

New paths and hidden attributes:

Watercolors as a late-life adventure

James N. Butcher  
Professor Emeritus  
University of Minnesota

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## Abstract

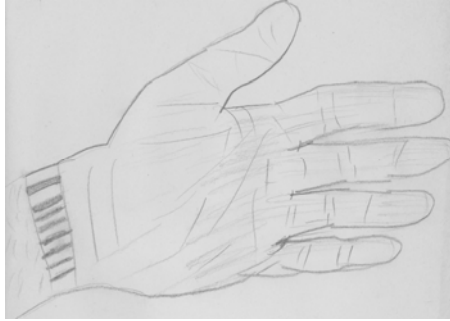
As life changes, directional shifts in interests can occur that bring an element of surprise to others, even to the individual. Many people possess unrecognized or dormant abilities that are never expressed in our task-oriented society. But, given a chance, or an accident of fate, new areas of functioning can emerge. And, with a receptive and encouraging environment a different direction in life can develop. This situation happened with me over the past six years. After a 35 year-career as an academic-clinical psychologist, I found myself involved with an extremely different activity—watercolor painting--with surprising results. In this discussion, I will describe my entry into the world of watercolor painting as a late-life adventure, including some points about beginning steps and will show some of the resulting images along the way.

Many people possess unrecognized or dormant abilities that are never expressed in our fast moving and task-oriented society. As a person changes through life and schedules alter, directional shifts in interests can occur that bring an element of surprise to others—even to the individual. Given a chance, or an accident of fate, new areas of functioning can emerge. And, with a receptive and encouraging environment (and it's a great advantage in life to be surrounded by people who tolerate some missteps and mistakes) a different and unexpected direction in life can unfold.

This situation occurred with me about 6 years ago. After a 35 year-career as an academic-clinical psychologist, I found myself with a strange object in my hand moving paints along a blank paper with surprising results. In this discussion, I will describe my entry into the world of watercolor painting as a late-life adventure—including some points about beginning steps—and will show some of the resulting images along the way.

There had been few hints of artistic ability or particular interests in the creative arts in my life prior to this time. I recall only one time, when I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, my teacher appeared to like my drawing effort and encouraged me to draw more. I did not follow through on this plan. A lot of things happened after that and I went into other directions—some more interesting than others.

My own artistic expression for most of my life was extremely limited—mostly to mindless doodling in long faculty meetings in order to pass the time. At one point in my early 50's, after we had given our 4 year old daughter a drawing set, I sat during a losing and boring Minnesota Viking football game and tried my hand (so to speak) at drawing...



This was the extent of it—this drawing was only rediscovered in our daughter’s junk box during our move to a condo in 2002.

In the past, some members of my family showed artistic ability. One of my sisters and a brother have had stints at painting... both were excellent. My sister’s work (painting animal figures onto driftwood and old saws) was sold in a little tourist shop in W Va. My brother, Jerry, (a Methodist minister) went through a period of oil painting that resulted in a number of outstanding pictures. There has been some research to suggest that genetics plays a role in creativity (Reuter, Roth, Holve, & Henning, 2004) although research in this area is only beginning to make connections and negative findings are also reported (Rothenberg & Wyshak, 2004).

My sister, Joan Hissom, gave me this picture of a coal mining tippie from Bergoo, WV, the small town in which I was born.



This picture was painted by Rev. Jerry Butcher, my brother.

In 2000, during a sabbatical leave in London, I acquiesced to taking an art class at the encouragement of my wife (who was afraid that I'd get bored and want to limit our time in London). This was certainly a new direction, something that was very different than what I had spent my career doing, and one that I had some questions about but I finally concluded "What do I have to lose? No one knows me here... if I make a fool out

of myself what difference does it really make?” Here is one of the early watercolors from a class at the Hampstead School of Art I took in London.



Still life painting done during a class period in 2000.

How does one go from a blank space to a complex web of color and form on a canvas? What is an interesting subject matter? As an amateur in artistic creation, I have not made a study of the underlying reasons for the genesis of a work of art. Certainly practice and gaining familiarity with the medium of interest is necessary for pleasing art but finding a captivating subject matter is also essential. However, something more is needed—a willingness to experiment with life, go out on a limb, do things differently.

Over the centuries, people have shown a remarkable acceptance of an endless array of images i.e. images from blank space to highly complex, skillfully crafted canvasses some fantastic and some unbelievably not. My ideal topics have been: flowers (because of the color) and landscapes because of their peacefulness... a nice commodity in these trying times.

How did I pick these scenes to paint? I am always attracted to the bright colors in flowers. But for the landscapes, I think it might be a spillover from my travels across-

cultures doing my international research—looking out at foreign scenery from train windows is always captivating.



- Tulips



- Regents Canal, Maida Vale, London ( a homework assignment for a class I took )



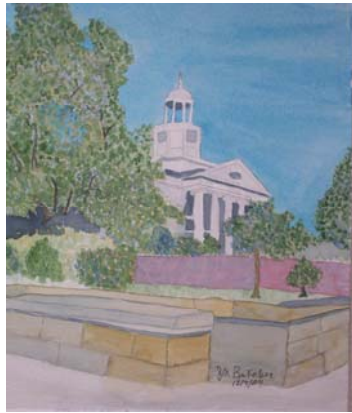
- St James Park, London



Ravello, The Amalfi Coast, Italy



- Cottage in East Anglia, England



- Vicksburg Courthouse (bookcover of Pope, Butcher, & Seelen, 2006; Use of the MMPI-2 in Court, APA Books.)



- A blue jar from Santorini, Greece



- View from the Glacier Express, near Zermot, Switzerland



Imperial Palace, Tokyo, Japan



Bike Trail in Excelsior, Mn. (American Psychologist, October, 2005)

I have pondered a few questions about it all since I became involved in watercoloring.

What is art for the non-artist? Creative artistic expression is many things to many people... Why is it that some older people wind up discovering new talents or interests? It does seem to be a notable happening. And, in some of my classes in London there were often older hobbyists. Is it a result of some human driven quality? Perhaps it comes from a willingness to try something different or by being less restrained by ongoing requirements? The attitude that I described earlier as “What do I have to lose?” was perhaps the genesis. I will leave the answers to the question of underlying ability to support this interest to the researcher. I will simply paint for enjoyment when I can... and enjoy the surprises.

What does this new found artistic expression mean for me? Clearly, there are a number of things I can see that art is, for me, not:

- Lifestyle. This new form of expression does not represent a new mode of living. Upon learning of my newly found artistic successes my brother asked me in his usual sense of humor “When are you going to slice off your ear?” I assured him

that ear removal was not in the offing. I have not simply grabbed a beret and headed for the left bank.

- Replacement for a life-active career direction that has been terminated.

Watercolor painting has not replaced other endeavors completely. Being a college professor has some advantages. A flexible life style--it has been said that it is often difficult to know when a college professor is retired... some do early in life; others never do. But, the well kept secret is that no one ever knows whether a professor is retired or not! I am still involved in psychology—writing, consulting, and lecturing but now I take a paint set along with my Powerpoint files!

- A distraction. For some people painting can be a distraction from unpleasant life circumstances: Winston Churchill (a notable artist, among his many talents wrote in his little book about painting as a pastime:

“Painting is complete as a distraction. I know of nothing which, without exhausting the body, more entirely absorbs the mind. Whatever the worries of the hour or the threats of the future, once the picture has begun to flow along, there is no room for them in the mental screen. They pass out into shadow and darkness.”  
P. 44-45.

Watercolor painting is not an escape. But it is, for me, somewhat of a cage against intrusions of the real world. When I am involved in a painting time stops—until the process itself requires a break (e.g. drying time) Now, I use time that is required for watercolors to dry... to work on an article! I have always been sort of a multi tasker.

- A pain killer. For some people, painting can serve as a buffer against pain. I recently read the touching experiences of a watercolorist described in one of those new type journals that I have been reading (Watercolor Magic) whose painting was a means of dealing with painful life experiences-a tragic family illness (Johnson, 2006). It does not work for me that way.
- An expression of a lifelong interest and fulfillment. For some successful people painting can be secondary but an extremely rewarding additional career. For example, one of my favorite songsters, Tony Bennett, has had an equally successful secondary life work in painting. (Visit his website at: [www.tonybennett.com/](http://www.tonybennett.com/))

#### There are deterrents encountered

Many things can interfere with newly found artistic efforts for the recent or developing artist.

- The rearing of ugly heads...schedule intrusions and hangovers from the world of work. I have had numerous deadlines and other distractions that have limited painting time.
- I get lured into art related adventures, particularly in London, at art lectures, exhibits, etc to explore other art forms. But, I have learned that some contemporary movements actually serve to discourage individual art skill development. For example, concept art movement and withdrawal of focus upon traditional creative arts (The Turner Prize highlighting the rebuilding of old barns

or the rumpled bed with used condoms spread about. My painting friends in London scoff at the misdirection of the Turner prize.

- Or I get sidetracked into technology—e.g. Digital photography and computer-based art creation.

Before closing, I want to acknowledge some people who have been particularly supportive of my watercolor adventure:

- Dr. Sue Kendall, a long time friend and PhD art historian, was very supportive of an early watercolor that I gave her and her husband, Phil Kendall, after a thanksgiving holiday we spent with them in 2001. She didn't immediately destroy "the Pumpkin of Avalon" but actually hung it in their home.
- My coauthor, Ken Pope, was very instrumental in my public displaying of watercolor images. He encouraged me to do the "Courthouse" watercolor for our 3<sup>rd</sup> edition book... in fact he was very assertive in his request! I couldn't resist his and Carolyn Williams insistence that I do the watercolor, even though I had great trepidation in doing the "commission."
- Linda Bennion, of Queensgate Studios in London, for her guidance in my skill development.

What has my new found artistic expression meant to me? It has been an interesting glimpse at an unexplored avenue in early life. A look back at a street untravelled—not with a sense of regret but with a sense of amazement that it could

happen at all. I only wish I had discovered this path sooner in my life. Who knows what would have happened with it all?

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