



## Death, Life & Eternity from 100 pounds of Clay

National Art Education Association Convention

March 4, 2012

New York City

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity...

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of the other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
'Beauty is truth,' truth beauty, --that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

*John Keats*

With clay, poetry, music and flowers, participants will create a world, destroy it and recreate it. This aesthetic experience was first part of the Senior Humanities Class at the Rhode Island School for the Deaf. Peter and Maura Geisser have adapted and used the workshop in a variety of schools for students of all ages. The workshop has been expanded for use at professional conferences for Art Educators, Special Education Teachers, The National Geographic Society, and the International Congress on Philosophy for Children, and a Graduate Course for Art Educators.



# Death, Life & Eternity from 100 lbs of Clay

Below is a description of one of the original presentations of this workshop. It has been done in small and large groups, with many different stories and musical inspirations. With clay, poetry, music and flowers, participants will create a world, destroy it and recreate it. This aesthetic experience will be presented by a philosophy teacher and an art teacher as it is presented to deaf students in the Senior Humanities Class of the Rhode Island School for the Deaf. This lesson has been modified everytime it has been presented. Attached are: a narrative with questions asked of the students, and a list of resources that has been used in the variations of this lesson.

**What ideas, perspectives, beliefs and aspirations will be identified as being Universal? What means are used across time and space to express these thoughts and universal perspectives?**

The presentation was made to the senior class which attempted to immerse the students into a variety of activities and media, with several common themes. The purpose of this presentation was to evoke personal responses to the materials and to bring together universal ideas in a creative way. To ask students to respond in a creative way, demands that the materials be presented in an artful, provocative manner.

Students were first asked to discuss the properties of the clay on the table before them: Was it dead or alive?; Why?; Where did the clay come from?; Why were there different colors of clay?; etc. A live sunflower, roots and all, and a skull were in the area and were referred to as living and dead objects.

A chart was on the wall from a previous class with the title of Gauguin's masterpiece from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, "Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"

A poem by Johnson based on the Genesis account of the creation of man was read to the students. They discussed their interpretation, stated their opinions and gave reasons to support them. Then the students were each given a lump of clay and asked to form a snake or coil and to join each of the coils into a circle around the table. (A group of educators from Holland were at the school and joined the seniors for this class.)

The students were then asked to sit (with wet, clay-covered hands) and view the film The Hands of Maria, a documentary about an American Indian who creates masterpieces of clay. The sound of the film was tuned off and Mozart's *Requiem* was played during the ten minute segment of the film. (Music for deaf children, using their residual hearing is a possibility not often exploited and too complicated to fully explain here. The *Requiem* is a perfect piece for many deaf students because of the

full range of frequencies.)

After the *Requiem* and film the students were asked to build fantasy creations attached to the circle of clay. While they worked, Tracy Chapman's music (a favorite among these students) was played loudly.

The students were warned that time was running out, and they must make a vessel in which their most valued possessions could be placed.

The Art teacher, who ran the media, while the Philosophy teacher directed the "art project" insisted that time was over. This time and experience had come to an end. The Philosophy teacher then began to roll the clay into a great ball again, thus destroying their creations. The students protested this end to their creation as being "not fair". So with only a few seconds left, the Philosophy teacher gave each student a handful of clay and asked them to again make a coil. These coils were then hastily formed into a huge vessel. The sunflower which had been broken off from its roots by the Art teacher and thrown into the lump of clay was put into the vessel. The skull was placed on the table and then the period was concluded with the signing of a John Denver / Joe Henry song: "The Wings That Fly Us Home": "There are many ways of being in this circle we call life, A wise man seeks and answer, burns his candle through the night...And the spirit fills the darkness of the heavens, it fills the endless yearning of the soul...it's the fire and the wings that fly us home!" The students commented that this vessel was alive now, made from what had been destroyed.

The period was over but for weeks later this "experience" was the source of discussions on Earth Mother, Eternity, Death and Dying, Perfection, Power, Creativity, Limits of time and space, Universality, Man's inhumanity to Man, and many other themes which were being studied in this Art History/Humanities course as well as in their Literature course.



## Possible Discussion Questions

### Death, Life and Eternity from 100 lbs. of Clay

#### **Art**

What is the sign for ART?  
What is matter?  
What are ideas?  
What is art?  
What is imagination?  
What is an image?  
Is art a metaphor?  
What is a metaphor?

#### **Universal**

What is universal? What does universal mean?  
What things are considered to be universal?  
Are beliefs, thoughts and criteria universal?  
Is universal?

#### **Vessel**

What is a vessel?  
What are specific vessels? (i.e. cup, vase, boat, blood vessel)  
What do these vessels have in common?  
Is a mother a vessel?  
How is a mother a vessel?  
How is the Earth a vessel?  
Is a vessel Dead or Alive?  
What about a broken Vessel?

#### **Clay**

Is it Dead or Alive?  
Is the clay dead or alive? Why?  
Where did the clay come from?  
Why are there different colors of clay?  
Has the clay been changed or transformed?  
Does the clay have the same identity after the change?

#### **Earth Mother**

How is the Earth a Vessel?  
How is the Earth a Mother?  
What is the world?  
Where does the world come from?  
Is there only one world?  
Can other possible worlds exist?  
Are all possible worlds the same or is one better than the other?

#### **Origins**

What are our origins?  
Where do myths come from?  
What are some creation myths: Native American, Greek?  
Why is it important to know your origin?  
Do people need to know their origin?

#### **Eternity**

Does anything last forever?  
What things last forever?  
What is forever?  
Are there things that never change and have a sense of permanence to them?  
Will the clay last for eternity?  
What if nothing ever changed?  
Is change good or bad or even necessary?

#### **Truth and Beauty**

What makes something beautiful or ugly?  
Why do we embellish things?  
Why do we tend to eliminate parts and things from a whole, which are not beautiful?  
Is it fair to destroy something beautiful?  
Is it fair to destroy something that is ugly?  
What is beautiful?  
What is ugly?  
What is truth?  
What is sincere?  
Would you destroy something beautiful just because someone told you to?  
Can a beautiful thing be evil?

#### **Life and Death**

What is life?  
What is death?  
Can there be life after death?  
What are beliefs?  
What do people of different cultures believe?



## Possible Materials and Music

### Death, Life and Eternity from 100 lbs. of Clay

#### Literature:

*The Creation*, From God's Trombones James Weldon Johnson, Viking Press, Inc., 1927, 1955

*Ode on a Grecian Urn* by John Keats  
 "As Kingfishers catch fire..." Gerard Manley Hopkins, C. Phillips Ed., Oxford Press

*The Cave* by Plato, *The Republic of Plato* translated by Francis MacDonald Cornford, Oxford University Press, London, 1971

Annie and the Old One by Miska Miles, An Atlantic Monthly Press Book, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1971

When Clay Sings by Byrd Baylor, Aladdin Books, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1972

*The Road Not Taken*, Robert Frost's Poems, Washington Square Press, Inc., New York, 1966, p.223

The Universal Myths: Heroes, Gods, Tricksters and Others by Alexander Eliot, Joseph Campbell, & Mircea Eliade, Penguin Books, USA, Inc., New York, 1976, 1990

In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World, by Virginia Hamilton, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, New York, 1988

The People Shall Continue, Simon Ortiz, Children's Book Press, California, 1988 (original 1977)

The Blessing Seed: A Creation Myth for the New Millennium, Caitlin Matthews, Barefoot Books, Ltd., UK, 1998

What a Truly Cool World, Julius Lester & Joe Cepeda, Scholastic Press, New York, 1999

Taoism: The Road to Immortality, John Blofeld, Shambhala, Boulder CO, 1978

#### Music:

World in His Hands M. Anderson

J.S.Bach     Orchestral Suite N.3 in D major II Air

Pachelbel    Cannon by G. Winston

Pachelbel    Cannon             by W. Marsalis

Williams     Shindler's List Theme by I. Perlman

Beethoven    9th Choral

Beethoven    7th                     Allegretto

Mozart        Clarinet Conc. Adagio

Walking Stones   Ken Kolodner

Copland       Fanfare For the Common Man

Mission       On Earth as it is in Heaven

Clapton       Change the World

Show Boat    Ol' Man River

J. Denver     Spirit

J. Denver     Wings That Fly Us Home

Vivaldi       The 4 Seasons Gil Shaham Mozart  
                   Horn Conc. #1 allegro B. Tuckwell

Mike & the Mech.   Living Years

Mozart        Requiem

U2             Joshua Tree

Lion King     Circle of Life

#### Additional Music:

Jim Carroll Band             People Who Died

Bob Dylan                    The Love Pilgrim

Talking Heads               Once in a Lifetime

REM                            You are Everything

[Green]                        Cuyahogo [Life's

Rich Pagent]                    Long Black Veil

Chieftains/Jagger             Life on Mars

Bowie                         Singing Winds

Santana                        Hallucinations

Bobby McFerin                 Wonderful Life

Nick Cave                      Wake Up and Dream

Ekstasis                        It's All in Your Mind

Beck                            Already Dead

U2                                11 O'Clock Tick

#### Film:

The Hands of Maria

Cinema Paradiso

The Neverending Story

#### Artifacts:

Print of Gauguin's  
 "Where have we come from?  
 What are we? Where are we going?"

Human Skull

Ceramic vessels

Greek and Egyptian sculpture

Flowers (live)



**Peter J. Geisser**

Stained Glass Artist/ Retired  
Teacher of the Deaf

Peter Geisser retired in 2003 after over 30 years as art teacher at the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, where he created an Art/Art History Program that received worldwide recognition and was

described in two editions of School Arts Magazine. He was a Continuing Education Professor at the Rhode Island School of Design for 15 years and this year has taught at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's Department of Visual and Performing Arts. Geisser created and directed the award winning "Circle of Clay" project for VSAarts RI at the Hasbro Children's Hospital, Providence, and he co-authored a chapter in NAEA's best selling publication: *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs through Art*. Since retiring he has made stoneware and porcelain mosaic murals with colleague Mika Seeger. Geisser is a stained glass artist with work in churches, homes and buildings around New England. He is a founding member of the Access Advisory Board of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and is a founding member and Past President of the Special Needs Issues Group of the NAEA. Geisser is a Past President of RIAEA and has served on the RIAEA Board for seventeen years. He received an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from the RI School of Design in 1997, the 2008 RI The Pell Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Arts and the National Art Education Association 2012 Marion Quin Dix Leadership Award .

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**Maura J. Geisser**

Retired Teacher of the Deaf /  
Researcher

Maura Geisser has taught deaf children for over thirty years. She retired from the innovative Rhode Island School for the Deaf in 1999 where she began teaching critical and creative thinking using

Mathew Lipman's Philosophy for Children Program. Ms. Geisser started this program with high school seniors and then worked it down into the curriculum adapting it for kindergarten and lower school deaf and hard of hearing children. With her husband Peter Geisser she created Senior Humanities, a course on the history of ideas a conceptual history of art. Her research and writing on theoretical issues of Language, Cognition and Philosophy have always been rooted in classroom practice and work with her Deaf students. This year she taught at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's Department of Visual and Performing Arts.

She has done workshops on the issues of cognitive and linguistic development, critical and creative thinking with deaf children at international professional conferences on Philosophy, Philosophy for Children, Deaf Education, and Art Education.

Some of her publications include chapters in: *Reaching and Teaching Special Education Students Through Art*, B.Gerber/D.Guay Ed., NAEA; *Advances in Cognition, Education and Deafness: Directions in Research and Instruction*, David S. Martin, Editor, Gallaudet University Press, 1991

Her studies have focus on Language Development, Education of the Deaf and Philosophy of Mind at Brown University where she was research assistant to Prof. Jaegwon Kim. Ms. Geisser received her bachelor's degree with honors in Education and Psychology from Boston State Teacher's College, University of Massachusetts, and holds masters degrees in Deaf Education, from Boston University and in Philosophy from Brown University.

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