

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #19
May 2021

from
FREEMAN PATTERSON



Koi approaching Terra Firma

It's my favourite season again – SPRING – the time of year when everything good seems possible and hope is a natural state of mind.

Here in New Brunswick we are blessed with attenuated springs; they never hurry and sometimes seems to languish for extra days in corners of fields or deep in the woods. Unlike in warmer climes, my daffodils (or jonquils, if you will) maintain their jubilant beauty for weeks, accompanied by long-lasting bursts of yellow from both the early and late forsythias, and followed by streams of golden marsh marigolds (a buttercup, actually).

Although the colour of the first part of spring often reminds me of a child's huge drawing of the blazing sun, the second half is more reminiscent of a rainbow. Purple violets and red and painted trilliums abound in their respective habitats, sheets of bluets cover old pastures, deep pink to white lady's slippers hide under branches of young firs, while ferns surge everywhere! Click on [WILDFLOWERS](#) to see some of our native spring flowers.

The "big three" ferns – the interrupted, the cinnamon, and the ostrich – abound, the first in drier places, the second in wetter, and although the third does well just about anywhere it's transplanted, it thrives along the shorelines of the St. John river and other streams. The emerging croziers of the ostrich ferns, called "fiddleheads" are a spring delicacy, often served with fresh salmon.

The interrupted fern derives its name from its transgender behaviour, each mature frond starting life as a male, then turning female for a while, before going back to being male. The cinnamon fern has separate male and female fronds, the female rising a rich cinnamon hue in the centre of a whorl of green males. Gender and sex are big deals in the plant world.

All three species of large ferns and several others form beautiful clusters in my three-plus-acre woodland rhododendron-and-azalea garden, where I spend uncounted hours every spring, even though the blooming season extends into the middle of August. Although rhododendrons have no fragrance, the deciduous azaleas (the only kind hardy here) are fragrant beyond describing, especially the late-season varieties. The aroma of azaleas in the still morning air seems often to carry with it subtle hints of blueberry and bunchberry (one of two native dogwoods), which bloom simultaneously with the early and mid-season cultivars.

As I've mentioned before, this garden is the fulfilment of my childhood dream of having a magnificent garden of wild and cultivated plants living in harmony; my survival of the two liver transplants in January 2000 was the catalyst for its creation. Once I was well enough, my neighbour and good friend Joanne Nutter and I began the heavy work and sharing the enormous pleasure of lumbering, uprooting, burning, digging, planting, mulching, and watering, which still continues even though Joanne has retired and Joel MacPherson, another neighbour and good friend, has taken her place.

Although I won't know until the flowers begin to open this week, 2021 seems like it will be a banner year. The flower bud set on both the rhododendrons and azaleas is nothing short of formidable and I've been able to keep at bay both ruffed grouse (who eat the azalea flower buds) and deer (who like both azaleas and rhododendron flower buds).

Please imagine me on the tiny balcony high on the back of my barn with a cup of coffee and a camera, photographing the scene below as the first rays of sunshine stream through the soft light of dawn, spotlighting one blossom after another.

For more spring flowers, click on [TREES AND SHRUBS](#).



Rhododendrons with interrupted ferns



Brio



Virginia Delp

“When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world. We were created to be creators. At its deepest heart, creativity is meant to serve and evoke beauty. When this desire and capacity comes alive ... difficulty becomes invitation and rather than striving against the grain of our nature, we fall into rhythm with its deepest urgency and passion.

The time is now for beauty to surprise us and liberate us.” *John O’Donohue’*

“...we need constant reminding that we have been operators of computers for a single generation and workers in neon-lit offices for three or four, but we were farmers for five hundred generations, and before that hunter-gatherers for perhaps fifty thousand or more, living with the natural world as part of it as we evolved, and the legacy cannot be done away with.”

Michael McCarthy



We frequently encounter sharp contradictions, such as that between the passionate life of the Irish ex-priest and writer John O'Donohue (page 3,) who cared profoundly about the creative process, and the lives of those who are stuck in their biases. Another priest, the Franciscan Richard Rohr, whose daily meditations are read around the world by people of all faiths and none, recently addressed this matter directly when he described these biases.

Complexity Bias: Our brains prefer a simple falsehood to a complex truth.

Confidence Bias: I am attracted to confidence, even if it is false. I often prefer the bold lie to the hesitant truth.

Confirmation Bias: We don't see things as they are. We see the things we want to see, the things that confirm our assumptions and our preferred way of looking at the world.

Both O'Donohue and Rohr, an increasing number of theologians, and many who prefer non-theological language think of evolution not only as the universe evolving, but of God who is coming to be. If a person conceives of God as All That Is, then we all live in God and God lives in each of us (and in every quantum, cell, organism, planet, and galaxy). In other words, everything is God, so you can also say that God is in everything, not outside somewhere, because there is no outside.

Or, if you prefer, you can say that everything is Creation and everything is part of the creative process. Creation creates – constantly, non-stop, all the time – which is not to say that it doesn't make false starts and get stuck now and then. We all know of examples, though few of us would think to include our negative biases (such as those above) as evolutionary dead ends. Do these biases serve Creation or God in any way?

The evolution of God is a hard concept for many people to get their head around. It flies in the face of the dogmas of too many religions and sects, especially those who think of God as being outside of Creation, though keeping a sharp eye on things, mind you.

Having presented these ideas, I'm going to leave them there. Each of you can cogitate about God, creativity, and biases as long as you like, or not at all.

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There's a new on-line monthly photography magazine I'd like to recommend. It's ELEMENTS, and focuses on artistic, elegant landscape photography.

ELEMENTS has clean, image-centred design, carefully curated photography, engaging, professionally edited editorials and articles. You can look forward to seeing the fine images of many well-known photographers, including Bruce Barnbaum, Christopher Burkett, Erin Babnik, William Neill, Rachael Talibart, Ned Pratt, Hans Strand, and many others. Strand's images in the first issue, March 2021, are brilliantly seen and his aerials are simply "beyond the beyond." (On a personal note, I expect to be contributing four times a year.)

Published and edited in Vancouver, BC by Olaf Sztaba and Steven Friedman, who have earned their stripes with the on-line Medium Format Magazine – specialising in medium and large format photography – that has featured the work of such notable image makers as Edward Burtynsky, Michael Kenna, Clyde Butcher, and Nick Brant.

See www.elementsphotomag.com. Special 10% discount code **FREEMAN10** for readers of this periodical letter.

I'm always appreciative of readers who let me know of a book, film, or website that may be of especial interest to me and possibly to others. Here is part of a beautiful, personal statement from Mike Bachman: "... the latest book by American botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass. Kimmerer's scientific knowledge, interwoven with the sensibilities, insights, and wisdom of her indigenous ancestors, has had a profound impact on me. Her poetic style has brought tears of joy and tears of sadness; her passion for the 'gifts of nature,' an inspiration. As my hiking friend taught me her language for hiking, so Kimmerer has taught me her language of the land."

On reading the book myself, Kimmerer engaged me deeply almost without my being aware of it. She releases the sweep of her knowledge about Earth and its gifts gently, lovingly. Kimmerer lives in Fabius, New York, where she is SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment.

Daniel Benn told me about Factfulness by the professor of international health Hans Rosling and his son and daughter-in-law, Ola and Anna. This highly-informative book contains eleven chapters, on topics such as "The Negativity Instinct," "The Fear Instinct," and "The Generalization Instinct" that deal with the reasons we're wrong about the world and why things are better than we think. Very readable and quite entertaining at times!

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"Knowledge does not dispel mystery."

Nan Shepherd (Scottish mountaineer)

LINGUISTIC DESIGN/ VISUAL DESIGN

In order to pay for my university education I worked at a variety of temporary jobs. One that I held during my junior and senior years was marking essays of first-year students for an English professor. At the same time I was beginning to develop a keen interest in photography. So, I guess it's quite natural that I've long been aware of the parallels between the design of language and those of visual design, especially the main parallel, which is that both have major and minor building blocks that we arrange in various ways to communicate.

Languages are composed of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, etc., whereas two-dimensional visual media (e.g., photography, drawing, and painting) consist of lines, shapes, perspective, textures, etc. (Please note that I say "shape" not "form," as form applies more appropriately to three-dimensional creations, such as sculptures.)

Right from the beginning I noticed that in both language and visuals "abstracting" or "seeing the basic building blocks" is fundamental to clear, effective expression. However, this perception was strongly reinforced in graduate school, when I enrolled in extra-curricular classes in photography and visual design.

Of course, I had learned in elementary school that a "noun" is a name word and a "verb" is an action word. We use the concept of noun to include all particular name words (such as moon, carrot, Elsie, and car). The same goes for the concept of verb or action word.

In those extra classes I quickly came to realize that in the visual world, which includes both the visible world around us and pictures of every sort, we have to recognize the character and qualities of each building block in order to use it well.

Take line, for example. Is a line straight or curving? What is the line's orientation (vertical, horizontal, oblique, diagonal?) What is its direction, its length, and its thickness? We also have to consider the expressive qualities of shape – those of the primary shapes (circle, equilateral triangle, and square) and those of the secondary ones (rectangle, oval, trapezoid, etc.) When making a photograph it's easy to change a circle into an oval, for instance, simply by altering the camera's position, which will affect how viewers respond to the image.

Also, between my undergraduate and graduate schools, I became highly sensitized to the fact that in order to communicate information or to express a feeling or mood there are useful principles of arranging the building blocks that are common to visual and linguistic creations (both written and spoken ones.) Among them are position (of a shape in a picture or a word in a sentence,) emphasis/de-emphasis (controlled by such things as size, colour, and tone in a picture, by loudness and speed of delivery in speech or by word placement and punctuation in written language.) These are just two of the useful considerations or guidelines of composition.

All of this is a roundabout way of my telling you something about my interest in the speed with which language changes – for better and for worse.

Away back in the days of the Watergate hearings, which heralded the end of Richard Nixon's presidency, John Dean (who had been called to testify) uttered the words "at this moment in time," which have been in common use in English ever since. Tell me, where else can a moment be, if not in time? If I'd been marking John Dean's essays, I'd have circled "in time" and written "redundant" beside it. Thank heaven, Dean didn't exclaim "at this moment in time" and at this place in space."

A huge decline in good composition came with the digital age - in both photographs and language, certainly in English. My photographic teaching partner, André Gallant, and I were initially quite taken back by how careless digital camera owners were with composition compared with people still using film. The reason clearly seemed to be that if you used film, you had to “get it right in the camera.” On the other hand, persons using digital capture often remarked, “Oh, I’ll fix it later in Photoshop!” even though you can’t “fix” in Photoshop what you didn’t see in the first place. (Although I use Photoshop regularly, to this day I compose my pictures in camera as if it doesn’t exist. A good example is my photograph on page one.)

Simultaneously, with the advent of computer spellcheckers, other digital linguistic “checkers,” and with texting fewer and fewer people have come to depend on learning basic language skills. The result, of course, is that even the checkers are frequently wrong or lacking basic information in grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure, because they depend entirely on human input that itself may be erroneous. It’s not quite “garbage in, garbage out,” though often it seems that way.

For example, when I type “Several are going; none are staying home,” my computer does not catch the error. *“None” is singular; it means “not one.” Would you write “Not one are staying home?” or “Are George sick?”* Next example: “She has more money than me.” Alas, my computer didn’t catch that either. *The sentence means “She has more money than I have.”* So, let’s try, “I want twelve items or less.” Again, my computer failed its English test. *It should have told me “twelve items or fewer.”* All those signs in supermarket checkout lines are incorrect. “Less” correctly applies to mass, “fewer” to separate things. *For example, “I’m eating less food these days, especially fewer processed items.”* A language is an expressive tool because such distinctions are observed, which doesn’t rule out useful changes.

Although I could easily provide several pages of current examples in which English is poorly or incorrectly used, I’d like to mention one word that has come into common use recently: “multiple.” I recall two items from the same newscast a year ago. One was about the terrible series of shootings in Nova Scotia, which spoke of multiple murders. (There were 22.) The other was about multiple injuries in a traffic accident. (Three people were injured.) I was left guessing in both cases. “Multiple” has become meaningless, because we now use it to indicate any number over one. It’s become a good way to be vague or to withhold information. I’ve certainly noticed how often police spokespersons make use of the term.

Long ago English developed more useful terms for “multiple,” such as “a few,” “several,” “numerous,” and “many.” They’re still far better choices.

Quite a number of people may feel like saying to me, “Oh, get over it! Don’t be so ‘anal.’ Everybody understands what you mean.” Although this may be generally true, I don’t see the advantages of doing anything poorly that you can do well, unless you’re under some sort of duress, whether it’s playing a musical instrument, creating a garden, making a quilt, building a house, driving a car, or composing a picture or a sentence.

Although nobody can ever become perfect at any craft, it makes good sense to me to aim higher rather than lower, to become fluent rather than merely functional, and frankly it’s much more satisfying.

“Be obscure clearly.”

E. B. White

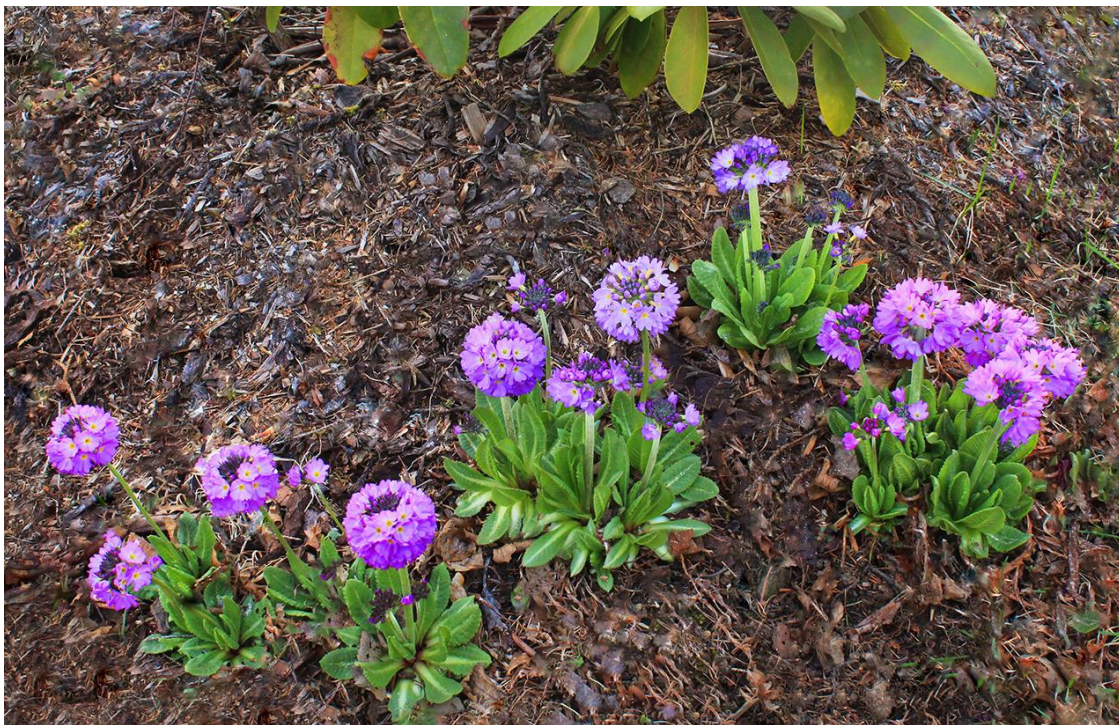
To change media, I've found that I get the same sort of charge from preparing healthy meals as I do from gardening, writing, and making pictures. Experimenting "turns me on."

Because I have a large freezer, I've gone grocery shopping once every two or three weeks during the pandemic, usually to the supermarket that carries the largest selection of fresh vegetables and fruits. I rarely have a list prepared in advance, often selecting vegetables that have reached their "best before date" and are marked down by 50%. It's a treasure hunt! Among my favourite "finds" are aubergine (eggplant), bok choy, and sweet peppers.

Back home I set about cooking many of them during the next couple of days, freezing cooked leafy vegetables, and making no end of soups and purées with nearly everything else. With the occasional exception of a small toaster oven, I've used only two microwaves for the past 35 years, which means that I cook all my vegetables with no water or a teaspoonful at most. The veggies steam in their own juice and thus retain maximum nutrition.

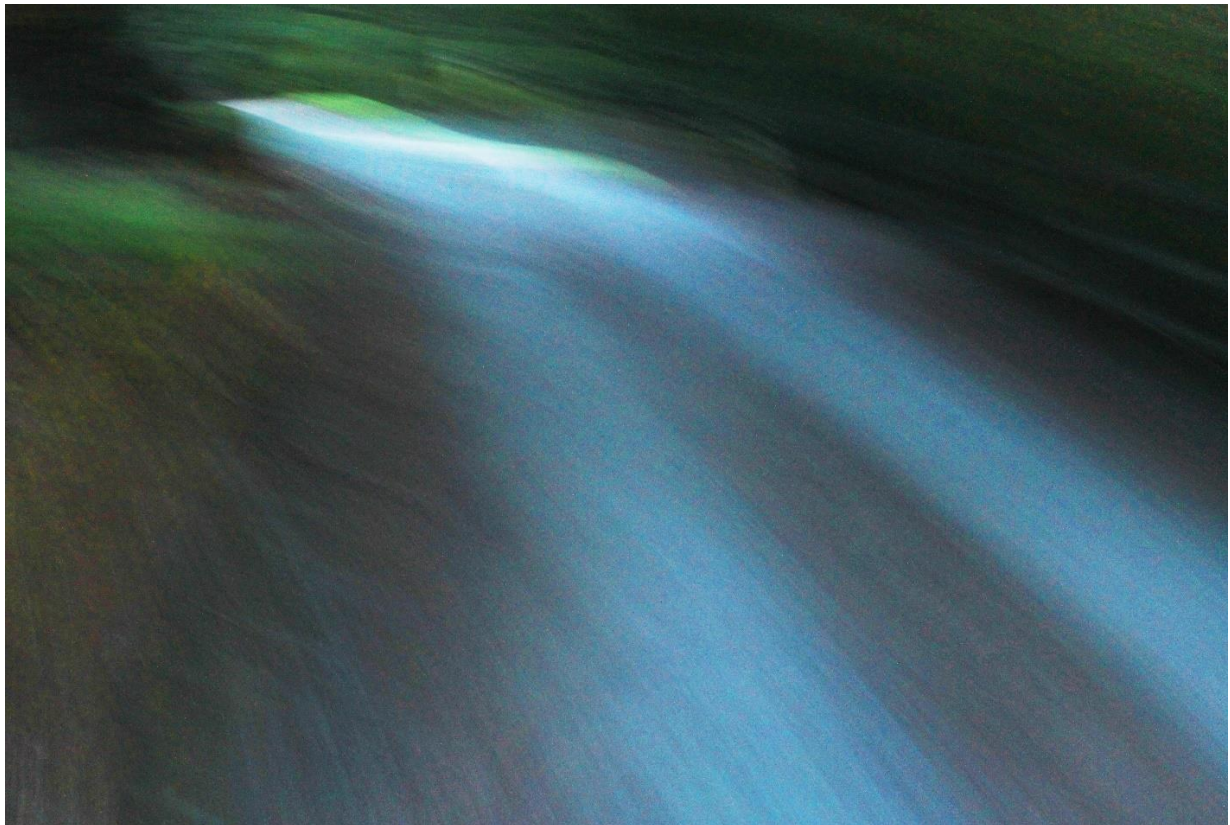
Last week I hit the jackpot with bok choy, a large container of organic guacamole, and several of organic cashew spread, all on offer at 50% off. After I'd sliced off and cooked the green tops of the bok choy for future use, I blissed out on a small plate of the white leaf stalks, dipping one after another into both the cashew spread and the guacamole. I followed this with a bowl of thick, creamy sweet potato and ginger soup. My dessert was a delicious purée of mangos, bananas, and rhubarb blended to smoothness with a little whole milk and a big dash of rose water. Few meals could have more flavour and nutrition!

Rose water, by the way, is to the Middle East what vanilla is to North America. There's always a large bottle in my cupboard. If you really want to "wow" your friends, top up a blueberry or rhubarb cake or a strawberry short cake with a generous helping of whipped cream to which you've added some rose water and just a little sugar.



In Canada, it's the time of year when motorcyclists "hit the road" sometimes riding in formation, but always alone for the richest experience. The sensuous magnificence of spring wafts over your whole body as you crest a hill or make a long roll into a deep valley. The temperature rises and falls, the wind rushes and eases with the throttle, odours foul are swept off the olfactory menu by the fragrance of apple and cherry blossoms ... and on you ride. Pierre Racine of Montréal knows the feeling. He sent me the following quotation.

"Transcendence, as I use it here, is a state of awareness in which the passage of time seems to slow and one feels more connected to some kind of universal consciousness. It's the sensation of being more in sync and merged into one's surroundings. In this state, one feels simultaneously very relaxed and very alert. This duality is not normally a part of our everyday lives, but it is such a satisfying feeling that many people seek the experience by practicing meditation, yoga, and similar kinds of activities. Motorcycle riding provides this same type of concurrent relaxed and alert engagement because the rider is unconsciously always busy, physically and mentally concentrating on guiding the machine, while simultaneously consciously experiencing the environment in ways which affect the overall nature of each ride. The result of such complex stimulation seems to be a transcendent experience which, at the conclusion of each ride, usually leaves the rider calmer, more focused, and in a notably refreshed state." Paul Rosenau





May the season bless you with warmth, with flowers, with hope and possibilities, and most of all with love.

Que la saison vous bénisse de chaleur, de fleurs, d'espoir et de possibilités, et surtout d'amour.

Mag die seisoen jou seën met jou warmte, met blomme, met hoop en moontlikhede, en die meeste van alles met liefde.

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