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**Oral history interview with Paulus Berensohn,
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Transcript

Preface

Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project For Craft and Decorative Arts in America

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Paulus Berensohn on 2009 March 20 and 21. The interview took place at Berensohn's home in Penland, North Carolina, and was conducted by Mark Shapiro for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Berensohn has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MARK SHAPIRO: I'm here in Paulus' home in Penland, North Carolina, and it's March 19th?

PAULUS BERENSOHN: Nineteenth [20], and it's the vernal equinox—

MR. SHAPIRO: Perfect.

MR. BERENSOHN: Which is propitious.

MR. SHAPIRO: Very propitious.

MR. BERENSOHN: At 11:44 exactly it will be the vernal equinox when the ewes are born.

MR. SHAPIRO: And this is the first disk, the first card.

So Paulus, will you tell us a little bit about where you were born and the circumstances of you coming into the world?

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh, my goodness. I was born in New York City. My father was from Austria. He had been in the First World War and was in a prison camp in Siberia with Lenin. He was probably—father never went to school. He came from a very poor family. In the prison camp he got his first education. It was, he would say, the happiest time of his life.

After World War I, he then became a designer of women's clothing in France, and was brought to this country in 1926 by Hattie Carnegie, who was America's leading designer then. She would go and hire people from design houses in France, so he came. My mother was a secretary in Hattie Carnegie's office.

The story is that one day my father walked into the secretarial pool and kissed my mother on the back of the neck as she was busy typing, but it was the wrong typist. [Laughs] He was meaning to kiss somebody else. He was so embarrassed that he asked my mother to the opera. That's what did it for my mother. To have someone—a handsome man invite her to the opera! Within two months they were married and 11 months later my older brother Lorin was born.

MR. SHAPIRO: Where did she come from, your mother?

MR. BERENSOHN: From New York City, from the "lower" Lower East side, also a very poor family. My father was a gift to her because he was making like \$300 a week as a designer in the early '30s during the depression years. So it was a boon to her. He was a charming and generous man. He was supporting several of his siblings as well.

When he was nine, my father was sold as an apprentice to a tailor. It was still the end of the feudal era. Children were often sold as apprentices. He ran away from his apprenticeship when he was 16 and found his way to France. When World War I began he was sent back to Austria to serve unwillingly in the army. As soon as he could he surrendered and was sent to Siberia. So he was a very intriguing figure for my mother.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was he older—

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes.

MR. SHAPIRO: —when you were born?

MR. BERENSOHN: I was born when my father, his name was Adolf, was in his '50s. Lorin is six years older than I am. My brother was their first child. He was something of a child prodigy. My mother took him to a matinee of the New York Philharmonic when he was three and he went back to preschool the next day and drew the entire New York Philharmonic on the blackboard. It's still there. They lacquered it.

The school called my mother and said, you know, "You've got a child who is an artistic prodigy," but Lorin said, "No, it's the music; it's the music." So they got him a piano and then a viola da gamba. He ended up playing the cello in the New York Philharmonic for almost 50 years, brought into the orchestra by Leonard Bernstein. My brother is Lorin Berensohn. They were of the same generation, looked somewhat alike and were friends.

It was emotionally challenging being the younger brother of a kid that's giving concerts in Carnegie Hall—[laughs]—at age 11. My mother was a very intelligent woman and would have excelled in college—had her parents not been so poor. She was the oldest child and had to help support her family.

MR. SHAPIRO: Where did they come from, her people?

MR. BERENSOHN: Originally Russia. She was from here. Growing up she was inspired by the peace witness of the Quakers. I've tended to think of myself as a mixture, raised by two atheists, a Quaker and a Jew.

MR. SHAPIRO: Sounds familiar.

MR. BERENSOHN: Both my parents were idealistic socialists in the '30s.

MR. SHAPIRO: Right.

MR. BERENSOHN: My father was passionate about equality. He had met Lenin and was inspired by ideas of equality and justice. When my parents discovered what was happening in the Soviet Union, it was devastating, my mother was blacklisted because of Senator McCarthy.

MR. SHAPIRO: Sure.

MR. BERENSOHN: She was very active politically—do you remember who Paul Robeson was?

MR. SHAPIRO: Oh, yeah, of course.

MR. BERENSOHN: She was devoted to him and his vision of civil rights.

MR. SHAPIRO: Right.

MR. BERENSOHN: He was a remarkable man: actor, singer, athlete, activist.

MR. SHAPIRO: As well, oh, yes.

MR. BERENSOHN: I don't think we would have had a Martin Luther King and a Barack Obama had it not been for Paul Robeson. He's the under-appreciated hero of the 1930s and '40s, a great singer and a brilliant actor and an inspiring leader.

My mother and Paul Robeson founded a camp together called Camp Wo-Chi-Ca [New Jersey], which meant workers' children's camp. [Laughs] So I had this very left-wing childhood—I had a wild aunt who had bright red hair and lived right at Washington Square. She had a well to do husband. They helped support the *Daily Worker*, which was a communist paper.

So my childhood was political, idealistic, and focused on civil rights during the second world war my mother was very aware of what was happening in the Holocaust. My parents would talk about it in other languages, but we got the message. I have two friends who grew up in similar circumstances and we, all three of us, say that our souls were touched by the Holocaust, are indirect victims of the Holocaust because of the fear it generated in us.

MR. SHAPIRO: So how old were you during that period? What year were you born?

MR. BERENSOHN: Nineteen-thirty-three.

MR. SHAPIRO: Thirty-three, right.

MR. BERENSOHN: During the Holocaust I was six, seven, eight, nine. I remember having a dream of rushing down to the subway and just missing a train, I watched the train pull out of the station. It was full of—packed with people in gray and looking like death. Years later at the end of the war when photographs of the concentration camps were on the front page of the *New York Times*, that was—

MR. SHAPIRO: The transports.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes.

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah.

MR. BERENSOHN: It's not uncommon. My fairy goddaughter Carol Ann Fer, also has traces in her psyche of images from the Holocaust, as do Remy Charlip and June Ekman, my two closest friends.

MR. SHAPIRO: And where were you living in—where in Manhattan were you living at that time?

MR. BERENSOHN: At that time we lived at number One University Place in the Village.

MR. SHAPIRO: Right, so downtown in the Village.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, and that's when I went to the City & Country School [New York, NY] on West 12th.

MR. SHAPIRO: Had your brother gone there as well?

MR. BERENSOHN: No, not. Lorin—my parents were believers in public education, but when I was ready for school and they took me, the first thing they did was stand me in front of Lorin's Philharmonic mural and say, you're brother did this; what are you going to do? And it got bizarre, emotionally confusing.

MR. SHAPIRO: No pressure.

MR. BERENSOHN: It got very difficult for me. My mother was very critical of psychology. She understood history and politics but psychology to her was a great threat. But she did finally get the message that it was not a healthy school for me. Each new grade they'd say, "Oh, you're Lorin Berensohn's brother!" Also, I am profoundly, I like to say divinely dyslexic, which they had no name for then. Are you dyslexic?

MR. SHAPIRO: I have a bit of it, yeah.

MR. BERENSOHN: I hardly think it possible to be an artist in America and not be somewhat dyslexic. It's one of our gifts. Of course it depends on who you listen to, Eudora Moore, at one time the craft art consultant of the National Endowment of the Arts, had a dyslexic child. She looked at the handwriting of every application to the National Endowment, and claims that 95 percent of American artists are, to some degree, dyslexic.

Dyslexia is, I think, a gift. It is right trained imaginative perception. It could save us from our compulsive linear rationality. It is not easy being dyslexic, as things are set up right now. Yet I really believe it's the right brain coming in to maturity, it was hard to be dyslexic and be a kid in school, especially then when so little was known about the diversity of learning.

A neighbor suggested to my mother, that the City and County School's "Progressive" approach to education could be a better fit for me.

MR. SHAPIRO: So your brother was in a more traditional—

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh, yes.

MR. SHAPIRO: Or he was in public school or—

MR. BERENSOHN: He was in public school and then he went to a public high school where he won what seemed to me every award at graduation.

MR. SHAPIRO: Right.

MR. BERENSOHN: He went to college and then to the Manhattan School of Music.

MR. SHAPIRO: Right.

MR. BERENSOHN: My relationship with Lorin was dysfunctional—I adored him because he played the cello so beautifully and was manly and handsome but he was annoyed about having a pesty kid brother. When I became a dancer, he was mortified—one of the memorable evenings of my life, was

at a *Hanukkah* festival in Madison Square Garden with the New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, Ed Sullivan, and Eartha Kitt and an elaborate dance pageant, choreographed by Pearl Lang.

The performance began with the then-relatively unknown *Fanfare for the Common Man* by Copland. First on stage I was to leap around the big circular space in a g-string—[laughs]—because I had good elevation—as the opening trumpets sounded. During the intermission we didn't get to rehearse with the New York Philharmonic—I walked up to Lorin, who was standing there with two of his colleagues—I was still in just my g-string costume. I put my arm around my brother's shoulder and he almost fainted. He was so embarrassed to have a brother who was a dancer, as was my mother.

Yet her resistance is one of the clues as to why I'm a dancer. She took me to the Brooklyn Museum when I was four years old to see Uday Shankar and his East Indian Ballet Company. Ravi Shankar was a teenager then, playing in the orchestra. I was totally enchanted.

MR. SHAPIRO: At age four?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. Age four or five, sometime before first grade. On the way home I said to my mother, "I want to be a dancer," and she said, "Boys don't dance." I said, "I just saw boys dancing." And she said, "Boys in my family don't dance." So I got the message—the wound. But three days later her friend, Ann, who was Eleanor Roosevelt's New York City secretary—she was a wonderful woman. My mother knew her from her political work—were having tea in our dining room. Ann asked about the children, and my mother went on and on about Lorin and how he was in Vienna [Austria] playing that very night.

Then Anna said, "What about Paulus?" And my mother said, "Oh, that kid is driving me crazy. He stands in the middle of the living room every night stamping his foot saying, I want to study dancing." And Ann said, "Oh, how marvelous. You will take him to a dance class, won't you?" My mother said, "No Ann, I can't have a dancing boy in this house." So it got a little thicker: No dance boys in my house. No sissies. Then Ann protested, "But, Edith, to dance is to spring from the hand of God." That, I believe, was my first art lesson.

I was in the next room playing with paper dolls or something on the floor and my whole body shook. It was as if I were given an antidote or a zen koan to chew on. I believe that image saved my life in at least my childhood.

MR. SHAPIRO: When did that exchange take place with Edith and Ann.

MR. BERENSOHN: It was three or four days after I was taken to see Uday Shankar.

MR. SHAPIRO: So you're still four or five years old?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, I was a child. When I look back now I think, oh, that Ann saved my life by just giving me that one praise. I've been repeating and meditation on that mantra for almost 75 years. I no longer say to dance is to spring from the hand of God; I say it's to spring from the hand of creation, which is closer to my evolving theology.

MR. SHAPIRO: But your mother was not moved by it.

MR. BERENSOHN: No. She didn't want Lorin to be a cellist. She was proud of him when he was young, but on her deathbed she said to him, "Couldn't you study law at night?" And he said, mother

—I work at night.

She helped raise another boy, the son of a friend who had a very severe post-partum depression. He's younger than I am. He became a great ballet dancer, a really outstanding dancer—and choreographer and the director of ballet companies. She wanted Lorin to be a lawyer, Bruce to be a doctor, and I was to be an accountant. [Laughs.]

Consequently, I have absolutely no economic imagination. None. My fairy godchildren and friends have to take care of that for me now.

MR. SHAPIRO: No, that's, I think—

MR. BERENSOHN: So that was the central issue of my childhood, resistance to my desire to dance.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did you find any adults who were supportive in the—in your school or—

MR. BERENSOHN: Not until I was in high school, and met Isabel Corcoran.

MR. SHAPIRO: And that school went through high school?

MR. BERENSOHN: No.

MR. SHAPIRO: No.

MR. BERENSOHN: I only went to City & Country for two years, and meanwhile I hadn't learned to read. I was nine years old and I couldn't read. City & Country School was the only school that would take me—because they worked on a "core" curriculum.

MR. SHAPIRO: I've heard of that.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, I loved it. The first year I was there, the core was setting type. We set type and we printed. There were printing presses. We printed all the stationary for the school and the school magazine, it was a great little school. It's still there.

Anyway, I couldn't read, but Stephen McGee, who was a classmate, would walk to school every morning with his mother and a cocker spaniel. I haven't thought of this in a long time. They would embrace at the door of the school, and I could see that they loved each other dearly. They really loved each other, touched each other. And I was very moved by that and jealous of it. I kept asking Stephen McGee questions about his mother, and he, you know, started to look at me in a funny way. We were nine, 10 years old—9 years old. And he said, "Well, if you're so interested in my mother why don't you read one of her books?" And I said, "Oh, she writes books?" He said, "Yes, she writes books for young people. Go to the library."

So I went to the library and Mrs. Pratt said, "Oh, you finally want a book?" She gave me a book called *The Saturdays* by Elizabeth Enright. That was Stephen's mother's pen name *The Saturdays* was a—as someone who grew up in New York City you would love that book. It was about a family of four children and they only received 25 cents each as allowance per week, so they pooled their allowance and each kid would do something special on Saturday. Like one of the kids used that dollar standing room ticket to at the Metropolitan Opera, Saturday matinee.

I didn't know then that, one could do that. So from then on I went almost every Saturday, even though it wasn't opera that turned me on so much as the theater of it and the dancing and the

music. Another kid went to the cloisters and he described how you could take the double-decker bus, 5th Avenue bus, from Washington Square all the way up to the cloisters.

So I loved that book, and learned wonderful things about New York City in it. When I opened the book for the first time I was able to read. It was like I learned to read instantly because I had fallen in love. That's what helped me learn to read. I needed to read this woman's book. She was beautiful, and so were Stephen and the cocker spaniel. They looked like triplets. [They laugh.] They were beautiful.

For high school—my parents—I should say my mother—I can't blame my father for any of this—my mother decided that I wasn't getting the proper education. She was convinced that I was retarded. And while I can't blame her because of how she grew up. In her own way she loved her children, but she got the wrong advice about child raising. In any case, she took me out of City & Country and sent me to a prep school: Adelphi Academy [Brooklyn, NY], which was—

MR. SHAPIRO: In Manhattan?

MR. BERENSOHN: The first 2 years I had to take the train into Brooklyn, but then the school moved to Long Island. In high school, my freshman year I used to play hooky a lot, I was too busy reading. The first book I read after *The Saturdays* was *Sons and Lovers*—[laughs]—it was too soon for *Sons and Lovers*—but I loved hearing Lawrence's passionate voice speaking to me.

MR. SHAPIRO: So this is after—

MR. BERENSOHN: Do you know that scene early in the book when he first meets Miriam and Paul takes her into this garden—or she takes him into the garden, and they're looking at flowers, and he describes—I believe her name was Miriam—that when she leaned down to smell a rose, she bit it. What an evocative image to digest when so young. [Laughs] So I loved D.H. Lawrence and then Thomas Wolfe.

MR. SHAPIRO: So this is after the war. This must be like in the—

MR. BERENSOHN: Early—

MR. SHAPIRO: —Forty-five, '46?

MR. BERENSOHN: —Mid-'40s—'45, yes. So one day I was standing in the subway on the way to Brooklyn to go to school, and I looked down and someone was reading a copy of *Life* Magazine, and upside-down I saw a photograph of what looked like a young boy, lying on a couch in a vest—wearing a tattersall vest! My whole body started to vibrate. I thought, who is this person?

So I got off at the next stop, bought a copy of *Life* Magazine, and when I opened it and saw it right-side up and it said, "Truman Capote, author of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, to be published this week—" I got off the subway, went to a bookstore, bought a copy of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and got back on the subway and rode back and forth all day, reading *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. I was very infected by early Truman Capote.

I got to know him a little bit in the latter part of his life. He was then a very troubled yet touching man. But his early work, his short stories and especially a book called *Local Color*. That's the one look of his that is no longer available. It was a slim little book of travel sketches, and the writing was pure poetry. I mean, he was a really lyric writer, vivid and accessible, perfect for a romantic dyslexic teenager.

MR. SHAPIRO: Now, Paulus, did you become aware of poetry at that point in your life at all or were you just reading fiction?

MR. BERENSOHN: poetry came a little later. Truman Capote led to Carson McCullers, then Tennessee Williams, who led to Flannery O'Connor, who led to William Faulkner. I was very, attracted to southern literature as a teenager.

MR. SHAPIRO: And the South.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. Who would have thought that I would have ended up in the South, although I don't consider Penland School the South. [Laughs.]

One day, when I was a freshman I was on the subway reading and this woman got on the train who I recognized as being the junior English teacher at my school. Actually I had noticed her before but I was too shy to speak or even smile at her. This particular day she sat down next to me and greeted me. She had a club foot so she had one shoe that was higher. Her name was Isabel Corcoran.

She was a modest self-contained shy woman and I was a shy little boy. She asked, "What are you reading?" And I said—*Sons and Lovers*. She smiled and said, "That's not on the freshman reading list." She asked me to tell her about it. So I started to tell her about it enthusiastically. The next day she gave me a list of books—her list had Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers on it. Carson McCullers! I can tell you how it smelled in Central Park when I was reading the last 10 pages of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*—that book touched my soul, awoke it.

My inner education came from reading novels, when young. I was not a good student in school. The reason that my parents sent me to Adelphi was that Adelphi in those years, could guarantee the parents that their children would get into Harvard, Princeton, or Yale—or Adelphi was a co-ed school—the girls would get into Vassar or Radcliffe.

I don't know how they got me into Yale—[laughs]—because I didn't pay attention except to Isabel Corcoran, especially the year that I was a junior and she was my teacher. Adelphi didn't offer art classes but they had a course on mechanical drawing. I did enjoy that. But otherwise, I played hooky sometimes three or four days out of five and Isabel Corcoran knew why. She would often sign in for me. We became—I mean, everyone thought we were having an affair because I would take her to my brother's concerts and for Christmas I would ask my father to have a skirt or a jacket made for her in his factory.

She was a graduate student in literature at Columbia. We lived then just a few blocks from Columbia; that's how come we would meet on the subway. During my first year in college in the *New York Times* there was an obituary for her. That was a shock but it didn't occur to me to question until years later, how this woman who I thought was a graduate student and teacher how she happened to have an obituary in the *New York Times*—if she had gone on to write something important or came from a prominent family, but I never found out.

She was the only teacher in school who encouraged me—she was the advisor to the school literary magazine, and I became its editor, that was what got me through the last 3 years of Adelphi.

Anyway, I went to Yale and I lasted three days because they—[laughs]—they put me in a suite of rooms with boys from the same prep school, which they usually don't do, and I thought, I can't take four more years of bowling, double dating and drinking. But what did I know? One of the boys, the one I thought the least serious went on to become president of Simon & Schuster.

MR. SHAPIRO: So that must have been about 1950 or '49?

MR. BERENSOHN: Forty-nine, probably, yes. On the Monday morning I went to the bursar's office and said, "I'm ill; I have to leave, can I have my money back?" They gave me three-quarters of the tuition, which then was \$1,100, room, board and tuition.

I got on the train to go back to New York City and ran into my friend, Pete, who had been a co-counselor with me the summer before, at a children's camp, and he said, "What are you doing? You're going the wrong way." [Laughs] I told him, "I've run away from Yale." He said, "Oh, you're as crazy as my brother." So I asked, "Well, what did your brother do?" Pete said, "He ran away from Dartmouth and went to this crazy school in Vermont where there are no tests, no marks and no required subjects."

"No tests, no marks? What's the name of the school?" And he said, "Goddard College." When we got to Grand Central Station, I phoned Goddard College, it was like 9:00 P.M.. A man answered and I told him, "I've just run away from Yale and I heard about your school, I'd like to come and see it." He laughed but responded warmly, "Well, come along and I'll pick you up at the train station, if you get on the train called the Montrealer that leaves at midnight."

MR. SHAPIRO: It's still there.

MR. BERENSOHN: Is it still? I rode that train often. It went to—what was the name of it?

MR. SHAPIRO: White River Junction.

MR. BERENSOHN: No, after White River. Well, it's near where Goddard is. It's between White River Junction and Burlington.

MR. SHAPIRO: Montpelier?

MR. BERENSOHN: Montpelier, yes. Good boy. Thanks!

I got off the train in Montpelier and there is this nice-looking, sweet little man with a baseball cap, and he takes my bags and asks, "Oh, what's that book you're reading?" I had a book under my arm. It was a "Three volume compilation of the autobiography of Maxim Gorky." So he said, "Get in the car and tell me about Maxim Gorky. Tell me about him." So I did.

When we got to the sign that says Goddard College he said to me, "Well, if you would like to stay here, you're accepted." [Laughs] And I said, "By what authority?" I thought he could be the night watchman. And he said, "Well, I'm the president of the college. My name is Royce Stanley Pitkin."

We shook hands. He, I learned later, had been one of John Dewey's leading students. He was a remarkable man. We drove up to the campus, and after Yale's huge grandure my first thought was, my parents are going to kill me. Goddard was a barn and a few buildings, 60 students at that time. It was tiny. I would have turned on my heels and run because it was scary and foreign to me, but sitting on the steps was Jane Mink During my adolescence I would go to Washington Square Park on Sunday afternoons because Pete Seeger would sing.

It was before he was famous. He was still in his very early 20s. He would sing, lead singing. All kinds of folk singers would come to sing with him. And Jane Mink was often there. She was a friend and student of his. She recognized me from the park, so she got up and said, "Oh, how wise of you to come here. This is a great school." [They laugh.] I said, oh? So I stayed, but only for a year and

a half, and then went on to Columbia for a year. No, what was the sequence? Columbia then Juilliard and then Bennington.

MR. SHAPIRO: So when does dance enter? When do you actually start dancing?

MR. BERENSOHN: Okay, when I was at Goddard, it was a very small school but they decided to do a production of Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*, which is an opera. Menotti didn't like tenors, so he substituted—the tenor roll in *The Medium* with a deaf mute dancer. None of the other boys at Goddard wanted the part—it's a dancing role. I was longing to do it.

But I was 207 pounds and shy, and—I wasn't supposed to dance, I finally went up to the director and told him that, I would like to do it, and he said fine. And so, I got to do it. A few years later I performed that same role with the New York City Opera Company for a season. Meanwhile, at Goddard, because there was no test, no marks, you could do design your own course of study.

There was no literary magazine, so I said, "Oh, let's have a literary magazine," which I then produced three copies of one a semester. Just this summer I visited a friend from Goddard in Maine and she had copies of those magazines. I would bring them to New York and sell them at the Gotham Book Mart. Do you remember the Gotham Book Mart on 47th Street?

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah.

MR. BERENSOHN: I can't remember—what was the name of the white-haired woman who ran it? Oh, dear, she wouldn't forgive me [Frances (Fanny) Steloff]. She used to bark at me all the time when I would come in to browse and then she'd put a book under my arm. She was a wonderful character, a close friend of Martha Graham's. She was a real figure in New York in those days.

MR. SHAPIRO: So what was that environment like at Goddard at that time?

MR. BERENSOHN: It was very experimental, political, left wing, very—

MR. SHAPIRO: Was this about the time McCarthy was starting to—

MR. BERENSOHN: It was after McCarthy, I believe. The Korean War, yes, because that's when I became a C.O. [Conscientious Objector], when I was at Goddard. That was interesting. I went, the day I turned 18, to court in Montpelier with Royce Stanley Pitkin's twin sons. We all had to defend our objections. Ronald and Belmont, they were wonderful boys, got jail sentences. I stood in front of the judge and talked about violence and war and how I was committed to creation, not to destruction. I went on and on and recited poetry.

The judge wept, and I got a C.O. status without having to go to jail, or do alternative service. At Goddard I edited, designed, and often illustrated our magazines. They were handmade, hand-printed. There was a new magazine being published then that you may remember, although you're probably too young, called *Flair* Magazine. It was edited by the wife of the editor of *Look* Magazine. Fleur Cowles, her name was. She was just beginning. It was a fusion of fashion, art, literature, and contemporary culture and had no advertising.

She had seen a copy of our *Goddard Community Biannual* at Gotham Book Mart and wrote to offer me an internship. Goddard had a winter work term. So I went and I worked for January and February and was supposed to go back to school in March. I was enjoying it so much that I thought to take

a semester off.

The magazine, despite its innovation and the excitement it had generated folded by June when I got a job as a copyboy at *Time Magazine*. *Flair Magazine* had a hole in the cover. It was a cover like this, with a good sized hole with a frontispiece that would be peeking through. It had pages that would fold out accordion style and articles on Dali and Picasso and Matisse and Dior.

Those jobs got me to New York City. I took a friend to the ballet one night. From adolescence on—from the very formation of the New York City Ballet, I would go to the city center to watch the performances. I would sneak in during intermission. There would be four ballets and you could sneak in during the intermission between the first and the second ballet and sit upstairs in the empty balcony.

On that day that I took a girlfriend to the ballet, she looked at me and she said, "You really dig this, don't you?" I said, "Oh, I can't think of anything more wonderful." And she said, "Well, why don't you study it, take a ballet class or modern dance class?" And I said, well, "My mother won't let me." [Laughs.] Carol laughed too and said, "You left your mother's home several years ago now. Your mother isn't standing here." And I said, "Oh, you're right," and the next day I went and took my first dance class.

I lucked out because I was, you know, 207 pounds. I felt mortified, as well as also carrying this wound, Boys don't dance." I went to the New Dance Group—I knew of it because all the left-wing dancers studied there. I didn't know whose class to choose so I just pointed to the name Irving Burton, and took his class.

During the class I didn't realize that Irving was a stutterer because he was performing and people who stutter often don't stutter when on stage or teaching. At the end of the class, Irving took me aside and said, "I-if y-you w-ant to be a d-d-dancer, you're going to b-be a b-beautiful dancer." [Laughs.] He was encouraging to me and many others.

So I started taking classes every day. There was an audition for Juilliard coming up, maybe within three weeks of that first class. Anyone could audition because it was Juilliard's first year of its dance department. There must have been 300 people the day that I auditioned. You were asked to show original choreography. And there were toe-tap ballet dances from Texas as well as brilliant young modern dancers from Los Angeles. Alvin Ailey was auditioning that same day, and Joyce Trisler, Kevin Carlisle, and Christine Lawson, all of them experienced and gifted.

We performed on stage with the jury in the auditorium. Martha Graham looked bored. Antony Tudor was reading the *New York Times*, and they'd glance up at the little girls doing toe-tap ballet, but when Alvin Ailey danced, they all—they stopped and they watched. They didn't allow anyone to dance for more than 30 seconds or a minute.

When my turn came I went up to the front of the stage—I was wearing a huge black cape that I had made so that my body wouldn't show. I went to the edge of the stage and I said, "I don't move for the first three minutes of my piece, so you won't see me dancing." Martha Graham asked, "What do you do?" I said, "I listen." She said, "Oh, to what?" I said, "To the music." And she said, "What's the music?" And I said *Das Lied von der Erde* by Gustav Mahler, at which point Antony Tudor closed his paper and he asked, "What part of it?" And I said, "All of it."

He was, in that period of time working slowly on choreographing a dance called *The Leaves are Fading* [1975] for American Ballet Theater—to that very music, which I didn't know. He asked,

"What's the title of your dance?" And I said, "*In Memorial, Kathleen Ferrier.*" Kathleen Ferrier was a legendary contralto. Just the other day I turned on the radio and heard her voice, deep, honey-toned, thrilling.

All I did in that dance was stand still, walk, run and fall, because I didn't really know how to put movement together and I didn't know how to dance. But they gave me a full scholarship—[laughs]—mostly because of Graham. She liked the way I fell. I had to fall to faint so I did like pratfalls. I had my hands under the cape to catch me so I looked like a tree falling. And I would turn slowly as if in emotional pain, because it was a dance about grief, Graham liked that. She assumed I was sensitive and cultured.

But Juilliard was difficult for me. I was put in advanced classes, which I shouldn't have been, and then Tudor insisted I take ballet. I got through it and I performed in the year-end performances, but meanwhile I auditioned for Bennington College.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was Carolyn Brown at Juilliard at that time?

MR. BERENSOHN: No, Carolyn wasn't at Juilliard.

MR. SHAPIRO: She took ballet there with Tudor.

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh yes, you are right. She did, and so did Remy Charlip. They were not regular students. They audited classes at Tudor's invitation. That's how I met Remy. Do you know Remy Charlip? Do you know of him? One day in Alfredo Corvino's class, there's this person standing in front of me at the barre, and we're doing our tendus and then it's time to turn around. Remy turned around to face me. Surprised I said, "Oh, I've always wanted to meet you."

Years before when I was 11 years old, or 12, I went to the 92nd Street Y for a concert of—Katherine Litz, who had been at Black Mountain [College]. Into the audience came Carolyn and Viola Farber and Remy, and several other Cunningham Company Members. Remy was wearing a jacket with no collar. He looked Chinese or Japanese. He's an Asian-looking man.

I would see him at concerts, and when he turned around in ballet class we became close friends almost immediately. He became a teacher to me, taught me about the imagination. We would take long walks in the village, and he would point out the oil slicks on the edge of the street and under the cars, with their iridescent rainbows, and all of a sudden the whole city was reflecting rainbows.

One of the best lessons I had about working with clay came from Remy. He told me this story before I started to work with clay—that when he was a kid, one class, not his, was allowed to work with clay with an art teacher. He would pass the door, stop and stand there and look. After weeks of doing that the teacher finally said, okay, come in, sit down.

She put a large hunk of clay just out of the bucket right in front of him, and said, now don't touch it yet. I want you to sit there and look at it for 10 minutes and then show me what you see. When Remy told me that story, I took it to heart and it led to a whole series of things that I did as a teacher. Don't touch yet, look; look at the light, look at the dark, then lengthen the light, differentiate the dark. That was one of ways I worked with students and hand-building.

MR. SHAPIRO: So this group of people—Viola and Carolyn Brown and Remy—at that point they were probably very involved with—

MR. BERENSOHN: With Merce [Cunningham].

MR. SHAPIRO: —with Merce.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: Were you aware of Merce at that time at all or—

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, I knew that he had danced with Martha Graham. From 11 on I would read *Dance Magazine*, and I would go to see dance. I would save my allowance or sneak in, but I saw all the early dance—modern dance companies. They didn't perform that much in those days.

MR. SHAPIRO: It seems like all those people, you know, who you describe in that group were taking ballet but really their—

[Cross talk.]

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, Remy and Carolyn. Merce's dances did.

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah.

MR. BERENSOHN: Not Graham's—

MR. SHAPIRO: Right, right.

MR. BERENSOHN: —but Merce's dancers. Although, you know, several of Graham's dancers did go on to dance with ballet companies. Glen Tetley, Paul Taylor—

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes, he was in—

[Cross talk.]

MR. BERENSOHN: — in *Episodes*. And Mary Hinkson did a guest roll with ABT—as a student of Graham, I was discouraged to see Merce Cunningham and other modern dancers perform, let alone date one of their classes. It was very factional, you know.

MR. SHAPIRO: Right.

MR. BERENSOHN: Tudor, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham—I had to choose at Julliard—Doris Humphrey wanted me to study with José [Limón] and dance in his company, but I wanted to study with Graham. Doris Humphrey said, "It's one or the other. You can't do both."

MR. SHAPIRO: I'm going to have to change this card.

[END OF DISC 1]

This is the second disc of interview with Paulus Berensohn in his home in Penland, North Carolina, on the vernal equinox of 2009.

MR. BERENSOHN: So I became a dancer. To be honest, I was never a very—I wasn't a technical dancer, but I had a vitality on stage. Pearl Lang once made a trio with Bruce Marks and myself. He's four or five inches taller I am. In the dance, she had him moving all the time. I had much less movement but wonderful places to stand still to just be present. And I asked her why she was killing Bruce with so much movement. She said, "Well, when he stops moving so wonderfully he evaporates. You, you stand there and people want to look at you."

So I had a kind of stage presence as a dancer, a drama, but I really couldn't point my feet very well. One summer when I was dancing at Connecticut College in a dance of Pearl Lang's, the next company—there would be more than one company in a performance—there would be like three dances by three different modern dance companies. The company after ours was Merce Cunningham's.

He was standing in the wings during our dance, warming up. When Pearl's dance ended and I went offstage with my colleagues, Merce put his hand on my shoulder and said, "There's an aura around you when you dance. If ever you can't afford to take class and want to, you can come and study at my school for free." Well, that was a Sunday afternoon. Monday night I went to Merce Cunningham's studio on 14th street and took class. I was very encouraged by what Merce said. Martha Graham was ambivalent about me. She liked the way I danced, but I was not 6-foot-4, which was her preference in male dancers. She liked me well enough to use me as a demonstrator when she taught at the neighborhood playhouse. She taught Sandy Meisner's acting students. But she wasn't going to ever give me a role. I carried a spear or two other—[laughs].

MR. SHAPIRO: But Remy wasn't that tall either, was he?

MR. BERENSOHN: Remy is about my height, but he danced with Merce, who did not have a height bias.

MR. SHAPIRO: Right.

MR. BERENSOHN: Remy did not share my passion for Graham's dances. He called Martha the "Phantom of the Opera." [Laughs] And I would say, "Oh, Remy, she's so deep." And she was. She was a remarkable woman and artist. She changed dancing forever. There have been three remarkable women in my life: Martha Graham, who almost killed me or ignored me; M.C. Richards, who almost killed me but who I loved and who loved me; and now Mary Oliver, who is like the universe saying you got through those two lessons, now we're going to give you something—a poet, a light.

MR. SHAPIRO: Your mother doesn't make the cut, huh?

MR. BERENSOHN: No. [Laughs] Forgive me. No. She doesn't. So I studied with Merce and then started to take a very interesting choreography.

MR. SHAPIRO: Is this before you went to Bennington? This is during that one year in New York when you left Columbia?

MR. BERENSOHN: This was after Bennington. This was a year or two after Bennington.

MR. SHAPIRO: So can you talk a little bit about being at Bennington?

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh, yes, I went there after my one year at Juilliard. I went to Bennington for two years. It was an all-girls school then, but they gave fellowships to a few men two dancers, four actors and a musician or two. And Alan Arkin was one of the actors. We were all very close. Barry Primus who teaches "method" acting in Los Angeles and Morey Pierce, who was a gifted actor and wonderful joke teller.

I loved Bennington because I could take other classes as well as participate in the dance program. Wallace Fowley was my advisor. He was a very urbane man who played the harpsichord. He would have me come to his apartment for our counseling session at 11:00 at night. He would give me a

glass of Pernod or something and play the harpsichord or the clavichord. Howard Nemerov was teaching there at the time, as well as Bernard Malamud and Theodore Roethke. So the literature department at Bennington at that time was spectacular. I loved taking their classes.

One of those years Dylan Thomas came and read at Bennington. There is a legend that he seduced half the girls—[laughs]—in one night. He was quite the inebriate. I was taking a class with Howard Nemerov on Eliot and Yates—the fall term was all Eliot, the spring all Yates. I don't think I understood much, but I loved the music in those poets—Nemerov read beautifully and often. The only assignment we had was to choose a third poet and write a major paper or do a major project. I chose Dylan Thomas. I could barely write, but wrote 60 pages on him. Nemerov wrote on the paper, "I think much less highly of this poet than you do. But this is a very fine tribute to him." That was nice.

I've just recently come across some Howard Nemerov's poems again. He was a fine poet.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did you graduate from Bennington? Did you finish?

MR. BERENSOHN: That's a whole story. The head of the dance department then was Bill Bales, William Bales. And he was married to the actress Jo Van Fleet—she starred in the film of *East of Eden* with James Dean. She was his prostitute mother that he visits, remember? But she won the Academy Award for supporting actress by playing James Dean's mother. Bill Bales took off a semester so that he could be with her when she got her Oscar. They had just had a child.

That was my last semester. I had to choreograph a thesis. I made a 90-minute dance. I don't remember the title. Oh yes, it was called "To Dance." It was in many sections and was about different qualities and emotions of dancing. I used two of the actors instead of dancers to be the animal quality. Everyone was excited about it.

Late spring Bill came back for a few days and attended a rehearsal, he gave notes. He suggested that—I had the curtains, the cyclorama open and closed for individual sections. He suggested that I have it open for one of the sections that I had arranged for it to be closed or vice versa. I thanked him for his suggestion and thought about it seriously for a while and decided that, no, I preferred it open and went ahead and did it. We took the dance to the 92nd Street Y in New York City. Bennington's dance department gave a concert there annually. My dance was chosen to be the piece that year.

When we returned to school I get a note from the administration saying that Bill Brown had failed me, despite the fact that he was on sabbatical and should not have participated in such a decision. All the other dance department faculty were shocked and supportive of the work I had done.

MR. SHAPIRO: Bill Bales.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. And I got a review in the *New York Times* for that dance. The president of the college when I consulted with him said, "Forgive him. The man is jealous. You're young. His wife just got an Academy Award and he doesn't know where he's standing. And you're an arrogant young pup. He's threatened." [Laughs.] He said, "We'll send you your diploma when Bill settles down again"—which they never did. Years later both Bill and I were on a panel. He was friendly and apologized. So I didn't formally graduate.

MR. SHAPIRO: But that was your final year.

MR. BERENSOHN: At the time many of Bennington's faculty were upset and threatened to go on

strike. The English department said, well, we'll give him a degree—[laughs]. Yes, so that was Bennington. Then I went back to New York where I worked with various dance companies, did a few musicals to make a living, taught and made dances. One night, after a very vigorous dance in a Broadway musical, I was panting. I had a few seconds to just stand and snap my fingers.

And I heard this voice saying, well, "Paulus, this is dancing on a stage, but what does it mean to dance in life?" I looked up as if to locate the voice. A friend of mine was in the audience. She said, "All of a sudden, you dropped your character and you were looking up." I couldn't see anything—it was an auditory hallucination. I had no idea then where that could have come from and what it meant.

You stumble through life and then when you think about it backwards, you think, oh, yes, everything was choreographed. This felt as if it were to happen.

Two weekends later, Merce Cunningham, after a rehearsal in the morning, said, "Oh, come with us. We're going to the land [The Gate Hill Community] for the annual picnic." I'm sure Karen [Karnes] has told you about those picnics. They had these wonderful picnics for the entire New York arts community, which was then relatively small—no more than 500-1000 people—dancers and painters and musicians. [The "land" was a gathering of one old and several newly designed living structures designed by Paul Williams. Most of the people living there had been teachers, students, and associates of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Karen, M.C., Merce, John Cage, Remy, and Caroline all met. Also Buckminster Fuller, Bob Rauschenberg, Kline, and de Kooning.]

We arrived early. There was time for me to wander around. I came across Karen's studio. It had a big window. I stood there and watched Karen from the back, sitting on her old Italian kick wheel where the wheel head was to her left. The first thing I saw her do was to pull up a cylinder of clay and at the same time lengthen her spine. And then—this was what got me—she reached for her sponge in the slip bucket, picked up the sponge, without taking her eyes off the cylinder, and squeezed some slip onto her work. The gesture of sightless reaching her hand made was elegant and inevitable. I thought, that's a dance to learn.

I said something to Remy or to Merce or to both of them. They said, "Well, if you want to learn to throw, M.C. [Richards], who was Karen Karnes' shopmate teaches—"

MR. SHAPIRO: At Greenwich House Pottery [New York, NY]—

MR. BERENSOHN: —yes, at Greenwich House and at City College, but that summer she was teaching—it was the first summer of Haystack at its current campus on Deer Isle.

MR. SHAPIRO: So is that in the early '60s?

MR. BERENSOHN: It was '59 or '60—I think 1960. Then again, maybe '58. And I hadn't really yet met M.C. At the end of that picnic, when we were all back sitting in the car ready to leave, she came up—M.C. came up alongside to kiss Merce. Then she'd look back into the car at me and said, "Oh, who's that cute one?" [Laughs] And Merce said, "That's Paulus." "Well," she said, "I'm M.C. Richards." And I replied, "I'm glad to meet you M.C. Richards."

So I took a sabbatical from the musical for three weeks and went to Haystack, which at that point I knew nothing about. Little did I know how important that jewel of a school would become for me.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was Fran Merritt the director at the time?

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh, yes, that amazing man. He sure was. I arrived on a Sunday night, just as dinner was starting. I walked into the dining hall. There was a seat next to M.C. She knew I was coming because Merce and Remy had said that this dancer was going to come to study with her. And she waved and I sat down next to her and we started to talk and did not stop for almost 40 years. We immediately became each other's most intimate confidante. It was immediate, as if part of the choreography. For me, there wasn't a sexual attraction. I think it was for her, but it was more than that. It was something that we recognized in each other; an old connection. She was seventeen years older than I was.

The next morning, she began—she hadn't written *Centering* yet, but on her way to Haystack she'd given a talk at Wesleyan Potters in Connecticut.

MR. SHAPIRO: That's where they had suggested that she write it I think.

MR. BERENSOHN: That's right. The suggestion came out of that talk. She began our workshop with maybe 10 minutes of introduction. At one point during it she turned towards me and said, "You know, Paulus, it's not a matter of having taste, but of having the capacity to taste what's present, to behold." Well, I nearly fell off my chair. That I think was my second art lesson.

What did she mean? Both my brothers would always say to me, you have no taste. You'll never be an artist. To them, taste was some mysterious judgment. This is good and that's bad. That didn't suit me. And here was this woman saying —because it immediately liberated what has become my work—that the behavior of art is more important than good or bad art; that it's in the quality of the behavior where the power is.

Anything worth doing, is worth doing even poorly if you're sincere, if it arise from your authenticity. I'm sure you've had students whose work wasn't that great, but they were having an extraordinary, a real experience. That for me has been the most important thing. That's what I came to understand M.C. was saying to me, that everyone is an artist. She was the one who inspired me to understand that art isn't a noun. It isn't objects. It's a verb that means to join. It's relational, participatory, a coming together.

MR. SHAPIRO: You know, Paulus, I was interested in—I've known you so many years and heard you speak. And you're always so interested in sort of taking apart words and seeing where they come from. It seems like M.C. —

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, she was a great wordsmith. Her idea of a sweet vacation once was going to London to go to the archives at the British Museum to look up the roots of words. So I would suggest to my students to get the New American Heritage paperback dictionary. Whenever a word came in our work we would look up its etymological roots because there was often a meaningful clue there, a hint.

Like I looked up—well, I think that would be a whole —

MR. SHAPIRO: Section.

MR. BERENSOHN: —thing in itself, yes. I'll —

MR. SHAPIRO: But Paulus when you—you're still dancing at that point, though. This is not a sudden change, right? There's a period—

MR. BERENSOHN: I took a sabbatical from the musical and I was supposed to dance some solos

later that summer at Jacob's Pillow [Becket, MA]. And Merce had asked me to join his company.

MR. SHAPIRO: At that time in Merce's company—wasn't there a lot of—had Remy being expelled or had he moved on or how would you put it?

MR. BERENSOHN: Remy was expelled and Steve Paxton –

MR. SHAPIRO: —but you put it as "expelled" or –

MR. BERENSOHN: —well, Remy, still, could give you an earful about it. He hasn't been able to forgive Merce. Remy was not a very technical dancer, and Merce's work was becoming increasingly challenging. Also, Remy was bald. Merce wanted him to wear a wig. That's what did it.

MR. SHAPIRO: But then Remy says he never—Merce never asked him to do that directly.

MR. BERENSOHN: Not directly—it was indirect. You'd have to know Remy. He is one of the most truly gifted human beings I've ever known. But it's never enough for him.

MR. SHAPIRO: I didn't want to ask that question to you to get into all that, but I was just interested in when you were involved with Cunningham at that point, it seems like it was a very—from reading Carolyn Brown's memoirs [*Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*]—it seems like he was tumultuous dealing with her and Merce, but you never had that experience with Merce. It was always –

MR. BERENSOHN: He was always kind and supportive, grooming me for his company. He encouraged me the year I took class with him to take this choreography class which has become legendary. It was supposed to have been taught by John Cage but then Bob Dunn, at the last minute, took over for Cage because Cage was called to perform in Europe. Bob Dunn was a composer, not a choreographer. He taught out of his own inquiries in musical structure. His class was a seed of the Judson movement. Yvonne Rainer was in the class, Simone Forte, Steve Paxton, the beginning of contact improvisation. I was the only one who made a "real" dance. [Laughs] And Merce was the only one who liked it. But he may have liked it because he liked me. It was a long and heroic dance that I called "This Kind of Bird Flies Backward," which I attempted to do.

That was a very interesting year because it was the beginning of a whole movement of change in dancing and movement inquiry.

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes, that's they're really thick up where I live because of—

MR. BERENSOHN: That's right.

MR. SHAPIRO: —what's it called?

MR. BERENSOHN: Contact improvisation. Also body/mind centering.

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes, there's a whole center for it in Western Massachusetts.

MR. BERENSOHN: That's right. David Hurwitz has his studio there. Yes, there is a center there –

MR. SHAPIRO: Earth dance.

MR. BERENSOHN: —yes. Do you ever run into David?

MR. SHAPIRO: Oh, yes, all the time, he was in—

MR. BERENSOHN: Please, give him my warm regards, yes.

MR. SHAPIRO: I will. I will.

MR. BERENSOHN: He came and taught here at Penland a couple of times. It was very nice, exploratory. Robert Turner, then well into old age, especially enjoyed David's work.

Where are we? Yes, the dance world—it wasn't only Merce's company that had some stresses. Merce's was the most benign. Martha Graham's company could be something of a viper's den and the choreographer I worked with on Broadway was a villain. But that choreography class was really wonderful—

Bob Dunn. Yvonne Rainer is still a friend. I admired what she did in those years very much. And in any case, yes, I was involved in that.

MR. SHAPIRO: So when you returned to New York, how did clay continue in your life?

MR. BERENSOHN: The thing is. I didn't return to New York. At the end of the three weeks at Haystack, I was in love with clay. I was in love with Haystack. And I was in love with M.C. That was how I began to understand what it means to dance in life.

That was the first step in responding to that mysterious question. Instead of returning to New York City I went to Pendle Hill to teach, weaving and graphics. I was a beginner with all that, the Craft Arts. I certainly didn't know anything about weaving there, but my students were older adults who were there on spiritual retreat, so if I were one day ahead of them in my own practice all went well. They were appreciative students.

MR. SHAPIRO: Tell us a little bit about Pendle Hill: where it was, what –

MR. BERENSOHN: Pendle Hill is a Quaker adult school in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, a half-hour south of Philadelphia. And it's in the next community to Swarthmore College, which is a Quaker affiliated college, a very good school. And so I taught for several years, 3 years or 4 years at Pendle Hill. After a year there I was invited to teach at Swarthmore College. That was a big experience, a big change, becoming an almost full-time teacher, suddenly with almost no preparation.

Students from Swarthmore would walk through the woods to Pendle Hill and would see my work. At that time, Swarthmore was a very academic institution with a honors program but no arts. It was the early '60s. Students were beginning to be more activist and to make demands.

So three young women petitioned the school to hire me. And they did. They hired a very fine painting teacher, Harriet Schor, and me. I got \$300 for the year, plus all the clay I could use and a studio to work in.

MR. SHAPIRO: So did you have to put together a studio, or there was one –

MR. BERENSOHN: The studio was an empty room. We had to build three wheels. I couldn't do it myself. Larry Wilson, then in his early teens, knew how to do it. I asked him to design a wheel where I could sit facing the students, so that we could throw together. I'd read about that in *A Potter's Book* by Bernard Leach. I started to use the studio in August to practice. I'm a practicer. Only three—those three young women had signed up for the class. And I thought, oh, this is going to be a challenge. Only three, very part-time, students.

But then, one day, before school opened, a new member of the football team wandered in wearing a leather jacket—also a stutterer—that was another important moment in my life. I was throwing. Jeff just stood there watching me while I kept working. When I finished that particular pot, I looked up at him, and he said, "W-would y-you teach m-m-me to d-do that?" I said, "Of course." Well, he told everybody and by the end of the year, I had given several hundred first lessons on the potter's wheel out of the 1,000 students at Swarthmore at that time.

I would make a pot—a simple little cylinder pot with a student's hands on top of mine. Then I would put my hands on top of theirs and move their hands to make a second cylinder. The third time, I would just advise them delicately with my hands.

It was a great way to introduce throwing a pot for someone who hadn't experienced it in their own body. I could center the clay and gave them the experience of centering, straight away, into their bodies, in their senses. It was intimate, sometimes erotic, always sensual.

MR. SHAPIRO: Where was M.C. at this time?

MR. BERENSOHN: She was in New York City, living on Spring Street but she would come often to where I was living. I was living at Pendle Hill, the first year I taught at Swarthmore and then moved to a tree house-like apartment in Rose Valley. She would come at least once a month and I would meet her in New York City. She subbed for me at Swarthmore a couple of times when I had to go someplace.

MR. SHAPIRO: Were you involved with the Quakers around there at that time?

MR. BERENSOHN: Even as a teenager, I would go to the Friends meeting on 17th Street. There was something about the silence I liked a lot and the image of the inner light captured my imagination. I've started, since August, going every Sunday to a Quaker meeting in Celo. They just built a new meeting house. For 60 years they met in a sheep shed. Now, they've built this long house with a big fireplace at one end, and with one side wall that is all glass that folds open in the summer time. So it's like—I wrote something about it saying it's like the Quakers have finally invited the more than human world into meetings.

The Quakers tend to be political activists, which is another thing I'm drawn to about Quakerism, their peace witness. They demonstrated against the wars in Vietnam and Korea. I learned about being a C.O. because of going to friends meeting, and how to be a tax resister.

So I've always been sympathetic to Quakerism, although of all the religions of the world Christianity interests me the least. It seems to me the least artistic. I'm moved by Daoism and Buddhism and Sufism and early Judaism and several Japanese religions—Omoto. Christianity is too punishing for me. It has a troubling history. But the Quakers and the Unitarians have wonderful hearts, liberal hearts. They've opened them to me. So I join them from time to time.

So I taught at Swarthmore. And started selling my work and exhibiting. I had an exhibition at the Print Club in Philadelphia. It sold out. I made \$1,000. Back then it was a lot. The very next day, a young friend of mine called up and said, there's a farm for sale down the road from the Murphy's. They were a family that I knew in northeast Pennsylvania, north of Scranton, south of Binghamton.

I went up to look at it. There was one field, a long field. You could see Elk Mountain beyond it. It had stone fences, one quite old house and 105 acres. The house was in poor, almost unlivable condition. The farmer was asking only \$15,000 for all of it and yes, a big barn. I went to the local bank and he said, "Oh, \$1,000 down would be fine. What do you do?" I said, "I teach at Swarthmore College." He didn't ask in what department or what subject. He gave me a 6-percent mortgage.

After I paid for everything, my neighbors at the farm said, "They got you. You shouldn't have paid more than \$5,000 for that place. They saw that you were a white fellow from the city." Anyway, it was worth every penny and the beginning of a new time of life.

After four years of teaching at Swarthmore, I decided it was time to be a full time production potter. I moved to the farm with a young couple, Larry Wilson, Laurie Graham and their infant daughter Sheligh, and lived there for several years as a potter and built a gas kiln. I began to invite friends to join us: Remy and June Ekman, and Burt Supree, who was the dance editor of the *Village Voice* and then just before he died, a managing editor.

He was a wonderful human being with a mysterious inner life. Burt died instantly on the subway at age 51, a massive heart attack from eating greasy food, we thought. He loved the Lithuanian delicatessens on the east side of the Village. Actually, just last weekend, at Bennington College, Sarah Lawrence students and Bennington students were putting all his dance reviews and his poetry onto a Web site that they've made for him, all these years later. There were, altogether, nine of us.

MR. SHAPIRO: So was Gatehill a kind of model in your mind?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. Gatehill was an early commune—like community of artists. M.C. had hopes for an even more communal structure than Gatehill. She was always interested in community, which is why she joined a Camphill Village toward the end of her life.

So we established shares and created a survivor's clause so that the last person to leave turned off the lights. [Laughs] They would have the whole place. Laurie and Larry were 18 years old when they came to live at the farm with me. I didn't know how to live in the country by myself with bears and cows and mosquitos and huge snow storms. They did and they made it possible for us. SO it's fitting that now the place is theirs. They are the last owners of the farm. Laurie and Larry have made the farm into a paradise. It's extraordinarily beautiful. They cut down acres of blackberry bramble, made gardens, beautiful flower and vegetable gardens.

MR. SHAPIRO: Isn't there a potter involved with –

MR. BERENSOHN: There has been a potter there again for the last several years. Jordan Taylor.

MR. SHAPIRO: —yes, that's right.

MR. BERENSOHN: Who I admire very much. He has built two huge anagama kilns. If you know a young potter who wants to fire with anagama—Jordan is—unfortunately for us he's moving. His wife is working on an advanced degree in public health at Duke so he's moving here to North

Carolina, which is a tremendous labor because it took him so long to build those kilns and now he will have to take them down and rebuild them. He has no regrets. He loves life with his wife and baby daughter. His new place is over east, near Raleigh. It will take time.

I should show you a new piece of his that I like.

MR. SHAPIRO: So was that on the land that you had, his anagama?

MR. BERENSOHN: Right, he built his kiln on the foundation of the kilns M.C. and I had.

MR. SHAPIRO: And was he actually living on the land too, or just using the kiln?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. Larry built him a great house and studio. This photo is of a recent piece of his. It's a lump of clay that he dug out of the earth. He just goes with his shovel and he digs out clay and looks at it. Then he puts it in the kiln. He doesn't clean it. He doesn't do anything to it. Puts it in the kiln. This is very recent for him. He fires his kilns for seven to 12 days. I think that's a brave act and an interesting direction for him to explore. Praising the earth just as it is.

So I lived there on the farm for much of a decade and made pots and was able to sell all of them. There were very few production potters at that time. Karen was the great inspiration. But there were maybe—I knew of a couple of dozen in the New York-Pennsylvania area.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was Byron in Pennsylvania at that time?

MR. BERENSOHN: Byron Temple was there and when I had—I left out one step! It was Pendle Hill and Swarthmore. And then the Potters Guild in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. At Swarthmore I taught a class for faculty and faculty wives. They got so into it that we outgrew the college space. We founded a guild, which is still going. It is just a few miles from the college in its own building. We had lots of students. I started asking potters to come and do demonstration style workshops. Karen was the first one, and then Byron Temple—

MR. SHAPIRO: This is in Wallingford.

MR. BERENSOHN: —yes, Wallingford, Pennsylvania just south of Philadelphia. And then Toshiko Takaezu and others came. Then I thought, well, these brilliant artists sit there for two days and throw and people watch. I had a feeling that if they're like me they leave a little discouraged because it's like seeing Pavlova dance and thinking how do I begin to dance with such artistry. So I thought we should really have hands on workshops—people working with an artist. That was unheard of then. There were no hands-on workshops except at residential schools like Haystack and Penland. So I asked M.C. if she would design a participatory workshop.

MR. SHAPIRO: I wonder if that model didn't partly come out of Black Mountain and those seminars, the pottery seminars.

MR. BERENSOHN: —it could very well have.

MR. SHAPIRO: It's interesting because it's such a ubiquitous model now.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. I always credit—I forget the Black Mountain history. In a sense M.C. brought a Black Mountain vision to Fran—I saw what an effect M.C. had on Fran.

MR. SHAPIRO: Which was?

MR. BERENSOHN: They were beloveds intellectually, pals. They understood each other, sparked each other.

Yes, M.C.'s workshop—I'll never forget it. We even slept in the art center and brought our food. M.C. would give us little assignments, a lot of which we worked on outdoors. That was very influential in my teaching. I remember one thing she did was to ask us—now everyone does it, but it was unheard of then—to make a clay marriage with something in nature. Have seen this picture of a sculpture by Goldsworthy. Do you like Goldsworthy's work? I love what he does and where he does it. But this is my favorite piece of his. Isn't that amazing?

MR. SHAPIRO: Is that clay?

MR. BERENSOHN: It's sand, but I'm sure he's put clay or water in it to hold it together. He often does use clay. But this piece is for me is one of the first ecologically inspired masterpiece of the 21st century.

MR. SHAPIRO: What were—can you remember any of the other assignments that M.C. gave that were particularly--?

MR. BERENSOHN: Some of them are in that video the Kane-Lewis production people made, *The Fire Within* [2004] but they also have made a video of her teaching. She would have us work with weight and lightness or with opposites and I believe that we did her clay circle for the first time, during which we put all the tables in a square or a circle. And I would take the 25-pound bag of clay and—have you—did you do that with her?

MR. SHAPIRO: We did this with you maybe at Haystack at one point, maybe.

MR. BERENSOHN: No, I've never done it myself because even though I helped design it; I felt it was sort of her thing. But anyway, I would—when I assisted her, I would pull the wire down this way and then that way, so you would have four square. We would roll them a little and attach them until we had one large doughnut of clay. This became the way a workshop would begin with M.C. The students would come in and sit around the table facing the doughnut.

She would say, "I'm going to talk for a few minutes, but please feel free to doodle with the clay while I'm talking." And she would talk and 15 minutes later, she would say, let's every one stand up. We would walk around the circle of doodled clay and look at what people had done. The transitions between your territory and my territory were always the most interesting conscious and unconscious part of what happened there. Then she would ask us to meet the images we saw with words. She called the workshops "Creativity in Clay, Color, and Word." She liked the mix of those three. She believed in an interdisciplinary curriculum.

So we did an early version of that clay circle in that first workshop. But it was wonderful and caught on. Even Karen started to do hands-on workshops.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was this the Continuum or was that before the Continuum [Karnes' group of students in the 1970s]?

MR. BERENSOHN: It was well before. When I started living at the farm, M.C. was living on Spring Street and was mugged three times. I was very upset and worried about that, so I drove to New York and packed up her apartment and put M.C. in the car and took her to the farm and said, you live here now, enough New York City. And she stayed. She liked being kidnapped. A couple of years later, she was invited to teach at Goldsmiths College of the University of London for a

semester. She went and in London she spent a good deal of time with Yoko Ono. Yoko Ono was then a student of sorts of John Cage.

Yoko Ono was an interesting character in those days. She hadn't met John Lennon yet. In New York City she hosted informal concerts of new music in her loft that I often attended to hear early work by Terry Ruly, LaMonte Young, David Tutor, etc. While M.C. was teaching in London she met Ann Stannard. She wrote to me and said, "I met a woman kiln builder. Can you believe it?" At that time in the U.S. women were generally not welcome in kiln building workshops. There was a man in Florida who gave many kiln building workshops. He wouldn't allow a woman to take the workshop. It was men's work!

Even Gerry Williams, who I think the world of—I don't think he forbade women, but women were not encouraged to attend. So M.C. said, "What would you think about a workshop in kiln building not limited to women, but for them. You and Karen Karnes and I would. We could do it at our farm?" And I said yes.

It took us almost a year to prepare for it. M.C. put in a garden—when she came back from England, she put in a large garden, and I fixed up the barn, so we had a big studio. It was during that kiln building festival that Ann and Karen met. There was another moment of discovery for Karen in that workshop—you know how she uses the cutting wire? That was an energetic moment, of creative discovery. We were all working and Karen turned to me and said, I forgot to bring my wire. Do you have a wire? And I said, sure. I handed her my wire, which was two wires twisted together. She made the cut off loop of the upside down casserole lid and when she lifted the cover and saw the landscape-like pattern the twisted wire had made she was thrilled. Everyone in the room saw it. It was a moment of how happenstance blesses the artist. [Laughs.]

Oh, God. I feel indulgent talking –

MR. SHAPIRO: No, it's great.

MR. BERENSOHN: —That kiln-building workshop was a very important event in all our lives in different ways.

MR. SHAPIRO: And it was all these multiple different—different approaches, right, because Karen would talk to Ann –

MR. BERENSOHN: Ann helped us build an oil drip kiln, a wood burning kiln, a gas kiln.

MR. SHAPIRO: It was the beginning also of smoke fire and that thing, wasn't it?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. The first sawdust firing in this country. The sawdust kiln was invented by Ann's mentor, who was Seonaid Robertson. Seonaid Robertson wrote a little pamphlet called "Beginning at the Beginning with Clay" [Society for Education Through Art Pamphlets, 1965] but she's most well-known for a book called *Rosegarden and Labyrinth*. She was a teacher in Scotland, an art teacher. Her students were the children of miners.

One day, she put all the chairs together on the floor on their side to make a tunnel and covered—had the children put their coats on over the chairs so that the children could crawl through the tunnels to know what their fathers' lives were like. Then she had them work in clay. So much of the work the children made resembled rose gardens and labyrinths coming out of the children's unconscious that she went and studied with Jung. So she became an important teacher in England and worked with Herbert Read, Sir Herbert Read. They started a program called Education

Through Art. They gave summer workshops for teachers. One summer Karen was invited to teach the wheel and I was invited to teach hand building.

MR. SHAPIRO: In England?

MR. BERENSOHN: In England. West Dean, near Chichester. This was a few years after she had begun her partnership with Ann.

MR. SHAPIRO: Paulus, we're going to have to put it on another one.

MR. BERENSOHN: What time is it?

[END OF DISC 2.]

MARK SHAPIRO: This is disc three of interview with Paulus Berensohn at his home and studio in Penland, North Carolina, on March 21, 2009.

PAULUS BERENSOHN: Yes, yes.

MR. SHAPIRO: I think that's got it all.

[They laugh.]

MR. BERENSOHN: This morning, I was thinking about what we said yesterday, and something that I've been doing in my teaching these last few years came up. I learned from an author who I admire tremendously, David Abram, who wrote a book called *The Spell of the Sensuous: Language and Perception in a More Than Human World*. It's a remarkable, an important book.

So I've been reading everything he puts out. He published a wonderful article on storytelling, as the first art form—that our first artistic behavior was telling each other stories. As an aside, he tells how the Cree Indians believed that stories had their own autonomous lives. They didn't belong to us; they had their own lives and they lived off in their own villages. Every once in a while, when the story wants to evolve, it goes out into the world and it looks for you, finds you, and bites you in the ass, infecting you with this story That will now evolve through your life.

I started to ask this question of myself and of my students. What has infected you? And indeed, I feel that way, that there are things that have come into my life—like, to dance is to spring from the hand of God—that's a story, an image that wormed its way into my soul and that that's been happening all my life.

I've just begun to really see that There are evolutionary dynamics living in us, despite us and we learn to surrender. I guess that's what I want to say about it, there are stories that—for instance, the first walkabout I went on in Australia. I think I've told you this story about asking the aboriginal elder on our last night why the Aboriginal Australians have made art, since the first day.

I still think of Aboriginal Australians as the first ceramic artists because their paintings were done with dried ochres. They chewed the ochres and put them on their bodies, their first canvas 400,000 years ago—if you believe some anthropologists. And to make a long story short, the elder said that the function of art was to praise the earth. He told me that Aboriginal Australian artists believe, that the earth would not be as productive and supportive of us humans without our praise and thanks and gratitude. He told me that the function of the artists is to "sing up the earth."

Talk about biting you in the ass—it was like, oh, that's what I'm about. That is what working with clay is about for me. To sing up the earth. To offer and praise and thank. Where did it come from? Not from my consciousness. It had to be awoken by a bite in the ass.

MR. SHAPIRO: When did you become aware of Abram?

MR. BERENSOHN: Some time ago.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was that around the time you were still on the land, back in Pennsylvania?

MR. BERENSOHN: No, no. I would say, maybe 15 years ago. We can look later at when the book was published. I don't remember how I happened upon it. I'm splendidly dyslexic, so reading—although I read all the time, I read in an interesting way. I wait until an image rises up out of the page because it's very hard for me to follow anything that's dense, left brained, linear.

His book starts telling how in order to go to graduate school in ecology and philosophy, he learned magic tricks to play at birthday parties for children. He got very into it. And when he got his Ph.D., he received a Fulbright to study magic in Bali and Nepal. During his time there he experienced a reciprocity with nature, which he had not ever experienced, except intellectually, in America. So he asked himself the question, what took us out of nature? Someone gave me a book of Jung's just last week where the author took all Jung's references to the earth out and made a complete book out of it. It turns out that Jung too was a dedicated environmentalist who felt that we were in a state of decline because of technology and our deracination from the earth.

MR. SHAPIRO: One of the questions that I've been thinking about is, when this theme of connection to the earth and deep ecology came into your life.

MR. BERENSOHN: This is a good time to pick that up, because that was one of the bites. Another was when M.C. wrote her poem "Potter," I was going off to teach for a semester. I was still working on the wheel then and I asked her if she would write a poem about clay with which I could inspire students. She balked: "I don't write poems on demand." But the next morning, it was on my desk. I think it is one of her best poems. It has a line in it: "Always we are eating and drinking earth's body, making her dishes." I saw that as a figure eight: a reciprocity between the human and more than human world.

MR. SHAPIRO: So is this about the time that Karen and Ann, and the kiln workshop was happening at the land, approximately?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. It would be before that time that she wrote that poem. Yes, because I was still working on the wheel, then. Yes. And then what really did it for me was learning about the life-from-clay theory that NASA has: that there would be no animal life, plant life and human life on this planet, were it not for the nature of the crystal of clay. When I read that, it changed my experience. The first time I heard that way of knowing our ancestry in clay was in a book by Lyle Watson. Do you know of him?

He's an Englishman who writes books about fantastic science. Like, he's written a whole book of phosphorescence and a book on wind. He has Ph.D.s in several sciences, but I think, straight science—academic science—would find him a little far out. But I like him a lot. And he has a book called "Life Tide." In it he tells the story of clay, you know, in a way that was revelatory for me. I learned when I started out that clay was an inert material. Watson say absolutely not mort? He makes the case that it is alive, the source of all life on our planet.

Soon after, in the *New York Times*, there was an article about Dr. Leila Coyne, a geologist at San Jose State who says that, if you take a one-pound ball of clay, and hit it with a hammer, it will glow ultraviolet light for a month! Clay is alive! Then other scientists began to talk about clay as being stardust, that when a supernova explodes in the cosmos and pebbles rain down on this planet and geological weathering gets to it, clay is born. The ancestry of clay is stardust. The ancestry of us is clay, so our ancestry is stardust. Native Americans say clay is our mother and stone our grandmother.

So all that gave me a cosmic sense of what clay was about. And that became more important to me than pots. And I tried to teach that I talked about it wherever I went. Very few potters seemed interested. They would thank me and smile and go back to work. I'm just now beginning to feel that the craft community is beginning to understand that every one of the materials that we use up there at the Penland school come from the earth. And that each of those materials are in some sense alive and have their own stories.

MR. SHAPIRO: You mean they don't come from the brown truck with UPS on it?

MR. BERENSOHN: Exactly. I think some young pottery students think clay comes in 25-pound plastic bags.

MR. SHAPIRO: I think it's really shifted up there. You have people who are looking around for local materials.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, think of Josh Copus, Michael Hunt, and Naomi Dalglish. People assume that I would be most interested in art ceramics. But in fact, if I were a young potter, I would be a wood-fired potter. Wood firing is solar firing, sun's energy stored in tree rings. Eventually, my dream is that we're going to have a solar kiln—that we'll be able to fire pots directly with sun.

It may be that the craft arts have become so important these last several decades because we have lost our imagination for a living reciprocity with earth. We need to reimagine the reality of that connection. Putting hands-on helps. We can re-accinate by sensing our feet of clay standing on holy ground.

And who better to talk about it and help us experience it hands-on embodied, than iron workers and clay workers and weavers; We really have a mission to talk about it, and to talk about the human hand, which is in great peril. We're really, in a sense, conservative in that way—we have a real story to tell with roots.

I feel I was a very unlikely vehicle for that story to bite. And yet it is an inflammation in me.

MR. SHAPIRO: Why did you feel that way?

MR. BERENSOHN: I grew up in New York City with an ambitious, sophisticated mindset—and a romantic image of the artist, the starving artist in the garret; doing something and being acclaimed a great artist—I don't think that way now. It's more than enough to just behave the way an artist behaves when receptive, when creative. That way of behaving I believe is healing me.

The stories of singing up the earth, and of life in clay reclaimed me, and then a dream. I had an important dream soon after I began to pinch. In the dream, I saw my hand going into the earth. When I lifted my hand out of the earth there was a ball of clay in my hand. I blew into it and it became this bowl. And then I saw myself placing the bowl back into the earth. So that started 20 years of not needing to fire my work.

MR. SHAPIRO: When did that start, though? I'm sorry to ask you these basic—

MR. BERENSOHN: No, I mean, it's hard to —

MR. SHAPIRO: Because I'm trying to remember about your trajectory from your land in Pennsylvania, and your farm, to Penland. And it involves Cynthia [Bingle], it involves Haystack, it involves—

MR. BERENSOHN: It started not long after I came to Penland.

MR. SHAPIRO: So just for background, can you—

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh, 1960, '59—1960.

MR. SHAPIRO: You left the farm at that time? Or —

MR. BERENSOHN: Well, I had no intention to leave the farm, but no, it wasn't 1960. It was later, it was '68 was when I first came to Penland. I was still working on the wheel then and had begun pinching. The first class I taught here was with Cynthia.

MR. SHAPIRO: So did you come here before you came to teach here or —

MR. BERENSOHN: No.

MR. SHAPIRO: The first time you came to teach was with Cynthia?

MR. BERENSOHN: Cynthia came as a participant to the kiln festival that M.C., Karen and I ran. I knew Cynthia because she was a student in the very first pottery class I took at Haystack.

MR. SHAPIRO: With M.C.

MR. BERENSOHN: With M.C.

MR. SHAPIRO: That's right. She was telling me that story.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. When she came to the kiln festival and saw the beginning pinching that I was doing—you know, almost no one was pinching in those days. She proposed that I come to Penland—in those years she advised Bill Brown about clay people—and that we teach a three-week class together. She would teach the wheel and I would introduce pinching. That was the beginning of my giving up on the wheel because I thought, well, other people do it so well and teach it so well—Cynthia, a brilliant example—and there's no one teaching pinching. And I had fallen in love with pinching.

MR. SHAPIRO: So was there a period of time before you were invited to be a resident here that you were still involved with the farm? And how did that transition happen and what—I just wanted to get a sense of what was happening at the farm as a community and whether that was changing and evolving and —

MR. BERENSOHN: Due to the nature of our work we always came and went to the farm. M.C. went off to England and would travel frequently to give workshops and talks. June got a job teaching at Sarah Lawrence, so she would come weekends. Remy also was always traveling and performing and he too would come weekends. And Burt as well—the three of them had full city lives. I think they came and joined the farm mostly because of M.C. and I and our deepening friendships.

The farm was only three hours from New York. Remy is very much a city boy. Time in the country drove him a little crazy. I don't think he ever spent a night at the farm alone. But in the early years would—when we would walk outside, he couldn't take his eyes off the earth because he was frightened of snakes. But by the end, 10 years later, he was in the garden all the time. He became a remarkable and dedicated gardener.

MR. SHAPIRO: And was that couple who was the original—who came originally with you —did they stay throughout, were they a –

MR. BERENSOHN: They went off at one period to the Nova Scotia School of Art [Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax], but just for a short period of time, a year or so. Otherwise they'd been there the whole time and thankfully still are.

MR. SHAPIRO: What is their name?

MR. BERENSOHN: Laurie and Larry Wilson. Oh, Laurie Graham and Larry Wilson. And now they are the proprietors, I should say artistic directors, of all 105 acres. You know, M.C. was a friend of Buckminster Fuller and Larry got interested in geodesic domes. We gave him an acre of land to build an experimental dome. Domes have the problem that they leak; that's why perhaps they haven't become more useful—but Larry figured out a way to cap them so they do not leak.

Then as a community we gave them 11 acres and sold them, I think, 15 more acres. And Larry started to build a home for his family. It's three geodesic domes going down a hillside. Magnificently, crafted—it now has a tower connected to it. It is a beautifully and original house that took him 11 years or so to build. He still is working on it; still adding things to it; decks, garden beds, walkways, a guest dome. For a couple of years after my first summer at Penland I would make the 14 hour drive back and forth frequently, on occasion, twice a week. I liked the quiet of driving then. I would leave at 3 or 4 in the afternoon and drive through the night on relatively traffic free roads.

MR. SHAPIRO: So I didn't want to interpret your trajectory about clay—I just wanted to figure out where you were in your life when you were beginning to think of those things.

MR. BERENSOHN: The image of clay receiving energy, storing energy and transmitting energy captured my imagination. Being a very body-oriented person who is—at the same time that I was becoming interested in the energy in clay—I was also very interested in the energy in our bodies. I was studying tai chi and the Alexander technique. Now it's qigong —which is all about having a participatory relationship with the energy that enlivens us.

And out of time sequence I should tell you about one of my attempts to create clay rituals, I always liked to do something on Earth Day, for potters and students of clay—just to remind us that this is where it comes from so take off your shoes. One year, a children's school, the Montessori school in Spruce Pine [NC]—my good friend Geraldine [Plato] was then the director—they invited me to do something with the kids early in the morning of Earth Day.

When I arrived the children were already outdoors —85 kids from ages 2, 3, to 11. I brought a raw clay bowl I had pinched and painted with slips. The children all wrote notes to the neotodes and microbes and worms in the earth. The little kids, the nursery and pre-kindergarten who couldn't write yet, drew pictures, little pictures on little small pieces of paper. They folded them up and put them in the raw bowl. One little boy dug a hole to return the pot to the earth. We did a group thank you to the earth and to the worms eating the compost and making friable earth.

I said a favorite poem called "Stone", which is about how stones must come from the stars, how they all have star charts on their inner walls. And what was amazing to me was that the smallest children got the point. It was like—they applauded. I mean, three-year-olds—when I said, "Maybe it's not dark inside a stone after all, perhaps there is a moon as if behind a ridge, just enough light to make out the star charts on the inner walls of every stone." These little kids applauded. I was thrilled.

I packed up and started to leave. The children were still playing outdoors. When I turned around to look back at them the first image that came to me was of an old master painting because the children were tumbling and jumping. Then all of a sudden, they stood still and I had the most exquisite hallucination. Each one of those children became like an electrical plug, their legs like prongs plugged into the earth. And out of the top of their head there was this transparent columns of energy connecting to the heavens it was a vision of what is and could be. Perhaps this generation will be the one to replugin our imagination into the electrons of earth.

So since then—and I don't know if it will happen in this lifetime—my intention when I stand like a tree to work with clay is to palpate the energy in the clay and bring it into my own body as a healing and visa versa. I've made some progress —there are moments when I feel it. And there have been a few moments in my teaching when I've been able to open us for such an experience.

Once in Germany a couple of years ago, during an outdoor workshop I led people in the making of a pinch pot where we took almost 20 minutes just to open the ball of clay. [Laughs.]

MR. BERENSOHN: As we finished that, sensing the clay and the energy in the clay, the church bells in the next valley rang 12 times. It was a surprise and powerful, the synchronicity. Everyone's body was so sensitive at that point that the church bells stimulated and vibrated our bodies. Marge Piercy has a wonderful poem where she describes the body as being like a great bronze bell. She says, that's what I'm for. I'm here to be struck: peel me again, peel me again.

So that's been my intention with clay. Just to hang out with it, to feel connected to it, waiting for it to speak to me. You know, from being a pro I haven't been able to work with clay all winter, because of this house not having a studio. But I can work in the summer, so let's hope something doesn't come along to divert my attention. So teaching clay was an attempt to teach the story that clay has to tell, rather than the techniques of object-making—which is done so well now –

These days young craft artists who have been to graduate schools, come to teach at Penland with very interesting ideas, and are articulate about them. And it's appreciated. But to try to teach on the story level, or about meaning is rare. The only person I know who does it profoundly with clay is George Kokis, who unfortunately has Parkinson's disease now. He told me an interesting thing .His hands shake—The only time they don't shake is when he puts his hands on clay.

He has begun to make pieces that he doesn't fire. He puts them out in the rain—he lives in rainy Eugene, Oregon—and let's them biodegrade. He's made a couple of videos of that process. He doesn't see the need to fire. Another potter who evokes a spiritual atmosphere is Joe Bennion. I gave a talk once, to which Joe Bennion came. Do you know Joe?

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes.

MR. BERENSOHN: I like him very much. I gave a long talk at a conference in Florida that he came to. He came up to me afterwards, and said, "Every time you referred to God, you referred to God in the feminine. Why?" I said, "Equal time, Joe." In Alcoholics Anonymous they say God however you

perceive him. Why not God however you perceive her. That feels closer to my truth. To me, God is natura, is nature, and Sophia, and Gaia. That's where it's possible to make a relationship with gods and goddesses, rather than with a patriarchal organization.

MR. SHAPIRO: So at some point you move to Penland from the farm. You come to teach a workshop. Has that happen immediately, or was it slowly an evolution, or?

MR. BERENSOHN: That first summer, one of the early days of that week, I had the students all lie on the floor, blindfolded, pinching a pot on their chest. Bill Brown came into the studio I had my eyes open because I was both whispering verbal direction and watching. There were 30 people lying on the floor including Cynthia.

Bill Brown came into the studio, took one look, turned purple. And walked out. At the end of the three weeks, he said, "I don't know what the hell you're up to, but the students were very touched by you. Come back next summer." At that time to be invited to teach at Penland was like being nominated for some important award. It was an honor to be invited to Penland and to be asked two years in a row.

By the second summer Bill began to get interested in what I was doing and would come and watch. We developed a deep appreciation for each other, Bill's wife Jane as well.

MR. SHAPIRO: Do you remember what years those would be?

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh –

MR. SHAPIRO: Sorry to—I can find them.

MR. BERENSOHN: Sixty-eight. It was "the summer of love." Yes, because when I arrived the first time on this campus wearing a tie-dyed shirt and with my hair down, to my coccyx, everyone else was wearing tie-dyed – it was a flowering of hippies and faux hippies.

And I felt, oh, this is the place. It seemed so very alive. The energy those first couple of years when —But that's a whole other story—the '60s and what hopeful things were in the air. Penland was at its height then. It just was glorious. I was happy to come back the second year.

By the end of the second summer—I had given a couple of talks and showed slides. That's what really got to Bill. He was interested in the response to the talks the conversation it provoked. He told me that he had received a grant from the National Endowment [for the Arts]. Penland had just built the resident barns. The grant was to bring an artist of his choice to Penland for three years. I was the first, Norm Schulman was the second and I don't remember who the third person was. Oh yes, Judith Cornell and her husband.

I stayed a year and worked in the resident barn, but I wasn't a resident. Cynthia was a resident then and Jane Pieser and Ron Garfinkel in clay. I had my own studio. That was the year that I wrote "Finding One's Way With Clay." I had no idea I was writing a book. I thought I was writing a long letter to my former students at the Wallingford Potter Guild. It's a publication as a book with photos by True Kelly changed my life.

MR. SHAPIRO: So you were brought in more as a visiting artist as opposed to a –

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes.

MR. SHAPIRO: This is more vocationally conceived, the resident program –

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, yes. It was. And it still is now except that now they're doing what they call an occasional mid-career residency, like Jenny Mendes these last three years. It was a great boon for me to have Jenny here.

MR. SHAPIRO: Were you provided housing at that time?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, everything was provided – I lived in the farmhouse, the basement of the farmhouse which was just a few feet from the barn. Meals were free when the dining room was open. So I thought well I'll just pinch for a year and see where it takes me.

So I started to write a letter like a journal, just saying what I was doing. I began then to investigate coloring clay, putting color in clay with oxides. I just kept writing about pinching and why I pinched and different ways of pinching. It was fun to do and came easily—a letter. By April the letter seemed long enough; it was spring, time to send the letter off. .

I sent my one copy to a friend, a woman who had been a student of mine—she worked at Simon and Schuster; she was a book designer—because she had a Xerox machine. She had offered to make 50 or 60 copies of what I planned to send to the students. I sent it to her on a Friday, via postal service. She received it on a Monday. True and I had made some photographs, that I included, the photographs in the frontispiece and the back where I'm dancing with clay. I had pasted them onto the pages.

She received the letter on Monday morning, unwrapped it, and her boss who rarely came into her work space—he was one of the editors of Simon and Schuster—came into her office and glanced, at the cover of the letter and just sort of paged through it. He asked Irene, "What's this?" She said, oh, it's a friend of mine's book on how to make pots. And he said, "I just came from a meeting and we think that craft books are going to be next big thing after cookbooks."

And so at 11:00 on that same Monday morning, I get a phone call from Simon and Schuster saying that they wanted to buy the book [*Finding One's Way with Clay*]. I was flabbergasted. I mean, I had no intention—I didn't think of it as a book. I thought of it as a letter. They offered me—I made the biggest mistake of my life, although I'm not unhappy about it—they said, we'll give you \$40,000 for it, outright. Well, that seemed like a fortune and, you know, I could give True 10 percent of that.

But then I had to work on it as a book. They suggested that I should have a chapter on firing so I was able to write about sawdust firing which I was happy about. And when that book came out, it changed my life.

MR. SHAPIRO: So you had signed away your royalties for that advance?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. I did. And Simon and Schuster made a small fortune from it because it—I don't know the figures, they don't tell you how many copies are sold. But Dan Rhodes when he was still alive, told me that *Finding One's Way with Clay* had sold more than all the other books on pottery combined. It was published at the right moment. It was right when people were going back to the woods and making things by hand.

And also it got a review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that called it the first sexy craft book. [They laugh.] Bob Turner was the first person to respond to the book. He said, which shocked me, that this book is a classic. It's going to be read in a hundred years from now. Gerry Williams also said that if you're a young potter, there are only two books that you should read, *A Potter's Book* and

Finding One's Way With Clay.

I felt unworthy of such praise. Something not me had come through me. But the book went off and had its own life. Thousands of people bought it—most of them not potters. The story went around that this was a book about permission for your creative life. I have received hundreds of letters over the years from people saying the book was their bible and had changed their lives. It challenged mine.

MR. SHAPIRO: Do you see a connection between that, your book, and M.C.'s *Centering* in that regard?

MR. BERENSOHN: I couldn't have written *Finding* if M.C. Had not written *Centering*. But they are very different books.

MR. SHAPIRO: As a kind of self—as a way into the self? Although yours is very technical—I was reading it before I came down and I was very struck by how precise and technical your language is.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. I was telling my students how to do it, but there are sections which are not, that are exercises for the imagination, for instance. Some of the writing at the back of the book and in recent editions of it where I've written a little about life from clay and energy in clay is not technical but meant to inspire. A woman wrote a book last year who lives up near you called *Clay* [*Clay : the history and evolution of humankind's relationship with Earth's most primal element*, Suzanne Staubach].

MR. SHAPIRO: Oh, yes. I've seen that book, yes. A friend of Karen's.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, she mentions Karen in her book. It's a nice book because she tells stories of clay that I hadn't known. Like, for instance, clay cooking—stove-making and clay pipes. Apparently, European potters, production potters, were kept busy making clay pipes which delighted me being a pipe smoker. In Denmark you do still see clay pipes. Small, blue glazed porcelain pipes smoked by women on the street.

MR. SHAPIRO: I think the Native American –

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, they are also clay. I have one back there. Then when the cigarette was invented, and pipe smoking became much less prevalent. Those potters had to change what they produced. That was interesting to me. She does have a small chapter on clay as healing and for that I'm grateful. A step in a propitious direct. In the direction of knowing and experiencing clay as both personally and, more importantly, transpersonally healing.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was the letter that became the book the beginning of your keeping of journals? Or had you been keeping journals throughout?

MR. BERENSOHN: That's a good question. Actually the first summer that I taught at Penland, I made journals for every student with multiple sections.

MR. SHAPIRO: How did you know how to do—did you know how to do binding at that time?

MR. BERENSOHN: That came later. I think I just got loose-leaf books. I used rings and had cardboard dividers for the different sections. There were sections for glaze formulas and a section for a kiln log, and for material sources and addresses. But there were also a sketchbook, a daily log, and a section for dreams: day dreams and night dreams.

I had been taking workshops with a Jungian analyst named Ira Progoff who taught something called the intensive journal. He was a brilliant man. He had many sections in his journals. But they were in black, loose-leaf books and he did not encourage illustration or color. When I went to his workshops I would always bring some clay to pinch. And in breaks I would doodle.

MR. SHAPIRO: Where were those workshops—at Omega [Omega Institute, Rhinebeck, NY] or—

MR. BERENSOHN: They were in Rye, New York, at a conference center there and in New York City. I invited him once to talk at Greenwich House. He wanted me to train to do his work. And I said, well, if I did it, it would have to be illustrated, that there would have to be color—I'm a visual person, writing is difficult for me. There would have to be time and space for doodling. That was unacceptable to him and that was fine with me. So I started to use some of the ideas, his idea of separating various things—technical and emotional and visionary. That started my keeping journals. But then it wasn't until the summer that I met my fairy godson Ian Anderson that we started to make our own journals. Do you know Ian?

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes.

MR. BERENSOHN: He's about to be a father. Ian snuck into a workshop of mine at Penland at age 15. It was a workshop that I taught with a writer. Several participants were therapists. It was geared in that way and they were all older. And there was this 15-year-old boy.

went to the office first thing on Monday morning and said, "We've got a problem. There's a 15-year-old boy here." You are supposed to be 19 to attend a Penland workshop. No one knew what to do. I said, "Well, let's just welcome his presence for a day. And then we'll see." Well, by the end of the day, everyone in the workshop was enchanted by Ian, as I was. He was a serious basketball player at the time—or he thought of himself as that—played the guitar and was writing a novel and drawing and worked with clay. In any case, we became friends.

The following year, he brought his Saturday morning ceramic class from the high school in Roanoke, Virginia he attended. He asked if I would teach a special workshop for high school kids, for, I think, it was 10 days in Ridgeway.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was that the school sponsored it as well?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. At that time Verne Stanford was the director and Verne was an often absentee director. So I was helping to run the school and making decisions. So I made the decision that yes, we would have this—because Ian was raising the money to bring his classmates. It seemed an important request to respond to. In the interim, Verne left and Hunter became Penland's next director—so by the time the kids came Hunter [Karihier] was the director.

I visited Ian's high school on my way on a trip north before they came. I ran into the principal and she was curious about what I was doing there. You know, what are you doing here? I said, I've come to look for Ian Anderson. And why? And I explained that he was coming to Penland and why and bringing a group of his classmates. Well, she got very upset because she knew nothing about this. She said, "Those boys, every Saturday morning they waste their time playing with mud when they should be studying. They have adversarial relationships with books." [Laughs.]

When I heard, that was like one of those bites in the ass. Adversarial relationship with book. When they came, Julie Leonard was just starting out as Penland's first book resident. I asked Julie if she would come and help us make a journal. I thought, if they have an adversarial relationship with a

book maybe that could change if they made the book. It worked like absolute magic.

When I announced to them that first morning we were going to start by making a book, every one of their faces fell. But we immediately began by making paste paper paintings for the covers and end sheets and spines of the books. Everyone loved doing that. We had a great day. And by Wednesday lunchtime when they had finished sewing—I started right away with this style of a journal because it's big and you can open it up flat –

MR. SHAPIRO: Is that the Coptic binding?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, Coptic binding. At lunchtime when they were finished sewing and we were walking from Ridgeway to the Pines, every one of them was carrying their book pressed to their chests. They were in love. That started a whole new career for me because I started teaching workshops that I called, "Soul's Kitchen: the making and keeping of a journal" because the making of a journal became so profound. Something changes when you make a journal you keep, something intimate.

I had this experience in Australia with bowerbirds who are birds who decorate their nest to seduce—the male bowerbird builds a bower that's like a Quonset hut. It's on the earth. Then he flies around and collects—like one bowerbird will collect only blue flower petals and use them to make an elaborate design in front of the entrance to his nest. Or another one would collect the markers that botanists leave on trees in the forest or white shells or—every bowerbird is a different kind of artist.

I have an acquaintance now who goes to New Guinea and paints bowerbirds' nests. And she said, there's the Michelangelo bowerbird, the da Vinci bowerbird, and there's the Andy Warhol—but anyway the bowerbird, the male when he's finished decorating his nest, stands in the middle of the artwork and dances. The females come into the nest filled clearing from the edge of the forest and they get to choose which nest they're going to spend their creative, reproductive life in, by the artistry of the bower and its dancing artist.

Well, that story bit me in the ass. So I would tell that story when we were making the covers for our journals, that the cover of the journal should seduce us to want to spend time inside. I loved teaching that workshop. It's a lot of work to prepare for, lots of materials. But I gave "Soul's Kitchen" at Omega Institute for almost 10 years and I did it several times at Haystack, and a couple of times here at Penland and many, many other times. And I have more students who have carried that work on than my clay work.

MR. SHAPIRO: That's interesting.

MR. BERENSOHN: I've had several people assist me who have gone on to teach that workshop in their own way. One woman—Susan Bonthron—went back to graduate school at Antioch and did her thesis on journaling, the making of the journal, and worked with school children and now adults in Vermont. And Meg Peterson, who directs Penland's outreach program—actually, Meg was my assistant for that workshop with Ian, so she learned to make a book at the same time that I did. She uses bookmaking, paste painting, moon journals as the prime medium in her outreach.

For instance, on Monday she will start again at our local high school helping the kids to make a book in which they tell the story of their family. Every kid now who goes to that high school has done it. It's one of the biggest events there. And she does powerful moon journals with young children.

She has the kids make journals that have scratchboard covers. And then they draw on black paper

instead of white paper. She introduces them into one cycle of the moon. The children make drawings or write a poems or tell stories—and they turn their faces and consciousness up to behold the moon. They're on exhibit right now in the TRAC Gallery [Toe River Arts Council Gallery, Burnsville, NC] in Spruce Pine.

Bookmaking has become very much a part of my behavior. The work book comes from the etymological root for branch of the tree. I like to say, Branch of The Tree—the tree of knowledge, the tree of life. For me a journal is like a nest. One of my fairy godsons wants me to make out a will—which I should do and need to do—and he said, "Well, what are you going to do with all your journals?"

And I said, "Oh, I want you and Ian and David and Terry and Joy and Mary and—to take all my journals out into a field that has a big catalpa tree. And I want you," Jonah [Stanford], to climb the tree. He's a tree climber—to climb the tree and to set the books open all over the tree. And then let them biodegrade. Let them return to the earth, page by page."

MR. SHAPIRO: Paulus, let's hold it there and I'm going to change the tape.

[END OF DISC 3.]

This is the fourth disc or card of interview with Paul Behrenson in his home and studio in Penland, North Carolina, on March 21, 2009.

MR. BEHRENSON: I would like to continue a little longer about the journal. My style of journalkeeping is not documentary, although sometimes it gets things going helps me to know what I'm thinking. I think of the journal as being generative; that it's a place I go to give my soul a place and time to whisper in my ear and to play.

The first assignment that I give myself and my students is to find something to do in your journal that is so pleasurable you'll want to spend time in there; Not another, I "should" write in my journal. You go there because it's the place to sing or rest or dance or draw or weep or praise, to practice praise.

I've always been a doodler but as soon as I started my journals, doodling became a major, major part of my survival, my time spent there—my artmaking.

Here is an earlier doodle but characteristic of how I proceed—I often doodle weaving.

MR. SHAPIRO: That's made by folding in half, now, or—

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, the original drawing is one-quarter of that. Again—the influence of John Cage is there. I don't draw something—I often will drop a string on the paper, trace the string and then follow the line, repeating it again and again. Or make a gesture and then fill the page with that gesture.

Doodling became a way of generating connection and presence in journal and it has evolved over the years until just this year I realized that what I was doing was "lace-reading." The women that were called "witches" in Salem and Concord were all lacemakers.

The oldest women—the old hags, were bobbin lace makers—you would go to them for a reading and they would read the lace. I realized, oh, that's what I've been doing, because when you doodle this way, images keep rising up out of it—that you haven't choreographed that but come from the

unconsciousness. I like to think, the ecological unconscious.

MR. SHAPIRO: So this almost has a connection to automatic writing, Dada, Max Ernst—

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes,. I was moved to think of my doodling this way by being in John Cage's sphere of energy. He once said that—I was the son of a Methodist minister—his father was actually a scientist, an inventor—but he said I'm the son of a Methodist minister and I was educated to see life his way, but when I toss the coins and use chance, then I can really see what's there. I like that. And when he says of Merce's work that the story is in the audience. I am the audience of my doodles.

The argument, the anti-Cage argument, at that time, was, that his music was just noise. But I love the idea of not knowing—starting something not knowing, but looking and listening.

When I taught "Soul's Kitchen," I had the students make the signatures first and start to keep one before we made the covers and sewed them. I would encourage them to document the process of the making of their first journal so they would have the "yogurt culture" to start the next journal. So the journal was started before it was completed. I learned to do that because many people, early on, would say, oh this book is so beautiful that I don't want to ruin it with my uncertain thoughts or poor drawings. When they made their last stitch it was already a work in process. It was already expressing them.

Another way of getting started was to draw the day, draw Sunday, Monday. There was a day when all I did was draw Sunday over and over in different ways until it filled a page.

MR. SHAPIRO: Let's keep this out, I'll make take an image of this —

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, that was a wonderful day when I spent the whole day just doodling Sunday. [Laughs] I find doodling to be a powerful meditation.

MR. SHAPIRO: Paulus, what's the difference between doodling and drawing?

MR. BERENSOHN: I think it's not knowing. You don't have to know anything to doodle, you could make any kind of mark. When people would say, as they do, I can't draw a straight line, I'd say good, draw a crooked line. [Laughs] So they draw a crooked line. And I might suggest, well, just do it again, and again, and again. Fill the whole page. Follow your crooked line and see where it takes you, what energetic pattern it could produce.

I have only given one workshop on doodling and as the gods would have it, Stuart [Kastenbaum] then a younger man attended that workshop. It touched him. He writes about it somewhere—oh, I think in the introduction her wrote for the monograph that I wrote. "Whatever we touch is touching us."

MR. SHAPIRO: Was that in Haystack?

MR. BERENSOHN: No, it was in South Paris, Maine. There's a potter there named Scott Chamberlain. There were a lot of people. It was like 50 people. A one-day workshop on doodling—"Doodling the Day Away." But Stuart was there and the idea of making a gesture and following the gesture he heard as instruction for a poet.

MR. SHAPIRO: And his poems are a bit like that, aren't they?

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh, I think he's a wonderful poet. I really, I think the world of Stuart. He's one of my heroes, [laughs] absolutely is the best model we have of the directorship of a craft art school.

Often, when I give a talk these days, I define certain words that I use a lot: art, craft, imagination, deracination—

MR. SHAPIRO: Kidnapping?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, kidnapping. [Laughs] But then there's a word that I use, called "to efflubiate," which is a word I had to make up. It's a word I use when I want—it's a form of exaggeration in order to create wonder and awe; to embroider upon something. I encourage my students to efflubiate, to fluff up. I'm an efflubiator when I get enthusiastic. Enthusiasm comes from the root of "theo," like in theology. So enthusiasm means, for me, to be full of creative spirit. An efflubiation can be thought of as a less than truth that carries us further towards truth.

[Cross talk.]

MR. SHAPIRO: [Inaudible.]

MR. BERENSOHN: I love that about words. They can be as plastic as clay. So yes, that was the journalkeeping. Now, in my journalkeeping, I would write poems—I don't write poems myself but I like to copy other peoples' poems—into my journals. Eventually it came out of the journal workshops to become a workshop of its own called "How to Love this World: Poetry by Hand and Heart," because I had become concerned about poetry being put on computers. It seemed to me that if you really wanted to engage with a poem, one needed to put it in one's own hand, writing. That way it can inhabit your body.

In that workshop, "How To Love This World," I give a handwriting lesson. I'd dictate a poem and give an energetic reading of what I observed in the students while they work.

One thing I would almost always notice was that I would see the whites of their knuckles caused by physical stress. Almost everyone was holding onto the pencil or pen with great strength. The original pens and pencils were feathers. Try writing as if you were writing with a feather.

What can happen is you begin to feel a stimulation coming from the texture of the paper. It comes through the tip of the pen and can come into your body the way pinching clay or throwing—the way the energy can come into you because your fingertips have become sensitive awake.

Then we would memorize the poem so that it's in our heart, and that seemed to me one step that I could take against what I see as a toxicity of our time, which is fast. In a way, it's not unlike the slow-food movement —not to consume a poem. It's not a workshop on writing poetry but on response-able consumership of the juice a poem can carry to touch your soul; that poetry isn't just an academic exercise or a literary exercise. One can be "saved by a poem" as Kim Rosen puts it.

Mary Oliver is telling us something and touches us in how she says it; live as if your arms are wide open. I mean, she's always saying, "Behold, look, praise." She ends one of her poems, "Love yourself, then forget it, then love the world." So write poems that can heal you, if you embody them through hand and heart.

MR. SHAPIRO: Had you been reading—when did you start really reading poetry or had you always been—because you were talking about having been a novel-reader as a child. When did poetry come into your life?

MR. BERENSOHN: Well, it started with my friendship with Isabel Corcoran, who I spoke about yesterday, when I was a junior in prep school and took her English class. She would read a poem every day. For most of my classmates, it wasn't their cup of tea. And some of it wasn't mine also but there was a day when she read that Wadsworth [Longfellow] poem about "splendor in the grass, glory in the bush." Some years later a movie was made inspired by that poem. And several of my friends were in that movie, *Splendor in the Grass*.

MR. SHAPIRO: Oh yeah, with Natalie Wood.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes, Elizabeth Watson played the part of an English teacher. and Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty sitting there in her class, splendoring in their own bush. I mean, they were really hot for each other, and there was this maiden English teacher reciting the poem passionately. It was a great scene, a poem about love, and these two teenagers too in love to listen.

So Isabel Corcoran got me started but it was M.C. who really opened the door of my heart to poetry through her own poetry and poetry of poets she loved.

[Side Conversation.]

[Audio Break.]

MR. SHAPIRO: We were talking about *Splendor in the Grass*.

MR. BERENSOHN: Oh, yes. So I was touched when M.C. started to read poetry to me. She got me interested in Rilke. Our friend James Lee O'Hurley sent us a poem by William Stafford that—it was an unpublished poem then called *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*. It began, "If you don't know the kind of person I am and I don't know the kind of person you are, a pattern that others made will prevail in our world, and following the wrong god home, we will miss our star." I was just beginning to travel to give workshops at that time and I used that poem to open every workshop—you know, reveal yourself. We have to know who we are or we'll follow the wrong god home.

That really taught me something about how powerful a poem could be. Then I went to a workshop with Robert Bly. Talk about being bitten in the ass, this was a very important moment for me—and it gets back to clay.

It was the first poem by Rumi that I had ever heard. And, I believe, in Bly's own translation—it was before he started to work with Coleman Barks. The poem says, I lived for hundreds of thousands of years as a mineral, as stone and clay, and then I died and I was reborn a plant. I lived for hundreds of thousands of years as a plant, as a cabbage and a rose, and then I died and was reborn an animal. I lived for hundreds of thousands of years as an animal, as a lion and a mosquito, and then I died and I was reborn a human being both male and female. What have I ever lost by dying?

When I heard that poem it gave me gooseflesh. Because what it began to say to me when I took it into my body was that clay wasn't part of the past; that the mineral would be still here. We have never lost our mineral-ness, we have not lost our plant-ness and we have not lost our animal-ness. That was really a beginning for me of understanding deep ecology.

In my own translation of the poem I don't say, "What have I ever lost by dying;" I say, "What have I ever lost by evolving?" That evolution isn't—it isn't a pyramid; it's a kaleidoscope.

Now that you're giving me this opportunity to look back, I can feel how important that was for me. It connected to clay; that I am clay. I don't know if I've ever read you the story that Daniel Rhodes

gave me, a Zen story. A very important story.

Once, when he visited—he and M.C. were friends and they would visit back and forth—he told me this story. And then a year or two later, he published it with other Zen stories in *Studio Potter*. I'll read it to you as it appeared in *Studio Potter*:

"The master potter seldom reminisced but one day Boso,"—his apprentice —"asked him how he had acquired the ability to make pots so filled with energy and life. He replied by telling a story.

'When I was a young apprentice'—like you are now—'I struggled at the wheel, like everyone else. I made good progress, but I was always dissatisfied, and sometimes discouraged. My pots seemed good to me while they were still on the wheel, moist, soft, and glistening. But later, when they began to dry- awful! And after the fire, worse still! My master, knowing that I was discouraged, offered suggestions, advice, and encouragement, but nothing seemed to help.

'Finally, to my surprise, he ordered me to stand on the wheel head. He then began coiling thick ropes of clay around my feet. Then he coiled around my ankles, my legs, and then my body and my neck. I was covered with coils of clay! I stood on the wheel transformed. I was the space within the pot!

'Then he took a paddle, and as the wheel slowly turned he beat the coils against my legs and my body, shouting, 'foot, foot—smack—belly! belly!—smack, smack—shoulder! shoulder!—[Smacking sound]—neck! Neck!'

"After that day, my pots changed."

Most potters have made the connection that there must be a reason we speak of the foot of a pot and the belly of a pot. That pots resemble our human vessel. But it's the last part of the story when the master potter uses the paddle, that years later began thinking was connected to Dr. Leila Coyne's work, that I was the inside of the pot being infused with the energy of the clay. That image moves me tremendously.

Another thing that happened to me when I was in high school at Adelphi Academy, preparing to go to Yale, was the day the science teacher gave a lecture on the human senses. He talked about the five senses; sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. When question time came I raised my hand and said, "What about the kinesthetic sense?" And he said dismissably, "There are only five senses in Western science" That really pissed me off because I was, you know, a closet dancer. What about movement and balance and the proprioceptive senses.

So since then I've kept a list wherever I came across something I thought to be a sense. From various sources, from Rudolph Steiner, from Guy Murchie who wrote books on the music of the spheres and the seven great wonders of the world –

And then there's a man named Michael J. Cohen who works at the Peace University in Eugene, Oregon. So I have a list now of 62 senses; human and more than human senses.

Because of the Rumi poem and thinking about evolution not as a scientific theory or as a political argument or religious controversy but thinking of it as a living thing; I had to think of the senses as more than human. Like for instance, the plant sense that I work with is heliotropism, which is that in a plant that is drawn by the sun. Well, that's still in our DNA. And that's, to me, is what happens in qigong and the Alexander technique and tai chi and yoga—that we are being drawn—I mean, many yoga teachers talk about being drawn by the sun. That's heliotropism. It's the levity that balances

our gravity which is another sense.

One sense that I work on now a lot is the coriolis sense, which is the sense of that we live on a rotating planet. And that's very good for reawakening the feet, which I'll get to later. Wedging clay has been a very important act for me. My dream, my only ambition now is to, somehow before I pass on, write or produce something called "wedging the potter's body," because I learned from wedging clay how to heal myself. Or so I like to think.

MR. SHAPIRO: There's also that story you tell about M.C.'s ashes, right?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. I've just thought to talk about the sense receptors in our fingertips and my fingertips to tremble because they know I'm going to talk about them—that there are 9,000 sensor receptors per square inch of human fingertip and something like 70,000 in our feet and we are losing our imagination for them.

So I try to reimagine that with pinching; that every pinch stimulates those sense receptors. And We have cut ourselves off from the earth by imprisoning our feet in shoes that block Earth's electrons from entering our bodies. That's a shadow of technology. We are losing our hands and feet, which I don't think has to happen. I think what's happened is that there has been a palace coup by civilization and technology that is distorting evolution, taking it off-course. One of the geniuses of the craft arts is that they can pull us back onto center by re-enlivening [sic] our senses, when we put hands-on living earth materials.

I found out that there are two German universities that have research departments on the senses. They have been studying the senses for at least 30 years. What they're saying is that we are losing our senses by 1 percent per year, particularly the sense of touch, and particularly in children—and Meg will tell you that in the last half dozen years, she's noticed how children are less and less handy. She has to teach them how to use a pair of scissors and a ruler.

There's this interesting book out now called "Last Child in the Woods: Nature-Deficit Disorder." The title tells you all you need to know about the book. The author doesn't offer any vision of healing this "disorder" like what if the handcrafts were reintroduced into public education to balance technology, to awaken our computer-stifened fingers.

On the radio on the news this morning there was a report that Michelle Obama brought a lot of children together and they dug a garden for vegetables. On the White House lawn which I think is wonderful, a step. It's a great thing that she introduces that image. And Alice Waters, you know, that great cook Chez Panisse. She has started an edible play yard, or courtyard, or classroom, a vegetable garden at a public school; I think that's absolutely much more important than teaching computer skills to very young kids.

MR. SHAPIRO: Paulus, I was going to ask, do you feel like—it seems like now, it's finally coming around with global warming and there's a sort of sense that the landscape has to be addressed in terms of a sort of deep ecology. And I feel like you've been addressing the inscape for years; the outscape is finally a public fact and people have come to that. But it seems to me that what you're talking about is a more internal and personal coming to this feeling of what's happening to the planet. Do you feel vindicated in some way or do you feel—how does that make you feel?

MR. BERENSOHN: When I did a residency at Harvard last year, and gave a public lecture, the woman who introduced me was both a potter and—you may know her—

MR. SHAPIRO: Nancy –

MR. BERENSOHN: Nancy Selva, yes. The way she introduced me was to say—I mean, I didn't know she knew anything about me, but she said that I had been talking about this even before scientists were talking about it: that clay has healing power, that it's alive. That was staggering to me because I didn't think anyone was listening. And I didn't even know, in a way, what I was saying.

I've been saying all these things and it's only now that I'm beginning to see, oh, it's all part of one story. No wonder I didn't want to exhibit, no wonder I didn't want to sell. I had another story to tell and that is my art as poorly as I do it.

Scientists are discovering that clay is a detoxifier. They're using clay now in cleanups of toxic waste dumps because it drinks in the toxicity. And there's a woman who's doing clay baths to detoxify our bodies.

I spent one day at a spa in California where you put clay on your face, a french green clay. I used to do that with my students when I was teaching the wheel. We did it once here at Penland. I had the students put their face in the slip bucket and then go out and sit on the deck where the sun was shining to experience the way the clay drinks in, cleans, and tightens the skin of our faces.

There was one boy in the class, Hunter Agnew Bronson III. [Laughs] He was an interesting young man. That evening there was a dances party down at Ridgeway. Some of us were sitting on the steps when out of the bushes came this enormous being, what I thought was a grasshopper. Hunter was so tall that when he crouched down to hands and his knees were over his head. He had covered his whole body with clay like a mud man from New Guinea. It was a wonderful moment, with an echo.

MR. SHAPIRO: I think there's also the whole experience in Australia, which we haven't really talked about. I don't know if that's what you wanted to go to.

MR. BERENSOHN: Well, I did tell that story about the old man, Paddy Roe, talking about the function of art was to sing up the earth. He'd say, "See that tree? E working with you; E sister and brother of you."

I just love that the way some aboriginal Australians use the letter E to signify he and she. But there was another thing that happened, an important part of my connection to Australia. The very first night during our walkabout, we had walked all afternoon on Paprika-colored sand on the edge of the blue-green Indian Ocean. At twilight Paddy's sons built this big campfire and others went and caught fish and dug yams. We ate sitting around the campfire as it got darker and darker.

At one point, I looked up and almost fell over. We were hundreds of miles from the nearest electrical grid so there was no light pollution and what I saw were billions of stars. I've never seen anything like it. It was layer upon layer upon layer of stars. There was more stars than there was space between them. I literally fell back in astonishment.

Watching me the old man whispered to his—he didn't speak English—he whispered to one of his sons, who said, "Paddy said to tell you that those stars are the campfires of our ancestors." He said, "They're sitting up there around their campfires looking down at us sitting around this campfire." He said, "They look down, and we look up, and we make eye contact." Making eye contact with the stars! That has to be connected to clay being stardust, our being stardust, to our time ancestry in the stars.

MR. SHAPIRO: Spark in the eye.

MR. BERENSOHN: Previously, I thought of ancestors as my great-grandfather in Austria. But this took it out of the personal and into the transpersonal. It took me into a cosmic dimension; The deep ecologists, Thomas Berry and Joanna Macy and others write about the story of the universe.

Thomas Berry has a book that he co-wrote with a cosmologist named Brian Swimme, who is absolutely brilliant, who is totally in awe. He's a scientist and yet, when he talks about the cosmos and—the evolution of the cosmos—it gives you gooseflesh. He's an amazing scientist—artist. They wrote a book together called *The Universe Story*.

Thomas Berry says that we are the earth knowing itself. That the human species, we're just adolescents in terms of the story—how when they talk about that clock where the human is the last seconds before midnight. He says in terms of consciousness, we're still adolescents. We're just beginning—and that explains all the problems we've been having with addiction and violence, but that in fact with the evolution in consciousness, we, the human species is the earth beginning to know itself, seeing itself; seeing the wonder of it. We need the artist even more than the scientist to see this way.

That's why I like Andy Goldsworthy so much—not specifically his pieces which are amazing but that he is always making relationship participating with the stream of living things. Have you seen his clay pieces? I saw an exhibition in Australia in which he had brought in huge stones and covered them totally with several inches of clay. In the course of the exhibition, and the clay slowly dried, and cracked and fell off. He's done walls that way where the patterns of cracking are like line drawings. He's telling a story about clay's life. Yeah, so that—making eye contact –

MR. SHAPIRO: It's a great image.

MR. BERENSOHN: It's a powerful image. It's one of those images that can live in you, feed you. Years ago, I heard depth psychologist James Hillman give a talk. I liked the tone of his talk but couldn't understand a thing he said except one phrase that rose up to catch me: "a guiding fiction." I had little sense of what he meant by it. I think he said that Otto Rank had this theory about guiding fictions. But my effluvia of a guiding fiction is a less than truth that carries you further to truth. So, you know, making eye contact with the ancestors is that kind of image. It carries you. That's one of the things about the behavior of art that I love, that how an image that lives in you finds its way out of you. I'd love to hear from you how the use of the calligraphy on your pots came to you—[laughs]—because I love those pots and it seems to me they reveal a truth that —[inaudible].

MR. SHAPIRO: Thank you.

MR. BERENSOHN: Where was I going to go with this?

MR. SHAPIRO: We were talking about the aborigines and –

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. I'm still back with story and the stories that – t was M.C. who first told me this. She said, she was quoting Henry James, who said: "We work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."

Now, that saying really got to me because of my curiosity about what he could mean by the "madness of art"? The way that has evolved in me was to follow madness into lunacy, lunacy into

moon, moon into the feminine to yin. Looking back I think that what I offered as a teacher was a feminine relationship with clay—there are a lot of women potters now and many of them aren't doing the same thing the men have done traditionally. There are other ways to be with clay, one being, not making a living from it, but making a life with it, that would be a, say, a feminine, a receptive way—less expressive but more receptive. So the rest is the madness of art, the out-of-control Pandora's Box, whatever comes up. Could we welcome what comes, like Rumi counsels in "The Guest House?"

When James says "our doubt is our passion," now, every artist I know suffers doubt. I would—in my own case—would change that to fear because fear has been such an issue in my life and many people's lives—that fear is our passion. So what do I mean by that? If you look up the word "passion" and you think of the passion of the Christ, the word "passion" comes from the root of, "to suffer."

But to suffer doesn't only mean, oh, dear me, I'm suffering; it means to see something through. So you can suffer joy. So that little couplet has been very sustaining for me. I was also helped by John Keats when he offers the image, "negative capability," that the artist needs the ability not to know so that he gets to learn something by uncovering it, which is what I think Cage's message was at heart, not knowing on behalf of opening to more of the world.

M.C. once said the most wonderful thing. She said the only prerequisite for education is ignorance. I'm so glad I remembered that. The only prerequisite for education is ignorance. I mean, that's a radical thought in this era of standardized testing and very typical of M.C.'s thinking.

M.C. was a miraculous—a seed-sower—she was a handful to love because she was such a peculiar bird, as she said of herself. She didn't know what to make of herself let alone what other people made of her. Karen once said to me, "You're the only person who's been able to live with M.C." [They laugh.] She said, "Be careful." [Laughs] She was warning me that it would wear me out. And, indeed, it almost did. But, on the other hand –

MR. SHAPIRO: You saw it through.

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes! I suffered it. Thank you. Thank you very much. Yes, I suffered her and what a gift she gave me.

MR. SHAPIRO: So, Paulus, it seems that now you're doing—from my observation of you, it seems like you're in this sort of very active, creative period where you're doing what you're doing in your studio with a copy machine and the drawings and the—and you're making these pinch pots and you're even firing some occasionally. And your journals are all over the place. It seems like at age 70 —almost 71. Is that right?

MR. BERENSOHN: No, almost 77! [Laughs.]

MR. SHAPIRO: Right there. You don't look a day over 65.

MR. BERENSOHN: I don't look a day over 71.

[They laugh.]

MR. SHAPIRO: No, it does seem really kind of like there is this –

MR. BERENSOHN: It's interesting that you see me this way. That's helpful.

MR. SHAPIRO: Do you experience yourself that way at this time?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes. When I had a little mini stroke last spring, it was clearly saying, enough, enough, because the traveling is what began to undo me—it was so stressful: You don't sleep in your own bed and when you're my age plumbing can be an issue in your life, especially when traveling. And I'm a compulsive preparer and worrier.

So I thought, enough. But I had no idea how I would survive because I have been a freelance workshop presenter and there are no pensions for free lance artists. So I had no idea how I was going to manage. I had enough money saved to last a year or two. And I thought, well, I have no choice; I'll just do it and see what comes to help me. And come it has from friends and fairy god children.

As of the beginning of this year, it's as if everything turned around, as if seeds put aside were beginning to germinate. One of my friends called me on Valentine's Day. Remember the musical *Hair*, the song: when Jupiter comes to Mars this is the beginning of the age of Aquarius. Well, apparently, on February 14th this year, all that it said in that song about the alignment of the planets happened suggesting that the age of Aquarius began on Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day is the most—second-most important day in my year, a designated form, an opportunity to educate my heart, exercise my heart.

MR. SHAPIRO: And you always do a—you make contact with everyone you love, I think, which is that—haven't you been doing that for a long time, sending out something?

MR. BERENSOHN: Yes and on the solstice—celebrating the solstice is underappreciated as an antidote to the materialism of Christmas. For many years now I generate a solstice image, hand produce it, and mail it to 300 friends.

I used to alternate between solstice and Valentine's Day but recently I've needed to do both. The minute I finish the solstice ritual mailing my heart begins to wonder, what image of the heart will speak for itself. I limit the valentine making to a hundred—though I snuck in 20 extra this year.

Yes, those two mailings. That's my gallery. When I travel and I visit friends, they'll say, oh, look, and they'll show me a folder in which they've collected every card I've sent them. I visited a friend a couple of years ago in Amsterdam and he had framed 30 of the cards.

This satisfies my need to exhibit. It's more intimate than in a museum space. I seem to need intimacy, to thrive on it. You asked me about my current studio work. It started on New Year's Eve. Jenny Mendes and her husband Mark Roegner picked me up on their way to a condo they had rented in Florida. I stayed with them for a sweet, sunny, and warm week of work and play—sun on my face. The first day I came across Ibis Park not far away.

We set up a studio and worked with clay, I got up at 5:00 every morning and went out to the Ibis Park. It was relatively small, but there was a lake and there were fountains with colored lights under them. When the sun rise would come up, huge birds would appear. So I started to photograph them. I also found myself looking at the reflections of the masts of boats on the bay because they would change color in the movement of the wavelettes. I took a lot of those photographs.

When I came home, the photographs started the winter studio work. I took two copies of a single photograph and wove them into each other and then made a negative print of the weaving.

MR. SHAPIRO: And is that this done on your computer or how is that done?

MR. BERENSOHN: By hand.

MR. SHAPIRO: Oh, took it apart, cut it apart and –

MR. BERENSOHN: Made a warp out of one photo, a weft of the other. I've learned that if you make a "negative print" on a copy machine you get the complementary color. I love that word "complementary" and to make whole, to reveal the whole, the color inside the color.

When I worked with a class of scientifically gifted high school students some years ago, I told them that for every pound of human flesh on this planet there are 360 pounds of bugs. Further more I'm told that most insects see kaleidoscopically. So who, then, sees reality, bugs with their eyes focusing and multiplying or we who think we see the big complete picture? Are there numerous ways to behold this world? Can I re-imagine my seeing, open it up, slow it down, weave it together. In Tibet they have a word for it, "tickle"—seeing the luminous particles.

[END OF DISC 4.]

MARK SHAPIRO: This is the Paulus Berensohn interview. This is the extension.

PAULUS BERENSOHN: Where I was working with this group of high school students, they had a good copy machine. I had brought them a photograph from a magazine of Easter flowers because it was Easter. We made two positive copies and two mirrored copies and put them together on a simple four paneled kaleidoscope. At first, all we saw were the flowers. But when you put it together, there was suddenly this figure here and there is another being. The kaleidoscope revealed a host of beings of nature. The students saw them and I saw them.

It happens almost always. It is like you get further into the face of nature by making a simple kaleidoscope. I didn't have time to follow through on that then, but now it's coming up.

MR. SHAPIRO: So this is a whole new body of work since –

MR. BERENSOHN: Since January.

MR. SHAPIRO: Just January.

MR. BERENSOHN: But the roots were there and the fact that I have woven paper before and love the meditation of doing so. First, I make the kaleidoscope. And then to further expand what's there I weave two copies into each other and make a print that reveals the yellow inside the blue.

I have been thinking of these as Altared photographs, spelled A-L-T-A-R. Our seeing is shocked, overwhelmed. We see too little of too much too fast. Due to exponential technology, we are seeing too little of too much too fast. Our sense of sight is over stimulated, taxed. The German sensologists say that the sense of sight has staged a palace coup. And it is the only sense that goes directly independently to its organ, whereas other senses will stimulate each other. I don't believe a single sense is meant to function on its own.

Rudolf Steiner warned about this at the beginning of the 20th century that the sense of sight would dominate. And when one sense dominates, we are in trouble. So I was thinking about slowing down my seeing which reminds me of another story, one of two stories that are helping me take on old age.

I did a workshop once on Flinders Island, which is one of 60 islands in the Bass Strait between

Melbourne, Australia and Tasmania. It has a population on all 60 islands just under 1100 people. Flinders is, I believe of the islands populated by a handful of humans, and millions of wallabies.

One night, I was walking on a path through the woods and turned to enter a clearing, and the whole clearing bounced away. [Laughs] There must have been thousands of wallabies. I was staying in a sheep-shearing shed with some huge spiders. The only spider that doesn't kill you in Australia is called the huntsman spider. But you could die of a heart attack because they can be as big as a dinner plate. They were on the walls, along the edges of the ceiling as if placed there decoratively.

I was with a group of friends I had made in Australia, a marine biologist, two deep ecologists, a woodworker, a painter. And we had to fly in on a tiny plane and bring all the equipment. It was a journal workshop. Our host, a resident of the island, told me that a couple of miles down the path, there was an old woman who had lived there by herself for 40 years and that she lived on what she could raise from her garden.

They asked if I would like to meet her? I said yes, sure. So after class one day we took a walk and came to her little cottage. We knocked on the door. There was a long wait before the door was opened. And there was this ancient woman and she was using a walker. My friends who knew her said oh, what happened? She said I had a fall. And so I started to commiserate and say oh, I am so terribly sorry. "Don't be sorry," she grinned. "You see that garden?" And she pointed to a garden. "It used to take me maybe four seconds to get from here to there. Now it takes me 45 minutes, just enough time to see all the life between the blades of grasses."

Well, that is a great story to start your old age. That story and Ram Dass – you know who Ram Dass is. I mean, he has appeared in my life six times—five times out of the blue. The first time he was still Richard Alpert and then Ram Dass. In any case, I just wanted to tell you—Ram Dass had a major stroke at least a decade ago. There has been a documentary made called *Fierce Grace* [2002]. I highly recommend it—*Fierce Grace*. Pam would respond to it. You can get it from Netflix.

The film was made after he had his stroke. To make a long story short, at one point he turns to the camera and he says, "I didn't have a stroke; I was stroked." [Laughs] Oh, wow. Anything can be a way of liberation, which is what Alan Watts said. Anything can be a way of liberation, even a fall, even a stroke, even a failure.

MR. SHAPIRO: That is great.

MR. BERENSOHN: I wanted to tell those stories to my brother. He is dying slowly with Parkinson's Disease.

I keep thinking, wondering if there were a way he could say to himself I have been blessed by this, you know, or in what way can I make this into a blessing but who knows what is going on inside him? Or if I will be able to do so when whatever befalls me, befalls me.

Eventually Lorin is the opposite of me. He told me that one day he met a friend of mine in front of Carnegie Hall. He said oh, my brother! "I knew when I was very, very young that I was living in a dysfunctional family. But I had an out. I practiced my cello eight hours a day. I could close the door and be safe in my own world." He said, "But Paulus stood in the middle of the living room and said love me, you are supposed to love me."

He couldn't understand why I would do that. His wife and two children adore him, love him, take dedicated care of him. His daughter Amanda said she had learned more about her father's life in

just a few hours with me than he had ever revealed to her. He is emotionally inexpressive, whereas, I can be like a fountain.

MR. SHAPIRO: No problem there.

MR. BERENSOHN: I have recently been attempting to read a book about the brain. The image I've received from it is of the triune brain—a relatively new theory. The brain stem is the reptilian brain.

MR. SHAPIRO: Triune?

MR. BERENSOHN: Triune like triad. So there is the brain stem, the old ancient reptilian brain that contains the flight and fear instincts. From our serpent ancestry. The serpent lays its eggs and makes its own way, leaving the eggs to make it on their own. But then the limbic brain grew on top of the reptilian. And this tissue began to grow, which is called the limbic brain.

It is characterized by the fact that the first animal to develop this tissue and to carry its eggs was the echidna, which is a small Australian animal that looks like the cross between a porcupine and an armadillo. It holds its eggs inside in a pouch and stays around to nurture the child. So the limbic brain was the beginning of the emotional brain. It is the center of all emotion.

And on top of that is the civilized neocortex, which is the intelligent, conscious brain. I think I have a heavy dose of the limbic. I guess I always have, but it didn't really shine forth until this conversation. [Laughs] I was very interested in psychology as a young person. Going to a therapist or being psychoanalyzed was a very radical thing to do in those days.

When my mother heard that I was interested in going to a therapist, she was very threatened by it. I had read some Freud and then Jung. Jung spoke more to me because he talked about a collective unconscious. There was more—I didn't really know then what it was in Jung that appealed to me.

Recently a friend brought me a book that is a compilation of wherever Jung talked about the earth. Turns out he was a deep ecologist by nature. He spent a lot of time by himself in the wilderness. And with his children—he would take his children on these long camping trips. He was very connected to the earth and stone—he built himself a stone tower. He talks a good deal about soul and soil, which strikes me as another connection with clay. What is soil? One-fifth of it is clay; at least one-fifth of it is clay. And there is so much clay. I read somewhere that if you raised all the clay that is in the planet, the body of the planet, and bring it to the surface, it would cover the entire planet one mile deep. That is how much clay there is. And it is being made as we speak. Clay is a sustainable resource. We know that clay is energetically dynamic. I don't know if it is so but I like to picture clay as the source or at least a contributor to earth energy. All those negative electrons rising through our bare feet, balancing and enlivening all the positive electrons and free radicals in our body grounding us. I like to think of clay as healing and my body as a site specific clay art work. Through imagination and intent I am transforming my physical body into a subtly clay-like body.

[Side conversation.]

MR. BERENSOHN: Let me think if there is anything to finish this up with. I did want to respond to one question you asked about the change in my life, which seems to have happened at the beginning of this year. You know how people in the new age say the universe will provide?

MR. SHAPIRO: I think I have heard Ann [Stannard] say that, quite a bit.

MR. BERENSOHN: I do want to tell you about this phenomenon of fairy godchildren in my life. The

first to be named so was Jonah Stanford, twenty-five years ago. Did you ever teach here when Vern –

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah, that is Vern's son, right?

MR. BERENSOHN: His youngest son, yes. He was the one who taught me how to be a fairy godfather. He is now an architect in Santa Fe, doing well, does state-of-the-art green architecture. He is a father and a husband. I am very proud of him and grateful for him. He came all this way twice this winter concerned about how I am doing. The second time he came and stood by the door and said, Paulus, I love you. I have taken power of attorney over you. And I am going to take care of you the way you took care of me when I was a teenager.

He set up a trust. He asked Geraldine Plato and Becky Plummer to be the co-trustees. He wants to create a network of support. At first, I said Jonah, I don't deserve that. But I had to stop because I could see on his face that he had to do it, for himself as well as for me.

MR. SHAPIRO: Of course.

MR. BERENSOHN: So all of a sudden, there is this network of friends and fairy godchildren who are offering me help, who are looking after me, which is, you know, extraordinary—a gift from the univers. From a life of offering bowls to an old age of begging bowls.

So that has happened and now that my work would be of interest enough to the Archives of American Art, that they would send you to listen to my stories.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

[Editor's note: the following was added by Paulus Berensohn post-interview.]

So, dear Mark, there was no plan. What felt like stumbling as I lived it now appears to have its own logic, its own thread. Dancing took me to an appreciation for the movement of throwing clay. The exposure to clay's life story and its energy slowed me to the intimacy of pinching, to no selling or exhibiting my work by giving it away or tithing it back to the earth. Teaching pinching led to other workshops, principally in journals and poetry which involved me with paste paper painting, bookmaking, paper weaving, going deeper with doodling, and recently with stitching on paper.

The thing is I never stopped dancing. My lust for freedom in my body, presence in my body when behaving artistically has been the ground under my feet of clay. I still need to have my hands and feet in clay, but I am not a potter, or a bookmaker, or a poet, or a philosopher. I'm a dancer, an amateur dancer who has found his way to dance in life. I start every day with two, sometimes three hours of dancing. Should anyone see my dance, I doubt they would recognize it as dancing. There is not much to see as it is very internal. It's not my physical body that allows it. I don't exercise muscle and bone. I don't care for exercise any longer. It seems to materialistic and end gaining. Nowadays I often dance by standing still visualizing length and width and roundness: rooted and at the same time free. Sometimes I think of this as somatic deep ecology, my bodies dissolve into the body of the world, the more than just human world. I'm still a beginner with this. It's an ongoing mystery—my body, earth's body, the clay body. I hope I have time to explore this further. I hope some young soul inspired by rumors of my dance with clay will be encouraged by, or better still, infected with this story that kidnapped me, so that they can follow its evolution through them and pass it on.

Thank you for asking me about the stories that have come to me infecting me with the need to behave artistically. All that to behave artistically requires is presence and attention, participation

and relationship to anything anywhere, "the rest is the madness of art."

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