

Translating from the *Subconscious*

by Nancy Utterback

April 5, 1987. My heart pounding, I opened the salt kiln this morning. It was completely filled with my journal pots. Two months of work. I smiled to see evidence of deep snow, melting icicles and isolation. With the warm sun on my face and the sounds of spring all around me, I had completely forgotten winter. No one else will ever know that these are talking pots. The winter of '87 lives on.

When the cop pulled up behind me and turned on his lights, my heart skipped a beat. It was 2 A.M. and I was parked by the old car wash, watching the studio next door intently. I was writing by flashlight in my journal, but I was certain this wasn't against the law.

"Keep your hands on the wheel," he instructed, and asked what I was doing. "Drinking a Dr. Pepper and writing in my journal," I responded. As I handed him my driver's license he asked me to show him the soda and the journal.

I held up the Dr. Pepper.

It was impossible to make him understand that I was just hanging around, harmless, waiting until the last potter had left the communal studio so I could go in and work alone. It was even harder to explain that my journal was private and that he couldn't see what I was writing, not ever. After some discussion, we compromised: I held the journal up, and let him look at it from a distance.

I started keeping my first diary in the third grade. I've always needed a place to tell my secrets. In the 70s, I worked in studios in which I shared space and equipment. My need for privacy made me someone who staked out the studio and waited until everyone else had gone home. I was a kind of clay vampire, working through the night and lying low during the day.

In 1985, I finally built my own studio, complete with kiln yard. As I stood in my studio reflecting back over the years, I started thinking about the possibilities of keeping a journal in clay. I wanted to explore my inner space privately, and travel over the surface of the clay in my mind. I wanted to speak in a different language between me and my sub-conscious. The kind of private language I had invented as a child.

Keeping a journal has always been about privacy. I grew up with three brothers who loved teasing and tormenting me. Their favorite pastime was stealing my diary and reading it aloud to anyone who

would listen. I knew I had to figure out some way to keep my journal private.

By the time I was eleven years old I had become fascinated by how mankind had used symbols to represent different ideas, how many languages and alphabets existed. I seriously thought about becoming an archaeologist because I was so intrigued with the idea of piecing together people's artifacts and fragments of their written language to figure out the way they lived. I loved the idea of their lives being recorded in a kind of code that we puzzled over later, trying to understand who they were.

At the same time, I began to question everything. I wanted to understand where we came from, and the truth behind our legends and myths. I wanted to know what god had really said and if he really existed. I announced to my parents that I was going to read



"Black and Yellow Bowl," 15 in. (38 cm) in diameter, thrown stoneware, with slip, salt fired to Cone 10, \$115.

the Bible. Both my parents tried to discourage me. I was too stubborn to listen; I made a promise to myself to read at least ten pages a night.

My mother had a beautiful Bible, leather bound, lots of illustrations and red lettering at the top of every page. Night after night I held this giant book and read my pages. After a few weeks my parents became really concerned. I had become withdrawn and



"Three Stacking Squares,"
17 in. (43 cm) in height, thrown
and altered stoneware, with slip,
salt fired to Cone 10, \$450.



"Stretched Vase," 18 in. (46 cm) in length, thrown and altered stoneware, with slip, salt fired to Cone 10, \$250.

quiet. My father asked me to tell him what I had learned. I couldn't really tell him any of the Bible stories because none of them made sense. He said that unless I was learning something, he was not going to let me continue reading the Bible.

I looked up at him and said I had learned that the Bible was written in code. His eyebrows raised, he looked over at my mother. "Well, she has learned something." He nodded and quietly left my room. That moment changed everything. I finished reading the Bible ten months later, and, with great relief, put it back in its place on the shelf.

September 1961. *I'm practicing writing backwards like Leonardo da Vinci. You have to hold it in front of the mirror to read it. Miss Denny says he needed to keep his writing so no one else could read it just like me.*

The idea of writing in code stuck with me. I began by writing backwards and then in my own language made up of simple symbols and drawings. I loved looking at Asian calligraphy and was intrigued by Egyptian hieroglyphics. My simple symbols took me to other countries in my imagination and encouraged me to explore different cultures through books and art. I had found a way to write in my diary everyday, so my brothers—or anyone else, for that matter—would not be able to decipher it. I had found privacy.

Years earlier I had discovered that even simple words could be a kind of code. I wanted to find out if a piece could hold the meaning of a word even if the word itself was not visible.

I made a series of pieces that I called "touch pots." They were completely closed round or oval forms with a word or a phrase on the inside. These were fun pieces and they sold well. I don't know if anyone ever unlocked the meaning inside. The piece would have had to have been broken and the shards examined for someone to know they had a meaning as part of their inner surface.

My work has always changed slowly—I agonize over every tiny design change. Moving into my new studio, working alone, I exploded with change.

I spent several days in my basement pulling out yellowed diaries, studying the bizarre record of my mind as a young girl.

Over the next weeks I worked on forms that would give me a surface I could use like a page to paint my entries. For the first time I was actually having fun testing slips and trying different oxide combinations. I read every recipe I could get my hands on. I was just learning about salt firing and started experimenting with different ways to introduce the salt. I began to fine tune the wetness of the surface.

I practiced brushstrokes and I began recording daily journal entries onto each pot. I felt the same satisfaction I had felt when my brothers were no longer able to read my diary. I could see that

the symbols and drawings formed a pattern; a surface that could stand on its own even if the person holding the pot didn't know it was a journal entry. I moved inward, discovering parts of myself I hadn't known.

August 26, 1986. I just peeked into the kiln. As usual, I made a marathon out of the firing. I glazed for two days with little sleep, fired all night and, yes, I am admitting I fell asleep during the firing. I let the kiln go too long, didn't start my salting as usual. We had to blast the salt in at Cone 10. I have been so nervous. Looks great! Maybe I have discovered something?

After one long day decorating pots, I returned to the house and fell asleep exhausted. The following day I was shocked to see a door painted on the surface of many of the pieces. It had a keyhole, sometimes blocked and sometimes open, and, to my surprise, I found keys painted in and around other entries. I had never consciously chosen this as a symbol. It hit me then that it was the door of opportunity.

What most amazed me was that the image of the door seemed to guide me to open up to other possibilities. I had always interpreted my work in the reverse. I thought about my life and wrote in my journal to express myself. In this case, I translated a message from my subconscious. I hadn't realized it, but I was ready to explore new territory. I reached for the key and opened the door.

I had spent a lifetime trying to find privacy and the space to work alone. Now, after five years of solitude, I began to crave companionship. I took a job teaching two classes a week at a community pottery facility. Teaching encouraged me to share that sacred part of myself with people I barely knew. As a result, my journal pots took on a new dimension. Evidence of a personal journey surfaced. Teaching guided me to find ways to share the way clay can take us to our creative center.

I began to make more time for hiking and exploring the world around me. After a wonderful day at my favorite park I began painting landscapes onto my pieces. I used simple newspaper stencils and found myself drifting back to elementary school. I worked quickly, and the work was fresh and challenging. I returned to the same state of meditation I had been in when I painted the doors of opportunity—not analyzing the way I was working, but sinking into that space between conscious thought and the dream world.

Many symbols have been born out of that dreamy state of subconscious awareness and many have come from everyday experiences. I'm often amazed at how I enter my studio, begin a simple task and many hours later emerge as if I am coming out of a trance. The walk from my studio to my back door is like waking up after a long and meaningful dream.

In my studio, working in clay, I live in the moment, I challenge myself, and I listen to my heart. I am able to slip into that sacred space where I can touch my own heart and hear my own voice. I have perfected the art of conversation with myself. Innuendo, humor, great joy and deep sadness all find their way into this one-on-one dialog.

Now I know that it is safe to share myself and enjoy the closeness that comes late at night with my talking pots glowing in the flame. I also know that all the symbols and imagery that find their way onto my pots are from my inner language; it comes easily like any first language. Translating it into English or explaining the many layers of meaning are the only times I feel it is complex.

While the pages of my journal become plates and cups, and my sketch pad is turned into vases and platters, I continue my conversation with clay, always alert for new meanings and surprising translations.



Large pitcher, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, thrown stoneware, with slip, salt fired, with overglaze enamel, \$125, by Nancy Utterback, Erie, Colorado.