

Brett Helquist Alumni Lecture

Madsen Recital Hall

16 October 2014

Introduction by Robert Barrett

It's a pleasure for me to be here today, and to introduce the college's distinguished speaker. Brett is a former student of mine; I've been here long enough now that I have lots and lots of former students. It's nice to have Mary Jane, his wife, here as well. She is also a former student.

Brett made the statement in an interview at one time, "In some ways, I'm in a profession that allows you not to completely grow up." Brett Helquist didn't start seriously doodling until college, but his illustrations for Lemony Snicket's outrageously popular *Series of Unfortunate Events* books have made him into something of a rock star in the world of children's literature. A 1993 graduate of Brigham Young University, Brett Helquist has produced a large body of published work in the editorial and especially children's book markets. In addition to his well known Lemony Snicket *Unfortunate* books, he has created illustrations for dozens of children's and young adult's books including: *Chasing Vermeer*, *Captain Hook: Adventures of Notorious Youth*, *Listening for Lions*, and *The Spoon in the Bathroom Wall*. He has illustrated other series such as *The Vengekeep Prophecies* and *The League of Seven*. He has also written and illustrated a few books including: *Roger*, *The Jolly Pirate*, *Bedtime for Bear*, and *Grumpy Goat*.

Speaking of rock stars, I remember a field trip that we took when Brett was still a student here. He was one of the students insisting that we go the Hard Rock Café for dinner on 59th Street, and he posed by a Jimmy Hendrix guitar. I think it was definitely the highlight of the trip for Brett. At that dinner, I learned Brett was initially a mechanical engineering major here at BYU, and was later accepted into the Illustration program. In an interview where I was quoted, I said he was like a fresh slate, having not taken art in high school, but he did take drafting. He was very trusting and willing to take whatever suggestions were offered by his teachers. Unlike some students who were resistant to change, in some ways, Brett's artistic naiveté allowed him to progress much faster than others, because he actually believed and took to heart the things that his instructors told him.

His first job out of college was with the Waterford Institute, here in Provo, Utah, animating games, which lasted only for a month and a half due to the company funding. He then moved to New York for a four-month internship with New York illustrator, Robert Neubecker. And in the spirit of giving back, Brett has not only taken many of our interns into his studio, but has always hosted our biannual fieldtrip group as we've gone to New York.

"The first couple of years were a little rough in New York," said Brett. "But once I got here, I fell in love with it. I'm not one of those people who had to get out of Utah, I love Utah, but once I got out, I realized how much I was missing in life. Just cultural things, like concerts in the park and street musicians and this cultural life that I'd never really known. So I determined I was going to stay here at all costs."

For about seven years, his freelance work appeared in newspapers and magazines while he worked as a graphic artist. When he decided to illustrate children's books, he took a month off from work to prepare a children's book portfolio and within about two weeks of showing his portfolio, he was given the chance to illustrate *The Bad Beginning*, by Lemony Snicket. He illustrated all thirteen books in the series. But to be fair, he was also dating Mary Jane at the time. I remember one dinner, that Brother Hull and I went to with them when they were still dating, where they talked with great enthusiasm about living in a singles ward in New York with actual musicians, writers, and artists.

With an art career now spanning over twenty years, Brett has been recognized with the E. B. White Read Aloud Honor Award, The Midwest Bookseller's Choice Award for Children's

Literature, and Book Sense Book of the Year Award for Children's Literature. Some of the critics writing about his work have said, "Helquist outdoes himself," according to *Book this Critic*. Ilene Cooper, adding in her appraisal of the book *Chasing Vermeer*: "The illustrator enhances the author's imaginative text by providing an interactive mystery in his pictures."

"Exquisitely detailed drawings of gothic gargoyles with mischievous eyes echo the contents of his elegantly designed hardcover," said another critic.

"Helquist's illustrations are equally effective in more whimsical lighthearted qualities," said yet another critic. And [a critic] when writing about *Milly and the Macy's Parade* said, "They were lusciously illustrated, featuring richly colored stylized illustrations that convey a sense of luxury associated with Macys."

[Here are] a few of Brett's own quotes, which I've written: As we've entered his studio in Brooklyn: "Learn something new everyday and every class you attend." He said to students, "I tried to do that."

"Don't ever define yourself by rejection."

"Persistence and passion matter most."

And "Trust your instincts, they will likely be right."

On Brett's website, in the question and answer area, the question is posed, "If you could choose any other profession, what would it be?" He responded, "A rock star, of course."

It is my pleasure to introduce to you our own rock star, Brett Helquist.

Brett Helquist

Thank you, Bob. Bob has been a great teacher and friend to me over the years, so I'm really grateful for that.

Today I'd just like to mainly tell the story of my little time in school, and my time in New York, and show you some work along the way. If there's one thing I hope you'll learn today, that no matter what level you are at today, you can improve and you can get better, and you'll see what I'm talking about in a few minutes. I hope that if nothing else, you get that. Beyond that, the way you do it is just by consistently and persistently doing a few small things, and I'd like to talk about those as well.

I used to start most of my presentations with this picture from an old comic strip called *Alley Oop*. I don't know if some of you are familiar with it. It still runs today, but the original creator signed a contract with a distributor that keeps it in small town newspapers, so it runs in the *Herald* here, I think. Anyway, beautiful cartoon. This was my first exposure to art. When I was a kid, and I thought of being an artist, that's what I thought I would be doing. I kind of dreamed about it for a while. I loved *Alley Oop*; I loved the short stories. It was great, because everyday you got a new three panel segment, three or four panels, in the paper and got a little bit more of the story. They were usually kind of funny. Eventually, you know, he's a cave man, but eventually he starts time traveling and all kinds of crazy things happen. It's just been a great part of my life. I used to dream of doing *Alley Oop*. But then I got side tracked.

When I was a kid, I did art now and then; I'm going to show you some things that I did as a young man. My mother sent me [to painting lessons]—this was probably when I was about eleven, I'm thinking, if I'm doing the math right—there was an art supply store in our town in New Mexico that the owner taught painting lessons, and I attended those for a period. This is some of my great work from then. That's Shiprock, if any of you know the four corners area. But other than that, I wasn't ever very serious about art. I'd kind of dabbled with it, but I wasn't disciplined at all. I never took it seriously. I just kind of dabbled.

Years went by, I'd draw a funny picture of my teacher or something in class and pass it around for some laughs, but I never really took it seriously. But I think there was a longing to be an artist. I spent a lot of time at the library when we moved up to Orem, Utah, and they had a great library there. I always found myself gravitating to "How to Draw" books. You know, I'd try

them, but I was never as good, and I could never duplicate what I saw in there, and I'd get discouraged and I'd put them away for a while. You know, people told me I had some talent, but I didn't believe them for the longest time.

Anyway, years and years passed. I ended up going on a mission to Hong Kong, a great part of my life. I loved the time I was there. While I was there, I fell in love, head over hills, with Chinese Calligraphy. On p-days, while everyone else was writing multiple letters to multiple girlfriends, I worked on some calligraphy. It started slowly; I think that's what started to awaken my sense of love for art again. I fell in love with Chinese painting, and I took some stabs at that. Before you think that that's better than it is, I copied that out of a "How to Paint" Chinese book. So I didn't compose that myself. I didn't pick the colors; I just tried to duplicate what I saw and followed the step by step instructions very carefully. But I was learning and just having a great time with it.

After my mission, I was here at BYU and I was an engineering student. I found myself very discouraged and unhappy. I took a summer break, and I went to Taiwan. I ended up stumbling into a job illustrating some English textbooks. That's what started to make me think I might want to do something else with my life. I was unhappy as an engineer. I knew that.

Anyway, I want to show you this book. This is the first book I ever illustrated. It wasn't *A Bad Beginning*, which most people think, but it was this. Oh, no. I'm sorry, I'm skipping ahead.

While I was an engineer, I was taking a painting class for an arts elective, and it was called Painting for Non-Art Majors. I loved that class and I loved being there. Anyway, I was working on this painting, and one day, the teacher pulled me aside—her name was Jean Clark, she was a great painter—and she pulled me aside and she said, "Brett, I think if you ever wanted to take this seriously, you could do something great." Somehow that thought just stuck in my head, and about that time I thought, "I don't want to be an engineer." But I didn't quite know how to be an artist yet. I just didn't know how to conceive of myself as an artist.

So I went to Taiwan, and while I was there, I got a job illustrating a textbook. Now, if we go back to that one that I copied, and then you can see what I can do on my own, when there was no step by step, no example to copy. Somebody was willing to pay me to do that. It's kind of laughable now. I kind of cringe when I think that's what inspired me to set off on this course that I ended up on. So, if that's not good enough, check out that interior. This is what I mean, if you get nothing else out of my talk today, see that you can improve, with some effort.

So that's what led me to Brigham Young University as an Illustration student. I came back from Taiwan. I met Bob Barrett. I met with Bob Barrett and showed him this and that Chinese painting and a few other scraps I had and who knows why, but he let me in the foundation level. It was still kind of a toe in the water for me. I wasn't sure yet, but quickly the classes started to really engage me, and within a month or two, I knew I was doing what I wanted to do, even though I wasn't sure what that was. I didn't have a clear conception of what an illustrator did at that point. I just liked what I was doing. It felt great.

I had planned maybe to show a few of my really terrible illustrations from my student days, but I thought these were good enough. So, I'm going to jump ahead a little. Just trust me, they were awful for a couple years to come. But through some great teaching here at school, from Bob and Richard Hull, and other teachers, I learned how to draw the figure. I got a little better every day. You know, one thing I did: I took every figure drawing class I could fit into my schedule, some semesters I had two. If there was a drawing session anywhere in town or at school that was available, at the Springville museum, or anything, I was there. I focused on how to draw the figure, because I thought that was the core skill that I needed. As you can see, I needed a lot of work.

One of the more important lessons I learned was who to be inspired by, and was shown some great illustration work that kind of opened my mind a lot, and this is the work of the great N. C. Wyeth, still probably my biggest inspiration. More of his work. Beyond N. C. Wyeth and his contemporaries, I also found myself in love with comic strips again. I've had to work my way

through school, and during this time I was working at the Smith Fieldhouse, and I had to be there at four in the morning to clean up after the football players, and when I finished work, I went up to the library. I had an hour or two before my classes started, so I'd try to get some homework done, but I usually ended up falling asleep. But before I did anything, I always read *Calvin and Hobbes*, in the *Daily Universe* then, and it was great. It was a great way to end a hard shift at work and get a good laugh and then be ready for the day.

Those little comic strips like *Alley Oop* and *Calvin and Hobbes* and the next one I'm going to show you, now they always were just magical to me. That an artist with just a few lines and a few dots could really bring a character to life. I mean, I think about Calvin and just how real and vibrant he was. He could literally make me laugh out loud. And another one that I discovered—I'd known it when I was a kid, but I hadn't paid attention to it—*Dennis the Menace*, by Hank Ketcham, and to me these are just the same thing. Just magic. Just a few scratches on a piece of paper, bringing a character alive.

I also, as I learned about composition, started to recognize how beautifully composed these are as pictures. A few years ago, a publisher started reprinting all the cartoons and I've been buying up those books, and I use them constantly as compositional inspiration. As time went on, I started learning more about these guys and N. C. Wyeth, and kind of came up with this crazy goal that I wanted to learn how to draw like that and paint like that. As crazy as that sounds, that's what I've tried to do all these years. And this was the work I was doing as a senior here. After a lot of hard work and paying attention to my teachers, and really trying to learn. I'd encourage you all to do the same. You've got some great teachers. Just really learn from them. If they suggest something, even if you don't understand what they're asking, just give it some thought, give it a try. You'd be surprised what it can do for you.

So after a lot of hard work, this is what I went to New York with. This is kind of a mini portfolio that I took off for New York with. The work I was doing my senior year at BYU. Still playing with a lot of Chinese themes. That's a character from an old Chinese Epic called *The Journey to the West*. Then my BFA project was an old Chinese folktale. So you can see I'm still struggling to stylize the figure the way I wanted to, I still hadn't nailed it down like I wanted to, but I'm getting a lot closer. This time I thought I was starting to learn how to compose a picture.

Anyway, I took off for New York and while I was there, I got a little side tracked. It was hard to get work from publishers at the time, and I really wanted to work, needed to work. I didn't have much money, so I needed some work. A lot of people were doing work for magazines, editorial illustration, and these were all conceptual pictures that were trying to come up with a clever visual concept to communicate an idea that the magazine was trying to communicate to its readers. I wasn't very good at it, but these were my attempts at trying. These were some promotional pieces that I did to try to drum up some of that work. I started out just simply making postcards with a color Xerox machine, one at a time, as I had some money. Then as time went on, I got a little extra money—I had a job, I found a job, because I had to. I was doing this in the evenings and these were my promotional cards. I was sending these out every few months for the longest time, just trying to come up with an idea.

About this time, I was getting work and I was working the day job. One thing that I did that I'd encourage you all to remember: that whatever your creative pursuits are, once you graduate, there's a good chance you're going to need to take a job that isn't the one you dreamed of just to pay your bills and have a life. A lot of people get side tracked by that job, and they give up their pursuit. They give up what they'd dreamed of. All I did was I went to my job, I worked from 9-5, well I was living in New York, so usually 6-6:30, sometimes later. I worked a New York Day. Then on most nights, I went home and I worked on these, and that's what I'd encourage you to do. Along with that I was building a mailing list, researching who might want to buy this art. Who I could work for. I just built it one name at a time, and just kept doing. So whatever you're pursuing, when you find yourself in that job that you don't necessarily love, just find a way to find a few minutes every day to work at your creative pursuit, whatever that is. And if you can do it

with some persistence, if nothing else, I can guarantee you'll have a lot more satisfaction, cause you wouldn't have given up.

There was a point where I was getting enough work off of this that it was rewarding. I had some pieces in magazines, some significant like *New York Times*. I'll show you one of those in a minute. I was getting some good work, but it wasn't enough money to pay my bills, so I had to keep working my job and there was a point I came to where I was quite content with that. I thought, "If nothing else happens, I'm doing what I set out to do. I'm illustrating. I'm getting my work in some significant publications. I have a good job that I don't hate. I like it some days. It's good." I thought I could be content. And I kept going, and I think that eventually the work just started coming in more.

At that point, I started to think that I'd gotten a little too abstract here with the stylization of the figures. They're very flat, and very abstracted. And I was thinking about all the experience figure drawing, and I was starting to be unsatisfied with that. They didn't look alive like those Hank Ketcham and Bill Watterson drawings that I wanted to emulate so badly. So I started to try experimenting to try to find a more natural way to stylize the figure. I hope you can see on that, that it's a little more dimensional, not as flat, and the features look a little bit more natural. It still took me a long time to get to where I am now, but I started making some steps in that direction.

By the end, I was getting some regular work. I had one regular client, it was a magazine called *The Technical Analysis of Stocks and Commodities*. It was a technical trader's magazine, and I didn't understand one article I illustrated for them. It was a great lesson in finding something where there really is nothing. I had to find a good image out of something I barely understood. I did well enough that I worked for them probably every month for a lot of years. Then I was getting some good work now and then from the *New York Times*. That one ran in one of the Sunday Papers, so I got a little coloring on that one.

Along there, I started to feel dissatisfied. I'd gone to New York wanting to be a children's book illustrator, and I started feeling dissatisfied. I sent some work to *Cricket Magazine*, and this is some of the work they sent me. I started pushing more kid-oriented work out there and started getting that kind of work. I sent out this promotion at one point that got me jobs like this. From what I understand, these two were the kind of the pictures and images like these that kind of sealed the deal when I finally got *The Series of Unfortunate Events*.

So this brings me to the beginning of my real career as a book illustrator. I just want to show you some of what I've done over the years. *Bad Beginning* was the first real book I illustrated. I hope by now you can see that, like I said, if you get one thing, with a little hard work you can improve. A lot of hard work, I should say. Here are two of my favorites from the *Unfortunate Events*. Some things I started doing early on with books were: I was married to an excellent graphic designer and was learning to appreciate good typography at the time. So I didn't want people to just stick their type on my illustration without having some say in it, so I started designing my pieces in a way that I left them little choice in where to put the type. At least I could control that, I thought. Sometimes it worked well, and sometimes it still got less than stellar typography on there. It was series, just giving them a certain spot.

These were some early stories that I got, that I loved, that were a lot like Robert Louis Stevenson's story. I've always loved pirates and adventures like that, so it was a great opportunity to illustrate these. These were published in the early sixties, but they wanted to repackage them with a new look, so I got the gig there. Great stories.

This was a series written by Jim Howe, who wrote the original *Bunnicula* stories, and this was a new series with some of those characters called *Tales from the House of Bunnicula*. In this particular book, the dog there, Howie, is imagining himself as a private detective, and so I was trying to get the feel of some of those black and white detective movies. You know, what do dogs do when they investigate? They sniff around looking for clues. Over the years, I've done a lot of them.

This was one of the earliest ones that I got the chance to actually do the lettering on, so I had lettered that. That's all one painting there; I painted the whole cover, lettering and all. Still, it

was an early one, and I'm getting better at lettering, I think. Mary Jane teaches me a lot and helps me get a lot closer to what I want to do with lettering. But this was an early attempt, and it ended up being in color, and now any chance I get, I hand letter a cover.

On this particular one, I didn't hand letter it, but I sketched out how I thought it should look and designed it, and then they hired a hand letterer to actually do it and make it look clean and crisp. This is *Chasing Vermeer*, which I'll talk about in detail in just a minute. Some interiors. I'm going to move a little quicker, because there's some things I really want to say to you at the end, and I don't want to run out of time.

This is kind of my pride and joy. I have great fear of writing; I never would have considered myself a writer. It was the only class I ever struggled in. I failed my freshman composition class the first time I took it, for many reasons, which we won't talk about, but part of it was just writing has always been difficult to me. But I had a kind editor who just encouraged me to give it a try and we ended up with *Roger and the Jolly Pirate* after about five years of hard work. Some pictures from that. The interior there. Then another one. I wrote my second one. Again this one was a little easier, but still hard: *Bedtime for Bear*. I was starting to use some of my comic book love there.

Then another one by Lemony Snicket. This was probably the biggest challenge I had as to designing characters. How do you give a little life to a lump of coal? I struggled with it until I put him in a tuxedo. Somehow that just worked. So we ended up with the lump of coal.

Then a few years ago I was lucky to get the commission to illustrate a picture book version of the Christmas Carol, probably one of my favorite stories. There's my Jacob Marley, and the ghost of Christmas past. That's probably the hardest single painting I've ever tried to do in my life. I usually paint a painting usually in about a week, this one went on for a good two months before I worked it out.

Another cover, I was getting better at the lettering. Mary Jane doesn't remember, but she helped me a lot on this one. Just some interiors from that. Now, my third book, *Grumpy Goat*, some illustrations from *Grumpy Goat*.

Finally, well not finally, but after a long, long time of being a great lover of comics and comic books, I finally got a chance to do my own comic as part of a bigger book. I got eight pages to do Rumpelstiltskin. Just a couple pages from that. Since I knew no other way, each one of those is a single painting. That's one painting. I know there's an easier way to do it, that real comic book artists do, but that's all I knew how to do, so I did it. Probably the eight hardest paintings I've ever had to do, just because there's so much going on in each one.

Then this is work from the last couple years, *The Vengekeep Prophecies*. I think, finally, my figure drawing is getting to where I wanted it to be. This work here is the closest I think I've come to that goal of drawing like Hank Ketcham and painting like N.C. Wyeth. I think I'm getting there. This one's just very recent.

Then my most recent book, that I'm quite proud of, the fourth book in the series of *Doll People* stories. The first three were illustrated by Brian Selznick, some of you may know him. I picked it up on the fourth book, and here's just a couple illustrations from that.

Now, here's one of the important lessons I want to give you today, and I'm going to go through it quickly, because we're getting low on time, I apologize for that. One of the classes I took early in school was The History of Illustration. It was a great class, it was taught by Bob Barrett. We were seeing great images like this every day, like this, by Howard Pyle. Day after day I was seeing these fantastic images, and starting to really get a sense for what I could do. You know, you could be a great painter and still tell a story and illustrate something.

Then there was a point that I started feeling a little discouraged. I'd see paintings like this, and my drawing and painting at the time was so far from this. It was just discouraging, simply. I wondered, "How am I ever going to get there?" Then probably the greatest lesson of my education, that I still use everyday since, was: Bob showed us this picture, great painting by Howard Pyle, and the next one he showed was where that painting began, as an idea. And that is it. Yeah. I looked at that, and it was just the greatest epiphany of my life. I saw that and I thought,

“That I can do.” It woke me up to the idea that there’s process to all of this. That it wasn’t this magical thing, that it was a series of steps. I felt pretty confident that I could execute the first step. I was clueless beyond that, but I felt really confident, “I can do that.” It made me realize I just had to learn the steps, and that’s what I devoted myself to. I’m still working on refining that process and learning how to use it, always trying to make mine better.

So really learn your process. It always starts with a scribble. Like that drawing there. That’s the beginning of my first book cover. That’s the *Bad Beginning* right there. That scribbly drawing. That was just one idea. If you look there, you can see Violet. That’s all that’s recognizable anymore. She’s very faint, but at the time, that was all I needed to see. I tried another point of view and added Klaus in there and some other things, trying it. I think there’s a hint of Olaf in the background there, a little bit. Eventually that became that. You can see kind of, and I’m just showing you a quick evolution, there’s a lot of drawings in between there, but that was my first idea for the cover of *Bad Beginning*. I thought I might give them another one, so I did another scribbly sketch of just a rough idea, just trying to put things into place.

By this time, I’ve done a lot of illustrating, so I’m better at it than when I was back in school when I first learned the lesson. But that was how I got here, was by really learning just to do this first step. It’s magical, because it gets rid of the anxiety of the blank page or the anxiety of not knowing how to start a project. You’ve got an idea, you don’t know how to start it, so just put something down on paper. Just put it down, see what you’ve got. It’s probably bad. Most likely it is. But then you’ve got something, you’ve put something down, you’re past that anxiety, and you can look and say, “Okay, this isn’t working, but what can I do to make it better?” Do things like trying a different point of view; that’s all that is. I don’t know if it made it better, but it made it different. And I ended up with that. That was my second idea for the cover. Eventually I ended up here, and that one’s even more scribbly than the other ones. But there it is. There’s the *Bad Beginning*. That’s where it all started. Just an awful scribble like that.

I only recognize what it is because I talk about this one often, but there are sometimes I can’t tell you what a drawing is a few weeks after, because it doesn’t mean anything anymore. Along with that, when creating a book, you have to come up with the characters. All they do there is start scribbling down characters. Here are a few of Klaus, because I kind of got his basic idea pretty quickly. I just keep drawing; I’m just deciding. I just try, and things drop by the wayside, and eventually you end up with the one you want, which is there on the left. It’s pretty much how Klaus ended up.

There are some early stabs at Olaf on the left there. Pretty much how he ended up in the end, but I’m only showing you a few. You know, there are hundreds of these drawings. Just trying all kinds of combinations of old and weird and creepy. So this one, I’m going to go through this really quickly. Same thing: Thumbnails, just trying some ideas.

This was probably the hardest cover I ever did. Trying idea after idea. This mystery involves some pentominoes, which are those mathematical puzzle pieces that you may have seen. You can see that I’m trying to use those to create a design element. I kept trying all kinds of things with this. This is going on over weeks and weeks and weeks and they keep getting rejected by the editor, because nothing’s quite working for her. She’s not excited by it. I like them, but anyway, just keep trying. Keep drawing. Eventually you also learn to collaborate and take ideas where you can get them. Sometimes your best idea comes from somebody you wouldn’t expect. I got a drawing fazed to me from the art director and my first idea was, “What an awful drawing, I don’t want to do it that way.” But I thought about it, “Maybe I just have to look at the idea and see my way of interpreting it.” So I came up with that. I just made it three-dimensional and rather than just cramming them in there, I created some space to put them in this puzzle. Eventually I did that drawing. I turned that in and I thought I nailed it, the editor still wasn’t happy and she suggested maybe I spend some time doing some research in Chicago in the neighborhood that this takes place in. I found a lot of great architectural detail. She suggested, “Find a way to incorporate that in. Give it a little local color.” Eventually we came up with that and solved it. So as you work with

people, learn to look for ideas even ones that don't seem like they're the idea at first. Just give a little space in your mind for it. It may lead you to something good. Eventually we ended up with that cover.

So that's a little bit about process, and everyone's process is going to be different. The only similarity is the beginning and the end. What you do in between you're just going to have to learn from trial and error what works for you. Just start getting something down on paper and just do what you have to do to make it. Spend the time you need getting it to be what you want it to be.

I wish I could show you sometimes [how] with any book I do, I have at least one archival box about that thick full of drawings that no one ever sees. Sometimes, for bigger books like a picture book, I'll have three of those. The thing is that's only about half the drawings. They're just the ones I saved. I throw away more than I keep. So just go through the sketch after sketch, or whatever. I'm talking as an illustrator, but if there are some non-illustrators in here, whatever it is you do, whether it's another draft of a writing piece or another evolution in a musical composition, whatever, just start with what you've got. Whatever you can put down on paper and just keep pushing it, refining it, ask for help. Ask your teacher. What can make it better? And then do it. Try it. Try what they say, learn from them.

So that's my process. The other important thing that I've learned over the years to really pay attention to—I started learning it as a student, and I've tried hard to remain devoted to the idea—it's something that musicians know very well, and I think we all understand: practice. The deliberate and very focused and repeated attempt at developing a skill. Sadly, I think in some other arts and other areas of our lives, it's neglected. Especially in Visual Arts, so many of us grow up with the idea that we're either talented or untalented. We either have it or we don't. I'm really skeptical of that way of thinking. It doesn't do you much good, because even if you are talented, and more gifted than the next, without practice and deliberate practice, you're stuck where you are.

So if you ever want to get better, you need to think about this idea of practice. I learned it as a student, spending hours and hours in the drawing room drawing the figure. I just put this up; this is just my version of the basic way to draw a face. Start with the circle, add a chin, draw a line down the middle, divide it up, that line that horizontal line that goes across is where I hang the eyes. The little line down below that is where I hang the nose, and the other line I hang the lips. You can see where I've done it there, and then I add a little bit of detail and a little bit more on the end. Every face I draw is constructed that way and this is something I practice. I still do. I just sit down and I draw faces that way. The idea is to practice your basic skill and get it so ingrained that it's just a part of what you do. That it doesn't require a thought; much like a musician will practice a piece until they can just play it without much thought. So whatever it is you feel like—whether it's writing or drawing or anything, any creative pursuit that you may be after—think of a way to break it down into a basic skill and just do it. Simply.

I've spent days practicing recently, because I realized I got really habitual about drawing circles this way. I noticed in sketch books, because I drew a circle that way most easily, all my faces ended up facing this way, because it was a good way to start. I thought, "I can't draw faces that way all the time." When I turned them this way, they were a little unnatural. So I forced myself to sit and draw circles counterclockwise, just to break the habit and get that to be natural, so when I draw a face facing this way, it wasn't so forced and deliberate. Practice, Practice, Practice, I can't say enough.

You can see here on a character development—this is the character from that *League of Seven* Cover that I showed you a few minutes ago—you see on this one how I've constructed it that very same way. I always do it that way. This is just something I learned from books growing up, "How to Draw" books. This is from a book called *Fun with a Pencil* by Andrew Loomis. Which, with a title like that, you may just reject it outright, but it's a book any illustrator in here should have. A publisher recently republished it so you can get a good pristine copy for about \$30, and I'd

recommend you have it. *Fun with a Pencil*. I just learned; this is where I learned it. I just did drawings like this over and over. Here's another page from *Fun with a Pencil*.

Here's another book by Jack Hamm, called *Cartooning the Head and Figure*. Here's where I learned to practice facial expressions. Again, I just drilled them. I've spent a week doing just angry faces, just to get that more natural. Here's an example of something I've done recently. This is a drawing I copied from a book by Burne Hogarth, called *Drawing the Human Head*. I just draw that to get a basic idea for that structure of the head from that point of view, but that's not what I want to learn, that's kind of the course of my practice. I push it beyond that and I use that point of view and that structure and try to create some characters of my own. I flip it around so again I'm trying to break that habit of always drawing faces facing that way. So I force myself to draw them this way, and I just fill my sketchbook with things like that. Some of these are copies of drawings from old cartoons that I like. Some are ones I made up. There I'm playing with an expression, again I'm just playing with angry disgusted faces. As I go, when I have time, I put some paint on them sometimes. This is just practicing how light falls on it, on the human head. I practice that basic skill, so when I sit down to do a job, I don't have to think as hard about creating the character that I want to create. It's all in my head.

I read a book by a chess master once and he talked about learning to play chess, and one part of it he said that stuck out to me was he said, "You had to learn the numbers to forget the numbers." That was learning the technicalities and the patterns of the chess game and memorizing, so eventually you can forget them. That's when real mastery starts to happen. That's what I do. So learn your process and practice.

We just have a few minutes left. I don't often get to share the more personal side of this all, and the kind of spiritual side, and since I'm at BYU, I just thought I'd take advantage and just share some thoughts that have been rolling around in my head lately along those lines. I read a book a few years ago by a guy named Steven Pressfield; he's a novelist. He wrote a great book called *The War of Art*. Another book that by the title you could easily dismiss it, but I recommend all of you go pick it up as soon as you can: *The War of Art*. It's not a touchy feely creative book. It's a "creating is hard and you've just got to sit down, muscle down, and plow through it and do it" kind of book. And you'll never be happy until you do. In one of the opening paragraphs of that book he says, "There's a secret that real writers know, but wannabe writers don't." He's talking to writers but he clarifies anybody doing a creative act. The secret that real writers know, but wannabe writers don't, and the secret is this: "It's not the writing part that's hard, what's hard is sitting down to write." I think we've all felt that.

I hope all of you have creative ambitions that go beyond just your schoolwork. Things you want to do, like my dream of drawing like Hank Ketcham and painting like N. C. Wyeth. Whatever your version of that is. Oftentimes we feel blocked, and how do you get beyond that? How can you get yourself to do the practice and learn the process and learn from the teachers and do the things and increase your skill the way that you need to? I've been thinking about that a lot while preparing for this talk, and it made me think of a scripture in the book of Nephi. We're all familiar with it, and I'm just going to paraphrase it a bit, but its that part where we learn about free agency and it talks about how there's opposition in all things. I'm skipping around a little bit in that chapter, but opposition, which to me sounds very much like what Steven Pressfield was talking about in his book. He calls it a resistance though. Whatever that is—that force that keeps us from doing the things we really should be doing—we understand there's this opposition, and we understand again from our scripture that we're free to act for ourselves. The phrase that sticks out to me more than any other is that we're free to act and not be acted upon.

So as you pursue creative life from here on out, you're going to have a lot of forces pulling you one way or another, and sometimes it will be family and sometimes it will be work, and we all have to deal with those. We may need a job and you certainly need to take care of your families, but along with all that, there are quiet moments early in the morning, or late at night at times, where we should just sit down and write that poem that we've been thinking about or paint that

picture or read that book about painting that we've been meaning to read for years, and actually doing the exercises in it maybe, if you're at that learning stage. But if you get past that and you just have a burning idea, and you're just not getting to it—like I said, you may have to find a full time job sometime—but I hope, I hope, that all of you will find a way in those moments when you're not working, when kids are asleep, if you have kids or whatever, and your family's taken care of, when even with a half hour, you can do some great creative work. I'd encourage you to do that and don't worry about what you get back from it. I showed you those early cards I sent out to the publishers in New York, and usually I got nothing back. No calls, nothing. I would drop a portfolio off, I wasn't even sure they looked at it. But I just kept doing it.

There's a great old poem by Rudyard Kipling called "If." It's kind of a father talking to his son and it's just a series of "if you do this" and "if and if and if and if." At the end, it ends up you'll be a man. So if you do some of these things, you'll be a better artist, a better musician, a better writer, whatever. Two lines from that—it's a long poem so I'm not going to read it to you—but two lines that have always stood out to me and that I remind myself of at all times: "If you could meet with triumph and disaster, treat those two imposters just the same." That means a great deal to me, because you're going to have ups and downs. You're going to get a great success and you're going to feel good. I got a great job from the *New York Times* once. It was the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, and I thought it would just blow me right open. But I didn't get another call from anybody for nine months. So triumph and failure, in failure you learn. The only lessons you really learn in life are going to be from falling on your face. So you have to be careful of both failure and success. Success can make you lazy, lose track of what your goals are. Failure can get you discouraged. Just focus on learning your craft and practicing it, doing well.

Then the last line—and then I'll wrap up—says, "If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run." To me that just again says: you're going to have little moments here and there, sometimes it will be half an hour, sometimes it will be an hour if you're lucky. Sometimes you might get a whole Saturday, I don't know. But please, if you really want to do this creatively, I really hope you do. I want to see some great creative work out of all of you in the future, and the only way you're going to get there is to use those minutes when you get them. When the homework's done, when the kids are in bed, whatever it is you're dealing with, when you're job's done, use it to create something and to further your craft.

It makes me think back to my teacher that I was painting that flower painting with, you know, and the things she said to me that stuck with me so long was that "If you take this seriously." She didn't say you are great or will be great, she said, "If you decide to take this seriously, you could do something great." So I'd like to encourage you to think the same way. Whatever it is you're studying, whatever it is you aspire to do, I encourage you to take it serious enough to give it the study that it deserves. I think if you do that, use a few ideas that I've given you today, hopefully, of just doing small things to get you closer, you'll be able to do it. And I hope to see what you bring us in the years to come. Thank you.