

THE MANY MEANINGS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Christine Brooks Cote

PHOTOGRAPHS HAVE BECOME AS much a part of our daily lives as food, and for many people the two intersect; yes, people love to take and share pictures of what they eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Like many people, I have a couple of camera apps and at least a dozen photo editing apps on my phone, and I use those to take and edit pictures of all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons. I'm sure, like me, you've looked at hundreds if not thousands of photographs that originate on cell phones—pictures of friends' children and dogs; vacation spots; events like graduations, piano recitals, weddings; pictures of what people eat; and let's not forget selfies. I've also made photographs

with my DSLR camera and have taken workshops at Maine Media College in Rockport, Maine. I've spoken with lots of photographers about their work, and I've looked at photographs in museums, including a memorable Sally Mann exhibit at MOMA in New York City a few years ago. I once audited a course on the history of photography, and I have a couple of boxes full of old photos of my extended family and my years growing up. To top it off, I spend many hours every week browsing through photos, working to find just the right image to accompany an article or grace the cover of a book. In other words, photography has many facets in its design, and I've peered into many of them.

But here's the thing: we are obsessed with taking pictures, and now and then I feel like it's too much, a huge waste of time and space. The vast majority of the photos that we see are really not that interesting. They are visual evidence, a seemingly permanent record of something that happened or something we saw, or some way in which we want to be remembered—as happy, glamorous, and proud. Most photos we see are forgettable; few are worth remembering. A very few carry any degree of significance. But the same can be said for words. Most words, spoken or written, are mundane and forgettable; only a few approach the level of literary craft and are worth remembering.





We might assume that photography surely means something to the person who presses the shutter or taps the screen. But does it? A person sees something in the constant flow of visual stuff that passes by, and they decide to capture it so they can look at it again or show it to friends, family, or coworkers. But it probably won't mean much to others. And, if we're being honest, the person who took the picture might never look at it again. It will become just one of the thousands of photos on our phone and in the cloud.

About fifteen years ago I took a photography workshop led by Douglas Beasley titled *The Zen of Photography*. Five of us spent a delightful week in late August driving through small towns on the Maine coast, taking pictures, talking about pictures, feeling the abundance of the moment. Through some kind of luck, Doug got us invited to the home of photographer [Paul Caponigro](#) in Cushing, Maine. (The same Cushing where [Andrew Wyeth](#) spent summers at the [Olson House](#) and was inspired to paint [Christina's](#)

[World](#).) We spent a few hours with him, listening to him talk about his life and his work, and eventually driving for lunch to his favorite seafood place on the water.

Paul was in love with nature, and one can see that very clearly in his photographs of landscapes and natural objects. Paul collected stones, shells, bones, twigs, feathers, all sorts of things that one stumbles upon from time to time. His collection was beautifully displayed in his house, and over the years these items had often been the subject of his photographs.

Paul's work has been described as mystical, poetic, and spiritual. In the 1950s Paul studied and traveled with

photographer Minor White, who was greatly influenced by the concept of equivalence that was espoused by Alfred Stieglitz. White wrote: "When a photograph functions as an Equivalent, the photograph is at once a record of something in front of the camera and simultaneously a spontaneous symbol." For example, "While rocks were photographed, the subject of the sequence is not rocks . . . the meaning appears in the mood they raise in the beholder; and the flow of the sequence eddies in the river of his associations as he passes from picture to picture. The rocks are only the objects upon which the significance is spread like sheets on the ground to dry."





My favorite word in this quotation is “significance.” Ansel Adams, who also had a close relationship with Minor White, famously stated that “twelve significant photographs in any one year is a good crop.” Meaningful and consequential photos, those that evoke emotion and stir the soul, are rare, and a broad range of factors need to converge to produce something that has significance.

But many enjoy the struggle—staying alert, maintaining focus, taking roads less traveled and sometimes not even recommended, pausing to momentarily hold one’s breath when something unexpected comes into view. Many enjoy the struggle

because of the process, the work. And the reward—whether it’s making a photograph or seeing a photograph—offers a peek into sublimity that is utterly indescribable and can change someone forever.

Not every photo can be significant. But we can never know what others will see in a photo, where it might take their heart and mind. Some photos become more significant over time, and there are many of those in this issue—photos of our ancestors, photos that show what life was like in a past era, photos that show us how far we’ve come or how much we’ve lost. In some cases, what was once a mere snapshot becomes far more. ❖



[l to r] My mother, grandfather, uncle, grandmother, aunt, c. 1918, a few years before my grandfather died of tuberculosis



Extended family, c. 1947, about eight years before I was born