

TUMBLE STACK

Scott Samuelson—Editor

Rich Briggs, kneeling into the wood kiln, scatters crushed oyster shell onto the floor. He twists his body back toward the opening, where I hand him an unfired bowl, and, turning back into the kiln, he nestles it into this favored spot. The crushed oyster shell will keep the pot from sticking to the floor when the temperature reaches 2400° Fahrenheit. Rich likens the thirty-hour flow of heat and ash, from the fire box through the kiln chambers and up the chimney, to a river. Vessels placed in the path of this heat river pick up the flow lines of ash. Thus fire writes on clay, and a residue of combusted wood creates the look treasured by those who recreate the Japanese art of wood-fired ceramics.

Kiln-like, a university is a structure whose work is combustion. It must be stoked round the clock for the transformational work going on inside. Getting it to and keeping it at temperature is essential, so that the contents—especially students—may experience the essential change from malleable, shifting clay to useful, beautiful, leak-proof vessels.

From the time clay was first formed into vessels, potters have fired their clay on the earth's surface or in shallow pits, and this method is still practiced today in parts of the world. Nigerian women potters fire their water and food storage vessels in a tumble stack. Heaped upon dry sticks that will be set aflame, the stack of crocks can reach five feet high and twenty feet in diameter. This seemingly random pile of vessels is surrounded with more wood and ignited. The one- or two-hour firing reaches about 1450° Fahrenheit, and about two-thirds of the pots survive. Pots intended for cooking purposes are basted while hot with the juice of certain leaves to close the pores because this type of fire does not produce watertight containers.¹

Rich and I meet at 6:00 a.m. to begin our three-hour shift firing the wood kiln. We take over from Nate and Seth, BYU-Idaho students who report that their night shift, 3:00 to 6:00 a.m., has gone well. Stoking steadily, they have maintained the 2000° level. We say good-bye to the young men. Rich glances at the firing record, looks at the pyrometer, and, putting on the heavy kiln gloves, pulls out a brick to see if the temperature cones have started to droop. Not yet. The kiln had been firing at this temperature for 15 hours. Some large wood-fired kilns take seven days to load and seven or more days to fire, being stoked by hand 24 hours a day.

As we establish our stoking rhythm, I tell Rich of the photo I have seen of the Nigerian women and their primitive crock firing, and I ask him about his understanding of the term “tumble stack.” Besides referring to

a random pile, “tumble stack” also refers to some wood fire kiln loadings in which very large pots are laid on their sides while smaller vessels are nestled on and near them on wadding (high alumina clay) that will prevent pots from sticking together. Though they look like they were just thrown or tumbled into the kiln, in reality these pots are carefully positioned by knowledgeable potters who know how to match the style and function of the pot to the position and probable effect of the wood fire.

Rich throws wedges of fir into the main fire box, and I toss smaller sticks of pine into the second kiln chamber, where, behind what is called the bag wall, vessels will receive less ash and heat. Typically, more functional ware is placed here: these vessels also receive the wood-fired look, but they are not likely to receive the thick ash deposits sought on sculptural pieces. The envisioned function of the piece must match the place in the kiln most likely to produce the desired surface. As I don the thick gloves, remove the fire brick, toss in a few thin wedges, it occurs to me that “tumble stack” is an oxymoron. The Nigerian women potters tumble their stack because they do not possess kilns or kiln shelves. Our carefully contrived tumble often involves shelves and artistically shrewd playing of hunches. Despite possessing kilns, shelves, and pyrometers, we often adopt so-called primitive methods like the tumble stack to create a more earthy look that we cannot replicate in gas-fired kilns.

I ask Rich what he finds attractive about the wood-fired look and process. “I am drawn to the fact that every firing is different,” he says:

We learn something new each time we fire. And the firing involves so many variables that it cannot be completely controlled. When you open the kiln after it has cooled, you are likely in for some surprises. The fire and the ash react with the clay and the glaze—all of these add up to a look that is natural, various, and partly unanticipated. You control what you know to control. And you do your best to orchestrate the happy accidents. But control freaks who want to produce exactly predictable results each time probably will not like wood-firing. Besides, it is very rigorous physically, and it demands a community of helpers converted to the value of the wood-fired aesthetic.

Similarly, at a university much that goes on with this work of educational combustion is planned, programmed, structured, and controlled—otherwise it could not function. But much that goes on also resembles the controlled tumble stack of the contemporary wood-firing potter: one plans as much as possible, but part of the plan should allow for, nay, encourage, the possibility for the happy accident of serendipity. Some of the great moments in my own learning came from my mentor teachers’ random remarks, wise asides, and departures in class discussion from the lesson plan. The play between the planned and the accidental accounts for much of the magic of teaching and learning.

As we stoke, I think about other parallels to my teaching and university life. I hope that in some of my words and activities are a river of heat and ash, washing over my students in ways that I cannot completely control. I plan and prepare, and sometimes the results surprise me and my students with beauty and variety. Some days my teaching is too tumbled, and some days it is too stacked. Some days I can't get it hot enough to produce the handsome surface texture I desire. Occasionally, I stoke too fast and too long, producing heat that can melt pots or fuse them together. But sometimes when I open the classroom kiln, I marvel at the exciting results the combustion has produced.

Rich later gives me an article to read about wood-firing in which David Hendley says:

The fire's the thing it all comes down to. The fire is the ultimate test that separates ceramics from all other materials and art forms. The thought has been thought, the work has been done, the feeling has been created, but it still must pass the test. The fire is my faithful servant and my demanding master, my most brilliant collaborator and my harshest critic. It transforms. It purifies. It all comes down to the fire.²

I am struck by the power of this poetic language. And I have known something of the fascination with fire since my parents first took me camping as a boy and let me dangle a stick in the flames. I also know the power of fire as a scriptural metaphor. Consider Brigham Young's call to action: "Let the fire of the covenant which you made in the House of the Lord, burn in your hearts, like flame unquenchable."³ Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego thrown into the Babylonian fiery furnace hot enough to kill those outside; King Nebuchadnezzar looking in sees that "they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25). Think of when the Savior blessed the children in the new world and the people "saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones round about, and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them" (3 Nephi 17:24). Fire: the scriptural element of testing, purifying, and transforming.

I later ask Rich what he thinks about Hendley's idea that "it all comes down to the fire." "Honestly," Rich says, "I don't really subscribe to it. Of course, the fire is pivotal, but I am more inclined to celebrate the entire process." As I think about the process, I note that the clay—earth—is itself as elemental as fire. And it is the clay, after all, that we think of when we say vessel or pot or ceramic piece. I imagine a possible answer to Hendley: Yes, the fire does transform and purify, but what of the other primal elements? Water mixes with earth dust to make clay. And air too is essential to combustion.

As rich as scriptural references are to fire, earth metaphors are no less precious: “Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). “As the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in mine hand, O House of Israel” (Jeremiah 18:6). “O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we are all the work of thy hand” (Isaiah 64:8). Earth: where we live, the soil we till to earn our bread, and the stuff of which we are made.

To insist as Hendley does, however poetically, that it all comes down to fire, is reductive and underplays the synergistic interplay among fire, earth, water, and air. Some university debates seem to me like the dispute in ceramics among those arguing for their favorite primal element. Of course each is important, even essential, but doesn’t finding a balance lie at the center of education—and life? And isn’t the attempt to balance these elements—as the potter balances raw pots in the careful tumble stack—more interesting than insisting on just one element?

When I was fourteen, I threw my first bowl (I still have the poor, pathetic thing). A favorite uncle showed me how and later glazed and fired it for me. I didn’t pursue the process at that time, but something transformative was working within me, waiting for its time to return my hands to clay. In my middle-age at Ricks College, I took Matt Geddes’ ceramics classes and learned again how to throw bowls. And though I eat almost every day out of ceramic bowls I made, until this summer I have not thrown clay in years. Who can tell where that urge to get my hands again in clay comes from, to feel the spin of a lump of wet earth on the wheel and the magic of that moment when it is centered? Who can tell where that urge to get me in front of a class of university students every September comes from?

I think the fact that I had never fired in a wood kiln is in part responsible for bringing me back to making bowls. I hand Rich an oval vessel with weird handles I have made. I do not dare to expect too much of this piece. But of course I have hopes. Rich says, “Shall we fire this one on its side and see what happens?”

“Sure,” says the tumble stack part of me.

I find that this “what-would-happen-if” part of me becomes increasingly important in my life at the university. To illustrate, I briefly mention two recent tumble stack teaching experiences.

May 24, 2009: the last day of the British Literary Pilgrimage, and all thirty-nine students and six leaders are celebrating the successful completion of our trip by sitting on the grass in a secluded grove under the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The happy, exhausted students perhaps resemble stoneware vessels fired for weeks in the kiln of travel, each a different shape with various glazes but all aglow. Emily is speaking to the group. Well-adjusted, a bright smile always on her face, she is a gifted, hard-

working student. So I am surprised by what she says: “I have always been afraid of everything. I was afraid of cities. I was afraid of crowds. I was afraid of being alone. I wanted to learn and experience, but insecurity has always been my companion.” As she speaks, I remember how on an early day in London when students in groups of three and four were going to literary and cultural sites of the city, she was sure to be in my group and usually by my side. I then began to see her become a little more venturesome when she decided to go to a West End play with a handful of our students. Now, under the magical Parisian lights, Emily is beaming: “I am so grateful for this pilgrimage and to all of you. I have seen sights I have wanted to see my whole life. I have gained knowledge and experience. But my real accomplishment has come in confidence. Give me a map, a friend or two, and a destination, and I can actually get around London and Paris, above or below ground.” Emily’s last name is Treasure, and how aptly named she seems right now, aglow in her new-found confidence.

And perhaps even more dramatically transformed by the combustion of education is Kendra, who seemed in the early stages of the trip to wear a frown, to lag behind, and resist being included. She was cold, she was sick, her feet hurt. She didn’t complain too much, but it was clear to everyone that the trip was far below her expectations. I’m not sure when it started to change—maybe when the jet lag wore off and it stopped raining, or when we visited our first medieval castle. By the time we got to Paris, she was a leader walking from the Metro station to the hotel. She had finally developed her travel confidence. Earlier, on the day of the celebration evening under the Eiffel Tower, she had gone with the group to Versailles, but she had been doing some research on her own and had learned that her favorite author, Alexandre Dumas, had lived and worked at a Chateau de Monte Cristo not far from Versailles. She knew it was a long shot, but, she asked Brother Waddell, would it be possible to go there instead of to Versailles? In one of those magical serendipitous events, the stars aligned, and Vaun was able to get a small group to the Dumas site, and it surpassed expectation. Whenever Kendra speaks of that place or that day or that experience, she glows. The girl outside the group became the young woman for whom an educational dream came true. How happy she was as she sat on the Parisian grass that night.

One way of looking at this issue of *Perspective* is to see it as a potter sees the opening of a wood-fired kiln in which many potters have fired pots. Of course potters anticipate the overall effectiveness, style, and strength of the firing. And as pieces are unloaded, potters and other interested spectators notice many creations that they had not taken seriously before that invite closer examination. A sampling to stir your anticipation:

We lead with President Eyring’s devotional address in which he discusses the rich synergy created by the proximity of temple and university. He reminds us of the prophetic vision of our work. Kevin Call’s Mind & Spirit lecture illustrates through teaching anecdotes some highlights of how his musical scholarship—or craftsmanship—informs his faith and his teaching. In our color section we feature prints from Gerald Griffin’s recent exhibit on campus, “Eternity’s View”: An Exhibit of Early Mormon and 19th Century Visual Symbolism. We have sets of articles on the online community discussion, the role of accreditation, and a report of a visit a few of our faculty made to the Harvard Business School. A handful of other articles complete the mix that we consider offering much to every reader.

Nate, Seth, Rich, and I assemble for the unbricking of the cooled kiln. It’s hard to resist the feeling we once had as kids about to go into the living room on Christmas morning. One of my oval pieces on the firebox side of the bag wall has fallen in the firing off its wadding and is stuck to the kiln shelf. Before trying to pry it loose with a crow bar, I take pictures of it whole but connected to the kiln shelf in case I break it in the separation process. Though destruction of the piece seems likely, the pot comes loose unharmed. I am pleased, though I am quick to acknowledge that those with an aesthetic more inclined toward the neat, clean, ordered look will likely think it a messy, ugly thing.

But not all aspects of the firing have been successful for my pieces. To my disappointment, the four cereal bowls and two batter bowls on the “safe” side of the bag wall did not receive enough heat or ash. They are totally unremarkable, boring in surface texture and appearance. “We can re-fire these, if you like,” Rich reassures me, cheering me up. I take home my two sculptural pieces with their ash deposits and “fire writing.” The others will go back into the kiln at some point in the future to see if they can be enlivened. Like some of my teaching, like some pilot programs at the university, like some of my students, not all of my pots are remarkable. But I can re-fire these, and I can always make more pots. It is, after all, an ongoing process. And today’s ho-hum piece may turn into a show-stopper next time. You just have to keep throwing, and you just have to keep tumble stacking, and you just have to keep the fires burning hot. ∞

NOTES

- 1 Bernard Leach, *A Potter’s Book* (Hollywood-by-the-Sea: Transatlantic Arts, Inc., 1967).
- 2 David Hendley, “Wood Fired Doesn’t Mean Brown.” *Ceramics Monthly*, 52, no 5 (2004): 38-43.
- 3 Brigham Young, *Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 28 Sept 1846, 5. Quoted by David A. Bednar, *Ensign* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, May 2009): 100.