

CREATIVITY AND SELF IMAGE

An Odyssey into Poetry through Photography *

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A pinhole in the side of a darkened space admits a small amount of light and projects an upside down image on the opposite surface. In the tents of roving Arabs this phenomenon was witnessed as a magic act centuries before the term "Camera Obscura" was used to describe the device. And it was still centuries later that a Frenchman named Niepce invented the film process to capture the "magic." In the 150 years since then, photography has truly restructured human experience.

A perfect sphere of many colors hangs suspended in empty blackness. The glistening figure of a space-suited explorer balances on the dusty surface while he witnesses man's first view of an earthrise from the moon. And we witness it with him! A combination of ethereal beauty and awesome significance. Beauty and discovery! The ultimate human experience? Do you remember what your feelings were the first time you viewed that photograph?

We now take very much for granted the way pictures have filled our world with visual experiencing. Through pictures we are able to "see" the sights of the ends of the world, and beyond. The gaunt figure of a starving mother holding her child in famine-torn India. The glistening interior of a Arctic igloo. Shrunk heads hanging in a witch doctor's hut. Faces, shapes, smallness, greatness, endlessness. Imagine what our life would be like today if all of our pictures were taken away.

The relationship each of us now has to photography is preexisting, as a well established part of our

culture. But there is literally much more than meets the eye at work in this realm. The study of these other elements and the connections they make to total life experience brings with it a sense of unlimited potential.

HUMAN ELEMENTS IN PHOTOGRAPHY

For many years I was preoccupied with the practice of taking pictures. Not the serious study of photography, not the technology nor the artistry of it, but simply as a tourist with a reasonably good camera might do to attempt a record of his journey. I have accumulated a lot of records of a lot of journeys since then, but along with the numberless quantity of pictures has come a special appreciation of certain ones above all the rest. As I looked through my collection, I would find myself lingering over one of these special shots, aware of the feelings it brought but unaware then of the multitude of connections it was to have for me in future times.

Later I became compelled to begin a search for some personal understanding of my own life experience. It was an effort to connect the feelings that were continuously at work within me to the realities and activities that presumably caused them. When this journey began my photography came along with me. But how does one go about photographing a record of a trip through inner spaces? The answer came naturally, within the search, in more ways that I am able to describe. It was as William Blake observed,

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"There is a place where Contrarities are equally true."

One of the first connections came from trying to find words to match the setting within a scenic picture I had grown to love. What I was able to write about it proved to be a beginning. There is a stirring in the depths of me when I look at that scene. The quiet waters of the harbor, the last rays of the setting sun selecting a few bayfront structures to set aglow, the dark and cloud crowded sky, all remind me of something gone and forgotten but somehow still compelling in the shadow of their memory. It has been over 20 years since that photo was taken, but my response is nearly the same each time I look. The elements of communication, connection, involvement are as present in each re-viewing as they were when I was standing alongside the high bridge and resting my camera on a firm rock to catch the fading light.

POETRY THERAPY

Many years and many photographs later I found myself in a therapy group-training session hearing people share their reactions to lines of poetry used in the therapeutic process. For some there were moments when a certain line reached parts of them in a much more compelling way. It was as if some special connection had happened to touch the memory of feelings experienced before, but now buried. Sometimes the memory became accessible enough for words and present feelings to flow out and around, and to begin to erode away old obstacles. Poetry therapy seems to work in this subtle and powerful way.

The occasion was a regular weekly session at the Poetry Therapy Institute, meeting in Los Angeles, and my entry to the organization came from an interest in the poetry and a growing belief in the value of groups as a place to find personal learning. Many of the positive feelings that came to me in these sessions seemed to have the same ring to them, the same responses my pictures generated. Involving photography there developed in a very natural way, as I had grown accustomed to expect.

SYNTHESIS OF TWO ARTS

Poetry and photography are certain pathways to feelings. This article is about the use of these elements, and it unknowingly began with the creation of a program I had prepared at the request of a friend who was program chairman of a local service club. It

consisted of matching words with color slides in an effort to convey the feelings I found within the pictures. I was surprised to observe the high degree of emotional involvement the audience revealed during and after the viewing. It seemed to make them feel and think things well beyond their awareness of the moment. Having created the program from what I thought were personal emotions of my own, I was compelled to do a little thinking about their response myself. I sensed that beyond the praise lay some valuable truths to be learned.

What were the elements in the pictures that caused me to find words to respond to them? What was the process that brought me joy in the taking of the picture, in finding words to fit the feeling, and in the sharing of it. Searching for understanding to these questions led me to larger questions, and a yearning for more diverse answers.

The most obvious place to start was with the taking of the picture. It was plain to me that it was not the technology of the process that mattered in this search. Rather it was the human element, beneath and beyond the existence of the picture. That seemed to be a source filled with much greater promise. What were my own attitudes and reactions to the experience of getting and having a picture that I might examine for clues.

PERSONAL NATURE OF BEAUTY

The basic nature of beauty intrigued me. For instance, an early discovery was that a sunset did not have to be a spectacular blaze of color to be outstandingly beautiful. Elitists who scorn the subject of sunsets as childish sentiment (if you've seen one sunset you've seen them all) already knew this of course, but the experience of simply discovering something for myself was a freeing space leading to many joyful moments with non-spectacular sunsets. It also freed me to be open to new ways of seeing things. I observed the remarkable fact that wet sand at the sea shore is a shimmering mirror to a sunset, and that it somehow is able to reflect much more color than is contained in the sky above. It is a synergistic action, and makes a lovely metaphor to help understand other areas where synergy is found.

I also learned that somewhere along the trail of photographic experiences a certain knowing developed for me, to begin to recognize those things I considered beautiful. The moving of the camera one way or the other, ever so slightly, made the difference

between something valuable to me or something just ordinary. Later, when an opportunity came to check these understandings out against established photographic concepts, the reasons and meanings of the concepts would fall into place.

But the real lessons still emerged as discoveries. I remember one day helping a friend move, and while carrying a box to the attic, I spotted a bare lamp shade frame propped up against a small round window, graced with cobwebs. The next trip up I brought my camera, and in a short time I had the shot. There is a true joy of discovery in this kind of photography. It is informal, and a purely personal experience, and it's connected to real life in a direct and compelling way. Stopping to respond to something the eye encounters offers reward enough in the simple acknowledgment of the involvement. The added effort in trying to capture the image in a photograph allows for an extension of the joy in the later re-viewing, and in the synergistic effect of sharing the joy with others. As it turned out, the picture was a success far beyond my expectations, and now is a highly treasured possession.

The exquisite books by David Cavagnaro are an excellent example of this kind of work, as he uses his biology knowledge and photographic skills to capture a magnified look at the world of insects and plants in a vacant field. The breathtaking beauty of dew drops arranged like jewels along a spider's web in the early morning stillness is only the beginning of this seemingly unlimited realm. The way Cavagnaro sees his field work is, "Each insect and flower, each blade of grass and drop of water in a meadow mirrors the universe." Truly the metaphors to "real" life are abundant in this unbelievable miniature world.

All things contain form and shape, and in that form and shape we can perceive beauty and react with joy. Kafka is quoted as saying, "Youth is happy because it has the ability to see beauty. Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old." But how is this ability acquired, and who can have it? In studying responses and listening to shared experiences, I'm convinced that everyone owns this ability, and that it is essentially a creative act.

CREATING OUR OWN CREATIVITY

There are those moments when obstacles fall away, leaving an unfettered awareness to respond to whatever happens. Suddenly a flow from deep within diffuses through my being and, beginning like the

flicker of a candle flame, light comes to reveal the shape of that which could not be seen before.

What is creativity? Where does it originate, and how does it work? Artists are so very aware of the elusive nature of their own special "gift" that most of them are reluctant to even discuss it. But in this broader view of the ability, there is much more to be observed. For my own understanding I have come to believe that the essence of creativity can be defined as an active and positive response to life. To be creative is to respond to life!

In his book *The Courage To Create*, Rollo May states that the beginning of the creative space is encounter. "Absorption, being caught up in, wholly involved. . . . By whatever name one calls it, genuine creativity is characterized by an intensity of awareness, a heightened consciousness." When we respond to encounter, feelings are born. Creativity comes from the use of this energy in a positive and joyful way.

But how do we discover what it is that brings us joy? Our frenetic competitive society provides an abundance of things designed to bring joy into our lives. Most of us get caught up in a frantic pursuit of all sorts of things that we've been told will bring us happiness, without ever checking with our inner selves to hear the truth of it. When I first became somewhat aware that I could sort out a few of the items in my life experience I felt good about, ones that made me glow in response to them, it was almost like a declaration of independence, complete with fireworks. It was within *my* power to decide. It was so obvious and so simple, and yet it felt like some kind of a miracle! In my embarrassment over the good feelings that I suddenly, personally, owned there was a searching for non-flamboyant words to describe them. Dignified, grown-up masculine words. Finally overcome with the truth of it, I gave up and admitted it was joy, and it has been comfortable ever since to use the word to tell of the process, no matter who it is I'm sharing with. The one shadow of caution that drifts across this new reality from time to time is the realization that I very easily might have continued to live out my entire life denying, or ignoring, that part of me. If Maslow had accomplished nothing more in his life than his description of a peak experience, the effects of his vision would still be felt in many lives, for it is the kind of concept that inspires change.

ELEMENTS FOR A BETTER SELF IMAGE

There is a connection between a person's inclination to look for the good and beautiful in the world around them, and how they feel about themselves. Training the eye to recognize beauty invests energy in a process of building a stronger self image, for the very act of recognition confirms a certain positive worth. It seems that the identity of the person as the recognizer, the creator of the response, is the element that gives substance to the good self image, and a will to see and enjoy more. There is a confirmation here between the person and the process that leads to a firmer foundation of self worth.

Learning to connect this extra ability to see with our creative energy does something else for us. It allows for a stretching of the boundaries we've previously chosen as to how we function in our world. Rigid habit patterns are not at all compatible with our constantly changing life experience. Where movement ceases, atrophy takes over. This appears to be as true in the realm of the psyche as it is with our physical framework.

Further, this principle seems to work in extensions of itself, leveraging into a higher order. When I first learned to allow my eye and my inner reaction to respond with freedom to what I saw, a process of selection developed. I was then able to recognize the way subtle differences in what I was seeing made large differences in what I was feeling. Sometimes I have noted this leverage principle at work in other areas of life experience. In relationships and communication, for instance, a small change in what is said can extend into a large difference in what is felt.

If we set aside considerations of artistic and technical merit as being separate work, it is possible to recognize the basic ability to respond in a creative way in uninitiated participants. The first time I tried using selected photographs to generate feelings in a Poetry Therapy group setting, responses I had expected as similar in substance came up as diverse as reflections from shards of a shattered mirror. The picture I used was the scene of the sunlit harbor described in the earlier example, and the places it touched for each group member came from his own way of seeing, and out of his own personal storehouse of memories.

In making comparisons with other modalities, one element that seems significant is the variety and unlimited selection of material both poetry and photography offer in finding ways to make specified

connection to feelings. While feelings are consistently generated in the practice of some of the other methods used in group work, few offer the rich tapestry of material and versatility of use to be found in this combination. Pictures and poetry work their affect on us in similar ways. One is an extension of our eyes to other times and places, and the other is an extension of our language to the oceans of human experience. These two things are quite natural together. Not as the cosy comfort of a greeting card would have it, but in the compelling reality of life experience.

DEFINING THE POTENTIAL

Poetry therapy has already started to accumulate a history of practice and experience from which to study, and the places to be looked to for resource material date back to the beginning of language. Adding a practical method to change the way we go about seeing the world around us would seem to be a logical extension of this effective work. In a more basic view, the essence of therapy might be described as an effort to compel the client to react. To encounter the therapy, to respond to the possibilities for change of attitude that the therapist suggests. Learning how to respond, in a personal way, to the world around us could prove to be very effective preparation for this specific learning.

If a facilitator can reach a place of freedom and awareness, the encounter group offers a remarkable place to mine for the gold of new understandings. Each person brings the sum total of his life experience, his energies, and his creative ability to the group setting. This provides a great and diverse collection of possibilities for creative moments, and a synergistic potential of unexplored spaces.

Plato spoke of looking forward to "The vision of a single science, which is the science of beauty everywhere." That vision has managed to elude mankind for all the ages since Plato, and will go on eluding us as long as we look to our material inventions for more than they can deliver. The only reality we know, beautiful or otherwise, exists within each of us as unique individuals. It exists as an expression of our creative self. It exists as our own personal response to life.

Every age, every lifespan, every moment confronts us with the requirement of choosing how we will be within our world for that time. I would choose to reach for those elements I have learned will bring me

joy, so that I have good things to share with those I encounter closely along the way.

TORCHES

Today I really thought of you
 My friend, knowing your love of trees;
 When on a street of trees, the sun,
 Bright winter sun, made torches,
 A patchwork of torches, light shining through
 Each leaf, each autumn color glowing.
 Today I really thought of you, my friend
 Remembering your love of trees.

CONCLUSIONS AND EMERGING CONCEPTS

Both poetry and photography are powerful ways to connect with our feelings.

Learning is an individual experience, as also is our recognition of that which we choose to see as beautiful.

The practice of photography leads to an individual appreciation of beauty. The recognition of beauty, as we respond to the unique scenes our eye selects, builds a more positive way of looking at the rest of the world. A better self image can result from this process.

The eye experiences an affinity for those scenes that cause a response from within. Developing this search for affinity is similar to learning any other

skill. The technical aspect of the photography and the literary quality of the poetry are separate realms from this personal response, and they can be expected to be pursued according to other needs in each individual.

We respond to our life experience through our creativity. Every one of us has the creative potential to respond to life in a positive way, and we use this ability in varying degrees. The experience of photography is one way to grow in this area.

The practice of photography is an extremely resourceful teacher. One thing it teaches is that all things are relative. Big is only big in relation to the rest of our perception. Small is only small until we allow ourselves access into the next level of size, and then that which we saw as small begins again as large. This amazing piece of understanding grows on you, because it can be applied like a pair of magic spectacles to nearly all else in our life experience, increasing greatly our ability to accept the honest reality of the world around us.

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