

Freeman Patterson Barriers to Seeing

In the preface to his 1985 book *Photography and the Art of Seeing*, the source of this passage, award-winning photographer Freeman Patterson of New Brunswick, Canada, writes that the photographer "best expresses a scene by using good composition, or visual design, to support the inherent design of the subject matter." However, he also argues that photographers who "merely follow the rules of composition" limit their own ability to respond to what they see.

On those frosty mornings when I grab my camera and tripod, and head out into the meadow behind my house, I quickly forget about me. I stop thinking about what I'll do with the photographs, or about self-fulfillment, and lose myself in the sheer magic of rainbows in the grass; in the multicolored prisms of back-lighted crystals. I am lost in a world of glittering lights and dancing colors. I experience myself in what I see, and the result is a tremendous exuberance which helps me make the best to use of my camera, and which lasts long after the frost has melted.

Letting go of self is an essential precondition to real seeing. When you let go of yourself, you abandon any preconceptions about the subject matter that might cramp you into photographing things in a certain, predetermined way. As long as you are worried about whether or not you will be able to make good pictures, or are concerned about enjoying yourself, you are unlikely either to make the best photographs you can or to experience the joy of photography to the fullest. But when you let go, new conceptions arise from your direct experience of the subject matter, and new ideas and feelings will guide you as you make pictures.

Preoccupation with self is the greatest barrier to seeing, and hardest one to break. You may be worrying about your job, or the kids, or other responsibilities, or you may be uneasy about your ability to handle a new lens or to calculate exposure. There always seems to be something standing in the way of real freedom. Frederick Franck in *The Zen of Seeing* calls this the "Me cramp"; too much self-concern blocks direct experience of things outside yourself. Sometimes the only way to overcome the cramp is through practice. You cannot relax your mind and body separately—they are too much a part of each other. In order to get the tightness and tenseness out of your body, you have to empty your mind. It is like the connection between wind and water. The waves will not subside as long as the wind is blowing. Relaxing is the act of stopping the mental winds, so your body will be still.

Another barrier to seeing is the mass of stimuli surrounding us. We are so bombarded with visual and other stimuli that we must block out most of them in order to cope. Instead of seeing everything, we select a few stimuli and organize these. Then, once we have achieved order in our lives, we stick with the realities we have established. We seldom try to rediscover the possible value of ignored stimuli, and are reluctant to do so as long as the old ones still seem to be working. We develop a tunnel vision, which gives us a clear view of the rut ahead of us, but prevents us from seeing the world around us.

A third major sight barrier is the labeling that results from familiarity. It was Monet, the painter, who said that in order to see we must forget the name of the thing we are looking at. When we are children we think primarily in pictures, not in words. But this approach is played down when we go to school. The basic analytical skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic) are impressed upon us as being more important than the appreciation of direct sensory experience, so we come to depend less and less on the part of the brain that encourages visual thinking. By grades three or four, many of us no longer regard painting or drawing as being very important; we stop visualizing things freely, and put word labels on them instead. This pattern becomes so firmly established that, by adolescence, we hasten to catalogue everything we see. We rule out visual exploration, and seldom discover the myriad facets of each object. As Frederick Franck so aptly expresses it, "By these labels we recognize everything, and no longer see anything. We know the labels on the bottles, but never taste the wine."

If you look at a fern and merely say, "Yes, that's a fern," you may not be seeing past the old, familiar label of its name. But if you really see a fern, you will notice its triangularity, individual leaf fibers, various shades of green, its sway and dance before the wind. If you put your eyes close to the fern, so close that you cannot focus on the plant

at all, but only on objects beyond it, the fern will become a nebulous green haze which drifts across the background scene. You will have found dimensions and hidden beauty not included in the usual definition of a fern, while learning for yourself the difference between looking and seeing.

In viewing a photographer's work, do not let labels like "She's a portrait photographer" blind you to a beautiful landscape that she has made. Always try to understand the symbolic content of the photograph, or the meaning that the subject matter may have for the photographer.

Have you ever noticed, on returning from a holiday, your increased sensitivity to the details of your home? You glance around when you step in the door, and some things in the house may actually seem unfamiliar for a few minutes. You note that the living-room walls are more cream than ivory, that the English ivy looks spectacular in the west window. You even notice the evening light spilling across the little rug at the foot of the stairs, something you can't recall noticing before. But these moments pass quickly, familiarity is restored, everything is in its place; and you stop seeing once more.

How unfortunate it is that we don't respond with wonder every day to the magnificence of the English ivy. How sad that we don't see the light spilling across the little rug every evening. These sights are dismissed from mind and eye because they are so familiar, and their value as things-in-themselves goes unappreciated.

Where I live, people seldom notice the dandelions in the spring because there are so many of them. But, in southern Africa, a woman I know struggles to grow a little patch of dandelions in her garden. For her, dandelions are not familiar. On the other hand, she treats the colorful species of daisies which grows rampant in her area as too common, too familiar to be treasured.

A photographer who wants to see, a photographer who wants to make fine images, must recognize the value of the familiar. Your ability to see is not increased by the distance you put between yourself and your home. If you do not see what is all around you every day, what will you see when you go to Tangiers? The subject matter may be different, but unless you can get to the essence of the

subject matter through keen observation, and express it through your photographs, it doesn't matter how exotic your locale.

Even the camera itself can be a barrier to seeing, in at least two ways. Susan Sontag, in *On Photography*, describes the first one: "A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experiences into an image, a souvenir." Making pictures can be a substitute for seeing and participating. The person who sees is involved, the person who looks is not.

The camera is also a sight barrier because it does not see as the human eye does. We see a scene or situation in terms of both our senses and our experience. When we look at a landscape, we observe and remember only a few dominant features—enough to give us an impression of the landscape, which is often all that we need. But since a camera has no experience, it cannot select, so it records everything in its field of view. Its memory is perfect. For our purposes, then, the main difference between a person and a camera is that a person abstracts, but a camera does not.

People are constantly abstracting. They do it without thinking. So when they use a camera, they are often surprised to find that the scene the camera saw is not what they saw or, more precisely, not what they thought they saw. A major challenge in using a camera is learning to control it (and other tools and techniques) in order to produce a picture that shows what you perceived.

Except for the optical differences between the camera and human eye, all barriers to seeing are related to the first one—preoccupation with self. A good deal of our self-concern is a natural part of responsibilities of feeding our families, looking after our health, and paying our bills. But all these things can be done without closing our eyes to the remarkable world around us.

Seeing, in the finest and broadest sense, means using your senses, your intellect, and your emotions. It means encountering your subject matter with your whole being. Good seeing doesn't ensure good photographs, but good photographic expression is impossible without it.

First Reading

1. Relate the title of the essay to the content of the excerpted passage.
2. What shift distinguishes the first and second paragraphs? How does the shift relate to Patterson's audience?
3. Summarize the major barriers to seeing as enumerated by Patterson. Why does he present them in this particular order?
4. What is Patterson's most surprising comment? Why do you think so?

Second Reading

1. How does Patterson define "real freedom" (line 32) in paragraph 3? How does his definition relate to "real seeing" (line 14)?
2. In paragraph 5 (lines 57–79), Patterson asserts that, during childhood, the development of direct sensory experience involving visual thinking is minimized as basic analytical skills are emphasized. How does he further develop this assertion in the paragraph? How does the assertion lead to the development of additional points?
3. Identify the unfolding ideas in paragraphs 8 through 11. In paragraph 11, how does Patterson build support for his assertion concerning the "value of the familiar" (line 129)?
4. Explain how and why Patterson draws a distinction between a person and a camera in paragraph 13 (lines 148–160).

Writing

Argument — In paragraph 12 (lines 138–147), Patterson cites comments by Susan Sontag on the distinction between photography and experience. Write an essay in which you first summarize and then support, refute, or qualify Sontag's position. Support your response with appropriate evidence drawn from your own observation and experience.