

The  
Alchemy  
of **Clay**  
& **Fire:**



## A CONVERSATION WITH TREW BENNETT

BY ELIEZER SOBEL



**IN NOVEMBER OF 1993**, Lesley Maclean (WHJ's gifted graphic designer) and I joined Trew Bennett's crew for the four days of Buck Creek Pottery's annual Anagama wood-kiln firing. The kiln, which Trew and her husband Tony built in 1980, is a huge, whale-shaped cave, capable of swallowing 1500 pounds of pottery and ten cords of wood in four days and nights, attaining and maintaining the temperature at 2300 degrees Fahrenheit. It takes a week to load the pots and a week to cool them down. The fire has to be fed continuously day and night, so we sleep in shifts. We wear protective, rubber fireman's clothes, arm-length gloves and goggles.

To peer into the sizzling white liquid heat of this inferno is to stare into a stunning light of another world, as dazzling as it is awe-ful. By Day Three, fire has taken over my entire psyche. In my conscious mind, wherever I look, there is only fire. When I lie down to attempt sleep, all I see is fire: raging conflagrations, consuming everything in their path. If I succeed in dozing off, my dreams are red and orange, heat and flame. It is relentless.

And it is magical, to be privy to the alchemical cauldron where simple objects of rounded clay earth are transformed by the great burning, (like desire?) into sacred vessels of holy craft: a tea bowl, a cup, an urn Keats would covet. Each piece has its own unique variation in color and patterning from the random drift of wood ash and carbon that floats through the kiln and settles on the work, creating the unpredictable.

When it's all over, Lesley and I return to our friend Asha's house in nearby Batesville, Virginia, to recover. (Batesville, where the Wild Heart Journal lives.) Within moments of arriving, the phone rings with unfathomable news: Trew's entire house and

### The Clay Jug

*Inside this clay jug there are canyons and  
pine mountains,*

*and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!*

*All seven oceans are inside,  
and hundreds of millions of stars.*

*The acid that tests gold is there,  
and the one who judges jewels.*

*And the music from the strings that no one touches,  
and the source of all water.*

—Kabir



studio has burnt to the ground. The cause of the blaze was electrical, “unrelated” to the firing. Her family has lost everything...except both of the kilns and all of the pots in them! How curious to contemplate the meaning of having only one’s art spared. But there is no time for contemplation—everyone is stunned, and friends and neighbors pour in to help. Fortunately, Trew’s heart and spirit were spared as well, and together with her husband Tony and son Kashuo, and the love of beloveds, the Bennetts bounced back and rebuilt their present home around the kilns.

Many potters might put a studio or kiln in their house. Trew and Tony put a house around their kiln! So pottery is central to Trew Bennett, who studied with Teruo Hara at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., as well as helping him in the apprenticeship tradition at his private home and studio in Warrenton, Virginia. She also studied with Malcolm Wright, and with the 13th generation potter from Karatsu, Japan, Takashi Nakazato,

Buck Creek Pottery maintains a long-standing tradition of producing utility ware, in a folk craft tradition, and takes on one or two year-round apprentices to help maintain the pottery and to study in the ancient potting ways. A three-month Anagama Woodfire Intensive is offered to a small group of committed potters every summer. Trew is also engaged in the study and practice of Chanoyu, Japanese Tea Ceremony, and considers it a vital part of exploring the possibilities and use of pottery. “When tea is served to the guest,” she says, “there is a chance for the guest to think about the earth that grew the tea plants, the people who picked the tea leaves, the powdering of the tea, the presentation, the potter and the earth that created the clay that becomes the tea bowl. It is one of those moments that one can deepen into, while contemplating all of the extraordinary events that have gone on to come to this one moment.”

Although Trew has taught at various universities and art schools, and has shown her work in numerous galleries over the years, today, at 60, she chooses mostly to stay home and work, and has become a local treasure in Nelson County, Virginia, where she always welcomes committed pottery students to come by for tea and talk, by appointment. She and her students offer a yearly Studio Show and Sale at Buck Creek Pottery.

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*(Editor’s Note: We were joined by Allie Rudolph, social worker, therapist, meditation teacher, friend and student of Trew’s.)*



**WHJ:** I read a quote recently: “As much as the potter is shaping the bowl, the bowl is shaping the potter”—what does that mean?

**TREW:** Well you will just have to come out and experience making a bowl! The clay is a material with a vital force—it is alive. When you’re working with the clay, the clay works with you. It has the life force in it: once you give it a movement, it gives a movement back. The clay is basically silica, alumina and water. Silica is also in the chips that go into computers, and when you give it a charge, it gives it back. So in a sense it’s the silica and the plasticity in the clay that’s giving some kind of reaction back. It has even been found in laboratory tests that if you strike clay with a hammer and then take heat-sensitive readings off it, it will hold the charge up to a month.

I’m working nearly every day, so sometimes I have a good day, and often I have a wonderful day! Then, of course, sometimes I have a bad day, or my back hurts, or I may have had a bad dream or be upset about something. So my process is to work through these moods with the clay. Sometimes all I can manage is to just make some very ordinary, straight-up cups, as similar as I can, or just service bowls.

But then there are the days when I might start out with some difficulty and then something begins to move and change as my hands work with the clay. Suddenly forms begin to emerge, and this is when I think one has to very alert. We give ourselves—whether it’s through our dreams, or through the weather that comes through our emotions—chances to change, and to recognize when that process is happening. I work a lot with dream imagery in my potting. Some of my favorite vase forms came from a particular dream I had recently: *I am lying down and someone who is very special to me reaches over from above and behind me and holds my head very carefully between their hands. I slowly reach up and cover their hands with mine. The communion feels so comforting and healing.* The power of that dream stayed with me all day, and I wound up making these tall pots with “touchings” at the neck to capture this mood. And I do feel by now, and it has taken me years and years, that I can tell when the energy is shifting and something is happening, and this is very exciting, and this is when it almost seems as though, “Who is making the pot?” I’ve got my hands on the clay and the

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wheel is spinning, but sometimes there's this extraordinary sense and quality that the pot is just creating itself, with very little touching or definition on my part. And in a beautifully formed piece of pottery, it's almost as if you can still sense it spinning, that it still carries within it the movement with which it was formed.

**WHJ:** *And what do you do to get yourself to those places of flow?*

**TREW:** When I first begin to work again, after a firing cycle, when I haven't been at the wheel for a while, I begin with coiling, which is very forgiving and very energizing, and it's a place where I can wander around with myself. I work on a kick wheel, which allows me to work in both directions, and at times with a very subtle slowness. I have used electric wheels, but I find that they are much less sensitive, perhaps like the difference between a canoe and a motorboat: you don't get there as fast but you can enjoy the scenery more! When I begin coiling I start with a pancake on the turn wheel and I roll out coils of clay, and then I attach and smooth those coils and let the wheel be my tool. And then eventually I throw the coils, and then I do some paddling into them, and the clay starts to stretch—it's like it gets a skin—and the larger it's getting, the more resounding is the sound of the paddling, and the working on it.

Then, when I find my sense of center again, I find my seat on the wheel, and I find my balance again. When there's an interruption, it's always an enormous task to return to the work. And the longer you've been potting, the larger the panorama of styles you can choose from—Korean, Japanese, English—how do you make the first pot again, choosing from all those styles and possibilities? And I find what happens in working with this coiling and paddling technique, which is called *tataki*—*tata* means to pat in Japanese—is that it guides me back into the rhythm, the movement, the clay, the water, the whole process, and then little by little, I remember myself.

The style I choose seems to emerge from this beginning coiling exercise, and I usually work on three to five coiled pieces at one time. I'll have an idea in mind for the shape, but then sometimes the shape decides itself due to the quality of the clay that day, or because I'll get the form a little bit too flared, or maybe the clay has gotten a bit too hard, so I'll need to finish even though I didn't think I was ready to finish. At times the clay helps me decide the shape.

What I love about pottery is how lively it is, how it's different every time, how we're so surprised by what comes off our fingers, and how it changes as it dries and eventually fires. Because I'm doing production ware, I'm hoping that some things will work as sets, but they're never quite the same. Pottery events can be totally unpredictable. Things happen in the kiln that one doesn't anticipate—shelves have cracked and dropped and blocked the draw of the fire so we didn't have the temperature we needed. And sometimes

there are lucky accidents; sometimes there are completely wonderful firings with amazing results.

**ALLIE:** For me a lot of it is about the centering aspect. There's a feel to it, a sense of balance. When I'm centered and the pot is centered, there is a feeling of connectedness and groundedness. And that's what really draws me to the work: when the pot and the potter feel as one. It reminds me of that saying, "if you're going the speed of the wind, then you don't feel the wind." I often get distracted and out of touch with this sense of balance in my life, and don't usually recognize when I've lost it. Meditation also helps me remember, but for me, pottery is about dropping into that place of stillness and connection where creativity and art emerges; pottery is an expression of that centered place.

**TREW:** When I'm doing my production ware, I make the analogy with journaling: you write everyday, and there's lots of stuff you just don't want to read again or that isn't useful or that is repetitive. But then there are places in the writing that are really meaningful, where you're able to say something, primarily to yourself, and then perhaps you'll present it to others. So when I'm working everyday with the clay, that's what happens. I'm working and working and maybe there are bowls one day, maybe there are cups one day, maybe vases, pitchers, covered jars.

And like with journaling, some of them get tossed or are unimportant. If you make 25 or 30 little cups, there are going to be a few of them that you find really special; some are just okay enough to go ahead and fire and glaze and put out for sale; and some, for whatever reason, don't quite make it. Usually it's a technical thing—I've bumped the clay, or it cracked in drying, or I've trimmed it too thin. And sometimes I look at it and I see a form and I just

don't think it sings or breathes or moves.

And then sometimes you can't tell until after the firing. Because truly you need to *use* a piece of clay to see how it brings the character forward, to see how it fits into your life, to see how it lives among your other pieces of craft that you use. The meaning of craft is something that is beautiful *and* useful. Mainly I make pottery that's for use—with food or flowers—I don't tend to make one-of-a-kind pieces anymore.

**WHJ:** *The word "useful" is unique to this form—you don't think of a piece of music or a painting being useful, or a dance...*

**TREW:** Well that's what craft means. I think some Japanese translations call it "hands and heart," something coming from your heart and out of your hands. So think about weaving—that's useful, or woodwork, or brass. My teacher, Teruo Hara, studied with an architectural group in Kyoto where in learning to be architects they had to make pots, blow glass, weave and dye fabric, lay stone, do joinery and weld metal, because these are all the materials and skills you need to build a house. And that's very rare—if you go into most modern-day homes, they don't have much of this true

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“A nobleman is riding through a town and he passes a potter at work. He admires the pots the man is making: their grace and a kind of rude strength in them. He dismounts from his horse and speaks with the potter. ‘How are you able to form these vessels so that they possess such convincing beauty?’ ‘Oh,’ answers the potter, ‘you are looking at the mere outward shape. What I am forming lies within. I am interested only in what remains after the pot has been broken.’”

—M.C. Richards, from *Centering*



craftsmanship quality in them. And often Japanese homes were built on site and the questions were, “What trees are here that we can cut down to use as lumber, what rocks are here, where is the structure going to settle right in the site?”

**WHJ:** *Is there also pottery as art, without the usefulness aspect?*

**TREW:** There is a lot of that now, if you look at *Ceramics Monthly* or *Art in America*. It’s a little like the difference between modern dance and folk-dancing. Modern dance is a lot about expression, and often has quite a lot of ego or modern interpretation to it. In folk dancing you’re just doing the same old thing over and over again—but it’s slightly different each time, and it has a pattern that has a tradition to it. There is a lot of pottery that’s really sculpture. And there’s a lot of pottery that’s very intellectual—particularly teapots that could hardly be recognized as teapots. However, clay is a material for expression, so there’s no right or wrong to that, it’s just not the aspect I am drawn to.



*Allie Rudolph working in Trew’s studio.*

**ALLIE:** I love coming to Buck Creek from my world, which is pretty crazy, working in a medical center, being mostly in my mind, communicating, working with people, lots of busyness and stress. Being in this natural setting with the mountains and the serenity and the quiet, and being able to work with Trew and her gentle, encouraging teaching style has been a real gift to me. And to work with nature, the clay, the earth, the vitality—there is a transformational energy in all this. I come bringing all my stuff, and when I can settle and start to join and be with these elements in a pure way, it’s an incredible healing process for me. Changes occur where I feel I can connect with nature—*my* nature, and outer nature too.

Trew helped me with a project when Jon Kabat-Zinn visited the University of Virginia, where I work. I was asked to speak at a dinner to honor him and many supporters of our mindfulness program, and Trew made beautiful tea bowls for me to present as gifts, each in its own box lined with green linen, and adorned with Japanese calligraphy. In preparing the talk, a line came to me that speaks to the tea bowl but

also to human form and purpose: “A simple form, whose empty space offers itself to service.” And that pretty much says it all for me. Because it’s really what happens *here*, (gesturing towards the interior of a cup) in the empty space, that its purpose is fulfilled. And that’s what we’re trying to teach: remembering to connect to this stillness of our empty space as the source of love and creativity and expression. It’s the essence and the spirit of who we are. Enclosed in the box with the tea bowls was this writing by Lao Tsu:

*We join spokes together in a wheel,  
But it is the center hole  
That makes the wagon move.  
We shape clay into a pot,  
But it is the emptiness inside  
That holds whatever we want.  
We hammer wood for a house,  
But it is the inner space  
That makes it livable.  
We work with being,  
But non-being is what we use.*

—Lao Tsu, from the *Tao Te Ching*  
translation by Stephen Mitchell

**WHJ:** *Can you, Trew, as a teacher, look at a student’s pot and get a sense of who they were and where they were when they made it? Do you look at a pot and say, “Oh she was distracted” or “she was really in the zone for this one”—can you assess that from the pot?*

**TREW:** That’s a little too momentary. However, I can look at a pot and see if someone just wants to be subtle and simple and clear, or I see that someone has just got too much going on—the trimming has a little too much ego in it, or there’s too much monkeying with the pot, or the signature is too wild. And these tend to be feelings I might have about that person, although I might love them very much and be good friends with them. But the aspects of their character that are too much or too loud or too soft or too shy or too bold—these are qualities that come through in pottery.

Pottery is like a signature—I can see a pot and know whose it is if I know that potter’s work. With students who are yearning to express themselves in clay and are asking for my guidance, I can often see where someone is impatient or undisciplined or not careful enough. When people are first beginning, I sometimes ask them to work blindfolded, to just go inside and get quiet and feel the material, and be more in touch with their feelings than with their eyes, because we see so many things that can distract—particularly the clay going around the wheel. I’ve done sensitivity groups where we’ve made pinch pots and then traded pots so that you’d feel what someone else’s fingers do that’s so different from what one’s own fingers do. And once a group of us made masks, actually pressing the clay on our faces, but then we decorated the *inside* of the mask, the side of the mask that *we* see, not just what we’re presenting to other people.

**WHJ:** *Will you speak a bit about the Anagama Firing?*

**ALLIE:** Going through a whole cycle of a four-day wood firing was an amazing experience. It was mesmerizing to feel the intensity of that fire energy at 2300 degrees! And to watch the transformation of those simple clay forms into shimmering, dancing, seemingly liquid light, knowing that once cooled they would turn to stone. It brought to mind thoughts of what the core of the sun must be like, or the inside of a volcano. There were also moments of fear and reverence and great respect for the ritual of managing that great burning inferno. I like intensity, so it was quite exhilarating.

**TREW:** The firing process is a little like sailing a boat, where you have to work with the wind, trying to find the right tack to keep going. Because we're working with the fire, and the draft, and the combustion, if you put in too much wood you choke it up and the temperature falls; if you don't put in enough wood you lose temperature up the chimney. The ideal firing is kind of in loops: as you add your wood and you reach your combustion point, the temperature begins to fall a little so you stoke it again and it climbs up a bit and then falls again until the next stoking, and you try to keep that rhythm going smoothly. And the whole experience is a major group effort, with many students and friends helping out at every step—from mixing the clay to splitting the ten cords of wood, loading and unloading the pots—I could never do it alone. And in particular, none of it could happen without my husband Tony, who was also a potter when we met, and who provided the force and strength to help build, (and then rebuild after the fire!) our home and studio and the kilns.

It's very exciting to watch the anagama firing from the beginning, when you just throw a few pieces of wood into the mouth of the kiln and it looks like a little campfire, and then pretty soon an orange glow begins, and the temperature starts to climb very gradually, so gradually that you almost don't notice it. And then by the end there's just so much fire and it's so hungry that you're just stoking all the time. It's a wonderful experience with fire. You're using eight or nine cords of wood in four days, and it's doing something good—usually that much fire is burning down a barn! And it takes us back—this is how the railroads went across the country. All original forms of massive energy were created by fire and water and steam. So I love that. It's symbolic, but I think of it often: here we are, doing what has been done forever, as long as man could figure out how to make fire and take some earth and form it into something. Almost all of our civilizations begin with pottery.

