What Photography Has Taught Me

by Mary Doo

We often hear that photography is about more than making photographs. But what does that really mean?

Some years ago, I attended a photography workshop led by landscape photographer Kerrick James to the Temple of the Sun and Moon in Utah. This spectacular place lies in a remote region of Capitol Reef National Park, accessible only by a rough dirt road. I remember vast sandstone formations, endless skies, and an isolation that made one feel very small in a very large world. I don't recall seeing another car or person for hours during the drive. We traveled with experienced outfitters in a heavy-duty vehicle, and they set up our tents in the desert. We felt well prepared. Or so we thought.

During the evening, an intense storm rolled in. The wind howled, and rain pounded the canvas. My tent shook violently from side to side despite being anchored on all corners by huge rocks. Everyone was anxious, if not frightened. Would the storm get worse? Would the tents survive? Were we in mortal danger?

As I lay there in anxiety, I suddenly remembered a story from my childhood Sunday school lessons. Jesus and his disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee when a violent storm arose, threatening to sink their boat. While the disciples were beside themselves with panic, Jesus was fast asleep. Fearing for their lives, they woke him. And, after calming the wind and waves, Jesus turned to them and asked, "Do you still have no faith?"

Lying there in my shaking tent, that ancient story took on a practical, immediate meaning. The word that struck me was ***still***. I imagined Jesus must be a bit disappointed with his disciples because, after witnessing his teachings, his miracles, and the sheer power of his presence, they still doubted. I began asking myself the same question: After all these years, and after many answered prayers, did I **still** have no faith?

For me, that night became an exercise in faith: I stopped overthinking. I committed the situation to God, let go of the need to manage the outcome, and tried to sleep. Miraculously, the motion of the tent and the sound of the rain rocked me to dreamland.

The next morning, I discovered that most of my fellow photographers had remained awake throughout the night. One worried about a flash flood; another's tent had collapsed. A few jokingly expressed outrage that I had managed to sleep through the chaos.



Temple of the Sun and Moon
Trust and Faith
What seemed threatening became unforgettable

Looking back, this experience makes me reflect on another kind of uncertainty we face in photography all the time:

- Will the sunrise be beautiful?
- Will the wildlife appear?
- Will the fall foliage remain at peak colors?
- Will the flowers bloom at the right moment?
- Will the weather cooperate?
- Will this trip produce worthwhile images?

Many of us spend considerable energy worrying about outcomes we cannot control. Photography does require planning - we study weather forecasts, scout locations, research subjects, and prepare equipment. But there comes a point where preparation ends and trust begins. The most important lesson from that night was about letting go of what I could not control.

Recently I have been trying to learn to be more present. I used to think of presence as simply paying attention. Now I think it means something deeper: becoming fully available to the moment instead of competing with it. Seeing each other, showing up for each other. Bringing out the best from each other. The world hasn't changed. But I think I have - or have I?



Spicebush Swallowtail Caterpillar
Being Present
We see when we slow down to observe

Now how does this relate to photography? When I am present, I try to notice not only the scene that surrounds me, but also my own emotional landscape. Instead of focusing on the one specific thing I hope to find - a preconceived image, I try to widen my awareness of the whole scene - light, color, texture, relationships, as many elements as I can see, and the atmosphere.

Photography has gradually been teaching me something that extends beyond making better images. Being present is not simply paying attention. It also means letting go of what competes for our attention—our expectations, our

plans, and even our desire to come home with a "winning" photograph.

As I continued thinking about this, I came across similar ideas in other traditions. In yoga, the principle of **Aparigraha** encourages us to loosen our grip on possessions, expectations, and outcomes. The Japanese expression **Ichigo Ichie** reminds us that every encounter happens only once and can never be repeated in exactly the same way. Although these ideas come from different cultures, they echo what photography has gradually been teaching me: when we stop obsessing over what we hope to find, we become more open to what is actually before us—and may discover something unexpectedly beautiful.

Perhaps that is one of photography's greatest gifts. Every sunrise, every bird in flight, every flower, every conversation, even every ordinary walk, is unique. We cannot repeat the moment; we can only receive and experience it. The camera becomes less a tool for collecting images and more a reminder to pay attention while the moment is still here.

Anxiety does the exact opposite; it narrows our vision. When I am preoccupied with a specific outcome, I become oblivious to what is actually happening around me. I remember missing a leopard lying on a tree stump until it was already leaving, an eagle perched on a branch until the moment it flew away, and the moon setting atop a Boston steeple until it was no longer perfectly aligned. I was simply not available at the moment.

When we worry about possible negatives, we fail to see the positives right in front of us. When I worry about "bad" weather, I can easily forget how a storm could create extraordinary images and memories. When I worry about flowers or foliage not being in peak condition, I forget that their wilting can invite us to reflect on the bittersweet beauty of life's natural cycle.



Acceptance and Resilience
Beauty endures, even after a storm

When we let go of the need to control and allow our vision to widen, we begin to notice subtle relationships and nuances, unique compositions that we might otherwise overlook. This expanded awareness allows us to see interactions in nature, where subjects almost seem to have a "conscious" relationship with each other.



Relationship
Presence reveals connections we might otherwise miss



Showy Lady's Slipper (Buds)
Tenderness
How a flower bud can remind us of love's embrace

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to look again at Maria Zorn's exquisite images. As you probably know, I consider Maria one of the best macro photographers, as both her technique and artistry are unmatched. This time, I noticed just how fully "present" she was in her work. She could see the most minute details, detecting specular highlights that I could not see even after she pointed them out, timing her compositions imperceptibly with the condition of the light.

My friend Janet, who was Maria's close friend, mentioned that Maria used to sketch out her planned images before actually taking the shot. This tells me that she beautifully balanced previsualization with being completely present for her photography when the moment arrived.

Some of my most memorable photographic experiences have occurred when I stopped chasing a result and simply became immersed in a place, a subject, or a moment. Looking back, I suspect that many of my favorite photographs were not the result of better technique or better equipment. They came from moments when I was simply fully there.



Delicate Arch, Utah
Awe
Completely present, I soaked in the wonder of the universe

The lesson I learned in that Utah storm and the practice of presence extend beautifully to our art. We cannot control the weather, the wildlife, the light, or the final outcomes. What we can control is our willingness to be present.

The older I get, the more I appreciate this simple truth: some of the best photographic experiences occur when we stop trying to force a result and instead immerse ourselves in the moment before us. Whether standing in a desert storm, waiting for dawn, or quietly observing a flower or insect in a garden, the waves in the ocean, the question remains the same: Can we let go of our anxiety long enough to truly see?