TRACEY ADAMS

Benthic Revolution 1, 2014
Encaustic on mitsumata, 40 x 26 in

COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

RANDALL GRAHM

The Alchemist's Apprentice

Winemaking as Personal Transformation

I became a winemaker and winery owner some thirty years before seemingly everyone else on the planet decided that they wanted to become one too. I was too young to experience the mid-sixties and its quixotic, neuro-expansive aspirations with full force. But there was still enough residual patchouli (and God knows what else) in the atmosphere in the early seventies to cense my sensibility with a healthy skepticism about following prescribed career paths, as well as to engender a naive optimism that, even in the absence of a plan, things would somehow work out. (In our current age, this seems like a belief system from antiquity.) I had studied philosophy and literature (and pre-med among other things) at University of California at Santa Cruz, with no career game plan in mind, and took my very sweet time in ultimately securing a diploma; this just drove my parents absolutely nuts, which was, of course, a secondary gain.

It is hard, at least for me at this remove, to even imagine how I could have simply let myself get carried along on life's surface—I was not the only *puer aeternus* of UCSC who floated like a jellyfish on the surf—but float I did for several years. I worked for my dad for a year in his wholesale tool and merchandise business. The one certainty I had was that his business—the buying and selling of general merchandise—was not for me. How could one become passionate about selling widgets, or care about the business deal *qua* deal? That was what seemed to get my dad up in the morning.

Can the winemaking life become a sort of spiritual path or an avenue for personal development? That was not how I thought of it when I began. It is hard to reconstruct where I thought I was headed when I began, but as a child of the sixties and seventies, especially in Northern California, a sparkly geode's throw from the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, the awareness of the human potential movement (think Abraham Maslow and Fritz Perls) was inculcated in the minds of my cultural and generational milieu. We were all going to have to eventually find jobs, of course, but we had to find jobs with Meaning.

While working on my undergraduate senior thesis on the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein* (never, alas, to be completed), I wandered into a swanky wine shop a few blocks from my parents' home in Beverly Hills. "Would you like to open a charge account?" I was asked the first time I

visited the shop. (I was not yet even of drinking age.) I'm not quite sure how any young person who was trying to find his way to something vaguely connotative of adulthood, if not sophistication, could possibly have declined that invitation.[1] I did not come from a family that really drank wine, and maybe that was part of the reason I took the offer. The offer was like an intriguing wormhole into a different dimension of experience.

The charge account soon led to temporary employment at the shop (the thesis was bogging down), and then to full-time employment, if not complete vinous immersion—that is to say, some pretty impressive opportunities to taste the greatest wines of the world, essentially on a daily basis. In a short time I found myself grown into a full-fledged, insufferable wine person.[2] When I left the wine shop a year later I imagined that I might enter the wine trade in some capacity, perhaps as a wine importer. Then I happened to take a home winemaking weekend course at UCLA Extension and the light went on. What I remember telling myself: "Randall, you have diverse interests and talents." (This is another way of saying: "You seem to be reasonably intelligent but have the attention span of a flea.") I have in general not been so clever at making certain life or business choices, but in this instance, a certain *daimon* was definitely whispering in my ear: "Listen carefully now, RG. Learning to be a winemaker may help you knit together some of these very disparate elements of yourself and give your life a kind of focus, which, frankly, just between us, seems to be slightly lacking." At the time I never thought of myself as any kind of artist or craftsman;[3] I just wanted to find some sort of organizing principle for my life, or even just a vaguely remunerative gig.

I managed to graduate UC Davis, and with the help of my family acquired some land in the Santa Cruz Mountains, ostensibly to make the Great American Pinot Noir. I failed spectacularly at making T.G.A.P.N. but was fortunate to discover the wines of southern France.[4] I didn't know it at the time, but it was a significant imaginative leap to begin working with Rhône grape varieties, which I began doing in the early eighties. Hardly anyone on these shores knew anything about these grapes. Blending the relevant ones together was an accidental masterstroke from a winemaking as well as a marketing perspective;[5] I was able to intuit a basic winemaking truism that if you are working with grape varieties that are themselves less than perfect, you may find or create complexity in a skillful blend, effectively disguising the shortcomings of the individual combinants.[6]

Somehow my lucky choice of métier resulted in a chain of events that allowed me to discover myself as a sort of artist, unleashing a spirit of creativity and intuition that had previously lain dormant. I am not convinced that winemaking in and of itself makes people more creative, but its work—the alchemical transformation of a baser material into something perhaps sublime—carries with it a potent metaphorical message: *If you can transform grape juice, maybe you can transform yourself.*

Winemakers are often in the position of having to do disparate things for their job, calling on different sets of skills—if not exactly at the same moment, then certainly in the course of a given hour or day; we must become *bricoleurs par excellence*.[7] I think that this may spark creativity and make us better problem solvers. The impetus to solve problems creatively also comes from being a small-business owner, with the level of psychic investment that that entails. If contemplating the gallows concentrates the mind, as Dr. Johnson suggested, then contemplating the potential demise of one's company motivates one to discover hidden resources—in my case humor, a sense of artistic design in both the visual and organoleptic realms, and even a kind of literary sensibility I didn't know existed within me.

Somehow my lucky choice of metier resulted in a chain of events that allowed me to discover myself as a sort of artist, unleashing a spirit of creativity and intuition that had previously lain dormant.

As the "Rhône Ranger," I gained notoriety in the wine business as the champion of Rhône-styled wines, a category that was almost unknown in the U.S. Having no background in marketing and an allergy to hard-core selling, I realized that, like a Paleolithic hominid, I would need to fashion my own unique tools *de novo* to bring down the wooly mammoth that was the burgeoning wine business. I worked (intuitively) on first principles: I knew I had to create a certain context or point of reference for this inaugural New World Rhône blend, which was ultimately to be called "Le Cigare Volant"—an homage to the French Châteauneuf-du-Pape. I discovered a bizarre ordinance adopted in 1954 by the town council of C-du-P prohibit-

1 A juicy morsel of gossip anent the shop's well-heeled Beverly Hills clientele: Among the shop's show biz clientele was Frank Sinatra. He (or one of his minions) had asked for several cases of the shop's "best/most expensive white wine." Several months later, the owner of the shop received a distraught ship-to-shore phone call from Sinatra himself, who was out on his boat. Apparently, the entourage was grilling steaks on board and Ol' Blue Eyes was unhappy with the wine. A rather intoxicated Sinatra told the shop owner through the tenuous phone connection that all of the bottles were no %!@# good; he and his colleagues had thrown one bottle after another overboard as each had proved to be "too damn sweet." (The shop had sent several cases of a rare, older vintage of Chateau d'Yquem.)

2 If you can without hesitation recite all of the Beaujolais *Crus*, remember all of the permitted varieties of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and eidetically visualize a Bordeaux vintage chart spanning the last hundred years, you are certifiably a wine geek.

3 Before beginning to discuss whether winemaking is an art or a craft, it is important to draw a distinction between "winemakers" as we are called in the New World and "winegrowers," or *vignerons,* as they are referred to in France. To put it baldly, winemakers *tout court* can be true craftspeople, but all too often we devolve into little more than technicians, learning certain tricks to fix winemaking defects or problems, and perhaps (if we're clever) learning to impose a certain (presumably pleasant and commercially viable) winemaking style on our wines. But the cultivation of this cleverness is precisely what can inhibit us from developing Buber's "I-Thou" relationship with the vines and the land on which they grow. We can easily end up developing the hubristic belief that our limited human intelligence is somehow cleverer than that of Mother Nature's, and miss the larger Gestalt, which is the breathtaking organization of the unique qualities of the site itself, its *terroir*, or sense of place.

As a craftsman, a winemaker is certainly following a utilitarian end—the product is intended to give pleasure to its ultimate consumer, but if the winemaker aspires to be a true winegrower, he must engage with his vineyards on a more intimate level to understand that he is truly a partner with the land, not its subjugator. The true winegrower is always in a process of learning how to truly "see" his land and vines, to study what gives his site its uniqueness, and to find how to amplify these characteristics without other ostentatious elements distracting. Just as a sculptor looks deeply into a piece of marble to discover its deepest secrets, a *vigneron* is always looking for ways—the most appropriate vine treatment, crop yield, degree of ripeness, and, of course, fermentation regimen and *élevage* or cellar treatment—to eloquently express the site's secrets and the unique qualities of the vintage. I am always astonished and delighted when I hear a *vigneron* whose family has been on the same parcel of land for more than five hundred years talk about continuing this path of the discovery of *terroir.*

4 The motivation for making Pinot came from a more primal place—the desire to achieve something impossibly difficult and elusive, thereby capturing fame, glory, immortality.

5 Jury may still be out on the marketing perspective. American customers are not yet sold on the idea of spending weighty sums on blended wines unless it is a *bordelais* blend (still believed to hold good resale value). Monotheism and *monocépageism* both seem to still have a lot going for them as belief systems.

6 I must have known on an unconscious level that it was difficult to make a complex wine from a single variety in a reasonably warm climate, and that in fact every Mediterranean grape-growing area blends different grape varieties together to make a balanced wine of real flavor interest. The Central Coast of California was this sort of Mediterranean *climat.* Making this imaginative leap was the first instance in my career of calling upon a different part of my psyche—the deeply intuitive—to summon up a solution to a winemaking problem.

It is amazing that I made among the best wines of my career when I had so little experience and understood so little about winemaking. While becoming a successful winemaker requires technical expertise as well as experience, they alone cannot bring about excellence without the added dimensions of imagination and intuition.

7 There is no great English translation for this word—"putterer," maybe, or "Mr. Fix-it"—which conveys the idea of being able to cleverly connect and integrate disparate bits together, using the elements that present themselves to hand.

The only things that really matter in the world of wine are vins de terroir, *or wines of place. These enrich our lives, like the discovery of a new species of bird, flower, or star.*

ing the landing of flying saucers and "flying cigars." By obliquely referencing this ordinance on the label, I could contextualize the wine for the uninitiated while appearing not to be a complete Frenchy-French copycat, and offer an ironic commentary on the business in the bargain. I had intuitively grasped some basic principles of marketing.

I discovered that wine drinkers who also happened to be readers would appreciate a wry, slightly subversive attitude toward the presentation of wine. Because I had such an aversion to "asking for the sale" or even to being so crass as to trumpet my wines' singular virtues, I was compelled to find another way to ingratiate myself with customers. I found to my surprise that I was, with a little practice, able to write literary pastiches—stylistic wind sprints—in my quarterly newsletters, proffering a vinous take on the prose of such figures as García Márquez, Kafka, Shakespeare, Poe, Pynchon, Salinger, and others.

I was fortunate to be able to work with Chuck House, the great label designer, who gave me more confidence in my artistic judgment. Together we created a number of memorable labels, having great fun in the process.[8]

8 Chuck is a great guy and fabulous designer, but in the day (he's better now) not always the most organized person, often showing up to our label conference meetings at coffee houses in Sonoma County having forgotten relevant materials and tools. We would prevail upon neighboring customers to lend us lipstick (for red ink) and eyeliner (for use as a pencil). Napkins stood in for labels and catsup or other condiment bottles stood in for wine bottles.

Maybe Malcolm Gladwell is right to claim that repetition enables mastery. I have approximately one half of an aesthetic brain—I can't draw or paint my way out of a corner, but I can sometimes come up with reasonably clever design ideas and can usually tell if a particular design works or not. When I am fortunate enough to collaborate with a real artist, some sort of aesthetic completeness and magic may occur.

The winemaking path has not made me a true artist, nor maybe even yet a real craftsman, though I have hope that that may yet come to pass. But, analogous to the dissatisfaction I once experienced in being a mere wine consumer, which compelled me to become a winemaker and to engage on a deeper level, I have in recent years grown unhappy with being a simple winemaker who is still largely a technician (with a few marketing skills) but not yet a true craftsman.

As a child of the sixties, a boomer, I have, true to type, looked for meaning in life. In the wine world I have achieved a certain amount of professional notoriety—though, in candor, what I've done to date has really been of the most ephemeral significance in the scheme of things. The only things that really matter in the world of wine are *vins de terroir,* or wines of place. These enrich our lives, like the discovery of a new species of bird, flower, or star. They connect us with the world, with nature's intelligence, in a special way that a "wine of effort" can never match.

I have learned that with this métier I have been given a special gift, a tonal range through which I might creatively express myself. (My slightly autistic self was equipped with less than optimal connectivity to this world; without this career choice, God only knows to what far orbit I might have been flung.) But I would suggest that success may not be merely about learning how to express oneself; it may well be tied up in the commitment to express something much larger than one's own point of view.

In Santa Cruz, where I live, we never quite completely grow up. For so many years I seem to have been stuck in the Kierkegaardian "aesthetic" mode. As a winemaker, this has meant the opportunity to create a lot of interesting wine labels, to make some clever blends, to experiment with new and exotic grape varieties and some unusual wine styles. At best, one might think of this as a form of performance art; at worst, the occupation of a dilettante.

Recently I've meandered into K's "ethical" mode—as a company, we've adopted the practice of transparency in wine labeling, scrupulously indicating all of the ingredients that touch the wine in the production process. Further, I have developed a deep commitment to meaningful sustainability in farming, to farm with minimal inputs, and to do so with the lofty ambition of farming grapes without irrigation—for example, in an area like San Juan Bautista that is very, very dry.

Maybe it is because I have personally experienced such an extended term of adolescence that it has been only recently that I have been able to imagine what Kierkegaard's "religious mode" might look like to a winemaker. Maybe the holiest sacrament of this church is a clod of dirt: one imbued with life—microbial life, at least. As a craftsman in the highest sense, one might be given the rare privilege of becoming a translator of the humblest materiality—dirt and some bunches of grapes—into a great elixir that can move human beings to poetry and other unexpected deeds of great moment.[9] My work in wine has been like a mystery that continues to be revealed. To this point it has perhaps been like a narrative that has been overly expository—a lot of telling with too little showing.

I'm currently working on a new viticultural project, extending into the unknown and indefinite future, proposing a rather unorthodox methodology—the creation of a vast population of new grape varieties from seeds and planting a genetically diverse vineyard, effacing varietal characteristics. The presumption is that soil characteristics might thus emerge, and perhaps one might then express that elusive creature, the *vin de terroir.* Maybe this febrile dream is truly the fantasy of a *Luftmensch*; but its intention, at least, is to return me to the vineyard, where I might somehow learn to "see" and then at least partially transcend my *Luftmensch* nature. While it would be nice to eventually learn how to read and talk to human beings, my true ambition at this point is to learn how to begin to learn how to read nature. What could possibly go wrong?

9 Burgundy wine is believed to promote courage; I believe this with my entire being. When I've drunk extraordinary Burgundy, I cannot help but believe in the overwhelmingly benign character of the universe.

Perhaps everything. But it feels to me as if I am at the very beginning of my career, connected (at least I imagine I am) to something much larger than myself.

Wine is largely made in service of the ego—you want people to know just how clever you are. Artists and craftsmen can be egomaniacs: their art is the drug that gets them high, but it also allows them a sort of transcendence of their own baser impulses—it is transformative of everyone it touches. I don't reckon that I will escape the prison of my own ego, but at last I am satisfied that some of the work I am doing will potentially have a usefulness beyond my own solipsistic horizon. And (if I play my cards right) I'll at least get outdoors more, and breathe some healthy fresh air.

Randall Grahm is the founder and winemaker of Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz, California, where he has been plying his trade for thirty-four years and is still hot on the trail of the elusive "wine of place." He is acknowledged as an innovator in the industry, and has received numerous awards and honors (including having an asteroid named after him). He was recently elected to the Vintners Hall of Fame by the Culinary Institute of America.