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Mentorship

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MENTORSHIP

by Richard Bresnahan

*YOU CANNOT EXPRESS UNLESS YOU HAVE A SYSTEM OF EXPRESSION;
AND YOU CANNOT HAVE A SYSTEM OF EXPRESSION UNLESS YOU HAVE A PRIOR SYSTEM OF
THINKING AND FEELING; AND YOU CANNOT HAVE A SYSTEM OF THINKING AND FEELING
UNLESS YOU HAVE A BASIC SYSTEM OF LIVING.*

This quotation by American architect Louis Sullivan hangs in my studio office at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. It constantly reminds me of the 'systems of living' that have been instrumental in my own development, both as a working potter and as a mentor to others: my upbringing in rural North Dakota, my education at a centuries-old Benedictine school in the Midwest, and my apprenticeship in Japan with Nakazato Takashi. All of these experiences stressed the importance of community and self-sufficiency, a respect for the past and the natural environment, and a commitment to providing for future generations through sustainable resources.

I grew up in a small town in the fertile Red River Valley. Numerous relatives owned farms in the area, and my own father ran a modest grain-elevator company. Every day I witnessed the rigors of an agrarian lifestyle, the interconnectedness of all things, and the need to improvise and make do with what was at hand. I also saw the tragedy of farm foreclosures, personal bankruptcies, and the abuse of the land by corporate agribusinesses.

I went to high school and college at Saint John's Preparatory School and University, which had been founded in 1856 by a small band of Benedictine monks from Pennsylvania. The kind and pragmatic brothers I studied with in the 1960s and early 1970s taught me the value of stability, simplicity, and frugality. They seldom threw anything away and routinely salvaged doors, windows, paneling, and even whole buildings that they later put to new uses. Saint John's first monks, in fact, had designed and erected the original abbey church and all the surrounding structures with lumber they had milled themselves and bricks they had fired in their own wood-burning kilns. Even to this day they still make all of the furniture used at the abbey and the university.

The Saint John's campus also has the largest number of Marcel Breuer buildings anywhere in the world. In 1953 Saint John's commissioned the Hungarian architect to devise a "100 Year Plan" for them. To date, ten of Breuer's designs have been constructed, including his famous abbey church with its monumental bell tower. While a student at Saint John's, I listened to Breuer speak and learned the principles of the Bauhaus school, which heralded the affordable, the efficient, and the well-designed and drew

no distinctions between artist, architect, and craftsman. They were all one and the same. The Bauhaus insistence on learning by doing also informed my decision to work in clay.

My art history teacher at Saint John's, Sister Johanna Becker, was an expert on ancient Karatsu ceramics. It was she who secured my appointment in Japan with Nakazato Takashi, a thirteenth-generation potter and son of a "Living National Treasure". My first year of questions as an apprentice led to two-and-a-half years of answers. The verve of 16-hour days and of doing everything from sweeping the floor and making tea to digging clay and building kilns provided me with a holistic approach, a humane way of using native materials, and a deep respect for indigenous systems. In fact, Nakazato Shigetoshi, Takashi's older brother, probably gave me the clearest explanation of the purpose of any apprenticeship. "When you are working in your own studio," he said, "95 percent of your time will be spent in preparation. Only five percent of the time will be devoted to actually making the pieces you want to create. Your long study here has prepared you to use that five percent most wisely."

Within these various frameworks of thought, I set up my first studio at Saint John's in 1979. Since then, I have trained and hopefully nurtured 32 apprentices. One of the things I have not done at my studio, however, is to perpetuate the feudalistic attitudes that have long been part of the Japanese system. A 21st-century apprentice should not have to endure servitude or the specter of indentureship. To expect an apprentice to mow your lawn or weed your garden while you and your family are enjoying a European vacation is morally wrong. So is the notion that apprentices exist merely to enhance the fame and finances of the master artist.

Unfortunately, poverty has proven to be an extra burden for many apprentices. To help alleviate this at Saint John's, grants from the university, the studio, and regional foundations provide apprentices with housing, food, health care, and a small monthly stipend. In addition, because all the clay and glazes used at the studio come from local sources and are processed on site, there is a ready supply of materials for apprentices and visiting artists alike.

By salvaging industrial waste products, firing with deadfall, and utilizing other renewable resources, the Saint John's studio practices a brand of environmentalism wor-

thy of its Benedictine surroundings. The program uses stoneware and kaolin clays retrieved from road construction sites and mining endeavors. Glaze materials come from area farmers, woodstoves, and nearby industries, which donate such unwanted by-products as granite dust and waste ash from burning the hulls of sunflower seeds.

Mentoring within the framework of sustainability also means that the two kilns built on campus utilize local materials and are extremely energy-efficient. The Johanna kiln, which replaced the Takigama kiln and was finished in 1994, consists of a front fire chamber, a glaze chamber, a Tanegashima chamber, a subterranean flue, and a chimney. Although the 87-foot-long brick structure is the largest woodburning kiln in North America, it was not intended to be a record-breaker. Rather, its chambered interior was devised to accommodate as many different firing styles as possible. As a result, apprentices can experiment with a variety of techniques before deciding which method best suits their own aesthetics. Nor will such a kiln ever be found in any traditional academic setting (for no student

ago, hoping to find messages from the past about style or technique that we could use in the present. Even so, it was always the information passed directly from potter to potter that proved most compelling and undeniable.

Before leaving Japan, I was taken aside by a veteran potter for whom I had a deep respect and who treated me like a son even though I was not his apprentice. To have a final cup of *sake* together, he took out an unassuming old bottle and two ancient cups. One cup had been deftly trimmed in one fluid motion and covered with a dark temmoku glaze. The old potter drank from that cup and then turned it over to ensure that every drop of *sake* was gone. "This cup was made eight hundred years ago in China," he stated, "and is a simple potter's cup from the Sung dynasty. It was given to me as a young apprentice by an older friend and has been handed down from potter to potter for generations." He filled it with *sake* and handed it to me. "It is now your turn to care for this cup," he said, "and to pass it on to the next potter when the right time comes." These then have been my various mentors, Japanese, American,

and Benedictine, and I vow to continue to pass on their great knowledge and that sturdy temmoku cup.

I wish to thank my editor, Sandra Lipshultz, for her help in preparing this article.

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Richard Bresnahan with Sister Johanna Becker.

will wait a year-and-a half for a grade, the usual firing cycle) or at any commercial site (for no consumer ever wants to wait for anything).

The Johanna kiln also underscores the importance of community and cooperation. It takes tremendous effort to make the 12,000 pieces typically needed to fill the kiln's vast interior. Moreover, loading, firing, and unloading generally take two months and require the help of numerous people, not only apprentices and visiting artists but family and friends as well.

As a young potter in Japan 28 years ago, I always felt a rush of excitement when going to an ancient kiln site with the Nakazatos and my fellow apprentices. Once there, we would invariably look for shards made hundreds of years