

Sara  
It was wonderful  
being with you  
thought of you  
when I read this  
Jude

# FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

BY LYNDA MCDANIEL

*How crafts and craft-making provide a connection  
to the sacred and to the Self.*

Susan Lightcap's books contain no words, yet they transform lives and ease death. Their pages are blank, yet they have helped to reunite a long-separated mother and daughter and to soothe a dying father and grieving daughter. How can empty books hold such power? The answer is that they are not empty. They are filled with the vitality of their creator and her Creator. Like the work of so many craft artists, they are incarnations of an eternal spirit.

Lightcap, who creates her books in the picturesque mountain community of Asheville, North Carolina, initially eschews the suggestion that her work could be called an incarnation. But after thinking for a minute, she concedes that if we truly believe in the sacredness

of everyday objects, perhaps she could allow such a lofty appraisal of her work.

"Joseph Campbell talked about finding the sacred in the everyday," Lightcap says. "For me that's what my work is about. It's allowing myself, and by extension other people, to be holy and to know that God is present in everything, that in the so-called mundane, there is holiness. I think we are starving—I know I have been starving—to honor that strong longing to put into tangible form our wonder at being alive."

Lightcap was called to her work 13 years ago during a troubled time when her marriage, family, and finances were falling apart. She learned about a book-arts workshop while attending a women's support group in Atlanta. "The

workshop tuition was only \$35, but I had no money. The spirit moved the women in my group to give me a scholarship. I went to the workshop on Saturday, and by Sunday afternoon, I felt that God had grabbed me by the back of the neck. The instructor said to me, 'You know you are a book artist, don't you? It is very apparent to me that everything in you understands this.' She was right, my spirit was singing."

Stories like this are common in the craft-making world, magical

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Although California ceramicist Judy Miller grew up more of a cultural than a religious Jew, she has re-connected to Jewish spiritual rituals through her craft. Her menorahs and mezuzahs feature bright colors, flowers, and animals, like the one shown on the opposite page.

tales of synchronicity and spirituality, inevitability and ineffability. Although some artists receive a direct message and others intuit their calling, they all express wonder at feeling as much a part of the finished product as the pattern or glaze.

"I'm putting myself right in these things," says Virgil Perry, an acclaimed folk artist from Hueytown, Alabama. "I get so involved, it just wears me out. I can sit here for three or four hours carving a bird...and I'm just whipped. But I just have to carve." Cleveland, Ohio-based enamelist Elvie Zell adds, "I think about concepts like 'follow your bliss' on an intellectual level, but when I am doing my work, I don't think too much. It is just flowing out of me."

This incarnation of spirit through the transformation of the humblest materials—wood and clay, paper and glass—positions craft artists in the role of modern-day alchemists. Consider the verbs of their work—fire, beat, mold, strike—all potent actions that forge the death and ultimate resurrection of the prima materia. And, true to the nature of alchemy, as the heat of their passion and the fire of a guiding spirit inflames the matter, the artists themselves enter the cycle of transformation on a deep, personal level.

"It is a very primeval experience for me, getting my hands in the mush," states Joseph Shuldiner, a sculptor from Los Angeles who specializes in delicate paper-and-twig lamps. "My degree is in weaving, but I found weaving too limiting, so I started cutting and deconstructing the woven pieces. The next logical step was papermaking, taking fibers and macerating them into a pulp and adding pieces of weaving, crude fibers, my hair, whatever. Through those pieces, I discovered my own spirituality in my art—a connection made through that tactile, liberating experience with my hands."

Although James Meyer, a jeweler from Williamsport, Pennsylvania, starts with gold, his results are no less metamorphic. "In jewelry,

the materials themselves are expensive and esoteric—the so-called incorruptible metals, the qualities of stone, the purity and transparency of color. The fact that these materials are straight from nature and their qualities so strong, we can pick up on the order of the universe being expressed in these small pieces. The creativity process also is how we can allow our Self to come to the surface and manifest itself through what we do.... It's

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book artist*

not as though we make things happen or create these things on our own. In a sense we do, but we are also letting it happen."

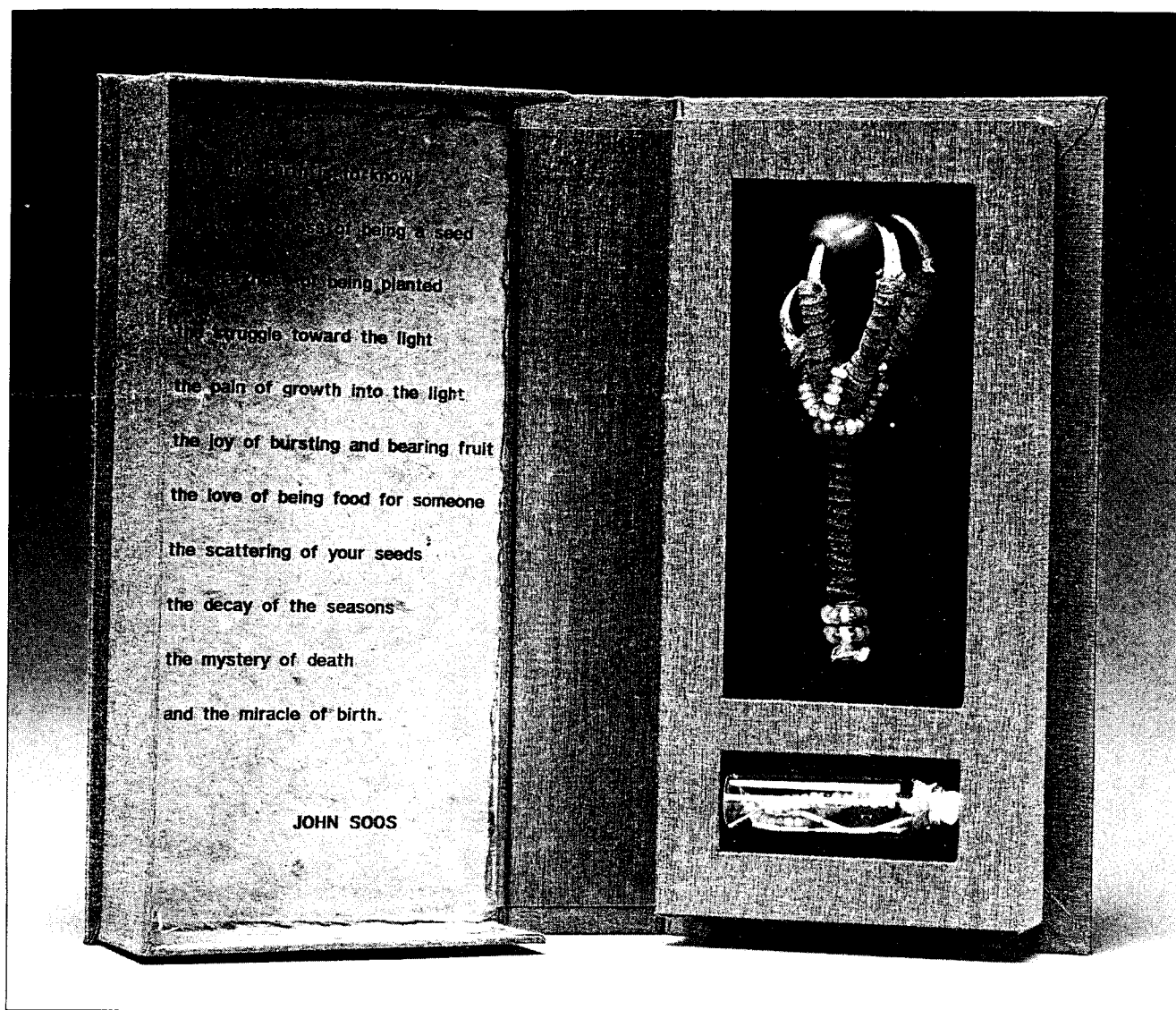
Asking craft artists to explain this strong pull to create is like asking them to define gravity. The invisible, elusive force that surrounds them is too much a part of everyday life to articulate. Donald R. McNair, M.Div., who practices a combination of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction with Jungian psychotherapy in Asheville, draws on more than 20 years of studying the works of Carl Jung for a more specific explanation. McNair quotes Jung, who wrote that the still-to-be-born work in the artist's psyche is "a force of nature that achieves its end either with tyrannical might or with the subtle cunning of nature herself, quite regardless of the personal fate of the man who is its vehicle. The creative urge lives and grows in him like a tree in the earth from which it draws its nourishment. We would do well, therefore, to think of the creative process as a

living thing implanted in the human psyche."

McNair, who studied with renowned Jungian analyst Robert Johnson (and considers it a privilege to be one of Johnson's "godsons"), has watched and guided this process in many of his clients. He cites a volume of Jung's *Collected Works* in which Jung argues that creativity is instinctual just like sexuality and hunger. "Everyone knows that instinctual urges have a life of their own," McNair continues. "Deny hunger long enough and you wither and die. For the artist, to deny creativity is to wither and die, at least as regards the soul...which is so finely attuned to the holy in space and time that its longings compel expression of the ineffable in matter, each utterance a one-time thing, every one-time thing an image of God. Artists seem to know where their gifts come from and that to work is to worship."

Although the small sampling of craft artists for this story formally worships in a surprisingly broad range of religions—Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Native American, Tibetan and Zen Buddhist, and pantheistic—their differences are superficial compared to their basic belief in the creative process and the need to surrender their ego to something greater. If, for instance, they were to meet in the Sistine Chapel and look up at Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam," they would agree that that is exactly what creativity feels like. Their god may not in any way resemble Michelangelo's, but they would agree that if the spirit of life is bestowed through the hand, then it must be the work of that spirit that comes through *their* hands, and that in doing their work and being true to who they are, they become part of an eternal cycle.

The craft artist's task, the earthly portion of this sacred relationship, begins after a seemingly lackadaisical Adam (his arm resting on his knee, his finger barely extended) is touched by a loving and enthusiastic God. Virginia Stroud, an award-winning Cherokee/Creek artist living in Oklahoma, has felt this



When Susan Lightcap, an Asheville, North Carolina, book artist, was working on "To Be of the Earth," the piece shown above, she says she had "a blood-level understanding of why people have taken natural artifacts and honored them in art and totemic objects." The piece is made of silk, suede, amber, and bone. It also features the talon of a red hawk and a saying based on a poem by John Soos.

divine spark many times in her 38-year career. For example, she recalls an experience in 1987 that broadened her approach to her work. "I sensed an invisible presence in the car with me," Stroud explains. "I heard a voice saying, 'You need to paint the helpers and let people know we are available to assist. Get people used to our presence.' I had an impression then of taking my figures from the canvas and letting them go onto a different kind of canvas—the bench."

Her benches often feature women and children sitting to-

gether, their backs and legs intricately cut out and painted. "When you sit down," Stroud explains, "you are sitting on their laps so to speak—their painted skirts are their laps. And that's how close our helpers, or what some people call angels or guides, are to us."

Stroud tells stories of spirits playing in her studio, casting shadows, turning on lights and swishing paint brushes at 3:00 A.M. "I start every day by burning cedar, and I say prayers throughout the day while I work, such as 'Channel through me, let me be an instru-

ment. Hey, what do you think? Any assistance would be greatly appreciated.' I talk to them, so why wouldn't they show up? It's just that I'm always surprised when they do!"

For Virgil Perry his calling came as a result of a prayer. He remembers what happened after his son-in-law brought home a small cypress stump from a flea market. "My granddaughter said, 'Oh Grandpa, carve me a unicorn,' and I said, 'Baby, I can't even carve,' but she wanted one, so I whittled on this thing and got nothing but

chips. Then I went to that flea market and bought five stumps, came back home, and whittled them away to nothing. Finally, I took a hunk of this wood and just looked at it, and I said, 'Lord, show me this unicorn.' And believe me, that's all I could see in that piece of wood—it had a flowing mane, the horn—and it just came out great. I knew then that I hadn't done this thing by myself. I figured I was onto something, and [ever since] I've just been carving like wild."

Kathleen Sweeney, a leather artist in Austin, Texas, has a similar explanation of her work. For more than 12 years she traveled to shows, although today she divides her attention between her craft and work as a yoga teacher and Reiki master. This poses no problem, however, as she sees all three disciplines as channels for divine energy. "It's not coming from me but through me," Sweeney explains.

Although not everyone receives such direct communication, their experiences can be just as profound. Their revelations come more from the inner work that Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan referred to when he said, "I searched and searched and searched for God but only found myself. So I searched and searched and searched for myself, and I found God."

"My work is about me trying to present something that is inside myself," says Glenn Gilmore, a North Carolina metalsmith who coaxes surprisingly intricate designs from such rigid materials. "The work and the quality of the work reflect how I feel and the fact that I live in a rural area where you can see the sun come up, the leaves come out, and understand that there is an ongoing process that is more than just getting up every day. The other night I could hear things in the woods and feel the wind blowing, and I thought about how amazing the power of nature is. There is a feeling and spirit out there that gives direction."

Another metalsmith, David Mazzarella from Ithaca, New York, expresses a strong attachment to a higher power. "I feel that I have a

reason for being here. I think that's a lot of what my sculpture is all about—trying to figure out my place on this earth with the rest of humanity. The production line is my bread and butter, but the other pieces are an opportunity for me to experiment and say something about my work."

The transformative qualities of craft-making have earned respect within the healing and scientific communities as well. Art therapy,

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*David Mazzarella, metalsmith*

for example, has increased in popularity in the past two decades, unlocking inner resources that can heal body and soul. Ceramic artist Judy Miller found that her craft work healed an empty place when it introduced her to her faith.

"We grew up with a Jewish identity but not a relationship with the religion," Miller explains from her Soquel, California, studio. "About two years ago, I designed a plate that had two white candles in the forefront. People asked me if they were Sabbath candles, which I'd never even *seen* at that point. Shortly after that I was doing a craft fair in Florida for the first time, and I decided to design some pieces that were specifically Jewish, such as plates depicting a Jewish wedding, lighting the Friday night candles, and a Seder plate for Passover."

In order to make these new plates with the heart and emotion that she has brought to her work

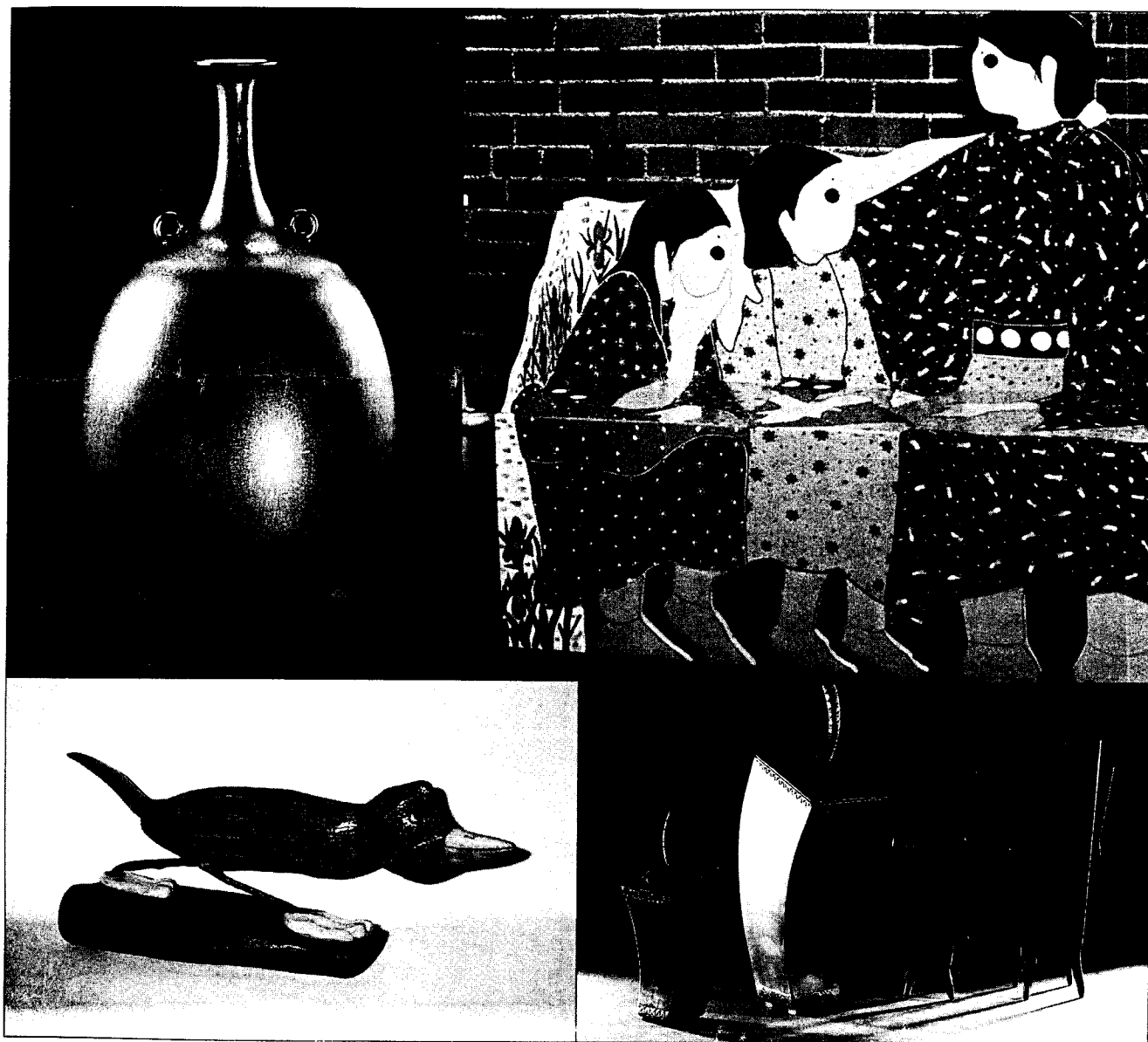
for 25 years, Miller had to talk to people who shared her heritage. Through those conversations, she got a sense of what these rituals mean and how they come from a life-enhancing place. "I learned that our traditions and rituals can be a binding experience, a coming together," she explains. "It seems a special moment to let go of all the *tsuris* (a Yiddish word meaning trouble, travail) of the past week and rest, be with family, and take the time to experience the goodness of one's life. I didn't have that in my life, and I felt what a loss that had been. I had been asking myself, who am I? It has been so fulfilling to have an understanding of this tribe that I come from."

She has since begun to make menorahs and mezuzahs, using the bright colors, flowers, dogs, and cats typically found in her work. "This experience has given me the inspiration to make work that gives back, that offers people work that depicts or can be used during the most sacred moments of their lives."

The healing power of crafts and creativity, however, does not always engender a joyful experience. Virgil Perry can feel exhausted after working with only a small carving knife, and David Mazzarella admits to sometimes going somewhere dark and lonely.

"I pretty regularly go through a personal crisis when I am challenged design-wise," Mazzarella states. "I often have a very difficult time. I get depressed and have to draw very far inward and exclude my family to a certain extent. I have to work on it very, very hard."

Like others on the journey toward self-realization, craft artists can be drawn to that mysterious place where they must suffer the alchemist's nigredo in order to find the deep center, the Self or God. In a 1970 presentation to The Analytical Psychology Club of New York entitled "The Value and Meaning of Depression," Esther Harding shared keen insight into why the artist working as God's partner might be called there. According to the Jungian analyst and author, depression can be a signal that "our



Shown above (clockwise, beginning from the top left photo) are a ceramic vase by Ipswich, Massachusetts, craftsman Hideaki S. Miyamura; a painted wooden bench by Oklahoma-based, Cherokee/Creek artist Virginia Stroud; metal vessels that are the creation of Ithaca, New York, metalsmith David Mazzearella; and a charming wooden bird carved by Alabama folk artist Virgil Perry.

wholeness, our individuation, the Self, can no longer wait while we follow egotistic ways or even seek for legitimate ego fulfillment." It is the Self, she asserted, that "brings us, drives us, into the wilderness of depression," where God waits to communicate with us "if only we will attend to the vision."

For these craft artists, the courage to journey through the dark times also means saying no to fear, facing the uncertainties of the marketplace and self-employment,

and working with an open heart. "Choosing love over fear—I like approaching my work that way," says Elvie Zell. "I do things because I want to rather than because I am afraid. I think it's sad that so many people keep jobs that they seem to hate because they are attracted to the 401(k) plan. The time of our life is our most valued commodity. I'm comfortable plunging ahead with things; I feel that it will work out."

Susan Lightcap knows a similar peace. "I grew up not trusting

myself very much," she says, "but I have learned to trust people, to trust the rent and insurance will be paid. God is always, always there, so I've quit worrying." She practices this trust every time she lets a book go without payment, when she offers certain customers the chance to pay her in installments. "I just know when the person walks around holding the book and cannot put it down. I tell them, 'If this is your book, I want you to take it; I want you to pay me

for it over time, with barter or any way you want to pay me for it. Let me honor your process of knowing who you are, of being exactly who the spirit wants you to be." In the five years that she has followed this policy, no one has ever failed to pay.

Throughout time, artisans and crafts artists have manifested God in sacred objects, from cathedrals and crosses to vestments and vessels. Lightcap, who had been a costume designer and weaver earlier in her career, recounts that her greatest satisfaction while weaving came when she wove vestments for liturgical purposes. Today while most craft artists do not focus on overtly religious objects, some employ symbols and ritualistic designs in their work. Judy Miller, Virgil Perry, David Mazzarella, and James Meyer have used Jewish, Christian, and Eastern religious symbols in their work. But it is only with great thought and care that Hideaki S. Miyamura, a ceramic artist working in Ipswich, Massachusetts, makes Japanese tea bowls.

"Tea bowls are very much a spiritual vessel," Miyamura states. "Some tea masters can tell the spirit of the craftsperson through the bowl. I make tea bowls only on custom order—I'm scared to, I'm afraid to make them. Spirit tea bowls require a certain kind of commitment."

Miyamura, who makes graceful vessels in a high-fired porcelain with a rare, traditional Chinese glaze known as *yohen tenoku*, explains the custom of not signing tea bowls. "Ancient teabowls have no signature. Tea ceremony people like no intention in the bowls. If artists put their signature, that means the craftsman's intention is in it. We have to surrender our ego. When you make art, most people sign, but the tea master says that is not good, because too much of the ego is in it."

He laughs when he admits that he signs his artwork. "I'm not a good potter," he jokes. But the rules are different in America, and sales of craft work contribute to an

important balance between the heavenly and earthly realms. The buying public, in other words, is not profane but rather an important element in the equation. As Lightcap says, "They honor my work by paying for these pieces."

Mary Doering and her husband, Mikael Carstanjen, who live in Orleans, Massachusetts, have earned their living making functional and sculptural pottery for 25 and 30 years, respectively. "I chose

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pastoral counselor*

to be a craftsperson," Doering states, "because it filled a need in me to make something that I felt was valuable. When I sell it, which is part of the whole process of supporting myself, I feel satisfaction from making something with my hands. In turn, it has made a living for us. If those who buy it are in a reflective moment, they will have some awareness about this person who made their mug, and this interacts with them in their life on something more than a superficial level. That is the moment when I would like to think about our work speaking well about the ideals and principles that have become our way of life."

As God speaks to us through these artists, we join those who while holding Susan Lightcap's books experience something magical. Years after their meeting, Lightcap holds back still-strong emo-

tions when she relates the story of a disenfranchised Native American tribal elder who was spellbound by a particular book with a bird claw holding a large amber bead on a purple suede cover. Eventually, he asked her to tell him what she experienced while making it. "I had this feeling that a door had opened," Lightcap recalls, "that I was being invited to a different reality of this person. I told him that something had awakened in me, and I could see back before people, before religion. I had a blood-level understanding of why people have taken natural artifacts and honored them in art and totemic objects. When I looked up, he had water flowing out of his eyes. He had felt called to return to his work as a shaman, but had been awaiting a sign."

She can tell many more of these stories, but none more compelling than the one involving a woman and the daughter she gave up at birth. Prior to their reunion 24 years later, Lightcap was commissioned by a mutual friend to make books for them. She created two identical books with hearts on the covers. When the books were opened, the hearts broke; when the cover closed, the hearts were whole again. "I felt there was a real brokenness that was soon to be mended. Before their meeting, they each wrote their hopes, fears, everything associated with the reunion. At the reunion, they exchanged the books and found they had written almost identical entries. I've never met them, but they wrote me letters and blessed me for being a part of their process. This is so rewarding to me. I don't make very much money, but that's not the point. I feel very blessed that I get to be a catalyst in an amazing process. It is a wonderful way of life."

Lynda McDaniel, a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C., has been involved in the American craft movement for 25 years, both as an artist and writer. She regularly contributes to craft publications, such as *American Style* and *NICHE* as well as other magazines including *Country Living*, *Southwest Art*, and *Chile Pepper*.