

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

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from
FREEMAN PATTERSON



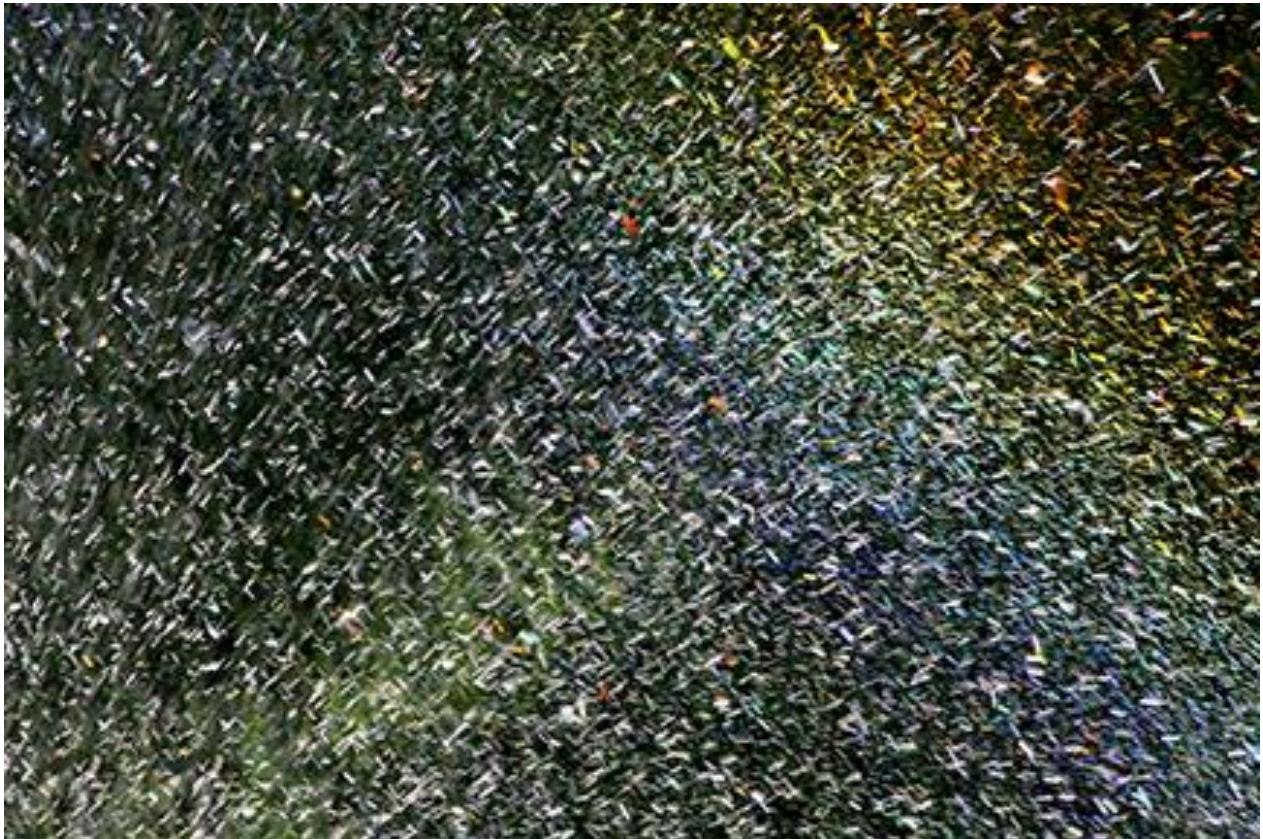
The best place in the world to SEE is wherever you are.

Time and again I've had somebody ask me the question "Where's a good place to make pictures?" The translation is: "Where can I photograph my preconceptions?" Answering this question is one of the best ways I know to stand still creatively. It's rather like taking a bus tour to Washington, D.C. to see the cherry blossoms without ever having noticed the beauty of the wild flowers (weeds) in your back yard.

Long ago I came to realize that a good, simple exercise for improving a person's ability to see is to ask a friend to pick a number, let's say between 20 and 50 (perhaps 36) and a direction "left," "right," or "straight ahead," then to take 36 steps in the given direction and stop. Using your camera or your smartphone make a minimum of 30 thoughtful compositions in that place (staying within a circle no wider than a metre.) Beginning is easy, as you'll photograph things you always notice in ways you always see them. However, if you feel like tearing out your hair after struggling to "see" more than 15 or 18 good pictures, you can be almost certain that persisting will reward you with a visual breakthrough.

You have to get on the other side of your normal ways of seeing, to challenge your perfectly natural need to label everything in order to see what's there, to see in ways you've never seen before. The challenge is often hard, but the achievement is always exhilarating. Give this exercise a serious try at least once a month – especially right around home where everything is so familiar you don't see it. This is a great exercise, not just for photographers, but for everybody who wants to be more observant.

I made the photograph on page one and the three that follow at spots I move through so often that, every now and then, I make a conscious effort to observe them carefully in order to "see" what normally doesn't register at all.



Rainbow in water from a lawn sprinkler



Sheet on clothes-line, photographed while I was lying on my back



A stack of jeans could be a geological formation (note the visual similarity with the next image)



Prince Leopold Island in the high Canadian Arctic; the towering wall of rock is about 265m (860ft)

Photographing indoors and outdoors right around home (or wherever you happen to be) is a superb exercise for **everybody** who wants to develop, indeed to intensify, your powers of observation – especially when you deliberately take points of view that are different from the usual way that you see objects and situations.

Pretend, for example, that you are a moth resting on a window pane. Or, pretend you are peering out of a space ship orbiting your ceramic coffee mug. Poke your cell phone into the middle of a bush, or from below aim it up at all the coats and jackets on a coat rack. Or, pretend your rumpled white bedsheets are a vast Arctic landscape. Regardless of what you eat for breakfast – bacon and eggs, or a bowl of cereal, or salads and natural yogurt - carefully study what remains on your plate or bowl when you're finished. With a close-up lens you could be lost all morning in the remaining swirls of egg yolk and bacon crumbs. Even keep a camera or your phone beside your computer, so you can use it every so often to examine shadows falling across objects on your desk.

What you are doing, of course, is pulling the usual labels – “bed sheets,” “bread crumbs,” “yogurt,” “jackets” – off common objects. You are observing **the actual things** instead. Once you get started doing this, the project can become joyously addictive. I usually end up feeling a sense of real achievement and a natural “high.”

Here are a few more of my right-around-me images that I hope will encourage you to do visual exercises like these on a regular basis. Hit [**FAMILIAR**](#).

A few years ago the New Brunswick Department of Tourism purchased the use of one of my photos for a large poster. The department also purchased a short poem from a well-known NB poet to be used with my image. When I received the mock-up or sample layout (which I had requested in advance), I was stunned to find that the eight lines of poetry were spread across the centre of my picture. When the designer called to ask for my thoughts, I asked if she would be good enough to create a second layout. "What would you like to see changed?" she asked. "Well," I replied, "This time please drop the photograph on top of the words." After about ten seconds of dead silence, she broke into a giggle and then responded, "I get your point." The final poster was a little broader than the original, but my image now occupied the large left-hand space and the eight lines of poetry were placed to the right.

Pictures are for everybody, just like words. People who create visual art assume that, but nearly everybody, including visual artists, gives priority to words. Strange in a way, when everybody with a smartphone is forever "snapping" pictures and people still remark that a picture is worth 10,000 words.

However, the big question remains, "Do we see what we're looking at?" Both my New Brunswick teaching partner, André Gallant, and I noticed an immediate decline in careful visual observation with the advent of digital cameras in the early 2000s and ever since we have had to stress the fact, often repeatedly, that discipline is essential to craft of every sort, that it is always the precursor to art. For photographers, this means 1/ knowing how to use your tools and equipment well and, every bit as important, 2/ being cognizant of the building blocks of visual design and basic principles or guidelines for arranging them within a picture space.

What's true for photography is equally true of speaking and writing. Effective communication with words requires the same discipline.

Perhaps my current favourite mis-use of English words goes like this: "It was a very unique experience." As "unique" means "one of a kind," to say that something is "very unique" is to say that it's not quite one of a kind, i.e., that it's uncommon or maybe rare. (As for olive oil, I'm dying to know how it can ever be "extra" virgin and wonder if, just possibly, the olive trees immaculately conceived.)

This brings me right back to where I began. Fine images in any medium don't depend on where you are, but on how well you see where you are. Everybody has a unique vision. There's only one of you. Your challenge is to develop and refine your vision. And, the place to begin is wherever you are.



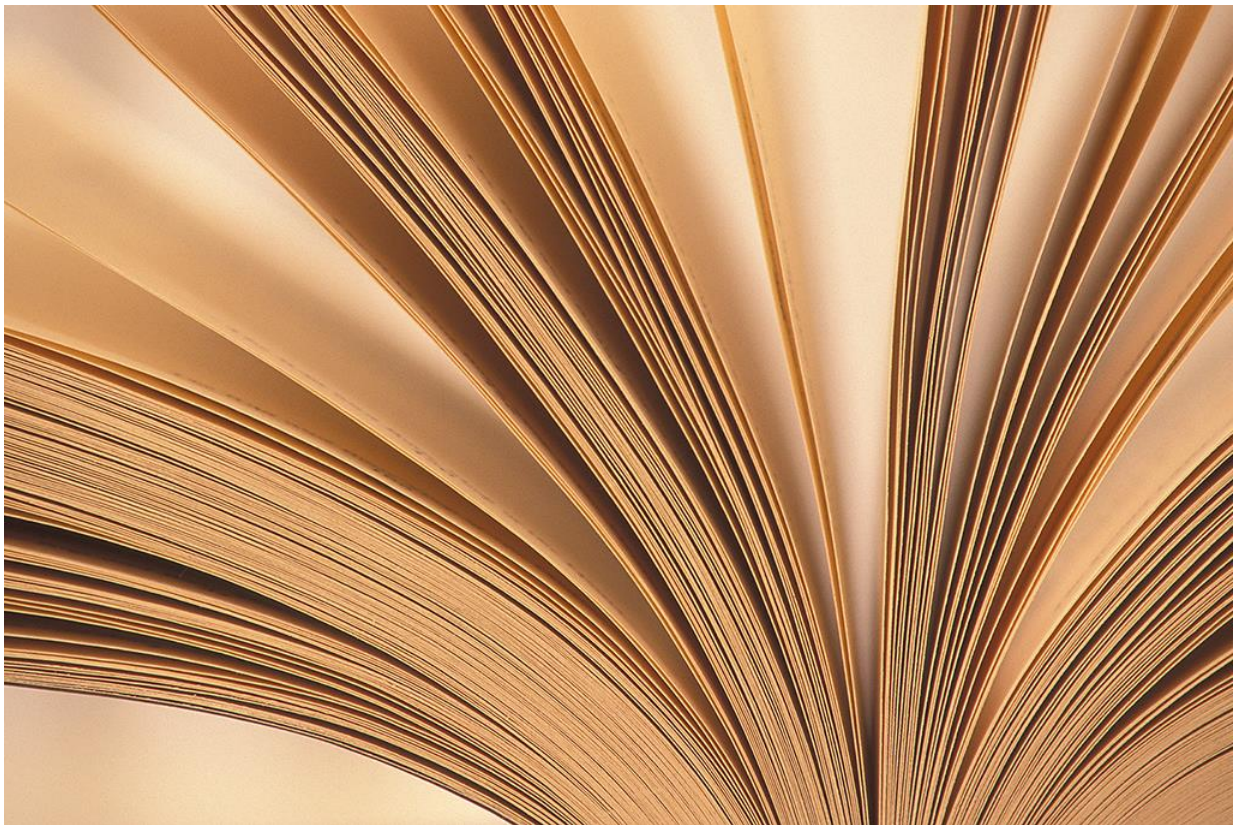
Most people have looked at this, but only a few have seen it. Have you? It's a large area..

An artist is not paid for his labour, but for his vision.

James Whistler

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Nobody I know observes what's around him with more care than my long-time friend and superb photographer **Robert Stahl** of Seattle. This practice became habitual, then automatic for Bob years ago, and he and his images have been inspiring me ever since the late 1970s. Bob graciously granted me permission to show this photograph of a book of poetry, which has remained in my visual memory for many years. Seeing it is like visiting a cathedral.



"Books are uniquely portable magic." *Stephen King*

I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read." *Groucho Marx*

"The whole culture is telling you to hurry, while the art tells you to take your time. Always listen to the art." *Junot Diaz*

Friends often give me books, which I truly appreciate, and I love passing them on – as gifts, as loans, and as recommendations. (I also carry a Kindle when I’m travelling.)

Last summer my friend Margery Nea gave me a copy of a new book, **Re-Imagining God and Religion**, by her friend Jerry Wright. My copy is now a flurry of yellow “post its” and I’ve written a greatly-deserved letter of gratitude to the author. Also, I’ve given copies as gifts myself and am recommending it to everybody for whom the title has resonance or “pull.”

The following paragraphs from the front cover flap (altered slightly) describe the book.

“Employing deep psychological analysis of our world-wide religious and political dilemmas, Dr. Jerry Wright identifies two simultaneous sacred endeavours: 1/ to eulogize, bury, and grieve for ... monotheistic god-images and the religions dependent on them [i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam] and 2/ to bring fresh imagination to the meanings of *god* and *religion* that can speak to the modern/postmodern mind and the ancient soul.

Drawing on the insights of analytic psychology and his professional experiences as a Jungian psychoanalyst and former Presbyterian minister, he explores heretofore taboo topics and reframes many traditional theological and Christological dogmas, thereby making them relevant to religious and non-religious persons alike. The essays are designed to promote consciousness in general and religious consciousness in particular. ...”

This brief excerpt from the book merely hints at the rich content: **“... As long as our deities and devils are perceived to be beyond the physical life and beyond the life of the human psyche, our species will continue to do great harm to each other and to our global nest. ...”**

If you believe that every word in the Koran or Bible is literally true, you will hate this book.

“I always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.”
Jorge Luis Borges



Part of my book nook

Speaking of books makes me recall with sadness the passing in January of **Mary Oliver**, the favourite poet of many and perhaps the greatest of our time. Her poems, such as “The Journey,” “Wild Geese,” “Living in the Forest,” and “Song of the Builders” penetrate and illuminate our emotional core with their honesty, directness, and beauty. In “The Summer Day” Mary asks each of us, **“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”** And, in one of her best-known poems, “When Death Comes,” she provides her personal answer.

**“When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.**

**When it is over, I don’t want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.**

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.”

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Everybody who read my previous letter will know that I’m presently in Namaqualand, South Africa – evading the Canadian winter, leading a two-week wilderness camping trip, and spending quiet time with my friends Maryna and Helmut Kohrs at the little Kamieskroon Hotel. In that letter I included a hyperlink on page four to 14 photographs of the Richtersveld, where we always spend the second week of the camping trip. (You needed to click on [WILDERNESS](#) on page four to see the images.) As some of you apparently missed that hyperlink, I want to mention that all my letters contain one or two hyperlinks that will lead you to extra photographs and the hyperlink notification will always be in a bright colour, capital letters, and underlined. In this issue there’s again a hyperlink on page four. Take a peek.

To all of you who have written, thank you for your letters – however long or short. I deeply value and appreciate your thoughts. (One good friend, who calls herself a born copy editor, even called to tell me that, in my last letter, I should have “donned” my parka, not “dawned” it. How I missed that mistake I’ll never know!) When I’m writing, I usually feel as if I’m having a good conversation with this person or that and receiving a note or a letter in response confirms that feeling. Although I always endeavour to reply, if you don’t receive a personal response, don’t ever think I haven’t appreciated your writing.

[Merci beaucoup pour vos notes et lettres. J’en apprécie tout.](#) [Baie dankie vir julle briewe.](#)

Have a HAPPY and a YUMMY!

FREEMAN

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