

## ALAN FELTUS

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Oil on linen, 39 1/2 x 47 1/4



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ALAN FELTUS

# Awakenings: Becoming an Artist

How my early years  
informed how I evolved  
as a painter

I was sixteen when I saw Robert Rauschenberg's combine titled *Monogram* (1955–59) when it was first exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. Rauschenberg made *Monogram* in the period when he and Jasper Johns used to visit Sari Dienes in her studio, in the same period when I was spending a lot of time with Sari, before I was an art student.

Rauschenberg's *Monogram* was probably the single work of art that spoke to me most meaningfully at that time about what a work of art made in the twentieth century could be, and what my life might be like if I were to become an artist. From knowing Sari, I was predisposed to see beauty and potential in found objects and in the odd things I might see in junk and antique shops that I couldn't afford to buy at the time. Those were the things Sari and Rauschenberg worked with. I liked how such things had elusive meanings that were subtle and poetic and suggestive of things that might live in one's subconscious mind.

*Monogram* is a very long-haired taxidermy angora goat with paint on its face and a car tire around its body, standing on an abstract collage painting. The goat, once a live animal, seemed to gaze out calmly through glass eyes from a head smeared with paint, making it look as though it had survived some dreaded violent mishap that had left it ensnared by a rubber tire to become transformed into something new and strange and mysterious that stood in the middle of a New York art gallery. Rauschenberg's *Monogram* has since become one of the most famous iconic works of neo-Dada and conceptual art.

Another of Rauschenberg's combines, *Canyon* (1959), has a dark, dusty, stuffed eagle with outstretched wings protruding from it and a pillow hanging from a rope below. I had seen that eagle many times, wings spread wide, atop a wall of cabinets just inside the door of another artist's studio next to Sari's. Whoever lived in that studio often kept his door open, almost inviting me to peek around the barrier to see what was beyond, but the eagle in its place high above was foreboding in that dim light of the hallway where I stood. I didn't know the man behind that wall and never went inside his studio. After the man died, Sari got the eagle and gave it to Rauschenberg.

Everything in an artist's studio, in one way or another, has a purpose specific to the work he or she makes. A studio might have things like old taxidermy and bones, and

things found and things bought that serve as still-life props or might themselves be incorporated into what an artist makes. Studios will have easels and sculpture stands, brushes and tools, and bottles containing substances known to the artist alone. They might have paintings in racks with only their edges showing, that together could make a museum retrospective of years of work, if they were given such an opportunity. I loved how artists' studios were so unlike the museums I had known where things were on display, catalogued and identified and expertly lit and made precious, and made do-not-touch public. But the studios were where I was able to be me and feel good about who I was. I was witness to the creative process before knowing what those words might mean, before understanding what it was to transform something seen or found into something new and personal, and meaningful. I sensed it, but without the explanation that I would be introduced to later. There was for me, way back then, the beginning of this nonverbal communication of objects, and I saw how what artists made meant so much more than things manufactured for commercial use. Years later, when I was an art student aware of the interpretations art historians attached to such works, those explanations did not begin to mean as much to me as being with the work in a studio in a silence that allowed something unspoken to move me.

It was that early exposure to museums and artists' studios that made me who I became, in a manner of thinking. I saw in those studios something of a life I wanted one day to have for myself. Still silent, still observing what was around me and being shy and timid among people, it made sense that I would turn inward. The complex and unique mixture of parental distance and a rich and stimulating exposure I had starting at the breakup of our family when I was six turned out to be right for me. And, perhaps inadvertently, that would have been the best thing my mother could give me. Circumstances put me there at her side so the things that were about her, and for her, I could know and be nourished by. We had David Douglas Duncan's book of photographs of Picasso, titled *The Private World of Pablo Picasso*, among the very few books in our studio apartment in that period. Duncan's photographs of Picasso instilled in me a great desire to make art and to live the life of an artist. Picasso seemed to be the most playful grown-up I was aware of when I was an adolescent boy.

I wanted to be like that. And I wanted to travel to other countries. I thought nothing would be more wonderful. But that would have to come later.

At that early age I was already very interested in what I had seen of the collages and assemblages by Dada artists and in some sculptures made by Picasso. His *Bull's Head* (1942) was made of the seat and handlebars of a bicycle and nothing more; put together they became not just an object that looks rather like the head of a bull, but a very wonderful sculptural interpretation of a bull's head. Another is Picasso's *Baboon and Young* (1951), cast in bronze from an assemblage he made that had two toy cars, one upside down to the other, that become a wonderfully characteristic head of a baboon.

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After our studio building at 58 West 57th Street was torn down in 1961, Sari moved to the Gate Hill Cooperative at Stony Point, New York, which was a community where a few artists of various kinds were given studios to live and work in. There she made some pieces that I dearly loved. One she called *Shoe Flower*. It was a shoe that she found in the woods near her new studio that had been rained on and dried out repeatedly for years, and in its second life it looked like a flower, like an iris made of hard gray leather. The stitching had long before disintegrated and the separate pieces of leather had broken loose and curled outward. She mounted it, toe pointing upward, on a thin rod attached to a wooden base under a glass dome, the kind old clocks had. That was all. Pure visual poetry.

Years later, Sari was saving the round flat coffee filters that had been folded into the conical top of her coffee maker. Flattened out and allowed to dry, each one was unique in its brown coffee-grounds-stained image. They were a sort of self-made drawing that fit well in the context of everything Sari did. I thought they were like sepia ink landscape drawings. And in the 1970s, Sari was making necklaces from things she collected on her walks. They were more breastplates than what we think of as necklaces, each an assemblage that might have incorporated bone and glass and plastic and metal. When my wife Lani and I were first together, she spent a few weeks with Sari at her Stony Point studio while I was teaching in Washington. And Lani began to make wonderful necklaces in direct

response to those Sari was making. It meant a great deal to me that Lani could also know Sari and learn from her the way I had when I was young.

Being with Sari, I also learned about cooking and about herbs and edible plants that grow wild in the country. Dandelion greens and others. Sari told me the name *dandelion* was from the French *dent de lion*, "tooth of the lion," from the shape of the leaf. Sari was using a blender to make concoctions she ate every day from the herbs she collected behind her house. And she collected mushrooms in the woods. She was a good cook, and like her art, her cooking was very inventive. Everything about Sari was intuitive and inventive, always had been. She was unlike anyone else I have ever known. In that period when Lani and I would visit her, Sari was washing her beautiful halo of white hair with Woolite. She figured if Woolite was good enough for sheep's wool, it would be good enough for her hair. She liked that a friend described her to another friend as a dandelion. Her hair was like the seed head of the dandelion every child has blown into the wind.

Milt Herder was the first surrogate father of three who were very important to me becoming the person I am. Milt was helpful for what he taught me, not only in his ability to make things but also in discussions about art. Milt took me to the Cloisters museum in Fort Tryon Park, overlooking the Hudson River in Upper Manhattan. The Cloisters, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was built in the 1930s from elements taken from five French and Spanish medieval abbeys and has a great collection of tapestries, paintings, sculptures, stained glass, and manuscripts. What Milt talked about in front of paintings and objects, even the architecture of the Cloisters, became new interests for me. Being in the Cloisters was the closest thing to being in Europe that I had yet known.

When I was looking at a website about the Cloisters recently, I read that it was the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. who purchased the 66.5 acres he made into Fort Tryon Park and then created the Cloisters museum and its gardens and put together the medieval art that is the core of the Cloisters collection. And he donated all of it to New York City. Rockefeller started this project when he purchased the Billings Estate and other properties in Fort Washington in 1917. It was this man, John D. Rockefeller Jr., whom my taxi driver grandfather was on his way to

assassinate after the Ludlow Massacre in 1914, if, in fact, that was true. What a terrible, terrible thought. So many things that have happened in history, and in our own lives, could just as easily not have happened.

Milt was an advertising design man by occupation, but he also built things. He built a sleeping loft in his studio/apartment. I watched him construct his small second floor. I learned. He also restored some of his furniture. On one piece he showed me, he had just painted perfect shadows on top of the actual shadows cast from the hinges of the cabinet doors, so that when the lamp next to the cabinet was turned off, the shadows were still there. He would do things like that to amuse himself. I may have been the only visitor in his apartment who ever knew about his painted shadows. Things like that fascinated me. Milt could paint trompe l'oeils as well as any I had ever seen. His practical making ability and the pleasure he got from everything he did for himself this way opened up a whole new world that was especially meaningful to me. My mother had no practical or mechanical abilities to speak of, and though she had many artist friends, she didn't make art. She was all in her head. She knew things from books and museums and talking to people. I remember once watching her cut parsley into little pieces using a pair of scissors, the parsley in a glass while she snipped at it. I doubt that she had a sharp kitchen knife or that she had ever sharpened a knife. I don't remember that she owned even the most basic tools, like a hammer or a screwdriver. In our Sherwood Studios apartment, she had a heavy mirror of beveled glass and she hung it on the wall using a stick-on hook that was obviously only adequate to hold lightweight pictures. And I don't know how many days later it was, the gummed-back picture hook failed and the heavy framed mirror fell to the floor with a loud thud. Old wall paint was stuck to the hook's backing.

We hardly celebrated holidays other than Christmas throughout my childhood. Christmases were simple. We had few ornaments to hang on a tree and few presents to put under it. One year we used a roll of cotton from the drugstore to tear little strips we layed on the limbs of the tree to look like snow. And it didn't look at all like snow to me. Christine Magriel had proper Christmas parties. Those are the ones I remember, with eggnog and the warmth of spending Christmases among friends. Christine was one

of my mother's closest friends throughout my childhood. Her two sons, Paul Magriel Jr. and Nicolas Magriel, were my closest childhood friends. In those early years, Peter and I used to watch television at Christine's apartment with Button and Nicky. Button was Paul's nickname. Christine would make us cheeseburgers and we would watch *The Lone Ranger* and *Hopalong Cassidy*. The good guys in white hats and bad guys in black hats on a black-and-white TV. Silver bullets, cowboys, and Indians. Button went on to become a chess champion, champion backgammon player, and poker player and lived in Las Vegas. Nicolas became a master of Indian music and lives in London.

My mother didn't host dinners. It may have been because we didn't have money enough to buy food for more than ourselves. It could also have been that among my mother's friends, such occasions weren't common. My mother could cook, though I don't remember that she ever baked a cake, or any kind of bread. In the oven, she cooked chicken and acorn squash cut in half with butter and brown sugar. She scrambled eggs. I remember frozen vegetables and frozen orange juice that we added water to in a pitcher. When I was a Cooper Union student, I sometimes baked bread for myself with whole wheat flour, dried figs, dates, walnuts, and raisins. I had learned from Bill Coperthwaite to bake bread. Maybe my mother didn't entertain, or rarely did, because for years we didn't have a place of our own with a kitchen. And then when she rented the studio apartment at 58 West 57th Street, for a while she didn't have a table big enough or chairs enough to seat more than four. Dinner parties were not part of my life until I was with Lani and we were hosting dinners and had close friendships. It's strange to think how what is now so much a part of our lives was new to me until I was a young man.

## CHAPTER 7: STOCKBRIDGE SCHOOL

For my ninth grade, Anne enrolled me in Stockbridge School in western Massachusetts, again with a scholarship based on financial need. Stockbridge School was founded by Hans Maeder and based on global humanitarian ideals. It was unusual among boarding schools in the 1950s for being coeducational and having an international and interracial faculty and student body. And it was established with what seemed to be a new concept that had students

doing the work that in other schools was done by employees. We did the setting of tables and the bringing out of meals in the dining room, the clearing of tables and the dishwashing. We pushed sweeping compound made of sawdust impregnated with green wax across classroom and hallway floors with wide brooms. We collected trash from the various buildings and drove it to the dump in a big old pickup truck. Every morning before breakfast and all morning on Saturdays we had our various assigned weekly rotating jobs to do. Dining room and dishwashing, unlike the others, were done three times a day.

The United Nations flag was hung under the American flag in front of the school, and raising the flags before breakfast and taking them down at sunset was one of the jobs we had. I still remember two of us fumbling to hook the metal clips into the grommets on the flags and raising the flags to the top of the flagpole with fingers numb, almost frozen, on some of the coldest mornings of a New England winter.

Bill Coperthwaite was a teacher at Stockbridge School for the first of my three years there, and he was the second of the three men that years later I came to think of as my surrogate fathers. Although Hans and Bill didn't agree on educational approaches and Bill only stayed that one year before moving on to teach at Quaker schools, he and I remained close friends from that year until he died in 2013.

Bill taught biology and a class in geography he called Map. And he ran the woodworking shop, and he had informal Sunday afternoon gatherings with the few of us who were interested, at which he would read from the writings of Kahlil Gibran and Gandhi, among others, and we would discuss nonviolence and Bill's ideas regarding work and life. As a conscientious objector, Bill had done community service with village people building houses in Mexico before he taught at Stockbridge School. And as an alternative to the school's organized sports, Bill led a group of students in clearing dead trees and underbrush and thinning the healthy trees in the woods behind the school. There was a significant difference in the work Bill did with us from the usual assigned jobs. For one thing, Bill worked side by side with students on his volunteer woods crew. With Bill, work was a privilege and it was something we enjoyed and took pride in. I was glad to have spent three years in a high school where work other than

our studies was part of our education. Bill's teaching was a crossing of disciplines, interrelating ideas, and enhancing the ideas through practice, which meant figuring out solutions to actual problems and working with one's hands. Bill treated me as an equal in that he had respect for what I might think or do. It didn't matter to him that I was a boy with little experience in the things he knew. That respect was very important to me.

My second year at Stockbridge, one of the Saturday morning work jobs was to cut down a fairly large tree that was threatening to fall on a toolshed, and because I had worked with Bill in his volunteer woods-clearing crew the year before, that job was assigned to me along with another boy. We had an ax and a two-person saw to work with. To direct the tree as it fell so that it would avoid crushing the shed was a challenge, and a few students came by to watch. Bill had explained how to fell a tree well enough to enable me to get the tree to fall where it was supposed to fall, in spite of it leaning toward the shed. And it did that, twisting as it came down so that it just missed the toolshed.

During my three years at Stockbridge, I started to catch up with classmates in my studies in spite of being a slow reader with an easily distracted mind that made studying more difficult than pleasurable most of the time. I was still reading at the speed of the spoken word, hearing the words in my head as I read them and all too often not listening to those words that I heard in my head. My thoughts would wander to somewhere else. I smiled when I recently read that William Butler Yeats wrote in his *Autobiographies: Memories and Reflections*, "Because I had found it hard to attend to anything less interesting than my thoughts, I was difficult to teach." Yeats also had not learned to read until after the age most children could read, but that did not deter him from becoming one of the most celebrated Irish poets and playwrights.

Having become aware of my poor reading ability, a new teacher took it upon himself to try to help me to read more easily and to concentrate better on what I was reading. If my reading difficulties were due to being somewhat dyslexic, as I suspect was the case, dyslexia wasn't well recognized in those years. A kid was thought to be bright or to be stupid, to whatever degree, and distracted boys did as well as they could. I should have appreciated that young man's offer to help me, and worked with him, but

the book he chose to read together was Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus*. And it read like this:

Romans, friends, followers, favorers of my right,  
If ever Bassianus, Caesar's son,  
Were gracious in the eyes of royal Rome,  
Keep then this passage to the Capitol  
And suffer not dishonour to approach  
The imperial seat, to virtue consecrate,  
To justice, continence and nobility;  
But let desert in pure election shine,  
And, Romans, fight for freedom in your choice.

It goes on that way for 320 pages and is violent and bloody and convoluted. I remember only that I couldn't make sense of names and an antiquated language in a story that didn't feel relevant or interesting to me, and I let go what might have been a good opportunity to be helped with my reading problems.

Embedded in my memory ever since reading Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* later that year are the beginning words: "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote, / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote." I liked the musicality of the Middle English. And mispronounced as I had them, the sound of those words would play in my mind unexpectedly every now and then, even until today. Another piece of our reading that does that for me is "Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie," from a Robert Burns poem that was given to us as an example of onomatopoeia. For some reason, all these years I remembered that first line of the poem as being "Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous little beastie." I had *little beastie* instead of *beastie* and I don't know why that was. Maybe our English teacher added *little* when he read it to us all those years ago. I see now, reading the poem, that it never had the word *little* in that line. But maybe because my memory had the word *little*, it sounds better to me with the word *little* than without it. And because I knew Burns was describing a mouse, *little* seemed right.

Our English teacher was Bill McCue, a flamboyant one-armed man whose passion about writing enlivened any discussions we had. I remember that he would throw pieces of chalk at students if they were talking to one another and not paying attention. And he would read with different

voices according to whose voice it was in a book. I don't know if any of us ever found out how he lost his arm. We had a math teacher who didn't seem to know how math might be taught better to those of us who found it difficult. And he couldn't see that we might never have a reason to use algebra. I would have liked to have been taught the basic concepts and logical structure of mathematics at some point in my schooling so I might be better able to do what I would need to do with numbers in school and later in life. I liked another teacher, Alex Perkins, because he was able to explain, in his elegant English accent, how history was about those who did and those who didn't have wealth and power, and how history could be understood in terms of people, place, and work. He made interesting and meaningful a subject that history teachers in my earlier years had presented as names of events and their dates to be memorized and tested on.

I was becoming less shy, and my three years at Stockbridge were long enough for me to make lasting friendships. Those were the years when boys were thinking about girls and about sexuality for the first time in any real sense. Juices were flowing within our bodies. We boys talked among ourselves about losing our virginity, and my roommate, Sam, did lose his virginity with one of the girls one night in our boy's dormitory. I was there on the other side of the small room, politely pretending to be sound asleep.

Unfulfilled dreams and desires were always among us, overshadowing the things we were meant to be doing. I did have a few innocent boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, but they weren't very meaningful. I can remember being besotted with one girl who was cute beyond belief. She had a boyfriend and all I could do was to try my best to contain my feelings. The next year, in my mind I was flirting with the young music teacher, who could see that I would have liked to have a relationship with her, but even if she would have liked that, it couldn't have been other than in my unspoken desires.

Saturday afternoons we could go to Lenox or Pittsfield. They were outings that broke the monotony of weeks of more or less repeated uneventful days. Sometimes there would be too many of us to find a seat on our yellow school bus and I might have a girl sit on my lap. I look back on my memory of those trips and smile at the thought of how much I liked having a girl sit on my lap on the bus. I liked

that I didn't have to ask a girl if she would like to sit on my lap because it was simply how we filled the bus for short trips. I liked that who would sit on my lap was left to chance and it might be a girl who wasn't in any of my classes and whom I barely knew.

I sometimes went to the Goodwill thrift store in Pittsfield. Those were my first thrift store shopping experiences. I bought a pair of leather riding boots one time. And I bought a hand-knit sleeveless sweater that was quite unlike any I had seen before or have seen since. Laid flat it was a simple rectangle with a square neckhole. The stitching that held front to back ended partway up the sides to allow for the armholes. It had to be something knit by a beginner who hadn't yet learned to knit curves. But I liked that it looked a little like chain mail with its horizontal rows of knots. I also had a long and heavy fur coat that I have no memory of how I obtained. It was a man's coat that I thought of as a Jack London *The Call of the Wild* coat.

One exceedingly cold winter day, while I was walking in the woods behind the school wearing my heavy fur coat and riding boots and enjoying feeling like someone other than myself in some other time and place, I encountered my Austrian roommate, who also happened to be walking alone in the woods. And then we talked as we walked together. But it was hard to form the sounds of some words because of the extreme cold. We sounded like two bumbling fools. So for fun, we devised a sentence we thought would be the hardest to say. I still remember it was "Where were we when we were wet Wheaties?" We could barely speak it slowly. We laughed at our silliness. Misha spoke German, French, and English fluently, and at home in Austria he had learned to ski and to ride horses well, and for those things I admired him.

My three years at Stockbridge were when winter seemed too long. There were many too many weeks of gray, below-freezing weather and not a lot to differentiate one from the others. One late night, Pieter Ostrander and Sam Annino and I walked off from the school along the small road in the dark. We ducked behind a thicket of bushes when we saw approaching headlights. After a few miles, we were no longer hiding from the occasional drivers on the road and we were stopped by someone who guessed we were from the school and brought us back. That resulted in Pieter and Sam being sent home for a couple

of weeks, but because my mother was in Moscow at the time, I wasn't sent home. I was only reprimanded by Hans in his office, which I didn't like. Though it was a school in which we all referred to our teachers by their first names, we weren't treated as equals by the teachers. There was a sense of authority, particularly with Hans's role as director, that I didn't like. At the time, I thought Hans's concerns were more about how to instill within students his ideals of moral and social behavior to right the wrongs in a troubled world than how to understand and deal with the emotional problems of the adolescent kids in his care, and I thought he could have been less rigid.

After a holiday break, one boy brought back a box of oranges that he had injected with vodka, which I thought was quite clever. Sam added sugar to a gallon jug of fresh apple cider he'd bought on an outing to the agricultural fair in Great Barrington. Knowing that the fermentation would cause a buildup of pressure, he kept it uncapped under his bed, but a few days later it overflowed, bubbly and fermented, onto the floor. Once I saw Sam swig the near-pure alcohol of Aqua Velva After Shave. What we were doing on those occasions was escaping from the confines of what was allowed and what was expected of us. We were aware that such pranks were common among boarding school kids anywhere and were part of a tradition that we wanted to partake in ourselves. We wanted the challenge of doing something that might be a little dangerous, and in some ways risky. We wanted to be free the way we might be a few years later when we would no longer be high school students.

I worked with Sam one summer renovating a house in Springfield that his mother had bought to rent as two apartments. Sam was from Springfield and knew other kids from before Stockbridge, so sometimes we got together with them at the end of the day at fast food drive-in parking lots. I felt like an outsider in small-town America where kids drove cars and congregated in such places after dark because they were the places that weren't their parents' homes. Sam had a red Jeep he kept at his mother's house during the school year.

Growing up in the city, I didn't learn to drive until way past the age most people learned. I wasn't like other boys who could look at any car and know its name and make and year and know what kind of engine it had under its hood.

I got my first driver's license when I was at the American Academy in Rome at the age of twenty-eight.

Other summers I spent in New York, except for one when I was at the Farnsworth School of Art in North Truro, on Cape Cod. Jerry Farnsworth took me on as a monitor doing odd jobs like sweeping the floors and stretching canvases for the students in exchange for having a little bed lofted above one end of the studio. I liked having a job that gave me responsibility and I found it exciting that I was sleeping there on my own when no one else was in the school at night. No parent, no roommate. Some evenings I babysat for one of the students' two little girls while she worked nearby as a waitress. At sixteen I was by far the youngest student in the school. It was the first time I painted in oils, working from still life and from models. I had a borrowed bicycle and sometimes I bicycled to Provincetown. More often I bicycled to the oceanside to walk along the beach. I loved having my toes in the sand and the wind in my hair and looking out at the sea and dreaming of things I have no memory of anymore.

Pieter and Sam were my closest friends at Stockbridge. When Pieter and I were in New York during school vacations, sometimes we would go to the Five Spot Café, where Thelonious Monk and Ornette Coleman performed. Pieter already played jazz trumpet and he went on to Juilliard to study music composition while I was at Cooper Union. I would see Pieter more often than Sam because Pieter was then married and had an apartment on the Upper West Side and Sam was back in Springfield working after we graduated.

Years later, Sam visited me when I was teaching in Washington and I saw that he had become seriously alcoholic and seemed to be depressed and needy. I thought it likely that his military experiences could have changed him in such ways that he might do harm to himself or to his friends and that worried me, being a very real possibility for any of our generation who had served in Vietnam. And after that I didn't see Sam again until we were at a reunion at Stockbridge School many years later. It was the only school reunion I had ever gone to. I was in New York for an exhibition opening after having moved to Italy, and I had been told about the reunion and thought it might be fun to see Stockbridge School again for what nostalgic memories a visit might conjure up. I was able to join a few

former classmates who were driving there from the city. We were older than our parents had been when we were Stockbridge students. That was strange. Being at the reunion was difficult for me because I saw that Sam seemed to have sunken still deeper into drink and depression. He had not been teaching as he had hoped to do after getting a master's degree in art from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. The war and whatever addictions Sam had succumbed to had destroyed what promise he had of making a better life for himself.

On the other hand, seeing Pieter again at the reunion was strangely fascinating. Almost without even saying hello, Pieter started to talk to me about aesthetics, as though we had left an ongoing conversation in midsentence a few minutes earlier. Pieter was fine. He seemed himself other than having lost the beautiful boy quality he'd had when we were younger. He and Belle had divorced and he was then married to a lovely Irish girl, and he was still involved in music.

At the end of my first Stockbridge year, Bill Coperthwaite stayed a couple of nights with us at my mother's 57th Street studio apartment in New York on his way to Venezuela. And he discussed with me and with my mother the idea of taking me out of school to travel in Europe with him. We would learn together all kinds of things firsthand. This was the kind of education Bill understood to be the most effective and it would have been very exciting for me. Anne didn't think that was a good idea. She believed it best for me to stay in school and then go to a good college and on to graduate school and to a career of some kind. Following that conversation, Anne started to refer to Bill as Saint Coperthwaite. I don't know how my mother could not have seen what that said to me about her own lack of devotion to my well-being. It wasn't that she didn't have time to be teaching me because she had to work for a living. I understood that, but rather that she could not comprehend, and she said so, why any man would choose to take on the education of someone else's child single-handedly, and not as a paid job.

Bill's convictions about education needing to be challenging and meaningful by means of direct experience rather than through the inactivity of the traditional classroom fit beautifully with who I had always been. I knew that I was not the kind of boy who would become a scholar.

I had always been fidgety and restless when not trying to keep from dozing off.

A few years after I first knew Bill, I joined him in exploring the coast of Maine, looking for a piece of land he might buy on which to settle and that he could reshape according to his concepts; this project would eventually grow to be the Yurt Foundation, set up for educational purposes. Together we took small ferryboats out to the islands with the interesting names of Vinalhaven, Matinicus, Wooden Ball, and Seal. I liked the deep-throated sound of the boats' engines and the smell of diesel fuel coupled with that of the sea air. From one of those islands, Bill borrowed a rowboat to explore Hurricane Island. We were camping, and we were watching great blue herons, loons, seagulls, and the occasional seal that would raise its head above the surface of the water to look at us as we rowed. We were conversing and listening to water dripping from oars in a world without people, as far from New York City life as I had known. Bill would sing as we walked and canoed or rowed during my visits to his native coastal Maine.

Bill was a maker of furniture and dwellings, using hand tools he collected and tools he made himself, working with techniques he adapted from traditional techniques that had not yet been lost. He learned an ancient kind of knitting he playfully called witless knitting. He learned from Scandinavian knife makers how to make fine knives. He learned to make Windsor chairs using a pole lathe to shape the legs and how to make and use a drawknife and a shaving horse. Bill was often whittling wooden spoons and making wooden bowls and plates when he visited us, using a curved knife he made after learning from Eskimo craftspeople how they worked wood with curved knives. Bill was always trying to improve on the design of hand tools and handmade furniture, and after some years teaching at Quaker schools, he shared his knowledge through teaching workshops in which he also discussed his beliefs about social change and the problems he saw as counter to the working of a healthy society. Bill's strong moral code came out of Gandhi's writings and example, and from personally knowing Scott and Helen Nearing who, like Bill, had dedicated their lives to sustainable and simple living and concerns about humanity as a whole. He brought Richard Gregg to Stockbridge School to talk to students about the concept of nonviolent resistance Gregg had learned while knowing Gandhi in India.

I gained a self-reliance that I took naturally from Bill. His world made sense because it was uncomplicated and I could see how one could live a life true to one's beliefs and be in almost complete control of everything day to day. But I was destined to be a painter whose life would be a mix of Bill's way of living and another that was about the making of art. Bill's making of things was function based, about design and how what we live with could be shaped by our own hands for personal use. His book, published in 2007, called *A Handmade Life: In Search of Simplicity*, is filled with photographs of his world and passages of his writing.

The making of paintings is another kind of concern for design and beauty. In one way of thinking, the paintings I was making weren't utilitarian, and therefore they could be absent from a person's life. But to the artist, art is as necessary as shelter and food.

**Alan Feltus** has an MFA from Yale University. He has received many awards for his art, including the Rome Prize Fellowship, Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, National Endowment for the Arts Grant, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, and the Augustus Saint-Gaudens Award from Cooper Union. His work has been included in exhibitions at the American Academy in Rome (New York City and Rome), the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the National Academy Museum, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Feltus is represented by Forum Gallery in New York, and Winfield Gallery in Carmel-By-The-Sea, California. This essay is an excerpt of a book length memoir in progress.