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Deep thoughts about life from Michener Museum curator

By Steve Siegel, Special to The Morning Call

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There must be crucifixion before resurrection. That is the gift, at once terrifying and frighteningly ecstatic, that Brian H. Peterson received when diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2007. Such a gift — we should all be so lucky.

Yet that's just one of the contradictions that Peterson — art critic, photographer, arts administrator and chief curator at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown — writes about in his unabashedly personal, sometimes unsettling, always honest memoir, "The Blossoming of the World: Essays and Images."

"I have the good fortune to be the conscious witness of my own gradual destruction," Peterson writes. "Each crumbling minaret, each tower that turns to dust, is a crucifixion ... to die so something new can be born." At the same time, he is noncommittal about the existence of an afterlife, and refuses to believe that life's graces and misfortunes are part of some mysterious, divine plan.

"The Blossoming of the World" is a different kind of book from Peterson's debut memoir, "The Smile at the Heart of Things," a gentle, personal reflection on art, life, and creativity written soon after that fateful diagnosis. Both are collections of essays and excerpts from diaries, combined with selected artwork. But there is a brutal honesty in "The Blossoming of the World," whose prose alternates between seething anger and reverential calm. Its images are all his own photographs, culled from a lifetime of photographic passion.

"I felt the first book wasn't totally honest — not in the way of a flaw, just that it went as far as it needed to," Peterson says. "I felt I needed to fill in some details I obliquely referred to in an essay at the end of the book, where I refer to some problems I had as a young man."

It is hard to picture Peterson, with his kindly face, gentle, compassionate eyes and scholarly beard, as a man who, he writes, is "haunted — no, tormented — by the rage of a violated little boy. I will never know what was done to me, but I do know it was serious."

"We are all shaped by our childhood, stuff happens to you that forms you. It makes a huge difference if we try to at least make some effort to understand it," Peterson says.

He finally did get a handle on it, in a journey that took him through a failed first marriage that lasted 17 years, years of therapy, and much wandering in the woods near his Philadelphia home and with his father, a petroleum geologist, on camping trips into Montana and Utah. His journal entries during this period, from the late 1970s through the 1980's, speak of depression, loneliness, and confusion.

But throughout this time Peterson's creative energy was unimpeded. He was taking photographs — he had graduated with a master's degree from the University of Delaware School of Photography in 1985, after getting his bachelor's from the University of Pennsylvania. His early, soothing sepia-toned black and white images of rocks, leaves, and forests, with a tone palette as rich as Edward Weston's, contrast starkly with more recent, unsettling abstract self-portraits, in a series called "I Sing the Body."

"The Parkinson's diagnosis totally rocked my world. One of the things I wanted to do when I still could was to write the books. But I also wanted to take all my photographs, digitize them, sort through them, and pick, say, the top 100," Peterson says. "One of the

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fun things in doing the book was to decide which ones to incorporate. At first the pictures were just an interlude between the words, then I tried to find ways to integrate them into the text as a kind of counterpoint."

All the "I Sing the Body" photographs are of Peterson.

"I started that project just as a challenge to myself when I was in my early 50s, as a set of digital meditations on my body. A lot of them were oddly dark, foreboding. Then a year later I got the diagnosis, and it was really strange — here I was, making pictures of my body falling apart. I really went to town after that, and got really intense," he says.

Those color photographs, sort of digital collages, are both subtle and powerful. A torso is superimposed with broken, spotted stone like flesh covered with boils. Peeling tree bark gives an abdomen the decaying look of flaking, dried skin. A shoulder shimmers with painful, fibrous nerves — actually the leaves of a fern.

In other hands, this sort of introspection and soul-searching might come across as maudlin and self-indulgent. But in Peterson's, it brings us a message.

"We should be afraid of ageing and decay, so we can find the courage to face what we have to face with eyes open," he says. "The worst thing we can do is be so afraid of the terror of life that we shut down. When you shut down the terror, you shut down the joy, too."

When Peterson writes about himself, he does so with instructive honesty, not hollow narcissism. How does one know the difference?

"I just felt those uncomfortable places are probably the places I needed to go to the most," he says. "What really shocked me about my first book was that the most risky and out-there sections were the ones people responded to the most, that gritty honesty about oneself."

Peterson doesn't skimp on gritty honesty in "Blossoming of the World." There's one passage where he describes an excitement approaching lust while watching a misogynistic bloodletting scene in a gory horror flick on TV. "It felt like vengeance I was absolutely indifferent to the pain of the suffering girl," he writes.

How then, do we connect these contradictions, and make sense of it all? The answer, for Peterson, is hinted at in the title of the book, a reference to Helen Keller's remark that the world blossomed for her only when she learned language, and understood words. One word in particular changed her life: water. And one word changed Peterson's: Christ.

For Peterson, Christ holds the key for being a connected individual, a caring person joined with the world.

"The Christian stuff in the book is not Bible thumping. I'm no evangelist, I'm not into the rapture, and in fact, I'm very hard on some points of Christianity in many ways," he says. "I had thought I was really unorthodox, into it only for the here and now, not convinced of a heaven, just helping me get through the daily joys and terrors of existence. Then a very close friend of mine, who's read way more about Christianity than I have, told me I'm actually right in the mainstream. I was really shocked, I had thought of myself as a radical."

For years, Peterson was totally against organized religion, turned off by the fire-and-brimstone bellowing, the Bible-pounding evangelists. "But there's a kind of creative Christianity which isn't like that. You come to the altar with the clothes you have on. I'm just telling people one can be a reasonably intelligent person who believes in science and creativity, and finds religion relevant in life. I desperately hope those parts of the book don't turn people off. I just had to be true to myself and said what I needed to say."

In ending his book with Sanford Bennett's popular hymn, "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," is Peterson telling us he really does believe in a heaven, and all that stuff about the here and now was just to lead us on?

"Sure, I'm contradicting myself there," he says. "But that's life. We are creatures finite and mortal, yet also creatures who have intimations and insight into some eternal kind of existence. You expect the human race to be consistent? Good luck with that one, dude."

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'BLOSSOMING OF THE WORLD' DISCUSSION

•**What:** Brian Peterson, chief curator at the Michener Art Museum and composer Michael Rose trade thoughts about "Life, Art and Whatever Else Comes Up" in celebration of the release of Peterson's book, "The Blossoming of the World: Essays and Images."

•**When:** 6-8 p.m. July 13

•**Where:** James A. Michener Art Museum, Ann and Herman Silverman Pavilion, 138 S. Pine St., Doylestown

•**How much:** Free with museum admission of \$12.50; \$11.50, seniors; \$9.50, ages 6-18; free, under 6.

•**What else:** The book is from Tell Me Press, 256 pages, \$34.95.

•**Info:** <http://www.michenerartmuseum.org>, 215-340-9800

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