



Open Air

The Beauty of Creation,
Marriage and
Painting

BY PETER BOUGIE AND NORA KOCH

Nora

I grew up on a dairy farm in north eastern Wisconsin. It shaped my early life and continues to influence my life. Rural Wisconsin has always been a theme in my work. I don't live on a farm anymore, but I get out into the country as often as I can.

I met my husband Peter in our parish at the age of 50. I was amazed that we shared many of the same responses to land and light and art. On one occasion in the early days of our courting, we shared—over the phone—our joy at the light of the setting sun as it illuminated the landscape to the east. We were enjoying the same phenomenon of light at the same moment from different locations. To have found someone that “got it” was astounding.

I admired his painting and encouraged him to continue painting. During our first year of marriage, I started going with him on his painting excursions. We try to get out at least once a week together. He paints, and I take photos or do watercolors. We share the experience of a day together pursuing shared interests via separate enterprises.

We started a tradition of having art shows at our home in the second year of our marriage and have done it ever since. We host them in November of each year, and they are an annual milestone. We have been gratified by people's continued interest and to hear from some that it is the highlight of their year.

My background in art is a mixed bag. I have a master's degree in Printmaking and Book Arts from the University of Iowa. Watercolors have always been an interest of mine, and recently I have taken them up again. It is a way for me to engage with the landscape. It is intense. I find myself getting up, scrambling around and leaning over my watercolor block, or sometimes kneeling next to it as I take another stab at getting what I want. The work is hard, but being in the countryside has a healing effect.

My brother and his family live on a farmstead nearby to us, across the field where my parents lived for more than 30 years. Peter and I have both painted there. We were both drawn to the barn as a subject. A couple of years ago it had to be taken down. I'm glad we paid attention to it when we had the chance. Without intending to, we are chronicling the loss of a way of life. I feel that loss profoundly. If I did not believe in God, I don't know how I could stand it.



Peter

I do primarily *plein air* landscape painting. “Plein air” means “open air” and was pioneered in the 19th century, first by the Barbizon painters in France, and was later thoroughly developed by various schools of impressionist artists up to this day. The purpose of my landscape painting is to represent my subjects directly and with humble fidelity to nature. That means I approach nature as worthy of careful, considered respect. As a faithful Catholic, nature is “Creation,” the work of God. Not God Himself, but God is present in it. The intention of a craftsman is in whatever object he or she crafts, and in that sense the craftsman is present in the object. I think God is present in nature in a similar but much more profound sense. God is the essence of being, the “I AM” He spoke to Moses and that Jesus spoke to those arriving to arrest him in the Gospel of John. God is present in nature in that

essence of being, in life itself, in all things becoming, while at the same time He is greater than that. The object of a craftsman or an artist is not becoming; it has become, period. Compared to God, obviously it is very limited.

Unlike Nora, I grew up in towns. We lived mostly in small towns, and my father often spoke of the idyllic farm life he enjoyed while spending summers on his grandfather’s farm as a boy. As a teenager, I worked on farms in the late 70’s and early 80’s. We did a lot of labor by hand with very simple tools that had not changed much in centuries—mucking heaps of accumulated manure out of a shed with manure forks, for instance. I was very fortunate to have many experiences like that. I acquired a sense that culture grows out of the earth. Obviously, there can be no artistic culture without first having agriculture. I think cultural elites today have no clue about

that, to the point of ignorant contempt.

I studied classical drawing and painting with Richard Lack in Minneapolis in the mid 1980’s. There was no training in plein air painting, although he encouraged students to pursue it. Some of us spent a lot of time “going out painting,” working to adapt our studio skills to work outdoors. Classical training puts a premium on careful observation, which is something that takes you out of yourself. In my opinion, it prepares you for spiritual practice, because it shows you that you are not at the center of the universe.

For Nora and me, our art related excursions are an important part of our marriage. We have pursued them persistently over time, and they are part of the fabric of our life together. I think we are both refreshed and nourished spiritually by these experiences.

