

Photography as Metaphor

I sometimes question why I am compelled to take nature pictures. It's a demanding pastime, often requiring waking up at unnatural hours and enduring terrible weather. It's a frustrating hobby frequently resulting in failure, and an expensive one, too. It's extremely competitive -- we live in a society saturated with fabulous images, often making me wonder if I can ever add anything meaningful to the overall visual dialogue. Why should I spend my precious leisure time in its pursuit?

The answer, or at least part of it, became clear to me one autumn day two years ago. I was hiking along one of my favorite mountain trails in New York State. It was one of those clear, crisp fall days that brings all the gorgeous foliage colors into full saturation, all the shapes of nature into sharp focus, and an inadvertent smile to anyone lucky enough to witness it all. The path followed along side a fast-running, rocky stream gurgling loudly from the seasonal rainfall. As I rounded a bend, I saw through the pattern of shadows cast by the tall trees, a solitary figure, clad in seasonally appropriate flannel plaid, casting a fishing rod into the waters. I don't think I had my camera with me. I'm sure if I had, I would have asked to take his picture, so ideally did he fit into the setting. We smiled and nodded, acknowledging each other's presence, then struck up a conversation, the perfection of the day demanding it. I eventually inquired what type of fish he was after, mentioning that in the many times I had walked along this brook, I had never seen any fish in it. His answer surprised me. To his knowledge there were no fish in the stream, he replied sheepishly. But, as he swept his free hand upward to indicate the splendor of sight, sound, and smell surrounding us, he said that on such a day how could he not fish. Perhaps, as they say, "you had to be there" to understand the sense and the truth of his statement. I certainly did. And I realized that it had little to do with fishing.

Which brings me back to my original question. The answer, in large part, to why I photograph is in the act of photography itself. The process of seeking out a visual subject sharpens my awareness of my surroundings, whether it is on a crisp autumn day, in uncomfortable rain and fog, or trudging through numbing cold snow. It somehow clarifies all the senses, not just the visual. The act of seeing, really seeing, makes me not only more aware of my environment but truly makes me become a part of it all, to be alive in that moment. And that increased sensitivity and immediacy, where time slows down and every sensation becomes extraordinarily vivid, seems somehow linked to some grand 'purpose of life', to a sense of correctness, of fulfillment, to the realization that, during that time of heightened awareness, I am fully participating in life, not just passing through it. This act of attentiveness, which we seem to possess naturally as children and seem to have to work at as we age, becomes, itself, an homage to the world being perceived.

So my suggestion to others who are learning this craft of photography: Don't become overly obsessed with the mechanics, as essential as they certainly are. Don't get too caught up in the competitive need to create a great picture, as rewarding as that may be. Next time you are out there looking through your viewfinder, composing your shot, calculating your f-stops, analyzing the lighting, using the rule-of-thirds, creating leading lines, waiting for the wind to die down, or that cloud to move into exactly the right spot -- STOP. Stand back from your camera. Take a look around. Record in your mind the sounds, smells, the feeling -- the total 360-degree sense of being there. Take it all in, relish it, memorize it. Your photograph, if successful, will come close to recording the visual splendor of the moment, but it would be entirely unforgivable to lose the ineffable beauty presented to the rest of your senses and to miss that magisterial feeling of just being there. In short, enjoy it.

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