

Heat and Pressure: Lessons from the Fire

When a potter prepares to fire a pot, he will often first fire test pots to determine if the clay being used will withstand the heat and pressure of the kiln. The potter may also place small vessels of different glazes and finishes into the kiln in order to see how materials react to the heat and pressure inside. Such is the history of the pots, pitchers, and test-firing bowls that I discovered in the Sowell Collection of Texas Tech University. On the side of one of the small glaze bowls were markings that read, “Red Clay 2400° F.” Inside the bowl, the once flat, matte, red-orange clay had transformed into an iridescent, shimmery, glass-like purple. The molecules of clay had undergone a process of extreme breaking and stretching that lead to a totally new molecule, one that could never go back to its original state. The change is permanent.

The ceramic pots and pitchers are prototypes of the centerpieces used in a restoration and reconciliation ceremony between members of the Comanche Nation and Texas Tech University, a ceremony described by Henry Chappel in “Bones of Conciliation.” In it, he describes how these ceramic pieces were crafted by Richard Rowland, a friend of Barry Lopez who is also a renowned potter living in Oregon. Chappell describes how Lopez and Rowland dug the clay for these pots in Tule Canyon, located in the Texas Panhandle, where in September 1874 thousands of the Comanche’s horses were slaughtered by the US cavalry.

Barry Lopez, who helped with the creation of these pots and pitchers, spent his first years in a two-parent household in Mamaroneck, a suburb of New York City. Early in Lopez’s life, his father, Jack Brennan, moved the family to Reseda, a town in Southern California. Brennan then divorced Mary, Lopez’s mother, and moved to Florida to be

with his previous wife who he had never actually divorced (Tydeman, 3). Lopez, and his younger brother, were plucked from a two-parent home in a suburb of New York and plopped into an industrially booming city in the commotion of Southern California. His mother, recently divorced, was then forced to work two teaching jobs to provide for the family.

In every divorce there is a lot of heat and pressure. A simple sentence can rekindle the furious flame of anger and an unkind expression can cause one to feel a huge weight on one's shoulders. Can the heat ever be quelled? Will the pressure ever relent?

On my seventh birthday, my parents finalized their divorce. I did not see any signs that my parents' relationship was anything short of perfection. To me then, it was a normal birthday. We celebrated by having a handful of friends over that day, and a couple stayed the night. My parents had done a good job of hiding their struggles. I had no idea anything had changed until I heard my parents yelling at each other a week after my birthday. I can remember my mom telling me sternly to go to my room and shut the door. I went to my room, but kept the door cracked with my ear pressed against the opening. This was the first time I'd heard my parents fight. I cannot remember the specific words, but each one seemed to shake the foundation of our house. My dad slammed the front door behind him as he left. I held back tears and lied to my mom when she asked if I had heard anything. My room was my refuge the next few days as boxes were filled, and slowly, all references to my dad in our house were taken down and stowed away.

Anyone who has been a child of a divorce can attest to its soul-crushing weight. It consumes every thought of every day. If you tarry in the endless depths of the sadness that comes with divorce, you will end up a cynic and a pessimist. This, however, is not a paper about divorce. For I could analyze the ashes, writing in detail about each and every particle, its composition, the substance that once was, or its texture, whether fine or coarse, or even the way that it feels when you rub it between your fingers. But this would be pointless, for I am far more interested in the creature that rises out of the ashes, transformed and renewed.

When clay goes into a kiln, it is weak. One of two things will happen inside. Either the clay will crack under the heat and pressure, which are too great for the clay to withstand, or it will be hardened, growing more tough and firm than ever before. If the clay survives, it will be able to stand for centuries in that exact form. Heat and pressure produce a substance that is able to stand on its own; one that is independent. Therefore, independence is the result of overcoming hardship.

In 1974, Barry Lopez submitted his various short stories to several magazines. He kept a chart, which is now stored in the Sowell Collection, that showed all his submissions and the answers that he received in regards to publishing his work (Box 21 Folder 18). Out of twenty-five editors or publishers contacted that year, eighteen would say no. Several sent back cards with the refusal to publish Lopez's work. Every refusal another log on the fire, increasing the hardship – the heat and pressure – that Lopez endured. Lopez persevered through the difficulty. He continued to send manuscripts to publishers at magazines and journals, in hopes that some might accept, and eventually they would.

I was struck when looking at the chart and cards in the Sowell Collection. I cannot imagine the difficulty Lopez faced when the weight of his future rested upon his work's acceptance. It is a miracle that any writer could withstand such overwhelming opposition. I look to Lopez with awe when I see how he persevered through hardship. I was reminded that the hardships of life build on each other. The hardships that Lopez faced in the divorce are what allow him to withstand the heat and pressure he would encounter later in life. Each hardship we face builds on the foundation of the last. Just as the potter will build on the basic clay pot with different glazes and finishes, so the hardships of life build on us, each a new layer that adds to the thickness, and the beauty of the final product.

So what keeps you going through the times when it seems like the whole world is against you? What do you fall back upon? When those hard times come, it's your foundation that matters, where you plant your feet. At the time, I didn't think I would make it through my parent's divorce. I thought that the weight on my back would crush me. However, looking back at that time, filled with heat and pressure, I can see that the end result was independence. I am now able to stand firm, just like a clay pot, through any trial I will face.

Works Cited

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