

I am going to speak about my own experience as a ceramic student and how I discovered my own thread which made working with clay the meaningful centre of my life.

My first ceramics teacher was Milton Moon and he brought to the experience dedication and passion and as a teacher demanded commitment, it could not have been a better introduction for me because I found throwing exceedingly difficult and it took me a year of daily perseverance to develop any confidence and fluency. Without Milton's attitude to learning I may well have given up for a task I found easier and in fact more agreeable but then I developed skills that have made sitting down at the wheel one of the most enjoyable activities possible.

Even after 3 years this still was not enough. Being insecure I believed I did not know enough to step out into the world without further tuition and direction. After a year at the Jam factory making my own production I took the position of assistant to Gwyn Hansen Pigott.

Gwyn's work was sublime and I saw things in the same pared down essential way, her practice very exacting and rarefied but I soon realized that preparing everything from the ground up would never be my way.... I just wanted to make.

By now I was a good enough thrower, I could formulate glazes and fire kilns but there was a struggle going on inside myselfI was searching..... I wanted to find something meaningful deep inside myself that made the work my very ownand yet the contradiction and irony was that I was still looking outside myself for those answers.....

My domestic life took me to London and a residency at Goldsmith's College gave me a time to experiment and play a little.

Then in 1980 I had the opportunity to visit the USA it was made possible by the cheap Freddy Laker flights across the Atlantic.

I visited friends in San Francisco and we made the journey to Aspen Colorado to attend the Annual Music Summer School where their brother a Julliard student, was performing.

Up there in the mountains, glorious weather and beautiful music

I remembered that Anderson's Farm was in Colorado and I believed Paul Soldner to be somewhere in the vicinity.

One afternoon I picked up the phone book.... Paul Soldner was listed and without thinking..... I dialed....., he answered..... I paused and panicked....'What would I say?'

I found myself blurting, 'I am a potter from Australia', and he said, 'Well you had better come around for coffee'.

And so at 4pm, that same day, I knocked on his door

And so this is how I met Paul Soldner, the teacher, the friend, the philosopher, the inventor, the engineer, the alchemist and the artist.

He graciously and gently showed me around.

The first building was rectangular and provided sleeping quarters, and a painting studio for his wife Ginney.

The second was the pottery an imposing stone building with a conical roof referencing 19th Century industrial kilns built from local stone hauled from creek beds. It was an inspiring space.

The recently built and not quite complete living rooms were modern and interesting and like the studio sat sensitively in the landscape. It was in there we sat and drank coffee, ate cake and chattered.

I remember thinking how patient and generous Paul and Ginney were, entertaining a complete stranger.

As we said goodbye Paul added, 'That if I was interested in participating in the graduate programme, at Scripps College, Claremont, California, I should be there on Jan the 15th. That was in exactly 5 months? Each year he made 3 places available for outsiders, his special students, and he liked to include some foreign students.

First I thought why? Why would he invite me he didn't know my work or really much about me!

Then I thought Why not.....and then thought..... but how?????

However I did! And on the 15th, January 1981 I flew into Ontario in Orange County the closest airport to the Claremont Colleges. The airport driveway was lined with Eucalyptus trees and although it was winter the weather was mild and comfortable. The College drive was lined with magnolias just coming into flower, and the street in which the ceramics studio was situated was lined with flowering oranges trees.

It was all too beautiful and such a relief after Thatcher's cold bleak London.

Within 2 days I had accommodation with a mattress on the floor, a tiny studio space with the first year masters students and transport, Soldner's old bike a very old bike!

The term began without any delay. Two formal lectures a week and one tutorial a fortnight. Lectures were direct and in fact minimal, only important information which was usually technical, was delivered and without any side tracking. Never more than half an hour, Paul believed that this was the maximum time for complete concentration. If, you missed it Mon pm you could pick it up Tues am, same thing for Wed lecture and Thurs. Often I went back for the repeat because they were crammed full and always relevant.

Morning tea was also about half hour..... around 11am Paul would get up from his work pick up his coffee cup and we would follow.....to one of the college

cafes..... the graduate students congregating to take part in free wheeling philosophic ramblings which took us from Art Theory to the meaning of life, science and music, politics and always back to the visual Arts and the experience of our own practice.

These conversations would be picked up and continued at the same time the next day or over beers at the end of a hot day, around the pond in the Scripps' courtyard.

We were stimulated and often excited as we returned to struggle with our own attempts at expressing ourselves.

Evening tutorials were held every 2 weeks at Soldner's home. They included a potluck meal, a soak in the hot tub if you had been making clay that day, information on the best methods of packing pots for transport always practical information, including making brushes with the tip of a dogs tail and perhaps tasting Paul's latest brew. Sometimes there was a gallery opening, which we would attend together. He engendered a sense of community, but more than that a sense of professionalism and students in their final Masters' year took themselves and their practice very seriously.

There was the occasional visitor to these evenings among them Gerry Rothman, Doug Laurie and Fred Marer the collector all contributing to our knowledge.

My studio space was tiny I did not care. I could make it work. I mixed my clay, in a Soldner clay-mixer, prepared and bagged it, then stored it under the table I shared with the other two 'special students'. And in my corner I was absorbed with my large coiled pots.

After about 5 weeks of 10hour days, I was struggling, feeling very unsure of myself. I had had no feedback and 'yes' I expected it, at least some reflections from the 'master'!

And then one evening, I was alone in the studio and Soldner came back to check on the work he had begun that day. He ambled over. Soldner, ambled he always seemed easy and relaxed. He asked me how I was going and if there was anything I wanted to talk about. 'Well' I said, 'and stammeredyes..... I had thought you would tell me how I am doing', and then he surprised me with, 'Don't you know how you are doing?' I was shocked..... as I realized I was not at all sureI had ben waiting for him to tell me what was successful if anything and to point me in a direction..... I suppose in factI thought that was why I was there???????Then he said,' Liz you need a night off', and took me to the local Mariachi Bar. We ordered beers, salsa and tortias.

When we sat down, he said....." that what I made was none of his business, 'It is your own discoveries which are important and you can only make these for and by yourself I do not want to interfere in any way with your aesthetic and conceptual choices because they have nothing to do with me my involvement in that way will stifle you and make you self conscious to perform what you think is right you will not find your own source that way."

I was completely on my own and it was a major shock.

He went on..... you are putting in the hours you are focused it is all you can do in this moment.

However if you have technical problems, I am more than happy to help you figure them out.'

But the conversation helped, it gave me insight into Soldner's teaching style. What I realized was, that he was always around, always making his own work, firing kilns, talking philosophy and enjoying life. He taught by example.... he took an interest in everybody but never told anyone what to do unless it was technical and there he kept no secrets.

I began to relax and experiment and slowly all kinds of possibilities emerged. Making my work became the most joyous experience imaginable. It was hard to stop. As the weather got warmer and the graduate shows crept up.... 9 hour days became 12hourswith the masters students surging to complete their exhibitions. After all I had nothing else to do in Claremont, California, but make pots that is what I had come to do!

I was sad to find that my application for a Visa extension was rejected. And in Oct, I had no alternative but to leave the USA.

But I wanted more. The experience had been so concentrated. It had taught me to be utterly absorbed in my own unique and creative dream. I had found the thread that thing inside that I had been so aware had not been there before. I was at last inspired.

What Soldner had taught me was that I would never need another teacher and that I was my own teacher..... I had got what I came for!

I returned to Adelaide and in quiet isolation set up my studio in the living room of my house and began to work.

In 1983 Soldner was invited to be the Key-note speaker at the Ceramics Conference held in Adelaide. As soon as he arrived our conversation began where it had left off some 10 months previously. It was basically about the struggle to find one's own thread and how to develop it.

It was 8 years before I saw Paul again irregular letters had kept us in touch. And then in 1991 I was awarded an Australia Council Grant to travel in Mexico. I flew into Los Angeles, Paul and Ginney were at the airport to meet me and we drove down to their home in Claremont. I must point out that Soldner and his wife took an interest in all students and their generosity and kindness was inexhaustible.

I stayed for a week before taking off for Mexico.

The event of that week I have chosen to relate is the one, which in my mind personifies him as a teacher and mentor.

On my second day in Claremont, Soldner was scheduled to review one of his masters' students.

The young man had his work set up in the Graduate Gallery space. The discussion began and was mostly explanations by the student and occasional questions from Soldner.

And once again I was so impressed with Paul's gentle and thoughtful and gentle commitment to his students.

Paul made me part of the conversation and after an hour, we had a beer to celebrate the end of semester.

The student told me he had to work quite long hours to afford graduate school and juggling both was not always easy. Soldner then asked him to take me to his studio and show me his previous semesters work. These pieces were sensitive and resolved and as far as I could see and these qualities were not evident in the work he was currently presenting. It is common for graduate students to turn their attention to completely different issues and styles for each of the 4 semesters of the Masters Programme

However, to me it seemed a shame to give up a sensitive investigation for one that seemed soulless!

I couldn't wait to interrogate Paul and as soon as the student was out of earshot....'Soldner, why didn't you tell him he was on to something last semester and that it was so much better than the present direction'.

'Well, that is your opinion Liz, it also happens to be mine. But this boy is in Graduate School and he must be responsible for all of his own decisions and actions. If I influence his direction, I do him a great disservice, he will look outside rather than inside, he has to learn for himself and from his own experience, the aesthetics and content of his expression is not my business.

'Yes', I said, 'I remember, the Mariachi Bar; when the penny dropped for me; that was definitely one the most important and influential conversation of my life!' And then we turned our attention to the tall shady pines we were walking beneath and the meal we were planning for that evening.

Letters got more and more intermittent as the years went by but my memories of those 8 months when I turned a corner remained very vivid, for it was during this time that I made a real commitment to my work and my own discovery and it has to be said that Paul played a significant part.

I feel very fortunate that I have had 3 outstanding teachers and all have had a significant influence.

When he died in Feb 2011, I went to his website which was flooded with the appreciation of his hundreds of students thanking him for the gift of independence he had given and the contribution he had made to their lives.

All of my teachers have played an important role in my life and for that I am grateful.

But it was with Soldner I had the defining moment with ramifications that have continued to reverberate and enrich my life.

In any situation there is a lesson and as a practitioner one meets so many other artists from which one always takes away a little something.

Teachers too are rewarded..... information and empathy flows both ways and now as a teacher of children these young adolescence rewarded me weekly with their freedom, creative energy and joy for simply being .

I have taught them for ten years and just now as they turn 16, I begin to fear my life without them, it will be less and it will be time to replace the experience with a new one for myself..... so it goes on.....and I do hope for a very long time!