

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #43

June 2025

from

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"Eruption," one of many varieties of rhododendron in my garden

Every year about this time I've included in my letter several photographs of my rhododendron-and-azalea garden at its peak bloom, which usually occurs during the first two weeks of June. This year, however, I'm posting just two images and, for those of you who are interested, adding the link to a short video of the more mature half of the garden made last year during the grand crescendo by my friend Ian Varty.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDHdDEtgW1U>

My garden, like Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's book Uncle Tom's Cabin, "just grow'd" and now spans four acres (1.62 ha) of open woodland containing more than 2200 plants – about 180 varieties of rhododendrons and more than 50 of highly-fragrant deciduous azaleas. Although I've established the garden perimeter, I'm still infilling selected spots with additional plants and will probably end up having about 2500. This is by no means the largest garden in Canada, but I know of no other private or public garden of this size that is devoted primarily to members of the rhododendron family.

Obviously, I did not create the garden all by myself. A good deal of credit goes to my longtime friend and neighbour Joanne Nutter, who worked with me every spring and summer morning from 2007 until she had to step aside about 2019. Joanne was succeeded by another neighbour, the multi-talented Joel MacPherson, who has been invaluable ever since. Also, I would be remiss if I were not to mention the continuing contribution of horse manure compost by my friends Jean and Rob Northrup.

One June evening last year while I was sitting on my front deck watching the sun set over the river, snatches of music came wafting through the woods just behind my house, so I followed the sound through the trees into the garden. Joel and five other musicians were "jamming" on a grassy path, making music inspired by the surroundings. I pulled up a nearby garden chair and blissed out until long after the sun had disappeared and fireflies were flitting about in the darkness like embers in a breeze.

Later in the summer Joel and his group, The Kingston Collective, had a concert for 75 people in the natural amphitheatre overlooking a marshy area at the rear of the garden. The Saint John String Quartet will be performing this year, sponsored by the vibrant local Kingston Peninsula Heritage Society, and The Kingston Collective will be accompanying the fireflies 12 days later.

As more and more people asked to visit the garden every year, it eventually dawned on me that the garden should survive me, and that the various programs and events that take place here should continue. So, two friends and I formed a non-profit organization to ensure that this happens. We're still working hard on both projects – the garden and the non-profit – and expect to file our application for charitable status with the Canada Revenue Agency within the month.

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"Gardening adds years to your life and life to your years." *Anon*



Of course, gardening is as much a visual art form as photography, painting, drawing, and sculpture. Here are some excerpts from the preface to my 2003 book, The Garden.

“Every garden and every gardener is a work in progress. And, no matter how tiny or grand, how colourful or restrained, how wild or ordered, the garden is a metaphor for the gardener. When you invite somebody into your garden, you are inviting them to meet you.”

“Because every garden is a place of dreams and every gardener is a dreamer, we should find nothing strange and much that is symbolic in both our own and other gardens. Are the paths straight or do they curve and wander? What colours appear constantly? Does the gardener worry about ripping out every last weed?”

“When we want to learn something important about ourselves, it’s a good idea to go into our garden, because we’ll find that we’ve planted a lot of the answers there.”

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The Value of the POLARIZER when Photographing Gardens

For digital photography I have only two kinds of filters – a neutral density filter that I seldom use and a polarizing filter (polarizer) that I use constantly. I wouldn't think about photographing a garden without one. It stays on my lens the entire time – sunny or overcast. (In fact, I have a polarizer for each lens and rarely take it off.)

The reason is simple. Shiny leaves in particular reflect light. Using a polarizer cuts down on reflections, haze, and scattered light and boosts colour saturation and contrast, but not only in gardens. (Although many imaging programs have tools to control colour saturation and contrast easily and effectively, none so far has the ability to remove glare and reflections the same as polarizing filters can.)

A polarizing filter is two pieces of glass set in a dual ring that screws into the front of your lens. You simply rotate the front ring until the light you want to get rid of is gone. The strongest polarization occurs when your lens is pointed at a right angle to the light source.

Since a photograph is supposedly worth 10,000 words, let me illustrate.



**Top row: Left/ Rhododendrons unpolarized, Right/ Rhododendrons polarized
Bottom row: Left/ Rose beds unpolarized, Right/ Rose beds polarized**

BOOKS

In two or three previous letters I've recommended books by James Hollis, including [Under Saturn's Shadow: The Wounding and Healing of Men](#), which I still feel should be mandatory reading for all men and a good idea for women to peruse as well. Other books included [The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning At Midlife](#), [Creating A Life: Finding Your Individual Path](#), [Inner Gold: Understanding Psychological Projection](#), and [Living An Examined Life: Wisdom For The Second Half Of The Journey](#).

Now in his mid-80s and in the past five years having had knee and hip replacement surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, deep vein thrombosis surgery, and two major spinal operations, Hollis brings us [Living With Borrowed Dust: Reflections On Life, Love, And Other Grievances](#). This is a collection of ten essays on a variety of related topics, such as "Filling Our House with Gold: Unbidden Ideas and Compelling Behaviours," "Spectral Visitants" (about dreams,) and "Divided Soul/ Divided Nation: Reflections on the American Electorate." If you follow American politics, which is to say world politics, this essay alone is worth the price of the paperback, digital, or audio copy.

Susan Kiil, who was the editor for my first five books (beginning in 1977) and whom I asked to come out of my retirement for my last one (2013) wrote recently to tell me about [The Light Eaters: How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Understanding of Life on Earth](#) by Zoë Schlanger. The book was on the New York Times 2024 bestseller list and among the top recommendations by most major literary and scientific media, however I bought the book because of Susan's recommendation.

[The Light Eaters...](#) is available in print, digital, and audio format. I just checked the "reader's ratings" on Amazon, a huge number, and see that it averages 4.3 out of a possible 5, which is about as high a recommendation as a book ever gets.

There's also [Journeys to the Nearby: A Gardener Discovers the Gentle Art of Untravelling](#), written and illustrated by Elspeth Bradbury. Inspired by adventures of world travellers, but unwilling to rack up her fossil fuel consumption, Elspeth invites the reader to join her as she ventures out to see the world as it resides in her own backyard. Her tentative efforts to learn the art of untravelling become a voyage and rediscovery of all four seasons.

The book opens with "An Invitation" and then chapter one "The Journey Begins." *"Shortbread and eggnog are already distant memories. The new year is underway; and I'm growing restless."* Then she's out the door and I'm right on her heels.

Elspeth employs all her senses as she travels – smelling, listening, feeling, seeing, and tasting – all expressed in her lyrically descriptive writing and beautiful pen and ink drawings, which are scattered throughout the pages. Available in paperback.

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"All our knowledge begins with the senses." Immanuel Kant

MEMORIES

My dear friend and nurse par excellence, Olga Cruz, of Long Island, New York, who passed away nine years ago, loved to travel and to make photographs. “I’m building memories,” she used to say.

In 2007, one of the several years that I was teaching in New Zealand during summer in the southern hemisphere, I invited Olga to join me for a five-week trip around the islands before I began teaching. It was “thank you time” for me, as Olga, after her retirement, had come to Halifax as a private duty nurse and cared for me during some of the darkest weeks following my liver transplants. She even force fed me at one point – when all food tasted like excrement to me – assuring I received the 2400 daily calories I needed in order to survive.

Because Olga had gone beyond the second mile for me, I made one stipulation in order to assure our trip would indeed be memorable. “We’ll make no plans,” I said, “just head out every morning, make pictures whenever and wherever we want, and stop whenever we want to find some accommodation.” I explained that to plan ahead would trap us, because we might arrive at a spot where we’d like to spend the rest of the day or longer, but if we had reservations we’d have to move on.

Three times one day when we had stopped along the road to make photographs, a local pulled up behind us to ask if we needed assistance with our vehicle. Olga was very impressed with Kiwis.

So we built memories together! Here are three from our trip.



Olga



Along the Lindis River



Flying over the Southern Alps in an upper-wing Cessna

Looking through the images of my travels with Olga sparked memories of many other trips I've made with friends. Among them was a trip to Haida Gwaii off the coast of British Columbia, where we clamoured over rocks, exploring tide pools one afternoon when the tide was extremely low.

I remember how surprised I was by the stunning colour range of both the plant and animal life in the littoral zone and also by how different the smell of the Pacific Ocean is from that of the Atlantic, rather like the difference between Cheddar and Camembert. Now, as I review my photographs from that afternoon, the sense of excitement I felt comes rushing back, and I think of Olga building her memories.

I'm also thinking of Alanna Baird www.tinfish.ca, a sculptor in copper and plastic, who lives within 30 seconds of the Atlantic ocean in St. Andrews-by-the-Sea, here in New Brunswick.

On her website Alanna writes: "I am inspired by the intertidal zone of my shoreline. There I find gifts exposed by the receding water, where the tiny creatures who inhabit this shared littoral landscape offer up their remains. The detritus abandoned by humanity mingles with the organics. My studio practice is a cross contamination of ideas, material, and structural exploration that are tied to the sea."

We usually visit Alanna's small studio during the artists' retreats that I facilitate every year in St. Andrews, and can physically handle many examples of her work, including a bronze of a lady's pump with a barnacle attached to it.



Jumble of sea plants, Haida Gwaii



Starfish, Haida Gwaii

LIGHT

Photography can be described as the art or process of producing images by the action of radiant energy and especially light on a sensitive surface, such as film or an optical sensor.

Although I've spent much of my life using light in this way, like everybody else I've both consciously and unconsciously used light as a metaphor for hope and guidance. For example, there is no need to explain "a light in the darkness," "a light in a storm," "a light at the end of the tunnel," and "a light in the distance."

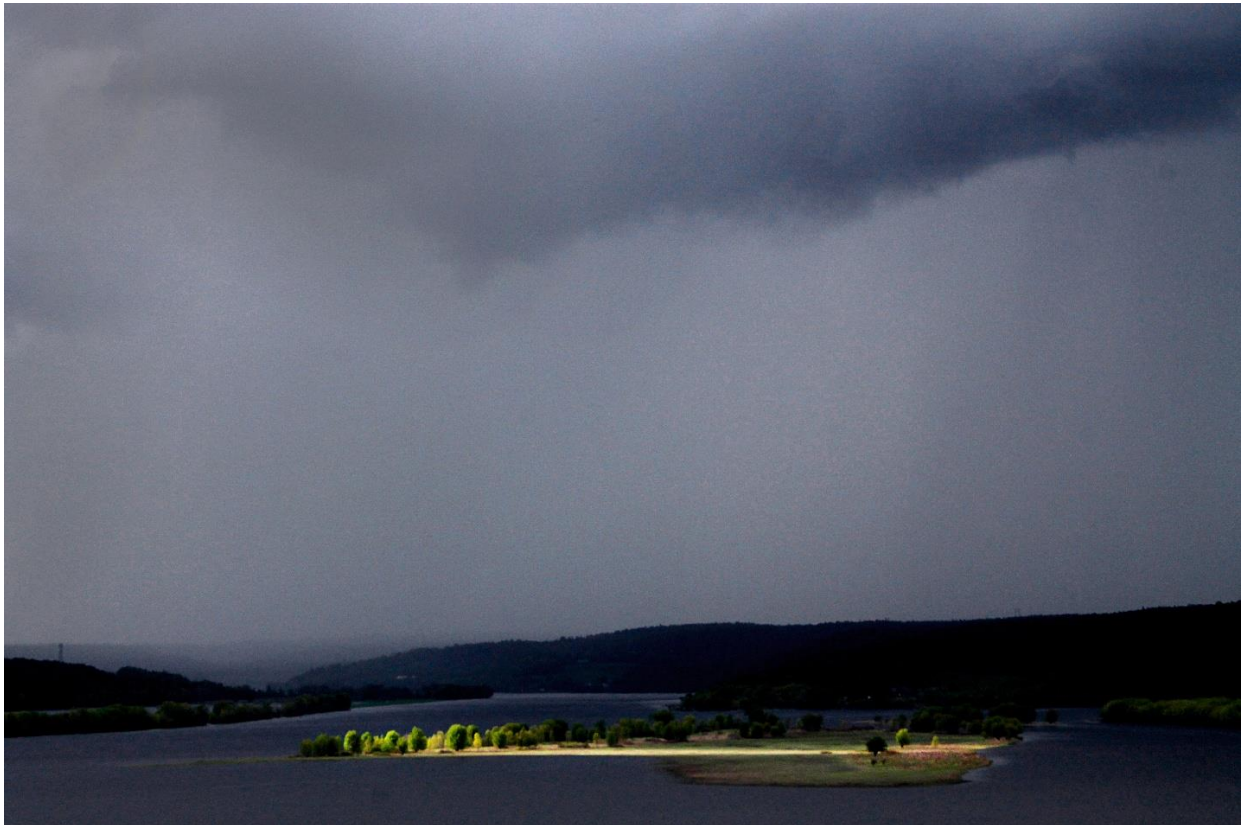
"A guiding light" and "a light in the window" have meanings similar to each other, but the latter also suggests a welcoming presence, often in a home.

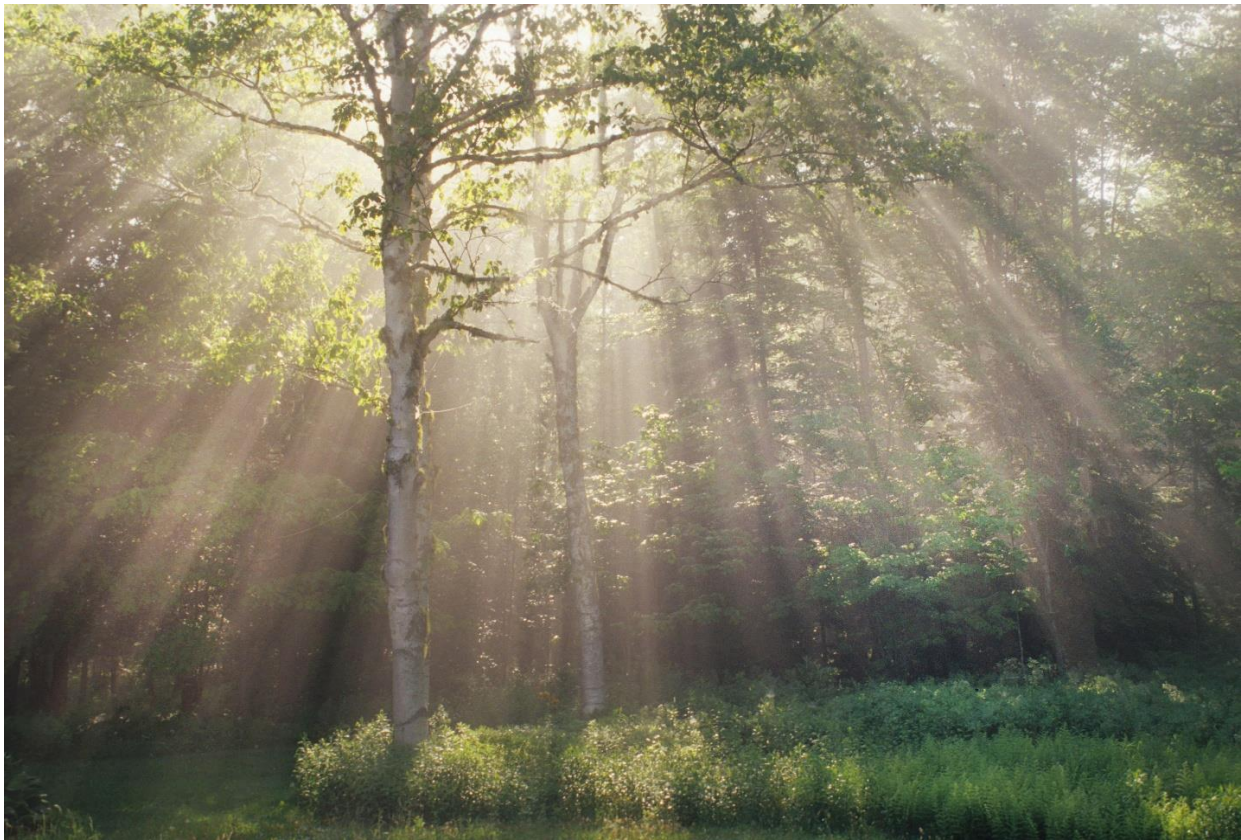
"A flicker of light" and "a glimmer of light" express the same thing and "a flash of light," "a burst of light," and "a burst of sunshine" can be used almost interchangeably.

Metaphors frequently express feeling as much as meaning.

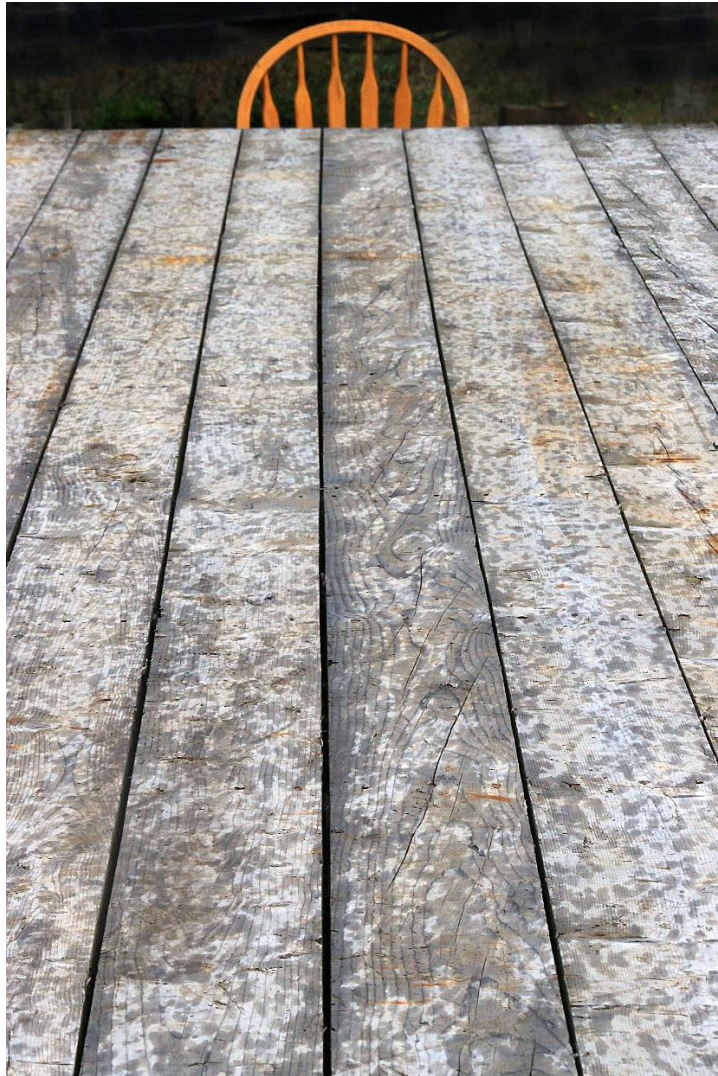
There are many more such expressions or linguistic constructions about light. I've counted at least 25, but the list is probably much longer, especially if we include languages other than English. However, what fascinates me about all of them is that they can also be conveyed visually (including photographically) and musically too.

Here are three of my own images, all made close to my house on Shampers Bluff, that have metaphorical value for me.





WHY did I make this photograph?
BECAUSE I wanted to!



Lekker dag en goeie herinneringe

Bonne journée et bons souvenirs

Good day and good memories

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