RESPECT: TO LOOK AGAIN
© BY PETER FORBES 2023. GRATITUDE TO THOSE PORTRAYED WHO HAVE HELPED ME TO SEE.

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I owe the craft of photography so much. It has taught me both observation and expression. It was my experiences as a photographer in South Asia that prepared me to work in and then push against conservation. Finding trust and relationships with very different people –over and over – through the close proximity of a 28mm lens birthed in me empathy and a social consciousness.

Photography has been my more intuitive path to story, guiding a man at different ages to meet the world. I search for clarity and justice in my writing and organizing, but I look only for relationships through photography. I’ve spent my life organizing and manifesting change efforts. There have been months when I wrote little, and periods when I have put my cameras down, but photography has always been what made my voice as an organizer stronger and clearer.

My twenties were devoted to trying to make a life as an editorial photographer. I remember being 28, in eastern Nepal, descending a trail and an assignment with 6 months of film and gear on my back and believing that this is what I would be doing with all of my years. But what I observed through those cameras was being destroyed and doing something about that was more important than making images of it. Beginning in my early 30’s, I started being asked to give public performances –let’s call them– about what I was seeing.
A philosophy of change merged inside of me and in those presentations. Someone sitting in the audience back then might have observed a young man expressing himself simultaneously through two distinct interconnected ways: words and images. The words would be explicit, the images implicit. One conveyed what I thought and the other how I felt.

For a few decades, these performances would be about both the power of place and about a white man calling for changes in himself and in other white people around their sacred cows and belief systems. It was important to me that I model through words and images everything that I might ask of others by showing what I was observing. Photography allowed me to convey ideas and feelings long before I had the words.

Can something be a performance without being performative? These strange presentations – there were at least 250 of them over 2 decades – came to include photographs of many different things, spoken word, story, conservation philosophy, and arose genuinely from within me. The funniest but most encouraging support an elder gave me about this phase of my life was Gary Nabhan at his university putting his arm around me one night and whispering “Peter, you were on fire. Are you ok?”
Really, I wasn’t ok but doing those presentations was a path to OKness.

In time, the movements for change that I was calling out and calling in began to reflect and represent more of what I had been calling for; my role naturally shifted from being in front of audiences to standing alongside others who were now in front, to eventually standing behind. Sometime in my late 40’s, I abruptly stopped giving those performances because I had said what I had the power and voice to say. Though I didn’t have the words for it then, I wanted to return to organizing, learning, growing, to shift from being in sunlight to being more so in moonlight. Literally, I started doing night photography. The night is for listening and observing.

My core offering is that conservation and environmentalism -- justice of all kinds-- is only about relationships. When relationships between people are at the center of that work, then there’s the possibility of healing both for the earth and for the people. Relationships begin with respect, when people choose to look again at one another beyond first reactions, beyond fear, beauty, age, skin color, weight, gender. To look again is the most important thing any human can do. I’ve been asking all along How can conservation show relationship and respect?
Sometime in my early 50's I began to create other organizing projects that rested upon this core belief in respect. Though this meant I would be spending less time with my camera and more time with the art of facilitating and organizing, I was never far from looking for the ways that art helped me to show respect.

I began a private journal of portraits made by others who did a fantastic job of conveying respect. I’m drawn to the formality of portraiture because of the context it sets to share an experience between people. I’m eager to make portraits that emphasize the brief and important relationship between subject and artist. But trained as a documentary photographer, I have limited skill and desire to use artificial lighting, to work inside, or even to stand still. I saw a lot of precision in popular portraiture: nothing out of focus, no movement that wasn’t frozen, hours and hours of different lighting arrangements to remove shadows and to attain some level of perfection. Even if I had the technical skill, which I don’t, or the perfect strobe lighting (hard to afford), these images felt sterile even when they may be beautiful.

What was the relationship between the subject and the photographer in those portraits? Was the photographer making or taking? How did they connect?
How is respect made visible through their act of photography? I realized that I am most moved by images that convey relationship and respect, and that by making these types of portraits I might be part of the process of healing others and myself.

It took me months of research to settle on the technical tools that might yield the experience that I was hungry for, and then more months to find and assemble them. Feeling let down by precision and drawn toward images that convey emotion and relationship, I settled on an unusual combination of camera and lens: a 1970’s television lens mounted onto a 35 mm digital rangefinder. I remember an early spring weekend flying down to New York City with two camera bags filled with decades worth of film cameras and lens and returning with a single Leica M10. It was as if I had left my right arm there on the counter in New York; I made my way home in pain, embarrassed, doubtful, believing that I had made an enormous mistake.

It didn’t take long for me to start laughing out loud at myself over the fun I was having.

I use a backdrop primarily to create a context for the person to step into that signals they know that they are there to be photographed.
Often, people arrive wanting to show me something.

I use continuous lighting, rather than strobe, because it’s much less jarring to the person being photographed, requires less technical skills and set up time, and because I’m looking for some blur and motion in the images that I make. Continuous lighting is cheaper, less technical, and allows me more time and energy to be in relationship with the person I’m photographing. I use a fast (.095) lens mounted on a range finder to be unobtrusive in a street photographer-way, to create images that focus the viewer’s eye on a specific part of the story. I start by showing my clients what this unusual approach to portraiture can produce: not just a background blur, the focal plane is so shallow that everything gets a soft finish when shot wide open, which is what I do. Done well, it feels classic, artistic, respectful.

When I shoot, I focus with my body by moving closer or further from the person as opposed to standing still and moving a ring on the lens. I place tape on the ground to mark for myself my focal range. I talk with the subject, I play music. If there are many people being photographed, I start with one person and have the others standing close behind me to sustain the relationship.
They are talking to me and to their friends as I move between them taking pictures. There is laughter, banter, suggestions, jokes. Nothing is precious except our time together.

Often, the very best images are the ones I take shortly after meeting the subject. What we say to each other in those early moments seems to yield the more unusually intimate and revealing images before a pose settles in. *Why are you here today? How has your week here been for you? What have you learned about yourself?* I will continue making images for another 20 minutes, but rarely does that yield better images than what happens between us near the start.

These black and white portraits bear witness to the people who have spent time at Knoll Farm and to celebrate their vision and presence here on the land. They reveal the power of relationship: to oneself, to others, to a place, and to give back what these individuals have brought here of themselves. What you see in these faces and in these moments are the reflections of those relationships.
Cover: Page Williams and Better Selves Fellows
1. Younger and older Hazel Adams-Shango
2. Tracy Banstrom and Eddie Merma
3. Lawrence Barriner and David Schwartz
4. Ellie Curtis
5. Dalida Rocha and Gina Christo
6. Wren Fortunoff
7. Gibran Rivera
8. Rani Arbo, Scott Kessel, Quin Kessel
9. Gina Christo
10. Yartitza Guillen
11. Madeleine Fischer
12. Antonia Perez
13. Anabel Santiago
14. Reilly Lawrence and Kayla Barrs
15. Wren Fortunoff
16. Lawrence Barriner and David Schwartz
17. Dana Kaplan
18. Roy Pope
19. Wren Fortunoff and Helen Whybrow
20. Stevie Alon
21. Rajiv Khanna and Roy Hage
22. Jay Malek and Willow Fortunoff
23. Jay Malek and Willow Fortunoff
24. Niyati Shah
25. Alexis and Miriam
26. Jay Kutrz and Wren Fortunoff
27. John Anderson and Jill Bobrow
28. Garvin Forrester and Noah Schoen
29. Marie-Frances Rivera
30. Chach Curtis and Kari Dolan
31. Ellie Curtis and Lanie Curtis
32. Roy Pope
33. John Anderson and Jill Bobrow
34. The Hazels Adams-Shango
35. Mariono Sironi and Heidi Weiskel
36. April Barron
37. Jayy Covery, Courage Pearson, Shel Pomerantz, Mercedes