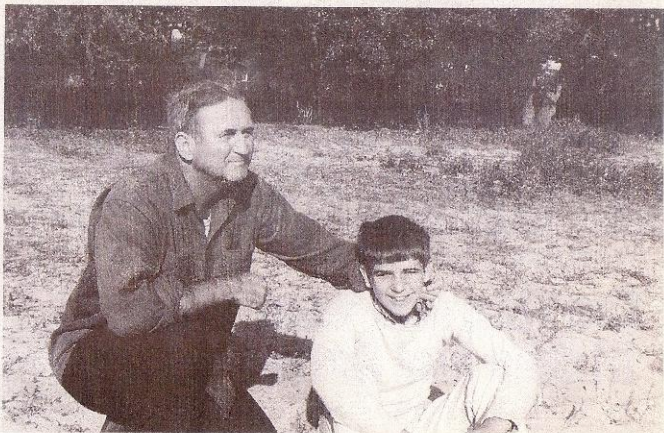


# A FATHER'S DAY CELEBRATION

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The late Herb Jones with his son Louis in Ocean View, c. 1966.

# Portrait the Artist as a Young Father

BY LOUIS JONES

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ot summer nights we'd lie in the cool grass of our front yard and watch the sky. Every shining star a miracle and a friend to us. The lightning bugs would do their best to mimic the twinkling and do their own "dance of light" to our pure delight. We'd collect them in a Mason jar with tiny holes in the top and smell their scent mixed with honeysuckle on our fingers. We always planned to bring them in our room for a light, but Dad would convince my brother Bob and me that they were happier outside. Dad had a love and respect for nature that even dwindled down to the life of a bug.

Mom and Dad would sit back in their lawn chairs and Dad would tell us outrageous stories of his youth. He was a poor Ocean View boy, wild and free. He would

sail his Moth boat on Little Bay. "The water was so clear..... You could see every sandy ripple..... Every periwinkle in 15 feet of water." He would continue with a smile: "We'd clam with our toes and get two cents a dozen and think we had it made, and we did." It was this vision of Tidewater and the world that my Dad painted.

Last Father's Day was my last Father's Day with Dad, renowned artist Herb Jones.

His hands, once so strong and steady now shook, but the light in his ice blue eyes was still brilliant. It was this light that showed me what it meant to give everything to what you are and to what you wish to become. My Dad would be the first to tell you how he was not talented and far from the artistic genius that the world perceived him to be.

But he believed in work. If that meant 20 hours a day, 7 days a week, so be it. If things became hard as they often did he simply would double his efforts and if that were not enough he would double again and so forth until he had created a painting he could be proud of. Every painting was given 100 percent effort. I saw him paint with such passion, so totally immersed in his work, that tears would run down his cheeks as he struggled to create a perfect cloudy sky; a perfect moment as seen through his eyes. Dad wanted to touch the hearts of his audience. To make them feel what he felt when he viewed the world around him, from the strength of a squall on the bay to the serenity of a single live oak. No price was too high for him to create "his world," the world of his paintings.

What we consider the real world, Dad considered a nuisance. He did not paint Tidewater as it is, but how it could be. Perfect in every grain of sand or tuft of sea grass. He loved these lonely places and rarely painted people in his compositions. He did not want to clutter the magnificence of nature with the intrusion of man. He once told me to "find something you love, then paint it. If it's real and from your heart you'll feel it and so will those who view your art." Of course he was right.

When you view my dad's work you will be moved; sometimes to smile, sometimes to tears. His art was honest and as he often said: "The very best of me."

I strive in my own paintings to maintain this level of excellence. I only paint

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those images that are a true reflection of who I am and what I find important. Images to touch the heart, or why paint at all? This work does not come easy to me and means a complete dedication on my part to the process. The hours are horrible. I work between 12 to 18 hours a day and I work 7 days a week, but...the high I get from painting is indescribable. No drug could make me feel so good. Of course, with those magnificent highs come crushing lows. They are an unfortunate part of the creative process. I understand why most people reject this intense level of creative lifestyle. It hurts too much. For me, there is no other way. I have never had a "normal" day. As a result of my art I have known joy and passion that few are blessed to experience. But I have also felt a depth of depression that no one should experience. It certainly has never been dull or boring. I'd have to say it's a great ride and I can't wait to see where my art will take me next. My paintings are my highest truth and the religion I live by.

And yet, as I work, one thought in particular keeps coming back to me: Dad is a tough act to follow. I wish to honor him and his courage to even attempt to make a living from his art. For someone whose last consideration in all of this was to make money, it is ironic that Dad was so successful. Dad was the epitome of the Everyman. He considered himself in no way special or gifted. When I was a young boy, he took me to downtown Norfolk for the first time. I remember I was afraid of so many strangers. All of them so different; from those in suits and ties to the laborers working in the street. Dad told me two things that day that I have never forgotten: "If you are afraid, pretend to be courageous; from the outside it looks the same." And then he said: "Never underestimate a man for the way he appears. Every one of these people can do something better than you. Every one of them has some special talent or skill that they could share with you, given the chance."

I remember when I looked at those same people again I wasn't afraid, but cu-

rious as to what each one's special gift was.

Though he was in virtually every *Who's Who* in the world and received hundreds of art awards and honors; Dad never lost his shy, good-natured Ocean-View-boy attitude. He insisted that all of his "one man" shows be open to the public: All of the public, not just the elite. He knew if he loved these scenes others like him would, too. He also knew, being from a poor family, the pain of feeling second class and not welcome. We carry on this tradition at our galleries. Dad would have expected us to make everyone feel at home.

Dad's paintings were the window to his soul, and he was more than happy to share

his love with the rest of the world. When the average person could no longer afford his original paintings, Dad began producing limited edition prints. In this way, more people could afford a piece of his work. These prints were inexpensive and won numerous awards for their quality. Dad would hand sign each of these prints to authenticate them for the many whom began collecting. These prints are what truly gave him worldwide recognition.

Dad's art was deeply personal to him. His paintings were his highest truth, his passion and his religion. He was the "real deal." No beret, no

French accent, just a simple, courageous man who refused to be beaten by the insurmountable odds against him.

Dad paid a high price for his love, his art. At 75 he looked 95. He never gave up. Never. He fought and painted till his last breath.

Today, I find solace in a belief that Dad shared: there is no death. Our bodies simply wear out, and we move on, shedding them like cocoons which we have outgrown. Now on summer nights, when I look to the skies, and gaze at the ice-blue light of the stars, I see the light in Dad's eyes, and know he's still with me.

Meanwhile, I try to be the kind of man Dad would be proud of. The highest compliment I can imagine is that my work in some way is reminiscent of his. It was an honor just to know him. It was a gift to be his son. ■

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