

THE KEY TO TAKING GOOD PHOTOS

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The Inspirational Factor

I thought we need a break from the Buddhist blogs and since many of you have written asking about how I approach close-up photography, here are my guidelines:

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins came up with a concept that struck me as true. He even made up his own word to describe it, "inscape." Inscape was to Hopkins an insight into the eternal or beautiful, literally the way or sign of the beautiful. Let me explain.

I look forward to my trips out into the fields and woods. They offer me a chance to get my head together, to relax from the day-to-day grind of running a business and generally to relax a bit. This is not to say that just going outside and walking in nature means that I am instantly relaxed. That usually takes time.

It is the same with taking photos. In the first ten minutes of a morning shoot I often don't see all that much to photograph. This too takes time, time for me to slow down, open up, and 'see', to let the natural beauty all around me in. It could be that I am still filled with all the workaday-world thoughts, the things I have to do, problems, and what-have-you. It takes time for my mind to relax and let go of its constant chatter. This endless worry and thinking affects my photography.

And here is where the word 'inscape' comes in. As I get out there and wander through the fields or wherever, I gradually start to slow down and gradually I begin to see things that are beautiful, scenes that I might actually want to photograph. Slowly my view of the natural world around me starts to open up again and I begin to view things differently. I begin to 'see'. It takes time and usually does not happen all at once. This little pattern of leaves over here or the way the light comes through the forest canopy, grabs me just a little bit, and the chatter of my mind begins to pause and slows. As I continue to walk along, some little thing or scene appears beautiful to me; I am touched by it, however lightly at first. I gradually get distracted from my daily distractions and begin to center. I wake up.

These little moments are 'inscapes', ways out of my mundane world of distractions and into the beauty of nature or, more accurately, back into the state of my own mind or being. As I take my time, I am able to see the beauty in things once again, and what I am seeing suddenly seems worth photographing. Like most of us, I photograph what catches my interest, what I find beautiful or worthy in the world around me.

These inscapes are signals that catch my attention, and they flag me down on my busy way forward to nowhere-in-particular. These moments and signs are how I stop going nowhere, and manage to almost miraculously arrive somewhere once again, perhaps only at my own peace of mind. This is one of the functions of the beautiful, to catch us in the turmoil of life, flag us down, and induce us to pull over and take a moment of rest. Time out.

These moments of inscape are different on different days, and different for different people. They represent the clues or signs that catch our attention and show us the way into the beauty of the natural world, actually into the beauty of our own mind. Another way of saying this might

be: what is beauty actually? What happens when we see something beautiful?

Beauty is not simply somewhere out there in nature waiting to be found, but always here within us, locked within us, we who are seeing this nature, we who can now see the beautiful. Beauty breaks down the rush of the everyday world and opens our heart a wee bit, making us vulnerable again, open to experience and input.

Through natural beauty we go inside and experience the inner beauty of things, which is none other than our own inner beauty. That is what beauty is for, to be touched on, seen, so that we find once again the beauty within our own hearts that we may have lost through the distractions of our daily life. We look outside in nature to see in here, to see into our own heart once again.

We can be sensitive to beauty in our photography. I would hate to tell you how many photographs I have of this or that butterfly or critter that are perfectly good photographs, but are empty of magic or meaning. They are well lit, well composed, and have everything that makes a good photograph except that 'magic' that keys or excites me. Instead, they are 'pictures' of a butterfly, but they have not captured any essence of anything. They might as well be in a field guide – snapshots in time with no meaning and for no one.

The reason for this, so I tell myself, is because they just happened to be there, photographic opportunities. I saw them and I took a photograph, but at the time they did not instill or strike any particular beauty in me. This, to me, is what I call "gotcha" photography, taking a photo because I can, not because I saw beauty in it or was moved to do so. There was no inscape moment, no moment of vision – snapshots only.

I find that it is really worth paying attention to what strikes me as beautiful or meaningful and photographing that, rather than just photographing the Grand Canyon because it is there or I am there. A lasting photograph, in my opinion, requires more of me than that, by definition. It has to mean something to me and, for that to happen, I need to actually be moved or inspired. Photographs that have special meaning for me usually have some form of inscape into a special moment that inspires me to capture the scene in a photo.

We can wander for miles looking for something to photograph, chasing down this or that butterfly or animal... searching. Or, we can slow down and let nature herself show us the signs, the inscapes through which we can relax and begin to 'see' naturally and photographically once again. We can listen to our own intuition. This process of inscape, of insight into the sublime in nature (the sublime within ourselves) I find to be the key to good photography and to creating photographs that are real keepers, at least in my mind.

If we don't touch our own inner self in our work, we touch no one at all, but when we are touched by a moment, I find that others also feel this. Touch one, touch all.

- Michael Erlewine

[Photo: The Rose of Sharon. I use Nikon cameras and a variety of lenses. This taken with the Nikon D3x and the Cosina/Voigtlander 125mm f/2.5 APO-Lanthar Lens]

