

The View from Here

Craft, Community, and
the Creative Process

Stuart Kestenbaum



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For ordering and permissions:
www.brynmorgen.com

Also available for tablet
readers through iTunes.

ISBN 978-1-929565-45-0

Printed in Hong Kong

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This book includes selected poems from the following books:
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House of Thanksgiving from Deerbrook Editions,
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FOREWORD

Tim McCreight

It was 1988 and I heard that somebody named Stuart Kestenbaum had been hired as the director of the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. I didn't know him, but the person who told me was a good friend and former neighbor of the guy and he was excited about the decision. I can recall his exact words: "As soon as I heard, I knew it was the right choice. In fact, now that I think about it, the fit is so good there is something inevitable about Stu being the director."

Haystack is a very special place, held in high regard by the thousands of people whose lives have been touched and often altered because of their time there. It was founded in 1951, which coincidentally was the year Stuart Kestenbaum was born. Perched on a rocky ledge on a small island on the Maine coast, Haystack has distinguished itself through its innovative programs, its award-winning architecture, and the consistently high quality of the education that takes place there.

The school owes a great deal to its founding director, a man named Francis Sumner Merritt, who ran the school for 27 years until his retirement in 1978. He created the template for the workshops, helped choose the craft disciplines that would be taught, and oversaw the creation of the current campus. Under his guidance, the cobbled-together dreams of a dozen artists coalesced into a vibrant program. But more than that, Fran Merritt imbued the school with a spirit that runs through every

activity, from the breakfast eggs to the late night fireside guitar. People come to Haystack to learn or improve a craft, and often end up learning about things like giving, creativity, and how to draw a clean breath.

Stu Kestenbaum, a potter-turned-poet, had a daunting task ahead when he came to Haystack more than two decades ago. During his tenure as director, he has expanded the school in breadth, depth, and grasp. The school reaches more people in more ways and with greater impact than it ever has before. Under his leadership, it has managed to embrace the concepts and technology of a fast-moving culture while remaining true to its simple roots in ancient craft.

Twice a year, Haystack publishes a newsletter called *Gateway*. In addition to news of the faculty and staff, fundraising announcements, and photos of the rustic campus, each issue of *Gateway* since 1991 has included a feature called “From the Director.” These have been gathered into the book you hold in your hands, a chance to reread and perhaps share these gently wise thoughts. Also included here are the texts of speeches Stu Kestenbaum has given at conferences; they are transcribed and available here for the first time.

In these pages readers who have visited Haystack will find sweet reminders of the sun on the deck and the breeze in the towering spruce trees. Those who haven’t been on campus will probably get the urge to visit, and yes, it really is that lovely. For all of us, though, these pages provide quiet reminders that for all its complexity, life can be disarmingly simple. A friendly wave to a neighbor, the shared activity of household chores, the haunting lap of waves on a granite shore. In these things we can find wonder and strength.

Fall 1991

Each summer Haystack participates in the Fourth of July parade on the Island. The parade and fireworks used to alternate between Deer Isle and Stonington, but now the parade is in Deer Isle and the evening fireworks in Stonington. Stonington is the preferred site for the fireworks, which explode over the water, the sound echoing back from the islands, and Deer Isle is the better side for the parade, with a wider street and better views for spectators.

The parade in Deer Isle makes its way through the town, up to the elementary school and heads back again, so you can enjoy the excitement twice—and it's an exciting event. Walking down the street, with crowds of people— Islanders, tourists, summer residents—enthusiastically cheering for floats and walking groups from the community.

For this year's Haystack entry we decided to create the Statue of Liberty. Our work force consisted of some staff, my family, and a handful of students. The Fourth came at the beginning of the third session, so we only had three or four days to get our entry ready for the parade. We made a large papier-mâché head and hands, and created a body out of dyed green sheets. Liberty held aloft a copper torch constructed from sample pieces made by students in Heikki Seppa's metalsmithing workshop who were studying anticlastic raising. We made more torches out

of brooms and a sign, reminiscent of a political convention, that said “Haystack: Freedom, Justice, Peace, Equality.” We spent two afternoons assembling our Liberty in the sun on the dining hall deck and on the morning of the Fourth loaded it into the school truck and headed to the parade, where we took our place in line with antique cars, a rock band on a flatbed truck, fire engines, the Boy Scouts, and bicyclists who had ridden across the U.S. to raise money for the Island Pantry, which helps provide food for needy families, and others.

Haystack won a trophy—second place in the walking competition, which we added to our growing collection of Fourth of July awards.

The event remains in my mind because of the power of making something and using it right in our community—where people cheered both our message and our efforts—and because of what it says about how we make things. Our parade entry wasn’t one person’s idea. Someone thought of the big Statue of Liberty, then another person thought of the papier-mâché, and another conceived of how to balance the head on the pole, then the metalsmiths made the torch—each idea led to another and we ended up with something alive—something that grew out of all of our ideas. That this took place with a deadline approaching made it all the more exhilarating.

— *Spring 1993* —

Yesterday, following our last substantial snowfall of the winter, a group of families from the Island, probably 25 people in all, went to the Lily Pond in Deer Isle to shovel off some of the ice. Many of you know the Lily Pond as an Island swimming spot, but it's also a serene ice skating location. A three-quarter-mile-long expanse of clear ice rimmed by spruce trees and dotted with skaters and sliders in brightly colored hats and jackets and an occasional careening dog. A scene like this, reminiscent of a Brueghel painting, can make even me feel graceful on skates.

By this point in the snow's life, it had become a compacted six inches. We managed, with one snow blower and 15 shovels, to clear enough ice to skate and play hockey. I'm remembering this today, both through my mind and through the aches in my body. The pond got cleared because of a community effort. It was a bigger job than one person could do, but with a group of people the work went quickly and we all learned from each other, developing a variety of techniques for snow removal.

I'm thinking about this event because it makes me reflect on communities and how they work. A community has a life made up of the lives of its members; it gathers in everything and creates a whole out of it. I've become increasingly aware of this in a community the size of Deer Isle; there is not somebody else, some greater authority that makes things happen—that someone else is you and your neighbors.

Within Deer Isle is the microcosm of Haystack, an even smaller community, and a temporary one at that; one that comes together and quickly gains a sense of itself and its members. Each community that is formed during our workshops is unique, but they all share in common the sense of momentum in investigating ideas and taking chances with those ideas. We all learn from each other in a context like this. And when you look back at the end of a session and see what the community has accomplished, it always seems much greater than what you thought was possible. Just like when we looked back at the cleared ice yesterday; there we were, a group of people with shovels and an idea, and in time, after a community effort and a sore back or two, we were gliding along in another world.

Spring 1994

This February, architect Edward Larrabee Barnes and Haystack were recognized by the American Institute of Architects with its Twenty-Five Year Award. This award, which is given annually, “celebrates the enduring nature of design excellence.” Other buildings that have received the honor include Rockefeller Center, Dulles International Airport, Gateway Arch in St. Louis, and the Guggenheim Museum. I traveled down to Washington, D.C. to attend the gala event, which included not only the announcement of the Twenty-Five Year Award, but also honored awards in architecture and urban design to newer buildings, and a gold medal award to British architect Sir Norman Foster.

A journey that begins in Deer Isle is always a reminder that we’re not centrally located. There’s the early morning 60-mile ride in the dark on an icy road to Bangor, the windy take-off in a tiny plane, a change of planes in Boston, the wait, and the connection to Washington. You can begin your morning at 5:30 in Deer Isle and arrive in Washington by 2:30. The flight gives me a tremendous view of the Maine coast, the awesome expanse of ocean, and then the sprawl of human activity from Boston through Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington. From the air I can spot Camden Yards, the Baltimore Orioles’ new ballpark (and one of the winners of this year’s

honor awards). Arriving in Washington, waiting for the Metro to bring me into the city, I look like any other traveler, but in my mind I am carrying the places I've come from and the landscapes I've seen.

The evening is black tie, definitely not the standard Haystack outfit. The only other time I wore a tuxedo I was a senior in high school, so I feel more like I'm in a costume than in my clothes, but in the evening I'm standing in the National Building Museum with about 700 other people, looking remarkably like everyone else. Following a dinner, the awards presentations begin. And there, on a large screen is a Haystack video, which the AIA had produced for the event. The tape, which runs 6 minutes, gives a clear sense of the site and architecture and the impact the school has on people.

It's a thrilling moment in the urban night, to see our modest wooden buildings recognized with this award, to see our shingles and decks, spruce and lichen, and to hear Ed Barnes talk (in the video) of his response to the site and hear students talk about the impact the architecture has on their work. The buildings work doubly well because, in addition to being integrated into the site, they convey what the best of the crafts can impart. There is the human scale, the sense of a seemingly intuitive grace, and a thoughtful relationship to the earth. It's a small victory for humility.

Fall 1994

A year and a half ago I asked Wayne Higby to teach a workshop in ceramics. Wayne, a loyal supporter and friend of Haystack, is always eager to be involved with the school. He also likes to push limits. He wanted to teach, but wanted to try something new. He thought it over for a few days and said he would teach if I would teach with him; we would design a workshop that would address ceramics and writing. Wanting to have Wayne teach again, and thinking it could be exciting to take a risk with this, I agreed.

I then placed my upcoming role of teacher in the appropriate file folder in my mind and went on with my directorial responsibilities. But from time to time, with some nervousness and anticipation, I would remember my commitment. In December as we were preparing the catalog, in March when we reviewed applications, and in April when we began to re-open the school, I wondered how I would juggle the roles of director and teacher, and what it would be like to participate fully in a single workshop, to see Haystack from the perspective of a teacher.

For me it turned out to be a wonderful experience, improvising with Wayne and teaching supportive students who were willing to take risks. We wrote and made things, using language as a way to inform our work in clay. In preparation for the

season, I developed some exercises to use with the class. One of these was to write about a work of art—your own or somebody else’s—to go inside it and make discoveries through writing. I wrote about a piece of Wayne’s that I had long admired—a large raku-fired landscape bowl. Writing this was a thrilling journey that allowed me to see the work in a new way. Sometimes re-examining those things and ideas that you’re familiar with allows you to know them again. Teaching here was like that; it gave me a renewed sense of Haystack and its mission.

After Floating Rocks Beach

a large landscape bowl by Wayne Higby

The sky is round, curving
into the rim of the world,
the edge of things. It is
the gentle curve of your arm
holding up the edge
of this planet, wrapped
in a circle like a dancer,
or the way a mother loves a child
with her forearm and elbow,
the crook to nestle in.
This landscape comes
from another time, the rocks
were towed by
boats in the foggy night.
They float in front of us.
At first you think these stones
are from a Renaissance painting,
that they were behind the annunciation
of the miraculous birth
and have floated here before your eyes.
Then you hear the wind,
a steady wind that catches
in the crevice of your ears
the perpetual sound we are adrift in
the sound before sound had a name.

Spring 1995

This fall and winter newspapers and national magazines were filled with information on computers—multi-media CD-ROM, the internet, laptop-docking stations—the high-tech future had arrived for consumers. At Haystack we've been computerized since the early 1980s. All of our donor and attendance records are on computers as is our mailing list. Our back-up system, though, is decidedly handmade.

We keep separate 3 x 5 index card files with the addresses, attendance and donor information, on all students and contributors. Whenever someone makes a donation to the school, that's the card we look at when we send our letters of thanks. Each card tells a story. With some I can recognize Fran Merritt's handwriting in the address, and the address corrections and notes by Ethel Clifford, Howard Evans, and Candy Haskell. I pass through generations of technology—from the handwritten card to a typed gum label to the electric typewriter. I can see students who later became teachers, and people who first came to Haystack as college students; I follow the crossed-out addresses on the cards as they move three or four times to their current residences. The cards also tell a story of the financial support people have given. Some begin in the top right hand corner with a gift in the 1970s and continue through 1995, running down the side of the card over to the back. One of our

donors had been here as a student in 1957, and made his first contribution this year.

When I look at these cards, it's as if I'm having a conversation with these friends and supporters. Some people I know very well and seeing the cards brings back memories of past workshops; others I know only through their donations. Either way, though, when I'm holding the cards in my hands, it's an immediate connection.

I know that all this information is stored on our computers, but there is something tangible in the dog-eared index cards of old friends, filed alongside the crisp new cards of last summer's first time students. It struck me when we were inundated with the news of the computerized future that these cards were another manifestation of a Haystack spirit and what makes craft compelling to us. They tell a human story that you can touch, that you can hold in your hands.

— *Fall 1995* —

When we end our programming year in October, it's a time when I can look back on an entire six-month season filled with the remarkable creative energy of the Haystack community. And it's a season where the facility is in use nearly every day—from conferences and short workshops in the spring and fall to our two- and three-week sessions of summer. Each day has moments that stand out as exemplars of what it is that Haystack does best as an educational institution.

During our first session in June, Mary Law was teaching a pottery workshop. Mary Law, a Chattanooga, Tennessee native who still retains her southern lilt after many years in Northern California, is called by both her first and last names as if they were one. She's a gracious and skilled potter and teacher. During the same session, potter Karen Karnes came by for a visit and spoke with Mary Law's class. Mary Law told me she was thrilled, because many years before when she was a beginning student in a workshop at Penland, Karen had been her teacher. She recalled that Karen had taken her aside near the end of the workshop and told her she "had what it took" to become a potter and that she should devote herself to that life. In the midst of an intensive workshop, it was a pivotal moment, one that gave Mary Law the courage to pursue a life as a maker. What Karen had given was encouragement, and what an impact a little encouragement can have.

That's what happens in every workshop at Haystack in some form or another—the encouragement to try something new, to develop a new idea, to think in a way you hadn't thought before. This encouragement may come from a teacher, fellow student, or within yourself. It may happen in a workshop, in a conversation over dinner, seeing slides of someone's work, in a walk on the shore. It may happen to a beginning artist, an advanced professional, an 18- or 85-year old.

There was a wonderful sense of continuity in hearing Karen speak with Mary Law's students. I realized in Mary Law's own workshop there would be similar moments of encouragement that would, in turn, engender future moments of encouragement. It's these moments that lead us forward into our lives.

— *Spring 1996* —

There is an old saying that there are only two seasons in Maine—winter and the Fourth of July. Those of us who have spent remarkably clear days on the Haystack decks know that this isn't completely true, but there are definitely two Haystack seasons—when you're here and when you're not. During the spring, summer, and fall when the studios are active and the dining room is full of people engaged in conversations, there doesn't seem to ever have been a time when we weren't alive in a session. When we close down for the season, though, and move back to our winter quarters in Deer Isle village, it's a decidedly quieter world, warmer in winter but without the view, and also without the immediate sense of community that Haystack holds when it is open.

But the community that Haystack has engendered has not gone away, it's just far-flung, and we reconvene in smaller ways, by postcard and letter, fax and phone. No e-mail yet, but soon. Whatever the form, these connections are what remind us of what happens at Haystack and why it's important. Nearly every week we'll receive show announcements from workshop leaders and students, work that may have begun as an experiment at Haystack. One show announcement in November came with a note "you know Haystack makes it all worth it, things just seem to make sense." Other times we'll receive snapshots taken

during a session and are transported back to one of those iceless days. And then there are the flash photos where our red eyes glow and we look as if we were all possessed by some sort of spirit, which I suppose we were.

Winter is also when we receive requests for information about Haystack, the way that people order seed catalogs, with hope for a time of planting and growth. Earlier this month a woman called who told me she had graduated from the School for American Craftsmen majoring in textiles. She had become a textile designer and had always told herself that by the time she was 60 she would come to Haystack. She had recently celebrated her 60th birthday and was ready to take a weaving workshop. I felt an immediate connection, as if she had carried a potential Haystack with her for nearly 40 years.

And I suppose in the winter, in a way, we're all carrying that potential community within us, the one from the past that can carry us forward in our work and the one that may come this year, opening up a world we can't yet imagine.

Fall 1996

Most of you probably know Haystack through our programs in June, July, and August. Our entire season, though, runs from mid-May through mid-October. We move out to the campus when there are only buds on the trees, and move back to our winter office when autumn is at peak color, the yellow maples' leaves brilliant against the dark green spruce. We stretch our season in the unheated studios just about as far as we can.

Spring and fall are busy times for us. We have shorter workshops for high school students and New England and Maine residents. This year we added an additional program—New Works—a retreat session for former Haystack faculty to pursue ideas for new projects. We also host college and other professional groups. Our short sessions possess a great intensity. They are all five days or less in length and the activity is more of a sprint than a long distance run. The character of discovery, though, does not differ from our longer workshops.

One of the more recent programs, Studio Based Learning, begun in 1992, brings together high school students from Deer Isle-Stonington High School and George Stevens Academy (the Blue Hill high school) for a four-day workshop. The rhythm of the studios is similar to our summer programs, with the exception that we make sure everyone is in bed by 11:30. And 70 high school students consume an unbelievable amount of hot chocolate.

One comment from this year's Studio Based Learning session stands out in my mind. When we asked students, as part of our evaluation, what was most difficult for them about their studio work, one young woman in printmaking wrote "getting ideas [when] I ran out [of them], but once I did [get ideas] they were back for good."

For high school students who are used to 45- or 80-minute classes, a full Haystack day devoted to art opens up a whole other way of looking at work. They have the time for all the experiments and failures that are critical to learning. It's the kind of time that exists for all of us who have taken workshops at Haystack. I think of it as a different time zone, one where you can try out new ideas, give up on them, come back to them renewed, or discover that you have changed the way that you are looking at your work.

Those moments may be small in terms of all the waking hours that we have in our lives, but to know that they are there can give us a kind of faith in our ability to explore our art. When we fear there is nothing left, we can dig deeper and discover there is more to perplex and enlighten us.