

# THROUGH THE LENS OF THE INNER EYE

## PHOTOGRAPHING SACRED IMAGERY IN THE SOUL OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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*the InnerView with Doug Beasley*

*by Werner Brandt*

**D**oug Beasley is a photographer who invokes one's own inner vision in the process of making photos. Doug teaches workshops that emphasize personal expression and vision, over the mechanics of camera use. His unique style of crafting photographic exercises in the natural



Photo: Abigail Brandt

world invites his students to creatively engage in the art of sacred image making.

~ Contributing Editor/IT Specialist Werner Brandt interviewed Doug Beasley in February, 2011.

### **W**hat is it you're trying to do with photography?

My work as a photographer is about seeking the sacred, looking to find the divine in everything. So I have a hard time explaining what I do, but what always gets my interest is the spiritual connection, whether it's to people or place, I think that's what unifies the work. It's the way you look at things, the way you express your spiritual or emotional connection to the subject, rather than what the subject matter is.

Photography isn't about finding the most spectacular place or photographing places that haven't been seen before. It's more about how we approach our subject matter. And where that comes from is our internal state—emotionally where we are at, and spiritually where we are at. To me it's more interesting to investigate that space than it is to always try to find the next new thing.

### **W**hen did photography first enter your life?

In high school, I received my first camera and was so intrigued by the whole process. I was shooting black-and-white film. It had a mystical appeal to me, a vehicle to take me somewhere else. I didn't know what that meant yet so I put it aside. Later while I was attending art school at the University of

Michigan in Ann Arbor, I enrolled in a photo class and loved it.

### **W**ere you brought up religiously?

My parents were both agnostics. They were Republican conservatives, on everything but religion. They were very open about it though they were brought up in very different traditions. I was raised with no kind of knowing how things were supposed to be, contrary to Catholicism where you are told exactly how things are. As a child I was looking for an answer. Since my parents didn't have any answers, I kept asking questions about spirituality. "What happens after you die?" "Who are you before you're born?" and "Where does time come from and where does it go?" Why didn't my parents have answers since they seemed to be smart and intelligent people? It was very disturbing to me.

### **C**an you describe the inner process that is working you, when you make a photo of your subject?

When I am very centered and grounded, it is easier to connect to the outside world. If I am floating and unconnected to myself, it is difficult to connect to my subject, whether a tree or a person. It starts with that awareness of self just rooting into

the earth, and then letting it go outward from there.

### **What has to be present in an image to invoke an emotional response in the viewer?**

In Zen we talk about our connectedness to everything. The idea of separation is artificial. The more you can live that feeling of connectedness, the more it is reflected in your photography. You can't enforce it or make it an intellectual part of the process.

### **How did you become acquainted with Buddhism?**

Starting in high school I took yoga and meditation classes and went on some meditation retreats. It just seemed to fit. It's a path you can follow. If you don't, you don't, no judgment.

### **What's most challenging when working with your subject matter?**

What challenges me is to not just record, but to respond. Photography can also be used as a tool for connecting to the world and finding your place in it. On the other hand, a camera can be an obstacle to experiencing the world and your own life directly. It is often used to remove and separate us from the stream of life, to become an observer rather than participant. That observer status is sometimes touted as a goal, but if one seeks connection rather than separation, you can use your camera as a tool to look deeper, both outside and within. It is there for those willing to not only see, but *feel*. I mean, to really open one's inner eye and feel with your heart.

One method is to develop a stronger visual point of view. Personally, I am not interested in making documentary images, in the sense of passive observer. Rather, I go for more personal pictures that reflect not just the outside world but also the inner vision and state of mind of the photographer. I am always more interested in how things 'feel' visually rather than how they 'look'. It's about seeing all places and things as sacred, and less about making distinctions.

### **You use the term "vision quest" in describing your workshops. How does this apply to your photography workshops?**

I learned the term from the Lakota idea of vision quest, where you go out for three days without food and water and

wait for this vision to come to you. Then you come off the mountain and have that vision interpreted to you by a holy person. But in our workshops, we never go without food and water (laughs) .... We want to be well fed in our vision quests!

Our vision quest photography is a journey of discovery—not just what we point the camera at, but the inward discovery of who we are. The process I offer helps you find what your perspective is, your unique gift or talent that you may have to offer. Finding that place that is your own, making peace with that place, and being comfortable with it.

### **Many photographers can be identified by their style or point of view. How would you describe your own point of view, and how does one develop this?**

Not meaning to evade, but I think that question is for other people. My job is to keep exploring visually, and it's only by looking backwards that you discover your style or point of view. Forging ahead is what I am interested in. Often I think point

of view is for other people to describe. I don't want to ever let that define me.

I do my art for myself, but then put it out there to share. At that point, when someone else looks at it, they don't have to feel or think the same things I do, they don't have to have the same inspirations—but if they can have their own emotional reaction to it, in whatever way, I think it's all there in the piece. It's more the process of leading them further into themselves. So if it can help someone look into

themselves, I think that is far more interesting than if it leads back to me.

### **You were commissioned to photograph Native American massacre sites. Can you describe what that project was like for you?**

I've worked on a number of projects in the Bad Lands and Black Hills, I'm very much drawn to that area. The sparseness of the landscape I find so rich photographically. I went to these places where horrible atrocities had occurred and I was looking into what emotional scars there might be on the land. Physically, after 100 years, the land had healed itself, but some sense remained palpably in the air—what did the trees and land feel like after these horrible acts of genocide occurred?

I had a need to see and find beauty, yet these terrible things



*Cynthia, Badlands, South Dakota*



that happened there caused me to see it in a different way. I was trying to make a beautiful photograph of an emotionally charged place. Some places I could feel the emotional impact of the land and other places, not. I don't know if that was just me and where I was at that day, but I had those feelings.

### **Any reason why you were drawn to photographing in black-and-white?**

Something more could be expressed in black and white film. Color seemed too concrete and real. Black-and-white film led me to that place of mystery and interpretation.

### **You mostly use film in your photography. What are your thoughts on digital vs. film?**

They are both great mediums. I see amazing work done in digital. It gives you a great freedom to explore and be able to shoot all you want. The downside is, 'I will fix or edit it later'. Film is the opposite. It's more precious. It's expensive and has to be processed and printed. There's so much more weight to it, so there is a sparseness to that. The prison side of that keeps you from having the freedom of digital. The ultimate would be to have the freedom of digital and the preciousness of film. To me it's somehow finding that perfect place between the two where you can flow back and forth depending on your subject and how and what you are photographing.

### **What has been the biggest surprise in your journey through life?**

Great question! Every culture where I visit, there are great photographers. One of the first places I started doing workshops was in Guatemala. There's so much beauty and so much poverty, but also a very rich artist community of graphic designers, photographers, and

amazing work being done there. One of my favorite photographers, Luis Gonzalez Palma, is from Guatemala. He and his work have exploded stereotypes that I had.

### **So, how do you invoke the sacred in your own work?**

To honor it and talk about it is very important, but to infuse that into your work is a whole different thing. It starts with intention. Just as our words describe the world, similarly we create the world with our thoughts and intentions. Those energy waves carry us into the work.

I'm always looking for that spiritual quality in the images, but I don't give a



*Kucho Ending Shaman's Ceremony, Macchu Picchu, Peru*

spiritual message to the subject. Rather, I think it's the subject that gives me the message. When I go to photograph I don't know what that spiritual message is, I am just trying to listen and receive information on it. It keeps the photos from being too trite or contrived. In other words, there isn't a specific message I am trying to send out. I'm trying to see what message the subject has for me.

So one thing I love is when you go out to shoot something, it often leads you to something else you completely

didn't expect. It's that constant process of discovery. For being such an organized person, I love the chaos of nature.

Organized chaos! I've learned to accept that I don't know what I am going to find. And because I don't know exactly what I'm looking for, the process of looking becomes what is most important. Said another way, the internal growth is essentially more important than the photography that we are making. I think art should serve that internal growth process. So often it seems the other way around. We want to spiritually grow as people so we can make better art. And that's fine too, but I think the art can serve us in a different way. And in the end, it's really who we are as people that is more important than the art that we make.

### **Can you describe where the intersection between the sacred and your photography occurs?**

Another great question! I might have to think about that one. I don't really have an answer right now. I'm at the Los Angeles airport and I am looking out at a plastic piece of pizza with all these neon lights all around me and there's a speaker going overhead announcing arrivals and departures (laughs!) and that question just kind of blew my heart open. And then I look up and see all this neon and plastic.

Doug Beasley is founder and director of Vision Quest Photo Workshops. His workshops are held in places such as Santa Fe, Hawaii, Guatemala, Peru, Japan, China, Africa and Italy, as well as at his Trade River Retreat Center cabin in Northwest Wisconsin. His photography has taken him to the sacred sites of the Lakota Indians, to the Mayan rituals of Guatemala, and to the wind-swept landscapes of the Badlands, to name a few.

His first book: "Japan: A Nisei's First Encounter," offers insight into the journey to his mother's homeland. His second book "Earth Meets Spirit" is being published by Five Continents Editions in Milan, Italy, and will be out Fall, 2011. Doug also photographs various fine-art based commercial and editorial assignments locally and throughout the world. For more information visit his website at <http://www.douglasbeasley.com>