



F&SU @ Capellagården Activities report & closing address

1 June 2016

In May, I arrived at Capellagården with no plan but holding a suitcase stuffed with clothing, a handful of postcards, and a few, folded, cloth banners. This was intentional.

Next door to the wood cabin where I'm staying is the small, stone studio built many years ago for the Swedish painter, William Nording. His chair and easel remain inside. On my second day here, I unpacked my bag and converted Nording's studio into a one-room schoolhouse and the first branch campus of Fair & Square University—where "Admission is Free. Thinking is Dead. You Are Enrolled."

Each weekday morning from 10:00-12:00 noon, FS&U at Capellagården was open for class. Night classes were scheduled from 5:00-7:00 pm. During the morning session, I'd meet with the different student groups in gardening, ceramics, woodworking, and textiles. Night school was open to anyone showing up anytime before 7:00. That first week, no one showed up; so, in the second week, beginning each evening at 6:00, I invited student volunteers to walk up the hill to my studio/schoolroom to teach *me* one hour of Swedish language lessons. And now my mouth can shape a phrase or two in Swedish.

At FS&U our motto is: We Make Mistakes. Our daytime seminars examined how making an object or thing (a pot or cloth or table or meal) is to imagine and make a world. In other



words, we considered how our makings are acts of social extension as much as a form(ing) of cultural expression.

We began by describing what we eat. Some of us eat animals. Some of us eat only plants and minerals. Several students are “Stockholm vegetarians” (vegetarians who eat herring and salmon). One vegetarian eats bacon. Another vegetarian confessed her love for steak. She is, I suppose, a “Texas vegetarian.” But in one way or another, everyone cares about what travels from their hands to their mouth and how it got there. All agree the gardens at Capellagården are important to them.

We talked about the significance of handcraft in the time of Ikea—namely, What does Carl Malmsten’s 1960 vision for Capellagården mean in 2016? These discussions feel urgent and reflective; in part because of the somewhat utopic founding of this place as a community for teaching and learning craft (part Rudolf Steiner, part John Dewey) but also because of the range of student’s ages and skill levels.

Should students at Capellagården remember Carl Malmsten or forget him? I appreciate Malmstem’s notion of the “expressive authenticity” of things made for human use—but, in a local joke, a Malmsten bed is believed to be useless for making love.

While here, I’ve been reading a book by Richard Sennett titled, *The Craftsman*. Sennett’s writing is sometimes insightful and (like Malmsten’s furniture) it’s sometimes boring. Nonetheless, both he and Malmsten each seem relevant to current times and politics.

Like Malmsten, Sennett believes,

-that “thinking and feeling are contained in the process of making.’

-that “we can achieve a more humane material life, if we only better understand the making of things.”

You hear the echo of Malmsten’s voice when Sennett writes “...all techniques contain expressive implications. This is true of making a pot; and equally true of raising a child.” Like Malmsten, Sennett believes that “Learning from things requires us to care about the qualities of cloth or the right way to poach fish; [that] fine cloth or food cooked well enables us to imagine larger categories of ‘good.’”

I think Capellagården is better than a Malmsten bed. In your time here, you each have learned or are learning how to make a good (or better) pot, or cloth, or table, or meal. This is a kind of making love. And if you keep at it, keep offering such things your time and attention, you'll eventually discover you have imagined—*made*, really—a better world. You will recognize it

because you once gave your time over to this good place.



During my residence at Capellagården I intruded on your time. To offer you my time was, after all, to ask for yours. Dropped into your lives I interrupted your schedules, disrupted your routines, and took what time you gave me. I tried not to be presumptuous—to listen more than talk—but I found myself chattering away at whomever might cross my threshold. In fact, however, the most frequent visitors to my classroom were bumblebees. The stiff buzz of insect wings announced

their arrival and I welcomed their company except when, like drunkards, they overstayed then needed to be shown the door out.

As you make your own exits out from Fair & Square University—whether or not you return to Capellagården—I hope you will hold on and hold fast to what you've learned here, done here, made here. Don't look for reasons *why* you're doing what you've chosen to do. You will find no reasons. Instead you'll find only distraction. And distraction is like a dog. It's always waiting for you at the door, wagging its tail, smiling for your attention. It asks to be patted. It rolls on its back to be tickled and scratched. It begs to be walked. Then, cunningly, it leads you away from your purpose.

To close this session of FS&U, I want to read you a story about tenacity—about *not* letting go of your purpose. As artists and craftspeople we're often told to pay close attention to nature; to learn from her. Annie Dillard, an American, wrote this story. It's not pretty. But just think of it as a fable describing what nature teaches us about the terrible thrill of holding fast.

-The Weasel [in Swedish: vessla] from *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

"A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Sometimes he lives in his den for two days without leaving. Outside he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites the prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, he does not let go.

... once, says Ernest Thompson Seton, once a man shot an eagle out of the sky. Examining the eagle he found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to the bird's throat. The supposition is that the eagle had pounced on the weasel and the weasel swiveled and bit as instinct taught him, tooth to neck, and nearly won. I would like to have seen that eagle from the air a few weeks or months before he was shot: was the whole weasel still attached to his feathered throat, a fur pendant? Or did the eagle eat what he could reach, gutting the living weasel with his talons before his breast, bending his neck to clean the airborne bones?

... you know. We can live anyway we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience—even of silence—by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and living spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding not fighting. A weasel doesn't "attack" anything; a weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity.

I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death, where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it, and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields, over fields

and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles.”

So forget Carl Malmsten. Then remember Carl Malmsten. But mostly remember, **WE MAKE MISTAKES**. Good luck. God bless. Thank you.



Michael Mercil

Artist-in-residence, spring 2016.