CENTERING
in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person
By
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they have the impression that these are extracurricular (like Newton's secondary qualities of color and so on) — and their capacity for balance between the life within and the world without shrinks or falters, or their desperation turns rank.

It is a sensitive matter, of course. I am not going to all these words merely to insult the spirit of true research. But my life as a teacher and as a member of the human community advises me that education may estrange us from life-commitment as well as bind us firmly within it. There are all kinds of things to learn, and we had best learn them all. One of the reasons formal education is in danger today is that a sense of work is split off from human earnestness. How may this split be healed? Working with our materials as artist-craftsmen may help to engender a new health here.

An act of the self, that's what one must make. An act of the self, from me to you. From center to center. We must mean what we say, from our innermost heart to the outermost galaxy. Otherwise we are lost and dizzy in a maze of reflections. We carry light within us. There is no need merely to reflect. Others carry light within them. These lights must wake to each other. My face is real. Yours is. Let us find our way to our initiative.

For must we not show ourselves to each other, and will we not know then who are the teachers and who are the students? Do we not all learn from one another? My students at City College are worldly-wise and naïve as lambs. I am sophisticated and uninformed. We make a good combination. They have never heard of e. e. cummings, who lived in their city, nor of the New York painters. They do not know that there are free art galleries where they may see the latest works of modern artists. They do not know very much about contemporary "culture." But they know well the life of the subway, the office, the factory, the union hall, the hassle for employment; they know what they did in the war or in their escape from Hungary or Germany, or in occupied France, or Israel. They know what it is like to be black in America. They are patient with my obtuseness, they check my too quick judgments, my sarcasm which is unperceptive. I help them to unmask, to be openly as tender and hopeful and generous as they inwardly are. I help them to open themselves to knowledge. They help me to open myself to life. We are equal in courage.

Must weakness be concealed in order that respect be won? Must love and fervor be concealed? Must we pretend to fearlessness? and certainty? Surely education should equip us to know what to fear and what to be uncertain of. Surely it should equip us in personal honor.
Must. Should. Convenient words! Exhortations meant to loosen the grip of congealed behavior . . . Perhaps these perceptions are not the proper work of intellect, but of some other faculty deeply neglected in our education. In any case, at a critical moment in life my hunger for nakedness and realism and nobility turned to the clay of earth itself, and to water and fire.

I took up pottery also, in a sense, by chance. Unforeseen opportunity joined with interest and readiness. Like teaching, not a consciously sought but surely a destined union. For the materials and processes of pottery spoke to me of cosmic presences and transformations quite as surely as the pots themselves enchanted me. Experiences of the plastic clay and the firing of the ware carried more than commonplace values. Joy resonated deep within me, and it has stirred these thoughts only slowly to the surface. I have come to feel that we live in a universe of spirit, which materializes and de-materializes grandly; all things seem to me to live, and all acts to contain meaning deeper than matter-of-fact; and the things we do with deepest love and interest compel us by the spiritual forces which dwell in them. This seems to me to be a dialogue of the visible and the invisible to which our ears are attuned.

There was, first of all, something in the nature of the clay itself. You can do very many things with it, push this way and pull that, squeeze and roll and attach and pinch and hollow and pile. But you can't do everything with it. You can go only so far, and then the clay resists. To know ourselves by our resistances — this is a thought first expressed to me by the poet Charles Olson.

And so it is with persons. You can do very many things with us: push us together and pull us apart and squeeze us and roll us flat, empty us out and fill us up. You can surround us with influences, but there comes a point when you can do no more. The person resists, in one way or another (if it is only by collapsing, like the clay). His own will becomes active.

This is a wonderful moment, when one feels his will become active, come as a force into the total assemblage and dynamic intercourse and interpenetration of will impulses. When one stands like a natural substance, plastic but with one's own character written into the formula, ah then one feels oneself part of the world, taking one's shape with its help — but a shape only one's own freedom can create.

And the centering of the clay, of which I have spoken. The opening of the form. And
the firing of the pot. This experience has deep psychic reverberations: how the pot, which was originally plastic, sets into dry clay, brittle and fragile, and then by being heated to a certain temperature hardens into stone. By natural law as it were, it takes its final form. Ordeal by fire. Then, the form once taken, the pot may not last, the body may perish; but the inner form has been taken, and it cannot break in the same sense.

I, like everyone I know, am instinctively motivated toward symbols of wholeness. What is a simpler, more natural one than the pot fired? Wholeness may be thought of as a kind of inner equilibrium, in which all our capacities have been brought into functioning as an organism. The potencies of the whole organism flow into the gestures of any part. And the sensation in any part reverberates throughout the soul. The unconscious and conscious levels of being can work together at the tasks of life, conveying messages to each other, assimilating one another. In wholeness I sense an integration of those characteristics which are uniquely ME and those interests which I share with the rest of mankind. As for example any bowl is symbolic of an archetypal circular form, which I share with all, but which I make and which therefore contains those very qualities of myself which are active in the making. I believe that pots have the smell of the person who makes them: a smell of tenderness, of vanity or ambition, of ease and naturalness, of petulance, uncertainty, callousness, fussiness, playfulness, solemnity, exuberance, absent-mindedness. The pot gives off something. It gives off its innerness, that which it holds but which cannot be seen.

In pottery, by developing sensitivity in manipulating natural materials by hand, I found a wisdom which had died out of the concepts I learned in the university: abstractions, mineralized and dead; while the minerals themselves were alive with energy and meaning. The life I found in the craft helped to bring to a new birth my ideals in education. Some secret center became vitalized in those hours of silent practice in the arts of transformation.

The experience of centering was one I particularly sought because I thought of myself as dispersed, interested in too many things. I envied people who were "single-minded," who had one powerful talent and who knew when they got up in the morning what it was they had to do. Whereas I, wherever I turned, felt the enchantment: to the window for the sweetness of the air; to the door for the passing figures; to the teapot, the typewriter,
the knitting needles, the pets, the pottery, the newspaper, the telephone. Wherever I looked, I could have lived.

It took me half my life to come to believe I was OK even if I did love experience in a loose and undiscriminating way and did not know for sure the difference between good and bad. My struggles to accept my nature were the struggles of centering. I found myself at odds with the propaganda of our times. One is supposed to be either an artist or a homemaker, by one popular superstition. Either a teacher or a poet, by a theory which says that poetry must not sermonize. Either a craftsman or an intellectual, by a snobbism which claims either hand or head as the seat of true power. One is supposed to concentrate and not to spread oneself thin, as the jargon goes. And this is a jargon spoken by a cultural leadership from which it takes time to win one's freedom, if one is not lucky enough to have been born free. Finally, I hit upon an image: a seed-sower. Not to worry about which seeds sprout. But to give them as my gift in good faith.

But in spite of my self-acceptance, I still clung to a concept of purity which was chaste and aloof from the fellowship of man, and had yet to center the image of a pure heart in whose bright warm streams the world is invited to bathe. A heart who can be touched and who stirs in response, bringing the whole body into an act of greeting.

Well then, I became a potter.

And I found that the mute arts of the craftsman's world combine fruitfully with the verbal arts of the teacher or poet. For what is poetry anyway, and teaching? In order to teach, you must be able to listen. You must be able to hear what the person before you means. You cannot assume the meanings and be a teacher; you must enter again into a dialogue — with all senses alert to the human meanings expressed, however implicitly. The experience of the potter listening to his clay strengthens this capacity. One must be able to hear the inner questions, the unspoken ones; the inner hopes and misgivings and dreams and timidities and potentialities and stupidities. One must listen carefully in order to serve as a proper midwife to the birth of consciousness in the student. The world is always bigger than one's own focus. And as we bring ourselves into center wherever we are, the more of that world we can bring into service, the larger will be the capacity of our action and our understanding. The more sensitivity and courage I develop working with clay and water and mineral pigments and fire, the more helpful I can be to my Negro
student from Panama who is taking freshman composition. All teachers should, as part of their class preparation, practice an art.

And the poetry. What is poetry: poetry is truth; and what is truth: truth is reality; and what is reality: reality is nature; and what is nature (you see what a good husband I am, asking all these Important Questions and answering them!): nature is life; and what is life: life is a death-dance; and what is a death-dance: a death-dance is the casting off of the corpse and the eating of the flame: the flame enters the womb, the green flame flickers in the seed, the new being is born, the next moment, the unfolding mystery. All the forces of the mineral world, in our skeleton as it were, all that salt and calcium and whatever it all is, want to grow rigid, want to congeal; all our habits and learned ignorance weigh us down; the death-dance burns away the bone, burns away, and lets the living impulses rise, the vision rise. Poetry tells the truth. But it doesn’t invent the truth. It too must listen, to the poetry that flows inaudibly beneath all speech. So it is difficult to use words and yet to invoke the sense of life which is unspoken, unspeakable, what is left after the books are all decayed, lost, burned, forgotten. What remains after the pot has disappeared.

Pottery has helped my poetry because I was less instructed in the handcraft and therefore less inhibited. I permitted myself a kind of freedom in the use of clay which I would not have known how to find in the verbal world. The freedom I experienced in my studio began to drift into my study.

Well, and what is freedom? First of all, freedom seems to mean the absence of external restraint, the freedom to play. When we are free from external tyrannies, we seek freedom from our inner limitations. We find that in order to play we must be nimble and flexible and imaginative, we must be able to have fun, we must feel enjoyment, and sometimes long imprisonment has made us numb and sluggish. And then we find out that there are, paradoxically, disciplines which create in us capacities which allow us to seek our freedom. We learn how to rid ourselves of our boredom, our stiffness, our repressed anger, our anxiety. We become brighter, more energy flows through us, our limbs rise, our spirit comes alive in our tissues. And our gratitude is immeasurable for all the hours of labor that carry us forward.

As I grow quiet, the clay centers. For example, I used to grieve because I could not make reliably a close-fitting lid for a canister, a teapot, a casserole. Sometimes the lid fitted, sometimes it didn’t. But I wanted it to fit. And I was full of aggravation. Then a GI
friend of mine who was stationed in Korea sent me an ancient Korean pot, about a thou­
sand years old. I loved it at once, and then he wrote that he thought I might like it because
it looked like something I might have made. Its lid didn’t fit at all! Yet it was a museum
piece, so to speak. Why, I mused, do I require of myself what I do not require of this pot?
Its lid does not fit, but it inspires my spirit when I look at it and handle it. So I stopped
worrying. Now I have very little trouble making lids that fit.

What I want to say is that as our personal universes expand, if we keep drawing
ourselves into center again and again, everything seems to enhance everything else. It
becomes unnecessary to choose which person to be as we open and close the same ball
of clay. We will make pots for our English classes. Read poems to our pottery classes.
Write on the clay, print from the clay. The activity seems to spring out of the same source:
poem or pot, loaf of bread, letter to a friend, a morning’s meditation, a walk in the woods,
turning the compost pile, knitting a pair of shoes, weeping with pain, fainting with dis­
couragement, burning with shame, trembling with indecision: what’s the difference. I
like especially two famous Zen stories: the one about the great Japanese master of the
art of archery who had never in his life hit the bull’s eye. And the other about the monk
who said, “Now that I’m enlightened, I’m just as miserable as ever.”

What I mean here is that in poetry, in pottery, in the life of the mind, it seems to me
that one must be able to picture before oneself the opposite of what one has just declared
in order to keep alive the possibility of freedom, of mobility, of growth. As soon as we find
ourselves spellbound by order and our ability to control our medium and our tools, to do ex­
actly what we want, we must do the opposite as well. As soon as we feel drunk with the
sport of building and destroying, of forming in order to deform, of working unconsciously,
with risk (with poetry, if poetry is saying hello to whoever-whatever is there): with dan­
ger, and disrespect for the canons of taste, do the opposite. One does not decide between
craft and art, pottery and sculpture, tradition and the individual talent. One is in a per­
petual dialogue and performs the act one performs.

Life leads us at a certain moment to step beyond the dualisms to which we have been
educated: primitive and civilized, chaos and order, abnormal and normal, private and
public, verbal and non-verbal, conventional and far-out, good and bad. To transform our
tuitions, as Emerson called our learning, into the body of our intuitions so that we may use
this body as in pottery we use our clay. By an act of centering we resolve the oppositions
in a single experience. The surrealists in France called it le point suprême and found it also at the center: le foyer central. When the sense of life in the individual is in touch with the life-power in the universe, is turning with it, he senses himself as potentially whole. And he senses all his struggles as efforts toward that wholeness. And he senses that wholeness as implicit in every part. When we are working on the potter’s wheel, we are touching the clay at only one point; and yet as the pot turns through our fingers, the whole is being affected, and we have an experience of this wholeness. “The still point of the turning world.”

Most of the separations we make need to be looked at very carefully: weakness and strength, sickness and health, not-knowing and knowing, play and seriousness. Human beings are an odd breed. We find it so difficult to give in to possibility — to envision what is not visible. For example, we tend to think that strength is all-important, and yet we have a very shallow notion of what strength consists of. For unless our weaknesses play into our strengths we are not as supple as we should be. And with our fixation upon health, we would do well to listen to the story that sickness is telling, as it brings its truth into our work. We must fill our devotion with the spirit of play, of celebration and holiday. Love-play. The rhythms of work seem to be the natural rhythms of life: they seem to go by polarities which swing around that unmoving center: the very rhythms of our breathing are the dialogue of inner and outer. The single craftsman finding his own way, and the same craftsman seeking fellowship with others. Working by preliminary design is answered by a desire to improvise. The joy of producing a well-made pot, beautiful in its physical balance and grace and accurate in its usefulness, is answered by a kinship with the ambiguous: some image which fills us with wonder or mirth or which leads us into continuous exercise of our faculties in an effort to fathom it, to grasp it, to embrace it. For we must surely embrace our world. Unless our ideals of peace and of love are so much cant, we must surely embrace our world in all its daily happenings and details.

What is the purpose of thinking about it in this way? Well, lots of folks worry about what things are called. Is it craft? is it art? is it sculpture? is it dada? is it music? is it noise? is it poetry? what is it? The words people use won’t change anything (I’m not absolutely sure of this). Certainly these words of mine won’t change anything. And the worrying has its own function to perform. Life changes things. If there are life and truth in anybody’s words, OK. Then they will correspond with nature. And if we are going along
with nature, we will not need to be told anything. The Buddha, you may recall, came to speak to a gathering, and he used no words. He held a flower up before the people.

"Poetry," said Wallace Stevens, "is a process of the personality of the poet." Creative work is a training of each individual's perception according to the level on which he is alive and awake; that is why it is so difficult to evaluate. And it should be difficult. In art, perception is embodied: in dust, in pigment, in sounds, in movements of the body, in metals and stone, in threads and stuffs. Each product, each goal, is an intermediate moment in a much longer journey of the person. Once when I was asked to write something about art, I wrote: "Art is an intuitive act of the spirit in its evolution toward divine nature." Because it is an act of self-education in this sense, it cannot be evaluated apart from its maker, the one whose vision it represents. That is why judging is such a ticklish business. To judge prematurely is often to cripple. To refrain from judging is sometimes to impoverish. One must, again, listen with one's total faculties before one speaks. For answers to questions of technique are, at another level, answers to questions of personal growth. The "minor" questions: How shall I make this lid, what kind of a handle shall I pull, how high a foot shall I throw on this pot, how small an opening should this bottle have, how much iron oxide shall I apply to this surface? — all these minor questions are the echoes and small ripples from the deeper questions: What am I doing? what do I know? what do I want to learn? how shall I bring myself into ripeness? Teachers of ourselves, we over and over again ask, "How do I want this to look?" And what we mean is, "What do I want to bring to birth in the world? In myself?" Our pots do bear our spirits into the world. We may then, it seems to me, let them grow like wild flowers, in all their varieties. But in our own gardens we may foster those which bring into our lives the influences we long for. We may also judge according to standards derived from the highest development we have observed.

My answer to the question, What shall I do about this handle or this lid? is — and I quote from that ancient text on "Centering" — "Wherever your attention alights, at this very point, experience." Make dozens, now this way, now that; putting them now here, now there. The should enters only when the goal is fixed, the standards formulated, and the techniques refined. Few of our moments have this character.

In teaching pottery, I am continually aware of how the learning of a handcraft reverberates throughout the spiritual organism, and it is this sense of personal destiny at
stake which makes teaching such a serious and stimulating endeavor. I wish now to speak of two friends whom I taught only briefly but whose experiences were especially meaningful to me in the terms I have been using here: two people in whose personal transformation craft played its part. One, an English teacher who had never before in her life touched a piece of raw clay with any hope of forming it, was imprisoned by fear and striving. The other, a college art teacher, more skillful than I on the potter’s wheel, was impotent with ambition and conceit.

The beginner, a person of deep culture and intuition, did indeed listen, but with such tension that she could hardly hear; and she was tongue-tied in her own behalf. “Is that all right?” she would ask quaveringly. She touched each hunk of clay as if at any moment she might plunge through the bottom into the abyss. Everything seemed alarming, and delicious. Her body sought the contact, but her taste reproved the appearance. Finally I asked her to work with her eyes closed so that her hands could be liberated from the censure of her critically trained eyes. To let the pleasure and search and sinew for making grow a little bit before chastizing their immaturity. To do all the things that hands can do: tear and sweat and push and pinch and squeeze and caress and scratch and model and beat. She sat like a blind woman with her clay, and she made a bowl this way, and when she opened her eyes, delight preceded doubt, and she was that much stronger in herself to do it again. She began to understand how it was for her to say if it was all right, not for me. I encouraged her to buy a can of workable clay and take it to her apartment. Her eyes are tired from reading. Let the hands carry forward the education.

Now the other potter had the opposite agony. He worked well, and produced in the beginning a regular storm of pots. But the more he did, the more he drooped. I heard he was going to drop pottery and take up weaving. One night I stood beside him at the wedging board while he morosely kneaded and slapped his clay. Suddenly he spoke. “What is a potter?” His accomplishment meant nothing to him. He did not like his pots. They bore no individual stamp, he said. They did not speak to him. (Perhaps he had not spoken to them?) “What should a potter do?” he asked me. What should he make? Who should a potter be? (You see these are real questions that men do ask!) Well, I don’t remember what I said, probably something about how a potter is a person; what should a person do? who should a person be? I suggested that he take a vacation from these thoughts of “should” — make some clay balloons and take them down to the granite sea shore and
roll them on the lichen-textured boulders, and have some fun. He did that, and made a charming little stoneware garden. Although he didn't know exactly what to think about it, he liked it. But his troubles were by no means over. He did for awhile give up pottery and take up weaving. I heard later that during the rest of the summer he gradually came back to center and worked with the clay in a way that brought more and more of himself into it, so that he felt good.

We have to trust these feelings. We have to trust the invisible gauges we carry within us. We have to realize that a creative being lives within ourselves, whether we like it or not, and that we must get out of its way, for it will give us no peace until we do. Certain kinds of egotism and ambition as well as certain kinds of ignorance and timidity have to be overcome or they will stand in the way of that creator. And though we are well thought of by others, we will feel cross and frustrated and envious and petulant, as if we had been cheated, somehow, by life.

I cannot talk about the crafts without appealing to the evolving spirit of man. We grow and change and develop capacities for centering and for dialogue throughout our lives.

Part of the training we enjoy as craftsmen is to bring into our bodies the imagination and the will. We enact. The handcrafts stand to perpetuate the living experience of contact with natural elements — something primal, immediate, personal, material, a dialogue between our dreams and the forces of nature.

In pottery it is perhaps because of the fire that the sense of collaboration is so strong. The potter does everything he can do. But he cannot burst into flame and reach a temperature of 2300 degrees Fahrenheit for a period varying from eight hours to a week and harden plastic clay into rigid stone, and transform particles of silica and spar into flowing glaze. He cannot transmute the dull red powder that lies upon the biscuited ware into a light-responsive celadon. He can only surrender his ware to the fire, listen to it, talk to it, so that he and the fire respond to each other's power, and the fired pot is the child.

Some craftsmen seem to be troubled by the question of originality and imitation. My only standard here is that a person be led into a deeper experience of himself and his craft. Human beings learn by imitation; certainly, in the years of childhood, almost exclusively by imitation. One is inspired by someone else's example. One seeks to do likewise. Sometimes the effort to do likewise gradually creates capacities and perceptions
that one did not feel before. These periods of imitation are usually temporary. They too may be aspects of the long journey each one of us is on to get where we are bound for, consciously or unconsciously. I have found imitation useful both as a discipline and as a momentary indulgence. People bring each other into activity. If, however, the phase of imitation congeals and one sticks in it out of inertia, then of course the works will begin to look tired too. Ideas do not belong to people. Ideas live in the world as we do. We discover certain ideas at certain times. Someone enjoys a certain revelation and passes it around. A certain person's courage inspires a similar courage in others. People share their culture: there are enjoyable resemblances that make us feel like a community of fellow beings, fellow craftsmen — using a tradition and contributing our own impulses to it.

I have a finger exercise for originality which I sometimes use. Working with a piece of clay, hand-building, I destroy every pleasing result, seeking the unrecognizable. For if it is new, it will not look like something else: not like driftwood nor a Henry Moore perforated torso, not like a coral reef nor a Giacometti sculpture, not like a Haniwa horse nor a madonna nor a "free form," nor the new look in pottery in the 'sixties. It will look very odd indeed, if it is really new. Insecurity we need perhaps the most when we are inventing: it seems like our philosopher's stone, turning base materials into gold. The image we make in such an exercise will not be our goal, but in creating it we will have performed acts for the first time, and these will bring new structures and coordinations into our hands and into our visions.

In my own work I like to vary my rhythms: from one of a kind to many of a kind. Two sayings from that ancient tract on CENTERING make one passage of my dialogue: "Wherever satisfaction is found, in whatever act, actualize this"; and "Just as you have the impulse to do something, stop."

I admire very much the pottery of Karen Karnes, with whom I share a shop in Stony Point, New York. Her work is clean, expert, uncluttered, useful, beautiful, restrained but warm, full of a feeling of original plasticity as well as the advantages of stone. A plastic form with beautifully fitted rims. And the shiny glazes of high heat. Yet my temperament turns equally to ornament, to fooling around, to doing I know not what. And to letting the clay stand naked and untreated. Or any combination of these, at any moment of their intersection. I like a dry scabby surface through which color barely strains as well as
depths soaked in lustre. Or just a simple semiglossy easily washable surface, no high jinks. The more a piece confounds me, the more it interests me. At the same time, one of the most thrilling experiences for me is to make table ware: twelve plates of the same size, twelve cups, twelve bowls. One after another. To make a lot of things alike is as exciting as to make one surprise after another. And of course the rewards of sustained working rhythms are marvelous. To throw forty tea bowls and to feel that certain ones have it. Have mu. Have shibui. Then you throw all the others away? No. For the quality of magic is not that clear: where you had been slowest to detect it, there it suddenly stands.

And yet the opposite is also true. There are moments when I could with ease clear all the shelves, clear the board, all the past, plough it under, make it new. Throw everything away. Is this a paradox? To be in love with the material world in all its stages of imperfection and yet to feel that love does not depend upon the permanence of its images? It is not the images per se that we adore but the being who lives within them and will live after the pot is broken. So goes the weather of this love of life and love of death, the feeling that the living and the dead are a permanent family fully alive in an awesome cosmic dialogue.

During the dozen years that I have been working with clay, certain influences from the potter's world have inspired me in special ways. The French potters in Vallauris. The folk potters in North Carolina, living by their craft, producing every day quantities of their unselfconscious simple useful appealing ware. Bernard Leach, as person, as potter, as author of A Potter's Book, Potter's Portfolio, Potter in Japan. Raku ware: the Japanese-derived ceremony of making a cup, firing it, and drinking tea out of it, all in a single rhythm: the living relation of the shaping and the drinking and the consecration. Bizen ware. Children who come into my studio to fool around with my clay. Three teachers: Warren McKenzie, fresh from a stint at St. Ives Pottery in England, where he had had to make five hundred mugs before the first one was accepted. Daniel Rhodes, his love for the craft in all the richness of its history and the combination in him of knowledge and feeling. Peter Voulkos, who told me to work with the clay till it collapses, that there's nothing to it, that if pots weren't breakable potters would be sunk, that there's lots more where these come from. Exhibitions of work in clay by sculptors Noguchi and Marisol and Nakian; exhibits at Asia House from Oriental antiquity and the present day; a visit to Mexico,
all that carved stone and all that clay; a visit to Picasso's ceramics in Antibes; Henry
Takemoto's coiled pots big enough to hide a thief; the paper-thin poetry of Lucy Rie's
thrown porcelain.

But perhaps most vivid: a visit to this country by a Japanese potter, Rosanjin. He
gave a speech at Greenwich House in New York City. In Japanese. He smiled throughout,
and spoke with feeling. At the end, a young lady read an English translation. He began,
she said, by saying how glad he was to be here, and how much he had enjoyed looking
around the Greenwich House pottery at the potters' work, and how he couldn't help wonder­
ing why they all made such hideous things! A great evening... He spoke about educating
one's feeling through a close relationship with nature and through drawing nature and
studying the masterpieces of previous ages. Then he gave a demonstration. A potter's
wheel was on stage. He did not throw the cylinder, he asked one of the visiting professors
to do that. Rosanjin pinched its wall, turned to his translator, and said, "The clay is too
wet, but I'll see what I can do with it." He then shaped a bowl. But because he opened
it too wide for the wetness of the clay, it collapsed. Then he rolled fat coils between his
hands and, lifting the rim of the fallen pot, propped it up. He pinched the rim into ripples
and held this extraordinary flop before his horrified audience of American studio potters
for admiration. Not only that, but he had it carried through the hall, up one row and down
the next, to be examined and enjoyed. His smiling comment was, "It doesn't look like much
now, but wait till the fire gets through with it, you never can tell!" I was transported with
delight and mirth and admiration. American pieties were being offended right and left.
The Orient was with us. Bringing its own joyful reverence, its own pieties to speak with
ours.

David Tudor is not a potter but a pianist. He came to Black Mountain College one
summer to give concerts. A half-dozen young student composers had arranged a short
program of their works and, not being performers, asked him if he would play. I will never
forget it. A grand piano. A college dining hall. All of us in blue jeans and tee shirts. The
pianist in a sports jacket to lend a formal air. He entered from the "wings" with each
small score, played the piece, whatever it was, with absolute sincerity and respect for the
composer and the composed; bowed, exited, re-entered. A half-dozen compositions by be­
ginners, handled without reservation nor irony nor sentiment nor anything except the
capacity to let the moment speak, and us listen. Is this not the emptiness for which the sages pray: to be filled as a spring is?

I have been inspired as well by potters who undertake huge tasks and realize them faultlessly. I once saw Mary Scheier throw bowls. Huge beautiful curved thin instruments: like bells. All the clay used and the bowl soaring off the wheel like a bubble.

And Margaret Israel's exhibition of works in clay at the Egan Gallery in New York during the winter of 1961. No pots. All sculpture. Mythic, archetypal, musing, bemused images. Huge impossible forms, all hand built; huge sacks, like grain sacks, made of clay, standing empty in the corner. Caves with rose windows and congregations. A horse's muzzle and a woman's face, emerging out of a clay union, into physiognomy. A book with clay pages. A doorway, eight feet high. A boulder too big to fit in a kiln. A box, with an axis, with an altar, with gears. And I learned that the potter came every day to change something. To smudge a little soot on here and there, to alter the color of the body. To try a little blue paint. To remove a figure, to add a figure, to break something. To put something on a pedestal, to take something off. Chaos still bubbling and seething with possibilities. And the frenzied artist carbonated with creative impulses.

To tear this one down so that we can put this one up. But we don't have to do it. Life and time do it. And we discover that what is being created is a single being: its apparent lives and deaths only the appearances of its metamorphosis.

Life in both its outward crafts and inner forms offers us the experience of destruction and creation. We speak in a vocabulary that discriminates between meaningful form and lack of form, between pot and shard. At the same time we cultivate a love for each particular thing, each particular moment, no matter where it stands in the long rhythms of life and death: I have an ancient Egyptian potsherd mounted on my treasure shelf. We discover that now is always alive, and that the generative force within life continuously heals what appear to be separations, by making them fruitful. It is an important thing for us to cherish this living contact, finding through it our poetry, our pots, our love for each other and for life: the centering and the dialogue.

I tried once to put this impression into a poem:
Poem

Pots are for shards, and shards are for shepherds, to cry with.

SHAPE: taken, and taking shape:
    avoid it if you can, you can't,
    shape's the void
    we're in; order is
    the chaos we befriend.

SAMSARA: one thing and not another, one thing
    and then another; samsara, is what
    it's called, what we're at and what we're
    in: forms, and naming. Names we bandy and
    are scouted by, th'outs and innings, everyday a
    requiem-birthday,
    spilling the shepherd's tears, spoiling the shepherd's fears —
    Job,

the job's permanent
at ground level.
"What shall we do with our emotions? Suffer them, I hear her saying. The subject she teaches isn't listed in the catalogues. Sooner or later we know we're studying with her. How is she and where? I am okay and growing, and trying to concentrate on really carrying this through. It ain't easy, or comfortable, but here we are, right? Not only the Devil, but the Lord, too, is on earth and doing His work beautifully."

—JOHN CAGE

“This book, in its form and in its content, seems almost without precedent. Its style flows directly from an intensity, an honesty, and a frankness which are rare. It is a poem, a sutra, a tract, a confession, a revelation, a guide to art and life . . . In my opinion this is not merely a good book, it is a great book.”

— DANIEL RHODES, Craft Horizons