Your Inner Gift: Cultivating the Art of Simplicity in Photography

Session 1: *Introduction and Preliminary Musings*

Introduction – *Who is your workshop leader?*

By way of introduction, I am both a published photographer (you can peruse my vitae on my website[1] and look at the blog I've nurtured since 2004[2]) and a Ph.D. physicist, specializing in something called complex adaptive systems theory, or "complexity," for short (I have written two graduate-level texts on the subject). That was not a typo. Your humble workshop leader is⸺in his day job, at least⸺a *complexicologist*![3]

I mention these unexpected (perhaps even unexpectedly amusing) and prima facie *contradictory* set of facts⸺"A complexity theorist is going to be teaching us about simplicity?!?"⸺neither to impress you nor to confuse you (and certainly not to frighten you), but merely to plant a seemingly crazy idea about what "simplicity in photography" is all about – an idea that, I hope, by the end of this workshop you will all agree is actually not so crazy! Namely, that "simplicity" and "complexity" are but two sides of the same aesthetic coin. Innately "simple" images that are devoid of a certain ineffable measure of elegance are typically banal and uninteresting, and rarely convey any deep meaning. On the other hand, "complex" images that consist of a myriad of individually interesting shapes and hues and textures, but whose assembly is sloppy and incoherent are, at best, forgettable and convey nothing of lasting value, and, at worst, are just painful to look at.

Of course, neither extreme leads to anything interesting: at one end of the spectrum, we have the infinitely "simple" (such as a solid-white image, with literally nothing else in view); and at the other end of the spectrum we have the infinitely complex, which you can represent in your mind's eye as some image of random noise (such as "static" on an analog TV, for those of you who remember such things). Our job, together, is to discover that the real goal of this workshop is not merely to find ways to create "simple photographs" (though specific methods for achieving this "interim" goal will be presented in later sessions), but to develop skills⸺observational skills, meditative skills, compositional skills, technical skills, digital processing skills, etc.⸺that allow us to *best communicate why we want to photograph anything at all.* In this broader context, the word "simplicity" that appears in the title of this workshop is really just a "wild card," an empty template for the highly personalized meaning it will eventually attain for each of you as you imbue it with your own unique aesthetic and photographic goals.

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[1] http://www.sudden-stillness.com/vitae.htm
[2] http://tao-of-digital-photography.blogspot.com/
[3] Complexity is the study of emergent properties of systems that consist of many dynamically interconnected parts (e.g., how does *consciousness* emerge from 100+ billion neurons, each connected to 1000+ other neurons?)

If what we are after as photographers is to develop and nurture the skills necessary to create *meaningful photographs* (meaningful to us, and, by implication, meaningful to those we wish to share our images with), we must first deconstruct what we mean by simplicity. We may *think* we know what simplicity is; e.g., something that has only a few parts, is "easy" to create, and/or is easy to understand. But if that is really what we mean, we might as well get proficient at taking pictures of items to be put up for sale on eBay and stop, our mission accomplished. After all, we'd be dealing with simple objects (a book, a ring, a mattress, …), simple white backdrops (to focus attention on the item we wish to sell, which we will dutifully place in the center), and simple lights (again to focus attention on the item of interest), we'll be able to create wonderfully "simple" images. Unfortunately, from the point of view of fine-art photography, and from whatever motivations and aspirations I'm assuming drove each of you to sign up for this workshop, this eBay-like simplicity almost invariably leads to nothing but dull, uninteresting images devoid of any feeling or meaning. Yet they (and the best eBay images) are, undeniably, simple. So, what is missing? How have we misunderstood simplicity?

To motivate the answer to these questions (which will unfold in stages of this workshop), I want to share one of my favorite Zen sayings (attributed to Seigen Ishin, 9th Century Zen teacher):

> *"Before I had studied Zen for thirty years,*
> *I saw mountains as mountains,*
> *and waters as waters…*
>
> *When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge,*
> *I came to the point where I saw*
> *that mountains are not mountains,*
> *and waters are not waters.*
>
> *But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest.*
> *For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains,*
> *and waters once again as waters."*

Substitute the word "simplicity" for "Zen" in the above saying, and the passage describes the intended path of our workshop: to start with our intuitions of what simplicity is and is not, reflect on it, ponder it, experiment with it, see it from new perspectives, reach a point when we are confused by it and perhaps even mistake it for what we previously *knew* it is not, and, eventually, after some sincere effort, recognize it for what we "knew without knowing" all along.

Substitute the word "photography" for "Zen" in the above saying, and the passage also describes the life-long path we take as artists toward self-discovery; a path that starts with us taking photographs of things, out there, in the world, that we point our camera at simply because they are interesting to us as "things," that later draws us into capturing images not just of things but which convey our *feelings* about things, and focus attention on what imbues *meaning* to things rather than on the things themselves; later still, the same path

inexplicably leads us to ourselves. One day, we will realize that our life-long oeuvres are not passive collages of "photographs taken," but are living embodiments of our artistic spirit and our deepest self:

"A man sets out to draw the world.
As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of
provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes,
rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals.
A short time before he dies,
he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines
traces the lineaments of his own face."

− Jorge Luis Borges

Goals

My main goal is to help you create the kinds of photographs most meaningful to *you*. It turns out that "simplicity"—while obviously a word that means different things to different people, and even to the same person at different times under different circumstances—is a powerful principle to keep in mind while "doing photography" precisely because it helps us focus on what is uniquely and most deeply important to us as artists. As we discover those specific attributes of our photographs—and the manner in which images are crafted (including how they are "found" and processed after capture)—that best reflect our aesthetic (even spiritual) sensibilities, the trick will be in learning to instinctively associate those attributes with the one catch-all word, "simplicity."

As we naturally go about the business of "doing" our photography, and reflect on how well our images are accomplishing our goals (are they conveying the meaning we intend to convey?), our understanding of the word "simplicity" will inevitably change, as its meaning becomes ever more refined, nuanced, and intensely personal. In time, "simplicity"—or the unique *concept* of simplicity evolves for each of us—will eventually become synonymous with making "good photographs." The "simpler" the process of photography becomes for us, the better able our images will be at communicating why we captured them in the first place!

Outline

Here is the outline for this workshop and the topics we will be looking at in each session (there will be six sessions in all). The write-up for each session will introduce you to a specific topic, provide examples of technique or approach that will be offered, along with a personal anecdote or two about how I have used a specific method in my own photography. In most of the sessions I'll also be sharing some on-line resources that you might find interesting.

Session 1: *An introduction to the workshop, as a whole*

An overview of what "cultivating simplicity in photography" really means, a discussion of various aspects of photography on which "simplicity" depends, and a few easy exercises to get us started. We will introduce some of the key themes of this workshop, before taking a deeper dive in later sessions.

Session 2: *The "Eye" – seeking simplicity in the environment*

This session will expand on some preliminary musings (introduced in Session 1) on "seeing" and ways of finding potential subjects to photograph. We will see how cultivating simplicity is synonymous with achieving an expanded awareness of place and time. We will explore how our state of mind determines what is visible to us and profoundly influences what we most strongly resonate with in our surroundings, and provide examples and exercises to heighten our powers of observation and perception. Examples of "minimalist" photography will be discussed.

Session 3: *The "I" – seeking simplicity within oneself*

Expanding on the lessons drawn from Session 2, we will explore how all of our outwardly directly efforts to find simplicity "out there" in the world will come to naught if we cannot find the calm center in our own deepest selves and from which all creative works naturally spring forth; we will move from "seeing" to *visualizing*. Practical methods to help achieve this inner state will be introduced (e.g., simple meditative exercises to put into the proper mindset, using the works of other artists and photographers that we admire to find echoes of our deepest selves, and learning how to enter a "state of flow" as we do photography).

Session 4: *The Medium, Part I – toward a visual grammar*

Sessions 4 and 5 will focus on the practical side of image making by introducing some of the key tools that a photographer can use to direct and sculpt a viewer's interpretation of an image; i.e., the essential elements of a visual grammar. We will discuss the basic elements of composition (e.g., the frame, light, contrast, tone, form, texture, etc.) and how they can be combined for a specific purpose, "seeing" the world in color vs. black-and-white, camera position, focal length, depth of field, and shutter speed. In tune with the insight gained from the "*Before I had studied Zen for thirty years…*" Zen saying we quoted earlier, we need to first see how "light, contrast, and tone" are not (what we may have previously thought was) "light, contrast, tone" before "light, contrast, and tone" once again becomes "light, contrast, and tone" and as instinctual as breathing. Before simplicity lies a complex path.

Session 5: *The Medium, Part II – Abstraction as simplification*

Session 5 will expand on the practical lessons introduced in Session 4, and focus on the art of *abstraction* as (somewhat paradoxically) a concrete method of simplifying photographs.

We will show and discuss how some of the best abstracts are really nothing more than "ordinary" photographs (of "ordinary" things and processes) that have been stripped clean of obvious meaning; for example, by eliminating an obvious context in which what remains can be readily identified, deliberately cropping an image to exclude an obvious boundaries or extraneous objects that might give a clue as what is left really is, or using just the right combination of lens, camera position, depth of field, and shutter speed to capture only the tiniest part of a larger reality. In a sense, this whole session will be devoted to exploring how *abstraction* may be used to pay homage to Minor White's admonition to photograph things for "what else they are."

Session 6: *Putting it all together – Photography as a path toward self-discovery*

We will conclude the workshop by re-examining the meaning behind the quote by Borges that appears on an earlier page. Specifically, we will explore why—in the purest spiritual sense—the "cultivation of simplicity" while doing our photography is synonymous with discovering ourselves. As Borges' quote suggests, we are, in the end, the sum total of what we have done; or, as photographers, what we have seen, been touched by, and photographed. We can no more escape the inevitability of "seeing ourselves as we are through what we have accomplished" than we can outrun our own shadow. The question is, What will we find when we get there?, and What can we do now to make sure we will like what we see?

Logistics

The workshop starts on Monday, Sep 10th. Each Monday morning for the 6 weeks beginning on this date, I'll be posting new material in the workshop folder on my website:

http://www.sudden-stillness.com/SimplicityWorkshop/Session2017

You will need the *username* and *password* I sent you via email (if you have not already received these, please email me: andy.ilachinski@gmail.com). I have also set up a private *Facebook* group (*Shanti Arts Simplicity in Photography Workshop*) in which you can get to know the other students in the class, post images, make comments, ask questions, etc. Indeed, I encourage you to make liberal use of this page, since the bulk of our mutual interactions will likely be taking place there.

What is *photography*?

Before we begin "cultivating the art of simplicity in photography," we need to first appreciate what photography itself is all about; at least the kind of photography whose practice warrants that time and attention be given to "cultivating the art of simplicity" in order to achieve it.

Etymologically, the word "photograph" (first used by the great English polymath Sir John Herschel in 1839) comes the Greek words φωτός = *photos* (genitive of φῶς = *phōs*, or "light") and γραφή = *graphé*, meaning "representation by means of lines" or "drawing." Taken together, "photography" therefore means "drawing with light." Of course, this tells us nothing about *How* – or *Why* – this is done. The "*How?*" part is easy to describe, at least technically, and involves either analog or digital processes, or one of myriad variants that have come and gone since the first permanent "recording of light" was made by the French inventor Niépce in 1822. There are numerous web sites and books that provide the requisite background on this question (see references at the end of this write-up). Except for discussing some of the key differences between how *we* see the world and how our camera/lens combination "sees" the world (in a later session), we will focus mostly on finding ways of approaching and answering the "*Why?*" part of "drawing with light."

My personal take …

For me, photography represents the quintessential example of an activity that is fundamentally impossible to capture using words alone. We can point to etymologies (as I just have), we can wax poetically on the nature of "stopping time," and use images as a backdrop to all kinds of socio-political discussions. But—again, for me (your takes will almost certainly be different)—none of these methods capture the ineffable *process of doing photography*. This process is obviously intensely personal, and has both conscious and unconscious components, meaning that even the photographer is not always aware of "Why?" her camera's shutter button was pressed at a given instant. Photography is a verbally ineffable *experience that unfolds inside the photographer*. It is thus a *language*:

> *"The concept underlying this phrase is a very important one.*
> *Just as in the media of the written word we have poems, essays,*
> *scientific and journalistic reports, novels, dramas and catalogues,*
> *so with photography we touch the domains of science,*
> *documentation and expressive art.*
>
> *When words become unclear,*
> *I shall focus with photographs.*
> *When images become inadequate,*
> *I shall be content with silence."*
>
> – Ansel Adams

The grammar of this language is unique to each individual photographer and consists of a lifelong collection of images, both captured and only imagined. Over time, this grammar reveals just as many insights about the world "out there" (that we point our camera at), as it does about the world "in here," in our minds and souls, the "I" behind the "eye," and the reason "Why?" we choose to point our cameras at anything at all.

Photography = …

This workshop is largely woven around ways to explore the basic elements that fold into appreciating photography as a language:

- Photography = *constant picture taking*

    "To be a photographer, one must photograph. No amount of book learning, no checklist of seminars attended, can substitute for the simple act of making pictures" – Harry Callahan

The only deep "truth" about photography is that in order for it to evolve and get "better" (where "better" means nothing to anybody except the photographer!) it needs to be *done*, *constantly*. As with any art and craft, the practice of photography has to be carefully, lovingly, nurtured. Even if you do not have a camera with you (though, nowadays, with cameras in every phone, you are unlikely to ever find yourself without one), you practice "seeing" the world around with your photographer's eyes (a process we'll describe in more detail as we go on).

- Photography = *communication*

    "Understand what you want to say. Understand how you want to say it. Then say it without compromise. Now you are thinking in terms of creative photography!" – Bruce Barnbaum

When we take a photograph, we obviously do so for a reason. Typically, that reason involves communicating something (of a place, an event, a *feeling*,…) to someone else. Even if we keep the image to ourselves and never show it to anyone, the reason we wish to do so is because the image conveys something that is of lasting value to us. The better you are understanding and using the elements of photography under your control (discussed below), the better your images will be at expressing what you want your photography to communicate to others.

- Photography = *feeling*

    "Seeing is not enough; you have to *feel* what you photograph" – Andre Kertesz

All of the best photographers through history agree on this one basic point: it is not the picture, as a physical artifact, that matters; it is the *feeling* that an image evokes that is all important. Photography is more—so much more—about capturing emotion than it is about "reproducing reality." This is true regardless of the kind of photography that most interests you (portraits, still life, landscapes, documentary, weddings, …) This key idea was introduced into photography by the great pioneer Alfred Stieglitz, with a series of photographs he took between 1925-1934 that he called *Equivalents*: "My cloud photographs are equivalents of my most profound life experiences, my basic philosophy of life."

- Photography = *aesthetic design*

> "It is all about how you build a picture, what a picture consists of, how shapes are related to each other, how spaces are filled, how the whole thing must have a kind of unity" – Paul Strand

The primary means of expression in photography—as a visual language—is *composition*, which refers to how the parts of an image can be organized so that they lead a viewer's eye around, and focus their attention on the message you wish to convey. Session 4 of this workshop will introduce some practical methods, including the use of light, color, form, pattern, texture, balance, focus, etc. However, as Ansel Adams once quipped, "There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept," meaning that no amount of "composing" can compensate for a lack of innate meaning. Which is why Sessions 2 and 3 of this workshop focus first on getting a sense of why we choose to point our cameras at the world at all; and what we wish to communicate to others by doing so.

- Photography = *an intensely personal journey*

> "A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to discover, through the detours of art, these two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened" – Albert Camus

The Oracle of Delphi,[4] Rumi,[5] Saint Francis of Assisi,[6] and myriad other philosophers, poets, artists, photographers, and spiritual leaders, all teach us that the creative process is, in fact, a process of self-discovery. In simplest possible terms, as photographers, we photograph what we are. Though (the paradox!) it may take a lifetime to discover what that is. The last Session of the workshop will explore and expand on this theme.

- **Exercise S1-1:** *Describe yourself as a photographer*

Tell me a little bit about your photographic history. When did you first start taking photographs. What generally interests you about photography? Are you drawn to particular kinds of photography? What generally compels you to pick up a camera, regardless of type or particular kind of lens attached to it, and point to – and capture an image of – something?

Each of us has a set of unique answers we can give to this question, answers that may (indeed, *ought* to) change over time, as our experience with photography both *broadens*, in

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[4] "Heed these words, You who wish to probe the depths of nature: If you do not find within yourself that which you seek, neither will you find it outside. In you is hidden the treasure of treasures. Know Thyself and you will know the Universe and the Gods." – Oracle of Delphi

[5] "And you? When will you begin that long journey into yourself?" – Rumi (1207 - 1273)

[6] "That which you are seeking is doing the seeking." – Saint Francis of Assisi (1181 - 1226)

terms of subject matter that we are exposed to and/or expose ourselves to, and *deepens*, as we discover things about ourselves from the evolving narrative of our own images.

So, the first simple "exercise" I will ask you to do is to reflect on this basic question*. Why do you do photography?* What do you find yourself pointing your camera at most often? For what reason(s)? Is it to record the presence of an object? A moment from some event? Is it to capture some beautiful light, a sunset or sunrise? Of course, there is no one answer—there cannot be—and there is certainly no "right" or "wrong" answer. For some of you, it will be (or may seem to be) easy; for some, the task may prove difficult, since not everyone is predisposed to self-reflection (looking over a portfolio of your own photographs may help identify patterns that are otherwise unknown or only latent). However you choose to go about answering this question, please take your time with it. Spend a few days just thinking about it every so often; over a coffee break, before bed, or while walking. Afterwards, summarize your musings with a few sentences or a paragraph or two. Your answer will serve as a provisional anchor around which we will build tools uniquely tailored to helping you "simplify" *your* path toward, and your own unique vision of, what photography is all about.

What elements of picture taking are under the photographer's control?

If you think about it, there are only a relatively few elements that the photographer has any real control over—either directly or indirectly—while doing photography:

- *Photographic equipment*: camera brand and/or make of model, types of lenses, filters, tripods, etc.

- *Subject matter:* nearby park, a trip to a nearby city, or some vacation spot,

- *Light and/or environmental conditions:* which may depend on mood, predilection, and opportunity

- *Vantage point:* the decision as to where we position our camera is not as trivial as it sounds

- *Framing and/or cropping*: which can be done either in-camera or after capture, and which is an important skill to acquire and nurture because cropping – or *lack* of a proper cropping – may make or break an image; learning the art of composition is vital for this

- *Plane of focus*: to decide what is in sharp focus – both literally and figuratively – and what constitutes a blurred foreground/background

- *The moment:* when do you press the shutter button? Why? Why then, and not a second sooner or a moment later?

- *Exposure time*: which the photographer must learn to align with aesthetic intentions; e.g., do you want to "freeze" the action on the football field or endow a waterfall with a silky sheen?, and

- *Presentation*: will the image be shown on-line on *Facebook*? Will it be made into a print? Is it part of an ongoing portfolio? More generally, who is the target audience?

Of course, the range of options and decisions grows exponentially *after* capture, as the photographer is faced with myriad options built into any decent image processing program (e.g., *Photoshop*, *Paint Shop Pro*, *Affinity*, and a host of alternatives). Of course, what matters most is the photograph itself: how it looks, what it contains, how it is presented, what ideas or questions it conveys, and—ultimately—whether it leaves a lasting impression on the viewer.

We will get to all of these specific elements in due course in this workshop, but for now it is enough to simply be aware of them, and of the fact that (apart from the plethora of options that image processing programs give us, which we also explore), there are not really that many things we can do, or change, while we are out in the field *doing* photography! In some ways, photography is *already* simple, albeit only after we've traveled back to the "mountains are once again mountains" stage of our journey. But the most important element of all—which underlies all of the elements on the list above, over which we have the most direct control, and whose "simplification" stands the best chance of leading us to create more meaningful photographs—is our *inner state of mind*. Cultivating simplicity in photography reduces essentially to cultivating an inner peace while doing photography.

What is *simplicity*?

According to the on-line Merriam-Webster dictionary,[7] "simplicity" is "the state of being simple, uncomplicated, or uncompounded," where the all-important word "simple" in this definition unfortunately entails no less than 10 variations of meaning, ranging from "free from guile" to "readily understood." Etymologically,[8] the word "simple" derives from the Latin *simplus* and from the Proto-Indo-European *sm-plo*, which refers to the root *sem−*, meaning "one; as one," together with *plo−*, meaning fold. The word "simple" was introduced c.1200 to mean "free from duplicity, upright, guileless; blameless, innocently harmless," but also "ignorant, uneducated; unsophisticated; simple-minded, foolish," and also partly derives from the Old French *simple*, meaning "plain, decent; friendly, sweet; naive, foolish, and stupid."

My personal take …

Here is a stream-of-consciousness cloud of words and phrases associated with the word "simple" that I put together for myself one day over coffee:

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[7] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simple
[8] http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=simple

Unity of purpose

Uncomplicated   Uncluttered   Empty

Informal   Calm   Relaxing

Elegant   Soft   Balanced   No frills

Innocent   Bare   Revealing   Still

Intuitive

Restful   Direct   *Simple*   To the point

Straightforward   Light

Naive   Effortless   Restrained   Clear   Silent

Easy   *Not* trivial

Quiet   Understandable   Few things

Tranquil   Minimal

Unpretentious   Focused   Austere

Guileless   Self-evident

Word Cloud #1

From this cloud, I then culled the five words and phrases that best describe what comes to my mind if I restrict their meaning to how the word "simple" might apply to a photograph (though, as I will make clear later in the workshop, the same terms apply equally well to my desired *inner* state, as I do my photography):

Unity of purpose

Uncomplicated   Uncluttered   Empty

Informal   Calm   Relaxing

Elegant   Soft   Balanced   No frills

Innocent   Bare   Revealing   Still

Intuitive

Restful   Direct   *Simple*   To the point

Straightforward   Light

Naive   Effortless   Restrained   Clear   Silent

Easy   *Not* trivial

Quiet   Understandable   Few things

Tranquil   Minimal

Unpretentious   Focused   Austere

Guileless   Self-evident

Word Cloud #2

Notice that the word "trivial" does not appear in my word cloud. Indeed, I deliberately included "Not trivial," and even emphasized the "Not" part by italicizing it. I am trying to distinguish between technically well executed images for which "cultivating a simplicity" hardly matters (e.g., taking a picture of a watch for some on-line catalog) and images whose surface "simplicity" belies hidden depths. Images in the latter case typically reward the viewer with a "more than meets the eye" depth of meaning.

11

- **Exercise S1-2: Generate and parse your own word cloud**

Either start with the word cloud #1 that appears above, or build a "master word cloud" for yourself, making sure to include as many general word/phrase associations with the word "simple" as you can and that are meaningful to you. Then highlight the top five words and/or phrases that are most closely aligned with <u>your</u> interpretation of simplicity, as it pertains to photography.

I have always thought that the one true "objective" measure of a photograph (in terms of its value to the viewer) is time: namely, (1) the time a viewer wishes (or is compelled) to spend looking at an image when she first encounters it, and (2) the time(s) after which the viewer finds herself revisiting the memory of first seeing the photograph, and reflecting over it, pondering its intended meaning, or simply using it as a stepping stone for flights of fancy. In this sense, "trivial" photographs almost never leave lasting imprints (e.g., I have never felt compelled to muse on the deeper meaning of an image of the hamburger displayed on a menu in a restaurant). They may be colloquially "simple," but not in the sense that we will be using this term throughout this workshop. Whatever "simple" is, it is emphatically *not* trivial.

"Simplicity" is also not necessarily something that is "not complex." Indeed, one of the most difficult conceptual (and aesthetic) hurdles for beginning photographers to pass through is to recognize that "simplicity" in photography does not preclude capturing images that *look* complex. Much of fine-art photography rests on the photographer's ability to (to use her self-organizing visual grammar to) *reveal the simple in the complex*. How's that for a paradox? ;-)

For example, in 2007 I submitted an idea for a book contest sponsored by the British *Black and White Photography* magazine.[9] My proposed title was *Sudden Stillness: Visual Echoes of Timeless Rhythms*, where the rhythms are *chaos*, *order*, *complexity*, and *entropy* (see figure below); notably, and deliberately, the word "simplicity" is absent. I described the book to the editors as:

"…a meditation on using photographs as tokens of a visual grammar to communicate one photographer's fragmentary impressions of some of nature's simplest patterns; partly as a physicist (with a physicist's eye and understanding of chaos, order, complexity, and entropy), and partly as an artist, with an appreciation of the subjective character of each of these four rhythms."

The tagline concluded with the hope "…that the book serves as a palimpsest of the author's⸺and reader's⸺process of self-discovery: as nature is quietly revealed, through four 'movements' of snapshots of its timeless rhythms, the reader will discover visual echoes of herself experiencing nature, as a sudden stillness."

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[9] http://www.blackandwhitephotographymag.co.uk/
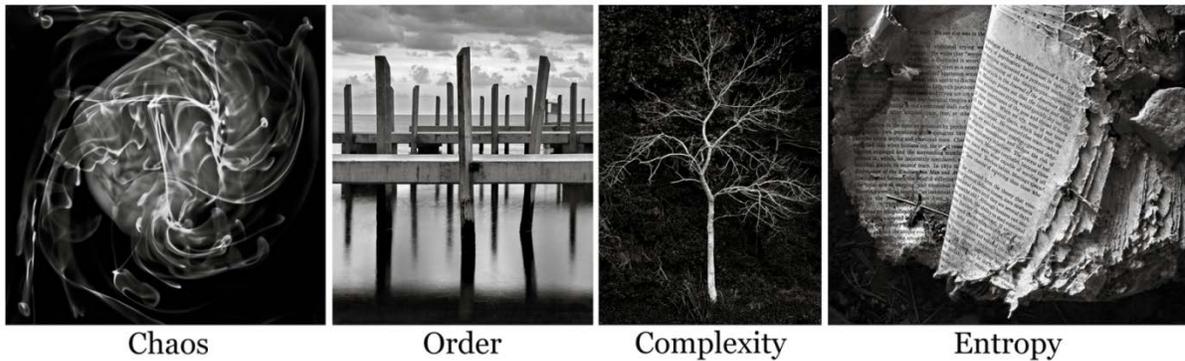
Chaos   Order   Complexity   Entropy

s1-i1

What do these images have in common? After all, the categories for which each serves as an example could not be more different. What does "chaos" have to do with "order?" What does "complexity" have to with any of the others, particularly "entropy" (which is a technical term used in physics to refer to natural decay). *And where is simplicity?*

One answer is that these images are all consistent—albeit imperfectly—with the five words that best describe what "simple" means to me (see **Word Cloud #2** above): (1) each image obviously displays a "unity of purpose," in that it conveys the meaning associated with its label; (2) each is *balanced* (in a technical sense that we'll be covering in a later session; for now, take "balanced" to mean that were one to attach weights to different parts of an image in proportion to the "degree of attention" each part entails to the viewer, the image would remain stable; i.e., it wouldn't keel over to one side); (3) each image, I hope, displays a modicum of *elegance* (i.e., a sense of grace, and/or style); (4) each, to a degree, instills a feeling of *tranquility* (though please feel free to quibble about this one, particularly for the first image); and (5) none of the images are trivial (meaning, loosely, that there is more to each of them than just some "thing" on display).

Let's dig a bit deeper on what we mean by "unity of purpose." It is not just that each image has a *single focus of attention*—which, please note, may be a "thing," as in the case of the tree and dilapidated book, "things," in the case of the geometrically arranged pylons of a pier, or even a "process," such as in the unfolding swirls and whorls of a diffusing ink-drop in water—but that the elements of each image, as a whole (i.e., the overall composition, cropping, range and placement of tones and textures, etc.), are arranged in such a way as to *intensify the viewer's attention on that single focus*.

There is also nothing that distracts. For example, the pier image contains only pylons, sky, and water; there are no boats, or parts of boats drifting off to one side, no planes in the sky, and no debris in the water. And there is nothing in the tree image apart from the obvious "tree" and background; the image is designed for you to "see" the tree (we will have more to say about this particular image on the next page).

Finally, although each image harbors a clear *innate* object of focus (i.e., the viewer's attention is focused on something contained within the image itself), there is also a hint of mystery associated with that object which compels the viewer to resolve. What lies beyond the pylons, just out of sight? Why are there no boats? Where, and why, was the book abandoned? And in the case of the ink swirl, were it not for my unsolicited "explanation" of what the image is "really" a picture of, the viewer might reasonably be expected to wonder, "What am I looking at?" This implied mystery only enhances the overall value of an image. It also presents a bit of a paradox, in the sense that the deepest questions about an image typically arise for the ostensibly "simplest" images. A quote attributed to the great Zen master of photography, Minor White, contains wonderful advice on one way to accomplish this: *"One should not only photograph things for what they are, but for what else they are."* The degree to which our photographs engage the viewer (and achieve a lasting value) is commensurate with our ability to capture the *"what else they are"* parts of things we choose to point our eyes and cameras at. The first step towards this goal is learning to *see*.

Seeing things to photograph—*"Tree" example*

"The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."
—Dorothea Lange

s1-i2

As a preview of future sessions—which will introduce a quiet, meditative way of "seeing" and tool to help craft our found images to better express what we see and feel—consider once again the "Tree" picture we discussed earlier. *How did this picture come about?* In the

most obvious and natural way possible; in the same way that I have captured most of my best photographs (that have proven to have lasting value): by being in tune with my surroundings, by not being rushed, and by simply enjoying the moment. In this respect, I (and many other photographers) follow in the footsteps of one of the great 20th Century photographers, Wynn Bullock (1902 – 1975), who took most of his best-known photographs while on travel with his family or on walks near his home. In the case of my "Tree," which I took some time ago (Nov 2004, to be exact), I noticed it while hiking through one of my family's favorite local parks.[10] More specifically, what I noticed was the scene that appears above (which I captured immediately prior to shooting the tree in the middle).

Notice the apparent *banality* of this scene! What is so special about it? Nothing. Certainly very little that one cannot see in a dozen other places in myriad other parks. But that is not the point. There is a significant difference between what I "noticed"—i.e., what caught my attention in my peripheral vision and caused my head to turn and eye to look—and what I *saw*, the latter of which existed only in my eye's mind and photographer's soul (before what my camera recording that day eventually evolved and transformed into the final image):
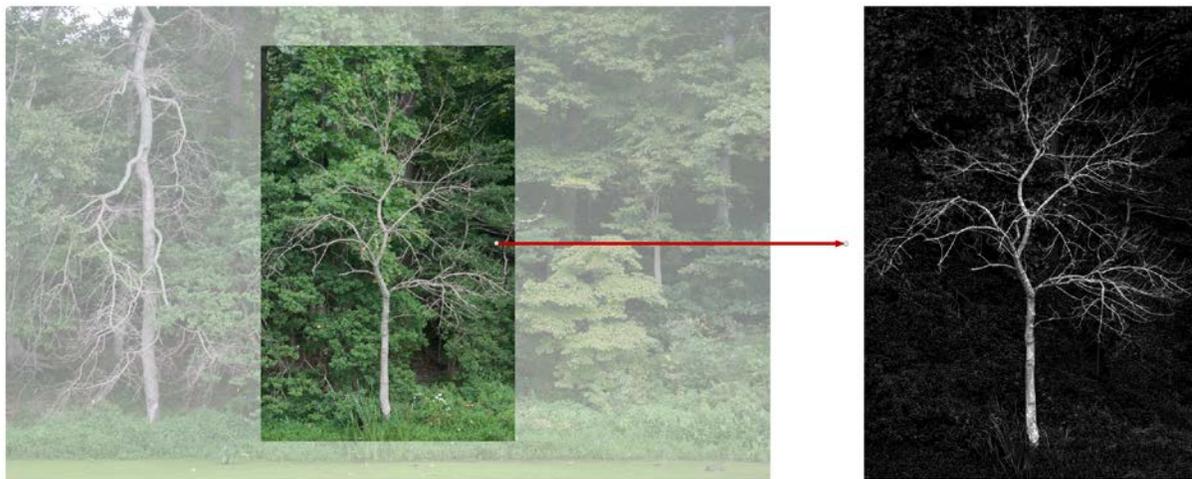
s1-i3

Apart from the fact that the final image is (I hope) pleasing to your eye—more pleasing than the banal "scene setter" image from which it derives—notice how the "Tree" grabs hold of your attention, gently but firmly; how it compels you to just look at *it*, as it palpably, but not forcibly, draws your eye to its magnificent form. All extraneous elements, including color and even a few "holes" that appear in the foliage (this is "fine art" photography, not photojournalism!), have been removed. Where, in the "scene setter" image, a viewer might reasonably ask, *"What am I supposed to look at?"*, there is no such ambiguity about the focus of attention in the final image. My knowledge of how color information is used to create black-and-white images (elements of which we will explore in a later session) also directed my instincts to "see" an elegant white tree against a richly textured dark-to-black background. In the act of simplifying an otherwise busy (and ambiguous) image, a beautiful

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[10] We live in the northern VA area, and the park in question is called Mason Neck.

tree is revealed. One might say that, in homage to Minor White's earlier admonition, simplification has revealed *what else* an otherwise ordinary scene was that day.

Though this first example may seem almost too trivial to mention, it contains a vital lesson in how to do photography. Apart from the technical craft involved in converting a color photo into a black and white image, three key elements resulted in this image: (1) *state of mind*, (2) *intimacy with environment*, and (3) *time*.

My wife and I have been going to this small park ever since we were married in 1996. As we've walked its trails, meditated on its diverse wildlife (the park is also a bird sanctuary), and spent many summer afternoons just basking in the sun, we have gained an intimate familiarity with its hidden gems and seasonal rhythms. For me, this familiarity leads to a quiet state of mind whenever I am in the park. I am never "in a rush" to see something before I need to leave. I have been to the park countless times, and anticipate photographing there many more years to come. And it is precisely because I was in a quiet state of mind that I "saw" elegance in banality.

This is a deep lesson I was taught by my dad, who passed away in 2002, but was a lifelong artist. Whenever we would go on family trips to new places in the summer, my dad would always, without exception, spend the first few days sans all his art equipment. He'd leave his rucksack, full of brushes and paints, and canvas in the car (hotel even), and spend the daylight hours walking, observing, immersing himself in the environment. When my 10 year old self asked "Why are you wasting your time not painting?", his answer made no sense to me back then, but is an important enough insight into the creative process that I wish to impart it to you now, 46 years later, as the first major lesson of a workshop devoted to "cultivating simplicity" (in any art form): *"I am far from wasting my time, for without taking the time to become intimate with a place, I will not know it; and without knowing it, the things I need to paint will be invisible to me."* I have followed my dad's lead ever since, and encourage all of you to try it for a while. Whenever you find yourself somewhere new, make a point of *not* taking photographs; instead, spend time simply "getting to know" a place. You may be surprised at how many more "things" to photograph reveal themselves to you in this way.

Additional exercises

Exercise 1 and 2 appeared earlier (see pages 8 and 12, respectively). We conclude this first session with a few more. Although you do not have to do any of these exercises, you will learn a lot more if you do. Please also post questions you have as well as a few of your images in our private Facebook group. Some of the practice exercises will also suggest things to post.

- **Exercise S1-3:** *Examples of photographers you admire*

Identify at least three photographers (living or not) whose work you most admire, and write a short paragraph (a sentence or two will do) explaining why. If you can find a link to some

specific images (in case the photographer is not well known), that would be very helpful. Here's the harder part: select an image or two (by any photographer other than yourself) that you would best like to emulate (not necessarily the image, but general style), but – for whatever reason – have failed to do so. Try to articulate in words what you like (about the style you wish to emulate) and why you have not been able to "recreate" it.

- **Exercise S1-4:** *Examples of your own work*

Look over your personal archive of images. Select a few examples from each of four categories: (1) those you consider to be your very best (i.e., images you would grab first in case of a fire); (2) those that others have told you are "your best" but with which you do not agree (and explain why); and (3) your most "complex" images (interpret to taste); and (4) your "simplest" images (again, interpret to taste).

John Daido Loori (1931 - 2009) was a Zen Buddhist rōshi (i.e., a spiritual leader) who served as the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in New York's Catskill mountains. Trained originally as a chemist, he came to study photography after attending a workshop in 1971 given by photographer Minor White (about whom we will have a lot more to say in later sessions). Also around that time he began studying Zen. Although I never met Loori, about a decade or so ago I stumbled across an extraordinary book of his called *The Zen of Creativity*,[11] and have been admiring - and following - his work ever since.

- **Exercise S1-5:** *Toward infusing photography with a Zen-like simplicity*

Please watch (nothing more! – well that, and muse some on what you hear in) this 8 min long *YouTube* video of John Daido Loori speaking about the Zen of photography:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPR_5MvFIXU&feature=youtu.be

We will pick up on some of the ideas presented here (oh, so eloquently) in later sessions. Please feel free to post whatever thoughts you may have on our Facebook page.

I hope you've enjoyed this first session. Please have some fun with the exercises. They are not meant as burdens, but as a way to jumpstart your own thinking about what simplicity roles in the creative process. I'm looking forward to hearing from you on our *Facebook* page. More to come next week.

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[11] An extraordinary book I highly recommend to anyone who has signed up for this workshop: https://www.amazon.com/Zen-Creativity-Cultivating-Your-Artistic/dp/0345466330/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1255548967&sr=8-1