

Christopher B Fowler
www.christopherbfowler-photographer.org

I started out as a graphic artist—I, quite literally, spent my childhood drawing. My father was a high school librarian and every memo, every announcement, every bulletin that came to the library was then repurposed for me to draw on the back of. It was how he kept me in paper. From there, I became interested in making animated movies—essentially bringing my drawings to life. I shifted, then, to making live action movies (this was the golden age of super-8 movie film).

I can't now remember whether I actually applied for or just thought seriously of writing for the application to the New York University Film School—with my father's blessing. He said I had "the eye". But, in the end, I lost my nerve (this was New York in the 1970s) and went, instead, to the small liberal arts college the Fowlers have gone to for several generations. That said, my first advisor there was also interested in filmmaking, so clearly I hadn't given up the idea entirely.

It was while I was there that the Metropolitan Museum of Art held a retrospective of the work of Edward Steichen and *Newsweek* Magazine, which I was taking at the time, devoted a full page to Steichen's early color photograph of the Flatiron Building. It remains for me one of the most subtle and beautiful photographs ever made. It showed me what photography could be and turned me into a photographer. It's the "ghost" I'm always chasing in my own work.

Another big influence, while I was living in Philadelphia, came as a result of a retrospective the Philadelphia Museum of Art held for the painter Thomas Eakins—in particular, his use of raked light, of strong light and shadow generally.

I've also acquired my father's love of the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe. In fact, my website features her remark that it's not mountains and trees and rocks that interest us, but rather the abstract elements—the lines, shapes, textures, etc.—they present.

In the late 1980s I, along with much of the United States, was captivated by a series of television interviews that Joseph Campbell, the well-known scholar of myths and comparative religion, made with journalist Bill Moyers just before his death. It led me to other recorded lectures and books Campbell had made, in which, amongst other things, he talked about the importance of art and the role of the artists in society—that it's our task to reveal the "radiance" behind the everyday reality.

This was then reinforced by my stumbling onto a series of recorded talks online by Jerry Saltz, the chief art critic for *New York Magazine*, in which he likens the role of artists to that of the shamans of traditional societies—that it is our visions that keep our communities correctly oriented. (I came upon a similar remark made, in one of his essays, by Dylan Thomas, saying that "art is about telling the truth", which I also heard restated that artists are the "gatekeepers" of the truth). Saltz' remark that art is the most sophisticated operating system ever invented—that it deals with everything, psychology, religion, politics, philosophy, human relations, etc., etc.—also reinforces my sense of my own art as a calling.

The above notwithstanding, my path from taking pictures to exhibiting them was still not a straightforward one.

I pursued writing for a while, resulting in several rejected short stories and an attempt at a novel, the manuscript for which has, relievedly, been lost. I did have some success with poetry, from time to time, getting poems published in *Friends Journal*, the Quaker periodical. In fact, one poem even was printed on the cover of one edition. (My father's family were Quakers and I am a member of the Quaker Meeting in Frederick, MD). At the same time, when I was passing around my vacation photos to my co-workers, they all said I was in the wrong profession.

It was through an ad in the back of *Friends Journal* that I became aware of a group called the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts and it was actually as a means of expanding the outlets for my poetry that I joined them to take advantage of their newsletter. At one point, they organized an art show and sent out announcements of it to everyone on their mailing list. Since, along with everyone else, they had sent me the announcement, I decided to enter three of my photographs. And they took all three of them. It's from that, finally, it's been photography ever since.

(From time to time, I wonder, now, what I would be doing if they hadn't taken any).

As regards my creative process, I'm afraid I have to state the all-too-familiar remark that I don't take my photographs so much as they take me. I become caught by the experience of something—probably from one or more of the abstract qualities mentioned above—and then seek to convey that experience through the camera (needless to say, I carry the camera with me pretty much everywhere). There have even been times when, beforehand, I've composed in my mind a photograph I wanted to take, only to arrive at the intended location and, as I was framing the image I'd wanted, noticed something out of the corner of my eye that clearly enhanced—and in some cases “made”—the final picture.

Even though I shoot on film, I have the images printed onto a CD by the processing service I use. Using the CD, I then tweak the images on my computer here at home—though only minimally, mostly cropping and truing the horizontals—and then send the completed image as a .jpeg to be printed. My intent is to arrive at what I saw through the lens, so as (once again), to convey my experience to the viewer.

How the viewer then interprets the experience, I leave to them. My father's *vocation*, as distinct from his *occupation* as a librarian and schoolteacher, was as a playwright and in one of his plays he gives a character the line that “the creation always escapes the creator”.

I'm okay with that.