

NORTH BENNET STREET SCHOOL
GRADUATION

Boston, Massachusetts
June 2, 2006

Barry Moser moved to western Massachusetts from his native Tennessee to pursue art. He taught himself to etch and engrave wood and studied printing and typography at Gehenna Press. Since 1969--when he composed his first line of hand-set type--Moser has illustrated some of the century's most beautiful books, including *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking Glass*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. After four year of work, he completed, in 1999, the *Pennyroyal Caxton Bible*---composing over 230 engravings---to become the first person since 1865 to design and print both the Old and New Testaments as a solo artist.

First, I want to thank you for the honor of your invitation to be here with you on this very important and happy day in your lives. I am honored because I revere craftsmanship and because every day of my life I am indebted to craftspeople of various stripes: punch-cutters, typographers, paper makers, tool makers, and especially book binders. God bless them all. Without them, what passes for my work would be a shabby affair indeed. It is also an honor to speak in this very historic church. I hope I don't attract lightning.

For the past few weeks I have been mulling over what I would say to you all this afternoon, and a lot of thoughts and ideas have come and gone, prompted by words running the gamut from Gautama Buddha to the German type designer, Rudolph Koch. All of whom had important things to say about devotion to work and the importance of craftsmanship. But through it all, as I told my wife a couple of weeks ago, my thoughts just kept migrating back to my childhood, and to my Uncle Bob, and to less august words than those of the Buddha, Koch, or any of the others. So, I'm going to begin by telling you a story.

I grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee. My dad sold sporting goods. My mom was a house wife (as they said back then). My Uncle Floyd was a Klansman who rode shot-gun on a chain gang. The rest of the family were pig-thieves and reformed drunks turned pious Christians who idolized Eugene McCarthy and Adlai Stevenson—go figure. But it is my Uncle Bob Cox, a good man from Chicago, who figures in this story.

Bob was a salesman for a surgical supply company in Chattanooga. He spent four or five days a week on the road traveling in Tennessee and Kentucky selling

and demonstrating the newest medical appliances and surgical tools. Sometimes he scrubbed and went into the operating theater with the surgeons to show them how the devices and tools worked—such were the more casual and less litigious times back then. He usually came home on a Friday evening, though sometimes it was late on a Thursday night. His homecoming was always a cause for rejoicing for my brother and me, especially on Thursday nights when we saw, from our bedroom window, the lights go on in his back yard and heard his dog barking, signaling that he was home. His being home an extra day that weekend meant that there would be a pretty good chance that I'd be able to spend a few hours with him in his workshop. I might even get to show him the results of some project I had been working on that week, a model airplane, maybe, or a ship—or perhaps a picture frame I was trying to make for my mother. I am sure that he heaped words of encouragement on me because he was, at heart, a generous and gentle man. A good teacher as well as a good craftsman. But the thing I remember his saying to me most frequently was

“Jesus H. Christ, son, that is the most half-assed goddamned thing I've ever seen in my entire life. What the hell got into you?”

These affectionate and encouraging remarks were usually heaped upon me in his workshop, which was in the basement of his house — just two doors up the street from ours. His comments were typically occasioned by some mitred joint that I had struggled with, gave up on, and glued into place without a proper fit, thinking that I could just fill the gaps with plastic wood and sand it down. Or maybe I left a brush in solvent, or used a nail instead of a screw. Who knows?

And to drive that point home he recited a little ditty to me, over and over, time and again—and it became in time, something of a mantra for me. In turn it is a mantra that I have been reciting to my students for forty some-odd years. It goes like this:

When a job is first begun
Never leave it till it's done.
Be the labor large or small
Do it well or not at all.

In that short, quirky little quatrain lies the genesis of this man's reverence for craftsmanship. In it lies the fifty-year history of failures and successes of my long-fought battles with the making of things more serious in nature than model airplanes—and there have been far more failures than successes, I have to say. Better advice cannot be given to a person who wants to be an artist or a craftsman.

Bob died of a heart attack a few months before my twelfth birthday, and I wonder what other advice he might have given me had he lived longer. I wonder how much better a craftsman I could have been had I had a little more time with

him making birdhouses and bric-a-brac in his basement. Good advice has a way of being handed on, handed down from one generation to the next, from one craftsman to another—from Bob Cox, to me, to you.

Over the years I have tried to heed my uncle's advice and to make it part of the life blood that courses through my work. And along the way, as it happens to those of us who devote our lives to making things, I have germinated some advice of my own, advice that comes from the well of my own experience and I would like to share it with you this afternoon. It consists of five brief but major points:

The most important advice I can give you all— and forgive me if this seems glib—is to work. Work. Work. Work. Everyday. At the same time everyday, for as long as you can take it—work, work, work.

You can't depend on talent. I've taught for over forty years and never met an untalented student. Talent is as common as house dust, and—in the long run—it's about as valuable as teats on a boar. I think it was Melville who said that there is nothing more common than unsuccessful people with talent. So remember that nothing is as valuable to solid craftsmanship as is the habit of work, and work has to become a habit. Has to become something that you cannot NOT do. It has to become bone within you.

And, by the way—just to show you that I wasn't spoofin' about the Buddha—he said that your most important work is to find your work, and when you have found it, to devote your entire being to it.

And Mark Twain, one of our greatest literary craftsmen, said that the happiest people on earth are those who find joy and fulfillment in their work. Amen, and amen.

Two—listen to music. Sure, listen to whatever blows your skirt up, whether it's the Dixie Chicks, Benny Goodman, or Mississippi John Hurt. But for God's sake listen to Bach. Especially Bach. Listen to his Art of the Fugue and The Goldberg Variations. Listen to them over and over and over. Everyday, day after day, until you begin to sense, if not understand, what Bach is up to. Then implement what you intuit from your listening into your own work, whether that work is lock smithing, violin making, book binding, or clock-making. I don't care if you don't like classical music, or if you feel that it has nothing to do with what you do. Do it. It is invaluable. Let the music fill your mind. Let it flow over you and into you until you are aware of nothing else. Bach—and others of his ilk— will teach you form and structure and rhythm and all sorts of things you've never imagined—if you will only listen.

Three—be willing to fail. William Faulkner said that to not fail is to be perfect, and that if we ever did anything perfect nothing would remain but to cut the throat.

Experiment and fail. Move on. Always keep in motion and finish the job, even if it is not exactly what you hoped it would be. Even if it is not as good as it

could be. The fact is that it will never be as good as it could be, and that's ok. It's ok because it's all part of the never-ending, self-perpetuating growth process—and failure, my friends, is the foundation of that process.

I've done over three hundred books and not one of them is perfect. But I'll tell you this: I would rather have the three hundred-odd imperfect books that comprise my history, that measure my battles with mediocrity and complacency, and that mark the vectors of my journey through my art form—than to have one perfect book which would comprise nothing but its own perfect self.

Four— Without doubt making a violin, or repairing one, is (or can be) an art. So too with book binding, clock-making, carpentry, furniture making. All the crafts. However, never think of yourself as an artist. Certainly never refer to yourself as an artist. Leave that up to someone else. To do otherwise is to be self-congratulatory and arrogant, and God only knows we see far too much arrogant, self-inflated, self-important pomposity in the arts today. So don't you go adding your own feculence to that cesspool. Work. And fail. That's all that's important. And in doing so try your hardest to be the best that you can be, and try your hardest to make the things you make as well as they can be made. Make them for the ages. Don't squander your work and your gifts by pandering to the cool, to the silliness of fashion, or to art or craft Lite (or to anything Lite, for that matter).

Five—Teach. If not in a school, at least hire on apprentices when you have established your own workshop. Pass your craft on. Do not let the hard-earned expertise of your mind, your heart, and your hands die and molder in the grave with you. It is, in fact, your responsibility as a craftsman to pass your knowledge and techniques along to the next and subsequent generations.

More I cannot advise you, except (as corny and prosaic as it may seem) to put love first in your life: love of your work, and of other people, and of yourself, and of whatever things of the spirit move and motivate you. Have fun and maintain a fierce sense of humor. There are very few things that are so serious or important that they can't be laughed at, or even poked a little fun at—especially politicians and televangelists.

Avoid the cute, the corny, & the obvious in your work.

Never underestimate the value of luck.

Practice safe sex.

Don't do heavy drugs.

Don't get drunk and drive a car.

Get plenty of sleep.

Eat your greens.

And never do anything half-assed.

Congratulations; I wish you the very best.

