

IMAGES, IDEAS and REFLECTIONS

Periodical letter #4
from
FREEMAN PATTERSON



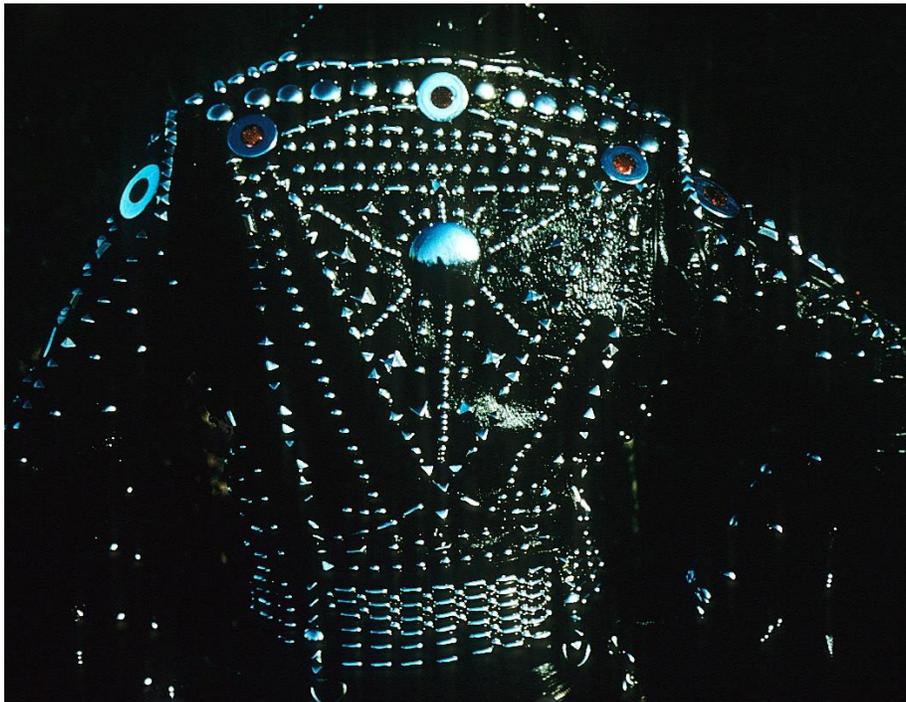
Graffiti art, Christchurch, NZ, a large area constantly changing until the structures were torn down by the city.

In my September newsletter, I referred to parallels between the symbols in our dreams and symbols that appear in our art, whatever that art form may be. I have never heard or read a discussion of this subject in photographic circles and only rarely among artists working in other media. Yet, it seems to me, there are few topics we can explore more usefully, as we humans use symbols constantly in virtually every aspect of our lives. (Most mammals and birds do as well.)

Take dress, for example. The fashion industry would not exist if the creations did not become almost instant symbols of what's "in" and what's "hot." In fact, most of the time most of us choose clothes which are not merely functional, but which also represent who we feel we are in some sort of fundamental way, sometimes even when choosing our "work clothes." In other words, we usually wear a costume. We do this both consciously and unconsciously.

One of the most common clothing symbols today is deliberately ripped or torn jeans, which make no functional sense whatever, but obviously possess psychological value for a huge number of people, not all of them young. Like all symbols, ripped jeans represent or "stand for" something entirely beyond themselves, and the people who use this symbol expect that its meaning for them will be understood by the people who matter to them. However, even when we recognize and admit to ourselves what we are trying to communicate with the symbol(s) we have chosen, we often fail utterly to recognize what we actually communicate.

The heavily-studded leather motorcycle jacket in the following photograph, which I made years ago, is probably a good example. I didn't have the slightest hesitation in asking the biker who was wearing it if I could make some photographs of it, because anybody who has gone to so much careful work to stud a leather jacket obviously wants to be noticed. He is delivering a message, just not in words. The intended message, though not one the guy would probably admit, is "I'm hyper-male, a rough guy, full of animal instincts," or variations on the theme, but the message I received was "I'm insecure." As a motorcyclist myself, I'm aware that the original reason for studding leather jackets was to add protection in case of a spill. However, I did not get the impression that this chap was overly concerned about improving the safety capability of his riding apparel. His "art" had another purpose.





Neither did I feel that this friendly young man (above) was aware that his symbols carried a double meaning. However, they worked for him, as he felt that they projected the persona he wanted.

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Art, like the dream, is an emotionally loaded form of communication conducted through the use of symbols.

Anthony Stevens

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So, what about the symbols in our dreams and the symbols in our art? Why are they important and why and how are they connected? Perhaps the most helpful – and most honest – way to consider this question is simply to speak personally. Let’s consider dream symbols first.

Around my 30th birthday I was experiencing an emotional problem for which I sought professional help and was referred to an elderly psychiatrist who worked with dreams. Twice a month for the next nine months the good doctor began each appointment with the same question: “Well, do you have any dreams or dream fragments you’d like to tell me about?” I soon learned that once I started paying serious attention to my dreams my recall improved dramatically. (This is a common experience.) After nine months (18 meetings) of discussing my night-time adventures and what they possibly revealed about my waking life, I had an extremely powerful dream that was accompanied by wave after wave of euphoria entering my body at my toes, sweeping upward through my entire body, and departing through the top of my head. When I told the doctor about it, he asked “What are your

thoughts about this dream?" I replied immediately, but with a little embarrassment, "Regrettably, I don't think I need to see you anymore." And he responded, "You are absolutely correct! That dream is the final passing of guilt. You will never be bothered by this problem again." And I never have been!!!

In addition to dealing successfully with a significant emotional problem, there was another huge gift; at a relatively young age I had learned the value of dream work, which ever since has played an important role in my life. Here's Anthony Stevens again.

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If sleeping and dreaming do not perform vital biological functions, then they must represent Nature's most stupid blunder and most colossal waste of time. When an animal is asleep it cannot protect itself from predators, cannot forage for food, cannot procreate, and defend its territory or its young. Yet for over 130 million years, despite enormous evolutionary changes, sleeping and dreaming have persisted in large numbers of species.

Anthony Stevens

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Why are symbols in our art (photography, painting, sculpture, music, gardening, etc.) also important? Well, not all of them are! There really are two ways symbols appear in our art: 1/ those that we deliberately choose as the result of a conscious decision and 2/ those over which we have little or no conscious control; they appear spontaneously. These symbols are far more revealing, because they tell our story without filters, and the longer we photograph or paint the more they have to tell.

In the work of all serious artists both the subject matter and the artist's approach to the chosen subject matter changes – sometimes slowly, almost imperceptibly, or more swiftly, sometimes abruptly. Go back through a decade of your images or farther back, if you can. You may discover that some things seem pretty much the same, yet at the same time be amazed at how much has changed. Both the constants and the changes are symbols of you. They show you (and others) if you have been stuck in a rut and for how long and they document your spurts or sustained periods of personal growth.

Several times during my long career as a photographer, I have been "seized" by certain subject matter, literally rendered emotionally incapable of not photographing it passionately. After the first couple of times this happened, I came to realize that the situation or objects were functioning for me as powerful symbols, even if I could not comprehend what they represented. I also learned to "photograph my heart out," in other words not to try to figure out rationally why I was so affected, but to make pictures until I was emotionally exhausted, which in the most powerful experience took three weeks. The intensity of my feeling was similar to that of the euphoria I had felt in the dream nearly half a century earlier, only this time it lasted a lot longer.

It happened in Paran, a small agricultural community in Israel's Arava desert, well south of the Dead Sea, where I was teaching three five-day workshops in January 2016. Just a kilometre from the classroom hundreds and hundreds of fabric greenhouses spread across the desert, most of them housing peppers being grown for the European market, but a few were temporarily empty. I visited the greenhouses with each workshop group; some participants were quite turned on, others had a so-so reaction, and a few seemed downright bored. On the other hand, I could not get enough of them. Every spare moment I went back alone, and between workshops I was there at crack of dawn, high noon, and sunset. I felt "possessed," but I had no idea why. So, I just kept on shooting.

Although I deleted some images in the camera, I returned to Canada with well over 3000. In my first edit I selected about 750 "keepers." All of these were technically good images with satisfactory composition, but also exerted some emotional pull on me. I eliminated 500 of these in my second edit,

retaining only those that “spoke” to me in a compelling way. However, I still did not know what was “going on.” I could not grasp the “why.” In the third edit, I decided to choose only those photographs that I wanted my print agent to see, so we could discuss them. This was a tough, but very exciting project, and I eventually brought the number of photographs down to 78. I looked at this distillation over and over and, finally, I began to recognize the meaning of the symbol.

My final, highly personal selection was eight images from all those that I had made. They were enough for me. They told my story. My Unconscious had used the fabric greenhouses as symbols to describe the story of my illness, how extremely close I had come to death, and (the two liver transplants that led to) my recovery to full health. I have never been able to express it as effectively with words. You can see a picture of the location and my eight “story” photographs in sequence by clicking on [FABRIC](#).

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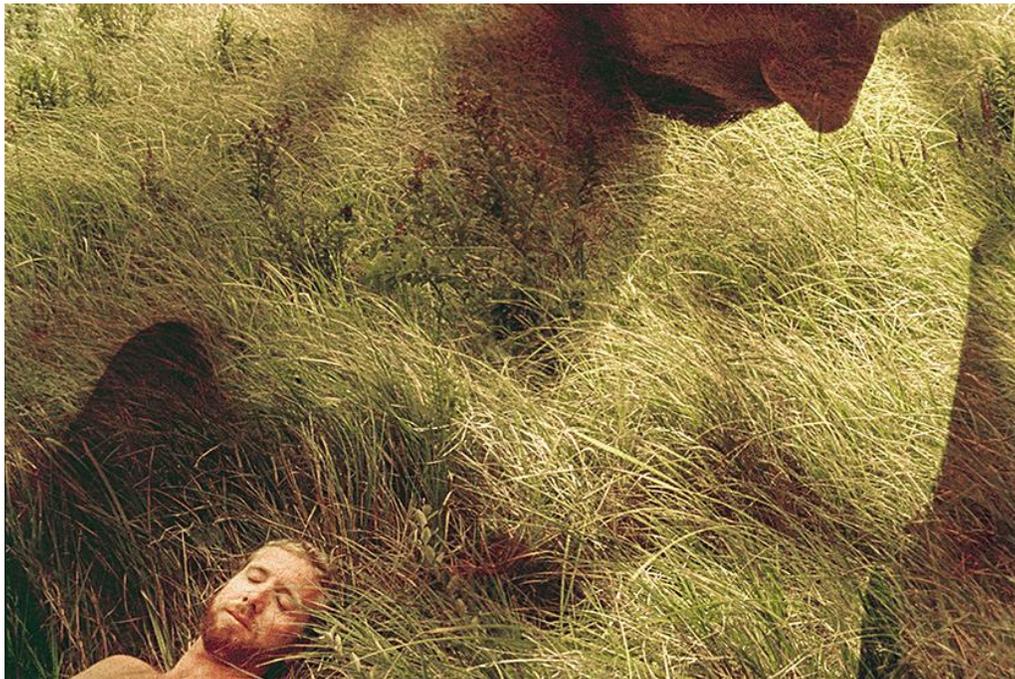
Three excellent books about dreaming, dreams, and working with dreams

Johnson, Robert A. (Harper Collins, 1986) **Inner Work** – very readable, superb book for “the curious, “beginners,” and everybody else, especially the first two sections.

Stevens, Anthony (Harvard University Press, 1995) **Private Myths** – a classic work on dreams, their connection to myths, and how dreams connect us with what makes us human.

Taylor Jeremy (Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Penguin, 2009) **The Wisdom of Your Dreams** (updated and augmented from the original **Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill**) – provides important basic information about what dreams “come” to tell us and much, much more.

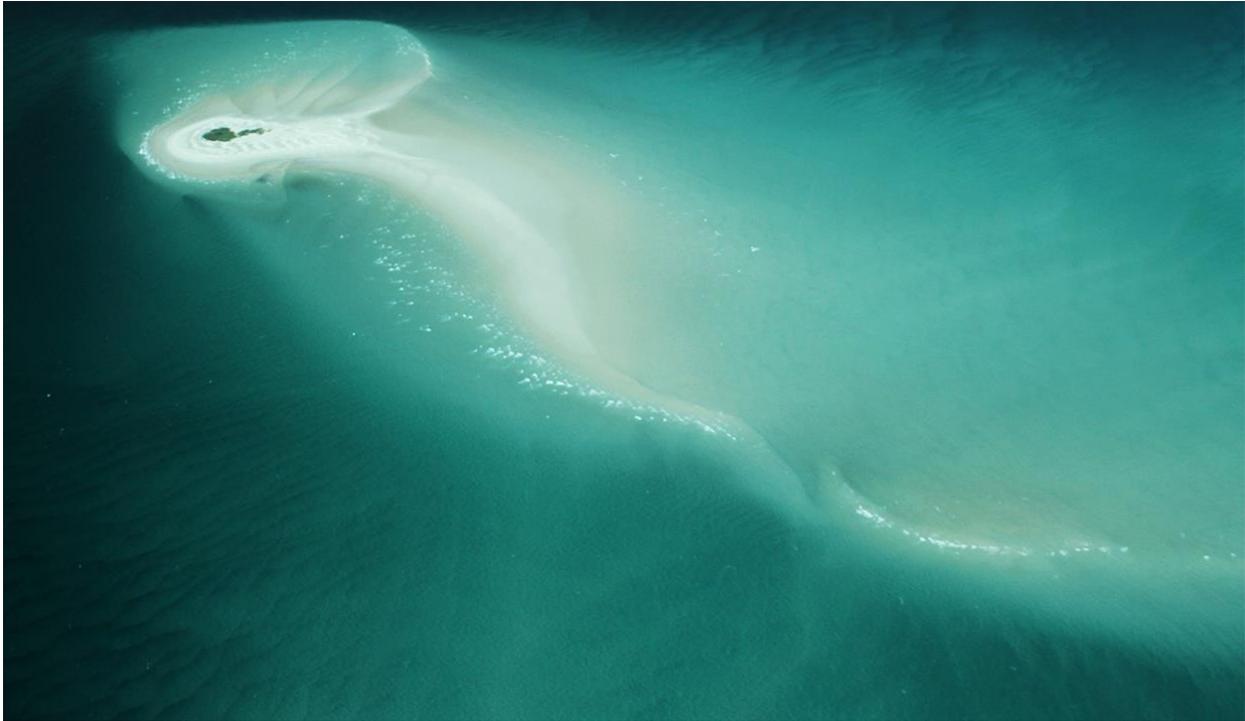
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“... traces of the sacred are everywhere before our eyes ... our task ... is to find these sacred moments, hallow them with our attention, and raise them up as a celebration of the mystery of life. We must take the time to stop and listen, knowing that the voice of the spirit speaks more often in a whisper than a shout.”

Kent Nerburn

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An aerial view of somewhere, the Great Barrier Reef



Along the shore of Lady Elliot Island, the Great Barrier Reef

When you receive this, I'll be in or near Wentworth Falls in Australia's Blue Mountains (west of Sydney), giving a five-day workshop and other photographic presentations and staying with my good friends Sue Lightfoot and Robyn Auld, who were with me at Shamber's Bluff for a lovely long stay in July. (It was lovely for me, that's for sure!) I will also be enjoying a second spring this year and visiting and photographing a large rhododendron garden in Blackheath, near the workshop site.



Govett's Leap Lookout in the World Heritage Blue Mountains National Park, Australia

On my first visit to Australia, three months back in 1991, I had the enormous pleasure of two motorcycle tours – one of ten days on a BMW through the states of Victoria and South Australia, the other a memorable Harley-Davidson ride with fellow HOG (Harley Owners' Group) members, which began in Melbourne and ended there several days later but reached its zenith at the national HOG rally in Wellington, New South Wales on Easter week end. I'll never forget sitting on a bale of straw at the Wellington horse-racing track listening to an Easter morning service conducted by a Salvation Army chaplain clad in full black leather, heavy with chains and studs. Crazy, crazy! I loved it!

I still remember how important it was to start watching for kangaroos about four o'clock every afternoon, as this seemed to be about the time when they began to emerge from the shady spots where they had rested during the hottest parts of the day. And it was hot, often in the 40s on the BMW tour! Some days we stopped every half hour at a service station to drench our t-shirts in cold water; then we'd haul them on soaking wet and ride away, cooling off as the water evaporated. But, first, we also had to wash off the greenish gunk splattered all over the face shield of our helmets – the mortal remains of our frequent collisions with huge flying insects stuffed with a gargantuan lunch of leaves.



En route to the HOG rally, we stopped for a beer. After parking my bike (left), I made this picture for my memories.

One of the things I've always liked about motorcycling is the relative anonymity. It's such a sensual experience and such a diversion from daily life that nobody much talks about what she or he does for a living. It's only by chance that you eventually find out that the young woman on the sizzling scarlet Harley Softtail Custom is a nuclear physicist and the lanky guy on the black Road King, the best mechanic in the group, is a kindergarten teacher.

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COMING UP

Except for some intensive work in French, I'm looking forward to a couple of quiet months at home after I return from Australia. As a friend used to say, "I'm open to an unlimited number of cancellations."

The dates and information for my 2019 workshops in photography and visual design with André Gallant and the INSCAPE workshop with David Maginley – all at St. Martin's, New Brunswick – are posted on my website www.freemanpatterson.com, as is information about the April workshop (or 2 workshops) in Claude Monet's garden, Giverny, France, with Charles Needle. Every workshop this year seemed like a gift of creativity and friendship from the participants to the instructors, and I ended each week feeling enormously grateful for the privilege of genuine sharing on so many levels.

I want to add that I also greatly appreciate the many letters and notes I've received in response to these periodical letters. The letters provide me with an opportunity to converse with you in some depth about ideas and feelings that matter to me and seemingly to many of you, and for me it's the depth that counts. Thank you!

Have a HAPPY and a YUMMY! Best wishes, FREEMAN

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