

BY HIS SON AND HIS STUDENT  
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LIFE'S EXPERIENCES BEFORE TEACHING  
2017  
AHDE LAHTI

This is a rough assignment Pop, how do I write an article relevant to the new teaching ideas and still keep your story relevant? If one were to write a story for The School of Art and Design, one might want to go back to the faculty rather than the students. Many more students might remem-

ber the instructors rather than the acquaintances they made along the way. I will try to put a little history into the mix and tell you about Aarre K. Lahti, Professor of Design in the Art School,



Loom Aarre designed with Irma (my mother) on the bench.

University of Michigan (1948? to 1969?) who was my father and teacher at the Art School. Here goes, and I hope I can weave it in some kind of orderly interest with threads of your life.

While working for the WPA Mr. Lahti was commissioned to build Looms to bring crafts back to Upper Peninsula of Michigan, only to find out that no one knew how to weave. He then needed to learn how to weave, then teach the locals how to weave.

In 1992 Aarre Lahti wrote this powerful letter to me while I was visiting him on Marquette Island.

"Thinking about our conversation yesterday I want to make several comments.

Life is simpler and more logical than the Judeo-Christian verbalism but far more complex and infinite.

The proselytizing of our cultures with unknowns built-up into mystical personified wishful pantheon of gods, devils and other characters. These characters in man's own image, since he could conceive of nothing else nor would his ego permit his gods not to take any form than himself, were non-existent but through words (man invented) became real. Man assumes that by words he can solve his problems and justify his ignorance. He cannot stand not knowing therefore he must establish a reality that suits his arrogant-ignorance.

He cannot accept the happenstance that can take place in universal time. HE cannot conceive of light years of time and not only conceive but not accept it as a quantity he cannot comprehend.

Thus he must invent or coin words to fulfill his pantheon of ignorance.

His greatest discovery is that of the genetic code. In it rests the steps to an understanding



of the logic and complexity of life's and his being.

We must remember that all of man's standards, are of his own making, constantly changing to provide for his own evolving (not that he admits it) comprehension. There are no absolutes, there is no perfection there is no sublime nor mysteries, the mysteries are the unknown. Man thinks in terms of paradoxes which do not exist and exist only in man's coined words.

Ahde, I think you are too concerned with mankind's verbal inventions and their distorted standards. You need to be truly arrogant (not that you need to express it to others), arrogance is a term for those out of step with their culture but have a personal conviction and a personal concept and goals. Every thought, standard, measure, meaning and reality is man-made — it does not come from above or from some mystical source other than

man's own ignorance. Sanity is only the norm our mores have created and accepted, anyone not conforming to them are subconsciously considered insane. Yet we quibble in murder trials to establish insanity so how can insanity be established on top of insanity – that is a verbal quibble for winning – not solving.

We talk of saving mother earth. She, he or it has no concern for survival only we are concerned with our survival – but we must attach some noble purpose other [than] saving ourselves.

I do not question the amazing evolution of organic from and inorganic source nor do I feel that our organic living development should not be preserved. Eventually it will be destroyed, but the ephemeral opportunity to experience this living, conscious, inquiring “mayfly” happenstance is phenomenal!

Yes, we do build edifices and monuments to heroes and villains, for conquerors and the exploited but, to me, the simple wooded spoon is at the heart and root of what is Finnish. In this age when everyone seems to be concerned with status, with propounding systems and with playing God; the basic humility, which is needed to understand humanity, might only be achieved by a willingness to face reality, examine our roots and produce with a humbleness not requiring monuments, obvious signatures or bronze plaques. Possibly, the sweat on the brow, the dark damp spot on a shirt between the shoulder and the calloused hands, are the base upon which the American Finn now stands.

Words that have no reality:

beginning

end

perfection

absolutes

static

right – wrong

beginning = start or awareness

end = the termination of personal awareness

perfection = a goal that cannot be reached if one is learning and evolving

absolutes = a term for an end of questioning

static = all is in motion, nothing is static, it is mankind's desire to stop things in his minds

flight

right and wrong are only relative and in human terms and they keep changing as we develop and evolve and evolving can be forward (our value) or



a regression from our value

Life is that simple but our struggle to know is complex, our building blocks emerge from ignorance and ignorance repeated in logarithmic attempts produce bits of facts, superior to what we had.

What is needed is to have arrogant-humility.

Arrogance, in that one is way ahead of one's culture but with a humility that there is much to know and learn.

Me? I take a back seat (no one), is the soundness of my philosophy!"

Professor Lahti had very advanced ideas about teaching. Teaching films so the student could study any technique in the library. Fairchild projector and film cassettes were the only solution back then.

He designed and built and used a sliding electric rheostat to instantly register all the students' evaluations of a project. There were two readouts, all students and his so the students could compare their results. He was big on averages and interdisciplinary working groups. He had his own business (CM Inc.), which was a Consultant to Management for design issues. He worked hard to find ways to calibrate design.

Here is an interesting story in his own words.

May 14, 1965

## The Legacy

Returning to the United States during the worst of the depression was a bitter reality to face. This bitterness was made even more grinding by the contrast of a return to a Michigan Upper Peninsula mining town from leisurely fellowship travels in Europe. My training in art, truly "long hair", had prepared me for creating epic murals, peaceful well groomed landscapes and portraits of haughty individuals. This, however, I must say for the depression; the artist and the public had achieved economic equality – now we were all destitute.

Shortly after my returning home, my father had managed to under-bid other contractors for the privilege of painting Civilian Conservation Corps barracks buildings. During this Job our shacking in an abandoned hay loft (we called it The Grand Hotel) was nightmarish. However, it was here and under these circumstances that my father opened my eyes and mind to what the art school ("The largest in the World") had failed to do. Absorbed in my own turbulence, I had not noticed that my father was aware of my aimless turmoil. Though as an orphan his own education in Finland had terminated with only a few years of public school, he had nevertheless acquired a philosophy and developed an insight adequate to cope with youth in revolt, and I must admit, his son was revolting in more ways than one. I can clearly recall the evening after we had finished supper on the patio of



The Grand Hotel when he said, "Kuuleppas Aarre, osaatko velstaa lusikan (Aarre, can you carve a wood spoon)?"

The reply, from one whose laurel leaves were still damp from a sprinkling of European culture was a definite "Yes"!

Late the following evening I presented him with my completed effort. He received my carving with a quietness in keeping with the stillness of the enclosing night.

He examined what I had made, turning it over in his hands with the same tenderness with which he had held me as a child, but here was no play or smile in his feelings. He had offered no criticism and recall no comments as we retreated from the mosquitoes to our net covered pads.

The following evening, after a hurried supper, he

led me to the edge of the clearing and after peering patiently into the woods, pointed to the fork near the top of a birch tree and said, "From that will come a good spoon." He cut off the tree below the crotch of the fork and then trimmed the branch ends. He carried the "tarvis puu" back to the "hotel" and in the warm light of the late afternoon sun his axe quickly roughed out a form. His axe cut into the "green" wood as though it were cheese. A bowl emerged from the tree portion of the wood and a handle from the thicker of the two fork tines. Next with long sweeping strokes of his knife removed long shavings and after concentrated effort, furrowed brow and pauses in his breathing and deep breathing following (the chest was used as an anvil against which the work was pressed) an elegant, yet simple compound form emerged. This form took into consideration the essentials utility of the spoon, its feel in handling, the nature





I can remember his “tarvis puu” collection. The term was used for pieces of wood cut and gathered to be ready when needed.



Wood spoon carved by Pop from the  
fork of a birch tree around 1956 in  
Norway.





of the tools available and even the efficiency of working the material "green". The view from the top and the view from the side countered thick and thin. While the top view merged from a wide flaring bowl into a very thin shank and again to a wider handle tip, the side view in contrast started from a pointed bowl tip to a maximum width, where the top view was thinnest, and gradually thinned to a delicate handle end. The form, from side, followed the grain of the wood and resulting in the bowl and the handle being at an angle with each other, an angle about that, when the arms of a clock are at nine five.

Now I understood my father's silence. My carving had been a picture of a metal spoon carved from a piece of two by four.

Later he taught me how to skin long continuous

strips of bark from birch trees and to roll them into balls for future use. But, even the balls had acquired an elegant traditional ovoid form, a form requiring a feeling for the complex geometry of making a ball from flat bands. During the winter evenings the bark from the balls was unrolled, trimmed to weaving width and dampened to restore the necessary pliability. I then learned to weave pack-sack baskets and even slippers.

My father's greatest legacy to his children was his statement, "Yos yoku elava ihminen voi sen tehda, nii kylla minakin!"

"If some living human can do it, well, so can I!"

Birch-bark slipper woven by  
Grandpa, John Lahti





Roll of Birch-Bark collected for weaving.







Finnish knife with birch bark sheath.

## The Big River

While perched upon the deck,  
Viewing the beauties of nature and  
the space about me  
Feeling the sensuous toying of the wind  
upon my body  
And the warm-cool breeze-rivers on  
my spine,  
Deep within me  
A disquieting melancholy of  
primeval apprehension  
Keeps all in a tenuous glow.

Convinced, I am, that man by nature  
has potentials for good  
And that these qualities the future  
will bring to light.  
These potentials, which the idealists  
(The creators of Utopias) had long  
envisioned  
But, who for their faith in man  
Were belittled, ridiculed, and  
scorned  
Ending their lives in disenchantment or  
upon the stake.

Through this creature, Man,  
While God-making and God-playing  
Will create Utopias anew;  
Each new generation, while  
bemoaning its lot

(some bestirring the very fossils of  
despair

In the trenches of the abyss)  
Will make of past Utopias today's  
reality.

Man will progress  
Until faced by the cataclysm of a  
cosmic certainty,  
A catastrophe which in his lonely  
melancholy  
He feared,  
He anticipated,  
He knew,  
But would not admit.

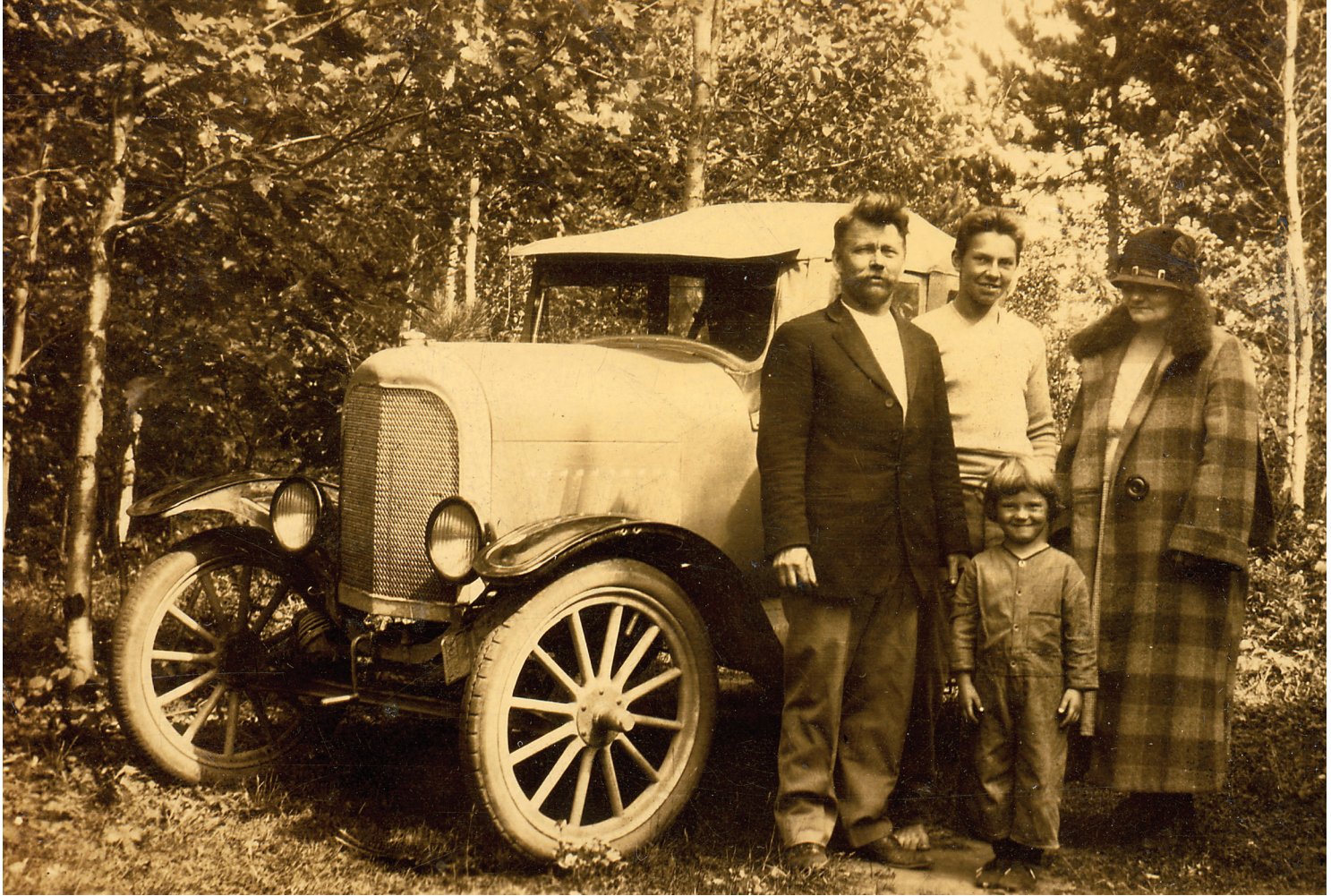
And when in the last dark depths of his  
mind  
The blood-red abstraction shudders  
He will say,  
"It was well  
worth  
being . . . ."

Aarre K. Lahti,  
Written on the Mississippi River,  
abreast of Grape Island (#385), 1963.









Here is an early picture of a car that he modified,  
lowered cab top.

Shown with his little brother Uolevi, Aarre (cen-  
ter), his father John (left) and mother Fanny  
(right).



Carving knife made from a mill file,





