

Chutzpah Galleries

Presents

Inquire Within

by

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"Inquire Within"

My first serious spiritual experiment was prompted by dire need. Homeless, scared and confused any remaining illusion of control over my life gave way to desperation. I was scuffling along a country road with no goal or direction other than stave off starvation another day. I had finally hit rock bottom. In abject desperation I began a dialog with the universe will never end. In retrospect my entry into the world of the spirit was almost comical. There's nothing like a total skeptic's internal dialog.

That first one went something like this. "Okay, I don't believe in this at all but I'm desperate. I've tried to control my life but can't do it. It doesn't feel right no matter what I try. Now every wise guy who ever lived says if you ask for help you'll get it so I'm asking. Help!" Note I prefaced my request with disbelief and didn't ask any specific deity, divine being, or reference any religious tradition. I think that's important as it drives home a point. Belief or lack thereof is not important. Sincere skepticism is possibly the best point of departure for a spiritual life. Heart-felt need carried the sincerity of my request.

After that fairly brief but intense internal monolog, I forgot about it as I went bumbling about scrounging something to eat or a place to sleep. I forgot about it until three days later when a blaze of energy came through the top of my head. It was so powerful I literally fell to my knees with tears flowing down my face. The message was both simple and complex. It provided two elements, first a sense of understanding the source of my difficulties and second, a visual image of a sculpture that perfectly expressed the moment of enlightenment.

While the entire message was complete in a fraction of a second it took a bit more time for the ideas to blossom into consciousness. The essence was that I was trying to dominate my surroundings to protect myself from my own fears. There was a mitigating element; it wasn't my fault but the result of my training. This was especially noticeable in dealings with people where I had been trained to use intellect, emotional force, even manners and clothing to project assumed superiority. Secretly however, I was trying to control the world so I didn't have to deal with my fears and insecurities. Fortunately I was a failure.

This understanding had facets that extended beyond merely recognizing the limits of my own ineffectiveness. One was the realization that most people share in a similar psychological pathology to some degree. Then I realized that war was a collective manifestation of this perceived need for a defense from one's own fears and feelings of inadequacies. The most virulent specimens of humanity have completely lost touch with their weaknesses. They may believe so in the illusion of their superiority that they have the right to create wars or precipitate actions of control that have horrendous effects on others. Yet most of these people aren't really conscious of the source of their motivations for their ability to feel is crippled.

This was a huge concept to embrace as it started at the root of my own insecurities and extrapolated to the whole world. Fortunately there was a second part of that inspiration as I now recognize the event. It was an image of a sculpture from the Biblical quotation "...And they shall beat their swords into plowshares." I saw a sword with just a bit of blade left on the grip. The rest of the blade had been beaten until it flowed into a plow shape. The image was crystal clear. It took fourteen years to complete.

Why? A good deal of the time I was homeless. I'd never done metal sculpture. I had to design and build the piece with only the crudest of tools until the very end of the process. But mostly I had to learn to live the lesson I had been given. That was what really took so long. That message was not fully realized even by the time the sculpture "Inquire Within" had been completed but it was so driven home that I would never do more than backslide a bit. The process of unwinding all the emotional defenses that life had taught me evolved from stopping poor behavior to creating goodness that takes its place. The process isn't finished.

Even though I'd had an inspired vision of a sculpture it still took some years to design the specifics. For example I learned that the shape I was wanting wasn't precisely a plowshare but actually a stylized moldboard and plowshare. From extensive research I must have been a momentary expert in the history of plows, from oxen drawn sticks to the modern industrial variety. Then there was the sword handle to consider. I had an inner feel for the piece by this time rather than a specific visual image from which to work. After more months of study, the hand guard of Garibaldi's dress sword seemed to fit the feel of the piece.

The primary tool used in beginning creation of the physical sculpture was a hand operated drill to drill the outlines of the shapes from steel sheet. I told you I'd never done metal sculpture. The edges were filed and then sandpaper was used to smooth them before polishing them with rouge. It was more drilling, more filing and more blisters for months. Years later as completion approached, I finally had access to a fair set of tools. A friend let me use his metal lathe for the grip and pommel. After shaping, the plowshare and hand guard were curved by heating the steel with an acetylene torch and were pounded into shape on asbestos covered, carved wooden molds. I used a ten-pound short handled sledge that had one face ground in a curve and polished.

Once all the pieces were fashioned, they were tapped and held together with threaded stock. A brilliant young welder with a TIG 'glued' them together. The weld beads required more grinding and polishing but by this time I had a small shop in which to work. The etchings were another project. I spent endless days with designs. I wanted the quotation etched on the one side and a nestled design of hearts, each made from two overlapping tear shapes, on the other. I thought of that design as a 'heart swarm.' Enter Francine Larstein and David Boye who collaborated on creating beautiful etched knives and had the skills and tools for refined steel etching. Francine agreed to take my designs, wax the steel, and

laboriously remove the wax where the letters and hearts would be etched. David performed the acid dip for the etching. They did a beautiful job.

The finishing touches were blueing the steel and filling the etchings with 23 carat gold. I wanted the beautiful colors of the natural oxidation patina that is imparted by heating steel from about 500° to 600°. To achieve that goal I polished the steel to a near mirror finish, cleaned it as meticulously as possible and placed it in a standard electric kitchen oven with a glass door. I pulled the sensor element of the thermostat partially out of the case so it would provide a false reading. The oven was calibrated using a thermometer for a 600° temperature rather than the normal 550° limit. I placed the sculpture in the oven and watched it anxiously for about two and a half hours until the colors seemed just right. The gold was applied to the etchings via brush and the metal sculpture was complete.

That's not all, though. It seemed to need a stand. My favorite version of the 'beat to plowshares' quote ends up something like, "...and each shall have his own vine and fig tree." My interpretation is that people will be able to initiate and be responsible for the actions that sustained their lives. I sought to express that dream by carving an imaginary wooden vine and tree hybrid whose branches would support a platform on which rested the sculpture. That took another year to make. Finally, after fourteen years, I had succeeded in expressing the wonder of my first conscious experiment in the spirit.

I've always had sort of a game of judging how close I am able to come to manifesting the reality of work motivated by bursts of inspiration. This is the best I've ever done. I feel it was 95% accurate.

Now ideally the story should stop there but there is one last oddity that is a sort of cosmic coincidence. About fifteen years after the completion of "Inquire Within" the wooden stand was stolen from my little rural shack. A trail of broken parts led directly toward the home from which a couple of kids were known to burglarize neighbors if they thought they might steal drugs or money. When neither was found in my home, they stole a number of things just to express their need for domination. The wooden stand was one. It was a very worldly thing to do. I zeroed in on the culprits and posted stolen notices at the end of their driveway. They panicked and threw the sculpture's stand into a small ravine formed by a creek where someone eventually discovered it some weeks later.

Now here is the universe-works-in-strange-ways moment. Those kids threw the stand into the ravine breaking up a year's work of love. It was almost thirty years to the day after the original moment of inspiration. That moment of inspiration had occurred on the very road within 50 yards from the little creek into which they tried to hide the evidence of their theft. You ever think the universe is has a cosmic sense of communication?

