

# IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

*Periodical Letter #25*  
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*from*  
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*Wild lupins/lupines blooming in the meadow below my house in June*

It's spring, it's spring at Shampers Bluff, the time of year I always feel that everything good is possible. My sense of exuberant release is always generated by the natural cycle.

Spring is an attenuated season here – extending this year from mid-March through to the summer solstice – so there's enormous opportunity to anticipate and appreciate the changes. Every year, for example, I mark the day when the last sheet of ice sails away down the St. John river, the day I find the first little bluet that presages the carpet of flowers to come (following photo), and the day that the new leaves of all the deciduous trees are large enough to rustle in the breeze. One day they don't, the next day they do!



*Bluets ([Houstonia caerulea](#)) carpet paths, pastures, and neglected fields in New Brunswick in early spring.*

May is a month of expectation and unfolding. June is a month of utter opulence! Beauty is tripping all over itself. It's when the rhododendrons and azaleas are in peak blossom here, so come along and spend three minutes in the more mature half of my rhodo-and-azalea garden. The entire garden covers four acres. Here's the link to a video made by my good friend Ian Varty in June 2021. (There's music, so turn up your sound.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-cQ7bVUrHQ>

## When MUSIC Was FEMALE

One of the great regrets of my life is that I never learned to play a musical instrument. It's not that I didn't try. When I was 12 and my sister turned eight, she began to take piano lessons from a neighbour and I pleaded with my parents to take them too.

My father nixed that request. Farm boys had no time to spend on matters of such irrelevance to their lives. I was made to understand that I should concentrate on useful things, such as pigs and cows and turnips and cabbage. A person could eat all of them and wear clothing made from the animals. They were useful.

Only one boy of my general age in the sprawling farming, lumbering, and fishing community ever had the opportunity to study music as a child. His father was an insurance agent who taught both his daughter and his son to play the violin, in the process motivating them to begin singing and leading ultimately to lifetimes as active amateur musicians.

Besides my sister's piano practising, about the only music I heard as a child was in church. The organist was always a woman and the singing was usually so bad that it defies my ability to convey the lack of quality, a neighbour named Gertie regularly screeching so far off key at the top of her lungs that even the totally tone-deaf spoke of the weekly horror.

And yet, and yet, my love of music developed and these many years later I find myself working away or relaxing daily to either the French or English music stations of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation – both of which offer huge variety, but always several hours of music that “gets me where I live,” which is primarily classical (especially baroque and renaissance) and opera. Even I wonder at times how this can possibly be. Opera, of all things! If my father were alive and confronted with his failure, he would head for the barn.

My love of music raises questions that revolve around my life-long synesthesia. Every number and letter has always been a specific colour for me and I always “see” the structure or visualize the pattern or fabric of music as I listen to it. In other words, it's both an auditory and a visual experience.

But there's more to it than that! Besides having a highly developed visual sense I've always had (and still have) an extended range of very acute hearing, a natural awareness of sound both above and below the normal range of human hearing that reaches to a great distance.

So, from time to time, I'll park myself on a chair outdoors or on a tree stump in the woods, close my eyes so I can “focus” on the cries, calls, and chirps of birds and insects and on the many differing rustling sounds as the wind blows through the leaves of birches, oaks, aspens, maples, cedars, and spruce trees. Then, when I can hold the sound of all these “instruments” or “blend” them into one “piece of music,” I'll open my eyes to add the visual – to experience the complete symphony.

Or, several evenings a year, I'll insert the disc of Vangelis' “Mythodea” (an incredible mix of instrumental and electronic music and both choral and solo voice) into my sound system, turn up the volume, close my eyes, and eventually rise through the stratosphere as soprano Kathleen Battle carries me up and up – beyond the beyond! And, as I rise, I also see the structure of the music – a vast, constantly-changing, multi-coloured fabric – a unity of sound and sight! **WHOW!!!**

There are some kinds of music, however, that I find difficult, sometimes impossible to tolerate and I do not understand why. I know that it will come as a shock to some of you, but jazz is chief among them. Quite a lot of jazz makes me feel hostile, even angry, a feeling that I do not like in myself. I've talked to several jazz musicians and aficionados about my reaction and listened attentively to a special program on "jazz for people who hate jazz," but I'm no closer to discovering the reason for my visceral dislike. (The reason the program failed was because the host absolutely loved jazz, so he had no emotional grasp of how I feel.) If you are shaking your head because you are thinking, "I just don't understand Freeman," let me say that Freeman doesn't understand Freeman either.

Maybe jazz is like vanilla flavouring, which everybody seems to like, but I can barely tolerate and never keep in my house. Maybe there's no need to fathom my dislike, just accept it, politely turn down invitations to an evening in a jazz bar, and get on with life.

Basically though, all music – opera, baroque, jazz, gospel, hip hop – is a statement or "a seeking" and, unrecognized though it often is, both the composer and the performer are giving conscious form to unconscious realities, urges they can express musically but may never be able to analyze or put in words.

Looking back now I realize that my father in his upbringing was deprived of all art appreciation and had no understanding that the spiritual is expressed through the physical and material. However, while he put a stop to my piano lessons before I even got started, he didn't dampen my latent love of music, as I soon "followed my bliss" (to quote Joseph Campbell) by shooting off in a related direction, and have had the opportunity and the enormous privilege of spending my life "in art."

Although my father never knew how to ask me about my career, he was satisfied that I was able to support myself, which was top of his mind when he nixed the piano lessons. I could also have supported myself as a farmer, of course, but then I would have lost my bliss.

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As some of you may be unfamiliar with the voice of the famous (and infamous) opera singer Kathleen Battle (whom I mentioned in the preceding piece,) I'm inserting the link to a video I shared in an earlier letter of Battle singing the beautiful Black spiritual "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands" (as a duet) with the equally famous Jessye Norman, backed by orchestra and a large male chorus. Norman is on the left, Battle on the right.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJJ3PIU-IKq>





## CONTRAST

Light produces two kinds of contrast that enable us to see and to make photographs of incredible visual range.

The more basic of the two is light value, degrees of brightness or, to keep it simple, tone. We think of white as being at one end of the tonal spectrum and black at the other with descending or ascending shades of grey in between. Even if we were totally colour blind, we could distinguish lines and shapes, for example, because some things are lighter and some darker. When we close our eyes or stand in total darkness, we eliminate contrast and, thus, vision.

The second kind is colour contrast. Even if a wall were illuminated equally everywhere (had no tonal contrast,) but half of it were painted blue and half painted red, we would see two shapes of equal size.

However, as we are blessed by being able to see both kinds of contrast, we can create or see a truly remarkable range of tone-hues. The colour charts we pore over before we choose the paint for a room are great examples. Our choice of a paint is almost always based on the feeling or mood we want the room to evoke. In other words, we recognize that every combination is expressive and, without even thinking about it, we engage in artistic activity.

After more than 60 years of making photographs, I return again and again to careful consideration of this fundamental visual constituent - contrast. It's because, although I shoot primarily in colour, more often than not I arrange the visual building blocks, such as line, shape, and texture on the basis of their tones, the distinctions sometimes being bold or stark, but other times subtle or gradually shaded to the point of being barely discernable. For example, notice how important the "pin pricks" of dark tone are in the image below.





*Tonal contrast is even more important in this photograph of my driveway in early May than the colour contrast.*



*One spring evening behind my house both tonal and colour contrast played a vital role in composition.*

## BOOKS

As the year moved into March and the continual blizzards of January and February ended, my seemingly endless snow shovelling came to a wonderfully abrupt halt and, best of all, I found time to read again. On my brother-in-law's recommendation, I picked up a copy of Tom Harpur's Water Into Wine (2007,) paperback because I had an advance feeling that I would want to mark significant passages.

Harpur, an Anglican priest, former professor at the Toronto School of Theology, and for many years the religions editor for the Toronto Star is a first-rate scholar familiar not only with Christian theology, but also Judaism, Islam, and other world religions and examines the basic similarities and, one might say, the superficial differences between them in developing the fundamental thrust of his book, which he states clearly in this discussion centred on the four gospels of the New Testament in the Christian Bible.

*"... we have to **remythologize** the Gospels, not demythologize them, and then try to see what the myths are intended to convey. It is precisely the mythic element in the healing and nature miracle stories [about Jesus] that bears the timeless truth so necessary and relevant to the plight of each of us today. That's where the true glory breaks through. To be robbed of this consistently, as many church-goers are, is to be denied the very water of life that religion is supposed to offer."* Harpur is writing here about the enormous spiritual deprivation that occurs when allegories and myths are treated as historical facts.

Later in his book Harpur makes this affirmation: *"We will never have true compassion in the religions of the world until we acknowledge this common bond – the divinity, the Atman or Christ that is in everyone on Earth. We need to expand our understanding of this truth until we see the divinity in other species and throughout the natural world as well. That is a spiritual or metaphysical foundation on which an all-embracing global harmony will one day rest."*

At the very end of Water Into Wine, Harpur refers to the great scholar of mythology, Joseph Campbell, asserting that we all have a great yearning for something that has never yet been seen in the world and then quoting Campbell's reply to his own statement: *"What can it be that has never yet been seen? ... What has never yet been seen is your own unprecedented life fulfilled. Your life is what has yet to be brought into being."* Then Harpur concludes *"That is the true 'hero's journey.' And it is yours and mine to make."*

This propelled me across the living room to my book shelves where, sure enough, I found Campbell's THE INNER REACHES OF OUTER SPACE: Metaphor as Myth and Religion. Right away I was re-reading about the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tendency to literalize metaphors. *"The idea of the Virgin Birth, for example, is argued as historical fact, whereas in practically every mythology of the world instances have appeared of this elementary idea [i.e. virgin births as myth for awakening to the spiritual life.] American Indian mythologies abound in virgin births. Therefore, the intended reference of the archetypal image cannot possibly have been to a supposed occurrence in the Near East in the first century B.C.E."* Campbell continues that neither can the Promised Land have referred to an area to be conquered by military might, but to a spiritual place in the heart, to be discovered by contemplation.

I highly recommend these authors and their books, especially Campbell's The Power of Myth and An Open Life and Harpur's The Pagan Christ, because I can think of nobody who is unconcerned about meaning in his/her life and, more broadly and often very privately, about the meaning of his/her life. In other words, we're all religious.



## On Line – Off Line

The second reason that I've been able to read books again is because I've made a determined effort to get "off line." Without in any way belittling the value of the internet, which we can access any time, any place with our watches, phones, pads, and our laptops and desktops, I simply have to recognize that spending too much time there can have very negative effects on both my physical and mental health and, although it provides an easy opening to the world on the one hand, it is equally capable of narrowing my perspective on the other.

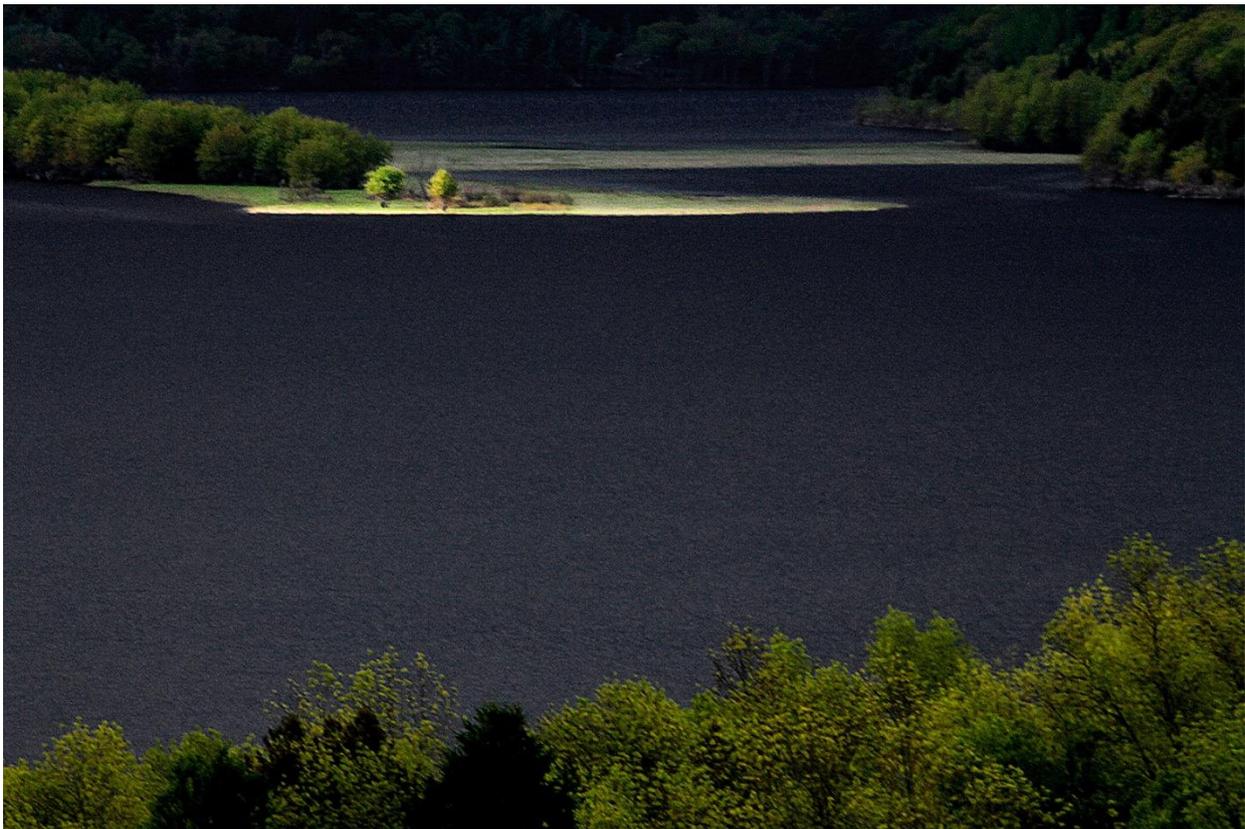
Of course I contribute to "the unlimited offerings" of the internet, this letter being an example, as are the many presentations I've done by Zoom or on an equivalent platform. So, what it comes down to is a balancing act, like so much else in life. When does my activity have value and when am I simply wasting precious moments that I could be spending in fresh air, making photographs, or reading a good book? When is enough, ENOUGH?

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**"All addictions are anxiety management systems."** *James Hollis*

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**"Here's to books, the cheapest vacation you can buy."** *Charlaine Harris*



*This fleeting moment of strong tonal contrast happened off line on my front deck.*

I've been talking to a couple of good friends in New Zealand recently and they were describing a damp, grey autumn morning while I was regaling them with a description of a warm, sunny spring day here. Another friend, who lives in Israel but was visiting South Africa (where she lived for the earlier portion of her adult life,) wrote to say she had forgotten how cold Johannesburg can be in April and had to buy some warmer clothes, which she could easily have taken with her.

So, although I'm tempted to send my regrets to all of you who are entering the coolest time of your year, I realize that it can be a relief in some areas, especially parts of Australia and southern Africa. I'm downright envious of the winters that bless much of New Zealand, which are short and mild by Canadian standards (except for coastal British Columbia.)

Away back in 1989, I experienced the coming of spring in five areas of the world, and I realized that in every region spring had an uplifting effect on the psyche. Although every spring was unique in many respects, I loved every one of them. I didn't have a favourite!



*A kayaker crosses a field near my home flooded by the swollen St. John River in early spring*

**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.**

**FREEMAN**

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