Novice, a camera, and a year | Seeing nature through a beginner's mind

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A Novice, a Camera, and a Year:
Seeing Nature Through a Beginner’s Mind

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A Novice, a Camera, and a Year:
Seeing Nature Through a Beginner’s Mind

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The author details her journey of taking nature photography throughout one year. The author experienced a true “Beginner’s Mind,” having no previous photography experience. Trial-and-error, self-discovery, a college photography course, and journaling allowed the author to delve into a foreign art form and see the project through to completion. Frustrations and disappointments allowed the author to grow as an artist and a teacher, realizing that students often experience the same feelings when they encounter a task foreign to them. Exhibiting the work, the author also experienced feelings of nervousness and fear, worrying about her peers’ reactions. The outcome of this exploration was an increased confidence in the author’s artistic abilities, as well as a collection of photography that demonstrates her journey. The relationship between artist and teacher was further connected by this reminder that many students fear and worry about others’ reactions.
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PROJECT INTENT

The intent of the Final Creative Project was to take photographs of Michigan’s natural environment. I intended to photograph the many seasons, moods, and places of Michigan throughout the year, aiming to represent the four seasons in my final body of work.

Moving back "home" to Michigan in the summer of 2003 was an opportunity to begin anew - to really focus on myself and what I enjoy. I am very interested in continuing to develop my artistic self. As a violinist, I am accomplished and comfortable in the musical field. For my first creative project, I explored hand quilting, which has become a pastime love of mine. However, I have neglected the intrapersonal intelligence and I felt that it was extremely important that I explore it for my final creative project. As Howard Gardner explains in Frames of Mind: “We see highly developed forms of interpersonal intelligence in...skilled parents and teachers” (239). I am confident in my abilities as a teacher, yet unconvinced that I have fully explored my sense of self. I regularly design my school lessons around the multiple intelligences, asking myself how to reach students who learn best through kinesthetic or musical means. Rarely have I thought about developing my own intelligences and incorporating them into my life. It was about time, and my choice was to explore the intrapersonal intelligence.

Howard Gardner defines the intrapersonal intelligence as “the capacity to distinguish a feeling of pleasure from one of pain and, on the basis of such discrimination, to become more involved in or to withdraw from a situation” (239). The intrapersonal intelligence is of great importance for me to explore because I am a newlywed implanted into an environment built around my husband’s schooling. As I was
adjusting to my new partnership, I felt that my personal time was less of an importance. In this project, my dreams were: to discover a new passion, to slow down and enjoy my surroundings, and to challenge myself in a new artistic field. My goal was to reflect and learn most through the process of taking the photographs as opposed to the final product. Although I hoped to take pictures worthy to frame, I had no intention of marketing them at anytime.

In the past few years I have been itching to try photography. I have no experience, so I was embarking as a complete novice, with a “beginner’s mind.” As Suzuki states, “...the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner.” (22) This is important because I want to use The Creative Pulse Program to challenge myself and learn new things along the way. “If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything” (Suzuki 21). I knew that my mind was open and ready to become a photographer and grow as an artist.

During my first and second summers in the Pulse, I watched many wonderful teachers present their field and final creative projects. One comment I made in my journal was that I was much more impressed with those that attempted something outside of their comfort zone. For instance, how rigorous is it for an English teacher to write poetry vs. a non-musically gifted teacher to sing in front of a group of people? I knew that I would choose projects that I had never attempted before and something that would be challenging yet immensely rewarding to complete. I also recalled many assignments in the Pulse that had to be evaluated on “risk, rigor, cost to you, and irrevocability.” For me, this was an important focus because it was such a strong message from our professors.
The field projects and final projects that I saw using photography really intrigued me. I am particularly drawn to nature photography because I feel a strong connection with nature. I love spending time outdoors and I knew I would greatly enjoy taking a closer look through a lens. Suzuki states, “The true purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes” (33). This Zen attitude seems to apply itself easily to the natural setting. You cannot force a photograph to happen; you can only photograph what is in front of you in a creative, unique way.

I grew up in Michigan and love the changing seasons. This is one reason I looked forward to moving home. The anticipation of the leaves turning or the first snowfall stirs within me a reminder that my life is forever moving forward, and if I don’t change what I dislike or find time for what I enjoy, life moves on. My goal was to have a sample of photographs that represent the various moods of each season, which could, in turn, portray the moods of my emotions and outlook of life.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Landscape photography is the supreme test of the photographer - and often the supreme disappointment. -Ansel Adams

My first accomplishment was no minor task for me: purchase and learn how to use a 35 mm camera. I knew that I did not want to look into digital photography because I felt that it was too easy to manipulate the photographs you take. I wanted to learn how to take a good shot not how to use Photoshop. My past experience with cameras was, simply, turn on and press the button. Having no previous photography experience, I
researched which camera was the best for my needs. I spoke to two camera dealers and asked their opinions, and tried out the cameras for myself. Most of the time, I felt helpless as I could barely understand the differences between the various models. In the flood of online purchasing, I often browsed camera sites and mass-purchasing marketplaces such as Amazon.com to enlist others’ opinions. In the end, I bought the camera that ‘felt right” to me and had many recommendations from beginners like myself. The Minolta Maxxum 4 was my camera of choice because it felt the most comfortable to me in the hand.

After I purchased the Minolta Maxxum 4, I quickly got busy experimenting, trying to learn my camera’s basic functions. I took the fairly complicated owner’s manual and went outdoors. The language was foreign and confusing: an f-stop? shutter speeds? And what about all of those fancy pre-programmed functions? I was overwhelmed thinking my mind wasn’t able to grasp the relationship between an f-stop and the shutter speed. I often stopped and checked to see what number I wanted if I wanted my subject to be focused, but my background tended to be blurred. I created childish terms to help me remember how to set my camera. For example: big f-number, big focus of picture. It was a gradual learning process, but one I had to master rather quickly in order to produce any worthy shots.

At first I would simply find a landscape that I liked, look through the lens and take what I thought was a good picture. I will admit that I didn’t give composition much thought. I would take a few pictures of the same shot, bracketing the f-stop or shutter speed. I wrote down my camera settings, hoping to look back with my photographs to
learn from my choices. When the pictures were developed, I planned to compare the
notes I was taking to the photographs in order to learn what worked and what didn’t.

The time was October, just at the end of Michigan’s wonderful fall colors. My
original intent was to photograph the amazing foliage that surrounded me. Unfortunately,
by the time I researched and bought the camera, the leaves had changed and lost most of
their brilliant coloring. The weather did not cooperate and was often cloudy and rainy,
hampering many photographic attempts. Although I did not get any photographs of the
colors that I am satisfied with, it was fun to be out enjoying the magnificent colors.

Fall is my favorite season because of the beauty. For me, it is a time of reflection,
yet, a time to look ahead. At this point in my life, we had just moved back from Montana
and settled in a new area in northern Michigan. The new school year had begun and I
looked forward to the many challenges of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. Lake
Michigan was twenty-five miles to the west and the area had many rolling hills and thick
forests, a landscape photographer’s dream. I was thrilled to be home and grateful to have
found a job. I felt that my life was on track and I was achieving some of the dreams that I
had envisioned throughout my years in Montana.

One downside was that we lived in a rural, low-socioeconomic and poorly
educated town where we encountered more rude and derogatory people than friendly
neighbors. For instance, I was on a public road composing a shot of a wonderful red
maple when a man yelled profanity to me. I worried for my safety knowing that he
mostly likely owned a gun or two. I rarely went driving in our town again, instead
focusing on more pleasant areas such as Traverse City and other neighboring lake towns.
This project was a slow journey in terms of accomplishments. I struggled in the early months to feel that I was taking any worthy pictures. While I admit that my expectations may have been a bit high, this struggle was an ongoing reminder about “beginner’s mind.” I don’t like to feel that I am a failure at anything I try, so these early frustrations were huge stumbling blocks for me.

I developed my first rolls of film, those with the end of the fall season shots and contemplated what I saw. I was overly judgmental of myself, unhappy with anything I produced. Why didn’t this row of various colored trees look as spectacular as they did with my naked eye? Why did so many pictures lack the “wow” message that jumped out at me before? Reminding myself that the season had almost passed me by before I began to take pictures, I decided to try and learn from my mistakes and move on. Too many pictures were ‘cluttered’ with extra images, and these distracted from my main idea. Many were simply not in focus and I knew that I still had work to do learning how to use my shutter speeds and f-stops correctly. From these early photographs, I knew that I also needed to think about how I was composing my shots.

I love Michigan, but its winters are known for being cold, dark and grey; not the conditions in which I was hoping to shoot nature photographs. In addition, we moved into the snow belt of the Lower Peninsula. I do love snow, and didn’t think our new home could be that much different from where I grew up, three hours south. I was wrong. The amount of snow was mind-boggling. It snowed relentlessly and the sun shined little. I love snow and the way it shines in the morning after a new snow. The image in my mind of evergreen trees weighed down by freshly-fallen snow was one I hoped to capture with my camera. The winter is a time of family activities: skiing,
sledding, building snowman, etc. The season often made the earth seem so quiet and peaceful, and it was easier to go into nature undisturbed by others. The hiking trails were often empty, except for the few daring cross-country skiers. Standing in two feet of snow is not everyone’s idea of a good time. Often, it was just me and my thoughts. Visiting a nature center or walking a bitterly cold shoreline, I was often alone and enjoying every minute of it. It was solitary and relaxing.

I took photos, hoping to gather some great black and white photographs of snow-covered scenery. Snow up to hips and finger-numbing temperatures aside, I was able to get the first picture of my project that I decided I was semi-happy with. I will admit that my husband found this picture’s promise before I did, but I gradually allowed myself this first success. No, the picture wasn’t perfect, but I did something right. The composition and lighting worked in my favor (see Appendix B: “A Winter’s Peace”). “A Winter’s Peace” has the curving river, which draws the onlooker’s eye in a pleasing way. I was happy to see the clouds’ reflections in the river and the snow reflecting light on the trees. I took note of my camera settings and what I liked about the picture, hoping to use this knowledge for future shots.

As winter was slowly winding down, I looked forward to the spring and summer seasons. As I reflect in my journals, “I feel that I have taken few photographs that I am thrilled with.” My journaling offers me a chance to note my mistakes and how I could work to improve my photographs the next time. There is a great learning curve in photography, and the only way I know to find success is to keep trying new things. My journals reflect my frustrations and the few low days where I contemplated quitting this project altogether for a different option. Many photographs of sunsets offered a boring,
everyday glimpse of the end of the day. My mother had plenty like mine in her photo albums. I like my photographs to have a unique message and one that you don’t see everywhere. Too many of mine lacked the pizzazz or “wow!” factor. The focus was off, the composition poor, or the lighting wrong. My journaling allowed me to work through these frustrations and reflect on my journey as an artist.

I received some photography books from my husband and was eager to read and learn from the pros. Although much of my learning came from self-discovery, I gained some wonderful insight from the authors. Bryan Peterson reinforced me, “You’ll certainly hit a ‘reef’ now and then, and you may even feel compelled to abandon ship at times” (8). I was grateful that my feelings of frustration were not unique to me. Peterson’s section on composition was an eye-opening read for me. Never before had I thought about the placement of the horizon or dividing your subjects into thirds. Looking back on my work so far, I could see my pictures split right in half by the horizon. I couldn’t wait to try out this newly learned technique. I worked with this in Appendix D: “Rocky Ending” by placing the horizon higher up and focusing instead on the rocks in the foreground.

My next accomplishment came as I took a class called “Top Ten Tips from a Pro” at a local college in early April. I was admitting I needed help, and this saved me and my project. The instructor, Kimberli Bindschatel, offered ten simple tips that she claimed would make a big difference in your photography. The simple tips were ones that changed my outlook, focus and way I was taking pictures. For instance, I learned that I should rarely take pictures past 9:30 in the morning or before 7:30 at night. The overhead lighting is horrible and very harsh. Looking back at my photographs, I realized
this was true. I tried to take some wildlife shots on the lake around 2:00. I could never understand why the image was so “blah.” Her next tip was to invest in a few select filters. From her recommendations, I bought the polarizer, which cuts down on glare off of the water and saturates colors. Since I was taking so many shots of water, I was grateful to learn about this. Even though my photographs were not ideal, I saw a small difference in the reflection in the water and how the sunset colors seemed a little more rich and deep in tone.

Kimberli’s most helpful tip was to use a tripod. I had never considered this before. I just took my camera and my film and went out to shoot pictures. Little did I realize that handholding your camera is the worst choice for landscapes. I went out the next weekend and purchased a tripod, which I now planned to take with me everywhere.

The noticeable difference in my photography began to uplift me and something “clicked.” The shots were feeling “right” as I viewed them in my camera. I was now considering the time of day, the horizon, and composing my shot to keep out unnecessary elements. Author Cub Kahn also clued me into a technique I was experimenting with: placing the subject off-center. He states, “You can often produce a more interesting image by placing the main subject somewhere other than the center of the image” (43). In addition to not centering everything, I worked hard to get closer. McCartney writes, “Exclude whatever is not needed from the composition” (88). Most of the authors I read agreed: get in closer and pick a focal point. Oftentimes, my photographs had ‘too much going on’ and were very distracting to the eye. I worked to zoom in and walk farther toward the object than I would have before. Appendix B: “A Resting Spot” was one
instance where getting closer worked in my favor. I worked to cut out all the distracting buildings and trees, and focused on the two subjects: the boat and the sunset.

After months of education via books and classes, I felt that my biggest accomplishments happened in the spring and summer. The weather was much more cooperative and my chances to travel to new places more abundant. Spring and summer mean a time of refreshing yourself, just as nature does. The dreary, ugly winter melts away and days become brighter and longer. Summer offers a time to take a break from my teaching and focus on travel, reading, and relaxing.

My focus on just Michigan scenery shifted during this time when I traveled to North Carolina and was struck by many beautiful images. I longed to find time to journey out into the environment, whether alone or with those I loved. My confidence was renewed and most of my frustrations diminished. The feeling I experienced when I viewed the first set of photographs was amazement mixed with relief. My visions were manifesting themselves into actual photographs! The images held messages that I was hoping to share, whether it was the tranquility of the early sunrise or the peacefulness of a lone sailboat anchored in the bay (see appendix B: “A Resting Spot”). My photographs had a more defined focus and the composition was superior. I found that the most appealing images were those in which I composed the horizon in an effective way and the subject was often off center. The tips I had acquired were helping me achieve satisfying results. I felt that I was finally, truly, accomplishing something as a photographer, and as an artist.

The final stage of my process was to have a show. I decided I would choose twenty photographs that represented my photography and the seasons and moods I was
trying to depict. Choosing them was no easy task, although some did jump right out at me. There were about four photographs that I knew would be in my show when I first looked at them. After these four were chosen, I went roll-by-roll and laid out the pictures on my floor. From these, I quickly eliminated any that were definite nos. I was usually left with a group of four or five that could be framed. Sometimes I had ten or more of the same shot, just with minor lighting or composition differences. In this case, I put them side-by-side and chose the one that pleased my eye the most.

Choosing photographs for the show was a painstaking process. It took some time for me not only to choose my favorites, but consider how many of each season I wanted to represent. Then I had to choose the size I would have them print. I chose my two favorites (Appendix B: “A Resting Spot” is one of these two) to blow up to 11x14 and the rest were either 8x10 or 5x7. I chose the photographs I liked the most to be the larger size. When I received the enlargements, the next challenge was to mat each one. Often, I decided that a simple black mat would be best to showcase my work. For a few of my photos, I enhanced certain colors with color mats. I had a wonderful shot of a tree line in fall colors and decided to mat that in red, bringing out the red and orange hues of the leaves. For water shots where there was a lot of blue reflected, I chose a blue mat.

I set the date for the show and found a great place to have it. My mother’s friend lives in a complex with an open meeting area. This area had a lot of light and overlooked a natural setting with a pond. There was a fireplace and a separate room for wine and cheese. It was in Kalamazoo, where my parents and many of my friends live. I borrowed many easels and music stands to display my work. When I arrived, it took a while to decide where to place the photographs and to consider the order. In the end, I grouped
them by subject: sunsets, winter scenes, flowers/trees. I had around 25 people in attendance and was offered many words of praise and questions of how I composed a certain shot. It was rewarding to explain my work and be treated as a true artist.

EXPECTED RESULTS

I have a great sense of fulfillment from completing this project, which was more difficult than I had expected. I have learned how to use a 35 mm camera. I taught myself the function of the f-stop and aperture and am more knowledgeable about film choice. In addition, I have learned how to compose a creative shot and how to capture the message that nature offers to me as a photographer.

While enjoying the many beauties of Michigan and other states during the four seasons, I took time to reflect on myself. This was truly an intrapersonal journey. Through my journaling and treks through nature, I was able to be alone with my thoughts and visualize dreams I have for my future. Alone with my camera I discovered a wonderful escape from the duties of everyday life. They were times to focus on my emotions and goals I had set for myself. It was a time to experience a new art form previously foreign to me. My confidence in myself as an artist not only grew, but this success has given me the courage to try new experiences and challenge myself to tackle other new situations that may be intimidating, such as signing up for art classes or exploring unfamiliar teaching topics with my students.
UNEXPECTED RESULTS

Csikszentmihalyi wrote, “Creativity is not determined by outside factors but by the person’s hard resolution to do what must be done” (133). I underwent a resolution to see the project through to completion. I had to challenge myself to work through the disappointments and early setbacks and keep moving forward. I was grateful that I did, because my photographs became more pleasing and my creativity was strengthened.

From the beginning, I was excited to experience beginner’s mind through photography. I wanted the feeling that Suzuki described: “When we do something with a quite simple, clean mind, we have no notion or shadows, and our activity is strong and straightforward” (62). My mind wasn’t cluttered with any previous knowledge and I felt like a virgin photographer, experiencing this for the first time. Little did I know how frustrating it would be. Photography was not something that came naturally to me. I felt that I lacked the eye to really see a great photograph waiting to be taken. I was out of my comfort zone, and many times in December and January I thought of quitting and changing my project. I am thankful I saw it through, and the struggle only sweetens my sense of accomplishment. One of the two black-and-white photographs in my show (Appendix C: “A Winter’s Peace”) was a favorite among many of my show guests. It was one of my early shots, and one I have grown to love. I was lucky in the composition because everything came together before I really knew what I was doing. The snow and the reflection add a magical dimension to this shot.

I had originally proposed taking photographs of only Michigan nature scenes, but I did not foresee a two-week vacation on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. When this trip arrived, I could not ignore the many wonderful opportunities that were just minutes
from my doorstep. I decided that this small deviance could be a positive addition to my project.

After my first ten to fifteen rolls, I began to see an unexpected correlation; the majority of my photographs were of water and sunsets. I did much reflecting on this in my journaling and came to two explanations of this much focused study. One is that Michigan is surrounded by lakes, and North Carolina by the ocean, so naturally, many scenery shots would include these aspects. Also, I absolutely love the water and love watching sunsets. They create the most peaceful, yet spectacular moods in the sky. Clouds add an uncertain dimension to a sunset. I often left my house to drive to the lake to shoot a sunset only to have a bank of clouds roll in unexpectedly, obscuring the sun from view. On the other hand, I did drive to a gorgeous view on a very cloudy evening to be rewarded with a magnificent sunset interacting with the clouds. What made the difference was that I made time to go out with my camera and look.

One of my favorite sunsets is the photograph titled “Rocking Ending” (appendix photograph D). I worked hard to achieve an original composition, focusing on the rocks and getting low to the ground. I was pleased with the final result. The sunset was there to add color, but the focus instead was on the calm, rocky shore. For me, nothing could be more relaxing and contemplative than sitting by the water watching the sunset. The day is ending, yet tomorrow brings a blank slate. I love to watch the sun set, as it is a quiet, peaceful way to see the day end. There is no noise, rarely any conversation, just me and my thoughts. I found that I loved to focus on this time of the day because of these qualities. For instance, the photograph titled “A Resting Spot” (appendix
photograph A) was my absolute favorite. The solitary sailboat resting on the water seemed to send the perfect message I was trying to convey: solitary peace.

PROJECT SIGNIFICANCE

This project was a wonderful journey through beginner’s mind. Although I do not practice Zen, I believe many of the principles apply to the creative process. When we don’t allow previous knowledge or experience to cloud our mind, we are open to feeling the simple joys of something for the first time.

As a teacher, I feel that these new experiences have provided me with both knowledge and the confidence to expose my students to new ideas. Photography was not something that came easy to me, and this fact was a large dose of reality. In the past, most artistic things I have attempted have been within my comfort zone, such as music or quilting. Photography helped remind me what it was like as a student of a new medium and how frustrating the process can be. Encouragement from others helped me continue, and I often think of this when I see a student struggling through an assignment or project.

This experience also allowed me some wonderful time to focus on myself, my relationship with my husband, and the serenity I feel when I am outdoors. Life gets too busy, and through forcing myself to get out and take pictures, I was able to slow down and appreciate what was around me. When I photographed alone it was great to discover what I liked and how I could express what that moment felt like to me. No one was there to offer his/her opinion about where to stand or how to compose a shot. I was free to figure out what message I wanted to convey and how best to convey that message.
Sometimes, what appealed to someone with me did not speak to me at all. These photographs are my personal expression of the images I am drawn to.

When my husband accompanied me, it was fun to explore new roads and bounce my ideas off of him. Sometimes he would look through my camera to see what I saw. He would often give me suggestions, some of which I used. Sometimes he would just sit off to the side and watch me “work.” I appreciated both the solitary journeys as well as trips with another person, but for different reasons. When I was with someone, there was more conversation and less contemplation. I appreciated the contemplation for the chance to be with myself and journal about those feelings afterward.

Throughout this project, I often had doubts about my abilities and results. I would journal and reflect, trying to focus myself on the positives. Seeing my work displayed for a public showing offered me a chance to step back and realize how far I had come in just a year. It was good to receive the recognition from others, yet knowing how I struggled through this process, the fact that I have seen it through is what matters most to me.

THE EFFECT ON ME AS ARTIST AND TEACHER

As an artist, I often find myself participating in areas where I am most comfortable, such as music or writing. Photography was a new branch of visual arts, and it was nothing I had previously attempted or been exposed to. I am often in awe of other photographers’ works, and this was a motivating factor in my choice of photography.

I remember vividly the classes from the Creative Pulse that challenged me like I’ve rarely been challenged before. Having to create the artists books my first summer was stressful. I felt pressure to produce a great masterpiece and felt that I would be
judged harshly. Thankfully, everyone was complimentary and very supportive of my efforts. I also remember the acting class. Although I love to attend plays and musicals, this was never an area I desired to participate in. I do not like being on stage solo, even performing my violin. I felt such a sense of satisfaction at the conclusion of that class, and it has remained with me since.

Having completed the photography project, I am much more confident in myself as an artist and feel that I will attempt more new experiences in the future. I find myself thinking of other new adventures I would like to embark on, such as stained glass and pottery. It has awakened a creativity in me, and I find that I am less nervous about what others will think or how my project will turn out. Gaining this confidence is something that will see me through other new and difficult creative situations. It will allow me to venture out of my comfort zone and seek new beginner’s mind experiences.

As a teacher, this project reminded me to wear my student’s shoes when I attempt to expose them to a new technique or activity. Krechevsky and Stork from Harvard Project Zero offer a vision that I think is noble: “Our vision for the millennium is that teachers will be emotionally and intellectually engaged as learners as well as teachers in their educational process” (66). I agree and believe that I can only become a better teacher if I am constantly a student learning myself.

I am currently a sixth grade language arts teacher and my passion is teaching writing, both prose and poetry. In something as simple as writing poetry, for example, I remind myself that students can be nervous about their work, especially if they do not have much poetry-writing experience. Then, there’s the sharing out loud we often do. Not only do I ask students to write poetry, which can oftentimes be personal, but I ask
them to share it with twenty other people. Adolescents are not the most forgiving 
audience, either. I have taken my feelings of frustration and nervousness in my 
photography project and can now empathize with how my students could be feeling when 
they attempt something new and strange in my classroom. I encourage them often and 
attempt to make my classroom environment as non-judgmental as possible.

I know that I have become more aware of my students’ preconceived notions and 
fears about the unknown. I challenge myself to help them overcome their hesitations and 
explore something new. If I can change an “I hate poetry” attitude to an “I guess it’s 
OK” attitude, I feel that I have accomplished something. I use my photography 
experience to guide me in building the confidence of students. For me, it was very 
rewarding to hear praise of my work from friends and family. Often the same students 
receive praise because they are good at many things. I really hope that I can help 
students find their strengths and encourage students to develop them.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix A
Selected Journal Entries

November 11

This was my first time outside with my camera. I have gotten a slow start because it took me a while to decide on a camera and make the purchase. I think it will be a good one for me, but it has so many buttons, I first need to know how to operate it. I am out in late fall, and this is a bit of a letdown because most of the spectacular Michigan color has come and gone. I tried to go out today and find some worthy shots. I think I have found a few that could work, but we’ll have to wait and see. It’s wonderful to take time and drive about this new area. There is so much to explore, and I enjoy driving with Caleb through the back roads.

November 22

The weather has not been cooperating with me of late. No sun, and by the time I am home from school, I have only a few hours of daylight left. The clouds and rain have hindered my ability to take colorful fall shots. I try to go out today, but it rains within 15 minutes of my drive. I return home, hoping for a better day.

December 8

It’s snowing here and snowing good. There is so much of it already, I can’t believe it. Today I went to a local nature center. The sun was out (amazing!) and I was ready to try and capture that new-fallen snow mood. I am anxious to see how the photographs turned out. The one issue I am having now is the cold. I was looking forward to winter shots, but I am prone to cold extremities easily, and this is not very helpful when you rely on your hand to focus and shoot with a steady aim. Oh well, the car is a warm haven anyway.

January 8

It’s been a month. The weather didn’t cooperate much, so instead I invested in a few photography books. I think they will provide some insight and suggestions that I feel I may be lacking. The photographs I’ve received back have been very disappointing. I grew frustrated and wondered if I should continue. I have talked about it with Caleb and vented my anger. Some days I feel that this is more of a chore than a joy. I thought I would love this, yet I find myself in tears. Maybe I expected too much too soon. I have decided to stick it out, but I feel cautious, not optimistic about the future photographs I will be taking.

January 10

Today I put on my skis and hit the snow hoping for a few good pictures. Brrrrr. But the new photography books I got are motivating me. Just go out and shoot, they recommend.
Think about light. So I tried to today. Hey, the sun was actually shining a tiny bit...a rare miracle for a Michigan winter.

I tried some close-ups, some overall landscape shots and even one looking up, so we’ll see! I wanted to have fun and not “think” or analyze too much. Try it out and learn from them. Then I might know what to do differently next time. It was nice going alone and having no one around. Peaceful, no pressure. I did enjoy going with Caleb before, but this was definitely different. Just me and the camera and nature. It was very beautiful. The snow here is amazing. It was relaxing after a long day at school. Too bad I didn’t bring enough extra film.

January 14

I’ve been out twice, both with OK results (I hope). Caleb and I ventured into a wooded area on the coldest day yet. I was absolutely frozen. My hands couldn’t work. It was insane. I tried to take notes as I shot some pictures, but my pen froze. It was a short trip.

Today we went cross country skiing and I brought my camera “just in case.” Quickly we came upon a flock of Black-capped Chickadees. I left Caleb and went after them. It was fun! I just clicked a bunch of pictures hoping one might turn out. It was snowing the entire trip, so that was all I took.

January 24

Brrr...zero degrees as we headed out today - in the sunshine - to photography. We went to a great nature area. Water and snow all around. I took an entire roll. Hopefully it turns out with something. It was quite beautiful, quiet and peaceful. Very undisturbed. A nice way to spend the morning.

January 25

I got my 3 rolls back. They suck. Really. I can hardly fine one that I like a little. It’s extremely frustrating to have nothing to show for the time and money I put into it. It’s a downer and very depressing. I don’t enjoy it when it makes me feel like this. The pictures are very boring and amateur. They just suck, and it’s not like I have years to learn. This is 4 rolls total without much to show.

I think I pick boring subjects-they don’t produce well on film. No lighting, no real framing of the subject...I need help! But we can’t afford a class around here (about $300).

I guess I prefer the black and white pictures of the colors to the others, but even they aren’t really that good. Argh.
April 4

I took a bit of a break to read, learn and try to find a more positive outlook. After shooting a bunch of photos in Florida (aka SUN!!) I was disappointed again. To the point of quitting. It’s so frustrating to get very few photos I like. I did a lot of birds (hmm…Caleb’s influence?) but that didn’t really work out as I need a closer lens, I think. I need to stick more to just nature and scenery. With spring coming, I have to just get out and take advantage of it. There was a big lull of nothing in the last few months because the weather sucks. The snow has finally melted-yippee-yet I am still stuck with very little to help me go forward.

I feel like a failure big time. Something needs to help me become more positive. This is a frustrating journey. Hard to know if it’s my lack of skill, lack of equipment, or lack of good subjects.

April 6

I took an adult ed class titled “Top Ten Tips From a Pro.” I took pages and pages of notes and found it soooo helpful. I wish I had this class in November. I am ready to try what I learned!

April 24

Went to Charlevoix today. It was cold, but a pretty good sunset. Took a chance on a semi-bad weather day because I actually had a free night to photograph. It was my first session after my class. It was a little less frustrating, so that’s good. I don’t have pictures back yet, but am hopeful. Sunset pics, mainly, which I am really drawn to. Tried new thing, different vantage points, horizon lines, etc. I would like something to turn out. This project isn’t what I thought it would be. I need some results! And some free time and good weather combined wouldn’t hurt either.

April 26

Got the pictures back. These were so-so. Some cool light ray effects. Like those for the most part, but that’s it. Would frame a few, which is a relief for me. Not the greatest subject material, but good to learn and move on.

April 28

Went to Old Mission peninsula today. It was windy, yet a great sunset, although dark. Gorgeous views. Went up to the lighthouse and was there for awhile trying to find a shot. Wasn’t being “moved” so we drove south a bit and found a better spot. Good colors. We’ll see how it turns out. Tried different things, getting low, putting the horizon on different levels. It wasn’t too frustrating, which was a change. Would go back for a change of venue next time.
May 5

These pictures turned out OK. Some good ones (at least in my opinion). Love the color with the water and rocks. Have a favorite. Not sure what professionals would say, but it’s a good feeling to actually like some. I am overall happy with the products.

May 15

Went to Charlevoix again. It was cold, but no wind. Clouds came in late, as they often seem to do. Went to Fisherman’s Island State Park and found a new spot and took a few early on to experiment. Then I found a great spot. I actually felt excited by my choice of composition. Lost the sun behind a ton of clouds that rolled in just for me. Got a roll of film out of it, but pretty dark. It was fun again and Caleb was a great support.

May 20

Some decent pictures from the ones I just took. I like the ones with the grasses, which I remember being excited about. Muted color, but I could probably pick one to use. Good idea overall, just need more oomph.

June 8-10

Tuesday night we went to Whitefish point. Great spot!! Being my first time there, I was pleasantly surprised. Great lighthouse, nice beach, but BAD flies and mosquitos. It really came close to ruining the night. Hundreds of flies that didn’t respond to deet. But I got some (hopefully) good shots. Better be, after what I went through.

Wednesday afternoon we went to Tahquahmenon Falls. The weather barely cooperated because it mostly rained, but maybe some will turn out. Fooled around with shutter speed with all that falling water. Could be interesting.

Wednesday evening we went to Pictured Rocks. Awesome views and a very incredible sunset after a not-so-good start. Great composition that I hope turns out. Also that day went to AuSable Lighthouse too, which could be good.

June 11-26

This is my vacation to the Outer Banks, NC. There were so many wonderful opportunities that I just can’t wait to see how they turn out. Some great, great sunsets. I woke up at 5 am to see some sunrises, but they never cooperated, but it could be pretty decent when I get the film back. My mom came with me on some of my trips, which was fun. She was learning what this project was all about, and it was neat to have her there to support me.
July 11

Got about 12 rolls of film back and finally, there are some GREAT ones! Some good ones too, so I think I am set for my showing. Now, it’s choosing what I want to use.
Appendix B
“A Resting Spot”
Appendix C
“A Winter’s Peace”
Appendix D
“Rocky Ending”