

Your Inner Gift: Cultivating the Art of Simplicity in Photography

Session 6: *Photography as a Path Toward Self-Discovery*

*** Exercise ***

- **Exercise S6-1: *Reflect on your own body of work***

It is worth repeating – both to emphasize and to make sure there is no misunderstanding – that *none* of the details of you have just read are important. Whether I (or someone else) chooses to call it the “Eightfold Way,” “Six Plateaus,” or “12 Steps,” or anything else, *the journey is the journey*. All, or none, of these steps may/may-not apply to your own journey; and even if one or more steps of whatever list seem applicable to you, it is far more likely than not that they simply describe various aspects of your photography as a whole, and not distinct phases of your own journey.

How the list is carved up with internal/external labels will only make sense as the journey nears its end (and perhaps not even then). But we *are* on a journey, as photographers, as artists, and as human beings. I have found it instructive – illuminating, even – to every once in a while (if I’m in a creative lull, taking a break, or am just in a pensive mood) reflect over my body of work. Not as an exercise in self-indulgence, but as a genuinely ruminative tool. Since we naturally ride the wave of our own consciousness, our “I,” we are usually in the worst possible position (in time) to perceive the myriad ways in which our perceptions of the world evolve, from day to day, over the course of weeks, months, and years. While the comments and insights of others is invaluable (artists of all kinds love to talk with other artists they have known for a long time about their work precisely for this reason), there is no substitute for taking stock of one’s own body of work; ideally, an exercise that should be repeated multiple times over the course of your life as an artist.

Set aside some time during which you know you will not be interrupted (as you did for Zazen; see session 3), take out as old and as complete an archive of your pictures as you have on hand or can find – print, digital, or both – and spread out as many photos as you can in front you (so that you can take them all in “at a glance”); make a spread on the floor, your desk, open up a digital lightbox on your PC, whatever is convenient.

Now, just *look; look, reflect, reminisce, ...!* Recall the moment you took each photo; remember what you were doing, who you were with, what you were feeling; assemble the images in groups of time, separating your earliest photos, from those, say, a few years or decades ago (that represent your “eye” from a time you consider as “way before” this moment), and from your most recent images; look for patterns that may distinguish one time period from another (of subject matter, places, people, type of photography – B&W vs color, landscape vs. street, straight vs. abstract?); look for the ebb-and-flow of themes, how you viewed/framed your subjects in different periods; which of the time periods has more “one off” shots than others?

When did you start taking “multiple shots” of the same “thing” or subject, or general theme?
When did first try B&W, or color if you started with B&W (as I did)?

To the extent that my “Eightfold Way” steps resonate with you and your own creative history (if not, make up your own list!), where would you place yourself at this moment? What milestones roughly equivalent to the ones I have described above do you remember “living through” as an artist? Consider how you might use my/your list to further your creative path. We will spend most of the remaining time in this workshop sharing – and mutually ruminating about – our respective discoveries about our individual journeys.

“Cultivating the art of simplicity in photography” is, ultimately, synonymous with forging a creative path that is uniquely *yours*.