

This lecture should be read knowing it was written twenty-five years ago. "Contemporary" calligraphy is now well-established, but I think the viewpoints expressed here are still relevant enough to be of interest now. If wished, it should be printable and permission is given for that, with proper attribution.

Sheila Waters, March 2013

CALLIGRAPHY IN THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

Lecture by Sheila Waters on the opening evening of the Letterforum Conference of the Washington Calligraphers Guild, Washington DC, August 6, 1988, to an audience of over 700, after an introduction by Rose Folsom.

Thank you Rose. An introduction with so much praise is a bit embarrassing to follow, especially from Rose, a very creative and growing artist, but not so unnerving as when I was handed my Lifetime Membership (of WCG), beautifully written on vellum by Rose incidentally, immediately before I gave a slide lecture to a very crowded Guild meeting of 250 people in 1983. The presentation was completely unexpected and choked me so much I could hardly stammer my appreciation.

Membership of the WCG has meant a lot to me during the past twelve years. Although so often out of town, teaching a workshop somewhere, I have tried to attend as many meetings as possible, regardless of personal interest in the evening's subject, for many reasons, not least that I value the many friendships I have made through knowing Guild members. It has also provided a means of keeping in touch with many of the students I have been privileged to teach in this area during the past sixteen years. Now the Guild has given me another honor, the opportunity to mount a retrospective show here this week in which I can put across training, development and working methods. I hope it will be encouraging and show that I too had a lot of difficulty and frustration in the early years and wasn't born with a pen in my mouth!

The talk on opening night is supposed to set the tone for the week. I can hardly make a better start than to thank each loyal member of the Guild who has made selfless, time-consuming contributions during the past eighteen months to make it possible for you all to be here this week. I have been a faculty member of all eight conferences, and at last, seeing it from the inside, I can appreciate the colossal amount of hard work and persistent effort that goes into the presentation of these affairs. On behalf of everyone attending - thank you, all of you wonderful people!

The theme of this conference is the pursuit of excellence in calligraphy. So that is my theme tonight. I looked up our theme in Webster's dictionary and was interested to see that the word excellence is derived from two sources - from the Greek "kellos" which means "to impel" and the Latin "celsus" which means "raised high". You might paraphrase, that excellence is not a static state but one that move forward and upward. Thought of in that way, excelling in calligraphy becomes less daunting and more attainable, for it implies a step by step progression, and adding "pursuit" before it implies great determination. Then I looked up the word "perfection" and felt relieved that our theme is not "pursuit of perfection." Perfection is daunting and seems unattainable, for it means flawlessness, completion, the highest degree of excellence. So maybe excellence should be pictured as the journey towards perfection. And we all know that sometimes the journey is more interesting than getting there. If our aim is perfection in calligraphy, my advice would be to forget it and be content with excellence. If our writing could become perfect in the fullest meaning of that word the unfortunate truth is that it would be lifeless through its sheer mechanical precision and repetitiveness. I hasten to add that in calligraphy you do not need to fear that perfection will creep up on you unawares and make your work unnecessarily dull! It will take an awful lot of years!

Rose used the expression "giving permission to care." We give permission to others all the time, but are often very hard on ourselves and get easily discouraged. So we have to give ourselves permission for many things in this pursuit of excellence in calligraphy. One is permission to make mistakes and forgive ourselves a little without being bowled over if they are pointed out, or if we ourselves notice them. It is only by making mistakes, recognizing them ourselves, and then working diligently to correct them that we can ever grow. It is said that the difference between the novice and the professional is that the professional has learned how to deal with mistakes. Many a student gets frustrated because the rate of progress is so much slower than was at first expected. But this goes for any craft that is worth the time to master. If calligraphy did not continually hold out new challenges I would not have stayed with it for over forty years.

I have many mental pictures I offer students. One is the funnel - not tunnel - that's the narrow tube at the bottom end of a funnel. Imagine being an aspiring calligrapher the size of an ant creeping in at the narrow end of an enormous funnel and you see daylight at the end of what appears to be a short tunnel. "Aha - when I get there I shall reach the dazzling light of being a professional and it won't take very long, maybe a year, and I'll be able to start earning money and maybe doing a bit of teaching on the side." And when you get there? What a shock - the tunnel hasn't ended, only opened out, wider and wider and it goes upward and outward forever! And you know you are not ready and that you really know so very little. It is a humbling stage to go through. You have to give yourself permission to go through it and press on. The negative aspect of earning money at these early stages is that it can slow progress by impeding solid study and experiment. The positive is that deadlines can exert discipline. After all, filling in names on certificates can be good writing practice.

Another mental picture is a horizontal one of two parallel paths. One we may call "developing skill", the other "awareness." On our journey we have to grow in both. At first the two are neck and neck and we are very satisfied with our progress. How exciting it is when the black ink flows from the pen and makes such enticing thick and thin strokes as if all by itself! We have little concept of good letter shapes, less still of the white spaces, the rhythm and all the little details that will later bother and frustrate us. If we have good teachers who are opening our eyes to see and understand, awareness is bound to forge ahead, while the developing motor skill inevitably lags behind. It is when the gap between the two is very wide that we get discouraged, even depressed. To quote a commonly heard moan "I've hit a plateau and feel stuck because I'm not improving." I believe that such periods have the greatest growth potential. It is time to feel elated that a new growth spurt is possible because the groundwork of more awareness and more knowledge allows the developing skill to have positive direction.

I have been thinking about this topic of pursuing excellence in calligraphy for some time, yet felt I needed others' views about it. During the past week I asked the students in my Fine Tuning course if they would write down some thoughts about it. Many interesting points were made. You might like to hear some of them. First a practical one: "Excellence in calligraphy begins with a commitment to discipline. This involves faithful practice and a careful and dedicated analysis of letter shapes. Ultimately this leads to freedom of expression in the creation of truly beautiful writing - a never-ending quest for perfection." I don't think we would quarrel with that. Ray da Boll summed it up in only two words "disciplined freedom." I'm sure most of us here are well aware that both aspects are inter-dependent. Disciplined writing with no freedom clings to the model with mechanical perfection as the goal. Free writing with no discipline is frivolous even anarchistic. The vital rule that governs our physical, emotional and spiritual world is surely that of balance. For the calligrapher, searching for balance between discipline and freedom is like walking a tight-rope - it is such a fine line.

Another viewpoint offered to me is more esoteric, even poetic and certainly longer, but I think worth quoting: "Excellence is the goal, the quarry. But how do we pursue it? What are the criteria we should follow? And how can we know when we have attained it? Or can we ever? I

believe not. Excellence is uniquely in the in the eyes and judgement of the beholder, the critic. The artist will forever find it eluding his grasp, slipping away to mock and allure and beckon from yet another ridge he must scale, the heights hidden in swirling, confusing mist. He knows that what critics and admirers acclaim in his work falls short of the Ultimate Desiderata. Were he to believe otherwise, to be convinced he has actually achieved excellence, he would be duped, in danger of staying henceforth on a ledge, or even slipping back and his work become imitable and by definition second-rate. Excellence is the prerogative and judgement of others, never to be claimed or assumed by the artist." End of quote.

This one poses questions. Is excellence being explained here or perhaps the perfection I mentioned earlier? What about the artist who is considered second-rate by his contemporaries only to be given posthumous accolades? The judgement of critics and certainly of the uneducated beholder who claims "I know what I like" can be subjective to say the least. But many of us here know very well the mixed feelings of pain and joy on seeing the next ridge to scale, and the next and the next. Two pieces of work in particular in my own experience stand out as containing ridge after ridge to scale. To complete the long manuscript book of Dylan Thomas's play "Under Milk Wood" seemed impossible at times during the disgracefully long period of seventeen years I worked on it. The Roundel of the Seasons took six months' worth of eight-hour days spread over ten months, and ridge after ridge kept appearing just as I felt the end was in sight. When I realized the whole middle of it was hopelessly wrong I had to erase weeks of work down to the bare vellum surface and find a new solution.

The third viewpoint I was given is specific in how to set about pursuing excellence, reduced to the simple equation that study and determination (with patience) should equal growth. The operative word for this student is growth - and I quote "not to be satisfied at any one point but always to strive for higher goals and standards, like rungs on a ladder. Be the best that you can be and continue to grow toward excellence." End of quote.

So far I have concentrated on the philosophy of the subject. But we are also talking about a practical craft which can be art, even a high art, though sadly, so far, calligraphy is rarely recognized as such in the west. Eugenia Holland made an interesting observation in Quill magazine, Fall 1982. "I have always felt that the perfect calligrapher would possess these four attributes: the precision of the Germans, the elegance of the British, the freedom of the Chinese and the originality of the Americans." Many of us could come up with interesting versions of our own on that observation.

I have collected a long miscellany of sound tips on how to become - not a successful calligrapher necessarily, but a worthy one who is growing towards a state of excellence. Many of these tips are worth passing on, being remembered and most important, worked upon.

From Irene Wellington: "It was about twelve years before I felt that I was really beginning to write. I think it needs five years before one could become what I would call a calligrapher; until then one is a letterer. After these five years it would take another ten before one finds that one is able to say something that belongs to oneself." She meant real years of solid study, not isolated workshops.

Edward Johnston: "The scribe should choose the best and simplest forms and arrangements and master them before going further. Let the meaning of your work be obvious unless it is designed purely for your own amusement. A good craftsman seeks out the commonplace and tries to master it, knowing that originality comes of necessity and not of searching." To paraphrase another quote from Edward Johnston that has been a guiding principle for me: "Follow the problem - it will show you what to do."

On criticizing the work of students of broad pen calligraphy, even that of his own students:

"Three primary conditions do not seem to be grasped, or observed, or understood. Weight, pen angle and letter form all seem to be chanced upon rather than chosen and all at the mercy of a rather imperfect writing surface. Perhaps the failure is deeper and more general and is really a failure to appreciate the three essential qualities of Sharpness, Unity and Freedom." This is still so true today especially as a sound and consistent basic beginning is hard to find.

Charles Lehman: And I paraphrase slightly, "Get the idea of what is to become accomplished and how best to succeed, then practice carefully with attention to the quality of the work. Finally, evaluate frequently for improvement and adjust the results. This is accomplished not only by correcting basic mistakes but also by learning from the work of expert scribes."

Thomas Ingmire: "We must begin where we are, not where we think we should be. We can't skip steps. Why would you want to anyway?"

Denys Taipale: Criticizing students who "...make an attempt to copy appearances without understanding techniques." Ann Camp has criticized those who copy the styles of others, rather than the structure within the style.

Charles Pearce: "Calligraphy is a demanding craft in which the boundaries of possibility are constantly being pushed back as standards improve. To be a true calligrapher you must live letters and spend years of study to master the discipline before you are ready to break out into the more expressive facets of the art."

Some recollections about the training I was very fortunate to go through might be appropriate at this point. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two I had six years of full time art school. The first three at the Medway College of Art in Kent concentrated on acquiring a broad variety of skills and developing perception of good design in both the so-called fine and applied arts. The course was really a four-year one culminating in receiving the National Diploma in Design, equivalent to a BA degree. I telescoped the first two-year intermediate course into one year, working day and night, with very little free time. This National Intermediate examination covered nine separate art subjects in drawing, life drawing, composition, anatomy, history of art and architecture, design, clay sculpture, and a craft. For my craft I chose pottery and after three months gave it up - I couldn't seem to slap the air bubbles out of the clay, so a thrown pot would not work. Then I tried linoleum cutting, worked out too complex a design and was told to do wood engraving instead. Time was getting short, the exam was in May and I made my first wood engraving in April, the second one for the exam itself.

For the last two years at the Medway I took my finals in two separate one-year subjects, first lithography, drawing on stones laboriously prepared by oneself, then on zinc plates. The end of year examination covered designs and carrying them out afterwards to final prints, and two three-hour written papers, one on history, the other on methods of production. Typography was a required second subject. For my second one-year course to complete the Diploma, I chose Calligraphy and Illumination, because in the July of 1947 I was asked to write a notice "No Tomatoes Today", realized I didn't know how to use a big pen so barged in on the calligraphy class to find out how to do it. What I saw there amazed me. Some students were writing on vellum, one in a corner was gilding, others designing posters - everyone doing something different. I was utterly captivated and when I experienced the feel of the ink flowing from the pen with its juicy black strokes I knew I had found what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I began the course in earnest in the September, but was thrown into writing Gothicized Italic (then called Johnston's compressed hand) right away, because most of the others were doing projects in that style. I don't recommend it as a first hand to learn though! After one month I was given the task of producing a small manuscript book and told I would also bind it. Within three months came the first piece on vellum - an ugly piece, starting "Glory be to God on high" in

vermillion. It shows my first gilding which was very overworked, but I was so proud of it. The college principal didn't praise the gold and remarked "You'll be doing much better than that in a few years."

In the following Spring I entered a portfolio of work for entry for the Royal College of Art, naming calligraphy as my specialty. Dorothy Mahoney must have seen some potential in my early efforts and I managed to gain the coveted entry. Only about one hundred students from the whole British Isles were accepted each year. But to return to the Medway: I think the most valuable learning experience I had in that year was to spend one day a week for six months in the British Museum Library, pouring over illuminated manuscripts in the students' room. For example, I was allowed to have the Lindisfarne Gospels in front of me for three consecutive Wednesdays, copying writing and illumination in ink and watercolors - an unheard of privilege these days. These studies were preparation for the history of the craft exam as we had to be able to illustrate our answers from memory. For the design exam we had two days to produce a working draft and the following two weeks to carry it out on vellum, with gold and illumination. The subject given was - "Fill a 14 inch diameter circle with writing, illumination and lettering." No text was given - a devastating assignment in an examination room with no reference material and no talking allowed. I stayed up all night at home, choosing texts and planning their arrangement. I began my first year at the RCA that Fall and showed the framed piece to Dorothy Mahoney and I realized what a lot I still had to learn after her penetrating critique of it. She was a wonderful teacher with the ability to critique any piece of design work, not just calligraphy.

From 1948 to 1951 I studied for my master's degree in the design department of the RCA. Whatever one's specialty, we all had to do a general course in the first year which included one day a week with Dorothy Mahoney for pen lettering. Specialization began in the second year but life drawing was insisted upon for the whole three years. Ancillary subjects for me were typography, drawn lettering and bookbinding.

This review of my six years of art college training with calligraphy incorporated into the last four, is given, not only to tell you about the extensive background a professional lettering designer was expected to have, but also to point out what it meant, day by day. Relentless criticism of our work by our tutors, and even fellow students, was our daily diet. This was to show us, not only what was wrong but also what worked well and why, so we gradually acquired our own critical judgement to quite a refined degree. I met my husband-to-be Peter Waters there during this time, as his specialty was bookbinding, with lettering as his secondary subject. Our bookbinding tutor was Roger Powell, the well-known binder and conservator who later restored and rebound the Book of Kells in 1953. This was followed by work on many other major early manuscripts, with Peter in a business partnership with Roger, in fine binding for collectors and presentations, and conservation of rare manuscripts, a partnership that lasted fifteen years until our family moved to the USA in 1971.

Our emigration from the UK was a direct result of Peter's work as technical director of setting up a restoration system for the National Library of Florence, Italy, after the terrible flood of 1966. He was asked to design and then head a new department for conservation in the Library of Congress, the reason why our family moved to the USA. I need go no further into personal history, but I would like to point out that the tradition of regular, in-depth critique of every piece of work done in the rough stages and on completion, which began during those college years, has mercifully continued throughout my career since, for Peter took over where the college left off. I sometimes wonder how far my standards might have slipped, had I not had the great advantage of a knowledgeable and perceptive in-home critic who never let me get away with anything but my best effort. He has never pulled his punches and has sometimes reduced me to tears with his brutal honesty and I've learned to trust his judgement. He has also been a positive support throughout our marriage. I must tell you an amusing story that illustrates this. One day I was working on a 25th wedding anniversary commission and was unhappy with the watercolor

background which had dried to a dirty gray. It was not being helped by the "expressive" colored writing on top of it. Peter came home from work, looked at it and said "Is that meant to be the finished piece?" I mumbled in the affirmative and then he said "Well, if you want to know what I think about it..." and without waiting for my response added "I think it looks like sewage!" That was the last straw and I burst into tears and tried to defend it but he stumped off to the kitchen. Ten minutes later, with dried eyes, I sought him out to ask for constructive help, which he readily gave and the new, final piece was much better. The annoying thing was that he always seemed to be right.

This kind of valuable help has saved me countless times through the years. Naturally our lettering-designer son Julian has joined ranks with Peter so I have two experienced critics at hand. But it's not all one-sided for we all have a great reciprocal relationship and help each other. So here is some advice: if you have someone who is able and willing to critique your work honestly and constructively, use that resource often. Ask to be told what you are doing right as well as what you are not. Both aspects are equally important. Totally negative criticism does not build up, it is destructive. And remember, if you are the critic, look for something good and positive first, before you start on the "buts". Whether we do the "straight stuff" or the "other stuff" as Dick Beasley puts it, good criticism is essential in the journey towards excellence.

Which brings me to the subject of the "other stuff". calligraphy as an art, expressive calligraphy or whatever you choose to call it. Creativity in calligraphy is a popular concept these days. Jaki Svaren has some very pertinent things to say about the current pre-occupation with calligraphy as fine art - not minimizing the importance of creativity, but putting it into perspective. I'm going to read a long quotation from an article written by her for the Fall 1985 issue of Calligraph, the journal of the SFC in Los Angeles, because I could not express it any better and I believe what she had to say is very important, for it may be comforting to many who may feel intimidated when viewing expressive calligraphic compositions by trained and talented graphic artists.

Quote from Jaki Svaren:

"Displays of our works, which originated in the joy of sharing ideas and experiences became more and more "artistic." Straightforward communication and legibility became de-emphasized as virtues. Design and artistic presentation began to take precedence over the simple letterforms we had so much enjoyed in earlier days.

"This focus on design and artistic presentation was not bad, but it gave power to a diverging purpose. In order to furnish works of gallery type and intent, one needs far more training than most of us had. So, we began to search for teachers who would provide crash courses in art. A crash course in art is as silly as a crash course in neural surgery. But since we had learned the letters with such comparative ease, certainly other aspects of art and design must also be easy. In this we were mistaken, and those who let us believe it led us astray. Some calligraphers, with time and inclination, signed up for substantial courses at art schools and universities and have achieved remarkable results. Many of us, however, looking at these works by trained artists in calligraphy, have tended to become discouraged and to give up. We admire the work being done, but we no longer feel that it is something possible for us to do. So our ranks are thinning. It seems sad that lettering, as a simple, loving meditation has been made to seem inadequate in the eyes of many.

"It is sad too, that this evolution towards "fine" art has changed the appearance of the letters so much that new people are discouraged before they even begin. Beautiful as they may be, if the designs cannot be read by ordinary, untrained people, will the work not find itself giving diminished pleasure to fewer and fewer people? And if the presentations involve the requirements of significant art backgrounds or obvious "talent", untrained people will not be tempted to try calligraphy at all. The great bulk of people attracted to calligraphy, and who have created amazing demands for books, teachers, and materials were, I believe, people wanting to

do something simple and beautiful and possible. When we look at the changing emphasis of contemporary calligraphy, can we honestly say that these values are being given their due? It was perhaps inevitable that calligraphy, so long lending elegance to the business of communication, should seek acceptance as a "fine art." This trend is an important one and its merits are not to be denied. But can it not continue to offer as well those attributes that attracted so many Americans for the last twenty years? Are we endangering ourselves by becoming elitist in our thinking and in our work? Is that really what we want to do?

"Edward Johnston called calligraphy "every-man's art" and I heartily agree. Every man, woman and child should be allowed pleasure in being able to write beautifully, simply and clearly without feeling inadequate because the results cannot compete with more sophisticated work prepared by trained artists." **End of quote.**

I will close with an extract from a letter from a student with whom many can identify.

Quote: "Sometimes I think I have a fairly firm grasp of the letter shapes, but when I do come up with well-shaped letters they are lifeless, also inconsistent, ragged at the edges and mostly not really good. I can see what is wrong but am unable to get myself out of the problem. Until I gain some sort of confidence and competence I cannot seem to work on a "real" piece without succumbing to the jitters and ruining the whole thing. My teeth are gritted, my muscles are tied into knots and my eyes are bulging after the first few words. It takes half an hour to warm up and by that time I am too exhausted to produce any work."

My advice to you, as it was to her, is to relax and enjoy the actual step by step process of learning. This week, if you feel intimidated by the person sitting next to you, remember you are not in competition with anyone but yourself. You are here for you. It doesn't matter if you are better or worse than anyone else. At this moment you can be only where you are. Your job is to improve your own awareness and concentrate on your own growth. This doesn't mean being thoughtless or unkind but it does mean not being nervous or discouraged and having the positive attitude that this week is going to be pure calligraphic joy in every aspect of your pursuit of excellence. Let us share and learn from each other with a caring spirit and make this week a growing time we will remember all our lives.

Sheila Waters, 1988.