

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

*a periodical letter
from*
FREEMAN PATTERSON



Himalayan blue poppy in my garden, first morning of summer 2018

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS #2

Freeman Patterson, July 2018

I've come to the conclusion, as much from feeling as from thinking, that a person is never too old to have a happy childhood. Perhaps I shouldn't generalize just because the richest, happiest years of my life have been those since I turned 65. No doubt surviving two liver transplants in January 2000 has something to do with my perspective, but I have come to believe that happiness is possible for everybody who looks back with disappointment, regret, or a sense of deprivation about important aspects of their earliest years, even those now suffering from illness or severe physical limitations.

Of course, a person has to give old age some serious thought and do regular, genuine self-examination before you get there, as otherwise you'll arrive at 65 (or whatever you consider an advanced age) and just keep on going as you always have until the end of the chapter. Perhaps the biggest thing to confront – and accept – is that you aren't handsome or beautiful any more and that you don't have to be. Being old is about more important things.

Why am I writing about this? Because I'm 80 and hope to get older, because I'm loving this stage of my life, and because my wish for each of you is that you have the opportunity, indeed the privilege, of growing old in good physical and emotional health.

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How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

Annie Dillard

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Besides eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise (the more the merrier), and lots of sleep, I've found these things have helped me:

1/ Identifying the behaviour and traits I least liked in my parents and then confronting them in myself. This takes time and repeated effort.

2/ Identifying and then doing the five things I was most afraid to do. This was my 40th birthday gift to myself and, having done them all, from time to time since I've had the courage to go where I might never have gone and do other things I might never have dared.

3/ Paying attention to my dreams and the parallels between them and my art, as both are direct and natural expressions of my unconscious self, the bigger part of me. (Nobody writes on this topic with more knowledge, depth, and eloquence than Anthony Stevens in his great work, Private Myths.)

4/ Realizing that no matter how urbanized a person may be, she/he is a CREATION, a product of the natural system and absolutely loaded with creativity. There are no exceptions.

5/ Actively engaging childhood wishes and dreams that I was not permitted to fulfill. (That's why I have a three-acre woodland garden of rhododendrons and azaleas. I'm gardening at last – big time! You can see some of my favourites images from this year by hitting [RHODO](#).)

There are other things, of course, and the two photographs on the next page will show you one of them, but your list may well be very different from mine.

During the summer I hang a hammock in a small wooded area just behind my house. It's a great place to dream and, sometimes, I even fall asleep. It's one of those places where I really give myself to myself. And, when it comes to making photographs, I'd be quite satisfied with having only this spot for the rest of my life. It's a swingin' place!



A lot of our ideas about what we can do at different ages and what age means are so arbitrary — as arbitrary as sexual stereotypes. I think that the young-old polarization and the male-female polarization are perhaps the two leading stereotypes that imprison people. The values associated with youth and with masculinity are considered to be the human norms, and anything else is taken to be at least less worthwhile or inferior. Old people have a terrific sense of inferiority. They're embarrassed to be old. What you can do when you're young and what you can do when you're old is as arbitrary and without much basis as what you can do if you're a woman or what you can do if you're a man.

Susan Sontag

Every Saturday from early spring until late autumn we have a wonderful community or farmers' market (largely outdoors) in the tiny village of Kingston just five kilometres from my home. It's the second largest in New Brunswick. Usually I'm there when the market opens at eight o'clock and run around to various vendors, picking up fresh seasonal vegetables and herbs, fresh and smoked salmon, honey, eggs, head cheese, stuffed grape leaves, Lady Ashburnham pickles, lavender shortbreads, and on and on. Once I've packed all my goodies in the trunk of my car I head back in for a breakfast/brunch of some sort (Canadian in the dining-room or, outdoors, Syrian, Iranian, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, and Canadian too) and often spend the next two hours chatting with friends I've haven't seen for a week or since last year. Normally I run into one or two members of my high-school graduating class (there were six of us and I was the only male), friends who have recently returned from winter months in Florida or Virginia, or neighbours from just down the road. Last week I met my most recent French teacher and we took an indoor table where we could sit and chat "en français" for an hour, then ended up beside the little outdoor stage listening to a very lively Acadian duo entertaining us musically in both languages.

I love going to the Kingston market and it would be the easiest place in the world for me to make photographs, but I never do. It's one of those extremely rare places – for me – where I don't want image-making to come between me and the experience of being fully present. My visual memories and my feeling memories of the market are so strong, so vivid, that I have no desire to supplement them with pictures.

One day recently the reason for my feeling such a "participation mystique," such a strong sense of being fully present at the market, struck me with enormous clarity. It's central to my living a missing part of my childhood, the broader community part in which I was largely unable to participate when I was young.

From my eighth birthday until I left for university ten years later, just a few days short of my 18th birthday, my father called me every morning at five o'clock to help with "the barn work," the feeding of hens and pigs and cattle, with milking the cows and cleaning the stables, and every night I repeated the regime. After that came school homework and bed. I really didn't know what community activities were like; I only heard about the Saturday night dances at the Legion hall, the church socials, the card parties, and other community activities where people interacted with lots of other people. I felt like "hired help" who never had time off.

Thankfully, away back in 1943, somebody made a photograph (next page) of all six pupils and our teacher in my first (one-room) school. For everybody else it's only a record shot of some country children, but the picture haunts me. That little boy on the right is me and I know how lonely he often felt. These days I let him know how much I love him and take him everywhere I go. He enjoys the community market so much that he never even thinks about making pictures.



Grey's Mills School (upper Long Reach, NB, 1943), Joan Smith, teacher, was 18. I'm on the right; grade one

Making pictures, such as the one above, is also a way of “keeping” experiences. In 1958, the year I won a World University Service of Canada scholarship to spend the summer in what was then Yugoslavia, I bought my first serious camera and fell in love with photography. Unbeknownst to me, the camera didn't work and the day I discovered I had no pictures of the trip was one of the low points of my life.

However, once the camera had been repaired, I used it both at university and during summers on the family farm, where (if my many pictures are any indication) I seemed preoccupied with hens. (I once exhibited the photograph below under the imaginative title of “Maybe Maggie Left It!”)



Those of you who are photographers may be interested to know that this is one of the first images I made on Kodachrome 25. Before that year (1962) the fastest colour film had an ISO rating of 10! (Yes, there was a life long before digital!)

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**I believe natural beauty has a necessary place
in the spiritual development of any individual or society.**

Rachel Carson

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Richard Jeffries wrote “the hours the mind is absorbed with beauty are the only hours when we really live.” I don’t agree with Jeffries, because as central as the search for beauty is to my life, I realize that I also measure beauty and its effect in my life by having to confront its opposite and that the “ugly times” are often the precursors of real meaning and, indeed, great beauty. The debilitating illness of my liver disease, the two transplants five days apart in January 2000, the six-week induced coma and loss of all muscle tone, the excruciating pain of learning to hold my head up straight again so I could begin other physical movements, etc., etc. were anything but beautiful. As I’ve written elsewhere before, I wouldn’t wish the experience on anybody. But in retrospect, I regard it all as an enormous gift, far exceeding in value even the gifts I gave myself when I turned 40.

What I do believe, strongly, is that the search for beauty requires no justification. You should never apologize for seeking it or allow anybody to make you feel it is a waste of time. All sorts of beauty, especially natural beauty like friendships and blue poppies.



My dog Gaia, my dear friend and nurse Olga Cruz (now deceased), and me



Flowering crab apples behind my house, spring 2018

COMING UP

The big news is that I'll be leading a two-week wilderness camping trip in Namaqualand (northern Cape province, South Africa) again. The dates are March 10-25, 2019 and the trip had barely been listed on my web site before five people had signed up and two more had signalled their intention – from South Africa, Canada, and New Zealand. The minimum number for the tour is 10 and the maximum is 15 or 16, plus the camp crew. (See full details on my web site www.freemanpatterson.com)

I've been facilitating these trips for more than a dozen years and wish they could continue forever, as I invariably find the community experience incredibly rich and the wilderness surroundings both visually stunning and conducive to reflection and meditation. However, they cannot go on indefinitely and I never know when I leave South Africa each year whether or not another trip can be arranged. One of the main reasons is that our hosts and suppliers of all the camping equipment and food, Maryna and Helmut Kohrs of the Kamieskroon Hotel, require fully capable staff to assume the management of the hotel while they are absent. Such personnel is not always available, that is available at least 10 months ahead, so we can advertise the trip. Also, although the trip is not "hard" on the participants, the weeks of food preparation, the packing and transport of all the gear to the two camp sites, the setting up of the camp, and so on is tough on the crew, especially Maryna and Helmut.

By the way, this will be my 45th trip to Africa and my 41st to Namaqualand which, as many of you know, is a second home to me.

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I haven't been everywhere, but it's on my list.

Susan Sontag
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As I mentioned in my previous letter, I'll be heading back to Australia for a month very soon after the last New Brunswick workshop this year ends in mid October. The workshop I'll be teaching in Australia's Blue Mountains is next door to a well-known rhododendron garden that should be in bloom at the time. This will be very easy for me to take and the very thought of having another spring this year is cheering!

However, before going to Australia I'll be teaching photography and visual design workshops with my long-time teaching partner, André Gallant, and facilitating two INSCAPE workshops with David Maginley, our third year for these. I'm still living in the glow of last year's INSCAPE experience, which means I'm really looking forward to the two this year.

David and I call these "workshops in consciousness and creativity" and even though I've endeavoured to describe them clearly on my web site, I find in conversations that many people make inaccurate assumptions about the content, usually based on their own interpretation of words such as "spiritual," "religious," and "consciousness." Or, they may express the feeling that they aren't "into this stuff" when, in fact, we've just spent the last hour talking about it.

So, maybe I should say that these workshops are not week-long exercises in "self help," nor is there anything overtly religious (in the usual sense of the word) about them; an atheist or an agnostic will feel just as much at home as somebody who regularly attends church, synagogue, or mosque. Nor is

INSCAPE for photographers or clergy any more than for chefs, teachers, mechanics, dancers, business men and women, and people who work in I.T.

The presentations by our resource people and by David and me generate intense and thoughtful discussion, both among the entire group and with one another. A feeling of community soon develops as participants share what matters to them as persons, yet at any time if what somebody wants most is to take a long walk alone along the shore of the Bay of Fundy or a hike in the forest, she/he feels completely free to do it. INSCAPE is definitely a week when you can step aside from your every-day life and reflect on fundamental issues. You can be as open as you want with no fear of negative judgement. Oh yes, the food is great and we laugh a lot!

By the way, I'd like to recommend again David's book, BEYOND SURVIVING: Cancer and Your Spiritual Journey. It's been selling like hot cakes to patients, family, friends, caregivers, and medical personnel. You can order from a local book store, Amazon, or David at www.davidmaginley.com.

In October André Gallant and I will announce dates for our 2019 workshops in photography and visual design at the St. Martin's Country Inn, St. Martin's, NB, and an INSCAPE workshop with David. I should have at least preliminary information on any other 2019 workshops in the September issue of this letter.

For all of you in the northern hemisphere, I hope you will have a very happy summer. And, for all of you in the southern hemisphere, I hope your winter will not measure up to Canadian standards!

Flowers and good wishes, FREEMAN



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