

## A Presence behind the Lens

Photography and Reflections

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### Chapter I

#### The Discovery

*I find myself here*

I was asked to put down my ideas about experiences and feelings in photography. This will be difficult for me because I am not a writer. I am a photographer with some experience in writing essays, and I have written a few poems. How it moves will depend on a few things. In particular is this feeling that there is a need to experience inspiration—a kind of impulse from within. This impulse seems to have a force that drives me on. It has been true of all the creative fields I have worked in. This project will be a view of my situation of the moment in photography, and in this writing as well.

There seems to be a materiality to inspiration—in the experiencing of it, or perhaps better said: It demands—of me—a certain materiality. It is daunting. How else can ideas push me into action unless they have a materiality all their own? So I feel a push from within, but why? I don't quite understand. It is perhaps suspicious, and ego no doubt plays its part. One step taken demands another follow, and perhaps this is not ego, but simply the need to stay upright, and to be as clear as possible. No ambition is actually involved in the ordinary sense. I have to keep up and stay on track. When I fall from grace, I'm sure you'll notice. I wish not to fall that far.

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For me it does not necessarily follow that I am already human just because I'm here, and am a two-legged animal. I am not all that sure that being human comes with the territory, nor without work. To go beyond my talents is my wish—in order to expand. That attitude helps make me potentially human. A capability is felt; a potentiality for being more human can be sensed. This would even be more desirable for me than being a photographer, or a poet. It may even be that in crafts we have a tool for developing this trait of being human. It relates in some way to bringing myself into balance. For every push there is a pull, resistance at each turn, and in-between, a truth. No compromise here—at least this is what I experience. Returning to this realization often is most important, and in the mix there is a chance of remembering that it is my humanness I wish to be in touch with—to express.

This wish cannot be hatched by dreams. There are form and reason to be considered. It must be nourished through sustained intent. But what do I actually know about intention? Is it possible to even be sincere? Just because I walk upright is no reason to consider myself better than other creatures. Even these creatures show some development, but for those like myself something more is possible. There could be something more in being human through the experiencing of art. I would like to speak about these things. I hope to make it possible for you to come along with me.

When I was young I had a calling to express myself and considered myself to be an artist. Now that I am older there are many questions. It is true that I have managed to make some strong photographs, and in this way I have felt called to search more deeply. Inspiration comes to the ill-prepared as well as the well-prepared, and lately there has arrived for me this additional struggle—to write. It is wonderful and exciting, like the time when I was learning photography, with all its problems and frustrations. For reasons not fully understood, I appear to have been taken by this task of writing, as I was—and am—by photography. All art is about being able, at whatever level of balance we are at, and about the turbulent waters crossed to receive that experience. Some people say art is about healing. In any event it is not art that heals us, but rather what is revealed through the experiencing of art. All embraces a skill of mind—hand, and the willing heart, to take it on. Best to think of it as a mystery, which brings a breath that develops my being. Learning about this is my intent.

Though art does reveal, and makes known what is seen, it does not always bring regeneration. There is something additional needed—understanding. There can be confusion on this point when I hold what I have seen too closely to the vest, not sharing. In that circumstance, understanding cannot grow. It may well turn into a virus that can harm me, and those near me. Not sharing is the very Devil. There can be a receptive moment when we are able to share. Any attempt to appear better than my peers can often involve a silence on my part that can be taken as a knowing. . . . It seems to me that there is a magic and truth that can be brought into the world when we speak out, though it is a great risk. In anyone's ill-considered actions can be danger. With this in mind, my intent is to write about the photographer in me. An ordinary sense of "me" brings a second character in. There are these two, but additionally, during my growing up, I saw that there is a third entity. This presence inside is so filled with light and life. I am compelled to write about that being as well. I believe it is from this third being that all good and worth originates, but its purpose cannot be carried out without some kind of new balance within. Writing about this third part is skating on thin ice, and grave danger lurks in including it, but I must.

Much was simpler when I was learning as a young man. In photography, directions were found on the box for the contents within. The only place I had to look for help then was to follow that yellow box, "the yellow brick road." (Eastman Kodak boxes were always yellow.) Everyone understood this expression in those days. Just as today people say, "Read the directions, dummy." In working with computers we have such helps as Windows for Dummies and many other similar works. It may not be too different in writing, as there also are books on writing. The important things I bring to the task are inspiration, former training, and myself. How and what is done with them is up to me. There are many difficulties in expression. I am fortunate to have the time and the capacity to address these troubles; I may even have the skill.

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# A Presence Behind the Lens

*Some parallels with another craft . . . and other reasonings of the heart*

*Rainer Maria Rilke writes:*

*Silent friend of many distances, feel  
How your breath enlarges all of space.  
Let your presence ring out like a bell  
into the night. What feeds upon your face*

*grows mightily from the nourishment thus offered.  
Move through transformation, out and in.  
What is the deepest loss that you have suffered?  
If drinking is bitter, change yourself to wine.*

*In this immeasurable darkness, be the power  
that rounds your senses in their ring,  
the sense of their mysterious encounter.*

*And if the earthly no longer know your name,  
whisper to the silent earth: I'm flowing.  
To the flashing water say: I am.<sup>1</sup>*

Life is a taste that needs to be cultivated. This cultivation cannot take place without intent on my part. I wish—strive—to be a student, as I engage in my work. Through this a taste of life can begin to appear. The wish is in me, but I need to work to find it. It is not easily found. It is not experienced as desire, and it does not arrive like the sun, the rain, or the wind, which come through the mechanics of nature. With this wish we can become apprentices at any age. It is necessary to again become students. Here we can meet a sense of awe—a sense of joy, even fear. All these parts breathe together, and in this way discoveries arrive. Many things can unfold.

Numerous points of departure are available in art. What lies beyond methods might take us further. To seriously look at questions helps. In following my interest I discover that I have not arrived here to do what has already been done, but to make my own road. So writing inspires me and brings the courage to stand up. I wish to convey more than the technique of photography.

Photography—all art forms—reflects their practitioners. In each person can be found unique expression. Artwork done from borrowed experience would be a worthless waste of time. That would be in opposition to the reality of an individual's natural worth. Most of my life has been illusion. I have lived long enough to reflect well on this fact. There have been few moments that have had the taste, and intensity of a fully balanced experiencing, unfettered by the dreams of time. I have seen my foolishness in following the influences of others. My knowledge is not flawless, but what I do know is mine through experience—hard fought and paid for. This brings strength and enables me to find what is true. To see this requires me to be honest and to see my poverty as well. It becomes obvious that copying the photography of another is an empty game. There is something that works in secret for the growth of my own being. There are impressions that are available, which could find expression through me. There is a note I need to write to myself as a reminder: Am I here to trace lines, shapes, and tones already made? It takes strength to be on my own—searching. What do I support and what supports me?

There are times when it's good to be cautious; this may be such a time for you, the reader. In teaching I have been guided by a principle that I am not in this world to teach what I know—we cannot actually. So I attempt to excite students into learning what is already known within them. This allows their essential nature to speak out. There is, of course, a truth that when stepping-stones are available it makes sense to use them. At issue is the ability to proceed, rather than move in the interests of accident, or imitation—not to vacillate. So I have a few tricks to share.

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Hopefully, I, as presented in these pages, can be a mirror for others to look into—even a door through which to enter into a new life. We all have work to pursue. The trouble is in finding it. Then one must stand up for it once it has been found.

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### *Obstacles urge me to make efforts*

There are issues in talking about creativity. If you speak to others about such subtle subjects, then you need to speak about all that makes it possible. Resistance is certainly an important aspect to speak of. I talk about resistance to indicate how we can weave a different fabric out of resistance—to somehow use that resistance as a measure, and to arrive at something affirmative. In fact if you do take an affirmative action, resistance is not far behind. It becomes a means of locomotion. Of course people don't want to hear that. It is thought that all art is beauty and that it happens like breathing.. Still I don't know how you can explain art without sincere questioning, without noticing the movement of things, but resistance is also a necessary and natural part of it all. People want the experience but at the same time they're reluctant to go beyond their usual boundaries. What can be done is to be an example, which is what I have tried to do. Not all will recognize the example or find value in it, but one can only make the attempt to communicate.

*I expressed some obstacles I had in writing about creativity in this note to a former student:  
Birthday Impression, 9/9/99*

*I am the clapper; you are the bell: when the bell is struck the resultant sound can be clear and sonorous. You have said clearly what I need to hear, that I need to know to whom I speak. It is the same no matter where we go in the world; I need to be a proper clapper and the bell needs to be of the right stuff to resonate. There is a need to know how to include both; it requires a sure openness. To arrange this possibility takes real craftsmen, sensitive persons with vision. None quite lives up to the mark but together there seems to be some chance.*

*Each of us can make sounds. It may even become music. But in everyday life there are creators of dumb dissonant noise as well. The possibility of tuning responses to one another nevertheless does exist. It comes out of learning to listen, simply being what I can be—an observer, not changing what I hear. We might respond to the clapper, or be the clapper. We may never hear the music of the spheres. In the end an artist needs an audience and the artist needs to know what the audience will respond to.*

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*A new freshness arrived in me today though it is quite dark outside; in fact there is darkness all about me. There is a spark of something astonishing within—why not? I am just giving attention to the moment. The sense of a thing—its worth—is what human beings will lay down their lives for. Some say, “On which people wager away their lives.” Do they? It may be quite true; here is a question not to be answered too lightly. We need to hang on to questioning our beliefs. Keep them open; new discoveries may arrive. So, I am just enjoying my moment. No risk involved for me because even if all goes wrong I will survive.*

*I don't know about man as a whole; it's honest to say that. I still behave as though I know myself! It seems rather an accident about to happen or that has already happened. There's not much here by intention, or conscience, in saying, “But don't you see I am acting by my own volition?” It is sad. Who, then, is trustworthy in the objective sense? Is everything based on need or avarice and appetite? No reason to respond. The word ‘need’ seems too abstract. In any event, you are precise in thinking there must be a new direction by searching for a new basis. The fact that we see our weaknesses shows that we can go beyond. The worst conditions may be the best for my work now. I keep my eyes open because the real problem is that I don't know how thin the ice is. New beginnings are essential and I will keep at it.*

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*As to the opening statement of my book, I must learn to make myself clear. There is a somnambulist 'I' in me; and there is a photographer not as asleep as that sleeper. The craftsman, knows how to search for image (photographs that have meaning), while being secretly in contact with another, more hidden entity inside—this secret sense of presence behind the lens of the camera and my own eyes. This personage who plays hide and seek with me—he is never far off. This can be realized only through working. Such a presence is much more aware and conscious than the craftsman, or me. Could it be that I have made this more confusing than it need be? For now it remains a mystery to me. The joy will be the pursuit. As for God—I know nothing. I simply enjoy what little consciousness I'm given and am grateful for that.*

What I saw when I wrote the note to my friend was that we all realize the great value of seeing questions. What is more is that the seeing and looking includes seeing myself. With this attitude much good can come, and a result which is honorable. The idea of questions that give birth to genuine questioning began a long time ago with my first photography teacher, Minor White, and his own peculiar inclination to question everything. Without resistance and questioning the *image* on the ground glass is virtually meaningless—empty and hollow.

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The Chinese sage Lao-tzu is reported to have said, “The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.” Albert Einstein had astute insight as well in stating, “The experiencing of the mysterious is the source of all true science” and I would add, “All humans when searching in wonder and awe can find wisdom—that possibility lies in all the arts—but without self knowledge all is empty.” Another observation attributed to Einstein is: “Genius has its limits but stupidity is endless.” So care needs to be taken for sure.

This book is linked with a practice of the Chinese. They bound straw tightly to use as fuel for their fires (tinder to be exact). When I discovered this practice I saw that works of art, and my own work, serve as kindling for the fire. The feel for me is that pictures unearthed in the

pursuit of truth are the materials that feed and sustain the fire of being human; they kindle the faint embers when they wane and all seems about to turn cold.

All this was not true about my work when I began. Much was caught up in possession, pride and self-conceit, where no freedom could be found, let alone kindling. Over the years this has passed into remission, and now the *images* are more often a sacrifice given for the growth of being human—toward connection with greater energy source that lies within. My intent is that practical evidence might be found in “A Presence Behind the Lens.” It may even be kindling for the fire of others.

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You may wonder why I am writing so much about learning to write rather than going directly to the photography. The reason I do so is to show that you may have some of these same problems in learning photography. I would like you to see that if I am able to have some success, it means you might find your way as well in photography—it's staying power that counts. I am writing about resistance encountered no matter what art form we may choose—that resistance is common to all. It is the measure of my ability.

My approach to photography is not conventional. It has been a long and twisting trail, and I am fairly adjusted in my present role. There are many and varied experiences that add a sense of rightness to my current work. Still there are many uncertainties strongly rooted in experiences of childhood. It is connected quite strongly with my art so I will tell some stories.

*Many years ago I was a child—living on a hill in a small town in western Pennsylvania. There was an abandoned stone quarry that existed in those days on the outskirts of town. It was filled with spring water and was called Rock Bottom. In fact it was in a small valley behind my house; now only the house still exists. It was the local swimming hole for all, both near and far. Most of the boys in the neighborhood hung their bathing suits on a willow tree in my back yard, because they were not allowed to swim at the quarry.*

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*They wanted to keep this secret from their parents. My mom and dad evidently felt I was responsible and a good swimmer so I was not prohibited this luxury. . . .*

*My street was at the edge of town and we ran the hills like wild colts. We, like most young people, were impatient for the day when the weather would turn warm enough to go swimming. One Spring Saturday we were running and raising general hell on the side of the hill when all together we came to the same notion—let's go see Rock Bottom! It was a beautiful day with clear wonderful sky, unusually bright for this time of year, so off we went screaming down the hill. It was quite a ruckus. When we arrived, the great body of water temptingly mesmerized us—lying quietly with steam wafting from her surface. We all stood in awe, hypnotized and silent.*

*An argument arose as to whether the water was warm enough to go in; one of the kids finally stuck his hand in to the wrist at the shoreline and said, "A little cool but should be fine." Some of us were a bit dubious, but I was open to going in. Someone said "Last one in is a so and so." So, off came our clothes in a great jumble, with each trying to be first. For some odd reason, I was first (that had never happened before). I ran to the low board with full heart and dove in.*

*I was in shock and all but blacked out. The wind was knocked out of me as I plunged deep—deep into the ice-cold spring water. Turning in the water, clawing at it with all my might—time was moving in slow motion—I regained the surface with great gasping, grappling at the rocks, I dragged myself up and out as though burdened with great weights. All my buddies were standing there dressed, laughing at me. I had been betrayed. Dressing silently, I thought, "we can only see our trust gone when it's taken from us."*

A few of my friends today are just such tricksters as children are, which is not of concern and may be very helpful—now that I understand a few things better. This is the nature of my

dilemma: I am capable yet skeptical. I am hoping not to fret too much on this account, and I do feel reasonably sure of surviving, even though it may be that I have been maneuvered into writing this book. This time will I see myself basted and broiled rather than frozen in ice-cold quarry water?

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*In another note written to someone who had read an early draft of my work I find again a note of caution.*

*The note:*

*I appreciate your response. Glad you got so much from it. There is a thought I have that the reader may want more from me than I can give, or something completely different. Who can be sure that what is written is complete? What I rather hoped for is that the reader's own fires would begin smoldering and would need tending. That would require attention. Attention is the reason behind all that I do well, so why should it not serve them?*

*There is a dream I will share with you. It is very related to a story I used to talk about with students in class—about a conduit or stream that flows through photographic history, and that many wish to be part of—to help carry that further. Not everyone can be a part of that conduit but there is a need to see if I can do so while not deceiving myself. It is important not to follow false notions of myself.*

*So your response has triggered something exciting and at the same time there appears a sense of grave danger. It's like seeing the grave digger walking across the turf with shovel already in hand to bury me. So maybe I won't find a publisher; I'll make a few copies for myself, and friends who have a taste for it.*

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*The dream:*

*I was walking in one of those city parks that are often found in rather desperate neighborhoods. In walking along I found a stream—a rather large stream, which was crystal clear and had a reflective surface. In following it for some distance. I saw under this glaring surface many dismembered pipes laying rather haphazardly. All were more or less running the length of the flowing stream. In zigzags they each carried the stream forward to its destination though somewhat confusedly. . . .*

*The stream seemed not to need the pipes at all. Trying to get to the source of that logic to some intelligence, I hoped to arrive somewhere in the dream. I did not go with the flow but walked against everything upstream. It was a tough neighborhood and I was aware of feeling that everything was in the way, which at another time would have held me back. In this dream though I felt strong and confident.*

*The dream suddenly ended!*

It's like that. I wish to carry this sacred water to its destination. I even feel I can, but something is missing so often in my observation. I know the goodness of a thing, but am usually indirectly connected to the source. I am not connected in a firm way. This may be the point. Yes, I may carry the waters of life, but for the most part I am oblivious and disconnected in any useful way with this source. Am I one of those disconnected pipes—enjoying the flow through me—or could I be connected in a better way with the source? Here are the possibilities. I may never find the source or all the connections, but I continue to look, and the search itself is very exciting. This does not mean I have found something as yet. One has to be very careful not to make bold assumptions.

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## The Discovery

Both letters and the childhood stories are examples of how insecure I can get about venturing forth, but I must express them or burst. It seems that in reaching out to others—to past experience as well—that time and again I am looking to be comforted. In truth that is not what I am doing—at least in my better moments, as courage does not come from that action. It comes from deep in my inner world, and is born of the moment—in a flash strength is felt. It is what is needed to meet resistance. A sense of presence seems at times to be watching my actions. It is the best of all measures. This can be explored, along with its relationship to my craft of photography, and the why of everything that gets in the way. At the same time it can be encouraging to have a sounding board in others.

1. From *The Sonnets of Orpheus* — XXIX. Translated by Stephen Mitchell  
A Touchstone Book  
Published by Simon and Schuster, Inc. New York Chapter I