

Photography of the Spirit

“Exploring the Images that Give Shape to Our Lives.”

Cameron Linton, JAN 2009



This past summer my family went on vacation to the Normandy beaches in France where the Canadian soldiers landed during WW II. It was a small side trip to the dramatic sites of London and Paris – and a wonderful way to understand one of Canada’s roles in the world. We toured the Juno Centre with its many photographs of the D-Day events, climbed on deteriorating German bunkers, and walked kilometers of shoreline trying to imagine what the battle must have been like. Of course, now the beach is like any other and my kids easily found loads of entertainment jumping waves and collecting sea shells.

Later, as we toured the Canadian cemetery not far away, my son suddenly realized he had lost his camera while he was jumping the waves of the incoming tide. We went back and searched for hours but the tide had filled the beach and the camera was now underwater or pulled out into the English Channel. We all felt bad for Owen. Naturally, Janet and I were frustrated: “when will he learn to take care of his things”?

But for Owen, the loss was not the camera itself – his grief was for the digital images stored in the camera. What he really wanted was that memory card of yet-to-be-printed photos. Indeed, he can still describe photos he took in London: the statues, the Harry Potter film scenes, the double decker bus, his dad having a pint at the Blackfriar pub. Sure he lived the experience, we were all there. But even within one week his memory started to transition from the events themselves to scenes displayed in the camera’s preview function. ***Owen remembers the snapshot as much as the actual event!***

Today I’m going to look at this phenomenon. “Photographic see-ing”, as it is sometimes called, or having a “photographic eye”. This phenomenon can arise from the tension that exists between photographer, object, and the environment that encompasses the two. A phenomenon brilliantly described by Susan Sontag in her 1977 book “On Photography”. A phenomenon where photographs come to represent how photographers observe the world, and remember their lives. Where reality is cropped to a 4x6 frame and transformed by light and placement. Where close-ups of objects like butterfly wings become unidentifiable without context; where portraits capture personality with a revealing expression. See-ing the world this way can reveal beauty and help us discover truth – truth about the innocence and importance of all objects.

Lewis Hine, from Sontag’s book: *“If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera.”*

Let's pause for a second: **what is your favourite photograph?** I don't mean necessarily one you took or one of you. Just, what is your favourite photograph? [big pause]

Why does this photo touch you? Why is it special? [another pause]

Photographs taken by others also appeal to us for a variety of reasons: from the special event they remind us of < --- > to the photo's technical composition, texture and colour. They freeze moments in time – preserving people who would otherwise be forgotten, events that might otherwise be lost, and textures and shapes that are otherwise unnoticed. And photographs *of us* become records that *we were present* at an event. Reference for how we interpret the world. *Evidence that assures us that something existed. Part of the inventory of our own mortality.* [pause]

So, what is your favourite photograph? Maybe your choice was National Geographic's "Afghan Girl", that definitive photo taken in 1984 of the unknown girl with haunting green eyes? Maybe it was the 1885 photo of the "Last Spike" with dignitaries and workers gathered on the rail. Was it Terry Fox, silhouetted in car headlights; the first shot of Earth from Space; or the first snapshot of your child? For me, these photos capture the spirit of a nation, the spirit of accomplishment, and the spirit of strength and resilience in a complicated world.

But what IS your favourite photograph, and why does IT touch you? [pause]

My favourite photograph is probably Ansel Adams' "Clearing Winter Storm", his definitive B&W photo of Yosemite Valley in 1944. In his own words:

*Yosemite Valley, to me, is always a sunrise, a glitter of green and golden wonder in a vast edifice of stone and space. I know of no sculpture, painting, or music that **exceeds the compelling spiritual command** of the soaring shape of granite cliff and dome, of patina of light on rock and forest, and of the thunder and whispering of the falling, flowing waters. . . .*

The photo touched me for a number of reasons. First, I was drawn to Adams' style that uses intense B&W contrast – capturing nature's light in the extreme. Second, I was drawn spiritually to the subject, a vast landscape of wonder that would eventually inspire a couple of pilgrimages. I can lose myself in this photo – spirit, nature, and beauty. [pause]

OK, let's give photography itself some context. The camera was invented around 1844, the same year this Congregation was founded. Like Owen, **my relationship with photography** started as a pre-teenager when I got my B&W 126 camera. Back then, after shooting a dozen photographs I would mail the cartridge to Kodak and wait a week to get the images back. By today's standards the photos are wanting but for me the thrill was *the new world* unfolding through the viewfinder as I acquired "the photographer's eye".

At 16 I got a stock-boy job in a drug store that had a photography counter. Before long I was helping to sell and service cameras and photography supplies. I bought a 35mm Pentax – a camera that would become a fundamental part of my identity at high school as I became a yearbook photographer. Family vacations became exercises in documenting what we were touring – and occasionally looking for that artsy shot such as the field of daffodils next to the old gnarled tree in Cambridge that still hangs in my parent’s house. My parent’s basement became a darkroom as I churned out B&W images of increasing sophistication for an intense 5 year period. I had gone way beyond just seeing the world through a camera. The images I printed became my expression and exploration. Like Ansel Adams, capturing reality and my experience in stark B&W became my passion.

And then the intensity stopped as my life changed and the hobby of my teenage years was put in boxes where it has pretty much stayed since. Indeed, over time I have somehow managed to *lose almost all* of the B&W images I created in those days. But through photography I formulated some of my relationship to the world around me. Through photographs – B&W in particular – I saw objects for their natural beauty. The butterfly sitting on Doug’s shoes drying its wings after Doug saved him from the waves of the beach; the girls wearing Spanish dancer costumes to the school play; the solarized glass structure that used to hang in the Royal Bank tower; the lobster at the St. Lawrence market; the family gathering at Christmas; my camping buddies in Bancroft; the bicycle buried in a snowbank.

As I said, many of these photos are now lost – but I still remember them. And like Owen, I remember the photo better than I remember the real life event when the photo was taken. The photo, my relationship with it, and perhaps its relationship with me are alive. *Evidence that assures me that these events existed, and comforts me that I was present.*

Ansel Adams once more: *These people live again in print as intensely as when their images were captured on the old dry plates sixty years ago . . . I am walking in their alleys, standing in their rooms and sheds and workshops, looking in and out of their windows. And they in turn seem to be aware of me.*

Today we “take” or “capture” photographs. With possession comes the ability to distribute or share, to catalogue / organize / index / classify / and so on. We typically capture exceptional events such as vacations and family to bring them back into our everyday lives, capturing a slice of the object or event to be our own. Kind of like how we capture and hold on to ideas as we shape our principles and perspectives, isn’t it?

I have a second question. **Think about *the* photograph of you, *by which* you would most like to be remembered. What does it look like?** [pause]

I’ve got my iconic photo of myself – do you have yours?

What spirit does it capture? An all-knowing gaze from a formal portrait – staring intently into the lens? A group shot showing your association with others or an event? Is it colour or B&W? Technically good composition, lighting, and sharpness – or grainy and blurred to challenge us to look at it closer?

What photo of you do you want to be remembered by? It doesn't even have to be recent – it just needs to be real. If you can't think of one, how would you want to appear in it if we could create one? What spirit will it capture?

Your iconic photo will probably live on after you, possibly treasured by future generations as a glimpse into who you are. Indeed, family photos are often the only possession refugees arrive with, or people grab fleeing a burning building. So strong / so important are these possessions.

My iconic photo **of myself** is the August 1981 pose of me next to Kaufmann Lake in the Canadian Rockies. *Evidence* of my first trip to the hiking trails of the mountains. But it's more. It *captures* the exhilaration of accomplishment. It *represents* a time when I know I was at peace with myself and the world – and when awareness came over me that truth is everywhere. The photo encompasses “me” and “my spirit”. This photo is not a portrait; you can't even see my face. Instead, as we view the photograph – we see the same beauty of the world that the “me” in the photo is admiring, < --- > together. And if future generations want to hang on to a memory of me, ***let this photo give them insight into who I am.***

I have one last reflection: Before photography, skilled artists could paint or draw to document people and events. But, to appreciate the beauty in the world and acknowledge our existence, the general population had to commit their experience to REAL memory. Now we have photography – and in our lifetime and in the lifetime of this Congregation – photography has evolved frenetically. Many of you now have phones in your pocket that can take a photo and post it to the internet for millions to see in a wink. In turn, we see thousands of photos of other people, places, and events from all over the world, everyday. Easily accessible, almost always available.

But do these photos continue to tell the story of who we really are? Has this mass accessibility to photographs *cheapened* or *enhanced* the experience – the relationship between photographer and object and the connection with the beauty and truth of the world? And are we creating the necessary conditions for the next photo of us to become an iconic, lasting photograph? A photograph that inspires contemplation, aspires to be unforgettable, and desires to be cherished by a future generation? What spirit will that photo portray?

CLOSING WORDS

And now we take our leave -

In closing, I leave you with the words of Ansel Adams, who is an inspiration to many photographers, including myself:

A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense, and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety.

May each of us bring happiness into another's life. May we each be surprised by the gifts that surround us. May we look upon our photographs with new eyes. And may we remain together in spirit until the hour that we meet again.