

A Mysterious Legacy

When I was ten my father came home from work one day with a copy of Walter Foster's "Learn to Draw Animals". "You're pretty good at drawing," he said. "Try some of these."

My View



Kathleen Valentine

I loved to draw - it was true. I was just surprised that anyone had noticed. For weeks I practiced Mr. Foster's intriguing little lessons - crafting circles and columns and triangles, building them in to shapes and forms, applying shading and dimension. Learning about texture. I practiced the lessons again and again - to this day I can still draw a

reasonably good rooster.

To a child of the fifties growing up in a rural area where "art class" meant learning to color inside the lines this was exciting stuff. Over the next couple of years Dad brought more - "Learn to Draw Trees", "Learn to Draw Wildlife", "Learn to Draw Streams and Waterfalls". Dad bought them at the camera shop where he went to purchase the lenses and equipment he worked evenings to afford. He was a carpenter and cabinetmaker with a secret passion to be a photographer. By day he built homes to feed his ever-increasing family but in the evenings he would go in to his wood shop and do a few extra jobs that would allow him to purchase the photography equipment that fed his passion.

He had a good eye. Even though the demands of family life eventually took precedence, his photography work of that period shows a keen appreciation for composition and lighting. He taught me how to see.

For me the lessons taught by Walter Foster (who was he anyway?) changed the direction of my young life. True that at the time my idea of a future career was to either be a nun (like the ones in school) or a detective (like Nancy Drew). But through all my own years of

trying to find the right fit - with a job, with a home, with a beloved - art always shimmered on the periphery of my soul like the one back home who loves us and reminds us that we always have a place.

This year I became involved with the North Shore Arts Association's "Legacy" exhibit. "Became involved" is a euphemism - I become totally and completely obsessed with it. The focus of the exhibit is the work of inter-generational families - fathers and sons, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters - all artists. At first the paintings fascinated - I sat looking at them trying to see traces of similarity or rebellion between the generations. But then as I got to know the artists and they told me stories of the past artists, and the parent artists, who inspired them, I became more intrigued with the passion to make art - the "legacy" - that passed from one artist to another.

The desire to make art is, of itself, a perpetual mystery. What is it in the human psyche that calls us to record, interpret, represent and reinvent the world around us? Wandering through the many local galleries it is tempting to wonder if the world needs another painting of boats and waves and lighthouses? And yet, at least in the better galleries, each work is so uniquely singular.... This passion to create is intrinsic to human nature and, in the families who nurture the passion, a vocation more than a desire.

Charles C. Gruppe told me a wonderful story. His grandfather, Charles P. painted for the Dutch Royal Family. His uncle Karl was the Chief Sculptor of Monumental Restorations in New York. His uncle Emile founded the Gloucester School of Painting. His father Paulo was a gifted cellist. When Charles was a young man, determined to make it on his own, he found a job which he was very excited about and hurried home to tell his family. "Job?" his father exclaimed when he told him. "What do you want with a job? Why aren't you upstairs painting?"

Though most of us only dream about that level of family support, the love of art passed from parent to child has helped those fortunate enough to be so inspired

to pursue a way of life that is sometimes beyond explanation. I have often thought that making art is a kind of alchemy - a mysterious blending of one's own internal mysteries with our perceptions of the world around us. In his entry for the "Painting with My Father" submissions to the Legacy catalog, T.M. Nicholas wrote, "...I began to realize that painting wasn't just about nature, that every good picture starts with an idea about what you're looking at. 'You have to combine some of yourself with nature. The subject is just the vehicle,' [my Father Tom Nicholas] would say."

And therein, it would seem, is the mystery defined. Each of us has a unique collection of ideas, observations, perceptions, and appreciations. When we set out to make art - or to create in any form whether it is a painting, a garden, a delicious meal, a birthday party for someone dear, or a new business - we are intermingling our own vision with the world's possibilities. We create because we are attuned to life. We create because we are part of the flow and by stepping in to it and contributing our unique set of perceptions we participate in eternity.

It is a beautiful spring evening and I am leaving the North Shore Arts Association after a meeting about future exhibits to be presented there. As I step onto the porch I stop, as I always do, to appreciate the view - the fishing boats moored in Smith's Cove unloading their catch, the boats skimming through the harbor catching the last of the sunlight in their sails, the shifting colors of day's transit into night painting the sky behind the turrets of City Hall and the towers of Our Lady of Good Voyage Church.

And there in the parking lot - at his easel - totally absorbed in capturing the last of this day's light, is Robert Gruppe. Painting. Carrying on the legacy of making art.

Kathleen Valentine is a graphic artist and writer who lives in Gloucester and is very happy about that.

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