

Prayer and Sculpture: Asking as a Way of Being

*There have been rumors.
There have been sightings.
There have been reports of something incredible,
Something wonderful—
at once terrifying and awe inspiring.
I wait crouched by the path, looking
to see.*

I wrote the passage above some years ago, and I return to it whenever I question why I am doing what I'm doing. What I do is sculpture, yet not as a means of making anything but as a way of being, as a way to catch a glimpse in to the mystery. A yearning, a passion, a deeply felt desire for unity with this mystery, this is the underlying basis for my sculpture-- and also of prayer. What I am presenting here is my process of doing sculpture as the concretization of prayer.

Ask and you shall receive. It is common to use asking as a means of receiving, if not even to grasp and possess. In contrast, I would like to step back, to consider asking as something of and by itself- to ask and to wait.

When we ask, we acknowledge a gap between what we are experiencing and what we desire. We see a connection by stepping out into the unknown. By so doing, one is compelled to submit.

In submitting, there can be a sense of passionate engagement, of perseverance, of not only holding one's ground but plummeting its depth, and in the process a transcendence, a glimpse into the mystery is revealed.

It is as if one is being told that something matters here, that what was formerly taken for granted now demands our full attention and concern. Yet the question remains, "Submit to what?" To precisely what is before us, what is at hand, and by so doing, establish a relationship and dynamic to the here and now. And with this relationship begins a whole new unfolding.

I have always proceeded with sculpture in terms of a process- that is, not attempting to necessarily represent or to be guided by any predetermined idea or concept. The following is what I consider to be my artist's statement, something never formulated for a show, which I wrote above my studio door:

I am concerned with being-being as inextricably related to non-being, fully embracing it as if it is something of and by itself, and as such as known through personal experience, daily life, sensed through the body, and physically manifested.

The fundamental concern of my work is responding to space as a tactile and palpable presence, as something of and by itself. It is a habit to perceive space in terms of form. What I find compelling is to arrive at the reversal of this perception so that form is defined in terms of space. And so what was previously perceived as non-being or negative space becomes, in fact, a source of being. As an artist, I am concerned with the process by which the unknown becomes known through an encounter with the physical.

What are the stages of this process? I begin with a concrete act, something akin to pitching a tent. Though in this case, it is mounding up of clay, sometimes 500 pounds of it. I have no preconceived idea though I may have some broad guideline such as a desire for a horizontal or vertical piece, or one that emphasizes mass as compared to a poetic or spatial arrangement. So with this in mind, once the clay is mounded and pushed around, I proceed to engage in a process of taking away, generally guided by a sense of vitality and rhythm. The piece always reaches the point where, yes, there is something going on here- there's this, there's that, a sense of force here, a sense of weight there, etc. And I feel competent to talk about the piece.

But eventually there's a shift and profound frustration as I realize I'm just talking about something, that the reference is not in the piece, and that I am, in fact, outside of the piece. And that, in effect, all I've done is simply made something. I realize that I haven't even begun, and that all my previous perceptions and sense of direction are simply just dead weight to be cast overboard. At this point, it is a process of deconstruction-- as if almost destroying what I had made, letting go of all prior expectation, so as to be able to start fresh and to take a stance whereby I embrace everything and anything that may yet happen within the piece.

This is a stance of radical openness and it marks a critical shift with several distinguishing characteristics and implications. To take this stance is to accept risk and the possibility of failure- as there are no guarantees in facing the unknown. What is radical about this openness is that it seeks to affirm, to say "yes" to everything perceived and imagined as a possibility for the piece, no matter what its

seeming incongruity. Whatever formerly may have seemed irrelevant is now unequivocally embraced.

This entails a freedom of the unconscious rooted in the conviction that beneath the appearance of things, there is an unseen order which if allowed to manifest itself on its own terms will do so as unity. I am called to say 'yes'- to say 'yes' no matter how things may appear to the rational mind. Faced with both possible failure and the unknown, the best I can do is to forgo all judgment, all concept, and to affirm everything as it is, simply because it is. For as with prayer, we seek God as God is rather than God as we have made him.

To receive things as they are, I have to empty myself to establish a space of hospitality, to receive the seemingly strange and awkward. I am faced with some questions. What do I bring to this process--what sense of life, what intuitions, what self-awareness? What are my capacities to empty myself so that rather than projecting my tensions or content, I allow the demands of what faces me to reverberate within. At first, I become aware of my own discordance- my false voices, false desires and fears. What follows is, in effect, a process of sorting out--through acknowledging them, knowing them, and naming them. Through this process, I am situated. The second pole of the relationship between me and the sculpture is secured, establishing a reciprocity. I can begin to be aware of how the piece resonates within me, to again move outward to re-engage myself with it and all that it demands. And it demands all of me, asking, "What does it mean to be?"

By responding to the piece from my own interior spaciousness, the relationship to the piece is grounded in my existence. That I am moved to relate from the intimacy of my very existence is critical and I believe that this is the crux of the matter. For no matter how much I am able to write about this process of doing sculpture, no matter how many sculptures I do, it is to this intimacy that I feel compelled to return again and again. Simply put, there is the sense of hitting pay dirt.

As much as I had thought I had already arrived at a beginning, and with the awareness that the future probably holds even more such moments of arrival, it is only now that I can begin. I can proceed with the ground of my existence- not with a concept, not with an abstraction, not with concern for art history, nor even a social, political, or liturgical concern. One of several of these may be expressed in the finished piece, but for these to act as a starting point would only serve to distance me from my source.

I discover that the deeper I move into who I am, the deeper I move into the piece. And that the very process of engaging with the piece is the process to which I submit myself. Things become inverted, as what was exterior to me becomes interior. And further, with the interchange of reciprocity, the relationships between form and space, being and non-being are also reversed. Intention is all important. I cannot force anything.

But after a while another major shift occurs. There is the point where all seems lost, that I've turned the wrong corner and reached a dead end. Then I really do think that the piece is a failure and that I'm wasting my time. In the face of real failure and vulnerability, the compelling urge is to go deeper. Submission becomes surrender, and the ultimate concern, with everything stripped away, is revealed as ultimate. Perseverance moves me to humility. The best I can do is to hold off, wait, and just endure.

There are times when I simply stay away from the studio. Like dry periods of prayer, words mean nothing and I'm left groping, not knowing what to say. Yet, I am left with the conviction that no matter what the circumstances, no matter what the particulars of the sculpture in front of me, there remains the possibility of an unseen order waiting to unfold. Either away from the studio or in it, I allow my body to be shaped by the sensations, perceptions, and intuitions of the piece. Listening becomes communion. I know that if the piece is to progress, it will be from this state of endurance- that this, in fact, is the belly of the beast.

In time, something interesting happens. I find myself returning to the work in progress, not having figured it all out, but simply liking a particular space or line. It might not make sense in terms of the whole but quietly serves as the point through which I become re-engaged with the piece. This response of affection becomes the golden string that leads me through the maze as I discover that one thing leads to another. And with affection arrives the expansiveness and release of hope, and the language of the soul.

The specific is infused with the poetic. *This* space is the discovery of a meadow of wildflowers along a rugged mountain path. *This* volume is filled with abundance and richness. *This* line is the opening melody of a symphony. The choices and decisions of the piece are quickened and galvanized into a rhythm of reciprocity and what seemed at one point to be a source of failure is now the source of deliverance and delight.

That is not to say that there are still problems and puzzles to be faced. Yet the awareness that something tangible is unfolding before me carries me forward. To give you a real sense of what happens in the process of doing a sculpture, I would like to excerpt from my journal an entry, dated June 13 1997, which was written after a long evening in the studio, “finishing up” a piece:

There was still one unresolved area left in the piece, and I assumed it was just a question of one line and was faced with the problem of what to do. I happened to be drawn first to one of the leg bases and working on that, I saw an opportunity for an interesting shift by slightly adjusting the plane of the lower leg. This made for a different spatial effect and with this, the upper piece was changed as it was now directly related to the bottom leg whereas before it was just on its own. Everything now around it had changed, the whole piece had shifted and it was now a question of following through its implications. I realized that the original line with which I had been concerned had resolved itself, almost as an afterthought. ‘Oh, yeah, when you leave the room, could you hit the lights?’ There had been a paradigm shift, a complete change of perception, and I was amazed by all of this, and it was as if now, I was asking to be shown what had happened.

What had begun as asking, followed by submitting, endurance, and perseverance has now led to play.

I have come to know this process of transformation as a process of remembering. In effect, of remembering the very same road that I’ve travelled before with each piece, though now not with a sense of habit but of discovery and a sense of belonging-as if knowing the place for the first time. It is also a process of remembering as having arrived at a unity I, too, am remembered as I rediscover who I am. And it is a process of re-remembering as through an unconscious logic, the human figure is presented in an unexpected way whereby each part can be perceived only in relationship to the whole. And as such, my own body is being re-remembered.

Ultimately, the process for each sculpture concludes with a sense of awe and wonder as if I find myself in a place where I never expected to be. And yet, there is always the sensation that it all fits, that somehow it all makes sense. The piece is complete with this sense of newfound freedom and my own journey turns a new corner.

What originally was taken as a question, “What does it mean to ask so as to receive?” is answered by discovering knowledge as a place. The very asking of the

question engages one in a process through which one arrives at a discovery- that what we transcend is not negated but affirmed. The very ground on which one stands is one's opening to the infinite.

Sam is an active member of Our Lady of Good Hope Parish in Camden and "grateful for the reciprocity of the relationship between such involvement and the time in the studio."

The Church World Diocese of Portland November 6, 1997