

A Lesson From the Book of Sharks

In the early 1960's, one of my young high school students from North Beach quietly confided to me that he had written a book about sharks.

Could I see it? He promised I could. Days later, he came to me after school, removed a large, multi-paged loose-leaf binder from a paper sack, and placed it carefully on my desk. Page after page, after page, of carefully written commentary, each illustrated by photos and sketches of different kinds of sharks.

How amazing, I thought: a 15-year-old boy, so shy and withdrawn that he rarely spoke a word, a barely average student compared to his competitive college-bound and verbal classmates, has devoted his life to the study of sharks.

This was a good lesson for me, a very young and inexperienced teacher at the time, and I learned it well enough to look for people who, despite all outward appearances and however unusual the subject matter, might possess great talent and artistic aptitude.

There have been many such incidents: I recall a sensitive and gifted teenager from the Sunset District who stayed long after school, waiting for all the other students to leave, so he could show his watercolors to me. So introverted and insecure he could only stare at the ground as he mumbled his apologies about the inadequacy of his talent. He positively glowed as he lapped up my sincere encouragement.

And the woman who lived on the Sacramento riverbanks for many years and came to Loaves & Fishes for a shower and a meal most every day, who once brought me a screenplay she had written about homeless people and asked if I would keep it in a safe place. I have.

And the case of a former staff member who served a three-year prison sentence in one of California's most notorious prisons, Corcoran, who asked me to read and critique a very insightful and literate manuscript he had written about prison life.

And the photographer who documented the farmworker movement in 1966 with hundreds of world-class photos and used them to create an 11-minute documentary film, which he showed only one time and then chucked it all into a closet where it remained untouched for 38 years. Last year, he offered to bring his work out of seclusion if I was interested in using any of it for my Farmworker Movement Documentation Project. These photos are priceless and will endure for a century or more.

Or the homeless street artisan, burdened by mental illness, who showed me a piece of wood, a guitar face, on which he had etched an image of a large tree in full leaf, with a root-ball of equal size underground showing its intricate maze of fibrous roots, with the entire perimeter length of the face etched with vine-like images and small stones. This magnificent artwork had been created by magnifying the rays of the sun through a piece of broken glass to burn the wood. The time and patience and artistry needed to create such a masterpiece cannot even be imagined, but only seen and admired.

Finally, there was the immense talent hidden in the guise of a tall, gangly, scattered, and slightly off-the-wall artist who came to eat his daily meal at Loaves & Fishes. It started with a very small sketch of a 1940's downtown two-story building, which fell on the floor from a helter-skelter sheaf of papers he brought to my office because there was a particular document he wanted to show me. Picking up the sketch, I studied it. Is this your sketch? Can you do that again? One hundred and fifty sketches later – executed over a three-year period – the result was a collection of very unusual, exquisitely detailed pen and ink sketches of the city's most notable landmark buildings. Nothing like it exists; amazing in its own right.

I cannot explain why any of these events took place on my watch or why my life intersected, if only briefly, with these artists, but I believe it must have begun with the lesson I learned from the book of sharks.

