

# *The Long and Winding Road*

by Randy McNeilly

It is a warm spring evening as I walk toward Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The city's legendary smog has been cleared by yesterday's rains and the pleasant breeze feels luxurious. The steps lead me down under the street below six lanes of traffic jammed with battered cars, buses and all the bicycles that must have been discarded by my generation forty years ago.

A feeling of anxiety follows me into the tunnel underpass leading to the Square. I can't stop thinking of the confrontation between the students and the Red Army that took place two decades ago. My consciousness is consumed by the memory of one of the most powerful images of the last century, the photograph of a young student standing in front of an oncoming tank. I know the Square will be an emotional experience.

Emerging back to street level, the scene is not at all what I expected. The Square is an immense plaza surrounded by government buildings. Instead of a gray somber area, it is completely the opposite. It is alive with activity, with an atmosphere of a festival or street fair. Vendors are selling food, garments, and flags. Children are flying kites. Families are taking snapshots of children in front of monuments glorifying the People's Revolution.

Everywhere there are people, thousands of people. All are moving in a great mass toward the opposite end of the square down to the entrance to the Forbidden City. All are here for the same purpose, to see the flag ceremony at sundown.

I am instantly aware of being the tallest, largest visitor, the one with the largest camera. Children and young people begin approaching me, eager to try out their English skills.

At first I am very perplexed by this behavior, as I had been walking all afternoon around the rest of the city relatively unnoticed. After some conversation it became clear the people in the Square tonight were tourists; pilgrims if you will, from all over China. Unlike residents of Beijing, they were not accustomed to seeing Westerners and were fascinated by them.

I started photographing the children and elders, showing them the images on the camera's back. The response was amazing. They brought their relatives to look at the pictures, and the next thing I know people are giving me babies and small children to hold so they can take their own photographs of us. Entire families came

to be photographed by me and with me, exuding an overwhelming feeling of warmth and friendship. Never in twenty-eight years of my career have I been able to use photography as a more effective tool of communication. I felt very much a citizen of the world.

At the entrance to the Forbidden City, I was photographing a small boy holding a miniature national flag. Looking through the viewfinder, I could see the iconic portrait of Chairman Mao in the background, as though he were looking over the boy's shoulder. The symbolism of the Old China Big Brother watching over the child, was striking.

Walking back to my hotel in the twilight, I was thinking how I was just like the boy, even 12,000 miles from the Appalachian home of my birth; the past was still looking over my shoulder. Photography had taken me to the other side of the earth both physically and philosophically.

I grew up in a small town in Western North Carolina. Casar, like most towns in the area, was made up of people working in mills, factories and agriculture. The community was known for three things; racism, taking care of its own, and keeping the rest of the world out.

It's hard to explain the culture of a place like this to an outsider. In a world with little opportunity, you tell yourself the things you can't have are unimportant. Higher education is undesirable and leads to work that is less honest. Traveling beyond home is foolish because no place could be better. Anything done for aesthetics is a frivolous waste of time. A man showing any tenderness or emotion indicates weakness. Doing better than the rest of your family is called getting above your raising. This can lead to being proud . . . and everyone knows pride is a sin.

I have spent a lifetime trying to understand this culture and have arrived at some conclusions. When you don't have anything to make you feel good about your life, you exaggerate the importance of some element of some of your life. Being the best hunter, fisherman, or baking the best pies can become your whole identity. When you have nothing else, the superiority of your religion or race will suffice. This is the culture in which I grew up.

My family was dirt poor like all of our neighbors. My father was a construction worker and part-time farmer, who spent every free moment hunting or fishing. My mother worked in the school cafeteria and spent the rest of her time working on our farm with her three children. We lived in a house without central heat or running water until I was thirteen. My family's idea of fine art was taxidermy.

Not everything about growing up in this town was negative. The closeness of the community made every adult seem like a parent and every child a sibling. Everyone knew your name and most everything else about you. The result was a security and a sense of belonging.

Most of the families did not have television until the mid 1960s. The result was people visited friends and neighbors for entertainment. Storytelling was an art form at these gatherings. Children would listen to the adults tales of hunting, foreign wars or life when they were young, all the while creating Stephen Spielberg-like movies in their minds. It was wonderful for a developing imagination.

By the age of fourteen I was fast tracked to become the next generation in this saga.

Then something happened to change this world. It came in the form of school consolidation. Abruptly I moved from the comfort of the tiny school where everyone knew everyone else to a large high school combining thirteen small schools. My identity was swept away in a sea of strangers. To make matters worse, my dreams of baseball stardom were crushed by high school curve balls.

During my sophomore year, I made two great discoveries, art and girls. Both were to cause me great pleasure and great pain throughout life.

My epiphany in art came from a book of literature. This particular book would follow each section of short stories with a collection of paintings. John Steinbeck's, "The Red Pony" was followed by the painting, "Christina's World", by Andrew Wyeth. I was captivated. The painting is of a woman (actually a polio victim) wearing a pink dress seated in a stubble wheat field. In the background there is a lonely farmhouse. I wrongly interpreted the girl to be an isolated young girl, out of place in her environment. I identified with her.

I would stare at the painting, until I was compelled to research Wyeth in the school library. I asked the librarian for help and discovered she was a longtime fan of the artist. While enthusiastically pulling books, she suggested I take art the next semester. Reluctantly, I did.

My epiphany in girls came in the form of Janey. She sat at the table with me in the new art class. She was as different from anyone I had ever met as day is from night. Instead of shying away from anything different, she embraced it. Curious Janey questioned everything music, religion, politics and art. Through her, I was introduced to the music of Bob Dylan and the poems of Dylan Thomas; the abstract art of Picasso and the euphoria of pot. I was smitten, but more importantly I was enlightened.

Encouraged by high school art teachers who were all too kind, I went off to college with hopes of becoming an art teacher. My parents were not excited. As it turned out neither were my college professors. By late in my sophomore year it was clear to them, and finally to me, that I had no real ability. I couldn't draw, paint, sculpt or throw a pot on a wheel. The only subjects I excelled in were art history, art appreciation, and an elective called introduction to photography.

At nineteen, I returned home a failure. The close-knit community again embraced me; providing protection from the outside world, but this time it was different. I didn't fit in with my childhood friends. My views of the world had changed so drastically any conversation seemed difficult. I had the clear, black and white, right and wrong convictions of a young man of my generation, but was caught in a land that had failed to progress from the previous generation.

I got a blue-collar job like all my contemporaries had gotten straight out of high school. The job was cutting meat at a Winn-Dixie grocery store twenty miles away in a town called Shelby. I hated this job so much that on my drive in some mornings, I would pull over to the roadside violently sick to my stomach. No one I knew had ever quit a job; I didn't know it was possible, so every day I kept going back to work.

During this time I met Mary, who later became my wife. Mary was on the same path I had taken earlier,

studying to be an art teacher. Helping her with photography projects rekindled my interest. That interest soon turned into an insatiable passion.

I devoured every book on photography I could manage to get my hands on, starting with the local libraries, then moving on to camera stores. After building a black and white dark room, I purchased a 4 x 5 view camera. It was love at first tilt. I found it difficult to focus on anything other than photography. This is the first time I can recall experiencing a kind of tunnel vision manifesting itself. This condition would help me achieve goals, but ultimately be detrimental to my personal life.

On a day off I mustered the courage to walk into a local photographer's studio. Mr. Hubert Carlisle ran a combination commercial and portrait studio. We liked each other instantly, and for the next year entered into an informal apprenticeship with me spending every spare minute in his studio. Even though Mr. Carlisle was seventy years old he was just as passionate about photography as his young pupil. He would spend hours discussing and lecturing on sensitometry, the physical properties of light, lens configurations or any other technical topics I would inquire about.

By the time Mary graduated from college we had formed a plan. We were going to move to a town about 150 miles away that had a two-year well-acclaimed photography program. She applied and got a job teaching and I applied and was accepted into the photography program at Randolph Technical College. Just as we were preparing to move in the fall, Casar pulled me back in. Mary got a job offer there that was just too good to turn down, keeping her close to her family, so we stayed.

Mary felt so guilty about interrupting my plans to attend photography school that she formulated a course of study. It was a two-year plan where I would spend one week out of every three months studying with some photographer I admired. She would contact photographers of my choice, ask them if I could spend a week being their assistant or observing. An amazing number of them said yes. The two-year plan was so successful that we extended it for another year.

During this time I was studying with commercial photographers because that's where my interest was at the time. Fashion photographers in Atlanta and product photographers in Chicago agreed to let me come and study with them. But the one week that stands out was spent at Dean Collins studio in San Diego, California. Later, I took a week long class with him. He had a command of the medium like no one I had met before or since. He gave me what I was starving after for so long.

Dean spoke in a photographic language I understood. This was my first experience with a truly analytical photographer. He didn't take photographs, he engineered them. Dean had organized all the loose elements of image making that were so chaotic in my mind. His work and his methods were sublime.

While completing my curriculum, we had opened a small commercial studio in Shelby. We lived on Mary's teaching salary and used every dime the business made to buy equipment and expand my education. I had inherited many of Mr. Carlisle's commercial clients after his retirement and added a couple of my own.

Things were going pretty well when the recession of 1984 hit. Two of the three agencies I worked for went out of business. The third lost half of its employees. Overnight, I became a portrait and wedding photographer to survive.

I never thought I would enjoy photographing people, but to my surprise I really enjoyed the interaction. Realizing that I had a whole new set of skills to learn, I took a portrait photographer friend's advice and joined Professional Photographers of North Carolina and later PPA. When I went to the first of these conventions I was very confused and somewhat put off by the information the instructors were presenting from the platform. I heard instructors use terms such as establishing a working aperture and how far the subject should be from the background. Having come from a commercial background where every image was designed for product special needs, I was appalled by the structure of these portrait photographers. However, the things I learned from them about posing people gracefully, managing the clients, and business practices were well worth the effort.

Previsualization became the cornerstone of my work. The images were made in my head before looking through the viewfinder. I developed an exercise to aid with the process. The first concept to turn my mind around was not using the focal length of the lens to determine the size of the subject but to control how much of the background to include. Then I would change apertures seeing the effect in my mind.

Next came the lighting, beginning with the main light. I would mentally move the light in and out, and around, seeing the pattern and highlight to shadow transition change. When I was satisfied with the results, my mind would bring in a reflector, varying the distance and intensity. Then hair, accent and background lights would appear. When happy with the position and intensity of the lights, I could then play a game with the color temperature of the individual lights.

This process completed the aesthetic portion of taking the photograph. In my mind's eye I could see this whole process take place as though I was watching a movie. It was just like when I had made the elders storytelling come alive when I was a child.

After the mental image was made, the mechanical process began. I saw this portion of the photographic process as an algebraic equation. I took the elements that were known and used them to find the unknown and idea I first got from the Serenity Prayer: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. This seemed to fit my process perfectly.

Usually, I would start with a known aperture, one that would provide sufficient sharpness for the subject and my desired look in the background. Then I would search the scene for elements I could not control. These could be natural or artificially lighted areas, ambient light sources, stained glass, etc. Now I would be back in commercial mode, problem solving again. The system worked well for me.

By the mid 1990s, the long hours of fifteen years in the photography business had me nearly burned out. Then I met Jack Holowitz, and was instantly charmed. I quickly befriended him as has most everyone who has met him. We started traveling to the American West together and I became interested in landscape photography, specifically large format black and white. Returning to the black and white image was renaissance for me. Black and white photographs reminded me of the monochromatic egg tempera printings of Andrew Wyeth that led me into photography. It was a natural progression for the black and white way of thinking to seep back into my portrait photography.

For the first time I realized the black and white image is actually an abstract. It gives us a way of looking at our world and the people we share it with in a very different way. As the millennium neared, my medium changed with the majority of my portrait sales becoming black and white.

I became aware of the shortcomings of my lighting. I had been seduced by the soft box. This easy and forgiving light source had become my default. Many of the portraits I had done in color did not have the same snap and punch when recreated in black and white. I added a new twist to my previsualization routine. Now I would try to imagine the light source, as a hard source like a parabolic or even a spot. Now I was actually making the lighting style fit the story I was telling.

I began constantly playing with the lighting during my portrait sessions. In the same sessions I would shoot part of the photographs with soft boxes part with parabolic reflectors, bounce, and spots, switching back and forth between strobe and tungsten and mixing the two together. Not only did this offer my clients greater choice and me more images to sell, but it made shooting in the studio fun and exciting for me.

By 1999, I had achieved every goal I had set for myself. I was breaking ground on my new dream studio but my personal life was about to fall apart. After two decades as my business partner, best friend, wife and being ignored, Mary left.

I began the millennium with a half-completed studio and little desire to continue. I was depressed. Just as I had after dropping out of college, I escaped to the small community I had been trying to leave behind. I had a dark year. Again, friends and family showering me with incredible support, helped me complete the studio. After six months of turning out uninspired, mediocre work, moving into the new studio was the spark that rekindled my photographic flame. I spent my time and energy refining my work in the new facility. The design allowed me to use the long lenses with the great distances from subject to background that I had so desperately been wanting. I emerged from the worst year of my life turning out the best work of my life.

The next great influence was to come from an old friend, Janet Boschker. Janet and I met when we joined PPNC at the same time, fifteen years before. We had been friends ever since. She is the finest photographer of children that I have ever met. She had a passion for the craft that surpassed mine. Her black and white portraits of children were clean and uncluttered, never containing a single element that didn't help tell the story. It seemed inevitable that we should be together. One day early in our relationship, while critiquing a young photographer's work I overheard her tell him, It all has to make sense. It was kind of another epiphany for me. It was something I had always known but had not been able to express, the missing piece of my equation.

As I applied this last element to my equation for image making, I would take the pre-visualized image even farther. For example, if one element of the image was dramatic then all the other elements had to fit. Pose, background, lighting, expression everything had to fit to tell the story. If the image is gentle, such as a mother and child, the lighting, pose, background, expressions all had to be soft. It all has to make sense and it did.

While all the pieces of my photographic equation seemed to now fit, the equation of my personal life did not. After seven years of trying to merge our professional and personal lives, Janet and I gave up.

As with each time of crisis in my life, I found myself again returning to my roots. This time instead of a retreat from the outside world it felt more like a homecoming. What was so different this time was my

awareness of my arrogance. How ironic that the community I had touted as intolerant had always been willing to accept me back home. It was my turn to reach out to them. Someone who has just moved back to the same community told me she spent her childhood trying to get away from this place and her adult life trying to get back. It occurred to me that I had a similar path. I had spent my life trying to leave my heritage behind but returned every time I needed comfort. Unlike my friend it has taken me over fifty years to find home.

I now live on a farm and enjoy the warmth of country living. Once again I can sit on a front porch and enjoy the storytelling of elderly neighbors, help gather hay on the farm and enjoy Sunday dinners with family and friends. Now I see my role as a storyteller in this community. Not telling stories in the harsh black and white of my younger years, but in a full palette of grays.

Had I never encountered the Andrew Wyeth painting; I would never have taken the art class that led to my career in photography. Had I not encountered the same people, how different life might have been. In the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, "I am a part of all that I have met. God, karma, or luck? I don't know." I do know I'm very thankful for the series of events that make up the enigma of my life and realize photography has been my reason for being.

***Accomplishments:***

- Graduated Burns High School .....1973
- Attended Western Carolina University ..1973 - 1975
- Started McNeilly Photography .....1979
- Joined Professional Photographers  
of North Carolina..... 1984
- Joined PPA ..... 1989
- PPA Masters ..... 1993

PPA Craftsman ..... 1994  
Approved as an Affiliate Juror ..... 1995  
EI Master ..... 1998  
Approved Photographic Instructor ..... 2003  
Imaging Excellence ..... 2007

PPA Merits: 402 total Merits  
( 88 Exhibition merits, 21 Loan)

***Service:***

Founder of PPA affiliate Foothills Group ..... 1996  
PPNC Board ..... 1995 to present  
PPA Councilman - NC ..... 1998 to present  
ASP Board ..... 2007 to present  
PEC Committee ..... 2007 to present  
SEPPA Board ..... 2007 to present  
SEPPA Salon Chairman ..... 2007 to present  
Jury Chairman in training            2008



