

THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF MACRO-PHOTOGRAPHY

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[note: I have been blogging a lot on photography lately because I am finishing up a set of two large e-books on close-up and macro photography. I will make them available to you folks soon. Here is a blog on “seeing” through photography that may interest some of you who also meditate.]

Taking good photos is not something I ever learned from books. There is always a stark gap between conceptual learning or training and direct experience. Books and teachers can but point at it, point out how to do it, more often how they did it, and not necessarily what would work for me. This is a perennial problem, the difference between book learning and actual experience. Experience involves taking the plunge into direct experience where we are out there on our own and have only our self to please. Imagine that?

We can read about how others do it and, inspired by their account, attempt to ride the coattails of their experience out into the field and find out for ourselves but this too often soon leaves us high and dry, forced to find our own way once again. As Yeats wrote:

“The grass cannot but keep the form,
Where the mountain hare has lain.”

We can never properly conceptualize direct experience. Words pale next to experience and words only exist to point the way to experience. We can describe how to do something, point out how to approach it, but can't just give the direct experience to another. We each must have the experience for ourselves. That is the whole idea of learning and teaching: to point out the way to the experience itself.

I only gradually became aware of how to present my photographs to others. For years and years I photographed and not only did not show them to anyone else but hardly looked at them myself because I was not interested in the final results or photos but more in the process of photography. What do I mean by ‘process’?

The process for me was being out in nature, usually in the early morning, often at or just before dawn. It was about the crisp morning air, the cold wet dew on the grass, the bit of mist in the meadow -- things like that, and seeing all this through the lens of a camera. This poem I wrote captures something of that:

From A Dream

I have gone to paint the sunrise in the sky,
To feel the cool of night warm into day,
The flowers from the ground call up to me,
The self I think I am is hard to see.

There was part of me that got lost out there in the misty dawn, a part of me that was too much with me the rest of the day, a part I needed a rest from. Let's just call it the busyness of my day-to-day distractions, my job or concerns about money, etc. Or we could say that there were things that weighed on my mind too heavily and needed to be set aside even if for only an hour

or so at sunup.

Photography was not simply escape; it was a way or door to the future, a rabbit hole that I leaped through, a door in the back of the cabinet that I could not wait to find whenever I could manage it. Through photography I helped to close a door to the past and spin a window on the future that eventually became a door I stepped through. I grew from it. I found myself through photography. It was visceral and not an option.

Our passions, the things that we love, need not always be a diversion or distraction. Sometimes they are the way through the present to our future and not just an escape from reality. Photography is just such an experience for me.

I am relating this not to discourage anyone from photographing but to point out that perhaps the single most important quality we need is proper motivation, the right intention. If we want to learn photography just because we have a will to learn photography, good luck! Of course we can do it, but it will take a long time and may be pretty boring as well.

If we want to learn photography just to show others our photos, that is even more difficult, perhaps almost impossible. Another way to say this is: our interest in others had better be as strong as our interest in ourselves if we hope to get good results. The only entrance I know into photography is as a way to satisfy or complete something in myself that is lacking. Again: photography can be a doorway to the future, not just a sidebar or pastime, even if we only do it part-time.

Photography is not something I 'should' do or have set out for myself to do but rather it is something I can't wait to do. Given the opportunity, this is what I find myself doing for fun, just because I want to. And there is this more subtle and difficult-to-explain point:

For me photography was never only about cameras, nature, photos, or techniques. Above all it is about "seeing," about a way of seeing in the world that for me is liberating. I very much mixed my mediation practice with photography and at the time hardly was aware that this was even taking place. I wrote a whole book about this experience so I will not belabor it here. But I will try to sum it up.

Meditation or training the mind is about concentrating, of course, but more important it is about relaxing or resting. And it is not about resting willfully; it is about just letting the mind naturally rest, allowing the mind (and body) to rest – allowing that to just happen. And in that resting there can be a pristine clarity, a seeing directly not of any 'thing' but seeing itself seeing – seeing 'seeing'. And that is liberating.

Well, in a word I found that 'seeing' or rest while looking through a lens and still do. This is why the process of seeing is more important to me than the resulting photos, but the photos seem to be getting better too.