

July 23, 2007

PAINTING REMINDS ME OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT — AND WHAT ISN'T

People ask how I come up with ideas for this space. It's easy. I look for the thinnest skin I can find and make a beeline for it, like a sand flea finding an ankle. Certainly, there is no shortage of thin-skinned targets to skewer. I scored a direct hit last week. While most of the reaction to my column applauding the appointment of a female minister to the First Baptist Church in Decatur was positive, including mail from a lot of Baptists, I did hear from a few self-righteous Bible thumpers who took strong exception to women in the pulpit. Jethro, for example, explained to me how Jesus had been persecuted and then proceeded to inform me that I was missing my private parts. Bible thumpers are weird.

The Bible thumpers say I am a lost cause. Too mean, and a Methodist to boot. Maybe they would be less judgmental if they knew I have a soft side as well. What they don't know is that once the commas are in place, the adjectives honed to a razor-sharp edge, and my column is shipped off to the editors, an amazing change comes over me. I put away my stiletto and my snarl, gather up canvas and oil paints and scurry off to Kristopher Meadows' art class like an eager first-grader. All I am lacking is a Spiderman lunchbox. My classmates can't believe that the person who slings arrows of righteous indignation on these pages weekly is the same one who happily paints magnolia leaves and grapevines and enjoys every living second of it. It is a transformation worthy of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

I have always had an interest in and a slight affinity for art. At one stage of my life, I thought I might like to be a political cartoonist for a newspaper, but chose instead the life of a robber baron. Frankly, it paid more and I didn't have to wear cheap ties and Hush Puppies.

Upon retirement, the Woman Who Shares My Name thought it would be a good idea for me to pursue my interest in art. Not only would it fulfill a lifelong ambition of mine, but it would also get me out of the house. She reminds me frequently that she had married me for better or for worse, but not for lunch. I think it was my efforts to reorganize her kitchen that did the trick.

So far, under the tutelage of Kris Meadows, I have produced everything from still lifes to portraits. I am told by people who have no reason to pull their punches that my work is pretty good. That is nice to hear, but that isn't why I paint. I paint because I enjoy it. There is something magical about putting paint to canvas and seeing an image appear. I enjoy learning as much as I can about the craft — and I have a lot to learn. I enjoy the camaraderie with my classmates, all of whom can paint rings around me. Most of all, I enjoy working with Meadows, a terrific artist.

The late actor Christopher Reeve — of Superman fame, had one of Meadows' paintings hanging in his office; a rare honor since Reeve received tons of unsolicited gifts over his career and gave most of them to charity. Kristopher Meadows has a letter from Reeve saying that his painting was too good and too special to give away. It occupied a special place in Reeve's office until he died.

Meadows is finally getting the recognition he deserves as a serious artist. He is now being represented by the Catherine Kelleghan Gallery in Atlanta and will have his paintings on display there along with other local and national artists.

I am not into the art scene, but I predict great things for Kris Meadows' career. The boy can paint up a storm. But as good an artist as he is, his real genius lies in reminding me weekly that there are a lot more important things in life than a few narrow-minded and self-righteous Bible thumpers. There is art. Thank you, sweet Jesus.