



## Let me tell you... about emulating Leonardo.

Brett Weber, a Moravian College alumnus, received his B.S. in Biology and his B.A. in Art in 1991. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in Neuroscience at Temple University in 1997. Brett was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) the week before completing his doctorate. Since then he has devoted his life toward understanding MS through science and art.

“I have always admired Leonardo da Vinci. He experimented in both art and science, and experienced his share of both success and failure. I admire that attitude to be unafraid, to pursue truth, to have faith in your observations, and to continue onward no matter what obstacles present

themselves. In that way, I have always hoped to emulate Leonardo. Not only by doing both art and science, but by pursuing each without fear in an effort to do some good.

As a scientist, I have been interested in the visual system and how the brain processes visual information. I have also studied nerve regeneration. Ironically, the week before completing my Ph.D. in Neuroscience at Temple University, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), a defining moment in my life. MS is a degenerative neurological disease that damages the central nervous system. It is not contagious and not often directly fatal, but it is unpredictable. Symptoms caused by MS vary in severity and duration and may range from blurred vision and numbness to blindness and complete paralysis. My disease has affected my vision in the last year and I am now quadriplegic depending upon a voice activation program to keep me on my computer and a daily caregiver to meet my daily most basic needs. The cause of MS is not yet understood and the form of the disease which I have has no proven effective treatment. Since my diagnosis, I have devoted myself towards understanding the disease through scientific research, but also through my art. I hope that my paintings may bring greater public awareness to progressive relapsing & primary progressive MS and encourage broader scientific research in these two areas. MS can be devastating to those who are afflicted with it and to their families, but like any major life-changing event chronic illness can also bring new values, new appreciations, and new colors and textures into one's life.

There is a sharp distinction between art and science, and studying a disease through art is not the same as studying it through science. My art is about my own emotional, intellectual, and spiritual journey, and within that context MS plays a significant role. When I paint, I feel as though I am on a journey of discovery. I allow myself to think about problems in a different way. I hear the words of great people and imagine the journeys they have taken as I navigate my own course through an expression of color and texture. My paintings tell me about my journeys. They are a record of where I have been. And, they express the artistic side of myself. Dissimilar as we may be, both artists and scientists are creatures of observation. What some overlook, we take joy in discovering. Things perhaps not clearly understood, but things we believe to be real and open to interpretation. We are in constant struggle to describe what we observe. And, even after we convince ourselves and others that we have seen some truth and made sense of it, there is always some doubt. For the artist and scientist both recognize how imperfect our human capacity is as we search for moments of understanding in a sea of complexity.

A friend of mine once referred to a painting I had just finished as being "either a complete abstraction or a landscape, but either way poetry." I was amused by my friend's comment, and although I have never painted poetry, I do feel that my paintings convey a certain beauty, mystery and brevity. Since that time, Sophia (my German Shepherd Helper Dog) and I have often created works of art together. See if you can correctly guess which paintings are Sophia's "official" signature pieces. Thank you for visiting our new show "**Voyage of Discovery – Berg and Beyond**" at Muhlenberg College from February 10<sup>th</sup> to March 4, 2011 & for joining the fight against MS this year.

Your friends, Brett & Sophia

BRETT  
  


## **Crazy Like Brett in the New Year: By Mark E. Smith – WheelchairJunkie .com (December 27, 2007)**

When I meet fans of WheelchairJunkie.com in-person, they always have a million questions. However, almost everyone asks one specific question, word for word, “Is that guy, Brett, on the message board, crazy? ”Absolutely nuts,” I confirm. “I’m waiting for him to mail me his severed ear like Van Gogh.”

Of course, in real life, Brett isn’t crazy in the least – but, he is among the most inspired individuals I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing, where he quietly strives to empower those around him, making his community a better place in the process, day after day, no matter how his life has changed. I’m not sure how long I’ve known Brett, but my first encounters with him must have been seven or eight years ago. And, I’ve been a fortunate witness ever since to the powerful life journey that he’s lead.

In 1991, Brett was graduated with both a B.S. in biology and a B.A. in art, going on to pursue a doctorate in neuroscience. In 1997, his education goals were achieved, earning a Ph.D. from Temple University. And, in-between, Brett pursued his passion for teaching, pointing to a likely path as an inspired young professor.

However, as you, yourself, may know, there are no certainties in life, no guarantees that if we simply work hard and live well, we are assured of calm futures. For Brett, this reality was presented in the first-person when, in 1997, just one week before receiving his doctorate, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

By 1999, Brett used a wheelchair and scooter, facing the progressive realities that many with M.S. experience. As I knew Brett through correspondences and meeting up with him at expos, I saw that there were obviously tough changes occurring in his life, the ebbs and flows of romantic relationships complicated by disability, the realization of losing portions of his independence, and the necessity to make changes in his living arrangements due to his progressing condition.

Yet, the more Brett’s life changed, the more focused he became, finding safe harbor in his two truest foundations, religion and art. It was these two passions that compelled him not to let M.S. slow him, but to inspire him. In the 10 years since his diagnosis, Brett has become a fixture in the M.S. community. Not only has he played a key role in championing 21st-century awareness for M.S., voicing the need for more research and a cure, but he’s a tireless volunteer and participant at Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Hospital in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where he helps lead the art-wellness program and raises funds through such activities as an annual M.S. Walk team. In fact, in 2007, Brett embarked on the acclaimed Faces of M.S. Mask Project, an art endeavor in which participants created plaster masks of their own faces, painted as an expression of themselves in light of the disease. Of course, with such a positive outlook, it’s no wonder that Brett is a sought-after speaker, including delivering keynote addresses at M.S. conferences.

Personally, Brett is an artist in the truest sense, his paintings coming from within, the canvas calling him, a passion that is a bit hobby, therapy, study, and vocation mixed in, recognized by galleries, showings, and patronages. And, when not volunteering or working on his art, Brett practices a deep devotion of faith, leading prayer groups and singing in his church’s choir – a clear source of his inner-strength.

Of course, Brett will tell you that much of his success comes from his not being alone on his journey, with unyielding love and support from his parents and family, as well as his best friend, Sophia, his extraordinary German shepherd service dog who’s always by his side as confidant, partner, assistant, and cheerleader.

Despite the countless lessons that Brett’s zeal teaches many of us, what strikes me most of all is that his life prove among my own foremost beliefs: Life doesn’t always work out the way we want, but if we have faith, it does workout exactly the way that it’s supposed to – that is, presenting us with opportunities to learn, grow, and empower, making a difference in the lives of many others along the way. In the New Year, let us all strive to follow Brett’s lead. Let’s not dwell on what we’ve lost or don’t have, or concern ourselves with what unwanted life changes may come our ways next. Rather, let’s draw upon our strengths and passions, and allow them to lead us toward making a difference in our own communities and in the lives of those around us. Let us know that although we may not be able to control what happens to our bodies, with dedication, fortitude, and perseverance, we can control the impact that we make in the world – an impact that offers understanding, hope, and empowerment to others.