

Painting What Comes Naturally

For years Pat Elliott struggled along as an artist. He has not achieved status or wealth. But he has discovered great satisfaction in perfecting his God-given talent for painting nature scenes. Could we learn some lessons from his example?

By Jamie Buckingham

There is something especially attractive about the creative person. The man who comes home after work, picks up mallet and chisel, and transforms a block of marble into an exquisite statue; the woman who sits down at the church piano and brings forth stirring music; the mason who lays his blocks to perfection, knowing they will be covered by stucco; the housewife who beautifully decorates her cakes, which instantly disappear into the mouths of hungry children—all these people are fulfilling their God-given gift.

To such a person worldly recognition, even financial return for an exquisite performance, is secondary to fulfilling the gift. In fact, many creative people never grow rich. Yet the satisfaction of performance with excellence—even if no one but God sees and applauds—is sufficient. Such a person, fulfilling his gift to the glory of God, is the real “Christian in Action.”

Patrick Elliott, a 45-year-old artist with an adoring young wife and a four-year-old son, is such a man.

When Pat turned his life over to Jesus Christ back in 1970, he asked nothing in return. All he knew was that he was 33 years old and had a great, unfulfilled dream in his life. He wanted to spend his life as an artist.

It's not that Pat hadn't painted before he became a Christian. In fact, he had been drawing and painting since he was in grammar school in Central Florida. In high school he would accompany his buddies into the dense swamps and hammocks, drawn by the haunting wild

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beauty of the Florida wilderness. The vast cathedral-like cypress swamps, the rattle of the cabbage-palm fronds, the tranquil solitude of a mist-veiled dawn in the lake country, the throaty cries of the sandhill cranes ringing over the still water—all touched his artist's soul. Although he loved hunting, it was the vast beauty of the bayheads, marshes, prairies, and hammocks which captured his spirit.

Returning home, he would paint and sketch what he had seen in the wilderness. During his high school days he often took a sketch pad into the woods and, sitting under a water oak, would sketch the beauty of the Econlockhatchee River swamp—complete with wildlife.

He began collecting reptiles—snakes and alligators, in particular. He would bring them home and use them as models for his paintings.

He loved nature—something he had inherited from his dad who was an ardent outdoorsman. But his dad, who worked for the railroad, discouraged him from painting as a livelihood.

“It's a good hobby,” his father told him, “but don't spend too much time with it. Most artists starve.”

To tell Pat Elliott not to spend time

painting, however, was like telling an armadillo not to dig holes. For there burned in Pat's bones the fire of an artist. He could no more stop painting than Jeremiah could stop preaching.

Even more interesting, Pat did not know the “fire in his bones” had been planted there by God. Pat understands that principle now. He realizes a man is never really happy, never really fulfilled, until he is practicing what he is gifted to do. What Pat didn't know back then was that the Holy Spirit not only brings gifts; He also activates the gifts which lie latent in the life of each person.

Pat knew he was a gifted artist. Through his grandmother's encouragement, he received an art scholarship to the University of Miami. It did not matter that most artists starved. He had to sing the song which was playing in his heart.

But there were other sounds also, discordant notes which slowly began to drown out the creativity. He dropped out of school. Alcohol, drugs, and finally the occult destroyed his vital contact with God's creation. For 15 years he struggled as an artist, but no longer seemed able to “touch the soul of nature” with his brush. Alcohol became his god; drugs, his constant companion; licentiousness, his goal. The dark undertow of the Satanic world was slowly sucking him down.

In time, Pat began to doubt whether he was gifted as an artist. Other artists, promoting the abstract schools, looked at his realistic paintings and said, “You're nothing but a draftsman.”

Yet, even in his alcoholic stupor, the gift kept emerging. He had to paint. Even

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**Pat Elliott's deep feelings
for nature can make
even dunes and water
live on canvas.**

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though the drugs and alcohol were eroding his body and soul, the gift never disappeared. His oils and acrylics were so real that they looked like photographs.

Salvation is a process of becoming what God intended a man to be when he was born. But salvation escaped Pat Elliott. Although he had a steady job as a museum artist at the Florida state museum, he was slowly slipping into the whirlpool of frustrating oblivion.

Yet it is in such a burial ground that seeds often come to life. Moses, herding sheep and goats in the wilderness, was commissioned by God to fulfill his destiny. The brilliant architect and builder, Nehemiah, relegated to serving the table

of a foreign slavemaster, suddenly had a burning desire to rebuild the wall around the city of his ancestors — a city he had never seen. Simon Peter, who returned to pulling nets and scaling fish, was commissioned by Jesus to “feed my sheep.” Each man, in the depths of failure, received a call and had his dreams fulfilled.

So it was with Pat Elliott. At the age of 33—his body burned out from the ravages of alcohol, his mind warped by drugs, and with hope of ever fulfilling his dream fading like the receding lights of a missed train—Pat had an encounter with God.

It happened in Gainesville, Florida. The words came through a radio one night at a friend's house. “You can do anything you want to do on this earth, but someday you will have an appointment with God.”

The next night, working late at the Florida state museum's exhibit shop, Pat heard the same radio preacher. He was quoting Romans 14:11: “As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me.”

“That,” the preacher added, “is an appointment *everyone* is going to keep.”

It was too much for Pat. He phoned the station and talked to the preacher, Gene Keith, the pastor of Southside Baptist Church in Gainesville. Keith, recognizing the voice of a desperate man, made an appointment to meet him the next day at a Christian bookstore in downtown Gainesville.

That afternoon, in the back room of the bookstore, the searching artist received Jesus Christ. Demonic voices, which had shrieked and howled in his mind for weeks, trying to bully him into submission, were silenced. A great peace seem to flood his mind.

Keith then laid hands on Elliott and prayed: “Lord, let Pat know he's saved in a way he can understand.”

The Lord often uses the natural abilities of a person to reveal Himself. To the musician He may come in the form of a song; the geologist may see Him in a rock formation; and the biologist, through his microscope. To Pat Elliott,

the artist, God revealed himself visually.

Returning to the front of the store, Keith told his wife and a few customers, "Pat just prayed to accept Jesus." An older woman, one of the customers, looked up at Pat and smiled. "I don't see how anyone can live without Him."

Instantly, Pat saw truth in her face. This was followed by a brief, but brilliant, vision as he saw the full, magnificent face of the Lord Jesus—enlarging in form until he saw His entire figure. First it surrounded the woman; then he saw Jesus actually come into his own body.

His face covered with tears, Pat walked down the street saying over and over, "You're real! You're real!"

When he returned to his house, the entire place was filled with a clear, golden light. He realized a cleansing was taking place. The powerful Holy Spirit was actually evicting the demon forces which had so long controlled his life. For days all Pat could do was wander around the city saying, "He's real!"

As happens to so many who are born again, Elliott almost threw away the baby with the dirty bath water. He wanted to rid himself of everything in his old life—including the gift of painting. As a result, he came close to falling into the old Jansenistic heresy of saying that everything of the earth is evil.

"All I wanted to do was witness and preach," he recalls. "I saw my painting as part of my 'old life' and tried to leave it behind along with all the sins of that life."

But it kept emerging. Like Jeremiah's fire in his bones, the gift of painting would not go away.

Pat moved in with Pastor Gene Keith who gave him wise counsel.

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"Gene Keith told me my artistic talent was a gift from the Lord," Pat remembers. "He said I would be sinning if I did not use it, improve it, and offer it up as a blessing to God. He told me if I buried it in the ground, I would be like the man in Jesus' parable who did not use his talent. He urged me to keep painting—not necessarily 'religious' subjects—but to paint the thing dearest to my heart."

The thing dearest to Pat's heart was nature—especially his native Florida.

Slowly things began to come into perspective. As he devoured the Bible, he became aware that when God created the earth, He said it was "good." When He looked at the whole universe, He said it was "very good." The Jansenists were wrong. The earth is not evil. Nothing created by God is evil. Pat's desire to paint was not evil. Only if he misused it, was it evil.

One day Pat found a truth in Philipians. "Whatsoever things are good, think on these things," he read.

"What is good?" he asked. He remembered those verses in Genesis. God had called this earth "good."

In Romans he read that God has revealed himself to all mankind through nature. The sin, the Bible said, came because men had served the creation rather than the Creator.

Pat understood that. He had been an evolutionist before meeting Jesus Christ. Now he saw the Creator's imprint on all creation.

Pat determined that it was God who had given him the gift of painting. Now Pat was to use his gift to paint scenes of this earth—the way God created it. In doing so, he would reveal the glory of God to all who saw his paintings.

I visited Pat in his humble little concrete block home on a back street in Tallahassee, Florida. I had seen one of his

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Pat does have a number of nature scenes which are available. It was one of these I had seen hanging on the wall of my friend's office. Back in 1975 a Christian friend in Gainesville, Florida, who directed an ecology project, offered Pat and Holly a place to live for two years—rent free—in exchange for Pat's paintings.

Six of these exquisite paintings have been reproduced as prints and are available in a set. But, unfortunately, Pat does not receive any royalty on them.

That bothered me more than it bothered Pat. He was grateful that for two years he had had a chance to create—and in return was fed as the ravens fed Elijah.

"What you need is a patron," I suggested. "Someone who will finance you until you can get your paintings on the national market."

"I would love that," he smiled. "But until it happens, Jesus Christ is my patron. When He is ready for my paintings to sell, He will make it happen."

Pat did not want to talk about money. He wanted to talk about what is happening to the earth around us.

"Of course ecology is of God," he said. "So is nature conservation. It was Jesus who said, 'Consider the lilies of the field . . . the birds of the air . . . the foxes of the field.' His hand fashioned the crooked serpent. The cattle on the hills are His."

Pat showed me a letter he had written to James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior, asking him to protect our natural resources—especially the national and state parks.

It made no difference he had not received an answer, just as it didn't seem to bother him that he does not have national recognition as an artist. What seemed important was doing the will of God—giving God the glory for all he does. That, it seems to me, is the true essence of a man of God—a Christian in action.

After Pat Elliott was saved, he did an interesting thing. He continued to paint his nature scenes. But he added one thing: a tiny outline of a fish—an "Ichthus"—in the bottom right-hand corner next to his signature. It indicated the artist and the picture were dedicated to the glory of God.

He also did something else. He went back to all those pictures he had painted before he was saved, and in the lower right-hand corner of each he painted in a small "Ichthus."

It was his way of saying that his gift of painting had been from God all the time. It just took the Holy Spirit to convince him he should be giving God the glory. ➤

Water hyacinths and a baby alligator blend naturally in God's ecosystem.

