

## **“A Charge To Keep”**

**(Gary)**

Some of you might be interested to learn that George Bush has a favorite painting. The artwork depicts a cowboy, bandanna around his neck and hair blowing in the wind, racing up a rocky ravine atop his galloping steed. Two other horsemen close behind are in hot pursuit. According to the online magazine Slate, the painting is by an artist named W.H.D. Koerner, whom I'd never heard of before, but who is apparently pretty well known as an illustrator of the American Southwest.

Originally born in Germany, Koerner started out painting cows on milk wagons in Iowa where his family had immigrated to join a community of German-speaking farmers back in the 1880's, but he got more serious about his craft after he moved to Chicago, studying at the Art Institute there, later moving on to the Art Students League in New York. Like a lot of city boys at the turn of the century, his imagination was drawn to the vanishing frontier—recalling purple sage brush and fierce Comanches and burly buffalo hunters—but when Koerner finally got a chance to go West, it was in a Buick, not a wagon train. He was dealing in nostalgia, depicting days gone by.

Now the funny thing about the painting is the subject matter. When he had the scene hanging in his Texas governor's office, George Bush told reporters it depicted a Methodist circuit rider, carrying the gospel to the remote fringes of the wilderness. And the title of the painting is “A Charge To Keep,” presumably meaning a charge to Christian witness, a phrase Bush liked so well that he took it as the title for his own autobiography. But the truth is the illustration first appeared in 1916 in the Saturday Evening Post with an adventure story titled “The Slipper Tongue” about a fast-talking horse thief who rides off to the Sand Hills of Nebraska to escape a lynch mob. Mr. Bush thought he was being inspired by a rendition of a trusty disciple of the Lord, serving the Almighty. But the original caption accompanying the picture in the Post read, “Had His Start Been Fifteen Minutes Longer He Would Not Have Been Caught.”

Now I tell this story, not to make fun of our President's taste in art, because actually I rather like the painting. Koerner studied under some of the great masters of his trade. He published dozens of works in magazines like McCall's and Collier's and Harper's. My point is just that this would be a pretty good painting, whether it happened to depict a missionary or a cattle rustler. There's action and drama. The musculature of the pony is anatomically correct. The trees look like trees. The whole composition carries you upward and forward with a visual dynamism that stands on its own, regardless of whether it portrays a low-down crook or a holy roller.

All of which suggests that good art isn't overly concerned with goodness. Religious art doesn't just hang in St. Peter's or adorn the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Spirituality is less about focusing on a certain category of subjects—angels or Madonnas or saints or choirboys—than about gazing at everyday objects and ordinary people with a kind of incandescent wonder. Art and faith have this in common. Both come in glimpses—the little moments of illumination that don't always take place in church, when we catch sight of the magnificent shining through the mundane.

Not everyone understands that. A few years ago, I organized a service just like this one celebrating religion and the arts. And just like this morning, a number of practicing artists from our own congregation spoke about what inspired them, how they believed beauty could enrich our lives and how images could often express truths more powerfully than written words or sermons. After the service, I received a note from a disgruntled congregant, complaining the service had nothing spiritual about it. It was all about vision, originality, passion, imagination, creativity. In the listener's mind, there was not a single reference to religion anywhere.

But if you can't find spirituality when it's right in front of you, you probably won't find it elsewhere. When I first started painting landscapes, I'd often pack up my car with easel and brushes and head out of town for the small towns and hidden farms and dirt roads of Vermont in search of inspiration, looking for that perfect pastoral valley, the most picturesque mountain view, the most impressionistic-looking haystacks in the most sun-drenched field possible. Often I'd spend more time driving than painting, never quite finding the landscape I was looking for. In contrast, now I seldom travel more than a mile or two from my home to paint. And while I still enjoy standing in the open air messing around with canvas and oils, I'm more than happy to paint the nearby Winooski over and over again. Learning to see what's here—right before our eyes—even if it's a muddy stream rather than a mighty river, is where the work of transforming life into art begins.

It's informative to remember that when Cezanne wanted to paint still life, he didn't need props of fancy cut glass or rich brocades or curios to add fascination to the picture. All of he needed was a bowl of apples, the most common fruit, to set his soul on fire. From his studio, he had a clear view of a low hill, the Mont Sainte-Victoire, which would really be something of a midget if placed among Vermont's Green Mountains, but Cezanne painted that, little hill more than sixty times, sometimes in off white hues, in dull gray and lavender tints, rose and blue and orange. "The motifs are plentiful," he enthused about his sacred mountain. "The same subject seen from different angles gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply by inclining a little to the right one time and to the left another." He didn't have to travel to Sinai to receive his revelation. When Renoir visited Cezanne in the fall of 1889, the two wound up quarreling, but what remained in the guest's memory was not so much the feud but rather the "unforgettable sight" of the older man standing by his easel peering at the scene before his eyes with a gaze that Renoir called "ardent, concentrated, attentive and respectful."

That's the quality of vision that at their best art and faith can bring to the world, and it's a goal worth aspiring to: to simply look with fearless honesty, with mindful precision, with deep appreciation. That is truly a charge to keep.

**(Katharine Montstream)**

Having changed my major in college to avoid a class in public speaking, I have to admit I tried to think of a quick excuse as to why I couldn't do this. My first response was

“ahhhh, gee, I dunno Gary, I think I might be in *Bermuda* that weekend.” But, that wasn’t true; I am here in Burlington. And although I have to confess I have a hard time understanding what spirituality means, (I actually *asked* Gary the definition) I will do my best to share my experiences and hope they resonate spiritually in some way.

When I first moved to Burlington 22 years ago, I took a watercolor class with Larry Goldsmith. Had I not been pushed out of the car by my then, fiancé, and strongly encouraged to make my way to that class, I am not sure what I would be doing for a career. But I *do* know that I wouldn’t have been a painter. Painting was something I loved as far back as I can remember, and I am fortunate to have parents who saw this and gave me wonderful opportunities to study as a child. Growing up in Old Wethersfield Connecticut, I was lucky enough to have an inspiring and dynamic art teacher who took us outside to paint the Wethersfield Cove, the farm stands and the Congregational Church in the center of town. These were my first plein air paintings, and I still have most of them under my bed in an old dress box that my mom had saved. I look back on that experience as the start of my love for landscape.

In college I never wanted to study art because ***who makes a living painting?*** And besides, I was at the University of Colorado, I was there to ski! And who wants to be the struggling, starving artist? Not me. So it would only be a hobby as far as I was concerned.

Then I met my teacher and mentor, Larry Goldsmith. He tapped into a whole new dimension of expressive, loose painting that I didn’t know existed. He dripped paint from above onto wet paper and watched it drift across the page, he scraped with the edge of a brush to indicate a trunk of a tree, he tilted and tipped his paper to make the color move, I was spellbound, and he was my teacher for seventeen years.

About a year and a half ago, I got an invitation to attend a painting trip that was offered by one of my favorite artists, Eric Aho. The invite read something like this.....” join us in Montreal with your canvas and painting gear to study in the boreal forest of northern Quebec. We will take a train five hours north to one of 200 lakes in this region and will travel by boat to a nearby Inn on an island and paint for five days.” Where do I sign, was my thought.

To be able to travel and have only to eat, sleep and paint is always a growing experience for me. The sky looks bigger, the colors more vivid. I notice how beautiful the gradations of gray in the clouds on even the dreariest of days. It all seems new, even my paint looks a little unfamiliar squeezed out onto my palette. Setting up my easel on a point near the water, I saw the birches were a deep yellow orange, the sky was a brilliant cobalt blue with almost a band of turquoise near the horizon. Clouds moved swiftly as to not make my job to capture the moment too simple. I looked out at the reflection of the water and began to paint. The only thing I could hear was the rustling of leaves and the lapping of the tiny waves at the edge of the lake. Across the way I saw a moose swimming across the water making its way to the other side. Fortunately, not to *my* side. Being outdoors painting can make you feel a bit vulnerable.

Vulnerable to weather changes, mosquito attacks, gusting winds or a possible change of course for a mother moose. Respect for nature is at its peak for me when I paint outdoors.

This experience is in sharp contrast to my studio work. There, any number of people could be coming and going, the phone might ring, the dog will certainly bark, and music fills my space as if to say... "it's time to get to work." There is no gale force wind to knock over my easel, no quick drop in temperature, no sunscreen needed. I don't need a hat, food is close by and no bugs crawl through my painting leaving little legs and wings behind when I try to flick them off the canvas. But in the haven of my studio, I miss the openness and that feeling of being part of the landscape, being *in* it.

Although I wasn't brought up with religion~ as a matter of fact I don't even think I have ever heard my parents utter the word "spirituality"~ I *can* say that painting in the elements makes me aware that the world is a powerful place. It's inspiring to stand there before miles of mountains, lakes and grasses, and know that it's all so much bigger than you. The goal is to lose track of time, to forget where you are, and to just see. Take it in and try to hold onto what's before you. There is a sense of urgency as the clouds change, the water shifts from blue to gray and the sun that was hidden is now shining brightly. All this is exciting and creates adrenalin that in turn will drive me to put paint on canvas. To capture that moment.

Later when I reflect on the day and look at my work, it takes me back to that space and I feel a certain amount of pride that I got out there, I got out of my studio and experienced nature as she was. Does this make me spiritual? I'm not sure. But I know my love of color, shape and the outside world gives me a sense of completeness and a reason to get my brushes out each day.

### **(Carol E.S. MacDonald)**

One of the principles of drawing that I really like and that I find to be particularly useful is Negative space. When you are drawing an object - the negative space is the space that surrounds the object, that defines the object - the space that is not the object or what we often refer to as the positive space. Often the negative space is much clearer to see than the positive space. An example is in the UU banner, the space inside the circles and around the chalice is the negative space. When drawing a bicycle or a chair which has very complicated positive space, often looking at the negative space can really simplify what we are seeing. Another example is in figure drawing when the model has a lot of foreshortening - meaning that a leg or an arm or their entire body, in a reclining pose, is coming directly at you - It is often through the negative space that we can draw and get the proportions most clearly.

I often tell my students about the purple room. A number of years ago an experiment was done with a purple room. A person was put into a room that was totally purple. The walls, floor, furniture - everything was colored the same shade of purple and the person was dressed in the color also. Purple would seem to be a fairly memorable color, I know that when I see a purple house in a neighborhood I tend to remember it. The test in this

experiment was to see for how long someone could hold the distinction - purple upon being in a totally purple environment. I believe that the results were about 20 - 30 seconds at which point everything read gray. Without another color to contrast with, the distinction of that color disappears. Color only exists in relationship to other color.

In the summer I run an art camp for children out of my studio. This year will be my 15th year of doing this. I like the idea of giving children a chance to work in and experience a real artists studio. So often being an artist is not a concept that is taken very seriously by adults or held as a viable possibility as a career. In camp we draw, make prints, work with an etching press, work with clay, make an artist's book and paint. I have kept the same structure of working in a variety of materials and having each child have the opportunity to design and work with their own images and ideas in the various forms. This is really what an artist does. We usually have mediums that we work in and sometimes those shift and change, sometimes not. The images develop. I often work with a theme for sometimes years until it morphs into something else. The children who come back to camp year after year have often been figuring out what they want to do for their linoleum block print or artist's book long before they get there.

One of my main goals at camp is to get children drawing from real life. Learning to draw is a process of developing a hand/eye coordination so that eventually your hand can draw or record what you are seeing with your eyes. We also learn how to see and understanding the concept of negative space is a big part of that. When you think about it the negative space is often about 50% of the visual information we have access to. But often we are so fixated on the object, that we forget it is there.

With many of the projects I ask the children to talk about something that they like about their work and which part was particularly hard or challenging. More often than not the hard part is what they like the most.

If I apply the idea of negative and positive space to my life - I would think about my inner and outer life. The positive space would be the doingness, busy, task oriented part and the negative space would be the meditative, restful, spacious time. As an artist there is the time spent marketing, framing, delivering, work and the time spent making it. On good studios days there is a strong connection to my soul. My work flows and I can work intuitively. Artists are always looking for the way into the psyche. How to make that connection. How to make the negative space visible.

Last fall I started a new body of work based on the process of knitting. I have been interested in repetitive processes as ways that we can come into our souls. Knitting is a sensual, colorful, tactile experience that is quite satisfying and often frustrating. I am not a particularly proficient knitter. I have made some sweaters and scarves and a couple of hats. I like to knit when Michael and I watch tv together and he has the clicker. When he is channel surfing, which drives me crazy, I can just get involved in my knitting. I like when I finally get the rhythm of a new pattern so that I can do it without thinking. It becomes almost automatic.

Bernadette Murphy writes in "Zen and the Art Of Knitting"

"Knitting is like life. We have to enjoy the journey if we expect the destination to mean much. Best of all, knitting is slow. So slow that we see the beauty inherent in every tiny act that makes up a sweater. So slow that we know the project's not going to get finished today - it may not get finished for many months or longer - and thus, we make our peace with the unresolved nature of life. We slow down as we knit. Our breathing and heart rate drop and knitters who've been at it a while experience a trance-like state that provides the same benefits as other forms of meditation."

In my new work, I am interested in creating a new sense of time and space which is something that I have also been creating in my life. I knit things and then print with them. I have taught myself how to draw the process of knitting. It was a big day in the studio when I figured out how to vary the density of the loop to create the distinction of knit and purl. My new work combines printing and drawing, the different processes interweaving with each other. The work is more abstract which is a new direction and often has a narrative piece to it, inferring a story of some sort. I am working toward a 1-woman show of this new work which will be shown at the Firehouse Gallery in the fall.

In closing:

I invite everyone to think about your own lives and consider what is the negative space in your life and what would happen if you paid more attention to it?