

Chapter 1

How It All Began (September – December 2003)

"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Arrival in the UK

I was trying to keep awake while waiting for my turn to have a chest X-ray in the early hours of the morning at London Heathrow Airport. After a long journey from Singapore, I arrived at the airport to find that I would not be granted entry to the United Kingdom (UK) unless I had a chest x-ray certificate to show that I was clear of SARS ⁽¹⁾. I was totally unprepared for this. It had never crossed my mind that I would need the certificate. The question that immediately loomed in my mind was, "Would the immigration officer send me back to Singapore?"

When he told me that I could get a chest X-ray done at the airport with immediate result, I could not express the relief I felt.

So, here I was, waiting for my turn to be x-rayed. Some fifteen hours ago, I was at Singapore Changi Airport, bidding farewell to the numerous friends and relatives who came to see me off. In fact, there were more friends than relatives. Now, after queuing at the UK immigration checkpoint for more than an hour, I was alone surrounded by strangers from many different nations waiting to be cleared by the UK immigration. I had all the papers needed to be granted entry – an acceptance letter from Emerson College, a bank statement to prove my financial ability to support myself, and a student visa for one year. What was lacking was just this X-ray certificate.

Another one and a half hours later, I was handed the proof that I was not infected by SARS. Finally getting through the immigration checkpoint, I picked up my two pieces of luggage from the baggage claim area, hurried out of the terminal to take a National Express coach to Gatwick Airport, and from there I took a taxi to Emerson College in East Sussex. The college had no main entrance or gate, according to the direction given on its registration letter. I was to ask the taxi

driver to stop at a big car park at the end of a long narrow lane from the village, Forest Row. It was about 3.30pm when I arrived, with weary eyes and an empty growling tummy. I had not had a bite to eat since touching down on British soil nine hours ago.

At the Emerson car park, I was greeted by a young Japanese guy. Michitaka, introducing himself as a student at the college, helped to carry my heavy luggage to the reception in Ruskin Hall, where I was given the key to my room at Pinetree House. The room was tiny, just enough space for a single bed with a pull-out storage drawer underneath, a small desk, and a minute cupboard to hang a few clothes. Never mind, what I needed desperately was to have a lie down and close my eyes.

Orientation

The next couple of days were just a blur. Jet lag was a contributing factor to the fuzziness, and it did not help to be bombarded with information given at the orientation talks conducted by the various staff members of the college, and to remember their names and faces. On top of this, it was quite overwhelming to be tossed into a sea of unfamiliar people from different parts of the world - new and old students with one common thread that linked us together - the English Language. Even for that, we had to attune to our different accents. This situation reminded me of my first time living in an international community in the mid-1980s. I stayed in the International Hall at Russell Square for a year while studying for my master's degree at the London School of Economics.

The student population in the college was around a hundred and fifty. About 40% were Asians - Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, one Chinese from the People's Republic of China and me the only Singaporean. The other major group were from the EU countries. The rest were from America - both North and South, Africa, Australia, Israel, Iceland, Norway, the Balkan and ex-Soviet Union states such as Lithuania. British citizens were a minority taking courses at the college. It was truly a potpourri of nationalities and cultures.

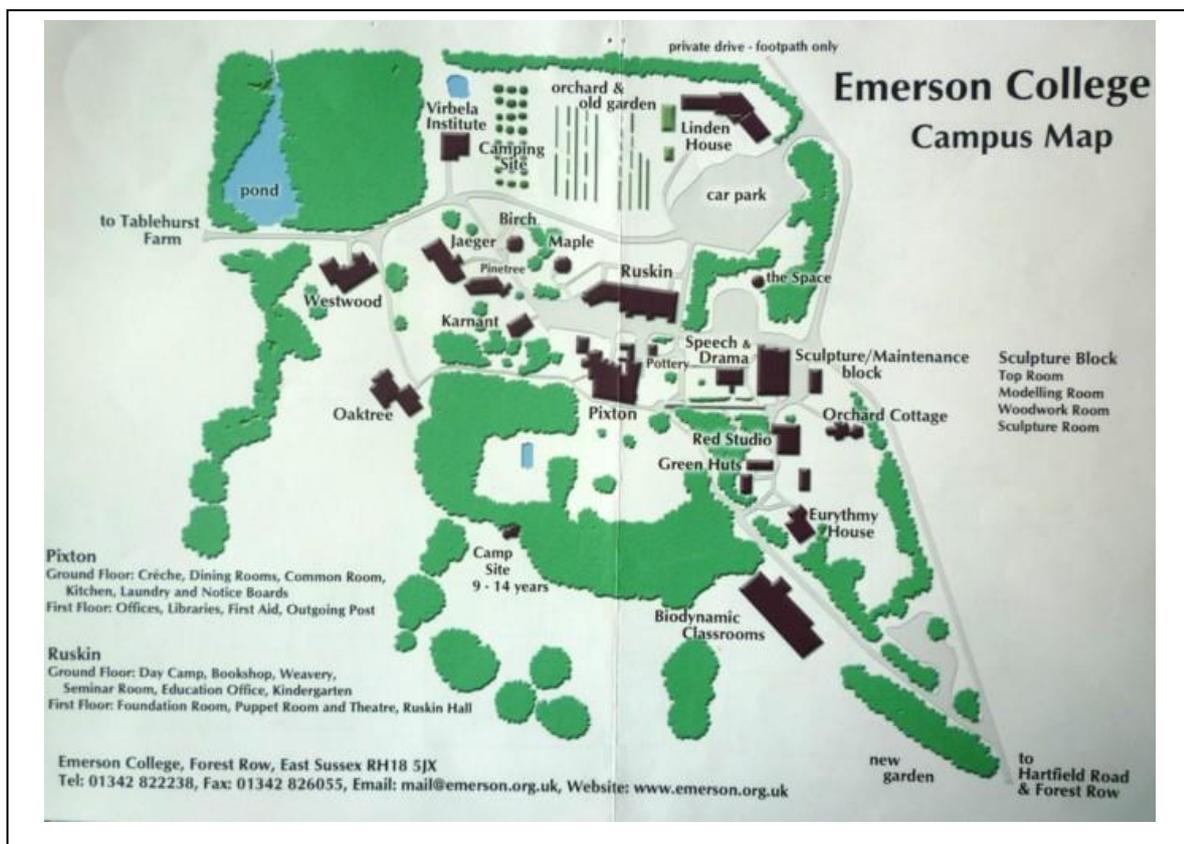
The new students were given a tour of the facilities. The campus was huge with Pixton House at its centre. This old white manor house, still with its original



Pixton House

sashed windows, had two dining rooms, a lounge, a big kitchen and a laundrette on the ground floor, administration offices, a meeting room and a huge library on the first level, and guest rooms in the attic. The next biggest building was the two-storey Ruskin Hall - a bookshop, weavery room, computer room and a seminar room occupied the ground floor. On the upper floor was an

auditorium with a stage, and a classroom.



The students' quarters were mainly two-storey houses named after trees such as Oak, Linden, Birch and Maple. My single room in Pinetree House had only two other rooms – both double rooms for couples. The student rooms, kitchen, bathroom, and toilet were on the first level. The ground level of Pinetree was the home for John Wilkes and his wife, both retired Emerson College teachers. It was a quiet house which suited me. The other student houses were bigger, each accommodating from ten to over thirty individuals. Not all studying at Emerson chose to stay on the campus. About half of them rented rooms in Forest Row,

which was about twenty minutes' walk from the College, via a footpath through Tablehurst Farm.

Students could choose either self-catering or meals provided by the college on weekdays during term time. There were three terms in a year, and one could change the meal option at the beginning of each term. I opted for the college's organic vegetarian meals for all three terms. Food was not catered for us during weekends. Each student house had a communal kitchen, where the inhabitants could prepare their own meals.

Emerson College was founded as an adult education centre for Anthroposophy by Francis Edmunds who was born in Lithuania in 1902, and it was named after an American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was one of his quotations that had inspired me to pursue a new path when I was contemplating leaving my job in Singapore.

He wrote: *"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."*

Edmunds was schooled in England, following his father's emigration to the United Kingdom and later he became a teacher. After he was introduced to Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, he started to run the first Steiner teacher training in the UK in the 1930s. He travelled to the United States where he helped to develop Waldorf schools after World War II. Emerson College in Forest Row became his office as well as his home after he set up the college in 1962. Together with his wife, they expanded and managed the adult education centre for Anthroposophy. He remained at the helm till his death on the campus in 1989, after which the management was transferred to a Trustee Board.

My Search for a New Life

Now, how did I get to know about this college? Why did I decide to resign from my full-time stable job in Singapore at the age of fifty, to start a new life as a full-time student in a foreign land?

The seeds for my decision was sown sometime in the year 2000. One day as I was walking in a busy commercial area in Singapore a poster caught my eye. "You

have gained the whole world, but have you lost your soul?". These words stared boldly at me. That set me thinking, 'Have I lost my soul'?

My parents had always encouraged me to have clear goals in my life. I had attached great importance to establishing a career and to financial independence. I had attained what society thought one should have to be successful. I had the five Cs that most Singaporean strived for – career, car, condominium, cash, and credit card. I had two apartments in Singapore. Before beginning my new life in Emerson College, I lived alone in a 150 square metres three-bedroom apartment in Cashew Heights Condominium, equipped with swimming pool, tennis courts, sauna bath, gymnasium, and immaculate garden grounds. The other apartment at Regent Heights was a two-bedroom unit which I had rented out since I collected the key from the developer in 2000.



My first condominium in Singapore, purchased in 1992

When I was studying at the University of Singapore (now renamed the National University of Singapore), the question of soul and meaning of life did come to my mind, but I was too busy to give much thought to it, as study and university activities took up a lot of my time. In addition, I had to give home tuition to school children to supplement my scholarship allowance.

With a B.Sc science degree, I joined the workforce in Singapore. My first job was a trainee programmer with the Port of Singapore Authority. How incredibly fast time flew from January to December each year. For over twenty-five years I worked long hours in all my jobs. Like many other working professionals in Singapore, there was not much time to plan for holidays, and I went for a vacation once every few years on packaged tours. Each year I had to carry

forward numerous days of my annual leave to the following year. I was still single and had no boyfriend.

What is life all about, besides work? Is procreation our purpose in life? Is seeking for fame and success life's purpose? Billions of people in this world have had their lives remain unrecorded in human history. So why bother? What about faith? My colleagues and friends had been trying to get me interested in attending church services. I did not want to embrace any religion. History has shown that strong conviction in one's own religion and intolerance towards others leads to conflict amongst nations and people of different beliefs.

Money and material things no longer satisfied me. I was getting tired and hungry for something else. I no longer wanted to work on the same job till retirement. I resented the usual order of life. Each evening after work I dragged my feet from my car park to my apartment, and the next morning I traced the same path back to my car. I wanted to live a more colourful life.

These thoughts initiated the search for a new direction in my life's journey. I read books on self-help by authors such as Deepak Chopra, attended talks on spirituality by Dr. Tan Kheng Khoo and went for meditation and Yoga classes. After over a year of seeking and reading, I felt the urge to take more positive action. No more procrastination. I made up my mind to leave my job, to do a course overseas, preferably in the countryside. Life is short. Nobody knows what could happen tomorrow. I had enough savings not to work for a year and to pay the instalments for my two mortgage loans.

Waldorf Education

In the course of my search, I stumbled upon Joyce Lye's Waldorf Education Interest Group. In 1998/99 Joyce poured her savings into opening 'Kampung Senang', a day care centre for the elderly, and a Waldorf Education based childcare centre in an HDB⁽²⁾ block of flats in Tampines. She had resigned from her job as the general manager of a bank to run Kampung Senang, relying mainly on volunteers. Waldorf or Steiner education based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner was something new to me. The more I learned about it, the more I was convinced that it was an excellent education system for children. In the summer

of 2001, I attended with Joyce and two other Singaporeans an Anthroposophical Conference in Hawaii. The conference, "At the Threshold – Seeking the Truly Human", in Waimea on the 'Big Island', was hosted by the Anthroposophical Society in Hawaii. It was my introduction to Anthroposophy – Rudolf Steiner's philosophy. At the conference, I met participants who studied at Emerson College in the UK and gave their testimonials of their wonderful learning experiences there. One of them was Harry Wong from China who three years later started the first Steiner School in Chengdu, planting the seeds of Waldorf Education in China.

As I did not want to go through the stress of pursuing an academic course and sitting for examinations in a tertiary institution, Emerson College seemed to suit my needs. However, I did not contact the college till more than a year later because I was contemplating studying in Australia as it would have been cheaper than the UK. Moreover, I wanted to continue to work one more year to be in a better financial situation when I resigned. During a holiday in Australia, I visited Parsifal College, a Steiner adult education centre in Sydney. I immediately dropped the idea of pursuing a course there. No, I did not fancy myself studying in a terraced shophouse, situated in the Chinatown area of the city centre.

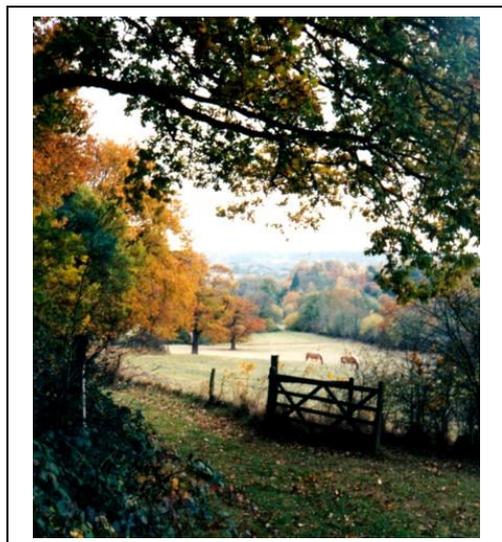
When I emailed Emerson College for more information about the courses it offered, I had in mind to sign up for the Education Course to be trained as a Waldorf teacher. However, two weeks later when the information of its various courses arrived on my doorstep, I changed my mind. Amongst the brochures was a write-up on a one-year Visual Arts Course. The wordings and the pictures of sculptures and paintings in the brochure beckoned me to take up art. That was it. I applied for the course. Art was not new to me. I always loved art when I was in secondary school and really enjoyed drawing and painting. Whilst I was working, I took up a two-year part-time course on Chinese Brush Painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) at its old campus at Mount Sophia. After completing that course in 1996, I continued to brush up my skills with the course tutor, Chen Shi Jin, for a few more years.

The letter of acceptance from Emerson College arrived in spring 2003. Now, I was ready to quit my job! As I had to give three months' notice, I decided to submit my resignation in early June as the course commenced in mid-September. My boss was shocked to receive my letter of resignation. Giving up a stable job with a good income was unthinkable in the situation of economic uncertainty in

Singapore at that time. She offered me unpaid leave from work. Well, having a short break was not what I needed. I really wanted a new direction in life. Realising my determination, she accepted my resignation.

A Fresh Start

Now here I was in Emerson College, in the tranquil and lovely English countryside in East Sussex. A whole new world embraced me. A college without a gate, a library without a lock, systems without control, houses without keys. Tall trees and open fields instead of walls and fences, formed the boundary of the campus. The student house where I lived had no key to the front door, and many students left their own room unlocked. How different it was from living in Singapore – a concrete jungle where most people reside in pigeon-hole like flats behind locked doors and grilles.



The college library, managed by one librarian, with its thousands of books was open twenty-four hours a day. I was surprised that no security system was in place for book loans. Staff and students who wanted to borrow books simply helped themselves. Each book had a small brown card slotted in a pocket on its inner back page. The college trusted that the borrower would write his or her name on the card, drop it into a box in the library and return the book when it was due.

All classrooms, the computer room, art studios and the auditorium were open twenty-four hours, allowing students to meet and conduct activities outside class hours. And there was so much space on the campus. The whole place was a huge park where we could enjoy pleasant walks and admire the sculptures created by students along the paths. In front of Pixton House was a large lawn that stretched to a ha-ha. Singaporeans may wonder what a ha-ha is. It is a design feature of landscaped gardens to prevent access by grazing livestock without obstructing the views beyond the lawn. It is a rather steep turfed incline so that the cattle and the sheep are not able to climb up to the lawn.

A short walk down a few steps from Pixton took one to a lovely garden with tall maple trees and a lily pond. If one wanted to have some quiet moments, an ideal sanctuary would be the 'grotto' formed by the branches and leaves of a gigantic rhododendron tree near Pixton. Greenery surrounded all the houses, giving of themselves the fresh, crisp air and the fragrance of grass. Orchards near Linden House, a wood with a pond near Westwood House, a kitchen garden, trees, and bushes along the walkways.

Amidst this tranquil and open environment, there was, however, a structure to the day. Each day, from Monday to Friday during term time, was organised thus:

- 08.30am to 10.00am Lessons
- 10.00am to 10.30am Morning Coffee Break
- 10.30am to 12.30pm Lessons resumed
- 12.30pm to 2.00pm Lunch break
- 2.00pm to 3.30pm Lessons
- 3.30pm to 4.00pm Afternoon tea break
- 04.00pm End of lessons, or optional studies/group meetings
- 06.00pm Supper for those who signed up for college meals

This structure applied to all courses on campus. The full-time courses offered when I was there were Foundation Studies in Anthroposophy, Education, Storytelling, Spirit of English, Biodynamic Agriculture, Sculpture and Visual Arts, and a one-year orientation programme for school leavers (aged 17 to 21). The coffee/tea breaks and lunches provided an excellent opportunity for people from



the various courses to interact with one another. After supper, students were free to use the lounge in Pixton House to socialise and exchange experiences. The campus was alcohol and television-free.

The Sculpture Department

Our first lesson did not begin until the third day of the term as there was still more orientation. Rudolf Kaesbach, the Head of the Sculpture Department, called a meeting to introduce the tutors and senior students to us freshies. There were also a few independent students, those who had graduated from the sculpture course, and stayed on at the college to do their individual projects under the guidance of a tutor. Interestingly there were more women than men amongst the group of over forty students with age ranging from 19 to over 60. After the meeting, Rudolf took us new students on a tour of the buildings where we would have our lessons.

The Visual Arts course constituted the first year of the three-year sculpture course. The second- and third-year students had their individual studio space allocated, a privilege not enjoyed by the new ones whose classrooms were in two buildings – the Red Studio, and the Sculpture ‘Hut’.

Next, the Visual Arts students were briefed by Rudolf about our year programme. It was the first time I got a close look at my classmates. Not all of them were taking the course full-time. A few of them, locals living near Forest Row were attending the course only in the morning as they either had young children to take care of or were working. There were only five British in our group. Dorothy who lived in Scotland had just retired and would be attending the course for only one semester. Retiree Susanna and young Zoe were full-timers; Marcus and Paul were part-timers. Two other part-timers, Anette from Germany, and Lisa from Norway lived locally and had young children. The rest were from America, Australia, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, and Peru. Eleven nationalities in a class of 22.

Rudolf distributed the timetable and highlighted a few key aspects of the course. There would be three staff members from the Sculpture Department conducting lessons for us – Rudolf, Ken Smith, and Margaret Shillan. Guest teachers would be

involved in doing modules such as Stone Carving, Relief Sculpture, Drawing and Pottery. We would be with Rudolf for Clay Modelling, Wood Carving and History of Art. Margaret would be our instructor in painting lessons, Ken in drawing as well as facilitating a weekly tutorial based on Michael Howard's book 'Art as Spiritual Activity'. The highlight of the year would be a trip to Paris and Chartres to view works of art, and we were to allocate £250 for this. Whenever interesting exhibitions came up at the museums or galleries in London, we would make trips to the big city, an hour away by train.

All materials and tools would be provided by the college except for a few items we needed to purchase - a water colour paint brush, a hardback sketchbook, pencils, and a woodcarving gouge which were available at the college bookshop. And there would be no assessment, examination or grading of students' works. Only feedback and comments would be given.

We were also required to attend a weekly hour of lesson on eurythmy, a movement art developed by Steiner. I had watched eurythmy performance at the Anthroposophical Conference in Hawaii and was really entranced by the performers' graceful movements. They seemed to glide across the stage without effort. I looked forward to this new movement art.

The Sculpture Department would hold regular meetings throughout each term for all its students in the three years of study, to review the progress of their creative efforts. This provided an opportunity to see the works done by students from the different years.

After providing us with the details of the course, Rudolf threw a few surprises on us. As we were living in a community, students from all courses had to 'volunteer' their services to the college which relied on only a handful of full-time staff. We, the visual art students, were assigned to do vegetable preparation in the kitchen from 7am to 8am once or twice a week throughout the whole year. We would get a free breakfast for that morning when we had finished our duty. We were also expected to participate in the various festivals held in the college during the academic year, and each course was assigned to organise one of them. The first festival would be the Michaelmas when classes would be cancelled for a day and all students were expected to help in harvesting in the farm run by the Biodynamic Agriculture students on the campus, raking the fields or preparing a big festive meal. Throughout the year, there would be one or two 'community

days' when all staff and students would tidy up the college, the buildings as well as the college grounds. Moreover, bank holidays (public holidays) would not be observed during term time, meaning that we had to attend classes whilst the rest of the people in the country had their day off work or school.

Whew! So much information to take in.

The First Term

Every Monday morning students from all the courses had to attend the college meeting in Ruskin Hall, akin to a school assembly. The difference was that we did not have a school master or mistress talking down to us all the time. It was like a morning news bulletin presented live by various staff members as well as students. Announcements of evening cultural or social programmes, news about special activities, accounts from students of their field works or course trips. Sometimes we had group singing and musical performances by students. All these easily filled up the hour and a half meeting. Quite a lively start for the week.

Throughout the first term, we Visual Arts students had lessons on clay modelling, painting, and drawing in the morning and wood working in the afternoon.

First Day of Lessons

The first lesson was on clay modelling. Rudolf asked us to make something out of the clay, anything we fancied and to present it to the rest of the class. This was my first time touching the cold, grey, soft clay. My 'sculpture' was the smallest of all. Was it a reflection of me being the shortest person in class? It was a tiny upright form resembling the shape of a tree trunk, about three to four inches in height stuck on a clay base.

The next two hours after the morning coffee break was painting with Margaret Shillan. We learned about colours, starting from first principles. We were asked to experience the primary and complementary colours using watercolour paints and given the liberty to paint anything we liked but the painting had to be formless. In the art class when I was at school, the teacher usually required us to copy an

object and reproduce it as closely as possible in the painting or drawing. Here I was given the freedom to be creative. What a different approach!

After the lunch break, it was wood working. First, we had to choose the wood we wanted to carve. We were briefed on the nature of the different kinds of wood – the colours, the wood grains, and the hardness. Oak being a hard wood needed a strong pair of arms to carve. The guys and Susanna, the oldest amongst us, chose oak. I liked the red cedar but being a 'softie', I went for sycamore which was much easier to work on. We had to chip the wood entirely by hand using our gouge.

That night, I sank happily into bed. How different it was from the office life in Singapore! I was enjoying what I was doing and doing what I liked.

Clay Modelling

I enjoyed the clay modelling lessons very much. Rudolf was an excellent tutor, patiently guiding us in our work and giving feedback and advice all the time.

The next exercise after our first day's session was to make anything we liked. I was at a loss as to what to create. Then slowly, the form appeared as I was playing with the clay. The outcome was a figure, which surprised me. This first 'masterpiece' in clay is still with me.

We were given a different exercise each week, with the aim of studying the specific qualities of a sculpture form. We examined levity and gravity, types of surface, what made a form quiet and what made it display movements.

Rudolf taught us to trust our hands. Let the fingers move the clay and try not to create a form consciously. As a result, the forms we created were all abstract. Rudolf was always positive in his comments on the students' work, a very encouraging tutor indeed. He also invited us to comment on one another's efforts as other viewers normally could see the form in a different light from its creator. For example, my classmates could detect a gentle



movement in my first form which I thought was perfectly quiet and still. Most of the lessons were practical.

Only once or twice, would Rudolf give a mini lecture. "Trust the wisdom of the hands and use your eyes. Let the eyes and the hands communicate with each other, with the eyes directing the hands." he said. Simply shape a lump of clay, and then let the eyes decide whether to remove excess or add on more clay. Also use the hands first and the tools last. When you were happy with the final sculpture formed with your hands, use the tools to help you to refine it. If you do not know what to form, start by making the shape of an egg with the clay in your hands. Then, change the shape of the egg, 'going with the flow' to develop it.

One exercise was particularly a challenge for me, although it may sound simple and easy. It involved creating a sculpture with flat smooth planes sloping at different angles like the pyramids, with varying heights and inclinations. Why I found it challenging was a mystery. The clay refused to obey my hands. I never got the planes flat and smooth. In the end, Rudolf gave up on me. He was very perceptive. From the various forms we created or were not able to create, he could read our personality.

Once we had a 'ball' exercise. First, we were to shape a lump of clay into a ball, as perfectly as possible. We sat in a circle while doing this exercise, and each of us passed our ball to the person next to us. After receiving a ball, each of us had to feel it – its size, its mass, its texture, how warm or cold it was, and then pass it on to the next person. This continued until we received our own ball back in our hands. Each ball I received felt different. The lesson we learnt through this exercise was that the spherical form was not just a piece of clay, a part of the creator had been integrated into it.

We went on to discuss the qualities of the spherical shape and came out with these attributes: centredness, focus, gentle, concentrated, symmetrical, balanced. It is the smallest shape one could create with the same volume of clay. Then we were asked to imagine that we were the sphere. What did we feel? I sensed openness. Being a sphere, the message that came to my mind was to look at issues from all angles.

Clay Recycling

After a few weeks of exercises, the studio was filled with numerous clay models. Imagine, each student had made seven pieces, and there were twenty-two of us. So, one morning Rudolf declared that we were going to do a clay recycling exercise. Most of the clay models were dry after weeks of exposure to the air, and we had to hammer them to pieces before putting them into two large boxes and soaking them in water. About a week later, we fished the lumps of soft moist clay from the box and put them in black bins to be used again for modelling. We repeated this clay recycling process two or three times during the term.

Rudolf usually kept a few pieces of the students' efforts he liked so that they would not end up in the re-cycling box. One of my pieces was still in his office when I visited him in 2013. I was really chuffed to see it there.



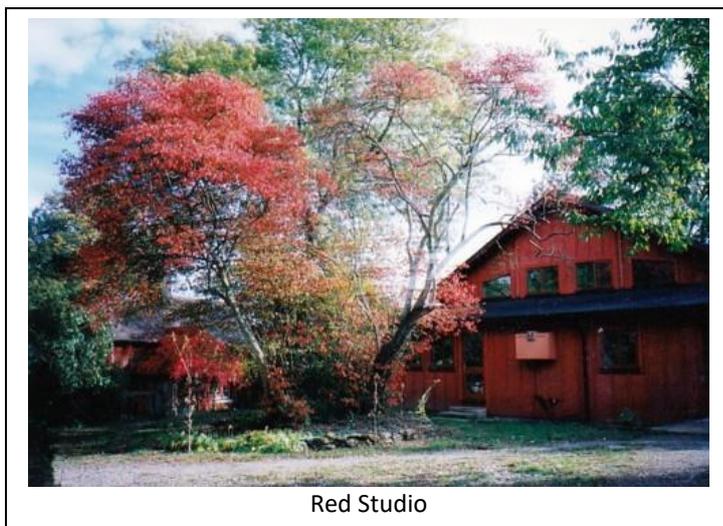
Plastering

After the half-term break, Rudolf gave us lessons on plastering. First, we learned how to create the plaster mixture using lukewarm water and Plaster of Paris for moulding and casting. We had to pick up a handful of the dry plaster powder and sift it through our fingers to avoid lumps and add it to the water in a bucket. We were advised not to add it hurriedly. The plaster would sink gradually into the water and when we saw some powder stay on top of the surface, we stopped adding. Don't mix yet, warned Rudolf. Let the bucket sit for a few minutes. Then we stirred the mixture with a wooden stick until it was smooth like ketchup. After that we poured the mixture on to the clay sculpture we wanted to plaster. This was to create the mould or the negative of the sculpture. It could be a messy job. We had to do this quite quickly as the plaster solidified rapidly, making it difficult for us to shape the negative. After the plaster had dried, we dug the clay form

out, leaving a hollow cavity. The mould was made. Then we made a mixture of plaster again and poured it into the cavity, and let it solidify. Finally, we broke the mould and we had a plaster cast of the clay sculpture. I found plastering a stressful experience, particularly for big or complicated forms. At that point in time, I would never have guessed that I would be making seven plaster sculpture forms at the end of the course for my graduation exhibition.

Painting

Painting lessons took place in the big red studio with high glass windows, which was spacious enough to accommodate over twenty students. Natural light is essential for painting. The first couple of weeks was spent on the study of colours and experimentation using watercolours. We also examined the feelings that were aroused in us by the different pigments. The painting lessons were fun initially but later I found it a bit of a struggle.



We had social painting as well – a first for me. We were divided into groups. One person in the group would start with three separate blotches of the primary colours on a big piece of wet paper, taking care not to have them touching one another. The next person would move the primary colours to create green, violet and

orange. Yet another one would mix the secondary colours to create the tertiary colours –for example mix blue with orange to create brown. And on and on until we had a multi-coloured formless painting.

We did wet on wet as well as dry painting. These techniques were also new to me. As far as I can remember, when in school we just applied watercolours on a piece of paper. But now we had to soak the paper in water, stretch it on a board, and place the board on the easel before we could start painting. After each lesson,

the students' works would be pinned on the wall, open for comments by the rest of the class.

The difficulty I faced was to paint from feelings. We were told to look at a tree, and then paint from the feeling of the tree, not the tree itself. What was the feeling in me? I tried to search for it within me and drew a blank. The tendency for me was to paint an object as it was. Abstract and formless painting was rather problematic for me. We were not taught the technique of composition either. Margaret asked us to look at our own painting and see if it was balanced, and then make amendments until it was. What is balance, I questioned. No answer from the teacher. I had to discover it for myself, feel it myself. As a result, I always found it a struggle during the painting lessons.



Display of our paintings

Finally, the six morning sessions with Margaret ended with a challenge from her. We had to stretch our imagination and to create a painting from a given poem. Unfortunately, I cannot remember now what I did.

Drawing

Ursula Stone took over from Margaret in the second half of the term to teach us drawing. I enjoyed the sessions with this energetic, mercurial part-time teacher who lived in Forest Row. She was an art therapist as well as a painter. The first lesson I must admit was a bit boring, we had to draw nothing but lines – straight lines and curves. But it was good training to free our arms. So as not to waste paper, we poured sand onto a huge piece of black paper and drew the lines on the sand with our finger, erased them and drew again. Later we were asked to draw lemniscate (the figure of 8), practising on sand countless times till we got a nearly perfect symmetrical shape. After having practised on sand, we drew lemniscates on paper.

She then moved on to pencil shading, contour, and negative space drawing. Lessons in drawing in my school days had been making the outline of an object, and then either shading or filling it with colours. Ursula gave us exercises to train our 'right mind' as we worked with our 'left mind' most of the time. She asked us to draw our hand. Then we were to draw the same hand again, but this time looking at the hand all the time and not let our eyes follow the pencil moving on the paper. This was what she called blind contour drawing. On comparing the two, the second drawing, though out of shape, turned out to be livelier. We also practised negative space drawing. "Draw something by drawing nothing". She stacked up in the centre of the studio a few chairs in different positions - lying on their backs, upright, upside down, and asked us to draw the chairs by focusing on the spaces in between them. We also went out of the studio to draw part of a tree by outlining the spaces formed by the branches and the leaves. All very interesting.

She shared with us several quotations. This was one I liked.

***'Only when he no longer knows what he is doing, does the artist do great things.'* - Edgar Degas**

Throughout the six weeks with her, we used drawing pencils, colour pencils, granite, crayons, and charcoal. I have a vivid memory of one lesson when she came to class with a big bunch of lilies in a vase. She placed the vase on a



sculpture stand in the centre of the room, and we all sat round in a circle. With each of us having a different view of the object, we started to draw. Not only were we to draw what we observed but also the invisible elements. Could we not feel the energy from the flowers? How to see the invisible? When we had completed our drawings, we pinned them up on the white studio walls, and we looked at one another's artworks and gave comments. I don't know how it happened but somehow the flowers in my drawing did reveal their vitality.

Wood Carving

We were told to make a clay model of the form we were going to create in wood. It had to be a form of a Mobius band i.e., with one surface and one boundary. To help us to visualise the form, we first made Mobius bands out of strips of paper. It was not easy to make the Mobius form in 3-D. I really did struggle to get the clay model right before I could start working on the wood.

Watching Susanna slowly shaping her piece of oak by laboriously chipping off the wood with a gouge and a hammer, I was thankful to have chosen sycamore. One and a half hours of continuous work on the wood was initially exhausting, particularly for me who was accustomed to office work. For the first few weeks I retired to bed with aching arms and shoulders. I enjoyed wood carving though and many a time I continued to work on it after the afternoon coffee break.

The breakthrough was to make a hole in the centre of the wood block. From then on, the 3-D Mobius form would slowly emerge as I carved the curved surface. After a while I could feel that the wood was communicating with me, telling me where to chip. Once I accidentally knocked off a fairly large chunk, more than I wanted and it turned out that the form looked better as a result. Once the wood had been shaped to the form we wanted, we could sit down with the sculpture on our lap to sand it till the surface was smooth. It took more than a week to accomplish this, rather boring. One consolation was that we could chat as we were smoothing the wood. Very peaceful, unlike the weeks before when we had to stand all the time and make a lot of noise as we all hammered our lumps of wood. We started the sanding process by using a course sandpaper number 40, proceeding progressively to finer sandpapers up to number 120. As the wood got smoother, so did our fingers. We all nearly sanded away our fingerprints.

At the end of the term, we invited the other college students to view an exhibition of our 3-D Mobius sculptures. It was quite marvellous that out of the basic Mobius Band so many different designs were created. For most of us, it was our first attempt at wood carving entirely by hand.



My Mobius form - result of many hours of carving and sanding

Group Study

The Study of Michael Howard's book "Art as Spiritual Activity" with Ken Smith took place throughout the whole academic year. Ken would select a chapter of the book for us to read before the group met for an hour every week. Not many of us read it before the meeting. We ended up taking turns to read the pages out loud when we met, and then discussed the contents. It was not easy to digest the book which contains a selection of lectures given by Rudolf Steiner on visual arts, with a lengthy introduction by Michael Howard. Perhaps it was the translation from the German text that made Steiner's lectures difficult to grasp. The concepts were rather original, trying to link spiritual elements with works of art. Many of us lost interest towards the end of the year. I guessed we all much preferred practical work.

Eurythmy Lessons

Now, what to say about eurythmy, this strange movement art. As students new to anthroposophy, we wondered why it was part of the Visual Arts curriculum at all. In Waldorf schools, eurythmy is taught to children to strengthen their expressive capabilities through movements, stimulate their imagination, improve their balance, concentration, co-ordination. All course students in Emerson College had to do eurythmy with Glenys Waters in a house specially built for the lessons.

We had to wear the flat shoes made of fabric to help us glide across the wooden floor as noiselessly and lightly as possible. A pianist provided the music to accompany our movements in our weekly lesson, and we learned gestures to expressive sounds or vowels in speech, and to synchronise with the rhythm of the music. Glenys demonstrated the movements to help us to cultivate a feeling for the qualities of lines and curves, contraction and expansion and colours, all appropriate to a visual art student. However, it was all lost on me. I found out later that the word 'eurythmy' has a Greek root which means *beautiful or harmonious rhythm*. There was a tendency for me while doing the movements to compare them with Taiji which I had been doing for years in Singapore and for

which I had an instructor licence. Sadly, after one year of lessons, I still could not appreciate eurythmy.

Weekend courses

Emerson ran a programme of weekend courses for working adults, and students attending courses in the college could join at a discounted rate. A weekend course typically began on a Friday evening, and ended on Sunday afternoon. The participants had the opportunity to stay two nights in the college guest rooms and to enjoy the tranquil environment as well as the healthy organic meals prepared by the kitchen staff. I attended a couple of these weekend courses.

'Between the Lines' conducted by Paul Mathews, a tutor on the Foundation Course in the college as well as a poet with a few book publications to his credit, revealed to me that perhaps I did possess a bit of creativity in writing. In his opening lecture, he highlighted to us that we were constantly between two opposing forces – day and night, sleep and awake, summer and winter, yin and yang. In sculpture, concave and convex; in dance, movements, and stillness; in music, silence, and sounds; in poetry, truth and lie, fact and fantasy.

He began the Saturday session by giving us a few activities in writing, both individually as well as in a group. I found the group composition exercise interesting. There were over twenty of us, and we sat forming two circles. Each of us had to write a line on an A4 sized paper and pass it to the next person but one to you in the circle, to add on another line of writing. That person could see only the preceding line, as we had to fold the paper to hide all the other lines but one before passing it on. This went on until we came to the end of the sheet. Most turned out to be quite humorous and made sense whilst a few writings were disjointed. Here is an example of a group creative writing using the theme of the workshop 'in between'.

*"Dawn, in between night and day
Sunrise, in between darkness and light
Shadows cascading into hedgerows
The birds have stopped singing*

*And the dew has given way to shafts of honey sun
Melting in my eyes and mouth
A big red lollypop
It's mine, give it to me now!
No, it is for me to cherish for eternity
If only you could understand what is cherish
I believe it is to treat with love."*

Paul advised, "We have to keep working, not just wait for miracles to happen. We need to sharpen our axe to be the instrument of the higher self." The whole course was full of activities to squeeze the creative juices out of us. The final exercise was to create a story of a dream using a set of random words. We had to use all the unrelated words given by Paul. I surprised myself when I completed this cohesive story, with the given words in bold:

*Slowly and steadily, the blue door opens in front of me. I see a magnificent **waterfall**, plunging down into a green pool. The pool shines with the reflection of the light from the **candles** all around it. What an enchanting moment!*

*I lean against a **holly tree**, my eyes feasting on the beautiful scene and my ears tuned to the sound of the splashing waterfall. Suddenly, an ugly **monster** shoots up from the pool. What a shock! I run as fast as my legs can carry me without looking back. My feet hit a hard object. I stumble. I find myself landed on top of the shell of a golden **tortoise**. Then I see a **black crow** flying towards me like an arrow. It suddenly changes into a white **whale**, and in no time, I find myself engulfed in darkness in the stomach of the whale. I struggle to escape. I kick and bang on the walls of the stomach. I call for help. Then I feel a pair of hands holding mine and I see my mother standing beside my bed, next to it is an overturned bedside **table**. What a dream!*

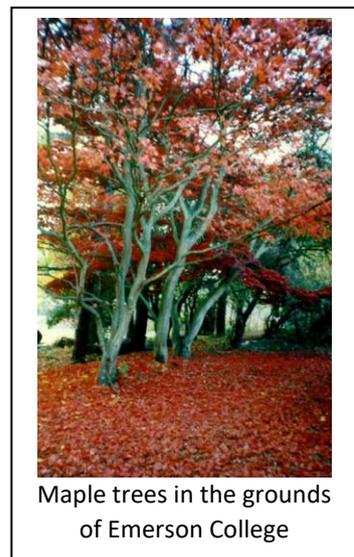
Amazing. Just the two days of practice and I was able to create a story like this!

On this course, I met Ingeranne, a Norwegian lady who lived in Forest Row with her British husband and three children. She was also on the next weekend course I attended. My interest in meditation prompted me to register for 'Walking the Spiritual Path with Practical Feet' conducted by Warren Lee Cohen, the course

leader of the Foundation Studies in Emerson College, and a facilitator in meditation from America. In this workshop, the participants learned how to do the Breathing Light Exercise and a few other meditation techniques originated by Steiner. It seemed that all meditation techniques are founded on the same principles – focus, silence, and stillness. After this course, Warren and I joined the fortnightly meditation group meeting initiated by Ingeranne and her husband, Graham, in their house.

End of first term

Fifteen weeks passed by in the blink of an eye. It was wonderful to watch the change in the seasons from late summer to early winter, so different from the tropics where green is the dominant colour throughout the year. Autumn was particularly stunning as the green foliage gave way to the yellow, golden, and red colours in the college grounds.



Waking up in the morning to hear the chirping of birds outside the window was a delightful experience. Embraced by the wonderful nature on the college grounds and the expansive countryside of Sussex, I asked myself, 'Do I want to go back to the hustle and heat of Singapore?'

The peace and serenity of Emerson College enticed me to take the sculpture training for a further two years. Another reason inspiring me to continue beyond the one year was the artworks created by the students in the second and third years. As the Sculpture Department held regular meetings for its students in the different years to view one another's works, I had the opportunity to view the efforts of these seniors and get to know their curriculum.

However, this decision necessitated me to raise funds for the additional two years of study. So, the three weeks of the Christmas break were spent in Singapore, clearing and packing the stuff in my apartment to get it ready for rental. I was a hoarder - all the big wardrobes in the three bedrooms were filled with my clothes, books including my school textbooks and university lecture notes, Chinese brush

painting materials, CDs, souvenirs from my overseas holidays, photographs, collections of postcards, birthday cards and letters. The kitchen was also full of cookware and utensils which I hardly ever used. I held two weekends of jumble sales in my apartment, and whatever I did not want to keep or could not sell went to a friend's church charity shop. I kept quite a fair bit of stuff, in anticipation that I would need them when I returned from my course. In those days, no digital cameras, all the photo prints were packed into eight cartons. I ended up with over thirty cartons of 'essentials' and stored them with Daniel Wong who was kind enough to share with me his big storeroom in his semi-detached house. I gave away most of my furniture.

At last, the apartment was empty, ready for rental. I did consider selling it. However, as Singapore was facing a recession, the property market was very soft. I decided to postpone the sale till better times. Before I left for England again, I passed on the apartment keys to an estate agent who warned me not to have high expectations of the rental income or to find a tenant quickly. I also cashed out my insurance policies, except for one endowment plan, to help my monetary outgoings for the next couple of years.

During my short stay in Singapore, I applied for a three-year student visa from the British High Commission, so that I need not worry about extending it at the end of my one-year Visual Arts course. In those days, the processing time for student visas was very short, less than a week. After three hectic weeks in the Lion City, I was eager to resume my 'student-hood' in the serenity of Emerson College, to be wrapped in the beauty of Nature again.

Notes

(1) SARS

SARS which stands for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, a viral disease started from an outbreak in China in November 2002 and July 2003, became widespread in East Asia, with most of the cases reported in HongKong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the Philippines.

(2) HDB

HDB is the acronym for Housing and Development Board. HDB flats are public housing developed by the Singapore government and more than eighty percent of the population in the country live in these flats.