

CONTEMPLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY AS PRACTICE AND THERAPY

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When I was ten years old I went to summer camp for the first time and took along my new Brownie Hawkeye camera so I would have picture souvenirs of my away-from-home experience. I felt the photos were important as a way to freeze cherished people and events.

At Camp Tuckabatchee something unusual happened as I followed people around with my camera. I couldn't have explained then what I was experiencing, but, in hindsight, "I" disappeared during those brief moments of framing a shot in the viewfinder and depressing the shutter button with my thumb. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to this loss of self-awareness and complete absorption in a creative moment as the "flow" experience. I had known it before while listening to music or playing the piano, but in very unpredictable, fleeting ways. As a child, I doubt I reflected intellectually on the experience—I just knew it felt good afterwards.

After camp, the photos went into a drawer, and the camera came out for special occasions. Other interests such as music and writing took priority. Near my 30th birthday interest in photography resurfaced, and I began seriously "wandering" with my camera. I remember trying not to think too much or let preconceived ideas of what and how to photograph get in the way. It was probably my first attempt to practice the technique of walking meditation, though I had no understanding, name, or training for it back then. Sometimes the photos were satisfying, sometimes not, and I did care how they turned out—but equally compelling was *taking* the pictures, relinquishing myself, even briefly, when the camera took over. The underlying process was just as important as the content it produced.

Years later, after receiving instruction in *vipassana* meditation and zazen and reading about meditation masters who performed

their art from a contemplative state of mind, I tried integrating breathing and walking practices with photographing. My motives were often mixed. I wanted to move out of my own ego-centeredness but then would get caught up in the enjoyment of having done so and would become attached to repeating the experience. This is a common dilemma in meditation practice.

Eventually I learned to be mindful and nonevaluative of whatever occurred and to see the value of contemplative approaches as tools in both personal growth and spiritual efforts. While my own interests continued to take me on more of a spiritual quest, I wondered if taking pictures mindfully might have value for other individuals interested in personal, as opposed to transpersonal, development.

How people approached using a camera would depend on their desires and conceptual frames of reference—while I might at times want to try “just photographing” as in the Soto Zen practice of “just sitting,” someone else may want to use the camera primarily as a way to get quiet inside and find relief from usual ways of thinking and feeling. Both were valid in my view. Thus, I began to think as a psychotherapist/photographer about ways to share mindful photography with individuals interested in personal growth.

Senior Center Class

Since I had earlier taught a stress management workshop at the Boulder Senior Center, I hoped they would be interested in a class in photography that would emphasize both personal growth and expression and the development of photographic skills. The social worker at the Center liked the dual emphasis, including the non-judgmental, contemplative approach, and hoped the class would generate some lively activity and improve morale during the winter doldrums.

Six women and two men, ranging in age from their mid-60s to 81, showed up for the first class. Some had brought automatic (“point-and-shoot”) cameras and needed help loading the film, and

others had vintage 35mm cameras they had rescued from closets. One of the men deliberately brought nothing to class; the other had had a stroke and communicated mostly by written messages.

During the initial introductions I heard that some people primarily wanted to learn to use a camera. Others who already had some expertise hoped to take better pictures of family, flowers, or mountain scenery. I realized that while I wanted to encourage them to attend to the process, to experience themselves and the world in a different way, their initial emphasis was on the product, the pictures they could keep. It was a difference that created a friendly tension that I liked, and I told them so. I also explained that I would be asking them to use quieting techniques to help them attend to their experiences more fully, and that sometimes people felt a boost in confidence or an improvement in outlook as a result. They seemed intrigued about what they might learn because of the challenge implied in my emphasis on the process, an emphasis I was to repeat many times throughout the two months of classes.

Underneath their cautious enthusiasm and hope that the class would be useful, I also heard self-degrading comments about “dummy” point-and-shoot cameras and their being “old dogs” resistant to learning new tricks. They wanted to know why a psychologist was teaching photography (“It’s my therapy,” I told them) and if they *had* to show their photos to the rest of the class (“Only if you want to, to help describe the experience of taking the picture”). I explained that the purpose was not to compete or critique—in fact, not to compare photographs at all—but to enjoy new experiences and evaluate “progress” only against themselves. But my initial assurances were mostly buried in their lively joking about being all thumbs or color-blind.

After class, when they could buttonhole me one-on-one, I learned that this was one woman’s first attempt to get out and do something for herself after a family tragedy. She was a teacher and artist but had been unable to paint or draw for the past two years. The man with the stroke gave me a note: “I don’t want to die—I want to talk through my camera.” The second man, who had seemed uncomfort-

able during class, revealed that he had been a professional photographer for an international airline but had taken almost no pictures since his wife died ten years or so ago. He had the makings of a darkroom in his small apartment but wasn't sure he wanted to activate it, or stay with the class for that matter. Another woman had recently moved from Florida and was very lonely and depressed. Her sister had pushed her into taking the class because she had always wanted to learn to take pictures and had nothing else to do. And a tiny woman with a soft Scottish accent said she had loved taking pictures since she was a little girl but was terrified of groups and didn't do much on her own anymore. The class scared her, but she was willing to give it a try. Maybe.

So it went, story by story, each person expressing layers of needs and desires. No one, so far as I could tell, had ever sought formal counseling or psychotherapy, but there they were with their cameras, ready to try to "take better pictures."

Senior Flow

As we worked on fundamentals of camera operation, how to work with available light, and basic composition, I urged the class to take a playful approach and enjoy the picture-taking process as an end in itself, to pay attention to subjects they were drawn to and to those that didn't interest them. They were to practice framing and shooting without film in the camera until they felt ready to move on. Finally, I asked them to sit quietly with their cameras before going out, to slow down and attend to breathing, and then try to maintain this inner quietness as they engaged themselves and the world through the lens.

Getting the class to *believe* I really meant they should be playful, rather than workful or meditative or immediately productive, was our first big hurdle. In their anxiety not to look and feel incompetent, they focused hard on improving composition and getting "good pictures." I was constantly pressured to evaluate their pictures—that is, to judge their personal worth as picture takers and

human beings. When I responded to "how did I do?" with "what was it like?" or "what did you learn?," I could feel their frustration. Sometimes I gave in and met with someone individually after class to go over his or her pictures, but in class I emphasized paying attention to every detail of the picture-taking process, particularly one's internal experience, moment by moment.

Sometime around the fifth class most of them began to relax and shift their focus from outer to inner, from *what* they could produce to *how* they experienced the production of what they got. It was a small revolution in class consciousness. Eight individuals who had been pulling in different directions now began helping each other and talking in "we" terms. As photos were offered for nonjudgmental class viewing, they asked each other questions and drew one another out emotionally. The two men went camera shopping together, one doing the talking for the other. "Glen" (not his real name) brought in old photos from his professional photography days. He was still not taking pictures but began to tinker in his home darkroom and offered its use to the others. People went out picture-taking together and compared notes on technique as they went. I overheard conversations that suggested several of the women were meeting for lunch and planning other outings together. Judging by the noise level during class as everyone talked at once, a certain level of comfort with each other was occurring.

Still, based on our private conversations before and after class, underneath the camaraderie and group energy individuals struggled with habitual self-doubts. Essentially, they felt that others had some sort of talent, ability, or advantage they lacked. They felt buoyed up in class but not fundamentally different. And they wanted more. As "Grace," the Scottish woman, put it, "I think there's something inside me that wants to come out, but I can't quite find the magic button yet."

They had done assignments such as "nature," "doors," and "shapes and patterns" and had been encouraged to select, frame, and shoot from a quiet place inside. But they had also needed the structure of topics, and it had been useful initially to focus the

group on common themes. Now I was going to ask them to begin photographing without much structure—shooting from the hip, so to speak. It was an open-ended experiment, a “what if,” playful way of being with themselves and the immediate world.

The first experience would be as a group taking pictures together in the area of the Senior Center. Fortunately, that meant along Boulder Creek in a beautiful parklike setting frequented by joggers and bikers and the resident geese and ducks. It was a warm, sunny mid-winter day (thank you, Colorado), and the collective mood was good.

“Today we’re going to do a shoot-out. We’re going outside and let our cameras take us wherever they want to go.” The group exploded with questions: “Where are we going?” “What are we supposed to look for?” “What if my film speed is too slow?” I reassured them: “Don’t worry, it’ll all work out, relax, enjoy.” They looked skeptical. I stood by the door and closed my eyes. Eventually the talking stopped.

“Feel your camera in your hands—don’t think about it, *feel* it like it’s an extension of your body, of your senses. Pretend you can reach out through the camera and touch the world.” They weren’t sure what I was getting at. We went outdoors. “Please don’t talk, just wander around. If you feel drawn toward something, see if it wants you to take a picture of it. The camera can decide.” There were a few feeble protests, but no one balked.

They milled around slowly, mostly on their own, and occasionally came together to whisper and laugh. Then cameras started to click and the momentum increased. If someone got distracted or drawn off, they stopped and felt their breathing for a moment, shifting attention inward. “Notice what’s happening, one thing at a time. Pay attention to it. When you get an urge to grab a shot, don’t think about it, do it. Then move on to the next thing. Keep moving.”

The effect seemed to be an exhilarating present-centeredness where all that mattered was “this,” right here, right now. Aches and pains, family problems, fears of illness and dying went on the back

burner. The 81-year-old woman had the man with the stroke support her as she leaned out over the creek for a shot of a duck. He climbed a small tree to get a desired angle on some rocks. Others were sitting or walking quietly. They were absorbed in whatever they were doing. Even Glen was taking pictures! One of the shyest students approached a couple sitting on a bench and asked to take their picture. They said yes, and she talked with them afterwards.

I felt something significant was happening because they were quiet. Better yet, the quiet was *peaceful*. As I watched, they looked graceful to me, slowed down, really there. An hour passed, but no one noticed. Several people ran out of film but continued wandering and looking, sometimes through an empty camera. The sunlight faded and the air turned chilly. They gravitated back toward the Center and began to process: "I could have done that all day," "I forgot about everything else," "I didn't think I could do it but I did," "It felt like I was in there with the ducks". . . . No one wanted to talk much or break the mood, so we said, "See you next week," and went our separate ways. I walked to the car feeling extraordinarily aware of light and shadows and textures and patterns all around.

At the next class meeting, they looked at each other's shoot-out photos and talked about the fun they had had. Two things stand out in my memory. The photos were the best they had done artistically and in terms of self-expression, and the air in class felt charged. People looked *different*. They had a hard time describing what had happened, but everyone agreed they wanted to do it again. There was a hopefulness in their comments, a looking forward, tiny sparks of growing confidence. They spoke excitedly of entering their pictures in an upcoming art show and asked for help getting them printed and framed. No therapy group I had facilitated had ever had a better outcome.

At this writing I am still hearing about changes. Time is probably the best test of the impact of an experience. Some of the positive side effects were likely the result of group dynamics and individuals feeling less isolated and alone. Some exhilaration came from learn-

ing new skills and increased feelings of agency or self-efficacy. But the increases in confidence and energy that the social worker at the Center and others observed over time also resulted from experiences we shared that day by the creek and during other outings in subsequent classes, and many of the changes lasted. Not to put the emphasis in the wrong place, but three people from the class won ribbons in the art show, and one of Grace's photos missed the show's People's Choice Award by one vote.

A year and a half after the class ended I had lunch with Grace, who brought me four packets of her most recent photographs. She also talked about changes in herself and let me take notes to use for this article. In her words:

"It took me a while to get into that, to quiet myself when taking pictures, but once I was no longer conscious of anyone around, it felt wonderful. The only thing I was aware of was the picture I was taking. Maybe it sounds stupid, but it felt cleansing inside, and it has stayed that way. It's difficult to put into words. I feel different. When I joined the class I felt distant. I never approached anyone. Now I talk to people first, and I go out and do things on my own. I don't have the same self-consciousness. I can just *be here*. When I see a picture, my heart seems to beat faster. Such excitement! I see a thing, and if I like it, I take the picture. I don't have to ask anyone, "Would this be a good picture?"—if I like it, I do it. My daughter and friends say I've changed a lot and I look calmer. I used to rub my thumbs together all the time. I don't do that anymore. I've always been impulsive and criticized myself. Now I'm impulsive when photographing, and it's satisfying. That is, I'm satisfied with myself. Now I want more."

The class had a major impact on me, too. I am increasingly aware that there are many ways to accomplish therapeutic changes and that some of the most deeply transforming experiences arise out of those moments when we "disappear" into the activity at hand and simply *be* with the world beyond ourselves. On a very real level, the experience is one of "I am that," and the consequent joy is carried into all other aspects of one's life.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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