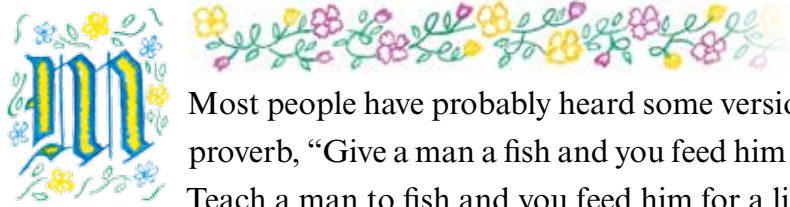


# Ages of Man



Most people have probably heard some version of the proverb, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

Pieper Bloomquist might have created a new version of that saying: “Teach an elder *Dala* painting, and you might find they don’t need you.”

Like most folk artists, Bloomquist learned her skills not in a formal art school setting, but from other folk artists, like her friends, Judy Kjenstad of Minneapolis and Karen Jensen of Milan, Minnesota. She apprenticed with them through the North Dakota Council on the Arts’ *Folk and Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program*.

Bloomquist is a traditional *Dala* or *Dalmålning* painter who has been teaching classes in the *Art for Life Program* since 2001. One of the most satisfying experiences as an *Art for Life* teacher for Bloomquist was in 2014, when she went to Maple Manor Care Center, an assisted living home located in Langdon, North Dakota, which works in partnership with the Northern Lights Arts Council. When she was there for the first time, in 2010, most of the participants had difficulty

with *Dala* painting. Some elders couldn’t decide which colors to use in the paintings. Some had trouble knowing how to hold a paintbrush. Others needed coaxing to get started. But in 2014, everyone came into the room and started painting on their own.

“No one needed any help,” Pieper says. “I was floored. That was wonderful.”

The *Art for Life Program* was developed and is funded by the North Dakota Council on the Arts to combat the Three Plagues (loneliness, helplessness, and boredom) elders often experience in long-term living facilities and which have been shown to negatively impact their emotional and physical health.

Sometimes elders come into Bloomquist’s classes “to have something to do.” But the painting classes also bring about conversations and elicit reminiscences as elders talk about their lives and common human difficulties, such as how to allow children to make their own mistakes. These conversations allow elders to celebrate their achievements and express their feelings in ways not usually available to them,

thereby combating the Three Plagues and improving their health, according to Bloomquist.

One of the aspects of *Dalmålning* that Bloomquist values the most is its storytelling component. *Dala* painting became popular in Sweden about the same time as did rosemaling in Norway, from about 1750 to 1850, and both feature elaborate, decorative flowers painted on furniture and everyday items. But *Dala* painting often was used to tell Biblical stories, teach morality, and commemorate important community and familial events. These stories were painted on canvas or on the walls of homes. In southern Swedish style, the paintings mimic tapestries and are called *Bonadsmålningar*. One common element of *Dala* painting is the *kurbits*, or gourd, characterized by large, swollen leaves and accompanied by many flowers growing from a single stem. In the Biblical story of Jonah, God caused a gourd to grow up over Jonah to protect him from the relentless heat of the sun, and the *kurbits* became a symbol of protection and is almost always present in Swedish paintings, says Bloomquist.

The storytelling element to this type of painting is a very powerful tool and helps very much to combat the Three Plagues when working with elders. “Ages of Man” is the name Bloomquist has given to paintings that show images of people on a series of nine steps that rise to the middle and then descend. As each step progresses by decade—at ten years old, twenty, thirty, forty, and so on—a man and woman

are depicted as growing up and growing old. In traditional paintings of that scene, there are skeletons or coffins after the last step, grimly showing the reality of death. When Bloomquist is painting these images, she often asks residents to help decide how the people should look at each stage of life, including the last stage, as a way of engaging the elders in the process. Gone are the grim images of death. Often, the elders want the last image to be a couple depicted as angels, where they are both young again, dancing and happy.

The painting and related discussion is a way for the elders to reflect, celebrate, and come to terms with various stages of their lives, including the end of their lives and what comes after. It opens the elders to one another to find commonalities and help address loneliness. In the Langdon long-term care facility, residents pointed out that the steps, labeled by decade, were missing one. The last decade shown was ninety, and a number of women in that facility were more than one-hundred years old! To conclude those particular paintings, Bloomquist added another step for the centenarians.

The hands-on painting activities give residents an opportunity to work with art materials and explore painting techniques, as well as to interact with others—but there are often other benefits, as well. Bloomquist first taught in the *Art for Life* pilot project at Pioneer House, an assisted living facility in Fargo, North Dakota. She helped the residents paint images in the *Dala* style, commemorating an event or memory



*“Ages of Man” Dala painting by Pieper Bloomquist.  
(Photo courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)*

from their childhoods. Included in the painting residency was a man who suffered from dementia, and often couldn't identify his room after leaving it. When those paintings were completed, they were hung outside each of the respective elder's rooms. Afterwards, the man with dementia would recognize his room by the painting. Memories from long ago often stay with us the longest. The art he created became a beautiful, visual reminder that aided him in a very practical yet poignant way, while also reducing stress and returning a

bit of personal dignity and independence. Like the *kurbits*, his art helped to provide him with protection.

“That first class at Pioneer House was a real learning curve for me,” says Bloomquist.

She found that residents needed something to start with, so she now comes prepared with a number of different line drawings the painters can choose from. But that is only a starting point, and residents express their vision in all sorts of creative ways. For example, one woman used only various shades of blue in her paintings.

Another woman said, “Well, I can’t paint, but if I *could*, I’d want to do that one with the fishes. But it only has three fishes. I would need four. One for each of the four fishermen in my family.”

“I’ll make you one with four fishes right now,” Bloomquist told her.

“Well, no,” the woman responded. “Then I’d need to write their names underneath the fishes, and I can’t do that.”

“I can do that for you,” Pieper assured her. And the woman happily painted the four fishes.

As an oncology nurse, Bloomquist works with an older population all the time. That experience helped her figure out what would work for the classes. You need to speak slowly, she says, and to take breaks between sentences. Elders often have difficulty hearing higher pitched sounds, so it is helpful to lower your voice, as well. Directions should be as simple as possible. You also should look directly at someone when you are speaking to them. When developing painting lessons, Bloomquist says she found she had to choose colors that were brighter than the traditional colors so that elders could see them better.

Bloomquist enjoys using her personal painting to tell family stories and to decorate her home. But she also really enjoys working with residents of long-term care facilities in

the *Art for Life Program*, helping them to tell their stories while improving their lives. “I owe something to my culture and society,” Bloomquist says.

#### **AUTHOR • KATE SWENEY**

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