

Finding the Authentic Self



Lauryn Axelrod
Vermont, USA

The empty vessel.

I came to clay through Japanese Tea Ceremony. I was studying Chado and fell in love with the chawan, the iconic ceramic tea bowl used in the elaborate ceremony. For me, the bowl was the quintessential metaphor for the human vessel: perfect in its imperfection; precious, yet ordinary; and containing the entire cosmos in its emptiness.

I set out to make my own tea bowls by asking the question “If we are containers for the best and worst qualities of humanity, what would a bowl of compassion look like?” I realized it would take me the rest of my life to discover that...if at all.

Each bowl continues to be a journey into authenticity. Can I be open enough to let the bowl evolve on it's own, my hands simply following the instructions of the truer self? Can I let who I am come through, or in the humility of a tea bowl, can my ego disappear? And what of marks? Those made by my hands or tools. Should they be left as is? The process visible?

The bowls have evolved: becoming simpler, quieter, clearer, and more immediate – unencumbered. Of the hundreds of chawan I make each year, only a handful feel authentic to me. These are the ones I cradle in my hands, close to my heart, and let them speak quietly of this fragile - but infinitely powerful - human life.

This is why I return to the form endlessly. I know it will take the rest of my life to make the one bowl that is truly authentic. Does such a bowl exist?

Continued on back

curated

ceramics

CuratedCeramics.com Minneapolis (612) 719-9632

***Pu* - The uncarved block.**

In Taoism, *Pu* is the metaphor for the authentic self: An uncarved block, absent of influence and conditioning, action and reaction, existing in pure state. It's a spiritual ideal, but it begs the question: Who are we? Who am I? If I am not only the amalgamation of genetics and environment, thoughts and feelings, then what am I? More to the point, how is it that I respond to influences and events from a pure state?

I began to think of clay in the metaphoric sense: clay in pure form, unmolded, as body, made of earth. Responding to events in the world that I could no longer avoid, I picked up a gun and began to shoot blocks of raw clay. The results – immediate, visceral, raw, fragile – spoke to me of authentic action and reaction. The effect of the world on the *pu*. How are we molded and shaped by the events that affect us? How do we respond?

The clay responded violently- as it must - to the force applied to it. The pieces brought up both beauty and horror. I was simultaneously attracted and repelled. The horror and repulsion I felt came from the narrative – the “suffering” of the body, shot by a gun. Without that, they were simply forms - abstract, sculptural, inimitable – affected by forces. And yet, they spoke of something I couldn't name; an ephemeral quality, unspeakable. I saw them as a metaphor for the human condition: the uncarved block acted upon in ways we cannot predict or control, yet beneath the pure state from which they evolved remains visible to the discerning eye.

The fire.

I fire with wood because there is no more immediate process to me. There are so many variables it is impossible to control the outcome. We cannot fully control the flame, the heat, or the way the pieces respond. We have to let go.

Each time I fire, I am reminded that control of anything is an illusion: we struggle and strive, contorting ourselves to affect things, to make life go the way we want it. And we fail... over and over and over. Suffering. When we succeed, it's more by luck... or by guidance. But we cannot be complacent or cocksure. The next firing will be different. And not under our control. Guaranteed.

The best firings are quiet, easy. Not because we have it under control, but because we accept that we don't. We simply pay attention and do what must be done. There is no suffering, no story attached to it. The pots will be fired...or not. And the results will be appreciated, even if they are imperfect.

What I learn is this: Authenticity is not something we control, and it's not something we even understand. It's an ever-deepening process of self-awareness that requires stripping away the influences and effects, pretense and illusion. Authenticity takes us deeper and deeper, makes us quieter and quieter, as we strive to return to that state of *Pu*. Always, the results are beautiful, even if, at first appearance, they are uncomfortable or challenging.