

A Song for the Asking
The Electronic Newsletter of
EarthSong Photography
and
EarthSong Photography Workshops: Walking in Beauty

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Hello to All:

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Blaming Cupid

Wherever you are doing something ceremonial,
that place becomes sacred.
The entire earth and everything about it is sacred,
not one place more than the other.

Long Standing Bear Chief,
Blackfoot elder

When one begins to understand the Great Mystery, to know,
in a way that transcends conventional knowing, that our human spirits
are part of a great circle of spirit,
then that understanding must also translate into action.
We begin with thanks.

Joseph Bruchac
Abenaki writer and teacher

Passion (pash´ən) *n.* [LL. *passio* < L. *passus*, pp of *pati*, to endure, suffer].
1. originally, suffering or agony, as of a martyr. 3. The state or power of receiving
or being affected by outside influences; condition of being acted upon: opposed to
action. 5. extreme, compelling emotion; intense emotional drive or excitement;
specifically, *a*) great anger; rage; fury, *b*) enthusiasm or fondness, as for music,
c) strong love or affection, *d*) sexual drive or desire; lust, 6. the object of any
strong desire or fondness.

If you look up the word “passion” in a typical Latin student’s dictionary, the first
term you are likely to encounter is *cupido*, desire, longing <*cupidus*, eager,

longing, passionate; so that although the meaning of our word *passion* is more directly derived from this term, we also get from it our word "*cupidity*" which means a strong desire, especially for wealth; avarice; greed. Yet the basis for all of it originates in Cupid, the Roman God of Love, and the hero of Valentine's Day.

As the Fox instructed the Little Prince, "Words are the source of misunderstanding." And so we are well-advised.

I am, however, quite passionate about several things, not the least of which is the desire to live each day as fully and completely as I can.

What I mean by this is not a frenetic searching for the next new experience, latest fad, or current technological

toy-du-jour, but rather the striving to be as present as I can in each moment, to be here now, and to understand here and now in the greater scheme of things.

At the moment, here happens to be somewhere on the shoulder of Mount Kephart, along the Appalachian Trail, a few hundred feet above Newfound Gap in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. I am here to celebrate, to be reminded, and to ponder: to celebrate my great good fortune at being allowed to do what I love to do more than anything in the world, to remind myself of the passion I feel toward this awesome land of wonder, and to ponder how we, as individuals, come to create and then to experience our connections with the world around us.



Top of My World, Newfound Gap

mind I could hardly imagine where the Great Smoky Mountains might be,



Time to Make Hay, Cades Cove

I can see, almost as if I were there, **Old Kep** and his good friend, **George Masa**, as they rambled along this way making notes, taking photographs, but mostly just being grounded in the moment they were in, doing what they loved in the most wonderful place they could imagine on the face of the earth.

In 1955 I had never heard of either of them, and in my eight-year-old

although my father had been careful to show me on the map how we would travel from our home in Athens, Georgia northward along Highway 441, located at the end of our street, all the way to North Carolina and Tennessee.



Little River Summer

excited about the prospect of visiting an Indian reservation and seeing the biggest mountains in this part of the world.

What I was completely unprepared for was the experience I would have in the middle of that trip as I stood at the top of Newfound Gap watching the world-as-mountains that fell away on every side as far as I could see. In that summer moment, surrounded by mountains and tourists like me, the shape of that world would change forever. In that moment an awareness would become as clear in my mind as the peaks and valleys around me: not a voice, and yet there were words that simply said, “One day you will live here.” How could I disbelieve such a

revelation, and yet how could it ever be fulfilled? I would live in Athens for the rest of my life, or so it seemed to me.

Fast-forward a dozen years. No longer do I call Athens home, yet I am there, now as a student. However, I am beginning to discover that I am spending as much of my time as I can, not in the rolling hills of the Georgia piedmont, but in the



fastnesses of the mountains **Autumn Gold, Upper Sugarlands Valley** that sit along the Georgia-North Carolina border, places with names like Standing Indian and Tallulah and Nantahala, where cold mountain waters splash over

rocks from the basement of time and there are still forests where bears and bobcats reign. And I come here because I am drawn to mountains. When I am in them my heart feels at home; and one more thing besides: when I am a little farther north, in mountains known as the Great Smokies, I feel that I am in the place where my soul was born, where I am connected to this earth like no other place I have ever been. How am I to make meaning of this?

Let me start with a story of an experience, one that I had at the age of eleven. Perhaps you may recall a similar experience from your own youth. If so, do not draw back from returning to it even now and seeing it for what it might tell you about who you are today.

I am in the rolling, piedmont woodlands of northern Georgia, just on the edge of Athens, not far from my home, a quiet neighborhood that formed part of the periphery between the urban reality of that small city and the rural countryside of Clarke County. With a group of friends, I am playing that best of childhood games,

Hide 'n Seek; and I am hiding in a landscape that I already know well.

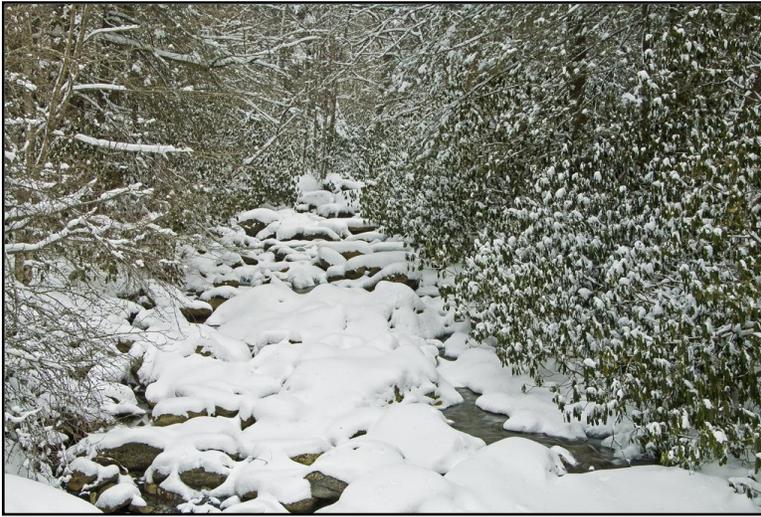
Not far from the edge of a winding, sylvan stream I find a diminutive, circular copse of trees, thickly clustered, about ten feet tall with a tiny opening that reveals an interior clearing perhaps 15-20' in diameter: a perfect hiding place. Quietly I enter and move to a spot away from the opening; rolling on my back, I lie looking up at a blue sky strewn with small, puffy cumulous clouds. The woods are still; there is no sound. I am transfixed by the wafting nebula, and it begins to seem as though the vapors and I are becoming part of some singularity. At some point, thirty seconds, three minutes, who can say, I become aware that time has passed; but more, that my last awareness – from which I have just returned to this moment – was that there was no distinction between me and the grass of my daybed and the trees around me and the cloud-filled heavens above me. We were all of a piece; one. In my return to being present in the hiding place, the spell is broken, and I am again the separate me of my “normal” waking experience. I can recall this occurrence today as vividly as I lived it more than half a century ago - the sense of having passed through some profound circumstance that was the unfolding of some deeper understanding of myself in relation to my world.

I do not believe that what happened to me on the day is unique, rather I believe that it is the common experience of nearly, if not, all of us at some point in our lives, especially when we are young, and that by not remembering it we have



Roaring Fork, Literally

chosen – deliberately, or not – to disregard a fundamental understanding of the world we live in; one that the mystics of the planet have taught for centuries and one that science, in its ponderous demands for proof and its bias toward seeing



things as parts rather than as a whole, is only now beginning to embrace.

Lest you label me as a refugee from a New Age encounter group, let me assert that I am, by nature, very much a skeptic, Missourian in fact. I am not a believer merely because someone suggests I should believe this, or that, or the other anything. In fact, I go out of my way to disprove the

Snowfall, Walker Camp Prong

reality of most metaphysical suggestivity to which I am subjected. The great magician, Harry Houdini, wanted so badly to believe in the reality of spiritual communication – so that he could be in contact with his beloved mother who had passed – that he made a second career out of seeking to disprove every instance of it he was presented, hoping to find that one moment in which it could actually be demonstrated to be true.

He never found one, but my own experience with connectedness led to a different outcome. In those early days of my wanderlust, four-lane highways were non-existent in North Georgia, and US 441 was still the main north-south artery that connected the counties in the extreme northeast corner of the state with the rest of the world. North of



Mid-Fall Color, Luftee Overlook

the quaint little town of Homer, the old highway began to take on the serpentine qualities of a true mountain road, snaking and twisting its way through northern Banks County as it approached the first uplift of the Blue Ridge, a long spine of ridgeline known as the Gainesville Ridge where Banks County becomes Habersham – and contrary to what **Sidney Lanier**, Georgia's great nineteenth-

century poet would have you believe – the Chattahoochee River does not begin. It originates instead in White County, north of Helen, but “White” apparently did not have the romantic ring to it that did “Habersham”, its neighbor to the east. Some few miles short of the base of the Gainesville Ridge, there was a point where the highway took a near-90° turn, starting off the edge of a wide plateau down toward the run of Mountain Creek. It was a beautiful curve that required some careful attention for successful negotiation at moderate speed, lest one end up in the woods wrapped around a tree as the reward for negligence. The modern, greatly straightened, four-lane version of US 441, running slightly to the east of its predecessor’s path, has deprived us of this moment of driving fun.

How many times I had driven that highway from Athens to Clayton, thence west on US 76, and then north through the community of Persimmon to the headwaters of the Tallulah River, just north of the Georgia-North Carolina border in Macon County, I cannot say; but I can tell you this: One Sunday as I made my way back to Athens and came out of the south end of that curve, I had one of the strangest physiological experiences I have ever had. A profound melancholy took hold of me that brought tears to my eyes and a lump to my throat, and as I struggled to find words with which to connect with what I was feeling, what came to mind was the image of a plant being torn out of the ground in which it grew, and I realized that the experience I was having could best be described with that image.

Back at school, life picked back up as usual, but the feeling and the image remained. Not long thereafter, I returned to the mountains along the same route. Approaching the Banks County curve I felt some apprehension as to what might happen; but, to my great surprise, entering the extreme “C”, I felt a sense of sheer happiness and joy, and the image in my mind was that of a healthy plant firmly rooted and growing in good soil: a feeling of deep calmness and peace. I was astonished. I could not imagine such diametrically opposed sensations coming in the same location at different times until, on some reflection, it occurred to me that the primary difference was that in one instance I was leaving the mountains, and in the other I was entering them.

If I return to that same spot today, I will feel one of those two extreme responses, which one depending on the direction in which I am traveling. Not only that, there are other physical locations of the face of the earth around the Southern Appalachians where I have come, over the years, to learn that I will have the same



Middle Prong, Little River

feelings, coming into, or leaving, these old hills. And over time I have come to honor these feelings as the evidence of a connection to place so keen and penetrating that it exists at a level beyond words, in the wellsprings of my soul, at



a depth that can only be described as sub-cellular.

Is this science; absolutely not, at least not modern. Did it happen? On an experiential level, I can tell you without any doubt that it occurred, and, in its first instance, it occurred without any pre-awareness on my part that it was about happen. Pure anecdote, take it or leave it. My

Fall Color, Middle Prong Little Pigeon

skeptic accepts it, and that's what matters to me; but more than that, he's been in some very good company in that regard for quite some time.

Perhaps in your pondering the nature of your existence, at some point you have given some attention to the experience of the First Peoples of this continent. And perhaps, you have delved somewhat more deeply than to say, "Oh golly, didn't the Indians get a raw deal"; possibly you have given some real consideration to how the world must seem through the eyes of the traditional peoples of North America. If you have, you have surely encountered many instances of description of how native peoples view their connection to the land. There have been countless books filled with the words of Native elders giving voice – to the feelings that do, indeed, go beyond those very words – to how they experience themselves in connection to the earth – all the earth and especially the land around them in which they live.

It was **Seattle**, the great Suq'wamish/Duwamish leader, whose enduring speech before the newly arrived territorial governor, **Isaac**



Stevens, contained what is likely the best summation of that feeling ever stated: "All things are connected,"

he said, “Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth...Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore thrill with the memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people.”

Yet it has also been expressed by countless others. **Kahgegahbowh**, the noted Ojibwe (Anishinabe) leader said, “I was born in Nature’s wide domain...I am one of Nature’s children...and whenever I see her, emotions of pleasure roll in my breast, and swell and burst like waves on the shores of the ocean, in prayer and praise to Him who has placed me in her hand. It is thought great to be born in palaces and surrounded by wealth – but to be born in Nature’s wide domain is greater still.”

“The Lakota,” said **Luther Standing Bear**, the venerated Lakota chief, “was a true naturalist – a lover of Nature. He loved the earth and all the things of the earth, and the attachment grew with age. The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power,”



Frosty Day, Morton Overlook

In-mut-too-yah-lat-lat, whom we know as **Chief Joseph**, and who was called by **Edward Curtis**, “...one of the greatest men who ever lived,” spoke of the Columbia River Plateau, and in particular the Wallowa Valley, his home and the place of his father’s burial, simply, “...I love that land more than all the rest of the world. A man who would not love his father’s grave is worse than a wild animal.” When Joseph died in 1904, long before his time, at the age of 63, after a life of struggle to keep, or to be allowed to return to his ancestral homeland from the reservation where his people had been banished, the attending agency physician, **Dr. E. H. Latham**, who had known him for the previous fourteen years, said of the cause of death, “Chief Joseph died of a broken heart.”

What we see, then, are not the isolated musings of a few, but rather the general expression of the many regarding a worldview shared by all, from the youngest child to the most ancient grandparent. There is something inherent in that which we are as living creatures that connects us to the land, the earth, the waters, the air, and everything that is. It is not of our making; it is not of our choosing; it simply is; and we ignore it most often, if not at our peril, at least to our detriment. To find that “inherent something” perhaps we can look eastward to the ancient cultures of the Orient where questions in search of answers to this enigma have

been raised for thousands of years; and answers have, indeed, been found.

In the West we have, historically, given little thought to that “thing” which is our living essence, especially in the wake of the general acceptance of the **Cartesian** separation of mind and body. On the contrary, the great traditions of the East: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism have long sought to understand the unity of phenomena and what might be the driving



Bullhead’s First Snowfall, Campbell Overlook force behind those interconnections; the energy of it all, as it were. What evolved from their efforts was the realization of ch’i, the life force, the basis of essentially all of the Eastern healing and exercise practices.

For the Chinese, an understanding of and balancing of the flow of this energy is essential for one’s overall well-being. When we are in touch with the flow of this vital essence, our lives are physically, emotionally, and spiritually in balance; and when we are separate from that flow, our health and vitality can suffer. When we are in that flow, we exist within the oneness of things, and our lives reflect that harmony. I offer this, not to initiate a discussion of the concept of ch’i – another of those notions that my Missourian skeptic has come to embrace over the years – but rather to bring in one more expression of the idea of oneness and interconnectedness, that I would suggest to you is the ultimate basis for the creation and realization of our passion as photographers.

Let’s, however, go beyond the metaphysics and spend some thought on the physics of this oneness, this universal underlying union.

For most of us, opening ourselves up to thinking about science, especially the esoteric stuff of scientific theory, is about as welcome as root canal surgery; and we generally seek to avoid it as if it were a contagion. **Bill Nye, the Science Guy**, was not, unfortunately, a teacher where I went to school, nor, I suspect, where most of you were educated either; and that seems to me to be real shame, especially for the children being exposed to science for the first time in today’s academic environment, because the older I get, the more passionate I become about the science I never learned in school, physics in particular; classical and quantum, and all the places that both of them have been in the past fifty years that I have to play catch-up to understand.

It is unfortunate, too, that much of what we might consider as modern science is, itself, being left behind in the wake of a growing cluster of thought-threads and experiments that seem headed toward an inescapable conclusion: there is a vast unifying force in the universe – or perhaps a more accurate statement would be

to say that the universe is a vast unifying force field of all possibilities: matter, energy, spirit, present, past, future; and the more we come to understand about this reality in all of its many implications, the more we will come to accept and appreciate the true oneness of all things.

This state, or force, is commonly referred to as the **zero-point field**, and the fact of its existence has been studied and affirmed by some of the brightest minds of our species from astronauts to Nobel laureates to run-of-the-mill geniuses in between, most of whom started their investigations as Missourian skeptics. Before you are tempted to send men in white coats in my direction, remember that the Catholic Church tried **Galileo Galilei** as a heretic for declaring that the sun, rather than the earth, is the center of our solar system. It didn't change the relationship between the earth and the sun. A good summary of the case for the zero-point field can be found in an interesting book by **Lynne McTaggart** entitled ***The Field***.

Consider these basic tenets of current scientific understanding: the human being is an organism designed for survival and powered mainly by chemical reactions and genetic coding; the brain is a discrete organ and the seat of consciousness, and driven by chemical cellular communication; **humans are essentially isolated from their world, with a mind that is separate from body**; time and space are finite, universal orderings.

From nearly fifty years of experimentation it is becoming rather clear that what is, in fact, more accurate is that communication in the world does not occur in the visible realm of Newtonian physics, but rather in the subatomic world of Heisenberg uncertainty; cells and DNA communicate through wave frequencies; the brain also perceives and records the world through wave frequencies; a substructure of the world exists that is essentially a

recording medium of everything, creating a means for everything to communicate with everything else; **people are indivisible from their environment; consciousness is not an isolated entity and it possesses the capacity to increase the ordering of the world.**

This is pretty much what the seers of all traditions have been saying for nearly as long as they've been talking; and at some point in time the mass of this information will reach a critical point at which it will be undeniable, ignored still by some, but beyond assailability. Energy, mass, and even spirit are an interrelated continuum manifest through fluctuations in this substrate field by whatever name it may be called. It is fascinating to consider, and the implications



Snowfall Walker Camp Prong

of its scope seemingly beyond comprehension.

From all of this vast field of potential understanding, there is one part to which I would wish to direct your attention: that people are not divisible from their environment and that consciousness is not an isolated entity. It is this

indivisibility from the land and the awareness of being connected to it, that draws me; and, perhaps, it is the experience of being cut off from the land, or never having been exposed to the understanding that such a connection exists, that creates such a malaise and sense of disorder in so many of us. Perhaps our response to this feeling of disorder is to



Charlie's Bunion

grasp for possession – the greed of cupidity – rather than to reach to embrace, which is the expression of passion. The legacy of Cupid is, perhaps then, a double-edged sword whose wounds can conjoin as well as divide, make us whole as well as tear us apart.

The imminent Canadian scientist, **David Suzuki** expressed this way of thinking about it:

“The way we see the world shapes the way we treat it. If a mountain is a deity, not a pile of ore; if a river is one of the veins of the land, not potential irrigation water; if a forest is a sacred grove, not timber; if other species are our biological kin, not resources; or if the planet is our mother, not an opportunity – then we will treat each one with greater respect. This is the challenge, to look at the world from a different perspective.”

The realization of being connected, from that first awareness so many years ago, through each experience of it since then, is what truly excites me as a photographer. I can never go to the same place twice, because there is no such thing as “the same place”; and if I experience the land as unchanging, it is only because I have allowed my eyes to become shut to its constant flow around me. On the shoulder of Mount Kephart, on the northeast side, there is a sheer cliff that is accessed by a manway off of the Boulevard Trail. Standing above the abyss one can see the entire eastern Crest of the Smokies from Charlie's Bunion to the heights above Davenport Gap; the peaks above Greenbrier and Cosby are visible and beyond them the Unakas, as well as the Balsams more directly to the east and Cataloochee Divide and the Newfoundns beyond that. It is a place called The Jumpoff. From it, the world is a sea of mountains in every direction. There my

heart truly soars.

There are, indeed, special and sacred places on the earth, however they may have become so – because they were consecrated by some event or series of events, because their energies are such that humans are drawn to them, because one man or one woman experiences them so profoundly, because...; and because they are special, the land itself – all of it – is special. When all of the surface of the earth is a something to which we are constantly connected, then what we feel for it can only be the thought of as passion; and, once we experience anywhere in this way, we create for ourselves the capacity to experience everywhere in the same way, merely by our intention that it be so.

What's Now?

Emergence, Not Like a Clock, But...

The mountains have much to teach us, in their great resolute silences, in the spectacular beauty of their wide horizons, in the way the cloud shadows brighten and darken the ridges and valleys. To sit all day upon a heavy, solid mountain is to feel anchored. Do not get up and leave early. The more fatigued you become, the closer you are to achieving that which you seek. Stay until you take on the color of the earth and grow roots and sprout flowers that you can take back as gifts to share with loved ones, as evidence, to them and others that there are worlds inside each of us that make the richest men and women seem idle fools and paupers.

John Murray
Nowhere Ridge

From the various polling places – burrows, if you will – around North America, the official results are in and have been tabulated:

By a count of 16 to 10, with one station not reporting due to a winter storm (which should theoretically go in the “six more weeks of winter” category), it has been declared by the groundhogs of the continent that there will be an early spring in 2011. Of course, the ultimate prediction in 2010 was for the same result, and just look at what happened last year. The art of predicting the advent of spring is, more than anything else, just



Winter in the Newfound, Madison County

that, yet even in the erratic face of a changing climate, it is fairly safe to say that it will come.

As I descended the inclines of Thomas Divide just a few days ago, coming off ridges still considerably covered with snow, I was struck by the bright green of the moss and ground cover, especially along the margins of the seeps and springs, and the running streamlets, whose flow is a testament to those ice-covered slopes above them. Even in the depth of winter the promise of spring arises. Perhaps slowly, perhaps in fits and starts; but it appears.

It has been another interesting and complex winter season in these mountains, this Shaconage. Back in late-November the weather gurus of the Southern Mountains were projecting a unified front to the effect that December was going to be colder and wetter than 2009, while January and February were going to be warmer and dryer than 2010. As December progressed,



Good Luck With That

it seemed **Oconaluftee Bound** that they were on a roll, especially with the big Christmas storm that swept in the last week of the month and dumped about a foot on our deck and as much as 16-18" in places like Luck and Trust.

However, instead of abating, as forecast, the next two months turned into much more of the same, yet with brief periods in which temperatures warmed into the high-60's for several days before plunging back into the high-30's for daytime highs.

I've now heard that last December will go down as the coldest overall on record in Western North Carolina, while 2010, as a whole, will enter the books as the hottest year ever. I promise not to say any more about that for the moment, you can figure the implications of it out for yourself.

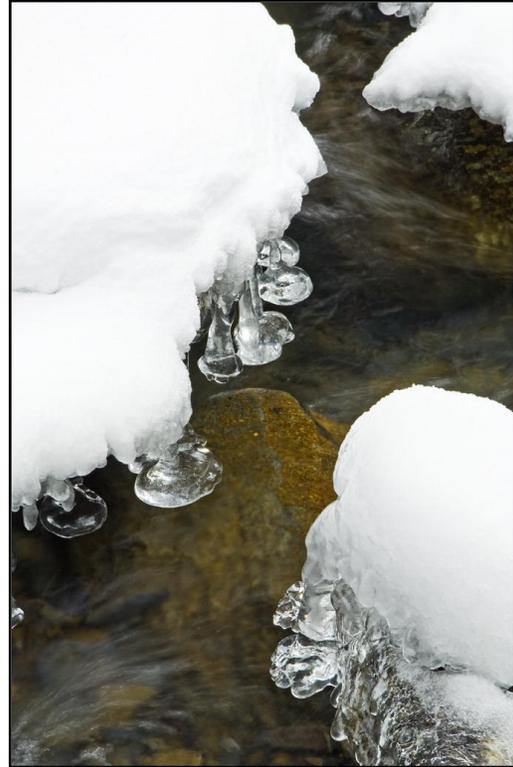
The upstart of it is to see if there is something understandable as far as the onset of spring might be concerned; and I, for one, am as confused as the weather

seems to be.

What I do know with reasonable certainty is that in the temperate latitudes of the Southern Appalachians of the Southeastern United States, spring will arrive and that by the time I write again it will be well underway, but that I will have enjoyed the season of cold that preceded it. And, as unpredictable as this winter's weather has been, it may well be that we will experience more significant snowfall events before it is over.

As conservative as the Park has become with regard to road closures during snow events, it's always important to know in advance which roads are open. It's not very productive to sit at closed entrance barriers for long periods of time waiting for the decision to open to be made.

Calling **(865) 436-1200, Opt.2, Opt.2,** will get you the current closures and you can more intelligently decide how long you might wish to sit at a barrier. There are places where you might be productive even



Mill Stone Row, Mingus Mill

with most **Icy Feet, Walker Camp Prong** of the roads in the Park closed. This might depend on whether there has been any snowfall in the lower elevations, but it can not only lead to good images, it can place you closer to a barrier as you wait for it to open. Mingus Mill and the Pioneer Farm Museum, both near the Oconaluftee Visitor Center, can be great places to do winter work – even when there's no snow at all.

Being prepared for winter photography is as important as being there when the barrier opens. Warm, layered clothing with waterproof outer shells, a close-fitting wool or fleece hat, gloves, and waterproof boots are essentials, as are waterproof coverings for your camera and lenses. A sturdy staff/hiking stick/trekking pole can be useful to probe snow depths when you are off the road or trail. Remember to have extra batteries when you're out in harsh

conditions. Cold weather saps the power of any camera gear battery, and there's no worse feeling than being out in winter weather with good opportunities and having gear lose power because of dead batteries. That's enough to ruin a whole



day.

At some point, however, we will begin to see a stirring. It will take several forms: We will notice more and more green beginning to spread across the ground, as the little ground-hugging species show themselves and then begin to flower; and the ground itself will begin to soften, as its frozen burden starts to thaw. This will occur

Frozen Spray, Walker Camp Prong

as the ambient air temperature reaches an isotherm of 35° . The air will warm noticeably during the daylight hours, and the daylight hours themselves will noticeably lengthen. Little critters will begin to scurry about, having awakened from winter's slumber or hatched from eggs that have lain quiet during the cold. More birds will begin to flitter, and migrating populations will be in evidence as they head back northward.

Contrary to what the calendar or the almanac might suggest, this does not occur as a hard line in the sand, regardless of the Vernal Equinox. On the other hand, each and everything that is affected by spring has its own particular time and place; and as we seem to have been seeing over the past several years those times and places are a changin'.

It is February 24th, the day of one of my annual pilgrimages to the Park, a day of my personal testing of the waters of winter to try to find some notion of spring's arrival. Like the weather gurus, I look for signs and portents, not in numbers and statistical analyses in computer models, but in observation on the ground, in the things that nature can tell me of its rhythms and pulses. I trust my own fallible eyes as much as I do theirs. Today my friend Jim Waller has signed on to the journey, so together we'll see what Mother Nature has to say.

There is a constant breeze of maybe 8-10 miles per hour and the temperature is in the mid-50's. An overcast, drizzly sky leads us as we descend Newfound Gap and pick up Walker Camp Prong on the Tennessee side. There are still piles of snow, from the scrapers, up high that disappear as we reach 4000'. Below 3500' we begin to see signs of incipient ground cover beginning to sprout. At the trailhead of Cove Hardwood Nature Trail the dappled tri-lobed new leaves of hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *acuta*) are much in evidence. Climbing around the face of the cove we find a bleached snail shell – one of the casualties of the season of snow. Further on, near the top of a rise, we find the unfolding tiffany shape of a

single, tiny hepatica blossom. What to make of it? In some years, on this day, I



have failed to locate any of these delicate, ground-hugging blossoms at all; but in other years I have found them in profusion. We venture a little further down the trail before turning around. On our return, near the location of the first, we discover 2-3 more. It seems to be a spot on a southwest facing slope of the hill that receives a good amount of sun – when the sun is shining – throughout the day. Perhaps because of it, these few are ahead of the others, but nonetheless they are here. It has been warm enough for enough days such that their internal clocks have timed them into blooming now. Perhaps this means that unless there is a lengthy return to colder days, this year’s blooming season may be a little ahead of last year’s – although last year started off behind, but then rapidly caught up in the heat that followed. That seems to me as likely a possibility as any. Now we’ll just have to wait for the Ides of

The Noble Hepatica Comes

March and then the equinox to see if the pattern holds, but I bear in mind Spring 2007, when the season was well underway by April 1, only to run head-on into an ice storm that devastated the early bloomers and nearly crippled the emerging growth of the cove hardwoods. Too much growth too soon this time of year comes with a risk. In Cades Cove we find daffodils (*Narcissi*) blooming strongly in several locations, but, again, not quite as widespread as in some recently past years; possibly more evidence to serve my conclusion drawn from the hepatica. We see what is happening now and we make a conjecture based certain assumptions that may, or may not, remain intact.

Certain things however can be counted on fairly reliably. On March 31, Clingman’s Dome Road will re-open allowing access to a beautiful sunrise location and for the next several weeks, a worthy sunset spot as well.



Cade’s Daffodils

Luftee Overlook will be a good sunrise location during the month of March; but, beginning in April the sun will rise so far around to the left behind the Smokies' Crest and Newfound Gap that the ball will not be an element until it's so bright as to be too "hot." Partial cloud cover, however, can still produce wonderful

opportunities there even when the sun is missing. Sometime in April the early pastels of spring, the unfurling flowers and wing-like fruits of the maples and the other budding hardwoods, will produce a subtle riot of high-elevation color along Thomas Divide that is a glorious sight, indeed, and the "greening up the mountains" from the valleys below will be underway in force.



The Subtle Colors of Spring

By the latter part of April, Morton Overlook will again become the sunset location of choice, as the setting ball slips over the Smokies' Crest from the North Carolina side, and behind Sugarland Mountain, into Sugarlands Valley in Tennessee.



Fronds of the Smokies

arifolia), wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), large-flowered bellwort (*Uvularia*

Even though there's so much to consider: water, atmosphere, and light among others; spring, of course, is primarily about flowers and growing things – more than 1500 blooming species in all. The earliest of these are, for obvious good reason, huggers of the earth, and it's only when the threat of frost has been removed that bloomers very far above ground begin to appear.

Look down close to the leaf litter to find the beauty of trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), wood anemone (*Anemone quinquefolia*), rue anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*), star chickweed (*Stellaria pubera*), a host of violets (*Viola*), crested dwarf iris (*Iris cristata*), fringed phacelia (*Phacelia fimbriata*), blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium augustifolium*), little brown jug (*Hexastylis*

grandiflora), mountain bellwort (*Uvularia puberula*), showy orchis (*Galearis spectabilis*), spring beauty (*Claytonia caroliniana*), bishop's cap (*Mitella diphylla*), squirrel corn (*Dicentra canadensis*), Dutchman's britches (*Dicentra cucullaria*), should I stop now, and a host of others. Growing a little taller, but not by much, you'll discover the trilliums: *grandiflorum*, *luteum*, *erectum*, *catesbaei*, *simile*, *undulatum*, and more; with some phlox (*Phlox*) and wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), and pink and yellow lady's slippers (*Cypripedium acaule* and *calceolus*) thrown in for good measure.

Between 2000'-3500' you'll find these in a variety of habitats. Cove Hardwood Nature Trail, Chestnut Top Trail, Huskey Gap Trail, Little River Trail, Porter's Creek Trail, Ramsay Cascade Trail, Chimney Tops Trail, Kephart Prong Trail, and Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail happen to be my favorites; however, you can find beautiful spring wildflowers on every trail in the Smokies. It's just a matter of being there at the right time.

While I'm at it, I may as well plug my favorite wildflower books as well: There're ***Wildflowers of the Smokies*** (Expanded Version), published by the **Great Smoky Mountains Association; *Great Smoky Mountains Wildflowers* (Revised and Expanded 5th Edition)**, the **Carlos Campbell, William Hutson, and Aaron Sharp** classic. These are pocket/pack guides that can be easily carried into the field. Then there are ***Wildflowers of Tennessee***, **Jack Carman's** masterwork; ***Wildflowers of the Southern Mountains***, **Richard Smith's** excellent volume; and of course, ***Wildflowers of the Southern Appalachians*** by my friend **Kevin Adams**. These are more detailed treatises and excellent companions in your vehicle. All of them are invaluable resources that make knowing and photographing Smokies' abundance all the more pleasurable and exciting.



T. Grand(ifolia)

As with late summer in these mountains, the onset of spring is always a grand opportunity to experience and photograph some of the finest atmospheric displays anywhere. Warming days and cool overnight temperatures conspire to produce amazing concentrations of fog, usually in the valleys, but sometimes in the higher elevations as well. Cades Cove and Cataloochee Valley are excellent places to photograph this phenomenon from within, while Thomas Divide, Morton Overlook, Clingman's Dome, Rich Mountain Road, and Balsam Mountain Road can be great locations to shoot it from above. Sometimes in the early morning hours, low-lying valley fog will be lit by the rising sun, creating an incredible light show from within and without that will literally take your breath

away. Pay attention to warm afternoons with little or no wind and a forecast of a cool overnight low that is projected to reach within 4 °F of the dew point (for what it's worth, the dew point is the temperature to which a given volume of moist air at a constant barometric pressure must be cooled for the water vapor to begin to condense) and a relative humidity of nearly 100%. That's a pretty good formula for fog formation. The rest is just the fun of it.

I have lived in these mountains now for nearly twenty years, just enough time in which to have learned almost nothing; but I know that the end of February brings on a stirring in this world, a twitch just slight enough to be felt. It is a compulsion that says there's an awakening about to happen. The dark days of winter can no longer hold back the birth of new light. These hills will burst out in a voice, like the trickle of dripping water in its beginning, rising to a flood tide along the way. The energy, the ch'í of earth will once again manifest the ten thousand things. It will be spring, and I will do what I can to be a part of its flow.

A Tip is Worth...?

A Question of Balance

Happiness is not a matter of intensity, but of balance, order, rhythm, and harmony.

Thomas Merton

It's all in how you arrange the thing... the careful balance of the design is the motion.

Andrew Wyeth

When I was in my early twenties I became a fan of a British musical group called the **Moody Blues**. Much of their material was about what might loosely be called consciousness-raising and the path of the spiritual journey. My favorite album (How's that for dating oneself?) was entitled "**A Question of Balance.**" I still have that album – as well as a more modern format version called a CD – and I still listen to it fairly regularly. Over the years I have given considerable thought to the concept of balance, both in my life and in my art, and I have thought long and hard about what it is, as well as how to attain it and express it in my work; and as I have been reminded, time and time again, it is no easy task, neither in art nor in life. I have come to accept, as some wiser friend once suggested to me, that balance is never a static notion; the still point in the changing world may seem still, but its larger reality is in perpetual motion, and the balance thus derived is always dynamic and fluid even in its seeming stasis. Absolute stillness ultimately becomes rigidity. Even that stillness found at the heart of meditation is aware of the flow around it.

In the collection of songs on this particular album, the first cut is entitled "Question" and the final cut is called "The Balance"; and the melodies in between are spent examining the larger issues of our existence, which, as such things

always seem to do, present themselves as the opposing sides of a single conundrum: love and hate, connection and isolation, what we have been and what we might become, life and death, peace and war.

I think what I always liked about it so much is that, in the end, it is such a hopeful lyrical aggregation, a journey leading to love, simultaneously recognizing itself even in the presence of what is not love – achieving, as it were, a balance. In photography, much the same process occurs, whether we are aware of it or not. We strive to make images that express the best of our capacity to communicate, to convey feeling and emotion, to tell the story we wish to tell, to share our vision with any- and everyone who sees our work. In the beginning most of us are barely conscious, if at all, of the tools available to us, much less how to use them most effectively. And consequently, much of what we do ends up being a shallow, often



Soul on Ice

rather **Eye of the Green Man** pointless documentation, a snapshot, of what our hearts would really wish to say. As we practice more and more, as we begin to learn the wonder of graphic design: the lines, shapes, patterns, forms, textures, and colors that make up our visual world, we become more aware that our ability to communicate visually has grown; we are saying more, frequently – though not always – with less, and we are saying it more strongly and clearly. We are expressing feeling, which makes our stories more powerful.

We come to realize that just knowing the elements of graphic design is not really enough; we can fill the 1 x 1.5 dimensions of our sensors with lines, shapes, patterns, forms, textures, and colors ‘til the cows come home, as my grandfather used to say, and they will carry our images only so far. We come to understand that something more is required: those

elements must somehow relate to each other, as well as to the boundaries of the frame itself; and we begin to consider the relationships among and between the arrangements of elements, including the frame.

Relationship is not – as I see it – an element of design, but rather a principle that,



when applied to an image, creates something more of an element or group of elements. To me, the elements are the “prime numbers” of visual communication, irreducible into simpler components; while the principles are those concepts that are applied to the elements to give final meaning, or definition, in a single, given context. And, from an accumulation of single contexts, they come to have general application. Principles are reducible in that they can be applied to any element or element set: in order to have a relationship I must have something more – elements to which to apply it; a line is just a line.

All of the foregoing is said in order to get to where I really want to be, which is where I started: with balance.

Everyone knows the great law of probability concerning the hundred monkeys: if you lock a hundred monkeys in a room with a (very sturdy) word processor,

Would a Walker Camp Here?

eventually they will write the Great American Novel. And, if you took away their word processor and gave them a D-SLR with a good “street zoom” (also very sturdy), eventually some of their images would rival those of the masters. I can see the concern on Pat O’Hara’s face now.

The results would be purely accidental, of course, because what the hundred monkeys won’t do, and what their camera can’t do, at least not yet, is arrange the elements that will appear in the viewfinder in some sort of considered fashion that imposes a contemplated order on the scene that the lens is “seeing.” It is only we, by our choice of focal length – our lens; our choice of perspective; our use of the elements of graphic design; and the relationships we make of those elements – the arrangements we create, who can impose the order on the random chaos of the visual world required to make meaningful imagery, to make art, to communicate feeling, to tell a story. When we succeed, what comes out of our effort is something called balance.

The best way I can describe it, perhaps, is to say that it is a feeling – I say that because, for me, the response I have is definitely physiological – that may be dynamic and filled with energy and motion, or that may be calm and filled with peacefulness, stability and serenity. Either way, it is a feeling that is complete unto itself; nothing is missing; there is nothing more to want for in the image. It

satisfies whatever emotions it raises and resolves whatever contradictions it poses.

Balance, then, as this would suggest, can be created in a variety of ways. It can be achieved by removing from the frame all that is not germane to the story of the image – by filling the frame with just the subject and nothing more, whether the subject is a macro element/set of elements/relationship/set of relationships, or a wide-angle landscape set of elements/set of relationships. What is not relevant distracts from balance; it creates confusion for the viewer.

Another way to achieve balance is to consider to visual weight of the elements and how they are distributed, or placed, within the frame. Are heavy visual elements clustered together in one part of the frame, or very close to one side of the frame? Is the visual weight at the top of the image so as to create a sense of instability? Yet, it is equally true that often an image does not succeed as much from too much balance as it does from too little, as where the space within the frame, or the distribution of elements within that space, is



Succulent Spiral

equally divided: a horizon in the exact middle of the image, or a diagonal from corner to corner with generally equal elemental information on either side.

In their development of art, in an attempt to express the order that they saw as fundamental to the appreciation of art by its viewers, the ancient Greeks evolved the concept of the Golden Mean (You'll really love the math), which results geometrically in a rectangle whose long side is two-thirds longer than its short side. If you superimpose over this rectangle a grid that divides each side equally into thirds, you get two results: nine smaller rectangles of the same proportions as the original, and intersecting lines that reveal the points where the eye seems to best appreciate the placement of primary elements in an image created to fill the space of the rectangle. Voilà, power points and the Rule of Thirds. Using these lines and these points, you have a wonderful way of creating balance. Over time it has come further to be appreciated that the human eye more favorably receives the elements of an image when the primary elements are in the right third of the composition.

Of course, with all rules, there are times when the best art results – and the best story is told – when the rules are ignored; but knowing what works better in most instances and applying that knowledge most of the time before embarking on a journey of ignoring the weight of that truth will allow you to better appreciate both the many times when the guidelines work, as well as the wonderfully fewer

occasions when they do not. The question of balance is a study that can fill a lifetime of living, as well as a lifetime of art. Sages and great artists throughout the history of humankind have struggled mightily to recognize it, to know it, to integrate it and to express it in their lives and work; and to pass along to all of us what it is they have seen and learned. They have given us so much to consider that it sometimes seems impossible to take it all in, but we continue to listen and to try to absorb it all.



Just Enough Luck to Get By

This past week I attended a celebration which highlighted the poetry of **Rumi**, the great 13th century Sufi poet. Among the readings were these words:

“Today like every other day we wake up empty and frightened.
 Don’t open the door to the study and begin reading.
 Take down a musical instrument.
 Let the beauty we love be what we do.
 There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

Balance in my work comes when it has acquired an order that can be felt as well as seen. It does not matter if the image displays great energy, or profound calm, for in either instance the result is a sense of resolution. It is as if a question has been asked by my eyes and my heart, and the answer that has been given, the image that I have created, has fulfilled my visual and emotional need in asking.

As for EarthSong...Walking in Beauty...

Walking in Beauty

As I walk with Beauty
 As I walk, as I walk
 The universe is walking with me
 In beauty it walks before me
 In beauty it walks behind me
 In beauty it walks below me
 In beauty it walks above me
 Beauty is on every side
 As I walk, I walk with beauty

Traditional Diné Prayer

In some respects I have been feeling like one of those prognosticating woodchucks who emerged from their holes earlier this month to test the length of winter. Not that this hasn't been a tremendously productive period – I've created new materials and new programs, instructional and, hopefully, inspirational – but it's becoming time to move on, and I'm getting excited about moving.

In April I'll be at the **John C. Campbell Folk School** during **Earth Week, April 17-23**. The class is full, and it will be a wonderful opportunity to share some of the new audio-visually I've created with the folks at the school during this special week.

On **April 29-May 1**, I will be on the program of the annual **Cumberland Falls State Park (Kentucky) Nature Photography Weekend**. This event offers a full weekend of instructional programs and photographic opportunities in one of Kentucky's most beautiful natural settings. If you would like to know more, contact **Bret Smitley**, Naturalist, Cumberland Falls State Park, (800) 325-0063, or BretA.Smitley@ky.gov.



Big Ivy Heading Down

May 6-8, I'll be hosting the **CNPA-Upstate Region** for a weekend **Fussy Photographer Workshop** in **Asheville**. We'll be doing the intense, but joy-filled, work of becoming intimately acquainted with what being fussy photographically is all about, with instructional programs, field work in the mountains of Western North Carolina, and meaningful critique sessions, all rolled into three days of fun. There are still a couple of places available, so if you are a CNPA-Upstate member – or even if you'd just like to hang out with some of them for a weekend, contact **Cindy Landrum** at clandrm@gmail.com, or cindy@cindylandrum.com. Or you can contact me at don@earthsonphotography.com.

May 29-June 4, I'll be returning to **John C. Campbell Folk School** for the first ever week-long **Fussy Photographer Class**. This is the class that is the proto-type of the upcoming Fussy Photographer Workshops I'll be doing later in the year. It's not a class for beginners; it's for folks who already own a set of good basic skills and want to take their creativity to an entirely new level. As of this writing, there are still two spaces in a class limited to seven, so if you are interested in a fun-filled week of intense learning contact **Karen Beaty**, Program Director, at karen@folkschool.org, or (800) 365-5724.

My **2011 One-Day Workshop Schedule** has been posted to the website and the events are already starting to fill. Dates for this year's one-day events are **July 16, August 20, and September 24**. If you would like to register for one of these excellent field-instruction opportunities, contact me at (828) 788-0687, or don@earthsonphotography.com.

The entire **2011 EarthSong Photography Workshop Schedule** has been on the website since the first of the year, but there are two upcoming events I particularly like to mention:

Acadia/Mount Desert Island, June 11-17, Seawall Motel, Southwest Harbor, Maine. Tuition: \$1050.

I have learned over the years that many people know about and have visited this wonderful Downeast location, one of the great national parks of our awesome system of public lands; but the vast majority of them consider that fall is the best time of the year to be there. It's something that only going there in spring can cure. Acadia/MDI in the vernal season is a paradise of photographic possibility. There are wonderful floral opportunities, great atmospherics, intimate harbors, and a host of other attractions. I have found that the Downeast Coast in spring is every bit as enticing as it is in leaf-season, if not more so. And the more people I introduce to an Acadian spring, the more there are who agree with me. Contact me to find out the details: (828) 788-0687, or don@earthsonphotography.com.



Frenchman's Bay Foggy Shroud

High Peaks Splendor/Adirondack Park, New York: June 18-24, Northwoods Inn, The Olympic Village of Lake Placid, New York. Tuition: \$1350. Limited to 12 participants.

Having photographed in the Adirondacks in fall, it did not take much to convince me that late-spring would also be a wonderful time to visit the High Peaks area. My assistant for this workshop is **John DiGiacomo**, who has lived part-time and photographed in the High Peaks region for many years. Together we'll be offering the **Fussy Photographer** concept in an exciting event sponsored by the **Adirondack Photography Institute**. There are spaces for this workshop but it is filling quickly. Registration is strictly



Osgood Pond, Adirondack Park

through Adirondack Photography Institute and can only be accomplished by phone. Contact **John Radigan, Director, Adirondack Photography Institute (ADKPI), (518) 478-8592**. For additional information visit the ADKPI website at www.adkpi.org, or contact me: (828) 788-0687.

I hope you'll join me for one of these exciting adventures. We put a tremendous amount of time and effort into planning for and preparing for a workshop, so that you can be assured of a quality photographic and personal experience that will not be exceeded. Our goal is your growth as a photographer and the best experience that the natural world can offer. Come join us.

Until next time, may the Spirit of Light guide your shutter release.

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Sunrise, Purchase Knob, Great Smoky Mountains National Park