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Catching the Copper

An essay. 1944 words.

Included in my book, *Quiet People in a Noisy World*

### Catching the Copper

Smoke. Fire. Smoke boils from the covered bucket. T.S. Berger, art teacher, track coach, Impala Man, grabs the bucket and runs like crazy. I run beside him. Eighteen high school students trot after us, lagging. A student says, "Come on you guys, run," and the rest of the students pick up the pace down the polished tile hallway, through the smoke, down the stairs. We pour out of Poudre High into the cold winter day.

Berger grabs welder's gloves and steel tongs and quickly transfers eight student-made pieces of pottery from the bucket to a barrel. He sprinkles hay over the pots and sets the lid on the barrel. Dark, pungent smoke, lacking oxygen to make flame, leaks around the lid, out into clear, winter air.

Berger waits a minute, then picks pottery from the smoking garbage can with the long-handled tongs, dips the pieces into a bucket of water, and then sets them on the concrete walkway. Berger picks one up, turns it over and looks at the bottom. "Look at the copper." He shows us the molded clay cup. In the broad, green brush stroke that circles the outside of the cup, irregular areas of copper shine forth, almost like gold.

"This one is really good. Whose is it?"

"That's mine, Mr. Berger." The young man takes the cup and looks at it and feels it, turning it slowly in his hands, as if his fingers are remembering the careful process of forming it from shapeless clay.

Berger squats, picks up the rest of the pieces, one by one, and hands each one to a reaching student. "They're really good. We got copper on all of them. These are really good. They're good for four reasons. One, we ran like crazy. Two, we said some good Japanese words. Three, I'm wearing this Japanese headband. Four, we got them into the water fast and stopped the molecular action. Okay, everybody raise your right hands."

The students raise their right hands. Berger says, "Now, repeat after me, I (state your name)"

The students speak as one, "I, state your name..."

Berger says, "do solemnly swear not to tell first period pottery class how well these came out. I don't want them to feel bad." Berger. Mr. Berger. Some of the students call him Berger. He doesn't object.

"Berger? Yeah, I like Berger. He's my favorite teacher."

Berger came in early this morning, carrying boxes of supplies. "Today is going to be a great day. Raku today. I was excited last night. I had a hard time going to sleep."

He took pots from a cupboard. "If I show them these, will they feel bad?" They were good pots, with fine glazing, pots with soul.

I asked him, "Who made them?"

"I did."

First period students came in. They sat down and focused on Berger.

He spoke to them. "Jon's shadowing me today. He knows nothing about Raku. We'll review Raku, and you address your answers to him. He wants to know something about Raku." One question for each student. "What is a glaze, Dave? What is a refractory element, Melissa? What is flux, Amy? What is crazing, Andrew?"

They told me the answers quickly, confidently.

The principal came in. Mr. Hubka, Poudre's other art teacher, came in, and three more adults. They jested a bit, not quite comfortable, but they settled down when they recognized that Mr. Berger and his students were quite serious about this ceremony. Mr. Berger took head bands from a cardboard box. The students came forward, one at a time; Mr. Berger bowed; the student bowed. Mr. Berger centered the red sun emblem on the student's forehead, and the student took the ends of the band and walked away, tying it. After all the students were head-banded, the adults received theirs.

Mr. Berger checked the bottoms of cups and bowls for names, but the students recognized their work and reached out for the pottery pieces. Mr. Berger handed out extra pieces to the guests. Everyone received chopsticks. Mr. Berger poured tea, and a student assistant served rice. Mr. Berger started a tape of Japanese music, and we ate rice and drank tea. The Raku process, wet, amorphous clay molded into shapes of a bowl and a cup, fired, decorated, fired again, smoked, dipped in water, inspected and then used for rice and tea, was complete. The students would take the pieces home and begin the next step in learning pottery.

Second period is Berger's free period. He moved materials, changed some of what hung on a big board, got ready for his next class. Two students, advanced enough in their work to qualify for independent study, worked quietly at foot-powered pottery wheels, drawing pots up from lumps of clay. Amanda's pot collapsed inward as she drew it up. Berger stepped forward with a knife, held it against the spinning clay, and cut the collapsed top away. He spoke quietly to Amanda and said something with the motion of his hands against the clay. She started again, drawing a hollow pot shape upward from spinning clay.

Anderson didn't need pointers. He kicked the concrete flywheel until the metal wheel on a shaft above it spun the clay at the speed he wanted. He drew up a hollow cylinder and bulged it out into vase shape. When Anderson put his materials away and walked up to the sink, I followed him. "Do you plan to go to college?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Will you major in pottery?"

He washed clay from his hands. "No, but I'll take pottery. I'll always make pots."

Eighteen student drawings on the wall illustrate "A pot without a soul is just clay around a hole."

Pots, pieces of pots, garbage cans full of clay, pieces of fired clay decorate the room.

Third period, Berger lifted the lid of the kiln; eighteen hundred degrees of heat glowed. He lifted out fiery red cups and bowls, put them in the can with hay, and ran down the hall with smoke pouring from around the lid of the can. He sent May down ahead of time to tell the people in the office there would be smoke, but, "I don't ask," he says, "I just do. Sometimes they might say, 'I wish Berger had told me ahead of time.' That's okay. I like to let them know we're here. I don't push the envelope too far. Jello wrestling, we did jello wrestling for a fund-raiser, and some of them thought that was busting the envelope, but we made a lot of money."

Five years ago, Berger's pottery students made and sold pottery at the mugathon and raised a thousand dollars for five scholarships for Poudre students.

After Berger made the first, smoking-bucket run, students took over that job. He wanted all of them to experience each step in the Raku process. Students catch energy and enthusiasm from Mr. Berger, but they are a little tired, part of the price of being a high school student, or they are, despite the enthusiasm, a little too cool to put their total energy into the project, so their runs down the hall take longer than Berger's did, and the pots in the next batches don't catch much copper but go beyond to green, a respectable enough finish, but not as exciting to Mr. Berger as the copper color achieved when the action of the glaze gradually cooling is stopped by the plunge into water.

The fifty-five minute class ticks away. One young man, nearly a head taller and forty pounds heavier than Berger, repeats what he said a while before, "Mr. Berger, I burned my finger." Mr. Berger steps over and hugs him.

Flames burst from the garbage can when a student removes the lid. Another teacher walks by, and Berger grabs him and lifts him high, "And now, for the human sacrifice," but he lets him go short of the flames, and the man walks on, accepting it as a normal part of experience close to Berger.

Berger runs water over a pot and polishes the green with fine steel wool until copper begins to glow through the green. He says, "It doesn't always work. The copper has to be there. Sometimes it isn't there."

Berger. Mr. Berger. Art teacher. The students in his drawing class move from realism to surrealism. Mr. Berger shows slides of Magritte's work and Dali's and hangs a definition of surrealism on the board. The students

divide a large sheet of drawing paper into quarters and sketch their ideas. They talk quietly to each other, about ideas for drawing. Two young men confer over a book of Dali's work.

Berger says, "I don't teach them drawing. They teach themselves. I set up a system where they..." he makes a going forward motion to complete the statement.

Once a year, they perform a ceremony. The students burn their worst works behind the school. "My mess-ups," says one student as he drops drawings into the fire. "I get those out of the way."

"To succeed in my class, you have to give something of yourself. You can't come in here because it's an easy elective and get anywhere. Some of the kids, we do have discipline problems." He touches a student, and the student smiles at him.

When Berger walks across the room, I ask the student, "Was there a discipline problem? or was that Berger's joke?"

"He was joking. That's just Berger." He touches my shoulder gently as he speaks, to reassure me or to include me, then turns back to the paper and sketches.

A student comes up to show Mr. Berger his drawing of a cup melting above an ink bottle, and Mr. Berger says, "That's cool, you're ready to go."

The student indicates the blank three sections of his paper and says, "Should I..."

Mr. Berger says, "No. You're fine. You got everything you need. Put it on a full-sized sheet."

To another student, "H-o-t. Hot. That is hot. Move this down. Get it in the picture more. It's almost crowded off the edge. Otherwise, go for it."

"Mr. Berger, do you have a picture of the earth?"

"The earth? This world? I think I do." He walks into the supply room, reaches into a cupboard, and comes out with a picture of the earth.

I walk among the students concentrating on their tilted drawing desks and look at what comes from their pencils onto paper. I think of saying, "You people, all of you people are doing really well. Keep at it." I don't say it. There is no need. Berger has taken care of it for weeks. He will go on taking care of it. He burnishes the students. The golden glow of copper begins to shine from them.

After school, Berger coaches track and runs. Some evenings, as Impala Man, with antlers, with a blue cape trailing out behind him, trying to keep up, he leaps and runs, a stirrer of enthusiasm among spectators at various events, a welcomer, "Hello. I'm Impala Man. Welcome."

Tomorrow, southwest Indian pottery. More background in pottery, more details about different kinds of clay. A film about Maria Martinez and her pottery. Today has been a great day. Tomorrow will be a great day. No fire in a can down the hallway, no pungent smoke bringing comments from students and teachers about getting high right by the school entrance,

but the always burning fire in T.S. Berger, Mr. Berger, Berger. Some smoke, too; there's a bit of smoke about the man, but look closely, and you see it's real smoke, underlain by fire, rising up from real fire.