

Self-Taught: Nancy Utterback's Story

By Nancy Utterback

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If it hadn't been for my friend Scott's failed romance, I probably never would have become a potter.

One evening over dinner Scott told me he was building a pottery wheel for a girl he hoped to date. When that didn't work out, he gave the wheel to me. It was 1975. I was married, and studying painting and drawing at the University of Colorado, pursuing my dream of becoming an artist.

Nineteen-seventy-five was a strange time for me. My friends were all searching, and I also felt as if I would never find my path. And even though my only exposure to clay had been in an art history class--the figures of Luca della Robbia still dance in my head -- I accepted the wheel without reservation.

I set up the wheel in our spare room. I found an old pamphlet at the library on how to make a teapot. Even though I knew nothing about centering or throwing, as soon as I put my hands on the clay, kicked the wheel, and felt it moving under the pressure of my fingers, I knew. I still remember the moment. The afternoon turned to evening and then night and then the next day. The summer flew by, with me at my potter's wheel in a state of bliss.

At the end of summer, I emerged triumphant. I had made a teapot. With pride and certainty, I announced I was going to become a potter.

This, of course, begged an obvious question. Just how did one become a potter? I decided to teach myself. I scraped together my pennies and rented an old warehouse. Using the wheel Scott had made as a model, my husband, Larry, and I built nine more wheels, two tables, and a couple of shelves.

I began to teach myself how to throw by making a pot on one wheel and then moving to the next. Each day I filled the wheels with freshly made pots. On the following day I would come in, remove the pots from the wheels, and begin again. In a couple of months the warehouse was full of tiny, lopsided pots and I was happy.

Soon it was time to build a kiln. Since I had never actually seen a kiln, let alone fired one, I had to rely on the library once more. I found a nice picture of a kiln with two chambers. I pinned it up on the wall and counted out the number of bricks I would need.

I began by hounding used brickyards. After a dozen or so visits to what became my favorite haunt, the brickyard owner agreed to keep a look out.

Three months passed, rent was due, and I was struggling. My savings were gone and Larry had taken a part-time job, while continuing to study writing and photography. Just as we were starting to really feel the financial pressure, the phone rang. My brick connection had come through. He had found 1500 high-fire used bricks in good shape. We bargained, he gave me a great deal, and delivered them to my door. In one stroke of kindness, he changed my life forever.

I built the kiln over the next several weeks, building both chambers simultaneously toward the middle. It was going pretty well until I discovered I didn't leave enough space for the chimney. Not knowing any better, I changed the design. The inside of my chimney was 4.5 inches wide by the full width of the kiln, 63 inches and 11 feet tall. It looked like it had a giant envelope stuck inside it. I had to keep telling myself it would be all right.

Life brings you all kinds of tests and trials. Next I needed to strike a match and start a flame. As a kid, I had been caught in a house on fire. I was rescued unharmed, but I was more afraid of fire than any other thing on earth. I grew up unable to roast a marshmallow.

I paced. I procrastinated. I cried. I lit the match. The burner flared, and, once again, I headed down an unknown road.

At that time, I didn't know anything about cones or pyrometers. I was relying on an encyclopedia that described temperatures by color. I also didn't have any kiln shelves, so I loaded the kiln in a tumble stack. My first firing goal was a bisque in one chamber while I dried pots in the second. It was a success. I didn't lose a single pot.

Glazing was next on my list. My research led to another exciting discovery; a ceramic supply store. With money, life could be a lot easier. I had already visited the Colorado School of Mines and had been given some geological maps to locate clay deposits. Digging and preparing most of my clay kept my expenses down, but also I didn't know any better. I continued using local clay for practice, but could now experiment with purchased clays, and buy feldspar and flint for glaze recipes.

My first glaze firing left a lot to be desired. Nonetheless, I forged on. In a few months I was firing with confidence. I began using store-bought clay for most of my pieces because it fired to a hotter temperature without melting.

One night as the kiln was beginning to glow in the darkness, a car screeched to a halt. The driver was Jim Mckinnell, a professional potter, and the first one I had met. My kiln chimney had caught his attention. He kept asking who had designed it. When I pulled my peep out to look inside, his head was next to mine. Our heads swung back and forth in unison. "Where are your cones?" he asked. "What are cones?" I responded. He shook his head at my innocence.

As it turned out, he was a great potter and teacher. The night we met, in front of my bizarre, cone-less kiln, was the beginning of a new chapter in clay.

Because I was both teacher and student at the same time, I read everything, looked at everything, tried everything. Soon I was in desperate need of money to continue. I saw an ad in a local paper for a pottery teacher through the Free University. You had to have your own studio, so I applied.

To my surprise, in a few weeks I was running a small, very informal pottery school. My students generally knew more than I did, and came eager to share their information.

Things really began to move forward. I learned about mixing and applying glazes, and all about cones and firing. I learned about kiln shelves and mostly I learned about potters. I found out about places to sell my work. I signed up for fairs and flea markets and even got into a couple of shops. I was eating on a more regular basis and I was buying all of my clay. I felt rich.

At that time I didn't ask myself if I was doing good work, or finding my own voice, or any of the questions I ask now. I simply concentrated on improving my throwing and firing skills. I still work seven days a week, but back then I worked seven days a week, sixteen hours a day.

I grew up with Corning Ware and Grandma's fine china, which may have had great design qualities, but certainly lacked any personal connection. They were sterile, flat, and gave no trace of the maker. My goal was to put all I felt in my heart into a piece you would use to have your morning cereal.

In the early '80s I took some of my new work, a couple of large, hand-coiled pots, to a fair. Local art fairs and small shops had become my major source of income. I priced one of them at \$150.00, a pretty high price at the time.

A customer told me how much he liked the piece, but that it was only worth \$15.00. I smiled and sent him away. Fairs can be grueling and this was no exception. I was selling, but not making as much as I had hoped. It was hot and I was tired. As the day wore on, the man came back and started in again. He said he would buy my pot for \$15.00. I refused, but he kept giving me a hard time. Finally he walked away. I was glad the day was almost over.

When I turned around, he was there again. I looked over at Larry and asked him to hand me the hammer. He wanted to know why. I told him to hand me the hammer. The man was going on and on about my pot not being worth \$150.00. Methodically, I smashed the pot into pieces with the hammer, not looking up until I was done. I threw the pieces into a bag, held it up, and shook it in his face. "Now it's worth \$15.00!" I shouted. He was backing up so fast he nearly fell over. Everyone was staring at me. I could barely catch my breath. Another man stepped forward and opened his wallet. He handed me \$150.00 and said that it was worth the show. My hand shaking, I took it.

The hour-and-a-half ride home was quiet. I kept thinking about the money, wondering why it didn't make me feel any better. I had, in a way, sold a pot for \$150.00. I realized then that it had never been about the money. The pot had a different kind of value.

It was the first time I faced myself head on. And it changed everything.

I had started out wanting to make a profound statement in my work. But what I came to understand was that my life is filled with sacred moments, not awesome moments of enlightenment, but full and rich with the single moments of my daily life. I am a simple, ordinary person with an extraordinary love of clay. I wanted other people to feel what I felt when they saw or used my pots, to experience the simple joy of a quiet moment with a mug in their hand.

From that moment forward, the pots were about me. They were not objects I made, they were expressions of me; what I felt, what I thought, and who I was.

I have always kept a journal; writing is one way I keep in touch with myself. As a young girl, I made up my own alphabet of symbols and drawings. That gave me a way to keep my thoughts and my privacy. When I wanted to combine my journal with my pots, I frantically searched through boxes of papers from grade school to find my old legend. Over time my alphabet has expanded and allowed me to set down on clay the daily entries from my journal.

Around this time I became seduced by salt firing. The next few years I focused on developing forms that gave me surfaces I could use as canvases. My friend, glassblower Steve Main, encouraged me to apply to the American Craft Council (ACC) shows. Everyone kept telling me how hard it was to get in, so I had very low expectations.

I applied in the fall of 1989. Several months passed. One day I collected my mail at the post office as usual, and there was a letter from the ACC in the pile. I had applied to four different shows, hoping to get in to at least one. Their letter said I had gotten into Baltimore, West Springfield, San Francisco, and St Paul. I walked home in a daze. I put the letter by my bed that night and when I woke up, I checked to see if I had really gotten in. I had.

I did some research to figure out what I should make for the Baltimore show, which was the first one. The system seemed to be something like this. You took your pots, gallery owners looked at them, if they liked them they would order some. Seemed pretty straightforward.

After consulting with Steve, I decided to show my work as a series, and came up with my day journal and my dream journal series. I made twelve pieces of each.

I began to worry about how I would get my pots, Larry, and me to Baltimore in my VW bug. Then one night I turned onto our street and saw a VW mini van for sale. I had made about \$1000.00 at a Christmas sale and used it to talk my way right into the mini bus. I thought we could sleep in the back and carry a cooler of sandwiches. I only hoped I would make enough in orders to make it worthwhile.

I focused solely on the Baltimore show, working and firing up to the very last minute. I had just enough money to pay for my trip out there. I took a table and a gray tablecloth to display my pots.

Larry and I drove straight through. A VW bus is slow to begin with, but loaded down with pots and food it is even slower, not to mention that the starter went out somewhere in Kansas and we had to push-start the bus every time. Another startling fact was that the bus had no heater. To add to that, the doors didn't seal very well. The February wind whipped through the bus like a hurricane.

I decided to spend a little of our gas money on some duct tape. Both of us were in our heavy coats with our feet wrapped in sweaters, and there was still ice on the inside of the windshield. As we drove we would feel a place where the wind was coming through and I would seal it up with the duct tape. First the front doors and around all the windows, then the back sliding door, along the floorboards. We finally stopped shivering. This was fantastic, until we had to stop for gas. We had to peel back the tape to get out. People started taking our picture. We waved to them with our mittens.

Forty hours later, we arrived.

We set up my table, spread out the tablecloth, and I unpacked my pots. Each one seemed like a treasure. I could hardly believe the pots and I were here. When I was set up I looked around. All around me were impressive booths, with lights, fancy shelves, and curtains. I stood there in shock with my little table and my 24 pots. Then the buyers descended.

The next three or four hours were a blur. People were at my table, asking questions and picking up my pots. I didn't have a price list or an artist statement. Suddenly a woman appeared. She asked me the price on a couple of pieces and then she stopped. "Is this your first time here?" I nodded. "You look like you could use some help."

The next thing I knew she had taken control. When my prices were too low, she raised them. I made a price list for her assistant to copy. She told me to put a business card in every pot. She handed me a pad of paper. "Get ready," she said.

I took \$10,000 worth of orders by noon that day. My work was apparently fresh, new, and priced to sell. I had moved into a new world. My fairy godmother turned out to be Sylvia Ullman, owner of the American Craft Gallery in Ohio. At one point, she asked me who I had studied with. In my tiniest voice I answered that I was self-taught. She began

to tell anyone who would listen how amazing it was to think I was completely self-taught. By the end of the day I was saying “self-taught” without an apology.

Even though I’d taken \$10,000 in orders, we had no money to get home. As I was closing up for the day a woman approached me. She offered to buy my pots outright, and pick them up at the end of the show. I could continue to take orders, but I wouldn’t have to ship my work home. My eyes lit up. “You mean you would pay me cash now?” I was delighted. My 24 pieces came to over \$1000.00.

I walked out to the bus. Larry was cold and hungry. I opened my bag and showed him the money. He grinned. We found a cheap motel, ate dinner out, and slept like two babies.

My current work is thrown, altered, slip-decorated, salt or wood fired, and rooted in function. It incorporates every aspect of my daily life. I weave together my family, clay, teaching, recreation, and artistic expression into the flow of days, months, and years. I spend four or five days a week in my studio, happily working and painting, recording my day-to-day existence from my journals and, hopefully, creating exciting and interesting pots. The rest of the time I teach and give workshops.

Inevitably, the questions always come up. Where did you study? Who did you study with? Years ago, these questions would make me shrink. I felt inadequate and embarrassed about the path I had taken.

It took me more than twenty years to say I shouldn’t have to apologize for the choices I’ve made. I have come to understand that having a degree in ceramics doesn’t necessarily mean you know more or less about clay, firing, or marketing. You simply have a different beginning. Now I am able to appreciate that each of us has our own journey. I can answer these questions honestly and without shame. I’ve studied everywhere I’ve ever been. I’ve learned from everyone who has ever touched my life.

For me, degree or no degree, it is always about the work. As a teacher, I can help with technique and, if I’m lucky, I can inspire and enlighten. But the individual must do the work. So, in a sense, we are all self-taught. We choose what to listen to, work on, express. Whether we study with the most famous of potters or alone in our studios, we have to find our own way. To capture a moment is the greatest compliment of our achievement. My work gets stronger and more to the point with each firing. I hope that my work, and work of the potters around me, will at some time capture a moment and be frozen in time.

Being self-taught was a choice, perhaps a gift I gave to myself. Allowing me to find me. My struggles have given me my freedom. I have broken the rules, sometimes with great success, and often with great disaster. But I have learned and moved forward.

My love affair with clay is filled with romance and adventure and risk. I wouldn't have it any other way.