KNOWING / NOT KNOWING

The classroom looked like we'd been occupying it forever. The seven large tables were covered with the assorted paraphernalia of thirteen calligraphers. The table surfaces lay under sunlight streaming through the large windows; filtered by redwoods, fragrant eucalyptus and pines, it drifted over papers, inks, brushes, pens, paints and pencils, and onto the dark wooden floor, polished to a warm glow by many unshod feet.

The setting was the Wheelwright Center at Green Gulch Zen Farm in Marin County, for Jenny Groat's "Knowing/Not-Knowing: The Creative Moment", a calligraphic retreat/workshop.

Jenny, has a background in painting, design, music and dance. She began her calligraphic work in 1956, and was a student of Lloyd Reynolds' at Reed College. She brings to her art work and to her teaching a sensibility reflecting her deep interest in nature, Jungian psychology and Zen Buddhism. She has taken lay ordination as a Zen Monk.

Green Gulch is a working farm and a Zen training center, with residents who are both monastic and lay people, working together to establish an American Zen practice. Its fields and gardens wind to the Pacific at Muir Beach in a lovely reverse "S" of peaceful order, rich color and heady scent.

In her initial flyer offering the retreat, Jenny described it as a "workshop for continuing students of calligraphy who want to try to deepen and free their creative approach to the work". She hoped that it would "provide a special and rich experience for those interested not only in technical calligraphic craft but in the spirit which motivates and frees art and life ". The workshop fulfilled these objectives admirably.

It is rare to find a teacher, in any discipline, who so consistently demonstrates a commitment to the personal creative growth of each student. Jenny's wealth of intelligent and focused energy is directed continually towards helping her students find their own voices. Her intense conviction that there is a unique voice worthy of expression in each person, and that one can (indeed must as an artist) learn to know, listen to, and release that voice, is a compelling and liberating force. It infuses her teaching with a cogent warmth and immediacy that is very exciting.

Our six days with Jenny included movement exercises, meditation, discussion, collective and individual work periods, delicious vegetarian meals, and walks in the hills and to the beach, ten minutes away. I found our group discussions, facilitated and guided by Jenny, to be some of the most rewarding times of the week.

What is important to Jenny is making one's work a true reflection of one's inner life. Therefore, experimenting with our own written words was encouraged in the class. Jenny invited us to pay attention to our speech habits and to strive for direct and simple expression as the most powerful way of communicating. One of her suggested "mindfulness practices" (a Zen concept) was to see if we could avoid using clichés for an entire day--very difficult! We all benefited from Jenny's stimulus; "awaken perception on many levels so that the resulting enrich-

Our classroom in Wheelwright Center. Jenny's table is in the foreground with a piece by the visiting Japanese scholar. It says "zazen-still mind." The "ABC" on the far wall is by Jenny and is owned by Green Gulch.

ment of your lives can be reflected in your words".

Some other ways we worked on this "perception awakening" were: daily meditation, (the importance of a spiritual practice in developing one's artistic self was a central theme); a Jenny-guided "perception walk" with sketchbooks and l" square windows in larger sheets of paper for quick composition layout ideas; we did movement exercises to free gesture, some stream of consciousness writing, and some improvisation practice; and the meditative ritual of ink grinding, using that time to slow our minds and prepare to release our calmed spirit through the brush.

We had a surprise visit from a Japanese master calligrapher touring Green Gulch. He sat down to demonstrate, at Jenny's invitation. Needing more ink, he energetically, but perfunctorily, scrubbed away with the ink stick on the stone. "So much for mystique," sighed Jenny.

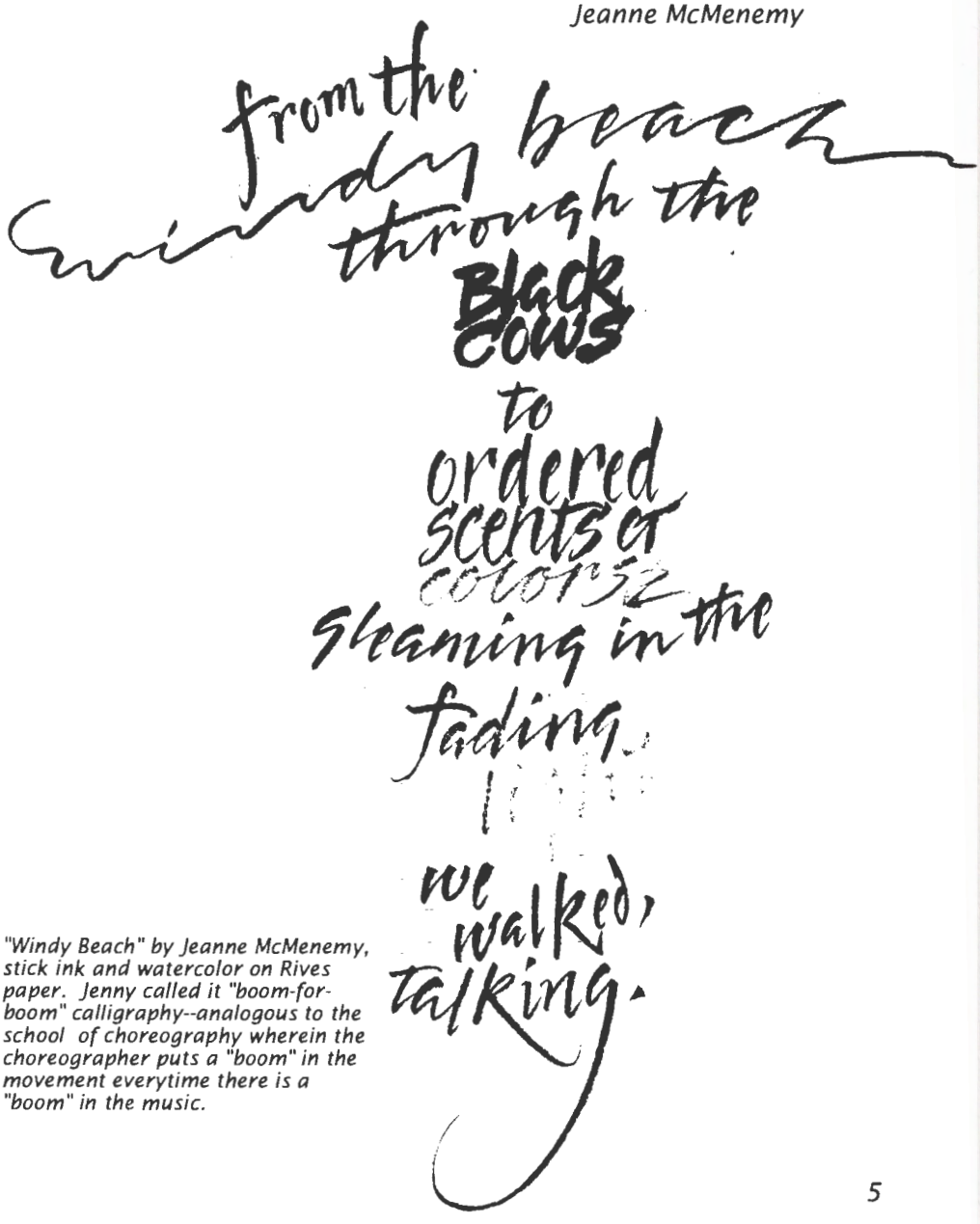
One afternoon we worked on designing an alphabet for a specific purpose, collectively discussing the necessary characteristics of line, scale, weight, etc., then individually arriving at solutions which were critiqued by Jenny. Very exhilarating to begin exploring the possibilities inherent in the role of originating artist!

Jenny creates a safe place for working--not just on calligraphic work but on personal growth as well. The class of twelve women had an age range spanning thirty years. From seven states and Victoria B.C. we came, with differing levels of achievement, diverse backgrounds and somewhat varied goals. Jenny's warmth and compassionate interest in each of us drew us together into a community. I learned that only by allowing my art work to arise from the full living of my life will it be truly authentic. We all took risks, both interpersonally and in our work, which were rewarded by a deep sense of excitement about the process of our growth, and an awakening of support for each other.

We all stayed in the Lindisfarne guest house at Green Gulch, a beautiful building constructed using traditional Japanese joinery--there are no nails in the exterior framing--to resemble a Japanese wayside inn. Simple and serene, it is a perfect environment for rest and contemplation. Each evening Jenny passed out packets of reading material to us, photocopied articles ranging from interviews with Zen scholars and Japanese calligraphy masters, Chinese poetry, word puzzles and Jungian analyses of fairy tales, to the poems of Wendell Barry, Rilke and Denise Levertov. The diversity and volume of the material was prodigious.

The residents of Green Gulch community were very welcoming. One of the cooks brought us an exquisite fruit tart and giant bowl of whipped cream as a midweek afternoon snack! I feel very grateful that I was able to participate in this illuminating week, with a teacher who views teaching as work in the Zen tradition of "right livelihood", giving unstintingly of herself so that each student can encounter, recognize and express her own true nature.

Jeanne McMenemy



"Windy Beach" by Jeanne McMenemy, stick ink and watercolor on Rives paper. Jenny called it "boom-for-boom" calligraphy--analogous to the school of choreography wherein the choreographer puts a "boom" in the movement everytime there is a "boom" in the music.