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## A Fender Painted Blue

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# "A Fender Painted Blue"

*Peter Leibert, Professor of Art*

**Recipient of the 2003 John King Faculty Teaching Award for Teaching Excellence**

**Delivered at the Honors and Awards Assembly, Connecticut College, April 14, 2004.**

I'd like to introduce you to a very old friend of mine, a friend who relaxes me, lets me be myself and (no question about it) lets me know when I am wrong. This is an Anglo concertina, which means with this system you start the scale with your left hand and finish with the right hand "pushing and pulling" the bellows, very much like you would breathe in and out with a harmonica. Both hands provide melody and the left hand brings in bass from time to time. I am going to play two short tunes primarily to put me a little more at ease with all of you. Petronella and Green Mountain Petronella.

$Al_2O_2 Si O_2 H_2 O$ : the formula for pure clay, or Kaolin. 4 basic elements come into play here: earth, air, water, and fire, the latter, fire, having the ability to make the material permanent. Clay, or Ceramics, which covers a much broader spectrum, has always fascinated me from the first time as a young kid I read about Heinrich Schlieman and the artifacts he discovered. My involvement with ceramics, professionally, has been primarily in the art world. Ceramics, however, crosses over into many disciplines and is part of our everyday life. It is an important key to understanding history; it has provided us with idols for worship, building materials, highly specialized refractory parts, kitchen and bathroom equipment, radio, engine, and rocket components. It is part of the chemistry and physics world. Traditionally, we have written on clay; kaolin on the surface of paper abrades graphite. We use it as a cosmetic and health aid: Kaolin – Kao and Pectin (used in jelly). Good old Kaopectate. So, if any of you have a dire need for Kaopectate, I can get you a 50 lb bag of kaolin and a jar of Pectin at a great price.

I used to worry a lot about spreading myself too thin: not "making it" in the big professional world in any one area. Probably I could be considered a classic case of ADD. I teach, play music, make art, call and play for dances, busk, and volunteer. For six years I volunteered in the State's largest mental hospital (one of the most rewarding things I have ever done). I was a member of the Preston Fire Department and also

Ambulance Chief (one of my childhood dreams of driving a fire truck was finally fulfilled). I founded the Westerly Morris Men 28 years ago. We still dance here on campus on May Day beginning at 5:30 AM when the sun comes up and we usually end up on President Fainstein's lawn about 6:15. Please feel free to join us.

When I mentioned my concern about 'making it' or 'not making it' in the professional world, to an artist friend, Jim Melchert, the former director of visual arts for the National Endowment for the Arts, he simply looked straight at me as we sat by the fire late at night in our keeping room. 'Peter,' he said, 'What are you talking about? You have made it.' Now that I have been teaching for about 200 years, I think I know what he meant. There is a certain security that comes with ageing, knowing that your experiences have contributed to a certain amount of wisdom that may be useful to others, or even a comfort. Couple that with a subject (clay, music etc.). It can't get much better.

I feel exceptionally honored to have received the John King Teacher of the Year Award and have been trying to figure out why I have been blessed with the ability to get along with, enjoy, and communicate with students, something that John, whom I knew quite well was exceptionally good at. Certainly, the discipline of studio art makes this sort of interaction a bit easier than, say, a lecture course in an academic area.

Most truly great teachers JUST HAPPEN and we probably never will know why. Those of us who happen to bump into them never forget them, nor do we forget the gift they gave us ' especially if we teach. I have been very fortunate throughout my life to have had great teachers personally in my family, academically, and within the arts. So I will try to identify some things that I think have made me aware of who students are, but equally important, who I am.

I knew at an early age that I wanted to be involved with the arts, a logical conclusion since I had been surrounded by music, dance and song since infancy. The visual arts came later and led me to the realization that I wanted to teach.

I remember little, if anything, of the 'nuts and bolts' education classes I have taken while pursuing a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science in Art Education. Most of what I learned about teaching came from the teachers and artists I had while obtaining my Master of Fine Arts degree.

I have read someplace that '80% of what we teach is who we are': 20%

is content; the 80% would be the life experiences and connections which shape the person. This kind of makes sense to me. And, Jane, my loving wife reminds me from time to time that ' people allow you to become who and what you are.' We are all teachers, intentionally or not. By our example we send a message to others. Hopefully the lesson we teach is the value of learning from others, the value of communication and the importance of avoiding jumping to conclusions. With these thoughts in mind, I have a few observations and a few short stories that may be helpful to those of you who deal with people, who like people, and, in particular, those who feel a certain compulsion to teach professionally.

I have certainly made mistakes, jumping to conclusions that I have regretted and also, at times, found amusing. Peter, our son, arrived home one Christmas from the Kansas City Art Institute. On our way to the airport parking lot, I noticed a slight sparkle just above his lip. It was dark; ah ha, a nose ring. I didn't say much about it but when we got home he proudly showed Jane, his mother, his TWO tattoos; one small armband and a huge Celtic design on his stomach. My na' ve comment was ' Couldn't you have spaced these out over the next few years?' His reply: ' I have.' Jane's comment was, ' If you and 3 of your Morris Men buddies could get a tattoo in Liverpool 18 years ago, there is no reason he shouldn't get one, two, or three tattoos in Kansas City.' So, that night, Peter, tattoos and all, took me to the El 'n Gee to hear a punk band he has played with in the past. Ye Gods, I have never heard such ' descriptive ' , obscene language, and wondered the whole evening why these folks were still alive and where they had come from. I didn't have to wait very long. After the show, Peter introduced me to them. They were the sweetest, most respectful kids I had met in a long time. So much for jumping to conclusions.

We adopted our daughter, Julie, when she was 3 months old. Julie is black. When I arrived at the hospital for the birth of her second child, Shaniqua, she asked me since I had been the coach for her sister Kristin, and brothers Damon and Peter, would I be her coach for Shaniqua's birth? Right, as if I had much time to decide. Off we went into the delivery room. I was standing next to Julie and holding her hand and ' coaching ' when in came Julie's obstetrician, a very attractive, tall, thin, black woman. ' What----is-----HE-----doing-----here?' she asked (talk about jumping to conclusions). Julie looked straight at her and said, ' That's my dad.' I have never felt prouder in my life.

I have always been somewhat of a risk taker and so when my son Damon, CC class of 2000, said that he wanted to take my ceramics course, after a

great deal of thought I said ' Okaaay.' For the first few weeks of class, few if any, knew that Damon was my son. ' Professor Leibert, could you show me why this thing keeps collapsing?' We both played a pretty good game even after the class was well aware of our relationship. Damon continued to call me ' Professor Leibert' and I continued to treat him as a student. Damon did well in the course and I became much closer to him as a father, mainly because of the comfort level he afforded me during the class. As a teacher, I will have to say that this was one of the best and cherished moments in my career.

At times, we all like to think we are pretty terrific. Most of you don't know my wife, Jane. She is amazingly quiet, one of the truly brightest people I have ever met, loving, and understandingly forgiving. One of my faults is that I have a horrible time remembering dates and numbers. Jane was helping me cut wood in the forest and we were loading it into the back of my truck when I said to Jane: ' why don't we go out to dinner tonight' . ' Sure, but why?' she asked. Thinking, ' Ah ha, I got her.' (she is usually amazing at dates) I said, ' Because it is our anniversary.' Looking me straight in the eye she said, ' Uh uh, Peter, that was last month' .

I have often wondered about discipline; what fits the ' crime' and what doesn't fit. I had just arrived at the Mall to pick up our daughter Kristin and her lifelong friend, Sarah. They were both 13. Not finding her where we had arranged to meet I parked and was heading towards the storefront when I saw two, very upset teary-eyed kids in the back of a police cruiser. Sensing that I knew these ' upright' citizens, the patrolman informed me that they had stolen some small items from the store ' it used to be called ' hocking' ' and that he was about to take them ' downtown' . It appeared, he went on, to be a ' first offense' and that they seemed to be aware of the consequences for their actions. In other words, to put it politely, they were scared to death. He continued that he would release them into my custody, if I were willing. Believe me, I was. After talking with both of them, Sarah's Mom and I decided that their suffering was punishment enough.

I would like to think that decisions like this come from ' common sense' and understanding that most likely developed a long time ago from my parents ' my first teachers. This leads me to ' A Fender Painted Blue' . I was probably 8 or 9 at the time and we had just purchased a 1949 gray Plymouth. It sat proudly in our garage but its color was wrong. It really should be blue. Well, I started with the back left fender. Light blue, enamel paint. About the time I got up to near the door my father walked in and

stopped dead in his tracks. ' Peter, what on earth are you doing?' he asked. ' Well' , I said sensing something was definitely wrong, ' I thought you and Mom would like blue; gray isn't really a nice color' . I don't remember what his words were but I do remember that, because he allowed me to communicate my thoughts and didn't jump to conclusions I was never punished. What could he say, the poor man, his kid was only trying to please him. I think of my parents and our family and I think of my family. I feel fortunate that they have been with me this many years and that they continue to come to class with me.

If you know me, you know I like to laugh and like stories. I would like to leave you with a short story about another kind of misunderstanding and also a tune to liven up your inner workings:

A fisherman's wife from Newfoundland had quite a severe hearing problem. She was also having infertility problems. She went with her husband, Daron, to see Dr. Jones about the problem. Daron sat in the waiting room while Maggie was examined thoroughly by Dr. Jones. ' The problem' , Dr. Jones said to Maggie, ' seems to be that you have an insufficient passage and if you ever have a baby it will be a miracle.' Well, Maggie looked at him as if she was going to pass out right there on the floor. She started to twitch and fled out of the office into the waiting room. ' Daron, I can't believe it; I just can't believe it.' ' Well Maggie, just what seems to be the trouble? Are you ok?' ' Oh Daron! Oh Daron! Dr. Jones, what he told me, tis awful. He told me I have a fish in me passage and that if I ever have a baby it will be a mackerel.'

TUNE: "Glis der Sherbrooke", also known as ' The Big Ship"