

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #50

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from

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The collections of rocks on my large circular coffee table keeps getting rearranged, occasionally increasing or decreasing in number, or moving location. It's as if waves rolling up on the beaches from whence they came are still lifting and repositioning them. Sometimes I'm responsible of course, but sometimes I'm not. Others can no more resist playing the role of waves than I can.

Why, why, why?

I've never photographed the rocks on my coffee table, but rocks on a beach or in a desert are another matter altogether – huge ones, little ones, rocks of every size, shape, and colour. If rocks could speak every one would have a long, long story to tell. That story would be one of enormous pressure, stress, and unending change, unless of course the rock ended up on my coffee table or in a similar situation.

Is our fascination with rocks a visual one or the expression of their power as symbols?





Recently a friend brought me what is now the largest rock on my coffee table. It's more or less the shape of the rock in the picture above, but it's a conglomerate, a rock that's made up of various kinds of small rocks from various sources. My friend loves conglomerates and it really doesn't surprise me, because she's friends with people of every sort from all walks of life.

I had a very long fascination with circular rocks, like the one above. It was most pronounced during my forties and fifties, years when I was probably at the most goal-oriented time of my life. For people in virtually every culture circles are a symbol of centredness, wholeness, and goal-orientation, whether or not they are aware of the circle's symbolic power. In later life my photographic rock collection has become more diverse.





“Rocks are the storytellers of our planet’s history.” *Anon*

From the middle of May until the middle of July it's broad daylight here by around five o'clock and I'm up. I don't want to miss the most beautiful hours of the day and the most comfortable hours for gardening.

Between 2001 and 2020 my neighbour and good friend Joanne Nutter arrived on these long days about 4:45 a.m., we'd sit at my kitchen table with our cups of coffee, share our dreams of the night before for 15 minutes, and then we'd get to work digging, planting, watering, and doing the myriad other garden tasks one can never foresee.

One morning about 6:30 a brilliant double rainbow arched above the hills across the St. John River. I yelled to Joanne to come to my front deck, opened a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, and we sat and sipped our wine until the magnificent colours finally faded. Many days by ten o'clock we'd remark what a great day we'd had and soon afterwards call it quits. One day, though, we lingered for another hour on a garden bench to watch my first Himalayan blue poppy slowly unfold its petals, celebrating with a bottle of Merlot.

As the days begin to shorten and the temperatures cool I rise a little later and often take my cup of coffee to the large, reclining easy chair in a corner of my kitchen, where I cogitate upon the upcoming day. What do I need to do? What do I want to do?

One morning recently I pulled Daniel Levitin's incredibly informative, 400-page [SUCCESSFUL AGING](#) off the kitchen hutch, where I'd placed it the night before. Although I'd read the book before and remembered many of Levitin's observations and recommendations, I was happy for the review.

Levitin stresses the vital importance of three things in particular: 1/ Don't retire. Don't stop being engaged with meaningful work. 2/ Spend time with people younger than you. Keep your immediate social circle exciting and new. 3/ Exercise. Get your heart rate going – preferably in nature.

Levitin writes about the playwright Daniel Porter, who described the profound effects of immersing himself in nature during his final days of suffering from pancreatic cancer and the refocusing of his attention on immediate sensory experiences, a Zen-like state, pointing out what we so easily forget – the only thing we ever know for sure is the present tense.

Most days I get good exercise in my garden or other outdoor settings, cold winter days being the exception. I eat a very healthy, well-balanced diet, avoiding processed foods like the plague. And, for more than 50 years I've had a daily afternoon sleep of at least one hour. (Both my land line and my cell phone are turned off.) Coupled with six or seven hours of sleep at night, I make sure to get eight hours of sleep out of every 24. These are the three things I can easily do to support my health and well being.

Also, at my age it's easy to spend time with younger people. The other day I suddenly realized that I know only two men and five women older than I. Although all of us have this or that which doesn't function as well as it once did, basically we're in good health and find life as rich and fulfilling as it's ever been, if not more so.

I asked my oldest friend, who'll soon be 96, what she thinks about dying. She immediately replied, "Oh, I never think about it." Of course she doesn't, she's too busy doing things that matter to her.

That's our common story. Don't worry about the inevitable when there are so many good things to do that aren't inevitable, but depend on our doing them and enjoying them.

Even if I should live to a very old age, my time is short and to my enormous surprise I now feel like I'm on a great vacation.

The only other person left from my small high-school graduating class is my favourite classmate. She sat in the desk behind me in grades eleven and twelve and was forever poking me in my back with a pencil to let me know she wanted to pass me a note, which usually contained a message that left me doubled over my desk trying to keep my laughter to the level of little squeaks. Well, we've rediscovered each other and the experience is wonderful!

The other night during a game of Bridge she said she like to try cannabis. (It's been legal in Canada since 2018, and every now and then I'll put some favourite CDs on my player, munch on an infused brownie, and relax into an evening of music that fills the house and transports me to extraordinary auditory and visual realms.)

The cannabis per se is unimportant; my friend's attitude is what matters. One day before long she and I will take the last step of our long journeys able to say, "What a trip!"

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"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." *George Bernard Shaw*

"Listen to your body and use common sense." *Dr. Vivian McAlister*

"Growing old is mandatory, but growing up is optional." *Walt Disney*



PROJECT

Have you ever considered making a folder of your very favourite photographs – the ones that matter the most to you, images for which you'd like to be remembered? One day someone will be faced with the daunting task of having to decide what to do with all the photographs that survive you, unless you make the decisions for them.

Perhaps your response will be that, except for some family pictures, delete them all or toss them in the garbage. However, consider what will be lost.

Every photograph you make and especially those you keep says something about you – what you regard as beautiful, what you imagine, what you want to remember.

I opened such a folder a couple of years ago and, as of today, have 39 individual photographs in it and a sub-folder of eight closely-related images. That's 47 so far, and if I live long enough and make enough pictures that matter to me, maybe I'll have 100 in the folder. However, I don't want to exceed that number by sacrificing my own standards and including any "almosts." This project has turned out to be a tough editing tool.

The previous image is one of the two most recent additions to my folder.

AUTUMN

Autumn here is an attenuated season, beginning in late September and stretching on to late November. Like spring it has a grand crescendo, an absolute riot of colour, and then it moves through a long period of desaturated secondary hues punctuated here and there by a lingering primary. I love this time of slow movement toward winter, and I'll probably write about it and show images in my next letter, but here's what comes first.





QUESTION

Here's a photograph that I'd put in an exhibition, but never expect to sell. It's another recent addition to my lifetime favourites folder – not because it's beautiful, but because when I made it and every time I look at it, I feel punched in the gut.

From my childhood I've been aware of men's oppression of women – often subtle, frequently violent, government policy in Afghanistan, but overt to varying degrees in every country around the world. Of course, it raises the question: "Why are men afraid of women?"



"A man came up to me and said, 'Don't you think you're too old to be running around the stage like that ... singing rock and roll?'"

'I don't know,' I said, 'Why don't you ask Mick Jagger?' " *Cher*

"In societies where men are truly confident of their own worth women are not merely tolerated, but valued." *Aung San Suu Kyi*

FAIR PAY

I have always charged \$500 for a ZOOM presentation to a group of any size. It's not based simply on the 75 minutes to two hours of the actual presentation, but on that and the weeks of work (sometimes months) that I've spent assembling and sequencing the images. This may include searching not only through my digital files, but also through hundreds or thousands of colour transparencies, scanning and then processing selected ones as digital images. Although it's usually a pleasure, there's also the time and expense of making the photographs in the first place. An informative program is not created in a rush or on the cheap, and I will have to present it several, often many times, before I have recouped a wage of \$20 per hour.

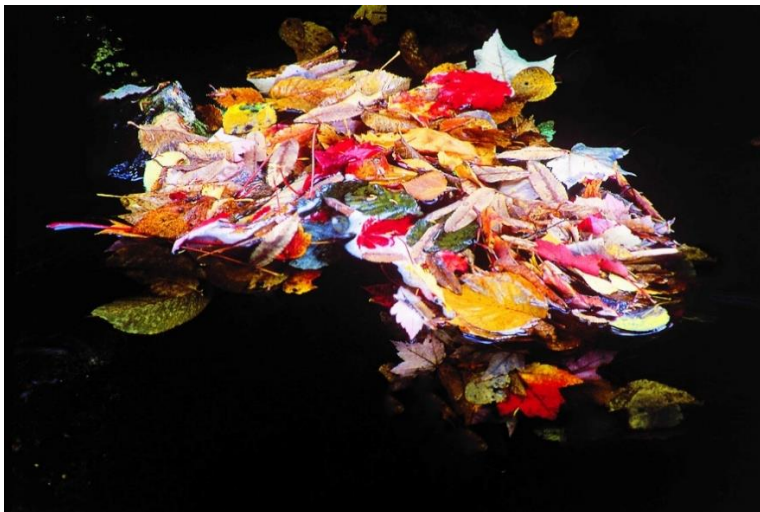
Most groups, including most camera clubs, understand the above. If they find my fee difficult to meet, they will partner with another group. One very small camera club worked with Event Brite, opened my ZOOM presentation to 200 persons, and not only paid me easily, but also cleared \$1000 for the club.

Do I make any exceptions? Yes, for the two groups to which I belong – Fundy Gardeners (a local garden club) and Kingston Peninsula Heritage (a local community-building organization for which I have enormous regard.)

Many photographers who are major resource people for camera clubs and other groups earn their living substantially or completely from photography in some way and should be shown the same understanding and respect when it comes to fair payment as a plumber, electrician, teacher, or other professional whose expertise has been acquired over many years.

*No sooner had I written the preceding paragraphs than I received a request from a national park in Atlantic Canada asking if could make a presentation on nature photography in its theatre. I'm sure the person who made the request receives remuneration far in excess of what I was offered. "I can offer to cover your mileage and **possibly provide a free night in an oTentik** (<https://parks.canada.ca/voyage-travel/hebergement-accommodation/otentik>)."*
I turned the offer down and stated why very clearly.

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Every now and then life surprises me with a moment, an hour, or a few days of unexpected beauty, or an experience of greater value than I had anticipated. This was the case during the last week of July when I was facilitating an Artists Retreat at Kingsbrae International Residency for the Arts in Kingsbrae Garden, St. Andrews, New Brunswick.

I knew basically what to expect, of course, as I know KIRA/Kingsbrae well and had planned the event. The number of participants is always small (six to eight persons and usually an accompanying spouse or two who join us for meals and occasionally at other times,) 24-hour-per-day access to the 27-acre garden and all the facilities of the magnificent refurbished mansion, our own chef, visits to artists' studios in the town, and late afternoon discussions about visual art on KIRA's huge wrap-around veranda with its comfortable white wicker chairs. Also, we spent two or more hours every morning in the garden classroom where both my programs and discussions of the participants' work were about WHY, not about HOW, about art, only occasionally about craft.

However, something more happened. A sense of community developed quickly among the nine of us, an openness, a frankness, an appreciation of each other. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I felt it strongly. It was evident in the fact that while six of the nine of us were either fluent or conversant in French, two spoke only English, and one spoke fluent French but limited English, conversations flipped easily between languages and those who were bilingual always endeavoured to make sure that nobody felt ignored or left out.

Of course the time passed too quickly, as such experiences always do, but its spiritual impact endures. I am deeply grateful.



Mom, Dad, and the kids



This letter has a rocky beginning and a rocky ending. I hope you don't mind.

Beste wense, almal

À tous, mes meilleurs vœux

My best wishes to all

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