

## Photography: An Eightfold Path Toward Self-Discovery

Andy Ilachinski

Blog: <http://tao-of-digital-photography.blogspot.com>

Website: <http://www.andy-ilachinski.com>

*"A man sets out to draw the world.*

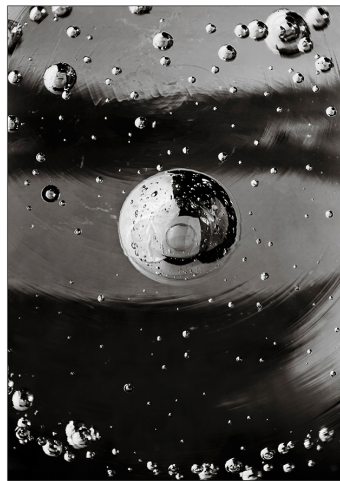
*As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals.*

*A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face."*

- Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*

In an age of ready access to all kinds of photo gear, from low end to high, and near instant self-gratification with "Wow, another great shot!" tweets from friends and family admiring our constant stream of smartphone image uploads, it is easy to forget that true photography – as a creative medium – requires a lifetime's worth of dedication, practice, and patience. The result is not an immediate, but ultimately short-lived, reward; rather, it is a Zen-like journey toward self-discovery.

I was reminded of this several years ago, upon publication of my first *Lenswork* portfolio, called *Micro Worlds*, when – in adherence to *Lenswork's* policy, I submitted a series of images woven around a single theme. After showing the published portfolio to my mom, she asked a disarmingly simple question: *"Andy, these photos are lovely, but why do you take so many pictures of the same thing?"*



My immediate reply was honest but shallow. I told her that individual images were inadequate to fully express what I wanted to communicate about what I was seeing and feeling. My mom – who is not used to shallow answers about art, having lived with an artist (my dad) for as long as I can remember – called me on my flippant reply, and probed for something deeper. I tried again: *"I don't think in terms of individual images anymore; and when I see a subject that interests me, I want to explore it more, with multiple exposures and viewpoints."* In some ways, of course, that was worse than my first answer. And my mom immediately countered with: *"Andy, now that you've restated my question, how about explaining why you don't think in terms of individual*

*images anymore?"* Though I had no meaningful reply, I realized that my mom had unwittingly revealed a meta-pattern shift in the gestalt of my photography at that time; one that I had not yet worked through on a cognitive level. The fact is that I did not then (those few years ago, when my mom asked her question), and do not today, find the same pleasure in capturing that "indelibly special image" as I did when I was first starting out in photography about 40 years ago; I need something more. This essay is a stab at communicating (mostly in words) the stages of development that, I suspect, almost all photographers go through if they stick with photography long enough, and which culminates not in the preternaturally magnificent final image (as all of us once aspired to when starting out), but a quiet, solemn revelation of our deepest selves. While my notes contain the germs of ideas for "stages of artistic evolution" whose numbers range from a only a few to more than a dozen, I eventually settled on eight stages, with perhaps an unconscious nod to the *Eightfold Way* of the Buddha.

**Stage 1: Joyful snapshots of anything and everything.** What is the first thing anyone who gets a new "toy" (or serious tool) wants to do? Play with it, of course. See what it can do, learn how to use it, and just have some fun with it. The beginning photographer doesn't really care about anything other than taking pictures of whatever strikes her fancy: pictures of their dog or cat, snapshots of their friends,, their own reflection, a tree, a street, a baseball game, whatever. Everyone begins somewhere; and that "somewhere" for photographers is a joyful – and unabashedly indiscriminant - expression of a new found tool that takes *pictures*. In a basic sense, anyone who is alive and is the least bit curious about the world - and is given a camera, or any other artistic tool - instantly becomes a stage-1 photographer.

**Stage 2: A passive stirring of aesthetic value.** As the photographer evolves from stage one to stage two, she still takes images of anything and everything that strikes her fancy but now finds that certain objects draw a deeper attention than others. Her gaze still falls on most everything that surrounds her, but her embryonic photographer's "eye" begins to discern that aesthetic value is not uniformly distributed throughout the environment. Certain scenes, and "special" things, draw her eye more than others. But the second stage photographer is still mostly passive, tentatively reacting to aesthetic stimuli as they appear and are recognized, but still largely undiscerning as to their relative merit and eager to "take in as much as possible." The stage-2 photographer creates pictures in which others recognize that certain things are given more or less visual weight than others; but - because the stage-2 photographer is still only a "beginner" - the pictures themselves are not necessarily as aesthetically pleasing as they could be.

**Stage 3: Willful engagement of the environment.** The transition from stage two to stage three is both difficult to see "from the outside" (for observers of the photographer's inner journey) and dramatic (as experienced directly by the photographer). The transition occurs when the photographer finds herself discontent with the merely passive capture of objects, and instead, now *actively* seeks objects she deems "interesting." She has started to categorize the world according to her own unique measure(s) of lesser and greater aesthetic value. Objects (or places, or people, or activity) that the stage-three photographer holds in high regard become beacons in the environment that immediately attract the photographer's attention. If the photographer finds trees of particular interest, for example, she is no longer content with leaving a park with a "few stray shots of trees," but now deliberately searches for as many different kinds of trees as she can find. The stage-three photographer begins to learn what she values most, and then goes out looking for it. She is also better able to use her skills to express why what she "saw" was so special to her.

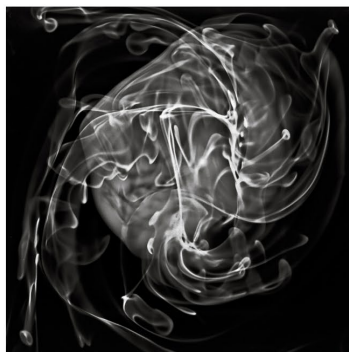
**Stage 4: Recognition of the power of expression.** The transition between stage three and stage four is marked by a gradual recognition of the power of using photography - traditionally, a print, but nowadays encompassing myriad forms - to express not the object itself, but what draws the photographer's attention to the object. In practical terms, this means that the stage four photographer is concerned less with depicting trees merely as objects of interest (in keeping with our "tree" example) - being quite happy to display a set of "shots of pretty trees" that are otherwise unremarkable in any way - and more with finding the one shot (and the one resulting print) that best expresses to others why the photographer loves to photograph trees. This subtle (and not so easy) transition represents a very significant worldview shift, as well as a shift in artistic sensibility. Indeed, many photographers, myself included, find themselves stuck at the stage 3/4 boundary for years, as they patiently explore ways to express *feeling*. Making matters even more difficult is that the stage 3/4 transition involves a gradual recognition of - and increased attention to - two different worlds of reality and expression: (1) Attention to using a print to isolate the tree as it appears to us, as an otherwise embedded feature of the external environment, and (2) Attention to using post-capture tools (either in a traditional or digital darkroom) to properly express the most important features of the tree as captured in a photograph. This distinction is both subtle and deep. It is meaningful only insofar as the stage-4 photographer realizes there is an important aesthetic difference between using tools to render differences between trees and their environment (in order to "make them stand out" better from the surrounding clutter), and using tools to selectively render the inner parts of a given photograph. Stage 4 is when the photographer gets the first inkling to dodge, to burn, and make other tonal changes to an image. The slow and careful learning, nurturing, and refining of these skills can (and often does) take years, if not decades, to develop fully.

**Stage 5: One picture is not enough.** Sooner or later, every photographer yearns to go beyond the "image"; to go beyond just showing a single picture, or at most a few prints, of some subject the photographer holds dear. More effort and greater care is put into every single capture, and its attendant post-capture processing; and more and more finished prints are deemed "worthy to show others" by the photographer. But the stage-5 photographer also grows increasingly dissatisfied over what she is beginning to perceive as "too shallow" an expression of an inner vision that is slowly trying to make its own voice heard. "I like this tree," she finds herself thinking more and more often, "but, by itself, it says little about *why* I love taking pictures of trees." She continues, "Each of my trees is lovely, and I'm proud to show them to others, but I'm somehow missing the bigger picture. It is as though each picture is but a chapter in some book not yet assembled." The photographer may not yet quite know what this nascent book is, or have any idea what form it will eventually take, but her aesthetic eye is being stirred to higher levels. The stage-5 photographer no longer thinks (or "sees") in terms of individual pictures; but is uncertain about how to use them to construct an artful narrative.

**Stage 6: Need to tell a story.** Inevitably, the photographer becomes interested in not just putting together a set of assorted - but only marginally related - prints (as in collections of "best of" shots), but in carefully crafting and sequencing the images in a portfolio of prints to tell a specific story. If the original interest was, say, *trees*, the photographer now wishes to move beyond her ever growing collection of "individual trees," to a new form of expression designed to reveal both how "sets of trees" are related, and a bit of the process by which the photographer's perception and expression of her general "love of trees" has itself evolved over time. The stage-6 photographer thus naturally steps away from prints as prints (even if they are otherwise a part of a larger collection),

and focuses increasingly on portfolios of interrelated images. It is no longer enough to just find that one "good" or "best" image - even though all photographers are always happy to find it; the photographer now first thinks in terms of sets of mutually interrelated collections of images. Ideally, each image stands on its own and compliments and/or enhances all of the others. In more practical terms, the photographer now wishes to express a deeper aesthetic experience of trees in general; as exemplified, perhaps, by a selection of personally meaningful images captured in a favorite park, or accrued over several weeks or months (or years) even as the photographer explores other subjects and themes. The stage-6 photographer's attention has moved from "pictures" to projects; motivated by a growing desire to tell *stories*.

**Stage 7: *Portfolios of Portfolios*.** The penultimate stage typically appears only when an photographer has attained a certain level of aesthetic maturity; by which time a meaningful body of work - consisting mostly of portfolios (though "individually meaningful" images still pop up from time to time) - has naturally emerged. Each portfolio has both a story to tell, and is an element of an as-yet unrevealed and unrealized deeper narrative; about which the stage-7 photographer hears the first faint murmurs of. A story concerning the truths of the world "out there" as revealed to the photographer through her lifetime's worth of aesthetic judgments as to what to shoot, what to keep, how to express, what to show, and what to sequence into portfolios. The photographer begins to appreciate certain universal truths by examining the aesthetic order that she has "imposed" on the world by her growing body of work. By studying her own portfolio of portfolios - as though her life's work was itself a "world" open to capture with an aesthetic eye and camera - the photographer discovers universal truths about the world itself. In my own case, I have glimpsed some of the feelings associated with a stage-7 worldview by looking inward to my motivation for creating a "portfolio of portfolios" called *Sudden Stillness*. *Sudden Stillness* consists of four fundamentally interwoven portfolios called *Chaos*, *Order*, *Complexity*, and *Entropy*. The subtitle of the book conveys the deeper meaning behind (and reason for the particular sequencing of images in) the book: *Visual Echoes of Timeless Rhythms*. Collectively, the four portfolios weave a "story" about the fundamental rhythmic patterns that regulate our world (from this one photographer's point of view, of course). In short, the stage-7 photographer uses her own work - consisting now mostly of portfolios of portfolios - to transcend art and begin addressing deeper and universal themes and issues regarding the order of the world around her. Art is no longer concerned solely with the here and now - for its own sake, and regarding limited sets of objects, themes, and contexts - but assumes an added dimension of seeking a transcendent truth about the nature of the world itself. And part of that truth is revealed - to the photographer - by the photographer's own body of work.



Chaos



Order



Complexity



Entropy

**Stage 8: *Self-discovery*.** Stage-8 is not all that different from stage-7, at least outwardly, and if measured objectively in terms of the photographer's physical output (in terms of the number and type of images and prints produced). The stage-8 photographer still typically produces portfolios of portfolios, still diligently practices her art, relentlessly striving toward perfection, and delights with each every "beautiful print" as though it was her first, just as she has always done. But the photographer shows no outward sign of doing anything different from the stage-7 photographer. Indeed, paradoxically, the stage-8 photographer may even appear to others as being stuck on a plateau (albeit an artistically very high one), and no longer willing, or able, to grow as an artist. But something fundamental has changed in the way the photographer understands and interprets her own work; and that is invisible to anyone but the photographer at first. In the same way as the stage-7 photographer uses her art to uncover truths about the world, the stage-8 photographer discovers truths about her own soul. The world, and the photographer's own work, have both come full circle: the world revealed through a photographer's vision; and the photographer's artful expression of her feelings about the world uncovering the depths of the photographer herself. Seer and seen become one; and the seen brings the seer back to self.



*"That which you are seeking is doing the seeking."* – St. Francis of Assisi