



At Ease, Sailor!

Today's little story might be a bit difficult for me to write; unlike most of these little pieces, this one covers a 'big idea', so getting to the core in the usual 600 words is going to be tough ...

I learned long ago that there is no 'standard type' of person who collects my woodblock prints; on my subscription lists are people from all walks of life and from many different age levels. The only way I could possibly categorize them is to say they are all just 'regular' folks.

I have good communication with some of the collectors; they write to offer their viewpoints or thoughts in response to some of the things I have written, and after years of such back-and-forth contacts, they transform from a 'customer' into a friend. Other people collect my prints quite 'silently' - we don't have very much, if any, communication. I get the order; I send the prints; they pay for them. I have no way of telling what these people actually think of me or my work, beyond the bare fact that they found it worthy of collecting.

I had an email exchange recently though that gave me a real start, and brought me to realize that the 'silence' of some collectors is not simply a matter of lack of interest in further communication. I had written to thank somebody for their order for one of my print collections, sending a fairly 'standard' type of response to them, and when no reply came back, I didn't think anything of it, but just mentally tagged that person as a 'quiet one'.

A couple of months later though, another email did come in from him: "Thanks so very much for the reply! I apologize for the slow response ... it has been a feeling of intimidation on my part - you've done some spectacular work ..." And then, he completely shocked me by going on to tell me a few things about himself, including the fact that he was a commander on a US Navy submarine.

I say 'shocked' but actually I was flabbergasted. How on earth could this man - a person who worked in a position demanding one of the most superb levels of training and education on this planet - possibly feel 'intimidated' by this little woodblock printmaker?

Now of course, I don't want to try and make him look foolish; for the most part, his comment simply reflected the politeness befitting his position as a naval officer. I am certain that 'man to man', he is not in any way whatsoever 'intimidated' by me. But it turned out that he had been trying to make some woodblock prints, had discovered that there was some depth to it, and had perhaps come to a better appreciation of the particular set of skills that I have developed over the years. I could perhaps express the idea by saying that he is willing to salute me as the 'commander' of the SS Woodblock!

When I was younger I read about the history and operations of the US Navy, and more recently heard a series of radio documentaries on the submarine service. Although I have no particular interest in things military, I have no hesitation in expressing my admiration for the way that these men operate under the pressure of the extremely heavy responsibilities our society has placed on them.

That my own work - even though I just sit in my own little workroom quietly carving and printing - has earned the reciprocal admiration of one of these men, is very much a quiet pleasure for me.

Thank you sir!

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