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forging a bond

by Angelo Acosta

The word "forge" is the act of heating metal and hammering it into shapes as well as the name for the blacksmith's furnace. More than these literal uses, we use the word when we talk about forging ahead - making slow, steady and determined progress on a journey through dense underbrush. And what about when we forge friendships? We create bonds of meaning and relationship.

The key to understanding what Spencer-based West Virginian artist-blacksmith Jeff Fetty does when he creates is represented through the word forge. He uses his coal forge as an extension of himself, coaxing life into hard, unyielding iron. It is the slow,

steady and determined process of an artist's journey through creation that yields his organic forms like vines, flowers and birds. Once finished, he has also forged a bond. The work itself becomes an instrument to connect his mind and hands to each client or observer. Through that bond, his work has meaning.

Fetty has been forging more than 40 years and has represented West Virginia across the globe. He has created metal work nationally for acclaimed writer Tom Clancy, the Clinton White House and, internationally, as far away as The Globe Theatre in London and for French fashion designer Yves St. Laurent.



SOTA What sparked the decision for you to become a blacksmith and begin creating art with metal?

Jeff I'm 60 years old and when I was a teenager, 18 years old, I started dating this girl whose father was a blacksmith. I vividly remember going to pick her up for a date and I'd never seen a blacksmith before. I drove up the driveway and there was a blacksmith's shop. Pulling in I could see him pull a hot piece of steel out of the forge and put it on the anvil. There was the visual of the hot sparks and the ringing of the anvil and the turning of the blower to put more fuel to the forge and the smell of coal smoke. I was just mesmerized. So, my date was in the house waiting for me to pick her up, and I was down at her dad's blacksmith shop turning the blower and trying to learn more about blacksmithing and thinking this was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. Immediately I knew blacksmithing was my destiny. Immediately I knew I had

to be a blacksmith and, whatever it took for me to figure out how to make my living being a blacksmith, I had to do that. It was my destiny from day one. More than forty years later, here I am in a large well-equipped studio with employees producing work that goes all over the world.

SOTA Did you know immediately that blacksmithing was going to be a creative endeavor?

Jeff Not necessarily. I think that evolved. What really turned me on and inspired me and caught my attention was the fact that you could take a cold, dead, inert piece of metal, heat it up to over 2,000 degrees, and treat it as if it was a piece of clay. I could make anything out of it.

To back up to the story above, this girlfriend I was chasing, I ended up marrying her. After a few dates like that, I figured out I needed to marry her. After 40 years, we are still happily married with grandkids running around here tonight. So it is pretty cool.



This Entrance Was Created For A Local Oil And Gas Developer
Utilizes Recycled Materials From That Industry. The Various Patinas Used Are Harmonized Through The Texture Of This Weathered Steel

Initially I was really enamored with the fact that blacksmiths could make their own tools. I loved that fact that you could make your own hoe or screwdriver or hammers or horseshoes or chisels. In the beginning, I was more into the farm-blacksmithing aspect of it and making tools. Then the creative light bulb came on one day and I realized I could make a plant hanger or fireplace tools or a trivet or hinge. Then I could make a stairway, and the rest is history. Then I started taking classes and traveling around and hanging out with the best blacksmiths I could find in Germany, Switzerland, England, Italy, and all around this country as well. I'm a firm believer of, "If you want to be the best at something, no matter what it is, you associate yourself with the best." I was fortunate enough to hang out with the best blacksmiths in the world.

SOTA Where do your ideas for sculptures come from?

Jeff I'm still trying to figure that out. Early on, one of my mentors said to

me, and this has really stuck with me, "If you want to be an artist, you must live the life of an artist and surround yourself with beauty and things that inspire you - whether it is traveling, painting, your garden or beautiful music." I think if one does that, and makes that effort, the design and inspiration will reveal itself to you. One of my favorite sayings is from Ansel Adams: "Luck favors the prepared mind." I've had some luck along the way, but at the same time I've had something to back it up with.

SOTA Do you create with different types of metals and which ones are your favorite to use?

Jeff Basically, 95 percent or more of what I use is steel. I do some copper, bronze and brass work, but the medium I am most comfortable with is steel. With that said, I've spent a lot of time developing different patinas to enhance the steel and make it sometimes not look like steel. But I'm definitely most comfortable with steel.



Tree Of Life

Wall sculpture of logo for "Tree Of Life Society", Trinity Episcopal Church / Indianapolis, Indiana
21" x 22"



SOTA What type of skills are required to become a great blacksmith?

Jeff There are a lot of skills one needs to become a good blacksmith or a great blacksmith, but the number one thing is the desire to become a top notch craftsman. The one thing I learned early on is, unfortunately, I have to be a better businessman than an artist. I don't necessarily like that, but it is really important. If I don't make enough money to keep my business going, I'm not going to be able to do my work. Basically I work for the freedom to do the things I want to do, not only travel, but to be able to accept my next commission and take my craft to the highest level I can. To push the envelope. If I can't pay the electric bill or pay my employees, that's not going to happen. So, I did learn early on and took some business classes. To be a great artist and blacksmith I have to be a good businessman.

SOTA What kind of fuel do you use?

Jeff I use coal and propane gas for my

forges. Basically I'm still using the same techniques blacksmiths have used for centuries - the forge to heat the metal and the hammer to hit the metal and the anvil to shape the metal on. I'm using century-old techniques in the same way they were used years ago. I do use a modern propane torch, but I also use coal every day.

SOTA Have any modern tools changed or made your creative work easier in your shop?

Jeff I do have power tools. I think it is imperative, if you are going to make a living as a blacksmith, that you have a power hammer. I remember the older guys, years ago, would say, "Oh, the old-timers, they didn't have a power hammer." Well, this one I'm using was made in 1898 and the ones I used in Europe were made in 1698. A power hammer is really imperative because you are able to move a lot more metal than you could otherwise. I do use various presses and welders, but it is basically the hammer, forge and anvil.



We don't have a lot of modern tools.

SOTA Has the advancement of technology such as CAD (Computer Aided Design) affected your process?

Jeff I'm old-school. I do much better with a straightedge, a ruler, a copy machine and a variety of pencils. Something that is really important to me is to make my drawings by hand. I just feel that connection between my brain to my hand. It doesn't have to go through a computer. I know blacksmiths that have used CAD and had great success with it. I really don't have any interest in it. I can do better the old-fashioned way.

SOTA How do you manage larger projects and what type of planning is required for them?

Jeff It is definitely a juggling act to keep everyone in the loop and up to date with my progress when I do the large commissions. If you are working with architects and designers, which often I am, you have to keep them happy and keep the contractors happy

and the clients happy. And me too, I like to be happy. So it is definitely a juggling act. Whenever I am offered a large-scale commission I start with the site. It is really important to me to do a site visit and look for clues. I listen very carefully to what the designers are doing and check out the style of architecture of the house. I try to get a sense of the client's style of art. The last thing I'd want to do is put a set of Art Deco gates on a colonial house. It is important to make sure the finished work looks like it is part of the master plan. Whether the house is 200 years old or just being built, it is important to make it blend in perfectly.

I take a lot of photographs, print them out large, and transpose my designs and drawings onto them to make a presentation. I'm always working with the other tradesmen there, the concrete guys and the carpenters. You have to have a good rapport with the crane operator who will be lifting up the work to make sure it is being



Coffee Table
18" h X 60" w X 36" d (oval)
Forged Steel With Glass







Bailey Table
30"h X 60" w X 16"d
Forged Steel, Bronze
Patina W/ Marble Top



Birds In Flight

Captures the qualities of freedom and discovery that a client observed in the flight of the young vultures in the New River Gorge and are expressed by adolescences of every species. Very free flowing metalwork atop pedestals mounted on rotating bases so that the view of the sculptures can be changed.

rigged and hung properly. When you are doing the bigger projects it is really stressful, that's for sure. I've done enough of them that I know how to make sure the bases are covered.

SOTA Other than the logistics, do you have a creative process? Are you more inspired by a space or by what a client wants?

Jeff I like the fact that I'm working closely with the client and designers involved. As we all know, the creative process doesn't happen on schedule. Sometimes I'll have a solution almost immediately and sometimes it will take a couple weeks. I like to think it is collaboration, but at the end of the day, it is my work. Back to what I was saying earlier, I listen, listen, listen, listen to what they want and try to find clues. I could give you an example of a recent commission...

SOTA I think that would be interesting for our readers.

Jeff There is a client we just finished a large sculpture for who lives on a gorge. He contacted me about doing a piece of sculpture for his landscaping, so I went there to visit him and he started pointing me in all these (creative) directions I really didn't want to go. At the same time, I was respectful and listened to what he had to say. But the one thing he kept talking about during our meeting was living on this mountaintop on the edge

of a gorge, and one of his favorite things to do is to watch the baby vultures hatch out of their nest. So this guy was literally looking down the gorge into their nests. He would talk very enthusiastically about watching the adolescent vultures take off on their first flight. When people talk about vultures, you think about a big ugly bird on a fence post, but he was talking about the beauty of these young birds flying in the gorge and was very adamant and expressive with his hands. I watched the motion of his hands and the gestured drawings and came back to my studio and started drawing my interpretation of these young birds in flight. I made a presentation drawing and sent it to him, and he immediately apologized for trying to get into my thought process. He felt this was the perfect solution. This piece is a job we are going to install next week and it is one of my best pieces ever. I just love the piece called *Birds In Flight*. Another project I'm in the preliminary stages of, I'm a little reluctant to talk much about it, is for a city in northern India. They contacted me about doing a monumental piece of sculpture for their city. It is really quite down my alley. I think I can definitely give them what they want, but the interesting thing about this endeavor is that I would make the maquettes here in West Virginia and then go to India with one of my assistants and we would spend a month or two working in their metal working studios with their blacksmiths. Basically, they are hiring me as the designer and project coordinator. We would be building the piece on-site. That's the latest thing from Jeff Fetty Designs.

SOTA Is there another accomplishment you are especially proud of?

Jeff (laughing) Besides my grandchildren? There is a book published in Germany every year since the 1990s called International Metal Design Annual. It is the who's who of metal designers and blacksmiths in the world. They chose seven or eight every year. There have only been six Americans that have ever been chosen to be included in the book. In 2012, I was chosen as one of the top metal designers in the world. I remember getting these books back in the early 90s, and I have every copy. Just to see who's who. Then, boom. Here I am. My shop in Spencer, West Virginia, is one of the best metal shops in the world. That was a really big deal to me. About the same time, the Governor of West Virginia named me as a Distinguished West Virginian. That is usually an honor awarded to research doctors, scientists, and inventors (laughing), but not blacksmiths.

SOTA Do you have a personal philosophy about art's place in society?

Jeff I've spent a lot of time in underdeveloped counties working with blacksmiths and documenting blacksmiths, specifically in Mexico. I have been down there many times working on a book about the importance of blacksmiths who are doing agricultural forgings - much more so than art forgings. I'm not sure this is a question I can answer readily. First and foremost, I'm a blacksmith. I love taking a cold, dead, inert piece of metal, heating it up, and manipulating it like it is a piece of clay and making something that is going to last for

generations - whether it is a tool or whether it is a piece of art. It doesn't matter. Everyday I try to remember to say to myself as I light the forge, "I'm still getting away with it." I've been doing this for over 40 years. I'm 24/7. My work is my life and my life is my work. At night I keep a sketchbook next to my bed so I can capture creative ideas that come to me. Even though I make what is considered art, what really inspires me and is important to me about blacksmithing is that we can make tools. I love the fact that blacksmiths are considered the king of all craftsmen. Back in the day they made dental forceps for the dentist, chisels for the stone carvers, and hammers for the carpenters. I just love the fact that the blacksmith, at one time, was considered the most important member of any community, not like today (laughs). I'm also a photographer and when I started traveling in undeveloped countries, I was very pleasantly surprised that blacksmiths in Mexico, Egypt and India, in the small rural villages, are still a very important part of the community and still doing agricultural forgings. A project I have been working on over the past 15 years has been documenting these toolmakers. Those guys are the real heroes of the craft, not me. I'm making what people perceive as art. What they are making are tools that are still sustaining the community. When I go into their shops with cameras hanging around my neck and notepad in hand, they suspect I am not a blacksmith. When they find out I am a blacksmith, they ask me to step up to the anvil and make something. They are always very skeptical. When I heat up a piece of steel and transform it into something in front of their eyes they are

impressed. Then we all know we are brothers of our craft.

SOTA On these travels is there ever any kind of exchange of technique?

Jeff Absolutely. We learn from each other. More often than not I'm communicating through a translator. But once a piece of metal is hot, we don't need a translator. We are both seeing this piece transform into something special.

SOTA What advise could you give to those looking to learn blacksmithing?

Jeff Get a forge and an anvil, heat up a piece of metal, and start hitting it. That is what most of us did. I know that sounds easy for me, but it wasn't. I bought an anvil and a five gallon bucket of tools from a flea market, then borrowed a bag of coal- that is how I started. It comes down to desire. If you really want to become a blacksmith then you can, and it's a lot easier today than 40 years ago because of the Internet and all the resources and blacksmithing organizations. Artist Blacksmith's Association of North America is one, and they have conferences. When I started there was one blacksmithing book that was published in 1971 called The Art of Blacksmithing by Alex Bealer, and that was our Bible for years and years. It is a lot easier now than it was 40 years ago. There are a number of craft schools like the John C. Campbell Folk School and Touchstone Center for Crafts. There are classes everywhere, all around the country. The only thing I want to encourage is that the world needs more blacksmiths, and if there are any young aspiring blacksmiths out there, give me a call. I'd be more than happy get them on their way.

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