

Messengers to the Creator

James P. Chagares

The smell of Hoppe's gun oil and fixer still permeate my senses. My father's gun room doubled as a dark room. Along with teaching me how to shoot clay pigeons, high powered rifles and muzzleloaders, he taught me how to use a Twin-Lens Rolleiflex, Carl Zeiss 35mm, light meter and the enlarger. There was nothing sophisticated about the process, not even a gray lab timer. We used an old Kodak desk timer and the most archaic print dryer imaginable.

Never having any formal training in photography we both stumbled through the process together. I would rummage through his old negatives finding portraits of my mother and cousins on which to practice making prints. Our techniques were primitive at best, but we thought we were creating timeless masterpieces.

We spent every season hunting and fishing. Each summer my parents would plan a fishing trip to Canada to fish for musky and northern pike. My dad loved to catch the biggest fish in camp. We would spend most of our day fishing and the balance of the day trying to find our way back to the lodge.

My dad was always patient enough to quietly row the boat closer so I could photograph an eagle perched atop a tree. I was enchanted with the diverse population of wildlife in Canada. We would see moose walking out from the shore until they were submerged to feast from the bottom of the lake. There were the sounds of beaver slapping their tails in warning and the call of the loon to set the atmosphere. If the porcupine, bear and wolves weren't enough to move you, rest assured the Canadian sunsets and northern lights would get your attention.

I was soon off to college to pursue a degree in Elementary Education. In 1972, I received my Bachelor's Degree from Ball State University and began teaching elementary school. Five years later I received my Master's Degree in Elementary Education. My job took me a hundred miles from my home of Richmond, Indiana. I taught third, fourth and fifth grades for the next fourteen years in the small town of Churubusco, just north of Ft. Wayne, IN.

I continued to read virtually every book and magazine I could find on photography. I purchased new cameras, lenses and accessories. I wouldn't hesitate to rush out to photograph a sunset, freshly fallen snow, an ice storm, concerts, sporting events, nature and wildlife. Indeed, I couldn't get enough wildlife. I took a camera with me everywhere I went. Things could not have been better. However, there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think of myself as being a full time professional photographer.

In 1984, I met the most encouraging person in my life, my wife Debbie. Debbie and I became inseparable. Beginning with our honeymoon we hiked and photographed the Grand Canyon, Petrified Forest, Rocky Mountain National Park, Grand Tetons, Yellowstone, Mount Rushmore, The Badlands and more, all the way into Canada. We later photographed, Olympic National Park, Shenandoah National Park, The Great Smoky Mountains, The Everglades, Algonquin and Jasper National Parks in Canada.

Then, in 1988, my father died; the same man that at 75 could out walk me when rabbit hunting. Debbie and I had had many conversations about moving to my home town. We both, however, had great jobs, a house and roots in the community. It wasn't until after his death that we realized how much more important family is over all other things in life. I went to

Richmond over spring break, found a realtor and bought a house. As soon as we closed on our new home, we wrote letters of resignation, quit our jobs and moved at the end of the school year.

Now was my chance to be the professional photographer that I had dreamed about for so long. My cousin told me about someone that had a one hour mini lab and was filing bankruptcy. I contacted the bank and found that I could purchase his equipment for \$5,000; a great deal for \$50,000 worth of equipment. My only problem was I didn't have \$5,000. We decided to cash in Debbie's retirement savings to purchase the equipment. We were now in the photography business.

My first task at hand was to learn to operate our new color film developer and print color prints without an analyzer. I became very proficient at color correcting prints using the subtractive filtration method. Soon, I was developing film for all the major accounts in town; the police department, fire department, the sheriff, the coroner, factories, realtors, a newspaper and others to numerous to mention. After two years our business was doing so well we drove to Virginia to purchase another machine to help keep up with our work load.

It was also at this time that I realized I really knew nothing about photographing people or the photography business. I heard about a one evening lecture in Cincinnati on wedding photography by two men of which I had never heard, David Ziser and Dennis Reggie. I had never before seen such graceful and elegant bridal posing and lighting. I left the seminar with two things to hold onto for the rest of my career. I left with a set of VHS tapes from both David

and Dennis and the words of wisdom from Mr. Reggie, "do not set your prices by your own checkbook," and "sell yourself first, then your photography."

It was now time to get a better medium format camera. I did not have the money needed to get the entire Mamiya 645 system, so I sold my guitar and traded-in my dad's Twin-Lens Rolleiflex. I knew from my past experiences that you are only as good as your equipment and the people with which you surround yourself. I joined the Indianapolis Professional Photographers Guild. Through the Guild I learned of Professional Photographers of Indiana and PPA.

My next seminar was also career changing. The programming featured Jay Stock and Barry Rankin. It's hard to explain in words the influence Jay has had on folks in photography. I later spent six years studying with Jay. Barry spoke about PPA print competition which kindled a fire in me to begin setting goals toward the PPA degree program. Until then I thought print competition was merely competing against your fellow photographers for first place. I was excited to find it was individualized for personal growth and education. I later pinned a Jay Stock bio to my bulletin board above my darkroom sink as well as the PPA Master/Craftsman brochure and the ASP Fellowship Degree brochure. These would be the goals I would need to achieve in my photographic career.

I knew it would take some time to achieve the PPA Master of Photography Degree, which I began working on immediately, so I studied the entire next year to take the PPA Certification examination. This was a goal I could achieve without delay and did so that next year. A large portion of the exam was to be on large format view cameras which I knew nothing

about. After studying the Upton and Upton book to prepare for the exam, I became so fascinated with the view camera I purchased a complete Sinar 4x5 system and went to Winona International School of Photography in Chicago four times to learn the view camera and commercial photography.

It seemed like a lifetime but in retrospect it wasn't long before I received my Master of Photography Degree. It was the late Dean Collins that put the degree into perspective for me. Dean's philosophy was that doctors study medicine their entire lives and say they "practice medicine" and we have the nerve to say we are masters of photography. It is because of Dean that I realized it is important to achieve each goal along the way but to stay humbled by our achievements.

Each time I would achieve a goal a new one would arise. After the Master of Photography Degree it was time to begin pursuing the goal of becoming a National Juror. This was a goal that would lead in directions that I had never dreamed. Certainly, now I would be under the influence of the most highly acclaimed photographers in our industry. The knowledge and diverse experience of this fraternity of colleagues is without measure. To be accepted into this esteem class of photographers was truly a milestone in my photographic career.

I decided not to begin pursuing my Craftsman Degree until I could lecture on a subject that others were not familiar. Then, along came the age of digital photography. In 1995, I began working my way through every Photoshop book on the bookstore shelves. I now felt like photography had opened a new frontier; one that needed pioneers to help pave new paths for

others to follow. I began lecturing on digital imaging. I was teaching again but this time teaching adults that were eager to learn and shared my excitement for photography.

I obtained the Craftsman Degree, Master of Electronic Imaging Degree and became Electronic Imaging Certified. Each time I would achieve a goal PPA would dangle the carrot of a new one. I received the Imaging Excellence Award for 13 Loan Collection images and am now looking forward to the newest achievement of a diamond bar for 26 Loan Collection images. I also have a personal goal to receive over 100 print exhibition merits and the Diamond Photographer of the Year Award.

My work goes far beyond awards and trophies. I feel we have a duty, as we try to humbly master our craft, to pass our excitement to the future. If we were to study every great achievement since the beginning of time, be it inventor, explorer, musician, photographer, sculpture, scientist, statesman and artists of every kind, we would find one common denominator, *passion*. Passion is a word that can be overused if not defined properly. It is a powerful and compelling emotion or feeling. Books, poems, and stories have been written about this powerful word. It is our passion level that touches those around us. They find enthusiasm in our success and they are inspired by us. If we keep creating art that inspires our inner soul then we will inspire those around us. The mechanics of photography is not hard to learn. The passion of photography on the other hand is what "makes the difference". No one can teach you passion. It is a gift of the spirit. Passion creates energy thus feeding the soul with strength beyond ones imagination. You cannot fake it. It rekindles our purpose and reason for

being. It is ours to discover and master. Passion is doing what comes naturally. Passion, like a river, gains energy as it travel towards its final destination.

Passion has been defined as a strong and extravagant fondness, enthusiasm, or desire for anything. But can passion really be defined or is it something which defines. You will know what it is when you have it. Have you ever worked all day on a project so compelled you could not stop to eat or sleep? It is what we love not what society tells us we should love. Some folks keep their passion bottled up only letting a little out when it is safe to do so. It is never too late to begin living passionately.

We must go past what we love and ask ourselves why it is we love it so much. I'm certain it is because of the impact we know we can make. It is what we will leave behind for others to take with them. It is not about what we take with us. What would you do with your time if you had no restrictions such as money? Most people are afraid to ask this question because the answer would be "why aren't I doing it".

I am fortunate to make my living as a portrait photographer-- a dream come true. It is no secret, however, that my true passion is nature photography. I love the challenge of the elements, be it sub-zero temperatures, snow, poor light, wind, rain, sweltering heat or insects. I cherish my time in nature telling the story of animal behavior that most people rarely get to see. Your senses are alive with the slightest sounds or movements. You are but a stranger in their neighborhood. What a challenge trying to capture still images made for motion picture cameras. It takes time, good equipment and, above all, patience. I love the thrill of photographing and camping among bears. Photographing wolves and eagles in the wild is

spiritual beyond belief. I am convinced that photographing nature and wildlife is God's plan for me. Each time I am able to capture these wonders I know the images are for His archives. The experience is valued more than the results of the day.

I begin each day with the attitude that I have a new canvas; that I have not yet created my best images. I have learned that it is not an act. I have made my profession who and what I am. I create new images as I would write a song; each having a melody with a beginning, verse, chorus, and ending. A song I must sing to the Creator. Just like a concert musician, I warm up before each performance and continue to practice for perfection. I have surrounded myself with the best players, all knowing we are Messengers to the Creator.

James P. Chagares

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1972 Bachelor's Degree, Elementary Education, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana

1977 Master's Degree, Elementary Education, Ball State University

1972-1988 Elementary School Teacher grades 3-5

1991 Member Professional Photographers of America

1991 Member Professional Photographers of Indiana

1991 Indianapolis Professional Photographers Guild Member

1992 PPA Certified

1992, 1993 Four Cooperate and Advertising Classes at Winona International School of
Photography

1997 Master of Photography Degree

1998 Craftsman Degree

1999 Certified Electronic Imaging

2000 Master of Electronic Imaging

2001 Loan Collection Cover

2003 Photographers of the Year Mid-East States Regional

2004 National Award

2004, 2005, 2008, 2009 ASP State Elite Award

Six time Indiana Digital Imager of the Year

Four time Indiana Professional Photographer of the Year

2006 Imaging Excellence Award

2007 ASP Gold Medallion, "Messengers to the Creator"

2008 ASP Gold Medallion, "The Otter Family"

2009 Regional Medallion, Score 100 "Great Coastal Brown Bears"

2010 Regional Medallion, Score 100 "Yellowstone: Backcountry Journey"

2010 Canon Par Excellence Award

Eleven Years Top Ten Indiana Photographers Award

Three time Photographer of the Year Indianapolis Professional Photographers Guild

Five time Professional Photographers of Indiana Platinum Award for highest scoring image

99 Print Exhibition Merits

27 Loan Collection Images

7 PPA Photographer of the Year Awards