

This summer, with the assistance of a Faculty Development & Recognition Grant, I travelled to Deer Isle, Maine, to attend a two-week workshop at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. I have been to Haystack before, working with a variety of potters from around the country. As in the past, this workshop was both informational and inspirational.



Haystack is an internationally recognized school, where craftspeople travel from all over the world to spend focused time learning and working with others.

The campus is beautiful, sitting on a cliff overlooking Jericho Bay and more than 30 small islands.

“The unique experience to be found at Haystack is owed to the combination of internationally-renowned instructors, intensive and focused studio time, the exploration of other art forms including music, poetry and dance, a diverse student body, and an award-winning campus. Students live, eat, and work at the school, and studios remain open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For more than fifty years, the school has created international workshops, conferences, and symposia, innovative sessions for high school students and local residents, a visiting artist program, scholarship opportunities, and more. Haystack continues to evolve with the interests and ideas of those who visit here.”

(Haystack’s website; <http://www.haystack-mtn.org/about.php>)



The school’s director is Stuart Kestenbaum, the author of three books of poetry. Stuart is also an Honorary Fellow of the American Craft Council and the recipient of a Distinguished Educator Award from the James Renwick Alliance. His poetry has been featured on NPR’s *The Writer’s Almanac* and *To The Best of Our Knowledge*.

I point this out because Stuart’s spirit permeates the school and its studios. Crafting, whether in pottery or poetry, is about an awareness of the world around you and an attempt to reveal some sort of truth through the work.

At Haystack, cell phones are (literally) frowned upon. There is no TV or radio. No internet. There is only the material, whether that be clay or glass or fiber or metal or wood. And, there are others who want to explore, collaborate and create.

Students sleep in small, unheated cabins within steps (and stairs – LOTS of stairs) of the studios. A large bell is rung at 8am, Noon and 6pm to tell you to stop working for a little while and go eat. (The Pavlovian response takes only about three days to become firmly established!)



I enrolled in a class led by Chris Staley, Professor and Artist Emeritus at Penn State University. Chris is generally considered one of the premier teachers in the field of ceramics. There were 22 students in the class, ranging in age from 18 to 81. The level of talent and skill was exceptional. Some were undergraduate students. Some were just heading off to graduate school. One was a primary school teacher in New York City. One was a military man; one a restaurant owner. One man was a retired engineer; another a gallery owner. Some had extensive experience with clay; some very little.



Most importantly, they were all kind, open and hard-working – and they/we bonded as a class in a most unusual way. I am still trying to work out how to bring that experience to bear in my classroom here at LLCC. Was it serendipity? Or was it something about the way Chris Staley directed the interactions of the class? I'm not sure.... Maybe, a little of both.

There were practical artistic exercises that Chris lead, which I am definitely going to incorporate in my classes. And, on one of the “down days” (when the work was cooling in the kilns), Stuart led the class through a number of writing exercises, which might serve to inform our work in clay.

It takes a week or two to adjust to “real life” again after a stay at Haystack. Terrible things happened during the two weeks I was there. A plane crashed. A war erupted. While at Haystack, we were protected from the knowledge of those events.

And, now, it’s time to prepare for a new year, new classes, new students, more meetings. But I carry Haystack with me and I came back inspired. So, if you see me sitting at my desk, staring off into space – I’m in Maine.

