




S. Portico Bowman

620.704.0418

www.s-portico-bowman.com

s.portico.bowman@gmail.com

In 1974 Paulus Berensohn thought he was dying. He sold his share of the Pennsylvania farm, left in secret, and drove to San Diego in search of healing. My book is based upon Berensohn's unpublished novella "The Silver Sword" that recounts how the craft of Bargello tapestry restored his life.



Dig: Paulus Berensohn, A Natural Life is a work of historical fiction based upon Berensohn's unpublished hand-written one-hundred-and-sixteen-page memoir *The Silver Sword*. In 1974 Paulus Berensohn thought he was dying. He sold his share of the Pennsylvania farm, left North Carolina in secret, and drove to San Diego in search of healing. Berensohn's text recounts the period from 1974-1982 when he discovered the craft of Bargello tapestry. Stitch by stitch, breath by breath Berensohn was restored to harmony and health while the first whimpers of the pending, and now full blown climate crisis could be heard. Half a century later Berensohn's healing arcadia frames the path to ecological recovery on a global scale.

In *The Grass Roots of Art* Herbert Read suggests, "If we could show that what we mean by a work of art is always and inevitably the product of the individual personality and of that personality operating, naturally not in a social vacuum, but in maximum conditions of personal freedom, then we should have established the irrelevance of all those cultural patterns which attract or menace us from the future" (1946). He goes on, "From this point of view culture is relevant only when it becomes interiorized within the person as a set of personal ideals, attitudes and traits." In this regard Berensohn's life is his greatest artistic achievement. He held the heart of the world in one hand and his pipe in the other. He pumped blood iron stardust through veins of ink, yarn and the capillaries of clay particles. These practices were the medicines he imbibed and prescribed. All matter was his companion. The vast cosmos did not terrify him. Berensohn was humorous. Curious. Fearless. Generous. Sincere. He was a dancer, ceramicist, and a fairy god-father. Berensohn was also a deep ecologist.

Dig is first and foremost about the man, but my story becomes intricately woven to the settling ethos of the counter-cultural revolution, and the burgeoning awareness that Mother Earth had been wounded by the runaway success of rubber and gas, in the same way that Berensohn

had been wounded by the runaway success of *Finding One's Way With Clay*. In both cases there's no one to blame. Earnest invention and a desire to serve are hallmarks of the homo sapien. Berensohn wanted to connect a culture to the craft of clay. Henry Ford wanted everyone to have a car. Berensohn connected. Ford provided. But the demands, pressure and speed had overtaken judgment. Berensohn writes, "Not knowing quite how to decline an invitation or having the sense to keep from getting in well over my head, I doubled my schedule" (1989). He goes on, "One morning in Albuquerque, New Mexico on the first day of a large workshop I was to co-lead with four other colleagues I woke up so tired and so distressed I was unable to continue" (1989).

In 1975 Dr. Wallace Broecker was the first scientist to connect emissions of CO₂ with rising temperatures. Berensohn's life has now careened close to the edge of the road and he was faced with possible extinction. It was, and still is, hard to believe that 5.972 sextillion tons of planet can suffer the same fate. But it can. It is. This is not a trifling serendipity or writerly spin that fosters my work as a storyteller. *Dig* now becomes my co-creative effort to join Berensohn and "sense the way in which we are being played through... We think we chose clay and a life as an artist consciously, when it may well be that we were chosen (kidnapped) by a dynamic larger than our personal needs - chosen by the earth, for instance to serve her, to help her heal in this time of escalating eco-catastrophe" (Berensohn, 1992). "Art in the tangible form of living and creative artists is not the by-product of a culture, rather, a culture is the end product of the outstanding personalities of a number of artists" (Read, 1946).

Berensohn's life is a symbiotic testimony to the inalienable right of the body to heal itself. Three doctors told him surgery was the only treatment for his pre-cancerous colon condition. Instead, Berensohn found a tapestry needle. This "silver sword" worked and *played*

stitch by stitch to become the harbinger of the demonstrative healing power of the creative life. My reason for expanding Berensohn's original text to include the mitochondrial relationship to the societal conditions of the seventies counter-cultural and craft revolutions – where young dissidents wanted to make things again – is because a craft and counter-cultural revolution needs to happen again.

Javier Cercas in "Resisting the 'Dictatorship of the Present' in the Biographical Novel," writes, "I am interested in the expanded present that encompasses in some form the past. There is an ongoing dialogue between past and present. The past is never fully past because it is here" (2018). The 1968 manifesto posted by dissident students at the Sorbonne is even more relevant today: "The revolution which is beginning will call into question not only capitalist society but industrial society...We are inventing a new and original world. Imagination is seizing power" (Roszak, 1969).

Berensohn declares, "Imagination has been called the rainbow bridge between spirit and matter...Imagination is world soul." He continues, "When you forfeit your sense of awe everything becomes the marketplace." James Galloway tells us, "The socio-political production expresses social life as a whole, which itself is in something of a perpetual crisis, whether the crisis be called planetary civil war, global warming, ecological collapse, increasing material fragmentation and exploitation or simply capitalism." He goes on, "Specific historical trauma migrates into excessively large numbers of representational form. The individual negotiates his or her own orientation within the world system" (2012).

Berensohn's life in craft, and before that, dance, and before that in childhood, was an anti-establishment counter-cultural revolution that cannot be split from his psyche without an atomic reaction. He had the courage to face down doubt and emerge fulfilled as a creative being.

We live ever more in a “technocracy where nothing is any longer small or simple or readily apparent. Instead the scale and intricacy of all human activities...transcends the competence of the amateurish citizen and inexorably demands the attention of specially trained experts” (1969). Berensohn had limited formal training in art and craft, however this freedom to be at home in the beginner’s mind gave him the courage to pick up the needle and begin his surgical study the first night he arrived in San Diego:

When I reached the crystal pier there was of course no clay. My clay studio was back in Pennsylvania. But in the drawer of the living room desk I found a matchbook-like folder. The folder had a needle and some colored thread. I decided I would just stitch a star. It was something to do, some act to ground my insight from earlier in the day: ‘Is the artist in me and the healer in me the same person? Is art by its very nature healing?’ As the tip of the needle appeared through the surface of the cloth the light from the lamp above me bounced off the tip in the form of a star. An instantaneous, sudden surprising energetic star. A star of light leading the way. I held the thread in its length. I was holding the needle in my hand. In my mind’s eye the needle increased in size. It’s a sword I exclaimed. A silver sword I exclaimed. In that moment a needle as a silver sword captured my imagination (1989).

“It is not that the individual ‘expresses’ the crisis, rather their highest faculties are called into being to overcome the crisis by the creation of new values which are the expression of a personal vision” (Read, 1946). The fish doesn’t know it swims, but it knows it lives. And most actively when the hook has hauled it out of the water. Berensohn didn’t accept what the medical establishment offered him. He sensed there was another choice. Intuition, for Berensohn, was the sister of imagination. He said it comes into us from the fuller landscape of being, before it can come out of us. Berensohn’s rarest talent was to trust both.

It is a different fiction to suggest that Bargello tapestry can save the planet, but Berensohn himself says, “My intuition is convinced that working with primary materials (clay, fiber, wood, glass, etc.) and working with them in a mode that rounds us out, softens our heaviness with life and gives us the opportunity to slowly withdraw our projections” (1989).

“Possibly had I submitted to the recommended surgery...I could have gone on with my life...But

that dynamic state of body-mind from which the symptoms arose would have been left intact” (1989). Berensohn’s example is the alchemical condition necessary for the transformation and radical change we desperately need. Greta Thunberg speaking at the Brilliant Minds conference in Stockholm told her audience, “Yes. I know we need a system change rather than individual change. But you cannot have one without the other” (2019). Bernsohn said no to techniques of inner manipulation and fear that tie us to an authoritarian system “that weakens the rationality of the protest...through a gossamer veil of efficiency” (Roszak, 1969) rather than creative efficacy.

Berensohn becomes a pure unbounded self, unfettered by a sense of inadequacy or failure, and therefore freed from dependence on the false claims of technocracy. Stitching in anonymity offered no reward but the present moment. If consumer societies become enamored with having enough, excesses will dissolve, along with institutions that perpetuate a sense of lack. False claims of security are no longer mechanisms for control. The suicidal commonplace eco-irony is to give up because we think we can’t do enough, so we don’t do anything at all. But everyone can find their silver sword and red thread. Craft becomes a pattern of kindness. Peaceful action can offset the addiction to technocratic mass production and runaway economic growth. It’s bountiful to hold a yellow pencil and draw a graphite line of counter-cultural integrity. Indra’s Net is also a tapestry. The next five-hundred years are the time for repairs to the interconnectedness of the universe. The craft arts are patient. And long suffering. Harmony is natural.

I’ve never met Paulus anywhere but in my imagination. He died six months after I heard about him for the first time. The New York Times obituary was my second notification of his existence. I was eleven-years-old when the right taillight of his sky blue Biscayne winked west for the open and unknown road. Berensohn’s past is our future.