Tom Bennick is a former Mountain Home, Idaho, teacher and writer. When he retired, five years ago, he started working full time on his papermaking venture. Today’s project is thick, cotton sheaves sprinkled with daisy seeds, the symbolism of which occurs to me only much later. I’m more stuck with how the pulp, weighing the feet of it in his hand, “remains the same, no matter what the fibers.” Bennick pauses with his hand in the charged pulp - like an experienced chef just “knows” the perfect mix and measures the pulp so he can recharge the pulp consistently. It seems meticulous to me, and I am impressed with his thoroughness, but he assures me there is no threat of uniformity where handmade paper is concerned.

“Handmade paper cannot be controlled, it is a stream-of-consciousness sort of art. It is an art form of serendipity.”

I recently spent a day with Bennick. Today’s project is thick, cotton sheaves sprinkled with daisy seeds, the symbolism of which occurs to me only much later. I’m more stuck with how the pulp, weighing the feet of it in his hand, “remains the same, no matter what the fibers.” Bennick pauses with his hand in the charged pulp - like an experienced chef just “knows” the perfect mix and measures the pulp so he can recharge the pulp consistently. It seems meticulous to me, and I am impressed with his thoroughness, but he assures me there is no threat of uniformity where handmade paper is concerned.

“The excitement of never knowing how it’s going to turn out,” he says. And then we start, “Okay, sheet after another. There’s never two of them that will be alike.”

The machine is portable - watch for it - and it’s fast. In honor of his new beater, Bennick took cotton concealed in a bag that contained old clothing to their indigenous papermaking process. Bennick makes lots of paper because he likes to make paper. Loves to make paper. His fledging sheets are a means to an end, but for Bennick, paper is all - and everything. “The potential for what you can do with paper is unlimited. Paper isn’t just for writing. It isn’t just for making paper airplanes.” When Bennick gives you a piece of paper, it’s a gift to the reader. “The end product is my paper. That is my art,” he says. “Someone else can do something else with it.”

Being part of that process is symbiotic. “Paper represents connectedness,” he says, a simple statement that belies the depth of the symbolism. Starting with seeds and sun, with rain, with people who harvest the trees and process the plants - the image of all the forces of nature working together toward a common goal is quintessential. “We all depend on each other in life,” he says, and he’s not just talking about paper.

Occasionally, I receive gifts in the mail that Bennett sends to batches of friends, usually in the spring or the winter equinox. One year it was “a little winter love in a dark corner.” A poem, however fleeting, on a piece of paper, however fleeting, to hang in the winter and summer.

Last spring, it was a paper bell. A paper bell with no clapper.

I share these things because these things must be shared - as Bennick did - and because they are concrete examples of something I’m having a hard time putting into words. When I make paper, fingers turning to raisins in the pulp, I am in another world. A world transcended in time, where each piece of paper leads to the next one like the water dripping off the table onto my sandals. As no sound is needed for the little bell, no words are needed in this world.

And Bennick goes there all the time. “My message is the paper,” he says again. A piece of paper. A simple piece of handmade paper...

He shows me an unbound Tibetan prayer book that he made, pages waiting for affirmations, koans, haiku or just to leave blank... to wear away with time. To wear away with time... In an culture where instant gratification is expected, where possessing has become a de facto art form and consumption our biggest pastime, to make one’s goal a simple sheet of paper - nearly incomprehensible!

To make a sheet of paper as art for someone else to transform or to hang on a tree for the sun and wind and rain to make their marks which means, essentially, to return to nothingness to much about these practices to see what kind of paper one can make from manure or to make art from castoff cellulose. This is a revolutionary talk. Talk for hungry souls, not just for papermakers.

The wisdom Bennett speaks of is the wisdom of a hermit monk, that of ageless simplicity, acceptance and generosity. “I was reading a poem to students about making his silent bell, said Bennick, uncomfortable at confessing the deep emotion that welled up as tears in his eyes. “Everybody has spirituality. This comes as close to religion and spirituality as anything.”

Bennick makes lots of paper because he likes to make paper. Loves to make paper. His fledging sheets are a means to an end, but for Bennick, paper is all - and everything. “The potential for what you can do with paper is unlimited. Paper isn’t just for writing. It isn’t just for making paper airplanes.” When Bennick gives you a piece of paper, it’s a gift to the reader.”

Black cotton, faded jeans, New jeans. Underwear. Ahem. The ingredients are changing. After years of using a beater made from a recycled engine and ingenuity, and more years of inventing a beater that ended up sort-of working, Bennick acquired a Hollander beater two years ago, which can convert, for example, old clothing to their original cotton fiber.

The beater has shifted some of Bennett’s energy from plants and native fibers, which can’t take the rigorous beating of the Hollander and which are, truth be told, pretty esquively to work with. But the principle of recycling remains the same, no matter what the fibers.

The machine is portable - watch for it - and it’s fast. “I can start in the morning with a pair of pants. In the afternoon I can be making paper... It’s magic.”

In honor of his new beater, Bennick took cotton contributions from friends, sent them through the beater and made covers for a project he called Fiber to Book. The
paper, pale pink with tantalizing strings of surprising col­
ors, gives only a hint of the stories inside, which are con­
tributors' explanations of their contribution. "I didn't
expect the variety of fibers and emotions that were shared," he writes in the introduction. "The covers are truly a
blending of the material with the emotional." As is all he
does.

He explained in the cover letter, "The books are truly a
work of my passion for paper. They are not perfect but
then neither are nature or people."


When Bennick finishes his work for the day, he gath­
ers the leftover pulp in a ball, which he collects in a bag in
his freezer - the leftover leftovers, if you will. Nothing goes
to waste. "I keep all these," he says. "After three months or
so, I blend them all together." Many of his projects are of
these mixed fibers - a British term called "Badger." Bennick says, "It's a gift of my work to others."

On this day, there was little to offer the Badger bag. I
got to use the rest of Bennick's pulp, combining my left­
over kenaf with the cotton and daisy seeds. He explained in the cover letter, "The books are truly
a work of my passion for paper. They are not perfect but
then neither are nature or people."

In papermaking instructions, Bennick writes that
papermaking "is an intuitive, fateful, whimsical, rese­
inspired piece of art. It is like a willow tree. I water, protect
and nourish the willow in my backyard, but I have no con­
trol over the symmetry or hue of each leaf and branch.
Every tree and bit of nature is an art form. The making
of hand-made paper has its own bit of artistic flavor."

Bennick uses the word "magical" again. "The final
product is...wonderful, and magical. It is magical because
nature has been transformed into something more or
something less than it was before."

And then I have to laugh. When I took my sheets of
still-damp paper home to dry, I discovered that my drying
system was not as efficient as Bennick's. For when I
remembered to look a couple of days later, the daisy seeds
had sprouted.

"Nature transformed into something more or less than
it was before..."

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A Recipe for Milkweed Pulp

by K. Jones

Find a stand of milkweed in the fall. Harvest (scatter­
ing seeds for next year), and cut the dry stalks into a
length just short of the height of your plastic bucket. Fill
the bucket with water, and cover with a weighted lid (so
the stalks stay in the water). Soak until you get around to
dealing with them. When they smell like a septic tank,
they're ready, says Bennick - hence, it's best soak them out­
doors.

For the same reason, strip the soaked fibers outdoors.
Dry them, if you want to break up the process, so they'll
keep. About 10 pounds of dry stalks will make one pound
of dry fiber. When you're ready, boil the fibers with soda
ash - about a soap scoop of ash to a pound of dry fibers.

Cook (again, outdoors can handle the aroma best)
until the fibers are slippery and slimy, when the fibers pull
apart between your fingers.

Rinse well, bleach with a tiny amount of Clorox (aes­
thetically optional); rinse well again and dry.

To make pulp, beat bleached fibers with a hand beater
or meat cleaver. It's like kneading dough - pound, turn,
and marrow of life transcending.

To make paper from prepared pulp on another day,
pour pulp and water through a screen. Squeeze water out,
place pulp in plastic bag and freeze until you're ready to
use it.

You'll get roughly 30 sheets of 8"x10" paper per
pound of dry fiber, depending on how thick you make
your paper.

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*Milkweed Paper*  

*Directions #1* 

*Take this sheet of milkweed paper outdoors. Hold this sheet so the sun washes over whiteness. Luster and mica like flash will make the milkweed glitter with a radiance.*

*Directions #2* 

*Now hold this sheet up so the sun is framed. This time the milkweed will reveal an impossible tangle of nature and marrow of life transcending.*

*Directions #3* 

*Focus on edges, wispy edges that flare and softly fade. These borders when felt between fingers shrivel in an enlightened void.*

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"Every year when I gather milkweed for paper, I find
less and less of the beautiful weed. Because milkweed
is becoming less plentiful, fewer Monarchs are
returning. As a symbol of the Monarchs returning
and the remembrance of summer, please hang this
butterfly made from the fiber of milkweed on the
branch of a tree or shrub."

- Tom Bennick

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_IDAHO CENTER FOR THE BOOK_

_Boise State University_

_Boise, Idaho 83725_

_http://www.lili.org/icb_