

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #27
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from
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A Man of Ikahuak

The other day I came across a set of photographs that I made in September 1970 in Ulukhaktok (Sachs Harbour) and Ikahuak (Holman,) two settlements in the high western Canadian Arctic, on my first of several trips to Canada's far north. What I remember most from that trip were the people I met.

I was part of the small press party (six persons) accompanying Canada's then Governor-General Roland Michener and his wife Nora to several remote communities. (For non-Canadians, the Governor-General is our head of state, representing the Queen, whereas the Prime Minister is our head of government.)

Our first and most southerly stop was in the village of Old Crow in the far north of Yukon, a village then and today of just over 200 persons. As our Hercules aircraft descended, I could see the entire population lining the edges of the gravel landing strip. After the "official greetings" the Micheners, flanked by their aide-de-camp and an RCMP officer led us all into the village where a large number of long tables - smothered in culinary treats from local wild meats and fish to an array of cakes with frosting of vivid rainbow hues – had been set up beside the tiny St. Luke's Anglican church. This event was "huge" for Old Crow! It was as if all of Canada was blessing them. It was also huge for me; I was very moved.

As we flew farther and farther north, touching down for several hours in other small, extremely remote communities, I repeatedly found myself choked with emotion. The people of these tiny, thoroughly self-sustaining communities didn't "need" Canada for their physical and emotional well-being, but the Governor-General's visit gave them a sense of being "cared about," of belonging to the whole nation.





Mrs. Michener came with gifts of oranges for the children – no candy for her! This little boy (preceding page) didn't know quite what to do with his orange until an older person realized his dilemma and carefully removed most of the peel, so he could suck out the juice.



I had to leave the press party a couple of days early, so when we stopped in Kitikmeot (formerly Cambridge Bay,) I boarded a second Hercules, the lone passenger with four RCAF personnel, and flew to Churchill, Manitoba, to overnight before flying on to Trenton, Ontario the next day. Shortly after leaving Churchill, fog closed in behind us and not long after that, while I was fast asleep (I always fall asleep quickly on planes,) a great bang jolted me into the wide-awake upright position. The propeller on my side of the Hercules was not moving!

A minute later the youngest officer aboard (perhaps 25) arrived at my seat with a tiny paper cup of water, a tranquilizer pill, and instructions. "Even though we can transfer the fuel to the engine on the other wing, I have to put you through crash procedure," he began, then promptly started telling me what to do and in what sequence. When he had finished, I handed him back the water and the pill and asked him if it would be okay if I were to go to sleep again. Clearly he was not prepared for my response, and I soon found out why. He'd been married for just a year and had a six-week-old son at home.

Half an hour later he woke me up again and delivered news that was rather more concerning. "We're going down," he intoned through parched lips, "the oil gauge for the good engine is showing nearly empty and we can't transfer the oil from the dead one, like we can the fuel. However, we're going to try to reach the tree line so when we're nearly down the pilot will pull up the plane's nose a bit and the tops of the trees should cushion the impact."

What could I do to help? Nothing, of course, so I went back to sleep.

The third time the young officer paid me a visit, it was to tell me that we were now over trees and aiming for the village of Nakina, about 60 km. north of Geraldton, Ontario, where (in 1970) there was an abandoned air strip being reclaimed by forest. And, not so very long afterward, we began our descent. It was by all measures the roughest plane landing of my life both before and since, as we were mowing down young conifers until the plane finally ground to a halt, its nose less than a couple of metres away from dense forest.

Twelve hours later an eastbound CNR train that had originated in Vancouver stopped to change crews and take us aboard. For the rest of my journey, from this remote northern Ontario settlement to Toronto's Union Station, I slept not a wink, but observed the gradual transition from wilderness to dense metropolis. *Quel voyage!*

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"No American wilderness that I know of is as dangerous as a city One should go to the woods for safety, if nothing else." *John Muir*

"At times you should leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover is yourself." *Alan Alda*

"Wilderness is not a luxury, but a necessity of the human spirit." *Edward Abbey*

"Wilderness itself is the basis of all our civilization." *Margaret Murie*

This Summer, This Autumn

Just about the time you'll be receiving this letter, I'll be in St. Martin's, New Brunswick (a village on the Bay of Fundy) with David Maginley, facilitating INSCAPE (short for Inner Landscape,) an annual week-long workshop/retreat on consciousness and spirituality. David is the supervising chaplain for all faiths and non-faiths in the cancer wards at the large Queen Elizabeth 11 Hospital in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a four-time cancer survivor himself, and author of BEYOND SURVIVING: Cancer and Your Spiritual Journey.

No two INSCAPEs are ever the same, because of the participants and because everything is optional. The presentations that David and I make, the contributions of resource persons such as Margery Nea (dreaming, dreamwork, dream symbols, and the relevance of dreaming to our daily lives,) and the thoughts of sculptor and member of the Sisters of Charity, Marie-Hélène Allain (how her artistic life and her religious life became one,) seem invariably to stimulate open, intense discussion and the sharing of personal stories. We talk about where we live, how we hurt, and how we celebrate – honouring both feelings and ideas. However, if somebody feels uncomfortable, uninterested, or overwhelmed she or he can simply leave and go for a walk on the beach, which everybody else understands.

Last year's INSCAPE participants have been meeting regularly by ZOOM every month since and many have visited each other at their homes across the continent. If anything, the community is even closer now than it was a year ago.

I also love the experience of facilitating the workshops in photography and visual design with André Gallant, my teaching partner since 1996, and the small artist's retreats (six persons and me) at Kingsbrae International Residency for the Arts (KIRA) in the 27-acre Kingsbrae Garden, St. Andrew's, New Brunswick, also on the Bay of Fundy. Inevitably, if often unconsciously, the participants in both the workshops and the retreats send me down paths I've never explored, which is exciting at the time, but may also have a lasting impact on my seeing and my visual creations.

Just one such stimulus occurred on this year's first workshop with André. One day he suggested that we split the group in two and each spend the second half of the morning along a very short portion of the village's main street. My group of six and I parked by the Baptist Church, right next to Huttges grocery store, but within moments after a brief stop to examine and discuss the old stones in the tiny cemetery, the group simply dispersed.

One person was on the other side of the street poking her camera's lens into the leaves of a young apple tree, another was aiming his lens at cracks in the pavement, a third was working with reflections in the store window, and I stood abandoned. Knowing that I should stay close to where we had arrived, just in case somebody needed to ask me questions or come for a bit of guidance, I began observing a very familiar location with unfamiliar care. The photograph on the next page is just one of many I made while standing more or less in one spot. Two days later, when I had a bit of spare time, I raced back to continue my visual exploration. The experience confirmed for me once again that the best place in the world to see and to make photographs is wherever you happen to be.



Besides the different number of participants in the workshops on photography and visual design and the artist's retreats (12 versus 6) the biggest difference is the content. In the workshops we talk primarily about "how to do it" or craft, André focusing more on tools and techniques and I concentrating more on the building blocks of visual design and the principles (guidelines) for arranging them in picture space (composition) in order to achieve a desired pictorial result. In the retreats, on other hand, we don't talk about craft at all, but about art. To put it another way, we ask "why" we do what we do; we examine the feelings, dreams, imaginings, and passions (right brain, so to speak) that energize us, all those things for which we use our knowledge of craft (left brain) to give form or visible expression.

To put all of this another way, a person can be fluent in any number of languages and in visual design (craft) and yet have nothing of value to express. Knowledge of craft does not produce art – in language or pictures. The production of art, however, depends on knowledge of the relevant craft, and fluency (advanced knowledge) helps enormously.

Anyway, I've come away from the first two of this year's three artist's retreats feeling that I've experienced "pure gift" and have tentatively reserved the same three weeks at KIRA for 2023. (If you're interested in any of these workshops or retreats or in a one-day workshop at Shamper's Bluff, check my web site around late October and early November.)

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"Where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art."

Leonardo da Vinci



Parts of two sculptures at sunrise in The Sculpture Garden, KINGSBRAE Garden, NB



AFTERWORD: Having distinguished between art and craft, I'd like to acknowledge freely that a great many of our photographs, paintings, tapestries, or other visual creations are not art and were never intended to be. Often our purpose is to document a situation or scene or to create something primarily functional. These efforts are essentially left-brain activities, but craft is as important here as it is in giving concrete visual form to dreams and passions and all those energies that arise in our unconscious.

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BOOK

I've received so many good books recently that I'm itching to find time to read. Although several of them are great for reading in fits and starts, a visiting friend simply couldn't put this one down. Apparently, it's as good as its title: **FORGETTING: The Benefits of Not Remembering**, by Scott Small.

The dust jacket states: "A renowned neurologist explains why our routine forgetting – of names, dates, even house keys – is not a brain failure, but actually, when combined with memory, one of the mind's most beneficial functions.... Forgetting is, in fact, *good* for us – and, alongside memory, it is a required function for our minds to work best."

Everybody who has ever uttered the words, "I'm having a senior moment," should sit up and take notice. (Available in hardcover, digital, and audio.)

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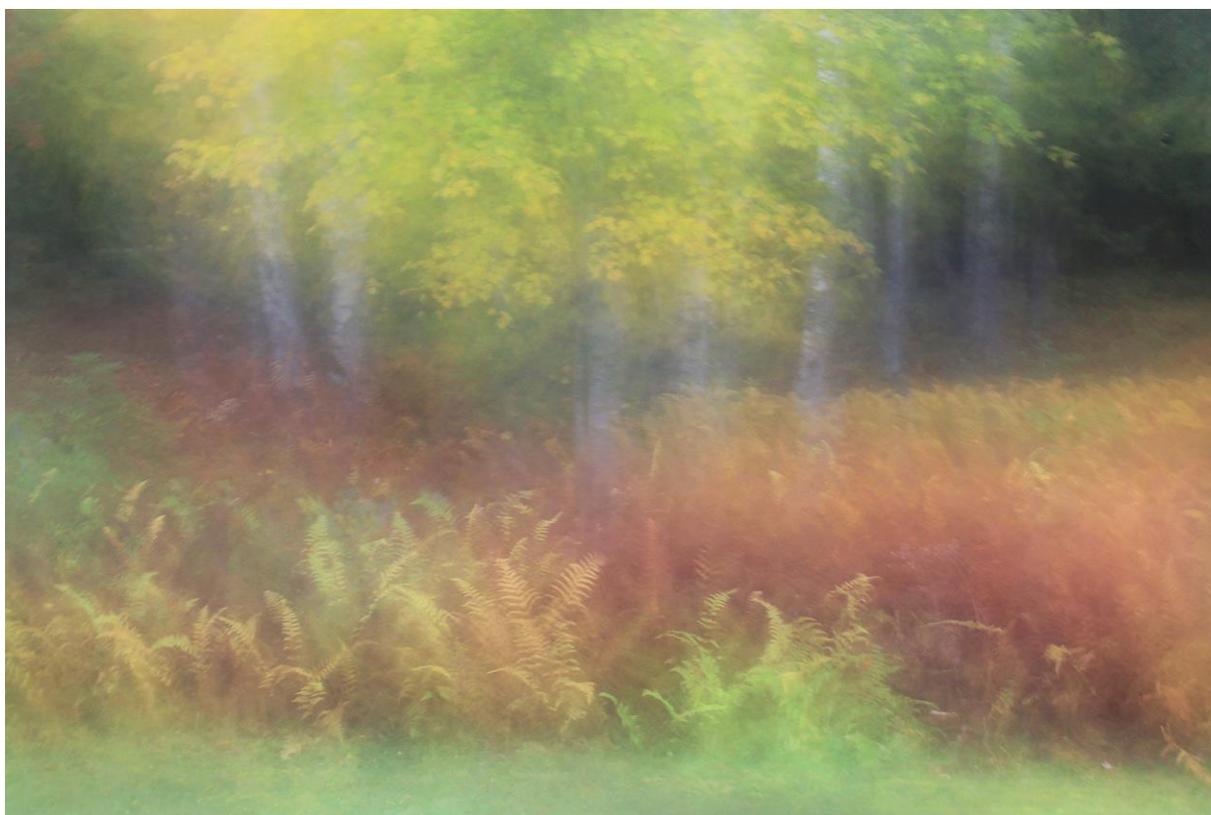
"If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." *Mark Twain*

A clear conscience is the sure sign of a bad memory." *Mark Twain*

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Summer's passing



Autumn's arrival

I refuse to think that summer is over because the long summer school holiday has ended. Here in New Brunswick, summer ends when it ends, earlier or later, usually sliding quietly away on progressively lower daytime and nighttime temperatures in late September and October. Autumn occasionally punches its way briefly through the diminishing warmth, only to retreat for a while before it returns. And then it stays. It settles in. You don't have to be told it's fall; you know it in your bones. Then, an equally slow, often relatively seamless transition to winter follows.

I noticed in the years that I lived and travelled in western Canada that, except for coastal British Columbia, the transition periods between winter and summer, summer and winter are usually much shorter than in the eastern parts of the country. My first year in Edmonton, snow fell on October 22 and the next time I saw bare ground was in mid April. That's probably less usual now, but from Manitoba through north- to south-central British Columbia, autumn always came earlier and raced by with a speed to which I was unaccustomed.

The same was true of spring. I remember a very drab early May in southern Manitoba when day after day the temperature hovered around four degrees Celsius. Then, in a sudden burst of energy, the temperature soared to 32-33C for three days in a row. By the fourth day all the deciduous trees were in full leaf. Summer arrived without spring ever happening.

We may adapt quite quickly to a change in climatic patterns, even if we prefer those we left behind, or at least many photographers do. Out they go colourfully gift-wrapped into

winter's ferocious blasts. They venture forth veiled in bug season to photograph a robin shoving worms down eager throats, only to emerge again a few weeks later under umbrella hats and lathered in sunscreen to capture the hues and tints of roses or waves spreading white foam across a broad expanse of beach. And then comes fall, which often dictates that photographers should carry morning, mid-day, and evening wardrobes in order to capture comfortably the blazing fires and the dying embers of the season.

So it is in Canada, but not the rest of the planet. One year I celebrated spring, my favourite season, in every month of the year and will forever dream of constantly circumnavigating the globe so I can live in eternal spring.

However, beginning right now I'll make the long New Brunswick transition out of summer into fall, and I know I'll love it.

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To bring you up to date, here's Tess then (two weeks) and now (ten months!)

(Photos by Christine Zinck and André Gallant)

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Célébrez cette saison où que vous soyez!

Vier die seisoen waar jy ook al is!

Celebrate the season wherever you are!

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