

Photography and Spirituality
OR
The Inner World of the Borderline Photographic Personality

by Steve Hixon

I've experienced something while taking photographs that I can only describe as the thrill of the hunt. Not being a hunter myself, I guess I'm not exactly sure what that's supposed to feel like, but I imagine it's similar. It happens sometimes, but not all the time, and frankly I can't even predict it. On many days there seems to be absolutely nothing worth recording for posterity. Everything looks uninteresting, obvious, mundane. This leaf is dirty and moth-eaten; that person is bland and boring; the sun doesn't set gloriously, it simply goes away.

But then there are those days – extended moments might be better – when everything seems alive, and alive with possibility. I want to respond to it, and it's the camera that connects me with the incredible visual world that cries out to be understood, or appreciated, or heard. To capture the image of that waterfall at that instant is a way of acknowledging that it is, or was, there. That it matters. Even if its life was brief, and perhaps more importantly if it was brief.

As a photographer, I've asked myself, "What's more fulfilling, the picture or the taking of it?" It's not always easy to answer. Of course the finished product, a nicely framed print that can be shared, that another person can gaze at and enjoy vicariously, brings joy to the taker and the viewer. But what if I took the shot and it was never shown?

Speaking of which, I've had my share of bad moments. When I "got serious" about my photography (stand back, people, this is a scary thing) I began sorting through all my old slides and negatives, whittling them down to the very best of the best, and finally I was off to the lab to have them made into astonishing prints that would announce to the world that I was here and ready to be noticed. Unlocking my car door, I reached into my pocket for my keys and placed the slide cube on the car's roof. The very best of the best. Four miles later my mind, daydreaming and lagging behind as usual, put two and two and two together. I never did find those slides, although I searched with the manic energy of a crazy man. Like a movie scene where the actor looks at the sky with clenched fists, screaming, "Noooooo!" it began to dawn on me that I would have to START OVER.

OK, another sad story, since we're fascinated by other people's tragedies. You're welcome. This time I was standing in a mountain stream (real photographers stand in the stream, while wannabes stay on the banks), lost in the wonder of one of Colorado's best and hardest-to-find waterfalls. Wanting to shout to a friend, "You've got to see this!" but having no friends around (another curse of "getting serious," but we'll get to that later), the best I could do was attempt to capture the day in pictures. Angle after angle brought new discoveries, each frame promised to be better than the last. Typically, I ran out of film in the midst of my reverie and needed to reload. Now, when my old camera was done with a roll, it was already re-wound and I could simply open the back and replace it, which I proceeded to do. As I pried open the camera back (otherwise known as Pandora's box), time suddenly slowed down, like a movie reel set on the

wrong speed, like a glitch in the matrix of the earth. In slow motion, my brain lagging behind once again (are you noticing a pattern here?), the terror began to dawn on me: that...was...my...old...camera, this...is...my...new...one. It...doesn't...work...that...way. I watched the film self-destruct, like an assisted suicide. Frame after frame was ruined forever, exposed to the cruel, deadly sunshine. In my panic I began frantically pulling the film out of the camera, trying to stop the destruction (OK, I know that doesn't make any sense, but that's what temporary insanity does to you.) Once again I was that actor, standing in the water with ribbons of film at my feet, crying out to the sky, caught in a cosmic ground-hog's day of photographic incompetence. Oh, the horror.

Let's go back to the point I was making (what was that, anyway?) What's better, the picture or the taking of it? The answer I've come up with is...both. However, it's the one that gets you to the other. It's the desire to seize the moment, to put the butterfly in the glass jar and somehow capture its beauty, that gets you to chasing the crazy thing, and learning about its habits, and habitat, and then respecting it and becoming entranced by it, and in the end not caring so much about capturing as simply watching in adoring, fascinated wonder.

“Helping to keep our cups full is one of the greatest gifts our photography gives us. Whether we ever make our living at it, whether we ever publish an image or win a photo contest, whether we ever even make a print, photography always fills us with beauty and joy and energy.”

- Dewitt Jones, *Outdoor Photographer*, May 2006, p. 84.

As hackneyed as it sounds, there have been times when I've felt most alive taking pictures. It's been an excuse to camp out alone on the edge of the Grand Canyon, to wake up freezing and try with numb fingers to trip the shutter just when the sun peaks over the horizon. It's been an excuse to embark on a treasure-hunt in the Vermillion Cliffs wilderness, one of the strangest terrains on earth, searching for the elusive “Wave,” and feeling as much invigorated by the search as by the finding. It's been an excuse to gaze at peoples' faces, to glimpse the unbridled spontaneity of a child, the fidgety inner panic of a groom minutes from matrimony, or the despair written in an old man's eyes. It's been an excuse to physically get down on the ground, up-close-and-personal to a flower, knowing that it's a better viewpoint than the normal I'm-up-here-you're-down-there perspective. Maybe that's what I like. It's an excuse to slow down, to stop and notice life.

“There is something beyond the surface of the everyday events of our lives and something beyond the surface of the lives of the everyday people we pass by. Sometime or another we have all seen it, or at least sensed it. And if we can't put our finger on it, it puts its finger on us, tapping us on the shoulder, urging us to stop and look and listen to what God may be saying to us through them.”

(Ken Gire, *Windows of the Soul*, p 43.)

It's also been an excuse – perhaps a doorway – for meeting some truly fascinating people. Photographers come in all shapes and sizes, various colors and Myers-Briggs profiles, GenXers and old fogies. I've noticed that they often tend to be on the quieter side, contemplative, almost humble about their inner passion. Finding them is serendipity. You say “camera” to a room full

of otherwise normal people and watch for the tell-tale jerk of the head, the gleam in the eye that betrays the artist, like a dog who hears his name and wants to go out for a run. And there's a certain sadness there as well, like the sadness of a golfer who just can't get a handle on his addiction, who's driven by the search for that elusive perfect shot. And there's definitely insanity there too, mind you. Part of that gleam in the eye is pure wackiness. The man or woman who wouldn't sit in the cold to watch a football game will bundle up and purposely hope for storm clouds or snow on an otherwise perfectly nice day, because it will make the skies "more interesting." The miser who eats at Chipotle rather than Outback will think nothing of buying a lens that costs more than a used car. I guess it's just a matter of what's important to you, the essentials of life or a shot that's better than the guy's next to you. Well, I suppose that brings up one more, darker aspect of the borderline photographic personality – call it pride, or ego, or irrational competitiveness. They say that when a photographer looks at a great image, instead of just enjoying it, he says to himself, "If I'd been there, I could've done that. And a little bit sharper, too." But don't get me wrong. They're generally very harmless and likeable people, they're just a little sick. My favorite line came from the leader of our local camera club, who described the group as a "bunch of drinkers with a photographic problem."

The thing I really like, though, is that passion. Although it develops in intensity, it was probably hard-wired into these poor people. They're helpless. Once they've discovered this obsession with the visual image, they're hopelessly hooked.

A small bunch of us were recently attending an impromptu workshop in a fashion photographer's basement, salivating over her multi-angle studio lighting and state-of-the-art wireless flash system. She had asked a friend to be the guinea-pig model. I learned a lot of new tricks that night, but what caught my attention most was an unrehearsed moment. Twisting and turning to find just the right shot, our host suddenly gasped, "Oh...my god!" I thought she must've blown a fuse or broken a nail. But she was simply responding to what she'd seen through the lens. "You're so beautiful." We all looked and silently agreed. The model was beautiful. Maybe not someone you would give a second glance in a normal situation, but with the attention, the lights, the focused care of the picture-taker, she was the queen of the moment. She was appreciated for exactly who she was, no more, but certainly no less. Most of the time, most people don't get that kind of attention, and as a result we miss the beauty that is right there. Maybe because we're always comparing people to someone else, someone a little bit better in some aspect – or maybe to the media-produced idols our culture has temporarily crowned. But when we isolate one person, one flower, one cloud – there's plenty there to rejoice over.

Then there's Walt. I knew Walt was a seriously good local photographer, by the quiet way he talked and held himself while considering a new piece of equipment. So I asked him if he'd have coffee with me to talk about picture-taking (a big risk, if you're ever tried that). He was gracious enough to humor me, to patiently listen to and answer my simplistic questions. In the process I learned of his passion for photographing weddings – more precisely, people getting married, enjoying that one perfect day when "lovers are at their best," as he would describe it. He is driven to capture the moments when human beings are closest to expressing or promising or hoping to experience the very best of life here on earth, however fleeting or bittersweet those moments might be. It's the joy and hope that he's after, the posed and especially un-posed secret longings on those action- and angst-packed very special days. Walt lit up when describing this

passion, but his voice got soft, and so did his eyes. He spoke the way people do when they talk about something sacred, something fragile and needing to be carefully understood.

C.S. Lewis often alluded to this sense of almost indescribable beauty which lies just below the surface of our consciousness:

“In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter.”
(CS Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*)

Photographers are compelled to capture (ironically, a word used frequently in photo technology) the images they see. Why? What are we looking for? What fleeting beauty do we chase?

There's a mysterious passage in the Bible which seems to come out of nowhere and draw back the universe's secret curtains for a moment, giving us just a glimpse into what it feels like to be “the creation.” The Apostle Paul is talking about us and our groaning here on earth and how eager we are to be rid of the stuff of mortality and pain, to cast it off like a garment, and put on something new and seamless and healthy and whole. And in the middle of that discussion, he reveals that this is the way the world feels, too. The grass, the ground, a mountain, the animals – the “things” with which we feel a kinship, yet can't talk to - can it be that they all also experience a similar sadness, a corresponding deep longing to be what they were supposed to be? And as beautiful as they are now, it's evidently just a hint of what they used to be and will be some day.

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons... (NIV)
(Romans 8:19-23)

And so artists – and photographers are certainly artists – find themselves tapping into a deeper, almost primordial longing, led there by their inner compulsion to capture what they see and also that which can't quite be seen. Don Hudson put it well:

“Art is the remembrance that Beauty will come--through the messenger who will make all things right, the one who has made all things beautiful through the artistry of redemption. His beauty was fashioned not by the glory of heaven but by the cross of this earth. His death ruined the tragedy of this world. And art helps us wait faithfully for the second resurrection by reminding us that the darkness has not overcome the light, that death has not swallowed up life.”

(Don Hudson, On Earth as it is in Heaven: Is Art Necessary for the Christian?
Mars Hill Review, 2 May 1995 • Issue No. 2: pgs 31-40.)

Perhaps that's why I don't feel alone when taking photographs. In the 1981 movie Chariots of Fire, Eric Liddell expressed so well his feeling of physical euphoria when he described it to his missionary sister, who doubted the spiritual value of athletics. Liddell said, “When I run, I feel His pleasure.” And maybe that sums up the best part of art and photography. When I experience the joy of discovery, of images that celebrate light, color, texture, shape, of the hidden beauty inherent in people, landscapes, wildlife, the world that reflects God's glory – when I'm doing that, I feel His pleasure.