svend when we were apprentices in England (see Essay 1 Apprenticeship). The vision I had was in large measure a variation of a medieval craft village. The facility required housing for the workers/craftsmen and a structure that would function as a workshop, housing the wheels and pots required to fill the "giamungous" kiln Svend was designing. Although the motivation for an enormous kiln is primarily the significant economy of scale, both Svend and I felt it was high time the modern potter's of the western world stop paying lip service to the idealization of this concept. Cardew's kiln, at 125 cu. ft. was considered overly large back in the 1970's. The first kiln built at Cornwall Bridge Pottery in 1974, and still in use today, is 5 times that size.

My first executive decision, at the tender age of 20 in 1972, when I approached my father to partner with me in a business to make and sell functional wood-fired pottery, was to convince both he and Svend that to get the business up and running we would need Svend's expertise. It took almost no persuading to convince them both that conceptually this was a good idea. In 1973 I invited Svend for a visit to New York City so that he could visit a piece of property my father had bought in a small village in northwestern Connecticut. I was of the opinion that it had many of the qualities I was looking for in this renaissance workshop I envisaged and I needed Svend's blessing so I could wholeheartedly embrace and commence work. Svend arrived in late November and was promptly escorted to 2 thanksgiving meals in a row: one at my parent's apartment and the next (a mere two hours later) at Evie's grandmother's home. Excess of this magnitude was a typically American characteristic and I began to feel that Svend's ideas about pots and potteries were more suited to the grandiosity of the US than the restrained constraints of post-empire UK. A bit ethnocentric in hindsight but fundamentally still arguable.

Svend and I, accompanied by both of my parents made a trip to Connecticut. Our initial concern was identifying if there was a plentiful source of wood. Originally we felt that siting the workshop near the clay deposits would be the most sensible. We had identified several southern states (Georgia, Kentucky or Tennessee) as perhaps the most logical locations for this fantasized potting workshop. But when the property in Connecticut seemed to fall in our lap I contacted many of the clay pits that would have supplied clay had we settled in the Deep South. The post-industrialization of these clay industries had streamlined their distribution so pervasively that the problem of shipping to any location in the contiguous United States was minor. Clay at the mine was "dirt" cheap. By the time it got shipped to us in Connecticut it was still "dirt" cheap. So we



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both became resigned to the fact that we would import the clay but utilize the wood from the local saw mills, of which there were many. The two major hurdles had been vaulted and Svend was intrigued with the challenge of helping me establish a pottery along the lines we had dreamed about back in our apprentice days in Cornwall England. As an historical aside there was a compelling coincidence at work: the village in the US that we were planning to call home and build our workshop is named Cornwall and the district in the UK that we had both trained in was also known as Cornwall. Svend gave his blessing, returned to England and married his long-time girlfriend (Jane Holden) and set off for the Far East on a working honeymoon. He planned to study the kilns in rural country potteries in Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia hoping to be fully prepared to begin the kiln-building upon his return to Cornwall, Connecticut in February of 1974. My responsibility would be to have the house livable, the workshop ready for potmaking and a source of bricks for the kiln found. Both of us lived up to our partnered commitment and when February of 1974 rolled around, Svend and Jane were picked up at Kennedy Airport and hustled up to Connecticut to face what Svend referred to as "the coldest weather he has ever been in." My father and mother were both convinced that my instinct to partner with Svend was of paramount importance. My apprenticeship with Cardew had been somewhat abbreviated. In the year of my study I had come away with a great deal of inspiration but very little practical from a training standpoint. With Svend in Connecticut with me I could continue the hands-on tutelage that would make it possible to leap frog from the ranks of dilettantes known as Apprentice to the solemn standing of Journeyman on their way to Master Craftsmen. We were all heady with excitement and the work that stretched out in an unending ribbon of effort was of no consequence. In fact it had an appeal not unlike the endless afternoons of playing that had typified my happy childhood. Sometime much later, well into my 40's, I overheard my mother's answer to a fellow parent. When asked, "Did you see anything in Todd's youth that would have lead you to think he might be a potter?" she paused and then opined that, "Todd has always been very athletic with an interest in many different areas and loves hard work. Being a potter requires a great deal of physical effort and skill and incorporates many disciplines. It is simply a fit for who he has always been." In that brief moment I learned more about myself than I had a right to know. Rarely are we privy to such an objective but loving enlightenment. Only a mother's love would be capable of such compassionate objectivity.

Without question the single most exciting find for all of us engaged in building this workshop was the remains of the H.K. Porter Refractory kilns just a mere hour down the road from where the pottery kiln was to be built. In one of my many phone calls around the country while looking for clays I learned that this plant had recently closed. It was the latest victim in the mass exodus of industrial facilities from the expensive labor pool and high real estate values that had transformed the landscape of New England. Once a veritable Mecca for all manor of manufacturing endeavor the late 20<sup>th</sup> century had forced many "smokestack" concerns like H.K. Porter into the Midwest, deep South or (god forbid) the Far East. This particular facility had been the crème de la crème for the material we were looking for. The kilns that had been dismantled were made from the highest quality and most heat resistant firebrick that money could buy. They had served their purpose and had been bull-dozed to the edge of the river that bordered the compound. When I heard that it was a matter of days before the whole lot would be

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pushed into the river to rest in perpetuity tumble-stacked next to brethren already firmly ensconced in the shoals I rallied the troops and we visited the plant. It was abandoned when we arrived. A bit like a ghost town or some contaminated nuclear waste site. There were cavernous rooms mostly emptied out save an occasional fork lift or pile of pallets. One room seemed to have been a testing room and that turned out to be a treasure trove of small lot oddball materials like sample clays or oxides used for testing. What was being tested and how remains a mystery but we loaded our little Volkswagen station wagon secure in the knowledge that if we didn't take these remnants the river soon would. But the most spectacular site of all was the piles and piles of what appeared from a distance to be rubble. But as we got closer there could be no mistake. The heft and purity of these bricks was unmistakable. We'd stumbled on a pirate's ransom. A few phone calls to local trucking companies and within a few days we were hand loading bricks into a payload bucket; those bricks would soon be sitting neatly stacked in our courtyard next to the site of the 625 cu. ft. kiln we planned to build once the spring thaw made foundation preparation possible. We bought two 40,000 pound loads (approximately 10000 bricks) for \$700 dollars delivered. The chemical analysis of these bricks indicated they were 95% mullite and even in the 1970's they sold, when new, for \$5 per brick. If you do the math you can see that this purchase alone made our little fledgling enterprise a viable business concern. We had saved close to \$50,000 dollars by scavenging, as any self-respecting potter should. Most of these bricks are still in use today, 35 years and 250 firings along. Save a thin skin of slag buildup they are still as white as driven snow; a testament to their extreme refractory capacity. They are sure to outlast me and the next savvy potter that is fortunate enough to carry on following my demise.

Svend and Jane had arrived in February 1974. The brick purchase was completed by March. We used the intervening winter months to receive and test clays and source wood from local saw mills. We also spent a lot of time insulating and equipping an old barn as our workshop. Meanwhile we had decided after a lot of conversation that we should build the simplest kiln we could, as this would be our virgin voyage as kiln builders. Many of the designs Svend had seen were quite complex structures with compound arches requiring elaborate buttressing. The kiln that appeared the most manageable from an engineering perspective is one that is known as the "tube" kiln. Svend refers to it as a "sino-korean tubular pipe kiln" and those that are familiar with Japanese kilns call it an "anagama" (single chamber) kiln. It is two parallel walls buried in the ground and spanned by an arch. Imagine if you can a piece of bamboo split vertically and laid on the ground. Many that happen upon it say it looks like the fuselage of an airplane or submarine. It is pitched upward at about a 10 degree angle; so positioned to encourage the natural transfer of heat from the downward end where the main firebox resides upward through the "setting" of ware and eventually out the chimney on the higher end. Strictly speaking this is a cross-draft kiln. Aside from being simple to construct it also is rudimentary in function. Cross draft kilns are notoriously uneven in heat distribution and therefore comparatively inefficient when compared to more modern (later than the 10<sup>th</sup> century) kilns. But I argue that the absence of interior walls mean that all of the generated heat goes to firing sellable ware and therefore the inefficiencies are offset by the phenomenal yield once the kiln is fired correctly. Some designs just can't be improved on: like, for instance, the wheel! I feel like a protective

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parent about this kiln. It has been through three rebuilds and continues to serve me valiantly.

We were busy as bees throughout the spring and summer of 1974. As soon as the frost broke we contracted a man with a backhoe to excavate the hole for the kiln. My father, in characteristic myopic fashion, had instructed us to dig the hole by hand. In retrospect it is a true Monty Python moment. There was a brief moment when the lunacy of the concept passed over us all but our earnestness to prevail ignored the fact that the amount of dirt to be shoveled would equal the full volume of a large train boxcar. But the deal breaker would be the twang of the first thrust with the shovel. Oh Yeah; it's New England and mostly large boulders at every turn. We figured the backhoe was the answer to all of our problems until the day after its' arrival a gasket blew and the large rusty metal eyesore sat stranded for weeks until the a replacement hose arrived. Each passing day became an encounter with the fundamentals of problem solving. Svend and I parsed them one by one. Our working relationship had been forged in the lonely Wenford workshop of Michael Cardew. This was the fifth pottery Cardew had established – Winchcome Pottery (1931) in Gloucestershire, Vume (!945) Pottery in Ghana, Abuja Pottery (1952) in Nigeria, Darwin Pottery (1966) in Australia. All over the globe he had worked pure magic when he managed to create a product from raw materials that he conjectured were in neighboring soils. His vision then turned to the practical challenges of organizing like-minded souls to undertake months of struggle to create pots from nothing but a dream. Our minor skirmishes seemed insignificant in comparison to his mighty battles with the elements. In one very notable encounter with an uncrossable chasm Michael had been on the verge of starvation. This was the role model Svend and I kept tucked in our hip pocket. Out of sight from the general public so that no one would think us any more deluded than we already appeared. We knew how bad things could get and we were continually putting our fingers in the holes as they sprung leaks. One by one: we needed expensive kiln furniture, so we made it; we needed clay as mortar to lay our bricks so we dug it off the mountain nearby and processed it in our workshop; we needed samples fired so we found a local potter to help us with this task. The list was never ending and through it all we kept one goal in mind – make enough pots to have our first firing. We were like Odysseus passing the island of the Sirens. All of the shrill cacophony around us could not stay us from attempting to realize the shared vision. That is until Svend's marriage began to show the effects of the strain.

Svend's wife had been terribly homesick from the first minute of her stay in the States. I was no stranger to that emotion having suffered through it continuously while away at boarding school and then again while an apprentice with Cardew at age 18. It's a horrible sensation and can't be rationalized away. Like many phobias it takes an unbreakable grip and then thrashes around. The more effort one makes to break loose the tighter and deeper the fangs penetrate. This new business endeavor was full of stress from morning throughout the day and well into the night. The complexities of my relationship with my family heaped on top of the uncertainty of Svend and Jane's future as a newly married couple and their status as employees versus owners made for some extremely vague working and living conditions. Svend and I did a magnificent job of keeping the doubt out of our relationship but the more powerful our teamwork became the more oppressive life around us seemed. Come August, a mere 7 months after their arrival Svend and Jane decided to return to England. Svend offered to stay until we'd had three

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firings. It was a very generous move considering his marriage was hanging by a thread and I resolved to do everything within my power to make that happen as soon as possible.

By late August the kiln and kiln shed were finished. We'd also managed to make a load of pots (generally about 3 tons of ware) and many thousands of pounds of homemade kiln shelves and bricks to be used as shelf supports and had collected what we thought would be enough wood for our first firing. The first match was struck fittingly on Labor Day in September of 1974. For a complete chronicle of the drama that unfolded in conjunction with Firing #1 please see the essay "kiln Calamities".

In hindsight the struggle to be a potter was just beginning. Svend and Jane left just before Thanksgiving of 1974. Evie and I drove them to the port of Montreal where they took the long, slow boat home to England. When I returned to Cornwall Bridge it was the first weekend in December and I felt bereft. I had lost my good friend and work partner. The pottery workshop became a cold and lonely place for me but I kept revisiting the Cardew chronicles of hope overcoming despair. I chose to see my glass as half full and simply took each day as a singular event. Before long I was surrounded by a team of eager students interested primarily in working with the large woodfired kiln but also attracted by the ethical commitment to make beautiful functional pots that would sell for a reasonable price. As the years have passed and I have matured as an artist I realize why it took the Chinese multiple generations to reach the zenith of their ceramic accomplishments. I am through a good portion of my working life and I still feel just a babe in the woods regarding the skills to make myself understood. Part of me hopes there may be a way for others to pick up where I leave off and keep trudging toward the manna of beauty. But I fear this endeavor, turning clay to stone, will go the way of the covered wagon. A quaint reminder that there were those with a passion to work hard and get dirty while pointed toward the horizon.

### Family, Friends and the Game of Tennis

There is not a life lived, human or otherwise, that isn't a collaborative effort. In the context of a memoir this statement, both wide and general, encompasses biologic nurturing and physical/emotional co-dependence in a single sweep. None of us, no matter how well endowed can accomplish an unassisted arrival. But the journey, once begun, will proceed with an endless progression of variables triggered by communal interaction. Some of these encounters become encumbrances, others prove enriching; some yield a sense of empowerment while others extract energy like some kind of vacuum. My older sister sent one of the most provocative New Yorker cartoons I've ever seen after our families had converged in Las Vegas. The descriptive title along the bottom reads ***Family Reunion***. The drawing depicts what we can assume are father, mother, aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews etc. in bathing attire on a potentially fun-filled outing standing next to what appears to be a large lake or pond of some kind ready to take the gleeful plunge. However, the sign identifying this body of liquid cautions: "***La Brea Tarpits***". In the realm of family interaction there is a primal ooze of complexity that serves to protect but often spills over as excess. Very few of us escape a lifetime without the smothering suffocation that began as a gentle, nurturing good night kiss. Approval, rejection, support, neglect, pride and embarrassment are powerful motivators. Decisions about life, particularly career, are made within the context of the elaborate web spun around us to

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manage our journey. Like it or not, our family and friends are stranded observers in this intricate weave and, passive or engaged, exert influence that often exceeds their conscious grasp. Making sense of this becomes either a life lived chasing or chased. In either case the effects are here to stay and, in my case, require some parsing to achieve some clarity.

I've written briefly about the moment that I walked out of the apprenticeship I was serving in my parent's house (see Essay 1-Apprenticeship). We had traveled to Ireland together as I embarked on the voyage into adulthood. At that point there was absolutely no indication that my career path would set me down the road to being a potter. I wrote of my parent's willingness to let go and their encouragement that I was prepared for the journey, whatever might come my way. What I haven't written about is the great sadness that befell my father as he watched me walk away. To this day I am certain a part of him was terrified that I might just walk out of his life.

Both parents became enchanted by Wenford Bridge Pottery and Michael Cardew. Soon after my arrival in Cornwall to begin the apprenticeship Michael embarked on a several week tour of the US as a visiting potter. His primary goal was to introduce the American potting community to his work and vision while serving as the Chief Pottery Officer in Abuja, Nigeria. Accompanying him on this tour was Kofi Athey and Ladi Kwali. Kofi, a Ugandan potter that had become a pivotal figure in Michael's life throughout the African portion of his career, served as a translator and protector for the much esteemed Ladi Kwali as she traveled from site to site within the US. Ladi Kwali in her role as one of Nigeria's most respected potters had legitimized Michael's efforts by embracing his vision for the Abuja Pottery Training Center. Michael felt the timing for a visit by these highly motivated, skilled craftsmen would be particularly interesting to African-Americans. Bear in mind this occurred in 1970. Alex Haley had just published *ROOTS* (an autobiography chronicling his own search for the West African ancestry that pre-dated his slave genealogy). Cardew's concept, although well-intentioned, underestimated the suspicions a Colonialist from Great Britain traveling with African entertainers would engender. This became something of a lose-lose proposition at the universities where "black power" had become the battle cry. But removed from those politically charged settings, within the sanctity of craft groups and enlightened liberal garden parties, Kofi, Ladi Kwali and Michael Cardew became dignified Ambassadors for a civilized, exotic and unique exchange of new ideas and magnificent creations. There is some footage somewhere of Ladi Kwali crafting one of her signature hand-built pots in front of riveted Americans. The finished work is a stunning example of grace and skill utilizing primitive techniques to create a huge, beautiful water jar in a matter of minutes. Michael had hoped to fundamentally alter African American attitudes toward craft with this trip. He was saddened by the narrow impact his trip had achieved in that regard. I could feel his pain. As a college student I too had hoped to have an impact on the chasm that separated me from this same segment of American society. Michael's efforts, although of modest immediate success, were a clear example of a person deeply committed to the principles of equal opportunity falling short while aiming high. I was consumed with pride in my association with this 70 year-old man that had the courage to even attempt such a task. I had urged him to seek out my parents while in the New York City segment of the trip. That encounter, between Cardew and his Nigerian friends and

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my parents at our New York City apartment, became as important to my friendship with Michael (if not more so) as my entire year of cloistered study.

In the context of a father and his, perhaps primal, sense of loss with me so far away and pointed towards a life path very different than the conventional post-war business model, his exuberance upon finding in Michael a new and fascinating friend turned into a quest to become familiar with the mechanics of a potter's life. In this way he saw an opportunity to reestablish the partnership that typified all of his closest personal associations. My father was the quintessential small-business man. Although he had the ability to think and behave as an anonymous corporate cog his temperament made him far more comfortable in intimate business relationships that had the potential for sizeable leveraged return. In his lifetime he was partnered with 7 close family members in at least 5 distinctively different businesses. He helped start a manufacturing company, a fast-food restaurant, a health food grocery store, a financial product business, an advertising firm and a pottery business. He dabbled in real estate and the stock market and was quite successful in both although never professionally engaged in either. Making pots, as a way of life was something that seemed to engage that most basic cautionary advice he would float my way: "Todd, find something you love and are good at." So he made it his business to understand the professional potter's challenge in the event there might come a time he would be called on to nurture a startup with his son. Beware of self-fulfilling prophecy's.

From Michael's perspective this new friendship touched a multitude of important nerves. I think primarily he was relieved for me that my parents supported my choice to bypass college for the time being and spend time as a potter's apprentice. But beyond that there was now a newly established pied a Terre in a very important world city. It wasn't long after Michael's visit to New York City that my parents made an excursion to Cornwall UK to visit with me and get a first hand experience of the pots and the potting life I had found in this small Cornish village. What they found enchanted them even further as the erudition of this 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher/scholar was profoundly evident in the extraordinary personality that defined Wenford Bridge Pottery. In the short span of the week visit my parents met Michael's three sons, Seth, Cornelius, and Ennis and learned of the large part that music played in the family life. Seth is an accomplished clarinetist and Cornelius, before his tragic and premature death, was a world renowned musician of alternative music styles. Certainly a well trained classicist, like his father he chose a decidedly unique avenue to explore as a professional. Michael was full of pride for Cor (as he called him) but remained somewhat skeptical about the cacophonous scores he wrote and performed with the motley group of musicians he gathered into the Scratch Orchestra (organized primarily to have fun and perform his latest creations). This was my first look at the circuitous and synergistic nature of human expression. There is no way a person born at the beginning of a century could fully understand and embrace those artforms positioned as vanguard efforts almost 100 years later. Whether it be painting, sculpture, music, dance, poetry, pottery the definition of "NEW" must accompany an admission that provocation is a goal. The test of time will determine whether the experiment is a success and Michael was reserving judgment. In Cor's case musician's like John Cage had blazed the trail that he was on until a freak swipe by a car on a London street during a snowstorm ended his life. Ennis, the baby, seemed to define himself as the one Cardew that was capable of leading a conventional life and building

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significant financial assets. Not only was he an accountant but he also managed to court and marry the heiress to a Greek Shipping fortune. Michael was very proud of the wheels of Parmesan cheese and cases of Chilean wine Ennis was able to commandeer (presumably from ship rations allocated for commanding ranks) and at the pottery they were served at every opportunity. Without fail, no matter how many times he had said it previous, as he poured the wine or carved off a hunk of the magnificent Parmesan he said, "This is compliments of Ennis and Josephine. How very nice of them to spoil me in this fashion!" I leave Seth, the eldest, to last because of the complexity his life brought to Wenford while I was there and since Michael's passing. As my mother likes to say, "There are no short stories only sagas!" and this one reflects almost epic father/son/grandson issues. When listening to Michael talk about Seth and watching the relationship perched, as it were, on the sidelines I would liken it mostly to a Greek Tragedy. Having been a Classics scholar at Oxford Michael was no stranger to this artform and his sadness when interacting with Seth seemed attended by a hidden Chorus wailing and moaning just barely out of sight. Michael referred to Seth as his "nemesis" and was visibly disapproving and shaken when three months into my apprenticeship Seth's wife Jutta and their three small children, Aeschylus, Ara and Gaea were parked at the pottery in Cornwall while Seth remained in London sorting out his life. They were sequestered in an empty attic space just above the potting workshop. It was a scene out of Dickens. No heat, minimal light and nothing but the warmth of family love to sustain them for the many long months of separation from husband/father. Although Michael acted the curmudgeon Scrooge, in hindsight it is clear that his generosity in taking them in and providing a stable environ for the kids to continue school and share in the world of their now-famous grandfather was noble indeed. Not to mention Jutta began to bring a domestic dimension to the pottery setting that had become decidedly crude and bachelor-like. The sharing of the cooking chores faded as Jutta became queen of the Larder and assumed the responsibility for shopping and cooking. After about six months or so Seth finally moved from London to Wenford Bridge and began a long-expected apprenticeship of his own with his father. This made Michael supremely happy for it meant that the legacy of Wenford as a functioning pottery owned and run by a Cardew would continue after his death. There were any number of previous students that would have been glad to take over the daily tasks of managing the workshop but Michael was clear that the whole enterprise would pass to someone in the family so no need sticking around unless you were willing to work for Seth. My only comment is that although an apple from the tree, Seth Cardew fell and rolled into some kind of science experiment and became a hybrid fruit. His loyalty in the end became the Church of God and his life as a potter has always had the look of expedience rather than conviction. After Michael's death Seth and his middle child Ara ran the pottery for about 10 years until a fierce enmity drove a wedge between the partnership as the physical plant collapsed in a heap between them. Wenford was sold in 2005 to non-potters and all the memories and archives at that history reside at the Victoria Albert Museum for any caring to research the colorful life of potter Michael Cardew. A biography, supposedly full of lurid details, is planned for publication in 2008. The remaining family has tried unsuccessfully to expunge certain facts but soon the world will get a peek at the complex Edwardian whose life began at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His personal tale holds a mirror to many important issues of our

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time and if closely examined will yield a portrait of a man of passion who kept his head just above the roiling surf of the worlds he chose to inhabit.

My own parents were smitten by the Cardew magic. Not long after my apprenticeship they returned to Wenford to produce a wonderful, award-winning documentary of Michael. It is called *Making a CoffeePot* and features a narration written and spoken by Michael himself. The accompanying music is a clarinet-recorder duet performed by Michael and Seth. It is a charming and exquisite work in its own right. It also paints a noble and dignified picture of the Cardew family. This is an example of the reach a close network can accomplish.

When the line between friends and family begin to blur there is often an opportunity for the most productive of all human interaction. The bond forged between the Cardew family and the Piker family was precipitated by the extraordinary friendship that developed between Michael Cardew and me. This original relationship was founded on a mutual fascination with the substantive yield of a creative life. We seemed to hold common values in the assessment of issues about Quality and Good and understood implicitly the profundity of falling short in effort. There was no need to spell out the subtlety of this communal understanding and in fact recognize the futility of such an endeavor. There is an extended family that encircles those of us who travel within the parameters of these uncharted sensibilities. Michael introduced me to the work of Robert Pirsig and his book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a tome penned to plumb the depths of the philosophical correlation between Aesthetics and Ethics. Cardew maintained that these concepts were fundamentally one and the same *à la* Wittgenstein when in his Lecture on Ethics he quotes Professor Moore, "Ethics is the general inquiry into what is good." To this day I continue the search for instances of simultaneity as in Art and Life, family and friends, time and space. The Fraternal Order includes those who have no fear of hard work, understand the nature of challenge and sacrifice in the pursuit of productivity, recognize the virtue of a life committed to happiness and have the patience and fortitude to swim against the tide when it turns.

In the 35 years that my home has been the setting for both my personal and professional life I've tried to blend the best of cottage industry with communal life; a setting not unlike Cardew's Wenford Bridge Pottery. My home is a small, colonial farmhouse that shares the lot with several other buildings. The largest outbuilding became the pottery workshop and housed the wheels and kilns. The workers – myself (and family) and the student/assistants – occupied the main house communally up until the early 1990's when both outbuildings were renovated as domiciles for the itinerant potters that sought me and the workshop out as a setting to continue their training to become production potters. In an effort to remain a small enterprise I've eschewed markets that would yield orders requiring me to "manage" instead of "make". This would have taken me into an entirely different profession and Cardew had warned that excessive mechanization by a potter would doom the effort: "One cannot make love by proxy!" I knew just what this meant the minute I heard it said and have resigned myself to seek riches measured by the quality of my life as opposed to the quantity of my possessions.

As a potter and a teacher I have experienced a bounty of intimate friendships across the 35 years in the profession. Since 1974 I've partnered with approximately 35 people as collaborators – teaching and being taught -- in this experiment to create a setting sympathetic to an almost Utopian ideal. Certainly no life is perfect and the



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realization of my model is no exception. But in retrospect there are many indications that I didn't fall too very short of the mark. What follows are vignettes, chronologically presented, that examine some of the players and the complexities of their interlocking role in the jigsaw composition of my story.

### **Svend Bayer**

Svend Bayer looms as one of the largest figures in my life (see Essay 1). His influence permeates almost every facet of my personality. I will never forget our first meeting at Wenford Bridge Pottery. He was out in the kiln shed when I first arrived. I had gone in search of him on Michael's urging and encountered him busily preparing to pull handles for some very large and unbelievably beautiful jars he had just made. He had been at Wenford about a year (I've written about our relationship and his remarkable prodigious progress in Essay (?)). He was just beginning to feel his way towards mastering the ability to make very large pots using Michael's technique of adding sections to achieve volumes far greater than possible throwing a pot from a single lump of clay. The pot to which he was about to attach a handle was a cider jug that was itself inspired by a shape Michael had become identified with through his career reviving English slipware in England. I immediately recognized it as an interpretation of the Master's form but endowed with an indelible personal quality. In an instant I understood the value of this kind of learning -- apprentice, journeyman, Master -- and took Svend's enthusiasm as an endorsement of the process. For all practical purposes I became **his** apprentice and shadowed his every move for the next year. Unfortunately my progress was anything but prodigious and the arc of the voyage to competence much more circuitous. But once our friendship was cemented I looked to partner my strengths with his as a lever to move heaven and earth in my quest to realize the dream of becoming a potter.

### **David Rubenstein**

In 1976 I met a couple from the Boston area that had been instructed by their 18 year old son to investigate the Cornwall Bridge Pottery. Their boy had recently taken a passionate interest in the art and was busily getting deeper and deeper into the many facets of the profession while "employed" as the technician for the Radcliffe Pottery in Cambridge. During their visit with me, his parents went on at great length about David and the contagion he had transmitted for the kind of folk art they had perceived at Cornwall Bridge Pottery. I suggested I stop to meet their son next visit to Boston. I was there often because my older sister had relocated outside in Belmont following her undergraduate years at Boston University. She and her husband were running a fast-food restaurant called the Underdog and I loved to take time away from Cornwall and visit them in that city full of young people and young energy. I was looking to take on an apprentice at Cornwall Bridge and thought maybe David would be the right person. According to his parents he would be a perfect fit so I scheduled to interview him on the next visit to Boston to visit with my sister. My younger sister Kim was living and working with my older sister at the time so when I set off for the meeting with David I took her with me as company (and another pair of ears). I found David in the cavernous halls of a basement in a large brick building owned by Harvard. He was firing a kiln I believe and was walking around barefoot while attending to other duties. We shook hands and began to talk. The encounter lasted about 45 minutes and I felt, based on his

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answers to many of my questions, that he was perfect to fill the vacancy I had for an apprentice at Cornwall Bridge. Later my sister Kim wondered aloud about my interviewing tactics, "You made the job sound pretty miserable. But every time you told him things like 'low pay' and 'long hours' and 'lonely countryside' he seemed to become more convinced that this was what he wanted to do. What's with that?" I hadn't realized this before but certainly this was part of joining the Order. I needed to establish that he had what it was going to take to persevere in this thankless endeavor. Somehow my instincts told me it was best to paint the bleak picture and see what kind of person it would flesh out. I knew that David had the necessary moxie for the undertaking, what I was to learn as time went on was how his precocious talents would help my fledgling business.

#### **Mark Hewitt and Robert Barron**

Mark Hewitt is an English potter that began his career as a Cardew apprentice a few years following my tenure. The romantic setting and powerful legacy that surrounded Wenford Bridge Pottery had smote him, like me. He'd been swept up in the tales of an Englishman that voyaged to Africa to work at times in penury in pursuit of an ideal setting to make pots. His personal fascination compelled him to travel to the source of Cardew's African years. After his apprenticeship with Michael he traveled via Land Rover across the Sahara Desert to Nigeria and spent time visiting Abuja Pottery. As Mark looked to the future to cement the skills necessary to become a production potter he sensed that he would need a workplace that had greater demand for production than the sleepy retirement business that Wenford had become. His instincts led him to seek out Svend Bayer who by this time (in 1978) had established a pottery with an enormous woodfired kiln in North Devon, UK. His primary instinct was to work with Svend and learn the tools of the trade in much the way he had been apprenticed to Cardew. However, Svend's vision of potmaking did not include a team producing ware but he recommended to Mark that he write me and perhaps there might be an opportunity to sign on to the Cornwall Bridge Pottery and thereby helping grow my vision. As has become a signature of his success, Mark's timing was perfect. I was indeed in search of another assistant/apprentice having lost David Rubenstein through attrition (the 4 year mark is something of a final threshold for an apprentice journey). Mark came to study with me on a visitor's Visa and stayed one way or another across 4 years time. In the end he married a girl local to northwest Connecticut and the two have established residency and a pottery with a large woodfired kiln in North Carolina. Mark has become a beacon in the world of woodfiring potters. His level of success is legendary and the body of work produced, with an ever-changing team of assistants also, over the 30 years he has been in Pittsboro, North Carolina establishes him as one of the most prolific and talented studio potters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (in my humble opinion).

Robert Barron is an Australian that phoned from Quebec, Canada around the time that Mark Hewitt arrived. I had recently become a party to a wildly successful marketing phenomenon with a local nursery of some renown. White Flower Farm, one of the country's most successful mail-order nursery's (founded by a writer named Bill Harris) had decided that a flowerpot I made would be a sensible add-on for a newly

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created forcing bulb called a Jasmine. The marketing hook was it “bloomed in the dead of winter” and they sold 40, 000 of them for several years running. They projected that 10% of those sales would go also choose to purchase a woodfired, stoneware planter and so they placed yearly, juicy orders for pots from “a local potter”. We were that “local potter” and with such a large order in house for the foreseeable future I felt I would need the help of potters eager and able to make and fire lots of pots. Robert, like Mark, hadn’t had a lot of production experience but was keen to learn the trade and in particular work with the large wood-fired kiln. So from about 1979 thru 1985 the pottery was staffed by a cosmopolitan crew of potter’s from literally all over the world. Along with an Australian and Englishman, a German came for a residency of a year or so as well. Earlier in the 1970’s I had hosted a Nigerian potter and a young Japanese potter. Cornwall Bridge was beginning to emerge as a western extension of Cardews Wenford Bridge Pottery. Something akin to the next generation with orders and an ever-changing staff of energetic, youthful and committed potters. In retrospect I couldn’t be more proud of this happenstance but at the time I recall feeling besieged by the continuously changing cast of characters and wondering as the 1980’s came to a close if the tumult might be deleterious to the sense of stability I had hoped to foster for my 2 young daughters.

#### Mark Skudlarek , Hoyt Barringer and Nancy Tighe

Mark Skudlarek was another referral from Svend Bayer. Mark had been living and studying to become a potter in the small pottery village of La Bourne in the southern part of France. The village of LA Bourne deserves a pottery book all to its own. Sometimes referred to as Mashiko ( a legendary Japanese pottery village) of the Western World it is the home of no fewer than 30 potters and their families. Many of these potters make functional ware and fire wood-burning kilns. When Mark arrived for his interview I was as intrigued by tales from La Bourne as anything else he had to say about his previous experience. I knew, almost immediately that I wanted him to become part of the Cornwall Bridge pottery team. He was friendly and direct and had (has) an inward humility that resonates with an almost sanctified purity. He is the youngest of 9 children born to a very hard-working farm family in central Minnesota. The years of struggle and visceral understanding of a life of manual labor predisposes him to a potter’s life almost genetically. He attended St Johns University in Minnesota and has a brother that is a Catholic priest (otherwise he, himself, might have ended up joining that Order). However, he is cosmopolitan and visionary in his professional life. He married Michael Cardew’s granddaughter and they have established a pottery in southern Wisconsin. Mark was at Cornwall Bridge for 3 very productive years. His name is engraved on a plaque I’ve dubbed The Harris Bowl (in honor of William Harris: the man that founded White Flower Farm). Mark holds the record for having made the greatest number of these planters (434) in one weeks time.

Hoyt Barringer arrived soon after Mark Skudlarek (sometime in the mid 1980’s). Hoyt had been making pots with his girlfriend Nancy Tighe in a small Irish village. They had established a small woodburning kiln but felt they needed more production experience before they put down roots and established a pottery workshop. Hoyt sought me out after hearing about Cornwall Bridge from an Irish potter. As a native

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of Connecticut he felt his years in Europe, although full of romance and music, had left him long on experience but short on practical skills. A stint at Cornwall Bridge was just what we both had in mind after our meeting. As added value he brought a remarkable musical gift. A beautiful, soft, sonorous tenor with an ability to pull out a guitar at any moment and serenade away the days troubles. Many were the hours spent listening to Hoyt strum and hum while downing a few refreshing Guinness beers and talking about the joys of living in Ireland. I know that is where he longed to be but the reality of making a living there as a potter seemed impossible. For the time being Connecticut was his focus and shortly after his arrival his girlfriend Nancy Tighe joined the Cornwall Bridge Pottery team also. Within a year or so they were married in a small ceremony at a local Cornwall church. The pastor that performed the ceremony has come to be known as the potter's pastor for he's married at least 3 couples that called Cornwall Bridge pottery home for the tenure of their apprenticeship. Hoyt and Nancy left Cornwall Bridge soon after they were married and worked helping Simon Pearce establish his workshop in Quechee VT until they were ready to start their own workshop further up in the Northeast Kingdom region of northern Vermont. I used to ask Hoyt if people there walked around with bells on the ends of their shoes. It sounds like a magical place to live and work and many fine pots were made there by Hoyt and Nancy.

#### Cary Hulin

In 1988 Cary Hulin and his wife Elaine came to Cornwall Bridge. Cary had been the Head Potter at a pottery factory in Wisconsin and was the first potter I retained that was fully trained as a thrower before he started work with me. The work in Wisconsin was primarily a "piece-rate" position and exacted a large toll on the spiritual value Cary placed on being a potter and living the potter's life. This was an eye-opening association for me and helped restore my own convictions at a time when I was beginning to reach a low ebb in the arc of inspiration that has kept me a potter. Cary had sought out the counsel of Cornwall Bridge Pottery. He was primarily interested in learning the art of wood-firing but he also longed to join the potter's community that was becoming characteristic of those that had spent time with me in Connecticut. I was both flattered and inspired. Surely the flattery had palliative value but the inspiration was much more valuable for my work. With Cary came a renewal in my own belief that what I was attempting here at Cornwall Bridge was indeed of value and reflected an important structural difference in the potting community. We spent four extremely productive years together and he continues to be a close friend and confidant. He is the consummate potter to this day. He has a humility about the profession that makes his work strong and persuasive. Whatever you do, be very careful about getting him talking because he has volumes to tell you. If he gets in earshot of a fellow traveler you might as well get comfortable because he relishes the exchange.

#### Philippe and Bela Selendy

In this same pool swim Bela and Philippe Selendy. These brothers were my neighbors in Cornwall when as teenagers back in the middle of the 1980's their mother Janine drove into the driveway and basically booted them out of the car. She marched up

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to me and suggested I utilize their boyish energy in any manor of manual labor to give them a taste of the ennobling aspect of “working with their hands”. Ideally she would have liked them to learn how to throw pots but their tenure – a summer vacation from school – was too short to engage in any form of motor skill training. In essence they became apprentices and received virtually no remuneration if my memory serves. In their mother’s eye their reward was to become a part of the communal unit at Cornwall Bridge Pottery and learn the art of life. I owe Janine an eternal debt of gratitude for delivering these two extraordinary people into my orbit and me into theirs.

It is my recollection the elder (by about 18 months) Philippe began as a day laborer first. He embraced every task, be it wood moving, bat scraping, clay preparation, floor sweeping or the like, with a healthy and characteristic enthusiasm but quickly understood that the most efficient way to accomplish the task at hand would be to manage a crew. So within a few days of his employ his brother Bela appeared to help with the latest project. I remember hearing Philippe explain the intricacies of the wood-moving task to his brother. Bela, in characteristic fashion, jumped in with great enthusiasm. In hindsight I recall thinking how very quickly Bela became extremely proficient and how very clever it was for Philippe to concoct this graceful segue out of one of the more brutish tasks that face a woodfiring potter. Not only was this vintage family dynamics at work but I was seeing, for the first time in this precocious 15 year old, the kind of intellectual wizardry that defines his present professional life as a top litigator at a prestigious law firm in New York City. As that summer came to an end Philippe resumed his academic life as a boarding student in a school near Boston. Bela, on the other hand, began a career as a day student at the nearby Hotchkiss School and this kept him available to me as an occasional wood-mover and assistant throughout his teenage years. Although I remained very close to Philippe and the family in general the friendship that started with Bela as a mentor relationship turned into something more like a collaboration. As I spent more time with Bela it became clear that there was a treasure trove of creative talents roiling within the restrictions this fancy prep school was trying to quash. Visiting the pottery and spending time with me seemed to give him ample opportunity to be fully engaged as a contributor based on merit rather than privilege. I recognized that his precocious behavior was something of a millstone for him and that given the opportunity he loved to relax, laugh and create in a playful way rather than perform and produce prodigiously as had become the norm. And so, an unlikely (due to our disparate ages) friendship began that has remained to this day.

His creative abilities are certainly a remarkable and defining trait. As a mere youngster (perhaps 9 years old) he had a weekly column in the local paper called Bela’s Mazes. The whole region knew him only as Bela. He met weekly deadlines and produced enough of these puzzles to compile and print a books’ worth of them that he sold. All of this before the age of 15. When I met him in the early 1980’s he was already a wizard with desktop computers and was writing programs to create Mazes with the fledgling machines. When I heard about his computing prowess we devised a project to computerize the Pottery’s growing mailing list. He managed the DBASE program “DOMAIL” that I used for years following his heroic (and paid) efforts entering the 8000+ names into the data file. To this day I see invented names that I’m sure he entered perhaps 20 years ago. Names like Harry Houdini or Ralph Mouth. His sense of humor was infectious and he was a joy to have around. As his teenage years came to an end and

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he went off to college at University of Chicago we stayed in touch across the summers. I knew of his growing interest in the film world and the work he had been doing with his mother and her various nonprofit projects. While he hung around the pottery we would talk about the possibility that we might together produce a short slide show about “making a teapot”. This went so well that we decided to enlarge the project to become a video about the pottery itself. This short documentary went on to receive a citation at the New York Film Festival in an albeit small category named Best Short Documentary in the Home category. But we were excited and proud of the accomplishment and finally created a teaching film I had wanted to do for years that would explore many of the theories I was developing about the art of potmaking as a result of my now-decades long career as a professional potter. When it came time for the narration Bela urged me to sit and script the text. It was that writing that initiated my belief that perhaps I had something useful to say as a potter. Without Bela’s prodding and friendship I never would have presumed I was capable of that kind of organized philosophical thinking nor the film product that followed, *Fundamental’s of Throwing: The Potter’s Dynamic*. The musical score is a typical Bela solution to a problem characteristic of many small budget films. Instead of borrowing money to use music that might be protected by ASCAP royalty requirements Bela fired up his digital piano and composed an original score. The music is exciting and appropriate and completely original. Yet another example of his ability to weave a marvelous tapestry from the colorful strands that life leaves scattered around. His life now is another example of the same genius at work. Married to a Swedish woman he has taken up as an expat outside of Stockholm with her and their 2 children. Although he is fully fluent he has chosen to be an internet entrepreneur rather than join the workaday Swedish world in order to be the stay at home parent and raise the kids. His wife, a chemist that has been promoted to management status, does battle in the marketplace as Bela sits at the controls of multiple websites built by him and designed to generate ad revenue as a result of their popularity with web surfers. Most of these sites are full of columns he has written – some satirically as in the case of [www.avantnews.com](http://www.avantnews.com) and others well-researched for subjects like [www.homebuilders.com](http://www.homebuilders.com) or simply public interest sites that speak to a deeply entrenched primal love of poetry like [www.everypoet.com](http://www.everypoet.com). He broke his ankle recently and spent the first month in recuperation writing a novel. He’s got a mind that is continually engaged and an intellect that sees no topic as too large or imposing. I was 45 years old when he left the US to marry and take up residence in Sweden. I knew it would be a sad goodbye but I wasn’t ready for the sense of loss his absence would create. In the few years leading up to his departure he had become a continuous fixture in my life. It was as if I had found the long, lost brother I had misplaced early in life. We were together a lot and what I remember (and miss) more than anything else is all the laughter. When I see him now it’s not long before we’re laughing again and a great comfort descends.

As luck would have it, just as Bela’s physical being vanished from my radar a curious likeness arrived to eclipse that gaping void. Older brother Philippe, with whom I also had developed an extreme fondness, chose, with his new bride, to buy his mother’s share of a Cornwall property. In typical fashion Janine Selendy (Philippe and Bela’s mother) had identified and purchased a strategically well-priced parcel in North Cornwall and had planned an elaborately engineered passive solar dwelling that would eventually function completely independent of the conventional power grid. In addition to thermal

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mass storage, photovoltaic generation of electricity and very large amounts of insulation it was going to employ a clives molstrum septic plant designed to minimize water usage for processing household human waste. The 1500 gallon tank had been delivered to the site and sat poised like a piece of abandoned equipment from the recent Bush I "War in the Desert". It was just about this time that Janine's elaborate plan ran afoul of the realities of budgeting and expense. Fortunately for the family, Philippe and his wife had both been hired by a very prestigious law firm and felt they could swing the ownership of this parcel. In hindsight this purchase was a masterful economic coup but at the time it seemed a stretch albeit a generous and appropriate endeavor for this new couple to undertake. They employed the talents of Cornwall's most favored architect to take the building to a finished condition without the burden of creating a watershed ecological masterpiece as well. My wife and I have been the beneficiary of their vision many times over as we've enjoyed hours and hours of mornings, afternoons, and evenings in the yard, by the barbecue or around the fire enjoying life in Cornwall at its' most comfortable and civilized.

Philippe loves to light a fire. Nothing satisfies his primal instinct more than collecting kindling and arranging it vertically on the back wall of the fireplace and gathering choice logs felled from trees culled from his own land in teepee fashion around those super-dry twigs. He beams with glee as the whole pile lights and turns into a crackling mass, certain to warm the house with both a sensuous warming and the added value of the fulfillment of his communal responsibility. I've used wood to warm my house for the last 35 years so for me the warming fires of winter long ago lost their romantic charm. But watching and sharing as Philippe revels in the process I am reminded how very fortunate for me that I have a friend such as this with whom I can unabashedly revisit the simple joys of country life: deep breathing the crisp, clean air, early morning tennis, late night ping-pong, brunch, lunch and dinner. We've even implemented a ritual barefoot run in the snow on New Years Eve. Ours is a mature friendship that includes both our wives and children as full participants in the routine of our relationship. We all travel together and share in the inevitable roller-coaster of our respective lives. He is my most astute collector and I swear he can smell it when there are new pots, freshly emerged from that wood kiln of mine. Nothing excites him more than a strong form that has been blessed by the flame. He's got a potter's sensibility and will not be persuaded that there is any room for ego or whimsy when it comes to a potter and their work. He has a sensory ability that detects artistic dishonesty as if it were a bad odor and is a fierce supporter of the quiet battle I wage to survive as an artist. I am humbled by his allegiance and find great motivation in his careful scrutiny and cautious collecting.

Of course I could carry on and fill volumes with anecdotal vignettes to further detail the profound impact friends and family have had in my particular voyage. Through the 1990's and here into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are another dozen or so student/friends that deserve some discussion. Matt Jones, Chris Giuliano, Bridget Duxbury, Naysan McIlhargey (see Essay 6), Steve Provence, Jeff Butler (presently rehired here and perhaps a future partner), Grace Pejouhy and Tony Arru. I think of these relationships and the role their influence plays in shaping who we are as the defining characteristic of our species. I'm not a particularly gregarious person but even I, in the circumscribed and cautious world I've created, have hundreds of significant people who

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have contributed to my personal saga. I will pull the shade on this window and spare you any further voyeurism. But in the interest of full disclosure I offer this final rendering of the potter at play. You cannot know me without knowing the role the game of tennis has played in my voyage.

### The Game of Tennis

Take a small pink ball that has a lively bounce and pings on impact and enshroud it in a fuzzy felt. Embed a loop of rubber similar to the stitching found on a baseball and pack three to a can sealed in a vacuum. When the top of the tube is popped a whoosh of air rushes in to fill the void then wafts out again carrying on its current the odd but strangely appealing smell unique to the game of tennis. Many of us that love the sport hold these fresh, new balls up to our nose and sniff deep. Soon after, the three balls are clutched by the thumb and fingers in a claw-like grip; dropped one at a time to detect the unmistakable hop of a lively, unused ball. As if this weren't enough sensuality, this libidinous afternoon also involves the use of a paddle to strike the ball. A flat wooden mallet would be an offense to the soft silence attending the quiet of the rubber-soled footwear called 'sneakers' and inappropriate for the oft-idyllic setting bathed by beautiful summer breezes wafting through low shrubs surrounding a well-sighted 'court'. So the paddle becomes a rim with a handle. The open hoop is now a netted swatting device woven closed with thin, sturdy filaments stretched and gleaming in the midday sun. The fuzzy, felted orb when smacked by this "strung racquet" makes a soft, popping noise as it is launched in a direction away from the player. The bright yellow ball with its black identifying markings make an oh so sweet cluck and begins a trajectory across a swatch of braided rope stretched like a fisherman's netting between the opposing players.

There is 8mm film footage taken of me as a 4 year old trying to play tennis with my father. The racquet was as tall as I and the top of the net hovered a full foot over my head. But it was clear even then that I wouldn't be daunted by such trivial obstacles. My head, heart and hands were obsessed with learning how to play and any suggestion that I wasn't ready to be competitive I looked upon as child abuse. My nickname as a toddler was Rumpelstiltsken and efforts to usher me off the courts often precipitated the legendary tantrum.

I've always been a fairly small person. I've just barely managed to reach an acceptable adult height of 5'9" (my wife insists I'm 5'8.5"). As a child I was miniscule relative to others my age. But luckily I was endowed with a mighty hand-eye coordination so all of the ball sports were of great interest to me. I played football and basketball and baseball and excelled as much as any small guy could. But tennis, as an individual sport where size gave only modest advantage, had the potential of being a venue that I might actually achieve some real prowess. So I stayed with it although I had very few friends that devoted any time to learning the sport. Part of my interest was that it was a place I could hide out and thereby avoid the fiercely competitive qualities of the world my peers and I inhabited. Throughout my childhood and into my late teenage years I played the sport and learned the fundamentals. My father and I found it a great place to bond and in retrospect some of my most treasured memories of him are associated with the game. He always found a way to get tickets for "the matches" at Forest Hills. I have great memories of watching Rod Laver, Ken Rosewall, Arthur Ashe



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and Chuck McKinley playing on the exquisitely groomed grass courts at the West Side Tennis Club in the days before the Open era when the American Slam event was played at the venerable ivy-clad club in Forest Hills. We'd watch as these giants in the sport would prevail or succumb and I'd hang on every observation and commentary my father would proffer as to the cause of their respective success or failure. He was never so astute as when he was opining about the merits of their game and often expanding the moment, realizing it gave him the opportunity to give some fatherly advice by way of metaphor. He would say, "You see Todd, he's tired and taking a few more moments to rest up by bouncing the ball before he serves. He's tossing the ball up to see which way the wind is blowing and to make sure the sun won't shine directly in his eyes as he serves." Sounded like straightforward advice on the logistics of the game but looking back I now know he was giving me insight about strategies for living in general.

The political atmosphere of the late 1960's made me look with disappointment at the game of tennis. What I saw were very exclusive clubs of privileged men and women and their children and I became ashamed of my own inclusion in such a setting. I had what now appears to be an extremely overactive awareness of the inequalities that carve our society into have's and have-nots and I chose to align myself as much as I could with the have-nots. Tennis, as a game, became a casualty of this myopia and from the age of 18 until about age 25 I never picked up a racquet. When I finally rediscovered the sport I was in desperate need of distraction and the physical benefits of aerobic activity. Although saddened that I had lost 7 years in my progress as a player I resolved to find the time to reconnect with the sport and have been playing continuously for the last 30 years.

For me the sport satisfies on a multiple of levels. Primarily there is great value to be found engaging in an activity that can distract. Everyday stress and the intensity of the workaday world require an opportunity to regenerate otherwise productivity suffers. But even more profound is the damage that results from aging without a strategy to stave off the inevitable changes in metabolic behavior. I've used the sport of tennis to provide me with stimulation to engage physically, mentally and emotionally within the context of the changing needs of my body, my mind and my spirit. Now that I am firmly entrenched in middle-age I have begun to find great solace in my ability to pass along the love of the sport as a teacher and mentor for other players. My competitive ability is compromised by a decrease in stamina and strength but I realize that the arc of my life as a devotee of the sport of tennis is reflective of a crescendo precipitated primarily by the aesthetic satisfaction I find in the game. For a short period of my career I was a highly competitive player capable of winning against most players of comparable ability. But that part of the game, for me, has never held much value. Winning is a transitory sensation, as is losing, and serves as a very poor motivator (unless there were some significant monetary elements). Far more important each time I step on a court is the sensory joy that comes from the tactile elements of this game that are unique but strangely similar in tempo, cadence and pitch to the subtle physical satisfaction that is, for me, a defining quality of the art of potmaking.

A good tennis player, like a good potter, values balance and grace as virtues. Both endeavors are primarily engaged in a search for the center. The taut strings of the racquet have a "sweet spot" in the middle of the weave. Hand, head and heart coalesce in a sweeping motion to complete the circuitry triggered by the bounce. When the firm, felted orb encounters the mounting momentum of the racquet reversing diametrically its'

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trajectory there is a comforting sensation that runs throughout the body, starting in the fingers and forearm, running up the arm across the shoulders. The ears and eyes pile on with sweet sensorial delight; a thwack, the swat, quiet but firm a rebound like an acrobat leaving behind the trampoline, the ball (now a bright yellow fruit) asserts itself on the return journey. As it clears the net it's as if the horizon has been breached and the journey from that point on becomes an explorer's adventure as strange and exciting new territory is mapped. And so it goes, back and forth (often between friends and /or family) until a lapse of concentration precipitates the rally's end and a pause to refresh before it starts all over again.

### Epilogue

In my years as a potter I have met many aspiring to join the ranks. Generally these people show great earnestness about their conviction and it would be hard to identify a success or failure based on their resolve. Usually they understand the long hours and guarantee of minimal remuneration. I often look to ascertain the level of physical capacity they possess for surely those long hours will include a significant percentage allocated to what's referred to as "donkey work." There will be kilns to be built and fired, clay to be moved, sheds to be built, glazes to be mixed and bricks to be stacked. If this person has a commitment to fire with wood there will be unfathomable amounts of wood to be shifted. I refer to this as the "million" rule. One cannot be admitted to the SOBP (Society of Blessed Potter's) without completing the checklist of basic requirements. Their portfolio of activity must include one million:

- Rotations of the potter's wheel
- Bricks moved from one place to the next and back again
- Glaze buckets sieved and washed
- Slab (or edging) stacked and unstacked
- Cone packs assembled
- Pounds of clay bought, pugged, and reclaimed
- Handles pulled
- Feet trimmed

The list is truly never ending and a testament to a mental state so distracted by a compulsion to produce pots that no amount of abuse will dissuade the voyage. But even with the fulfillment of the above there remains an elusive predisposition, the absence of which will negate all the earnestness and hard work manifested by the "Wanna Be". A potter suffers in the way all addicts are afflicted. In the presence of pots that are of interest a craving for information - about the maker, the clay used, the firing technique employed, the year made and the location and kind of kiln that it was fired in - becomes a kind of drug. The more of this we receive the more we need to know. Every potter I have ever known is like this about pots and it is a tell tale indication that the sorry soul will need to make pots to ever find happiness. There is the possibility of profound happiness within the constraints of all of the above-mentioned challenges. And lucky is he or she that manages the courage and fortitude to persevere in the trade. Luckier still is he or she that was born to the calling.

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I consider myself a lucky man. I have found a way to engage with the world on my own terms in a profession that holds endless fascination for me. The only other activity with this kind of unstructured discovery is something known as “child’s play.” I am unabashedly proud of the fact that I have managed to spend so many years in such self-indulgent pleasure and I have come to theorize that most adults, if given the chance, would roll back time to the last memory of carefree frolic. For in truth this is the last vestige of freedom for a human life devoted, from that time on, to the relentless pursuit of wealth accumulation. It hangs like a cloud over us all. In earlier times the burden of this workaday routine fell heaviest on the manchild. The manifestation of a career path mentality confirms healthy testosterone levels much the way facial hair and an interest in girls puts all at ease. Woman’s Rights has secured an entitlement to a comparable adulthood. But from where I sit they often have traded one form of slavery for an equally insidious variety. In fact their prize has been the opportunity to bear both the burden of childbirth and then, piled on, the excruciating role of bringing home extra bacon. Surely there is more significance to living than can be measured by such criteria. Indeed the notion of employment for financial remuneration is the last frontier of slavery. As sure as I am about the nose on my face, there will come a time in the evolution of human consciousness that we will free us from this institution. When the shackles are removed there will be a universal realization that human potential is most creative under conditions of maximum play. Work will become an effort engaged in primarily as an opportunity to be productive. Such productivity will be the cornerstone of progress and fundamental to the survival of the human race. I know this is a Pollyanna concept for the moment. I trust that very few of you will take this idea seriously. But history shows us that human enslavement never prevails. The trend will always be away from anything that undermines our basic birthright of a life of unfettered freedom. I will leave the details of the precise configuration of a society without employees to future generations.

For now let me say for all that will listen, from my perspective a potter’s life is a voyage of discovery. Every step of the way we are part of a learning curve that begins the day we are born and proceeds, if we are lucky, in an uninterrupted arc through all the stages of life. I am a prisoner to some extent, as are we all, to the fickle requirements of a market economy and in this regard I must continually compromise to sustain good relations with all my creditors. Loans were never a part of my sandbox focus. But occasionally there is a patch of smooth, uninterrupted concentration. Anxiety falls away and I can return to the essence of this trip. I sense consciousness as a continual spiral that spins around me regardless of other worldly distractions. My secret, gleaned from years of studying things that spin, is if you can time it right there will be a moment to jump on for a ride. But look for the spiral; it’s the circle that’s spinning a thread upward. It’s impossible to ride it without pause and if you don’t hang tight and concentrate there is the danger of slippage and when you alight you might find yourself below the spot you first grabbed hold. But that’s the beauty. As long as you stay alert and centered within its sweep there will be another opportunity to ride the wave. And next time you will release your grasp only after you’ve found your footing in a land that’s new, where the scenery is fresh, the challenges invigorating. This place will be higher than any other you’ve ever seen because that’s the nature of spirals. They go upward and outward forever and always.

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