

While Cleaning up...

PASSION, SAID FRED

A few days ago, I was kindly but firmly invited by my better half to put some order back into my negatives, prints, photographic magazines and other miscellaneous papers that started to seriously invade her living space.

So I started to "sort". But how do you know whether a document can be thrown away, when you don't remember much of its contents? So the living room quickly became a reading room and the clean-up did not progress much, but I found with great pleasure some long-lost items...

A small grey binder caught my attention: it contained about sixty copies of the ZONE VI Newsletter, published between 1973 and 1995 by Fred Picker, an American landscape photographer relatively unknown in Europe who was also a manufacturer of darkroom equipment, an organizer of courses and workshops, and the author of technical photography books.

He mainly used large format cameras (4x5" and 8x10").

His photos and articles were published by Popular Photography and the New York Times, among others. His wild landscape photographs and his studies of natural forms can be compared to the works of Ansel Adams, Paul Strand or Edward Weston. He published "Rapa Nui" with superb photos of Easter Island. The introduction was signed by Thor Heyerdahl. His books "Zone VI Workshop" and "The Fine Print" were used in many photography schools in the United States.

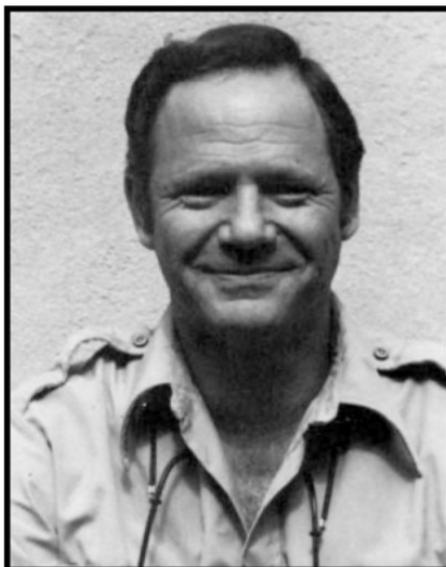
Fred Picker was a director of The Friends of Photography – an organization founded by Ansel Adams – a committee member of The Vermont Council of Arts, and a consultant for the Polaroid Corporation. He died at the age of 75, in April 2002, of kidney failure that he had been suffering from for 3 years.

I cannot resist the pleasure of delivering here, with the authorization of his nephew Andrew Simonds, who continues to maintain his <http://www.fredpicker.com> website, the text of newsletter # 45 dated December 1985.

This text has not aged a bit, and deserves to be meditated on by any serious photographer.

Enjoy the reading!

Jacques Kevers.



**ZONE VI NEWSLETTER #45
December 1985**

"What makes a photograph powerful is the sense it gives the viewer that the photographer cared passionately and intensely about his subject, about the way that he and his camera saw it, and about every detail of the final image. The viewer must sense that it was absolutely essential for the photographer to make that photograph in order to express some fundamental need.."

The basic, if self evident, difference between an artist and other people is simply that an artist has a more highly developed sense of the importance and urgency of making art. "

– Richard Whelan, Double Take ().*

* * *

Squall light. A black-bright presence that arrives in a rush to announce heavy rain or high wind or a cold front coming through. Squall light, though rare, seems more frequent on summer evenings but it can appear, where I live, at any time of the year. Its effect is startling. Dark objects seem bright, somehow concentrated, as though charged with energy. Pale objects radiate light. The effect is unearthly, unsettling, exciting, surreal.

The wonderful strange light arrived in a rush while I was driving south through the Granville Notch on Vermont's beautiful Route 100. I immediately started a frantic search for something – anything – that would serve as subject matter. (The drama of the light alone would almost make the picture.) In a minute the light was gone. It never lasts much longer but I knew from experience that it pays to set up anyway. (Because it happened, it could happen again.)



If you set up, you might get nothing; if you don't, you will surely get nothing. Maybe I can find a subject quickly and maybe there will be a usable camera position and maybe the light will come back. When opportunity and preparation meet, luck can happen. It's getting late. Because I am going south and it is evening, I am looking only toward my left. (Everything to the west is back lit; no use looking there.)

Suddenly, a smooth pale granite cliff and in front of it the most photogenic of trees; a magnificent young beech. Beech trunks glow like mercury, even in ordinary light. The tiny leaves are butterflies. Tumbled rock creates a base rich with detail, a jarring counterpoint to the smoothness of the cliff. The shadowed cracks between the bright rocks will print like jet. The silvery glow of the beech will be further accentuated if the squall light returns. There is a place to park and in no time the 8x10 is up, focused, the shutter cocked and a holder in place. With the 480mm (19") lens the depth of field is short. I guess 1/5 at f/64 and set it.

There is no change in the light so I have time to take a few meter readings. I want liquid silver. That means placing the high values on VI and developing normal-plus. (If the light should return, the high values placed on VI will go up to VII and the normal-plus development will bring them to VIII.) That's a perfect negative; fully exposed and fully developed, but nothing blocked.

A negative like that gives the photographer all the options. He can print the high values pale as is and still get blacks if he wants or print all or parts of it down as deep as he likes. Because the high values are at the top of the curve, the lower values will be up on the straight line as far as possible and as well separated as they can be. I hate milquetoast negatives. The meter agrees with the setting. All dressed up and no place to go... Nothing to do but wait out the fading day. The subject in ordinary light doesn't justify the \$2.00 cost of a sheet of 8x10. Wait.

WHOOSH! A Greyhound bus pulls up in back of my car and a herd of people debus and flood across the road at me. It is early in October...the time of the leaf peepers. They come from everywhere, in every size and type of vehicle. There are Greyhounds like quonset huts, Winnebagoes like moving vans, Jet Stream trailers like silver worms, Mercedes, pickup trucks, Pan Ams, Grand Ams and Mini Ams. They carry license plates from Florida to Alaska and display bumper stickers proclaiming their love for a person, place, or thing and they throw their trash all over the roadside. The year round population of Vermont is about half a million; in "foliage," two million.

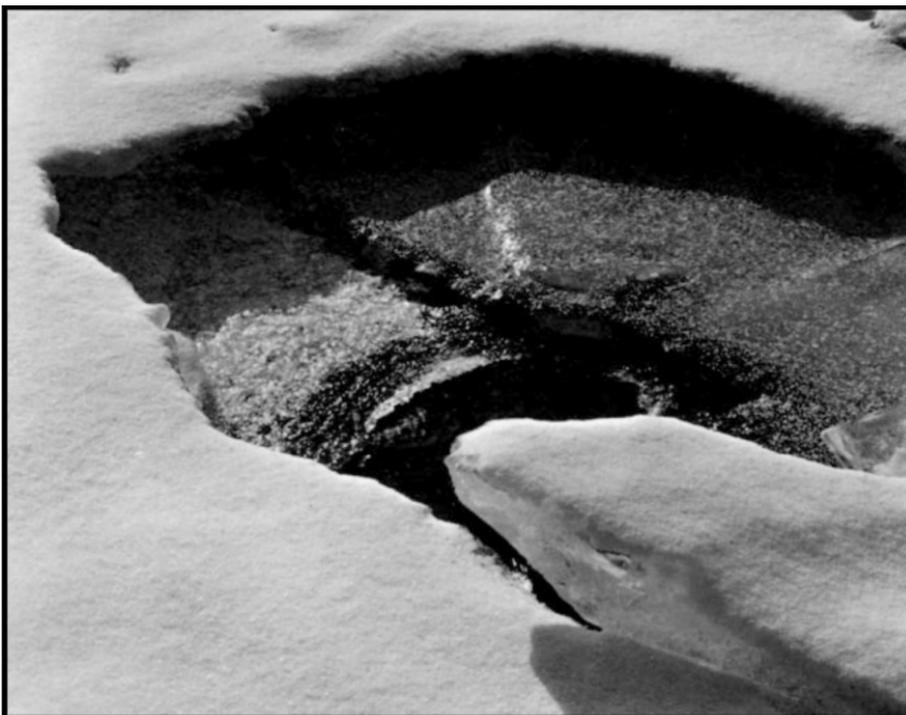
The sign on this bus reads "New Jersey Camera Club" or something like that. To a person, they are necklaced with cameras and, in a moment, I'm surrounded. And they've got a guide-coach-

phototeacher-expert along to show them the ropes. Names of cameras are written on his clothing and on his designer camera straps and he's lecturing as he goes, "don't laugh at the old fashioned camera; some good pictures used to (indignation mine) be made with cameras like that." I'm reminded of a trip I made to Maine twenty years ago with Paul Caponigro. I was trying hard to sort something out of a series of tide pools and there was a large and unattractive dog attending. He was growling fiercely and darting menacingly here and there while carefully maintaining a position just out of rock range. I remember asking Paul how he could concentrate under the pressure of that racket, that movement and that threat. He said you have to concentrate so hard that you shut out everything else except what you are photographing. Grit your teeth and shut it out. It can be done.

Several camera clubbers were right in front of the camera, staring at the lens. What is the fascination that lenses hold for the amateur? I get about five calls a week asking whether I think Schneiders are better than Nikkor or Rodenstock. I always feel like saying, "No, but I have an indigent uncle who is a Schneider salesman." I have never had a gallery opening during which at least one person didn't ask me that most dreaded of questions, "What lens?" As though a good lens could make a good picture. I'd be delighted to accept a 50% reduction in lens quality for a 5% increase in visual acuity. Weston did OK with a \$5.00 lens.

"Please get the %#\$@*& out of the @\$#&* way," I explained. And then the light was back in a wave and my thumb on the cable release, all by itself, it seemed, delivered a 1/5 of a second slice of it to the waiting film. I pushed in the slide, pulled the big holder out, turned it to the other side, pulled the second slide and cocked the shutter. Though I knew I had caught something rare and very beautiful, perhaps it would come again. Maybe better, stronger. Being set up in the right place at the right time with the right gear and getting one chance was something. Getting two chances would constitute undisputed proof of a religious upbringing and a wholesome life devoted to good works. In hopeful anticipation of even stronger light I set 1/10 second and suddenly it flooded back in an incredible blaze as I fired number two.

During this fantastic light show the herd stood quietly while the photo-coach explained to them what he thought I was doing. Fifty armed "photographers" and an expert were watching me while the most wonderful thing a photographer (or, for that matter, a non-photographer with about a half ounce of visual sensitivity) could



hope to see was happening right before their eyes. One fellow had timidly taken a picture of, as near as I could figure, the back of my head. No one else made an exposure.

The day was over. I followed my lights down the White River Valley but I couldn't get the scenario out of my mind. Why didn't they see the picture, even when a very noticeable camera was pointing straight at it? How could they miss the light? It's not unusual. I've seen many photographers walk past unique and exciting subject matter and stop only when they reach something ordinary. Last summer I took a group to a wonderful area of rock and river. There were a lot of people sunning, swimming, and generally having a good time. There was a lady drinking sixpacks. She weighed about three hundred pounds, was pink and jolly, and she bulged alarmingly from a woefully inadequate bikini. She was attended by a wizened little fellow who looked like a retired Irish steeplechase jockey and a Doberman as slick and black as a snake. You could see that the jockey was wild about her and she was wild about the dog. Meeting people who are proud of their child or pet or vintage car is as easy as walking over and saying, "What a beautiful child, animal, car, etc." They'll jump right in your lap, especially if you have a camera. This group of three was the most fascinating (and accessible) subject imaginable. What was everyone photographing? Mud cracks. Why? Because they recognize as usable subject matter only that which they've seen in other people's pictures. That's how cliches are born. Staff member Clare Brett and I literally drove our protesting charges to photograph this group. Once they got started they had a wonderful time and, I'm sure, got some fascinating pictures.

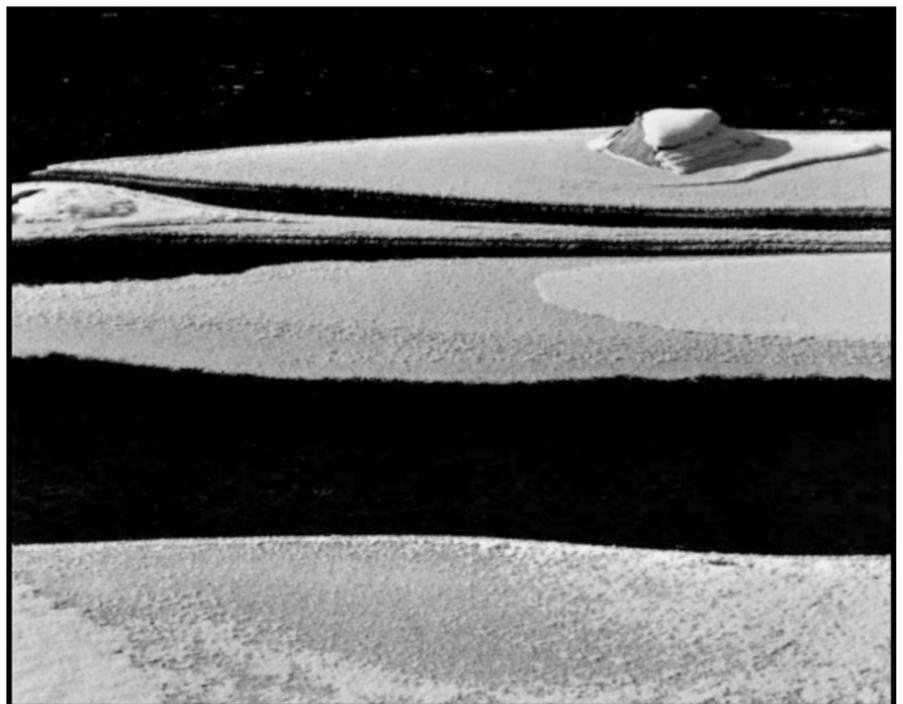
We've had more than 1500 guests since we started our summer workshops and they generally divide into three more or less distinct but numerically unequal groups. Many are convinced that all they need is a little help with their technique. Zoning. Developing. Printing. Toning. Mounting. Whelan says, "*The way a photographer resolves ... technical decisions will reveal some facet of his artistic personality and intentions – but technical proficiency alone can never make a great photograph. Mastery of technique is essential insofar as it allows the photographer to express himself as fully as possible. He must, however, have something to say photographically.*"

John Irving, the best selling author of "The World According to Garp", "The Hotel New Hampshire", etc. teaches at writing workshops now and then. He told me that beginners who have nothing to say and much trouble saying it, take whole courses in negotiating with a publisher!

Photographers who are primarily concerned with fussing with technique or swapping equipment are like writers who think all they need to do is improve their typing or get a word processor. A print full of zones, empty of emotional content is as dull as a perfectly typed, but meaningless manuscript. Norman Mailer once remarked that at the age of forty he became tired of punching people who told him they could easily write a book and decided instead to patiently point out to them that learning to write was at least as difficult as learning to play the piano. So is photography. Good photography appears so effortless (study Atget) that the fantasy that anyone can do it proliferates. It is a truism that the more skillful the photographer, the more invisible the art of creation. If the photographer has done a competent job, his insights become so lucid, universal and accessible that they seem to belong to the observer of his work. What follows, then, is the assumption that the viewer could have produced the work. This, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, is why the myth endures that the photographer merely pulls out a picture as a dentist extracts a tooth. It reminds me of the story of Michelangelo telling a man who admired one of his angel carvings that his job was not difficult,

because the angel had always been inside the stone. Michelangelo had simply set it free.

Photographers who excel are no different (and no more numerous) than other champions. Although common sense precludes the thought that without rigorous preparation any one could leap into the role of ballet dancer, Olympic skier, lawyer or cellist, almost everyone is sure he can design and decorate a house, write a book, create a restaurant, and make a photograph. The photographer-without-portfolio's delusion is, "I am just as good, I have just as much to say, more to say, but I am just missing a few technical details." He feels that his experience is unique, as indeed it may be, but what he fails to realize is that it is not necessarily universal or relevant and, even if it is, he may not possess the drive, the sensitivity, or the skill to present it. Why do people photograph? Some do it only because the process interests them. (To them, the medium is the message.) They are fascinated by the magic that happens when light sensitive emulsions are exposed and they'd rather see a print appear in the developer than make a picture. They play with the toys. They can't seem to talk about photography without mentioning their cameras. That's OK. They are hobbyists without pretensions and they do no harm. Their hobby refreshes them and they make photographs which, at worst, will serve someday as nostalgic records. And they are easy to teach – up to, and often beyond, the goals they have set for themselves. They are like the amateur musicians in the community orchestra, enjoying the camaraderie, the cooperation, the performing, but never (well, hardly ever)



thinking, "next year, the Philharmonic." Next, there's a group that's tough to teach. They are not a lot different from the first group in expertise but much different in their evaluations of their skills. They rate themselves "advanced." They are stubbornly dedicated to what doesn't work just because they have been doing it so long. Although they have not yet made a picture that is exciting or unique they are sure they COULD. (Couldn't we – couldn't anyone – have composed the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth? It's only two notes. All we needed was a piano.) And all they needed was the time, the equipment, and the place. That somehow they have not yet assembled the components seems to them merely coincidental.

Another writer whose work I admire immensely, E.L. Doctorow ("The Book of David", "Ragtime", etc.) wrote a few weeks ago in The New York Times, "...the most important lesson I've learned is that planning to write is not writing. Outlining a book is not writing. Researching a book is not writing. Talking to people about what you are doing, none of that is writing. Writing is writing." But very few people have the discipline or the dedication, let alone the talent, of Irving or Doctorow (or their equals) or Atget or Strand, for that matter. Most people don't even read Irvine or Doctorow (or their equals) or study the work of Atget or Strand or listen to Mozart and Bach and until they do, their chances of distinguishing between art and trash are limited.

Sometimes it takes a while. I remember a fellow looking at a staff show – and you can believe that our staff can outphoto any group of eight anywhere, anytime – on the opening night of a workshop. He asked me, "What's so good about these pictures?" By the end of the week he apparently had found the answer. He had purchased four of the very prints he had failed to appreciate earlier. It's exciting when students surrender their pretensions and begin to see – exciting for them, and for us.

The last group is the most stimulating and challenging. They are familiar with painting, sculpture, literature, dance, and music. Some have never developed a roll of film, but all have carefully studied the works of master photographers and they are sensitive and careful lookers. They understand that the mechanics and processes of photography must be learned so well that they will become automatic. They want to get through this phase quickly

so that they can get to the important work. Even the beginners in this group have work, though crude, that is often more original and arresting than those with long experience. They (and I) understand that they can not leave their careers and devote their lives to photography. Nevertheless, they have the desire, dedication, and sensitivity to make beautiful photographs and the determination to do so. They are movers, explorers, and adventurers who can accept direction. They are not afraid to work and they are not afraid to fail.

Photographic knowledge and skill grow only from failure. Not a few failures; thousands. Not identical repeated failures, intelligent recorded failures that will not be permitted to reoccur. Good photographers have failed more than poor photographers because they have worked more. (That's why they're good.) They are discriminating, bored with old work and never satisfied. They expect and are used to a high percentage of failure; their drive for perfection makes most of their work unacceptable to them. They regularly trash negatives that most photographers would cherish. Their favorite picture is the one they are going to make next week.

Perhaps the strange notion that photography is somehow easier than music, writing, painting, sculpture exists because it is done with a machine. But a piano is a machine and so is a typewriter. Is it because everyone can make a photograph though few can stumble through the Bach cello suites? Sure, you say as you look at a great Adams landscape such as "Clearing Winter Storm" (my favorite), "if I had been

there with his camera I'd have gotten that picture." But you weren't there. No one but Ansel was ever there. (Have you noticed how much more often good photographers get lucky than poor photographers?) Ansel had the lust for it. He wanted it enough to go out in 100 storms and set up an 8x10 100 times and stand in the wind for hours and come home empty 99 times. The picture? It looks to the uninitiated as though it was made in a 1/10 of a second as, in a sense, it was.

Why, though thousands have tried, has no one approached the power of the photographs that Edward Weston made on a beach half the size of a tennis court? It isn't because we don't know where the beach is or don't have a better camera and it isn't because he didn't show us how. His pictures are published and available to all. It's because he had the talent certainly, but more important, he had the passion. That's what made his pictures great and, if you're alive, you can feel the strength of his desire bursting out of the prints. Desire for what?

The truth. What drives man to create is the compulsion to, just once in his life, comprehend and record the pure, unadorned, unvarnished truth. Not some of it; all of it.

(* *Richard Whelan was Robert and Cornell Capa's official biographer. He also published a book on Alfred Stieglitz. In his book "Double Take: A Comparative Look at Photographs", he compares photos of different artists, linking their different styles and different ways of approaching the same subject.*

© *Alle pictures: Fred Picker.*

