

“It’s the Journey, not the Destination”

ASP Thesis

by Dennis D. Hammon

Throughout my photographic career, there has been one constant in my life: photography. Photography allows me to see life differently and with a fresh perspective. As I watch the last rays of the sun make its final descent over the Grand Tetons, I realize this scene will never be viewed again. I realize it’s my decision whether to record this scene or not. I ask myself, why do I have such a passion for photography? It is my humble way of communicating the beauty of life and wonders of the world around me and recording my own personal visual journey.

Just like when I was growing up, playing childhood games and picking the players for our teams, I now know that photography has chosen me to be on its team. As I reflect over the last thirty years in this profession, with my shingle hanging out showing that I am a “professional photographer,” I reflect on the friends I’ve made, the clients I have had and places that I’ve been. I ask myself the age old questions: Why am I here? What can I contribute to others? What am I doing with my life?

Living and growing up in rural Idaho wasn’t easy. I grew up on a small farm, the eldest of eight children –a lot by today’s standards. But we were unaware that all families didn’t have that many kids. We all had daily chores starting from the time we could carry water and feed buckets to take care of the animals. We all worked in the huge garden, and we were taught the value of hard work and putting in long hours. I was raised to put in an honest day’s work and get paid for the same. My Father used to always tell us kids, “To succeed in life you only have to work part time. It doesn’t matter if you work the first twelve hours or the last twelve.”

Growing up in the country wasn’t all bad. We got to go hunting and fishing frequently, and the extra food for the table was nice. But when we would go out in the woods, dad would teach us how to survive, hunt for food, and appreciate the beauty that was all around. We didn’t have a lot of money; thus we never went on expensive vacations. As a family, we went on fishing trips, hikes and family drives. We learned about nature, the ways of

the animals, how to tell what the weather was going to do, but most of all we learned to respect and love those things that God had set out for us to enjoy.

At an early age we were taught to respect people's property, to give up our chairs to the lady folk, and the elderly. We would let others go ahead of us in the dinner line and pray over our food. Most of all, we were taught to love God, our family, and appreciate what we had.

While I learned from my father the ways of the out of doors, it was my mother who taught me about life at home and how to enjoy some of the finer things. Reading and art appreciation and a love of music were some of these things. Sitting and learning from my Mother taught me the softer side of life and helped to round out my informal education at home.

School was always easy for me, and I enjoyed going. I found joy in reading and learning. It was in junior high that a cousin brought over a box of old *National Geographic* and *Life* magazines. The images and stories from those magazines filled a country boy with dreams of travel and grandeur. I fell in love with them, reading every magazine from cover to cover. I poured over the amazing photographs of places and things that I could only dream of ever seeing or experiencing. I was being exposed to the finest photography anywhere in the world. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever expect a farm boy from Idaho would ever have the opportunity to visit the other side of the world.

About the time I was starting junior high, I was able to start music classes and became quite proficient with several instruments, traveling with bands frequently. I was exposed to many types of music and learned to appreciate all of them. It was the middle of my junior year when a friend who worked for the yearbook asked if I could take a camera on several of the band trips and get some pictures. Besides my parent's old Brownie box camera, I had never taken a photograph with anything as cool as the rangefinder camera he was asking me to use.

When I held that camera, it was easy to visualize myself as a photographer in those magazines that I so loved to read. I remember dreaming about being in those exotic locations, shooting for a magazine. In reality, I received a quick ten minute lesson on how to focus and expose and was told what they wanted for the yearbook. When I returned, I was called

to the yearbook adviser's office and I remember thinking that perhaps they should have trained me better, I was sure I was in trouble.

What happened next served as a boost to my confidence. I wasn't prepared to hear that he was happy and excited with my pictures and thanked me for doing such a great job. He asked me if I would continue to help out even though I wasn't in the class.

I attended college after graduating from high school. I had to work throughout the summer just to pay for the tuition. I had decided to pursue a degree in something else that I enjoyed, biology. I decided that I was going to be a forest ranger and nothing was going to stop me. I had to take an elective Art class, thinking it would be an easy class, so I signed up for "Introduction to Photography." The first day of class, I met Professor Harold Nielson, and we developed an immediate friendship. We had similar backgrounds, and I found myself immersed in his class. Combining the science of photography with the art seemed to be just what I was looking for. Mr. Nielson gave me personalized attention and allowed me to come into the black and white lab anytime I wanted. He would loan me his precious books on photography to read. I studied them and wanted more.

I felt like a thirsty soul, and I was parched. I wanted more and more knowledge and information. I received additional assignments and worked on them daily. He critiqued my work, giving me help and advice. Taking me on photo safaris with him, and working with me in the darkroom, he showed me how light and shadows played an essential part of producing the photograph. I had never really paid attention to these things before. I was taught to look for colors and light and how the patterns played into a design or shadow. It was like a new world unfolded before me. Advanced black and white, color photography, and color slide classes followed. I couldn't get enough. Mr. Nielson offered me a position as a teaching assistant. I accepted even though I was finishing up my biology degree. He counseled me with some very sage advice, "Dennis, choose a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life." I live by that saying to this day.

I still had to support myself to attend college, so I found a job at a local ski resort. I worked nights and weekends. One of the benefits was I could ski for free. After classes I could ski and photograph ski instructors, employees and anyone that wanted me to. I began to follow the "hot dog" circuit. I was living the dream- or so I thought- photographing skiing and

getting paid for doing something I love and probably would have done for free. What more could a guy ask for?

My roommate introduced me to Renee. After a brief courtship we were married. Now I had to provide for more than just myself. A year later we started our family: first Denee, then Melisa and Amanda, Justin, Brenton and Braeden followed. My children were and still are a big part of my life.

Sometimes, we get caught up with life, enjoying what we are doing and ignoring the signals that are set in motion for us. When we are not on the path that God had intended for us and not paying attention, He sometimes has to hit us with a two by four. I continued to work for the ski resort until I was injured on the job. I had five fractured vertebrae in my back.

The doctors told me I needed months of recovery and couldn't do the physical kind of work I was doing at the ski resort. While recovering, I went and visited Mr. Nielson. He had been born with physical handicaps and had no sympathy for my ailments. He told me to quit feeling sorry for myself and do something with my time off that reflected what I knew and loved. He told me about a school in Winona Lake, Indiana, that he had just attended. It was owned by Professional Photographers of America. I had no idea anything like that existed. I called them and found out what classes were coming up. Having no idea of where I was going or what I would do, I registered for a couple of classes, and I drove across the country to attend Winona School.

I signed up for the first classes available, and I had no idea who the instructors were. I met Frank Kristen and Gerhard Bakker and spent two weeks with them. I will never forget the principles of composition, design, lighting, that those two great mentors taught me. What amazed me most was their passion for this craft we call photography. They showed me I could find and create images from ordinary, everyday objects that often we just walk past; I firmly believe that this began my photographic journey. I thank God daily for those experiences as they opened my eyes to see that there was beauty everywhere.

After returning, I set up a studio to work out of my home. We worked out of this tiny basement studio for three years. With small children in the home, Renee and I decided to separate home life from the business.

A space opened up in downtown Rigby, Idaho, so we remodeled the location, and I stayed for over fifteen years. I photographed anything and everything, trying my hand at every type of photography available.

Along with wedding and portrait work, I added school photography to my workload. I appreciated the opportunity as it taught me to work quickly and effectively with each client. Many photographers don't like that type of photography, but I did. I had very low retakes with each school, as I would take the time to pose and converse with each student. I would call them by name and chat with them for the thirty seconds I had them in front of me. I remembered another saying that my father would quote, "If you don't have time to do a job right the first time, when will you have time to do it over?" I have followed that advice my entire life and career, by striving to complete my sessions correctly the first time I worked with anyone.

Life was good and the business was growing. I was humbled that others wanted to learn from me, so I began to share my knowledge with state and national organizations. I became a frequent visitor to the speaker's podium and judged often. I was able to expand and move into a new 6,000 square foot dream studio that I designed. I was busy, photographing dozens of schools and seventy-plus weddings a year, and had sessions every week. More and more time was working away from home and traveling to speak and judge. I was determined to make the new location and my business a success. I was so intent on succeeding, that I neglected the very reason I was working so hard. Yes, I was providing a home, cars and trips for my family, but I wasn't providing what they really needed, my time and attention.

My marriage failed. At the same time, tragedy struck. My mother passed away. I fell into a mental fog. I was only going through the motions. I was just making pictures and not creating the art that I knew I was capable of. We are all actors in this profession, and no one knew of my challenges, yet I knew there was something missing from my life.

My saving grace, besides believing that there was something more important to live for, became my frequent trips to Yellowstone and the Tetons. I found my peace there. It became my place of solitude, a place I could relax, and my source of inspiration. Imagine a place so quiet that your heart beat sounded like the percussion set at a symphony. I found my inner peace.

I learned to become one with my feelings and to experience the depth of emotions in the mountains. To this day I encourage everyone to find their own place to go to recharge and think through things in their lives. It was necessary for me to re-kindle the creative spirit that I knew was lying dormant in me. I needed to re-discover me and reach out and find new levels of success with new ideas.

I would frequent the hills as often as possible and on the weekends when I wasn't working. I realize that the art and passion I had started this journey with had somehow become elusive. The hunger in my soul was not getting fed. I reached out. Thank God for good friends who stood by me in this dark time of my life. I consider my two friends from Colorado, Don and Steve Emmerich to be my brothers. They were there for me, to talk to and give me advice. Besides our passion for photography, we talked frequently about love and life. They didn't judge or condemn but inspired me to be the best I could be and this is the example I try to follow to this day, giving back in some small way to those who need help.

During my many trips to the mountains, I found what had been missing. I re-discovered my lost passion, my love of photography, and the thrill of composing an image and seeing the results of my labor in front of me. To capture nature is to capture life in all its magnificence. Finding those small nuances of nature was what I was looking for. I love photographing individual objects and looking at the light around them. I am amazed at the depth of vision this provides. Light gives images life and sparks the soul. Through this expression of art, I again found my light and therefore my life.

My confidence and ability returned, and once again I begin entering my work into competition-not just to compete against my peers, but to judge how my personal work was maturing. Up to this time, my competition images had only been paid client work and photographs that I had printed myself. Entering my fine art work became rewarding as they were being accepted into the PPA merit and loan collection more frequently. I had come from a place that had become successful from a business point of view. I realized that my artistic soul was finally being nourished. My heart was lifted and so did my ability to capture those elusive images that touch the very soul of the viewer.

Henry David Thoreau stated, "It is not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." So often I would compose an object in front of my camera

and found that what I was seeing in my lens was not what I was feeling. The challenge became to capture the magnificence of any scene or object and encourage the viewer to wonder what it is and take the time to think about it. I want them to experience a visual treat in every sense of the word. I want them to interact with and enjoy the image as much as I enjoyed creating it. Too often, many of us forget the most important thing in photography: to enjoy photography and have fun.

Traveling became a way to open myself to new experiences and perspectives. I ventured beyond my normal areas of travel, visiting Europe, Mexico and Canada. There was a whole world out there, and I realized that those magazines from my youth instilled in me a love of life, travel and beauty throughout the world. I sought them out through the viewfinder of my camera. My natural curiosity to find something new has led me to many discoveries in the world and about myself. My commitment to photography has dictated my artistic success, as I realize I have the gift of creation. The gift to find a vista or scene and create something others might love and enjoy. This knowledge drives me, knowing that others want to view my images and feel what I was feeling, seeing through my eyes and experience what I was feeling in my heart.

The gift of creation was given to me, I truly believe, with the condition that it was used, exercised, and shared. My feelings transcend into emotion as I became more confident in my abilities at creating an image. I find myself drawn to intimate landscape photographs that depict less grandiose things people often overlook. Going out to photograph images in all kinds of weather, showing nature has different moods, or getting up predawn to get that one image, has shown me the splendor of the world. I found myself looking for that shot that shows the light, tones, and texture that Mr. Nielsen taught me.

The business of photography has not always been easy, yet I was making a living creating images of people, and felt I was good at it. Making subjects comfortable was my God-given gift. I was able to discern their needs and felt I had the ability to capture their essence in a portrait. Knowing how to put it all together was my job and passion. Capitalizing on what I was learning on my trips allowed me to put my client work at a different level. I discovered that I could take a beautiful location, place a family creatively in it, and make an art piece for them.

Yet my passion was in fine art and scenic photography. Frequent trips to the mountains, finding old buildings, waterfalls, or anything that would create a great image became a passion. That passion has evolved into a way of life. Once again, I felt alive, and was influenced by the beauty that inspired me in my images.

I felt that my passion was transforming something ordinary into something extraordinary. Photography became an expressive art form for me that relied on skills of observation of how light and shadow played in relationship to each other to form a composition. Design and contrast were my tools. Color became my palette on which to express emotion and feeling. I love the subtleties of light and tones, yet I feel that the impact of vivid scenes will capture one's heart and live in their soul.

We live in a color world, but frequently an image speaks to me, screaming to be black and white. We see colors, but with black and white we see the sublimity of tones, with light and shadows defining the intensity of dynamics in the image. Determining whether or not an image is to be color or black and white, the eyes see, the mind thinks, and the heart with infinite wisdom knows what the final creation of that final image should be.

I ask myself continually, what is this source of inspiration and passion? Is there a romantic ideal that creativity just appears? To some degree, this may be true, but there is a need to train our minds to work more effectively. I find if I am prepared by studying fine works of art and photographs, my mind is ready. It adds clarity and focus in what I am doing if I am prepared, emotionally and mentally. Passion is the very essence that pushes us to want to improve, to learn more about our craft, and the desire to inspire with our images. Passion is the fuel that makes me get up in the pre-dawn darkness to go to a location that I wouldn't normally go to. It is my desire to be technically proficient with this craft, and because of this burning desire to be creative, and capture that elusive light and shadow that drives me daily, sometimes with reckless abandon.

I guess before now I never really thought about analyzing my drive and passion for photography. It feels like it has always been there, a hungry force within me needing to be fed with a constant need to find and create timeless images. My life has been one of continually seeing beauty and objects. My goal and desire is to capture those objects turning them into an art form.

The art of photography has been an exciting and lifelong process. This thrill we all seek to capture a small part of the world or someone's lives, knowing that even after we pass this mortal existence, our images will continue to touch those who remain behind.

Sitting in the mountains, reflecting on my life, I hope that we all can observe and embrace what was given to us by the Creator. I am finally realizing that opening my mind, and most of all my heart, was the turning part of my career. I have thought about this journey I've been on, and as I look at the landscapes of this beautiful world, I remember those magazines I studied so hard in my youth, I realize that I have been to many of those places. There are still many more places I would like to go to and enjoy. I have not reached my goal of creating that perfect image, nor is my photographic journey complete. It has become a journey of sacrifice, love and vision that I feel I have just begun. I am still excited daily to get out of bed and say that today I'm going to create a beautiful image. I'm frequently asked which of all my photographs my favorites are. I simply smile and reply, "It's my next one."

I often recall the life-changing advice given to me long ago, and I truly don't believe I've worked a day in my life.

Respectively submitted

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