

## Nature Photography... A Personal Journal of Self-Therapy

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"Share moments. Share life." How often have we heard this during the Kodak commercials airing on TV? As photographers we celebrate life through the images we create. We celebrate the beauty of nature. We celebrate births and birthdays, marriages and anniversaries, all of the happy milestones of our life and our family's lives.

However, photography has become much, much more for me. I use photography as a means of self-healing and self-therapy after stressful events in my life. Being a hopeless dyslexic and lacking in refined verbal skills, photography has become my primary means of self-expression. I may not be able to verbalize or write down my emotions, but I can express them through my photography.

About 25 years ago, I lost a dear friend to a vicious, fast growing brain cancer. My friend and I had nurtured our friendship since the first grade in grammar school. By the time we were 25 years old, we were inseparable. We celebrated each and every accomplishment of our young lives. You can imagine the shock I felt when my friend revealed to me that he had a terminal cancer. With that simple statement of fact, my life was turned upside down.

I turned to the outdoors and I turned to photography to deeply examine and come to terms with this tragic event in my friend's life and my life. During difficult times in my life, I throw my camping gear and photo gear in the truck and escape to quieter environs where I seek solace and concentrate on ordering my thoughts. "Cline Cabin" was created at a moment when I was contemplating how I could best help my friend. While composing the image, I realized that the winter weather and snow represented my friend's cancer. The open gate and open door of the cabin was the hope that I was holding in my heart that there was avenues open for my friend's recovery. However, the darkness of the open door held no promises. In this one image, I was able to distill my turbulent emotions.



Cline Cabin, Four Peaks, Arizona

I had made several other photographs during this trip and printed them up to show my friend while he was in the hospital. He leafed through prints and upon examining "Cline Cabin" he stated, "You made this one for me, didn't you?" My heart about stopped when I replied, "Yes". My friend passed away a few weeks later, but I can always keep him close to me with "Cline Cabin".

Several years after I lost my friend, life couldn't have been better. My wife (at the time) and I were raising three wonderful young children, I had a good job and we had just finished 6 months of living in our first house. Who could ask for more out of life? One evening, after 9+ years of marriage, my wife announced that our marriage was over. The ensuing divorce was unnecessarily bitter and embroiled in controversy over who would have custody of the children. A year later and the custody issue settled, the divorce was granted. The ink had not completely dried on the divorce papers when, suddenly and without warning, my ex-wife decided to abandon our custody agreement, abandon the children, and move out of state. It was now up to me to raise our children. "How do I explain this to our children?" was the biggest question on my mind and cause of much angst.



A New Day, Verde Valley, Arizona

I was contemplating this very question one early morning when I decided to throw the children in the truck, throw in the camping gear and photo gear, and head for the hills! Somehow I knew I could find the proper forum in nature required to speak with my children about their mother having left. I woke the children up and announced a “surprise” camping trip. On the drive “up north” we were descending into the Verde Valley in Arizona just at the break of a beautiful dawn. This was *it, the* place for me to break the news to the children. I hurried off on a side road and parked the truck.

We formed a circle sitting on the ground and through many hugs and tears we all came to accept this unfortunate event in their young lives. I knew then that we had cemented our family. I made a photograph of our “New Dawn” and it became the focus of our family therapy. In the ensuing years, whenever my children questioned why their mother left us, I would see them pondering “New Dawn” before they would come talk to me. I think “New Dawn” gave them comfort when their own minds were in turmoil.

A couple of years later I married Marsha, the absolute light of my life. Marsha gave birth to our youngest daughter during our first year of marriage. As all women do after childbirth, Marsha suffered significant postpartum “blues”. It is a little known fact, and most men will not admit to it, but fathers suffer their own version of postpartum “blues”, too. Only in men, it takes the children leaving the “nest” to bring on the blues! After my two boys “flew the coop”, our family was reduced to Marsha, our two daughters, and myself. The “blues” were starting to set in. I didn’t want our daughters to grow up so fast. I wanted to hold on to my children and their childhood. Our youngest daughter, especially, was growing up too fast in our eyes influenced, no doubt, by her much older sister!

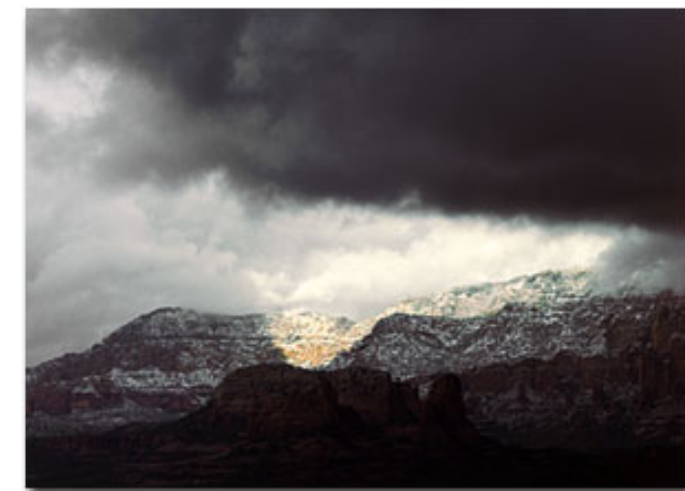
I was contemplating how fast children grow up now days when our youngest daughter, our last baby, sauntered by me one morning. I grabbed her and gave her a hug saying, “Let’s go on a trip!” I loaded my camera gear into the truck, tossed my daughter in, and off we went! On the drive up to Oak Creek, Arizona we had a very “adult” talk, daughter to father. This just confirmed my feelings that, all too soon, my baby will “fly the coop”, too. Boy, the “blues” really settled in now. We ended up at the “West Fork of Oak Creek”. As we piddled along the stream, I saw this wonderful composition of a dead tree having fallen across the stream and leaning against a canyon wall. The colors and composition were beautiful.



West Fork of Oak Creek, Arizona

As I was framing the composition, my youngest daughter appeared on the shoreline and picked up something to examine. Right then and there I came to the realization that she wasn’t growing up so fast as I thought! The “blues” evaporated. She was still my baby in a great big world after all.

As photographers, we attempt to communicate our emotions to others through our images. We display our most significant work in the hopes that our photographs are interpreted as we have meant them to be. However, it is not always possible to understand the truly personal emotions a sensitive photographer pours into a single image. I find by viewing a photographer’s whole body of work that I can only then come to understand the emotions driving his/her own work. Our family is facing a new challenge in our lives and we have spent some time recently sharing our thoughts on my most personally significant images looking for a common theme amongst them. What we have found is that through my photography, I am always an optimist deriving an internal strength from nature and photography. Whether it is open



Winter Storm, Sedona, Arizona

gates and doors, a brilliant sunrise, the immensity of the world, or a clearing in a winter storm, my best images speak of an optimistic future. Nature photography has been tremendously therapeutic, not just for myself, but also for my family, who view my images and take quiet strength from them, too.

*Editor's Note* - Visit Tom's online resource of photographic information at [www.reasonableexpectations.com](http://www.reasonableexpectations.com).

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