

THE PERFECT MOMENT

By: Daniel E. Thornton

Personal Credo

In the lifelong pursuit of becoming a master storyteller using the visual art of photography, I have invested most of my life's best years documenting the world around me. The people I meet, the natural world, and all God's creatures have contributed to a balanced purpose of life.

Driven by the need to express the perfection of all God's creation on film, I possess a passion to record images that will inspire and challenge others on an emotional level, and move them to love and protect the precious gifts our Maker has made us stewards over.

I respect the brevity of life, and believe recording its existence is such a worthy pursuit. I believe photographers share an important part of the responsibility to share our current world with future generations. The divine nature of our subjects demands we approach this pursuit with courage, passion, and integrity.

I discovered photography at the age of 12 because my older brother, Allen, loved taking pictures, and I loved hanging around with my big brother. Photography proved to be an excellent way for us to spend time together. In no time we had a makeshift darkroom under the stairs in his first house. My job was to count (one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three, etc.), as my brother would flip the power switch on then off to expose the light sensitive paper below our \$25 enlarger. I still have some of the first prints we made together. Although our knowledge was limited, we possessed a wonderful attribute, a love for photography and the ability to create something with our own hands of which we could be proud. Even though we now live in different parts of the United States, we still get together at least once a year and go on a photo safari. I will always be grateful for all the attention that Allen gave me growing up. He may never know how much my life has been enriched and shaped by his guidance.

The high school yearbook, photo club, and small local newspaper proved to be a great way to pursue photography on my own. With the help of my English teacher, Robert Gillingham, who was also the editor of the local paper, I received my first chance to get paid for taking pictures. It was because of that opportunity and his encouragement that I decided to make photography my profession. Before graduating from high school, I was already photographing weddings and portraits and earning money that I could spend on more photo equipment, and to support my seemingly habitual need to expand my photographic abilities and knowledge.

It was also during this time in my youth that I would meet the one person who would affect my life the most over the next 30 years. Her name was Joy, and joy is also how best to describe the way she makes me feel in my heart.

When I have been discouraged, she has always offered encouragement. When I would feel inadequate, she would be there to give me support. When times were hard, she stood by my side, always lifting me up, pushing me on, putting me before herself. Together we have shared life's joys, fears, sorrows and wonders. Because of Joy, I have been able to live my "life's dream." She is the one person that I am the most grateful for. After more than 30 years I still thank God for leading me to the one person in the whole world that would be my perfect companion. Little did I know that the young girl that caught my eye by carrying a Nikon camera to school would later become my sweetheart, wife, lover, best friend, and partner in both business and in life.

Joy and I put off having children for the first fifteen years of marriage. We worked hard starting our little business, which we operated from our home for the first few years. I had many challenges to overcome and found that the best way to continue my learning was through an organization called the PPA. Even though on more than one occasion I was told by other established photographers that my work was not very good and that I would never make it, Joy and I knew that if we continued to work hard and increase our knowledge and skill through this organization, we would

succeed. Eventually after much hard work we moved into a small storefront studio where we remain to this day. Our core philosophy has always been to provide the best possible product and service by showing our clients love, integrity, and respect.

Many times I have been reminded how truly important our profession is to others as I find out that someone I have photographed has had their life cut short by a tragedy. I have also been asked on several occasions to make the “last images” of someone that knew their time on earth was going to be cut short because of illness. I keep a photo taped to my camera stand of a young man that I photographed that was taken in a car accident. It serves as a constant reminder of the awesome responsibility I have to always do my best. I truly believe that the success of our studio is only because of the way we have strived to service our clients with the measure of talent our Lord has entrusted with us.

The second fifteen years of our marriage has been devoted to raising a family. To say that having children is a life changing experience is truly an understatement. I recall tears of joy running down my face while holding our baby boy, Joshua, who was born only a few minutes earlier. Two years later I felt many of the same emotions when gazing into our baby daughter Katie’s eyes and witnessing her first smile. Even after 15 years I am moved by those and other similar memories. I feel I cannot adequately put into words the love I have for my family, but I would gladly give my

life for any one of them. God help me be the father and husband I should be.

Another life-changing event was the passing of my father, Ethan A. Thornton. Dad was a man's man that liked manly things, particularly hunting and fishing. He was rugged and strong and almost never got sick. Going to see a doctor would only slow him down. In fact, on more than one occasion I remember him actually pulling his own teeth just to save the aggravation of seeing a dentist. He was also a very hard worker, holding down two jobs, and doing other things on the side to make ends meet. He worked most of the time and had little time for his kids. It wasn't that he didn't love us, he was just so focused on being a good provider. This was likely because his father would periodically abandon his family when my dad was young. My father had sworn he would never let us suffer in that way. Although dad loved us, he had a very hard time expressing his feelings outwardly. I don't ever remember him telling me that he loved me growing up, but even through his hard exterior I could see his true feelings. I am grateful now for the values that his parenting impressed on my heart. Respecting God and others, honesty and dependability, being in the habit of always doing more than you are paid for, a willingness to help others, and a deep appreciation for the world and all its beauty around us are examples of those values.

It was on hunting trips with Dad that my brother and I would first appreciate a sunrise and be overwhelmed by the way the earth wakes up at the first light of day. We were

with dad to witness the wonders of the woodland creatures while sitting still in the woods and to hear the flapping of wings in flight going overhead from Canadian Geese almost close enough to touch. We seldom brought any game home on those trips, but more importantly we brought back a fondness for nature and a deep appreciation for the wonders of earth.

It wasn't until my 30s that dad and I were able to verbally express our love for each other. This happened as a result of a letter I wrote to him during the delivery of my son, Joshua. In this long letter I thanked him for raising me the way he had, and at the conclusion of the letter I told him that I loved him. From that time on we never parted without embracing and expressing our love for each other.

Only a few years passed when that strong man I had been fortunate enough to call "Dad" was taken by cancer. I was so glad the last words I said to him were "I love you." After his passing, the letter I had sent to him was found in his safe where he had kept his most treasured possessions.

Because of his death I began taking a deep look at what was really important in my life. I decided that spending time with my family was more important than financial rewards. It was then that I gave up wedding photography, which was 25 percent of our business. Dad's life and death forever changed me and the ones I love. In the fall when I hear the honking sounds of geese flying overhead during migration, I can't help but think of my father. What a wonderful reminder of his impact on my life.

Not long after Dad's passing, I was invited to go hiking in the mountains of Colorado with my brother who had moved there a few years earlier. I first said no because I was in the middle of my busy season at our studio. Taking time out now would be ridiculous. I would stand to lose a lot of money if I took time for myself. Logically, I should stay at home, but in the back of my mind I felt compelled to go. After talking it over with Joy, we decided, "What the heck!" This might be just the thing I needed to recharge my batteries, and the thought of taking photos for myself sounded great.

The third week in September is the perfect time to be in Colorado. The Aspen trees would be in full color, and the Elk would be in rut, which is the best time of the year for them to be photographed. On the day we arrived at the base of the mountain, it had just snowed. To say it was spectacular is an understatement. The yellow Aspen covered by newly-fallen snow with the Rocky Mountains as a backdrop is almost beyond words. We hiked and photographed the mountains and elk from sunrise till sunset for three days. It was wonderful. My brother and I were able to reconnect, relax, and enjoy the world around us, in a way that was not possible in our normally busy settings.

The life-changing event came on the third day. Allen and I had just made it to the summit of our ascent up the mountain. We had been on a marked trail and a person with climbing skills would have been laughing at my fatigued appearance. The air is thinner up there, and it is very easy

for a flatlander like me to be overcome by exhaustion and dehydration. At the summit was a crystal clear lake formed by the passing of a glacier more than a thousand years ago. The lake was surrounded on three sides by the peaks of the mountains. At over ten thousand feet no aspen could be found, but the ancient pine that decorated the landscape added to the inspiring view. Allen and I had gone our separate ways at the top to take photographs, and I had made my way to a large rounded boulder that was the size of a truck. Making my way to its top, I had sat down and turned my face to the warm sun. In that moment I felt as though time were standing still.

In that moment nothing else mattered. The busy schedule back home, the urgent challenges of the day-to-day routine, the thousands of details involved in running my business, all had melted away as I felt the sun's rays fall on my shoulders. I wondered what the first man that had arrived at this summit must have thought. For the first time I knew what the bible was talking about in Romans 1:19-21, when it said that nature itself gives evidence and proclaims God's power and majesty. How could anyone gaze at the perfect design of this view and not believe in the existence of a higher power?

At that moment I felt as though I was closer to God than I had ever been before. I began thinking about my life, and how much I had been blessed. I had been given good health, a loving wife, two wonderful children, many close friends, and a successful business. I have also been given the measure of talent necessary to create images, that some

have said to be of superior quality. Then I wondered what if the purpose of this ability was not just to make a living? What if my whole life so far was a preparation? A preparation to become a tool in the hands of our Father to be used as a way to move people through the visual art of photography. In that moment my mind was clear, as clear as the air that I breathed, as clear as the view that allowed me to see hundreds of miles away. I wanted to stay in that perfect moment for the rest of my life. It was in that perfect moment that the thought and inspiration came to me that photography could be used as a way to worship.

If I were a painter I would have started painting my surroundings on canvas. If I were a musician, I would have written a song. If I were a poet or a writer, I would have put down on paper the feelings that I had in my heart. But instead I am a photographer, so I picked up my camera and began to capture all that was around me. It was as though I was looking through the lens for the first time. After that trip my thoughts continued to circle around the idea that photography could be used as a way to worship.

Together Joy and I are now working on something we feel is truly important. As often as possible we travel to beautiful destinations, mostly in the southwest, but we will never run out of places to go. Just as our collection of images continues to grow, our passion for this work is also increasing. Now we not only make new images but also find new ways to show them. We are also discovering new opportunities to share our faith through this work.

Photography now has new meaning: it now brings into our lives inner peace and balance.

Sometimes after 30 plus years in this craft I still can not believe that I have been allowed to do the very thing for a career, that I would be doing for fun, even if I had a different job. It is as though my entire lifetime in this profession has been a preparation for something of greater importance. I now view it as a quest--an assignment, appointed to me that I am compelled physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to accomplish.

To make a living I am a portrait photographer. I enjoy all types of portraiture through it I can show, the love and relationships of family, the pure innocence or excitement of a child. The transition from youth to adulthood that is such a wonderful time for high school seniors, as they are still willing to show you what they are really like before time and our society have put up walls between the camera and their true spirit. It has been a great way to make a living, and I would not hesitate to do it all over again. But portraiture is not the reason I feel in love with photography, and even though it remains my greatest source of income, it is no longer where my real passion lies.

In retrospect, although few things in life have moved me on an emotional level, there have been four things that have impacted me with such force that my life has been forever altered: the devotion to my wife; the birth of my children; the death of my father; and recently the discovery of my

life's passion of recording images that demonstrate God's wonders and some of the more inspiring ways man has interacted with His creation.

My hope is that through this photography I can share my faith, and also inspire and challenge others on an emotional level. My prayer is that my images will move others to love and protect the precious gifts our Maker has made us stewards over.