

Gratitude and the Spiritual Practice of Photography

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by Evan B. Howard (July 12, 2016)

A few weeks ago Father Larry Day was giving his sermon at our church. He began by telling us about how he and Peggy, his wife, were sorting through their old photographs. And he posed the question: "Why do we take pictures?" What is it about that moment in that situation at that place that we aim our camera and push the little button to record what that machine sees? One suggestion Father Larry made was that we often take pictures to archive them and then to re-live the event or the season when we look at the pictures later. Weddings, proms, the child's first bike ride: all of these events certainly lend themselves to archiving and re-living.

But as I got to thinking later, I thought of another reason we take pictures, especially these days. We take pictures not so much to use them as a record of the past but to share them with others as a way of allowing people to participate in our experience in the present. A friend told me about a time when he was in downtown Ouray while some of his family were walking the perimeter trail. They were texting him pictures while they were walking and he felt like he was right there with them. Another reason for taking pictures.

My wife says that she takes pictures because she sees art in things. Just as someone might set up an easel in front of the Eiffel Tower and communicate a way of seeing through paints and brushes, so Cheri points her camera at the right time, in the right light, in the right way, and communicates a way of seeing beauty. We appreciate her pictures, not just as a memory of the past or a sharing of the present, but also as a way of capturing what is.

Which brings me to this present moment. As I write this I am on the shore of Clear Lake, near Silverton. The rock and snow mountain, reflects off the lake in dancing ripples. The wildflowers are red, blue, yellow, violet: covering the hillsides. The sky is a perfect blue. The stream flowing from the

lake gurgles a pleasant song as it flows down to join the rest of Mineral Creek. And I am taking pictures. Still pictures, video footage, lots and lots of pictures.

I noticed something this morning as I was taking a picture of the sunrise light illuminating the rocks and flowers in just that special way. I felt grateful. It was almost as if my push of the camera button was a prayer of thanks for this beautiful world that God created.

And that got me to thinking. I thought about those pictures I take when I am traveling and post on Facebook to share with friends. When I listen carefully inside myself I can actually notice a bit of gratitude in those moments as well. The shot of my friend and tour-guide from Scotland standing with me in front of the Edinburgh Castle. The picture of the brilliant colors at the fabric shop in Mumbai. The textbook high school reunion picture. I was thankful, truly thankful: for the places and for the people. And perhaps somewhere within the very act of taking these pictures I was offering a prayer of thanks.

So then, what about our wedding photos and those videos of our daughters' first public gymnastics routine. I know how I felt when I held the camera trying to record my daughter's gym routines. True, I was fumbling around with the camera and trying to follow her every move so we could all see it. But there was joy, and gratitude. I was thankful to have this daughter and to celebrate her first routine. In some small way, my home-spun cinematography was a worship service.

Now I know that photography plays an important role in documenting crimes and such. Not all pictures are pretty. But I would venture to guess that the vast majority of pictures taken--memories, Instagram posts, senior pictures and so on--have some measure of gratitude associated with them.

So here is where I am going. We take lots of pictures these days. We take more pictures in a single day than were taken in a year a decade ago. And if we look deeply underneath all these pictures we can acknowledge the presence of a whole lot of gratitude. Furthermore, we know that gratitude is good for us. Research has demonstrated that gratitude contributes to longevity, to disease prevention, and to well-being in general. So why not make this prayer-of-thanks-while-picture-taking thing

intentional? Why don't we, every time we aim and push the button, say a little prayer of thanks. "Thank you God that I can enjoy this dinner with a friend in this nice restaurant where I am taking this selfie together." "Thank you God for the way the sun makes the colors of these flowers so bright." "Thank you for these buildings and this part of town." In this way every photo we take becomes part of our devotions.

So this is summer. We visit friends. We take those trips up to the high country. We have adventures. Here is my suggestion. While you are out there making memories, take some pictures. And when you push the button, just say a little prayer. Every shot a moment of gratitude. God deserves it and it will do you good.