

# PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL OF AWARENESS

Joseph F. Ryan, Ph.D.

*East Molesey, Surrey, U.K.*

*ABSTRACT:* There is a spiritual aspect to the art of photography. A person's awareness of the objective, exterior world can be developed through this medium but, rather than this mere observing, it is possible to begin to *see* into the non-dual nature of reality. The separation between the photographer and what is photographed, the self and other, gradually diminishes. This article finds inspiration in the photographer Minor White to demonstrate the potential of photography to develop awareness and deepen spiritual growth.

My unfolding has been a growing pattern of awareness of the cosmos surrounding all of us constantly ... the greatest hindrance has been my pride.

—Minor White

... if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.

—Matthew 6: 22

Many photographers comment on the spiritual aspects of their art but, beyond specific photographic literature, there is little written to suggest the potential of this art to foster spiritual growth. While several writers acknowledge the spiritual aspects of photography, their voices have not been greatly heard in the past. Hence, it is perhaps time for further writing and debate. The reader is first afforded a review of available literature that mentions photography as a tool for growth, followed by the voice of Minor White as exemplar. Stressed throughout is the fundamental importance of developing awareness as a vital aspect of spiritual growth and the potential role that photography can play in that process.

Gross and Shapiro (2001) have suggested that creative photographers may exhibit the specific characteristics of the Sage described by the 4<sup>th</sup>-century B.C. Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, including freedom from the sense of self, receptivity, *wu-wei* (non-forceful action), spontaneity, nonattachment,

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joseph\_ryan@btinternet.com

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acceptance, resourcefulness, *te* (virtue/power), and free and easy wandering. In more general terms, Pastor Jim Bonewald (2007) states: "I've slowed down to take a better look at things around me. This process of slowing down has helped me see details in the world around me that I've never noticed before." Steve Hixon (n.d.) describes "extended moments" when "everything seems alive, and alive with possibility. I want to respond to it, and it's the camera that connects me." It is in taking photographs that he experiences the "joy of discovery, of images that celebrate light, color, texture, shape, of the hidden beauty inherent in people, landscapes, wildlife, the world that reflects God's glory" and Hixon concludes that "when I am doing that, I feel His pleasure." Zen Master John Daido Looi used photography both as a way to demonstrate spiritual truths and of self-exploration. It was through the "back door of the arts," admits Looi, that he entered the spiritual life (American Museum of Natural History, 2004).

#### AWARENESS: THE CAMERA AS POTENTIAL CATALYST

The word "awareness" derives from "wary" or "watchful." A person's awareness, according to Austin (1999), may be "clear or indistinct, expanded or contracted. It can perceive what is meaningful or meaningless, real or imaginary" (p. 296). Awareness can be expanded through a variety of well-known spiritual practices, such as yoga and meditation. Austin (1999) argues that eventually an advanced state, a "flash of insight-wisdom," may occur in which awareness "still takes in that very same field of basic sensory data from the outside world as it had during the instant just before. But in milliseconds a fresh grasp of this scenery has totally reinterpreted it into a new realm of absolute reality" (p. 296). This article suggests that there is a widely available means, or tool, that may help others to increase awareness (an important aspect of spiritual growth) and *see* (rather than just look at or perceive) the world with clear eyes, gradually drawing people closer to a state of susceptibility to intuitive understanding of the reality that surrounds, interpenetrates, and shapes their being. That tool is the camera, the use of which enhances the ability to *see* (that is, seeing beneath superficial appearances), which is vital to an individual's ability to connect more deeply with the world. As author and photographer Lester (2000) explains, photography ensures that people "see the world rather than just look at it. And by seeing we also begin to understand ourselves" (p. 102). For Franck (1993), the ability to see is that "specifically human capacity that opens one up to empathy, to compassion with all that lives and dies" (p. 39). Indeed, the awareness and acute concentration required for photography lends itself to contemplative practices. As Lester (2000) suggests, "When you use a camera, not as a machine but as an extension of your heart, you become one with your subject" (p. 4). The novice photographer discovers that taking a good picture is much harder than it looks and ponders why images by professionals seem so much more effective. Awareness, however, gradually develops in people to include the effects of light and shadow, sunlight or moonlight, or artificial illumination. Fortunately, as Mitchell (2002) writes, light is "always ready to befriend the sensitive photographer and to induce metacomprehensive

wonder” (p. 189). Not only the time of day, but also the passing seasons become relevant. As Coleman (2005) observes:

Those who practise and study photography learn in short order that their real subject matter is not the physical stuff in front of the lens, but the light reflected from it. The camera’s lens and film can only describe that light, and the surfaces from which it bounces. It is up to the photographer to find, within those limitations, ways of articulating what that light and those surfaces reveal, and, in addition, what is perceived and intuited behind and beneath them (p. 32).

#### MINOR WHITE AS EXEMPLAR

One of the most vocal champions of the link between photography and spirituality was the American photographer Minor White (1908–1976).<sup>1</sup> He was an associate of Alfred Stieglitz, as well as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston (co-founders of *Aperture* magazine in 1952), and an expert in “Equivalence” and the sequencing of images.<sup>2</sup> One of White’s achievements, according to Adams (1996), was to demonstrate that photographs “can point beyond themselves” (p. 92). In a similar vein, Johnson, Rice, and Williams (2000) argue that White was a “most influential photographer,” pushing the boundaries of perception beyond merely what the eye can observe (p. 638).

When the photographer is willing to spend time with something, or someone, the act of looking can become one of seeing. White (1969/1982) reassures that: “No matter how slow the film, Spirit always stands still long enough for the photographer It has chosen” (p. 22). He suggests (p. 143), as a photographer:

Be still with yourself

Until the object of your attention

Affirms your presence.

Ideally, the photographer receptively opens the heart, devoting total attention to the subject in all humility until the rift between self and other diminishes. Thereafter, as White (1975) says, the “ultimate experience of anything is the realisation of what’s behind it” (p. 286). This “presence,” however, is beyond words and lies in the realm of experience. It is “something sacred, it’s our Creator, or it’s another force, it’s grace. Through the centuries there have been many names for it. If you give a person a word for it, he doesn’t see it, or he says he sees it, but he really doesn’t. You have to work for it” (p. 286).

At a psychological level, Minor White (1963) points out that a photograph acts as a mirror to the viewer of that image: “If he is struck with terror, perhaps he has met something worthy of his fear. If he finds something magnificent, it is because something beautiful in him has been magnified.” Furthermore, White (1978) states that the “image or sequence that holds the mirror to the man

scares the fearful and stimulates the joyous. Sometimes a spiritual one sees his Self” (p. 43). In other words, the way things are seen is a reflection of a person’s being. That is, each person’s experience of an image will depend on their level of consciousness. Indeed, photography (or, literally, “drawing with light”) relies entirely on light, in which White (1968) argues, “the inner and the outer stand mirrored” (p. 12).

Minor White was responsible for developing a Creative Audience class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Here, White (1975) says, the photographer induced “heightened awareness in himself in order to have an experience of the thing he is going to photograph. And a person who is just going to look at photographs can do exactly the same thing.” Furthermore, he argues that it is “creative to be able to induce that state, because it puts one in touch with deeper places in oneself. One can get in touch with the Creator within oneself” (p. 282). White (1975) then points out that photography is just one tool for this process, stating: “I try to find this Creator in everything I do. This is the way that you can move through photography, or anything else that you’re doing, toward locating that aspect which is ever-present and ever-hidden from us” (p. 284). So, everyday activities are also a path to insight, whether it is walking in the park, making a cup of tea, gardening or washing the dishes.

The work of Minor White was the most inspirational in the writing of this article, but his work is not as well known, nor available, as it deserves. Although he was a consummate photographer, the real work of White (1975) was spiritual: “I am attempting to be in contact with my Creator, asking and allowing that to tell me what to do. I’m trying to be in contact with something that is ultimately wise and follow its directions” (p. 287). For White (1972), this is not necessarily a Christian God or Buddha, but rather he recognises that for photographers: “Some force, not of their doing, *working through them* works through camera” (p. 19). That force goes beyond the constraints of any religion.

Minor White (1968) summarizes the spiritual journey of the individual: “from the ego centered to the perfect servant through which the light can work. The search for authenticity to the I AM Self” (p. 13). White (1968), however, regrets that people “walk in miracle constantly, but live isolated in apathy and unawareness” (p. 70). Yet, photography is a readily available means for engaging the world with increased concentration, and in contemplation or meditation. It offers the possibility of a deeper awareness and heightened consciousness for those who are willing to use it as a discipline for developing their understanding and experience of spirituality, and the reality in which they are immersed. So, photography, used skillfully and wisely, is another means to help engage with the spiritual path.

Minor White’s “Creator” is always there for those who wish to become aware of it. The art of photography, in its ultimate form, is concerned with a person’s vision of the world and the deeper meanings of reality. Photography can be a tool for seeing the world (rather than looking at it) and act as a stepping stone towards intuitive understanding. Images are no longer an attempt to capture the external environment, but a witness to reality.

As Gross and Shapiro (1996) point out, photography (as with the other arts) shares the “capacity for evoking the transpersonal dimension of a larger universe, by such means as grasping the constructive nature of reality, generating a breathless moment of eternity, inducing a deep state of mindfulness, or sweeping away the self through a sense of awe” (p. 189). Minor White grasped this potential of photography, but his insight should now be accessed again by this generation. The advent of the digital camera has made the photographic path to spiritual dimensions even more easily accessible. It is up to all of us to harness this readily available tool to expand our awareness and start experiencing the non-dual nature of reality. Without the experience, all the theory is dust.

I would like to invite others to dialogue and debate the use of photography, and perhaps other arts or ways (for example, poetry, martial arts or the tea ceremony), as means by which a spiritual life can be nurtured and then its fruits shared with the wider community. As photography is able to promote greater awareness, to what extent and in what way might that be valid for all other forms of creative or fine arts, and which is the most efficacious? Such questions warrant further investigation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Minor White Archive is housed at the Princeton University Art Museum. For examples of his work, see Peter C. Bunnell (1989), *Minor White: The eye that shapes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum); Stephanie Comer and Deborah Klochko (with an essay by Jeff Gunderson) (2006), *The moment of seeing: Minor White at the California School of Fine Arts* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books); and Nathan Lyons (Ed.) (2008), *Eye Mind Spirit: The enduring legacy of Minor White* (New York, NY: Howard Greenberg Gallery). For a brief introduction on the Internet to his photography see, for example, Masters of Photography, Minor White, retrieved February 27, 2011, from <http://www.masters-of-photography.com/W/white/white.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Equivalence suggests that an image can be a visual metaphor for something else; for example, an emotion. See Minor White (1963), Equivalence: The perennial trend, *PSA Journal*, 29(7), 17–21, retrieved October 18, 2007, from <http://www.jnevins.com/whiterreading.htm>.

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### The Author

*Joseph F. Ryan* graduated with Highest Honours in History and Political Science from Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, and has a Ph.D. in History from the University of Hull, England. Joseph served as an army medic and later worked at the Ministry of Defence. He is now a transpersonal counselor and integrative supervisor, working in London with people addicted to alcohol and drugs, and with their families, in particular at the Addiction Support and Care Agency (Kingston and Richmond-upon-Thames). Joseph is the author of a wide variety of publications and recently completed an M.A. in Creative Writing at Kingston University. Dr. Ryan lives next to the River Thames, close to Hampton Court Palace, Surrey, and may be contacted at: [joseph\\_ryan@btinternet.com](mailto:joseph_ryan@btinternet.com).