

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #40
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from
FREEMAN PATTERSON



From a commercial flight over Australia's Great Barrier Reef

I always ask the participants in the Artists Retreats at K.I.R.A/Kingsbrae Garden, St. Andrews, to bring 15-20 images with them and be prepared to tell the group why they matter. Or to put it another way, “Please explain the impetus, feeling, or motivation for your creations, not the tools or techniques you used to create them.”

This is not always an easy thing to do – for the simple reason that feelings, however intense, can’t always be easily explained in rational terms. Sometimes the photograph (or other art work) is the best articulation, conveying what words never can. Other times the feeling or reason that matters to us is shrouded in mystery. We simply don’t know why we feel the way we do.

For the last morning of this year’s second retreat I decided to select and show 15 images that matter to me, discovering in the process how difficult a task I had set. So, for future retreats, I’ll ask participants to bring 15 or 20 photographs that matter to them, but to talk only about those that they want or can. Otherwise, they can simply let the image express itself, knowing that every viewer comes to the viewing with his or her own life experiences, which will influence their response.

Several of the images in this letter are from the group I showed to the participants in the last retreat. If you don’t recognize the subject matter in some of them, remember that the question to ask is not “What is it?,” but “How do I feel about it?” I won’t attempt to explain why any of them matters to me.



From a private flight over the Bay of Fundy shore near St. Martins, New Brunswick, at low tide.



CHRIS HARRIS and his dad G.J. “CHIC” HARRIS

Photographers

I know or know the work of so many superb photographers from across Canada and, indeed, from around the globe that I refrain from writing about any, as selecting some to write about would necessarily mean leaving out others for whom I have enormous regard. However, I'm making a rare exception for reasons that will soon become apparent to you.

Chris Harris lives on the other side of Canada from me in 108 Mile House, British Columbia, but in important ways the distance is very short.

Let me quote Chris' artist's statement:

“My path as a photographic artist has been defined by three influences: my origins in a family of artists, from whom I draw my aesthetic sense; my passion for adventure and exploration in the wilderness of British Columbia, discovering with every foray into the back country more about who I am, and an equally passionate drive to share with others the beauty I find there and the truth it leads me to.

Friend and poet, John O'Donohue wrote: ‘When the soul is alive to beauty we begin to see life in a fresh and vital way.’

With a vitality for life, and a remembrance of the sacred in beauty, photography is my way of inspiring an ethic of respect for the generous Planet that is our sustenance, and our first beauty.

Hauling my camera gear has always been worth the extra effort. Live life with passion.”

Chris' statement is a teaser, a strong hint of why I want to tell you about him. But, before I write more, let me tell you about his dad, “Chic,” who was a dear friend.

Chic Harris, born in England, was a chemical engineer who lived and worked much of his life in Quebec, retired at about 65, and took up photography “as a hobby” early in his retirement. However, his hobby almost immediately became a creative passion and his excitement an inspiration for others. Well before his death at the age of 88 Chic had published two books with his good friend “Doc” Tardif. However, there was so much more to Chic than these simple statements of fact encapsulate.

Chic's contribution to my life was enormous. After Chic enrolled for the second time in my earliest workshops at Shampers' Bluff, his love for photography and the joy he found in being with and helping other photographers was so apparent that I simply invited him to come as often as he liked, and he came often.

Of my many happy memories of Chic, three always come flooding back. The first was of Chic returning from a field trip, his car packed with other photographers (all women) and him, looking particularly sexy with his flowing white hair and dark glasses – grinning from ear to ear through the open car window.

The second was his daily late afternoon ritual. Just before dinner I'd see Chic's tall, lanky figure holding a cup under the tap of the coffee urn – only no coffee ever flowed. Moments later with his cup in hand Chic would amble out to the kitchen and mix himself a Manhattan. I was the only person ever to “cotton on” to his ruse.

The third memory is from the last workshop Chic was able to attend, as he was having great difficulty walking. He brought with him his audio-visual program “Three Dreams,” a Carousel tray of 80 slides and a tape with three short, beautiful pieces of instrumental music. The subject matter was unrecognizable in all three slide sequences, but similar in its light tones and desaturated hues – everything non-representational or “abstract,” as we like to say.

Chic asked me if he might show the program to the workshop participants, but as I’d already seen “Three Dreams” more than once I knew what its impact would be and I knew how greatly Chic would endear himself to the participants during the week, so I told him that I’d like to save his presentation for the final day.

On the last afternoon Chic presented “Three Dreams,” the music ending with the 79th slide. In the momentary hush that followed, Chic spoke. “Here is where I made all the photographs,” he said, as he showed the 80th slide. It was a picture of his old, somewhat battered chrome, General Electric toaster.

To a person, the workshop participants rose and gave Chic a sustained standing ovation.

Chris Harris is now in his 80s. His involvement in photography began earlier than his dad’s and his pursuit of artistic expression, which is ultimately self expression, can best be described by one of my favourite phrases, “Onward and Upward!”

I find nothing more inspiring at this point in my own life than to witness somebody (and a photographer to boot) on a strong upward trajectory – learning, growing, excited with the possibilities that life offers, living passionately.

If you have yet to meet Chris, please go to his web site www.chrisharris.com. Above all, browse through some of his many newsletters. You’ll spend your time well.

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“You can learn new things at any time in your life, if you’re willing to be a beginner. If you learn to like being a beginner, the whole world opens up to you.” *Barbara Sher*



BOOKS

Has 2024 flown by for you, as it has for me? It's December, so soon, so soon, and I'd like to ease out of this year and into the next. It's time to pause. For me, as a Canadian, the short days and long nights are a tremendous inducement to settle into my comfortable reading chair and, fortunately, friends have been showering me with book suggestions. Recently I ordered a whack of titles. Here are a couple of them that I'm already reading.

[Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI](#) by Yuval Noah Harari. *(The following is the Amazon description)* From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Sapiens* comes the groundbreaking story of how information networks have made, and unmade, our world.

"For the last 100,000 years, we Sapiens have accumulated enormous power. But despite all our discoveries, inventions, and conquests, we now find ourselves in an existential crisis. The world is on the verge of ecological collapse. Misinformation abounds. And we are rushing headlong into the age of AI—a new information network that threatens to annihilate us. For all that we have accomplished, why are we so self-destructive?"

"*Nexus* looks through the long lens of human history to consider how the flow of information has shaped us and our world. Taking us from the Stone Age, through the canonization of the Bible, early modern witch hunts, Stalinism, Nazism, and the resurgence of populism today, Yuval Noah Harari asks us to consider the complex relationship between information and truth, bureaucracy and mythology, wisdom and power. He explores how different societies and political systems throughout history have wielded information to achieve their goals, for good and ill. And he addresses the urgent choices we face as non-human intelligence threatens our very existence."

I've never read a book of greater relevance.

[An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us](#) is "a thrilling tour of the radically different ways that animals perceive the world that will fill you with wonder and forever alter your perspective, by Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist Ed Yong is top of everybody's best books of 2023," including that of my friend Anne Taylor.

"The Earth teems with sights and textures, sounds and vibrations, smells and tastes, electric and magnetic fields. But every animal is enclosed within its own unique sensory bubble, perceiving but a tiny sliver of an immense world. This book welcomes us into a previously unfathomable dimension—the world as it is truly perceived by other animals.

"We encounter beetles that are drawn to fires, turtles that can track the Earth's magnetic fields, fish that fill rivers with electrical messages, and humans that wield sonar, like bats. We discover that a crocodile's scaly face is as sensitive as a lover's fingertips, that the eyes of a giant squid evolved to see sparkling whales, that plants thrum with the inaudible songs of courting bugs, and that even simple scallops have complex vision. We learn what bees see in flowers, what songbirds hear in their tunes, and what dogs smell on the street.

"In *An Immense World*, author and acclaimed science journalist Ed Yong coaxes us beyond the confines of our own senses, allowing us to perceive the skeins of scent, waves of

electromagnetism, and pulses of pressure that surround us. Because in order to understand our world, we don't need to travel to other places; we need to see through other eyes.”

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There is a caveat to devoting so much time to reading, however; it's known as “physical exercise.” Last winter I thought I was getting sufficient exercise, but my return to the garden in April proved me wrong. So, this year I'm off to the gym three days a week once the snow keeps me out of my garden.

“Fitness is not about being better than someone else; it's about being better than you used to be. *Anon.*”

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WORDS

Have you ever noticed how often we say what we don't mean?

A common example of this is "I'm sorry to hear about all the trouble you've had," or "I'm sorry to hear that Mary or Joe has passed away," or something like that. When somebody says this to me, I've taken to replying, "I'm sorry! I apologize for having told you," because they've just told me that they don't want to hear my bad news.

Perhaps the most common example of all is the reply to "How are you?" Nine times out of ten the answer will be "Good" or "Good, thanks." Every now and then I can't resist remarking, "I'm not inquiring about your moral condition; how's your physical health?"

Then, there's the matter of superlatives. My first editor, Susan Kiil, warned me about using "wonderful," because it no longer means "full of wonder" and has become so generalized in its meaning that it carries little significance. Of course, I immediately realized that we'd long ago reversed the original meaning of "awe-full," and had already set about destroying the meaning of "awesome" by regularly using the word in trivial ways. For example, the other day when I gave my lunch order to the waiter at the local pub, he replied "Awesome!" There was nothing awesome about it, of course, nothing whatever. What did he mean? Perhaps, "Thank God, you've finally made up your mind!" Anyway, I'm still considering a list of possibilities.

A friend said to me recently that she's going to scream the next time somebody says something is "amazing," when it clearly isn't. And, I shudder every time somebody uses the word "multiple" when it's use provides me with no indication as to whether the person is speaking of "a few," "several," "numerous," or "many," all of which are also imprecise but at least give some indication of the number of items, incidents, or persons being referenced. In common speech "multiple" has now come to mean "more than one." It tells us nothing more. When you want to be vague, "multiple" is a good word to use.

The design of languages and pictures (of every sort) have a great deal in common. Both have building blocks, which we usually call "parts of speech" when we are discussing or learning a language.

The main building blocks of linguistic design are the noun and verb. Give a person a noun and a verb and she can make a statement or ask a question. Some other building blocks are the adjective, adverb, preposition, and conjunction.

The main building blocks of two-dimensional visual design (photographs and drawings, for instance) are line and shape. Other important ones are texture and depth (often conveyed through perspective.) Once we learn the building blocks of a language or pictures, we can start arranging them or making compositions.

The point of using good linguistic design and good visual design is the same: clear and effective expression.

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"The alternative to good design is bad design. There is no such thing as no design." *Adam Judge*



WORKSHOPS 2025

Complete details for all workshops are posted on my website www.freemanpatterson.com.

In my last periodical letter I wrote about the **INSCAPE** workshop with David Maginley, Margery Nea, and me and about the **ARTISTS RETREATS** at Kingsbrae International Residence for the Arts in Kingsbrae Garden. In this letter I'll describe the two workshops I facilitate with my long-time teaching partner André Gallant and the one-day workshops I give at my home.

PHOTOGRAPHY and VISUAL DESIGN

St. Martins Country Inn, St. Martins, New Brunswick

September 21 (Sunday afternoon) until September 27 (Saturday morning departure)

In this workshop we put primary emphasis on seeing and feeling and on learning how to express or convey effectively what you see and feel. We regard visual design as the craft or the language of visual expression and our hope for every participant is that she or he will become fluent, using design with the ease of speaking your first language. We strongly believe that, if you make photographs for yourself above everybody else, you will tell your own story as clearly with pictures as you might with words.

To be more specific, I make a daily presentation on the building blocks of visual design followed by a major program on principles or guidelines for arranging them in picture space (i.e., composition) and André gives a daily presentation on various photographic techniques, which he follows with field demonstrations.

Together, André and I provide a daily “evaluation session” of workshop participants’ photographs. Our basic aims in these sessions are to identify what the participants have done well in creating their images and to indicate how they might improve on what they’ve done.

The workshop is not a competition in any sense of the word. We never compare the work of one participant with another, but endeavour to help everybody improve their use of tools and techniques and their fluency in visual design. Over the years, many participants have returned for a “refresher” and also for the enhanced person-to-person learning that occurs when all the participants and instructors are living “at home” in comfortable quarters at the 158-year-old inn and sharing delicious and nutritious meals.

EXPLORING AUTUMN

St. Martins Country Inn, St. Martins, New Brunswick

October 5 (Sunday afternoon) until October 11 (Saturday morning departure)

During this workshop we dedicate our mornings to capturing the natural beauty of New Brunswick. Our itinerary includes outings to the spectacular coastal scenery of the Fundy Trail Parkway, rainbow-coloured blueberry fields, winding country roads that cut through forests, and the town of Hampton nestled along tranquil stretches of the Kennebecasis River.

Although our autumn schedule offers participants more hours for hands-on photography, we will still have a daily instructional program by either André or Freeman. Also, to enhance the learning experience and foster a sense of community, we have daily participant evaluations. We believe this feedback is a vital component for both learning and collaboration among all participants, as is our living together at the lovely old inn.



**Individually Crafted ONE-DAY WORKSHOPS
for one to three persons**

My home, Shampers' Bluff, New Brunswick

Available dates from mid-March to mid-May and July 1-21 (except Saturdays in May and July)

I craft each workshop to meet the needs and interests of the participant(s.) Some will want to concentrate on “how to do it” – such as learning basic camera operation or useful techniques, or concentrating on visual design (the building blocks of visual design and the principles of arrangement or composition.) Others may want to probe “why I do it” – examining the self-revealing nature of the subject matter they choose and the approaches they use in photographing it. I always set some time aside for making and new discussing pictures.

A delicious lunch is included and, if you are coming from a long distance, please enquire about accommodation assistance.



"The capacity to learn is a gift; the ability to learn is a skill; the willingness to learn is a choice."

This final image in my rather eclectic selection of photographs for this letter is very recent. I know why I made the picture, why it matters to me, which is not always the case.

I hope you make some pictures like that – photographs, drawings, paintings, whatever. Don't let it bother you if nobody else likes them. What matters is that you make them for you, because (to borrow the phrasing of Chris Harris) "you will discover with every foray into the back country more about who you are."



Gelukkige nuwe jaar!

Bonne année!

Happy New Year!

FREEMAN

www.freemanpatterson.com [SUBSCRIBE \(for free\)](#) freemanpatterson23@gmail.com