

Art as Life, Life as Art
Biography submitted as part of sculpture portfolio

Searching, Authenticity, and Unity - these are the hallmarks of my life and of my art. I discovered sculpture (in the clay studio of Victor Robinson, Wilton, CT) during a year off from college (1975-76). This inspired me to change the direction of my life as I transferred to State University of New York at Purchase (SUNY Purchase). I graduated in 1980 with a BA in philosophy and with a senior thesis paper on the theology of Paul Tillich. Given my previous year of clay sculpture, ongoing sculpture at SUNY Purchase and a summer at the Studio School in NYC, I received permission to do a sculpture show for my senior project. Even so, I decided to bring to focus my long-standing interest in Paul Tillich's theology. His fundamentals; the existential call to authenticity, the embracing of non-being, and unity of thought and action, still resonate for me today and serve as the basis of my sculptures' apophatic sensibility. These were rich and tumultuous years. I entered therapy with an excellent psychiatrist to work through my estrangement and family tragedy. This relationship became an enduring one. I am grateful for the fruits of healing and the opportunity to discover the power and richness of the unconscious.

After college, I wanted to work with my hands and enrolled in a welding trade school. I ended up working as a welder at a boat yard in Mamaroneck, NY for eight years while living in nearby Portchester. I refer to the work force of this boatyard as nation builders-a mostly Portuguese immigrant work force with a fierce work ethic and sense of pride. We built several America's Cup hulls. Before leaving my employment in 1988, I vowed to do two things; learn Portuguese as a way of expressing my gratitude to the men with whom I worked and to build a wooden pram in my third floor walkup.

In 1988, I was off to Maine to participate in a two-year wooden boat-building program, taking with me several of the clay sculptures that I had completed while continuing to use the CT studio. These were accepted for a statewide juried show in 1989. This show became the basis of my relationship with Richard Robertson, a potter in Rockport, ME who offered the opportunity of being a studio assistant while providing the studio space for me to establish a full body of sculpture. Yet, upon finishing the wooden boat-building apprenticeship, I was off to New Bedford, MA with the hope of

establishing a boat-building program with a Portuguese sports club. This did not work out upon which I decided it was time to claim my life as a sculptor and to take up Richard's generous offer. However, after several months, we had a falling out as he insisted that I attend church on Sunday. I had been raised Catholic but had long ago left the Catholic faith and was not part of any faith community. Though I did move out of his studio, to his credit, I decided to explore different churches in the area and came across an Episcopal church in Rockland, ME. In its bulletin, there was an announcement of a Centering Prayer group led by Cynthia Bourgeault who at the time was an editor for Thomas Keating. This turned out to be a life changing experience. The discovery of the rich contemplative tradition and Keating's initial work served as the basis of my religious vocation.

I resettled in neighboring Camden, ME renting a room and a studio while working at a local warehouse to support myself as a sculptor. I did become a parishioner of the local Catholic parish but only after finding myself in the ER twice in one week during August of 1993; once as a passenger in a minor car accident, the other having injured my knee at work. As a monk friend said, "Sam, if you don't listen, God will get to you" So much for 1Samuel 3:10.

Over the next 7-8 years, I sculpted, exhibited and sold some work. All of this came to a climax with a one person show at Andover Newton Theological School (now closed) in the fall of 1997 along with participation in the annual symposium of the Boston Theological Institute with the presentation, "Prayer and Sculpture: Asking as a Way of Being." As moving and fulfilling all of this was, I sensed that it was time for a change of direction in my life.

My experience in the parish was grace filled and became the basis of discerning a vocation in 1998; first with the diocese of Portland, and then with the Capuchins given my contemplative background. Concurrently, it seemed time to acquire some professional training for a job should my vocational discernment not work out. I moved to Lewiston, ME in the fall of 1998 and enrolled in a two-year associate degree in civil engineering. That lasted only one year. I realized that if my intention was to discern a religious vocation, the stress of pursuing a civil engineering degree was not conducive to listening. Already a volunteer at the St Martin de Porres Residence for the Homeless, I became a staff member. By December 1999, I felt confident in the unfolding of my discernment with the Capuchins and applied to join the Order. I was accepted.

To prepare to enter postulancy that August in Brooklyn, NY, I closed up my studio, sold my kiln, and packed up all of my sculpture to store it in a friend's basement.

At that time, I thought that by joining a religious order, I had to give up sculpture. The opposite was true as I became depressed within the first few months of postulancy. As my ministry was working with the art teacher of a local high school, I obtained permission to use the art room with its kiln on the weekends. I was able to complete and fire several sculptures.

The following year, at our novitiate in Wisconsin, I assisted the art teacher and set up a small studio where I completed several more works. Once our novitiate class arrived in Boston for studies in 2002, I rented space with a clay studio in Brookline, which proved useful throughout my five years of studies. I showed my work several times at the library of Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge.

In the spring of 2006, I asked for an extra year of discernment before making solemn vows. With my father's recent death, I realized a major focus of the previous years had been in caring for my parents. Therefore, it seemed best to spend an extra year in discernment. However, the question was put to me by my formation director, "Sam, are you a sculptor first or a friar?" In this light, I began the academic year that Fall not knowing if I would remain a Capuchin. I chose a new spiritual director who provided the space and depth that I needed. Then in a dream, I was asked to give up my key to Victor Robinson's studio where I had discovered sculpture, and to hand it over to the Capuchin Order. At first, reflecting on the dream, I balked. After several weeks of discernment, I realized I could. God first, then sculpture. It was if that as with God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), my relationship with God had come to the point whereby I was being asked to give up that which was most precious in order to deepen my relationship with Him so that it would be all the more intimate and authentic.

I professed my solemn vows as a Capuchin. I know I am such thru and thru. I completed my studies, and in the fall of 2007 was off to Rutland, Vermont to serve as a transitional deacon for one year. I was able find a potter who made her studio available. This proved particularly advantageous, as I was able to have a one-person show in Rutland that spring. With that year in VT

and following, my work has become more explicitly religious as signified by such titles as *Exsultet*, *The Ascension*, *Trinity* and *Gloria*.

In the fall of 2008, I was given my first priestly assignment; Associate Pastor of St Pius X Parish in Middletown, CT. I was able to set up studio space in the basement of the friary with an electric kiln. To this day, this serves as my studio. True to the conviction that an authentic faith extends beyond the sacristy and the church walls, by 2012, I was working with a team of faith-based activists concerned for the environment. For the next three years, we organized and led what became the Hartford Earth Festival. This was my first experience of the dynamic of solidarity.

In 2015, my new assignment took me to St Anne-St Augustin Parish in Manchester, NH where I was in residence at our friary but not part of the parish staff. I was to be of help to the pastor and free to give workshops and retreats along with the opportunity of continuing to use my CT studio. This was in a sense a dream come true. I was accepted for a one-person show at Rivier University in NH, which opened in September 2017. That summer, I had been asked to consider being a pastor. I declined, as I was hesitant of taking on the administrative workload of such a position. Yet, God had other plans and again, I was not listening.

Due to the sudden illness of the pastor in late October, I was compelled to be the pastoral administrator for the next three years. It was an all-hands-on-deck challenge as the task was overwhelming complicated by the nature of our multi-cultural parish with its many undocumented immigrants. In the end, I am profoundly grateful for such a transformative and graced filled experience. Among other things to revive the parish, I worked closely with the music director for a renewed sense of liturgy to enrich our multi-cultural celebrations. Collaborating with the NH Immigrant Solidarity Network, we stood up for immigrant solidarity in clear and energizing ways. We established Centro Latino as a center of community outreach for the Hispanic population, which in turn became a food distribution center along with a COVID test site. As I mentioned to a friend, my words became truer as I was compelled to deepen my prayer life, and to act and move from this depth. The process of the working on one particular sculpture, *The Prophet*, was instrumental to my prayer life at that time and to my role as the pastoral administrator. It compelled me to place myself in what I saw as the 'mercy seat', a part of the

piece which entailed a low-lying arch. Situating myself within this arch became my anchor and with prayer, I came to know mercy as a grounding and fundamental dynamic. With the quote of St Augustin, *Beauty ever ancient, ever new* impressed on my heart, there was the reciprocity of being shaped by mercy and by what I visualized in the piece.

Not having enough friars to staff St Anne-St Augustin, we as a province, withdrew from the parish to return it to the diocese as of August 2020. Before leaving, the mayor presented me with the Key to the City. The plaque hangs on the wall of my office. I look on it as once a statement of healing in being able to respond fully and freely to the situation at hand, and as a statement of authentic faith thru the embrace of solidarity with our immigrant siblings in upholding their basic human dignity. It was through such an embrace along with participation in the NH Immigrant Solidarity Network that I came to experience what can only be called, 'the arc of justice'. These experiences infuse the sculpture, *Magnificat*.

Searching, Authenticity, and Unity - these are the hallmarks of the reciprocity of my life and of my art. As of three months ago, I moved to Boston to be part of an expansion of our Capuchin Mobile Ministries through which we encounter and accompany the unhoused in the streets of the city, and discover solidarity through those who are homeless, in ways ever ancient, ever new.

**Samuel Fuller, OFM Cap
December 21, 2021**

-Writings on my website offer a fuller articulation of some of the themes referenced here.