

The Picture Inside the Frame

BY WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN



*A lifelong love of photographs
helps define one man's understanding of himself
and his connection to the world.*

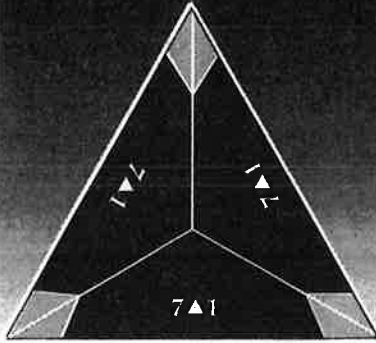
IN THE BASEMENT OF MY PARENTS' HOUSE, ON BARE WOOD TWO-BY-FOURS bracketed to the back wall, are several boxes of photographs. I haven't been down there in a while, but 25 years ago those shelves were my playground, my archives, my adopted memory—my Narnia. In fact, in those days, much as the children in C.S. Lewis's tales disappeared through a wardrobe into their enchanted land, to get to the boxes I had to make my way between two overstuffed metal racks of out-of-season and outgrown clothes: a boy's blue-and-white sailor suit cheek-by-jowl with a thick camel's-hair overcoat next to a tomato-red maternity dress unworn since the '50s, still emanating a trace of perfume.

As a child, I spent hours poring over the pictures in those boxes. A yellowish-pink snapshot of my honeymooning parents on the beach in Miami. My brother, two sisters, and I—ages six to one—cramped onto a wooden rocking horse, with me, the youngest, at the helm. (This horse recently turned up again; its seat is about six inches long.) There's a shot of me, not quite two years old, standing alone on the rain-soaked promenade deck of the *S.S. United States*. For a time I insisted, to incredulous ears, that this moment was my earliest memory, until I came across the photo one day and realized that it was my memory, the image fixed in my brain from some long-ago viewing.

In my family, I became the de facto Keeper of the Photographs. If a dispute arose regarding when an event had occurred or where a certain picture was, I would jump up unbidden from the dinner table, run down to the basement, and be able to locate the appropriate proof in seconds flat. (There was no organization or chronology to

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the boxes, just hundreds of loose snapshots along with a few unmarked envelopes and rubber-banded piles; I felt my way through them as if sifting for gold.) I was particularly fascinated with those that documented my presence before memory had taken hold. We had lived in Germany for my first two years, so in addition to the common mystery of who one was before awareness, there was the exotic setting of a foreign country. The Bavarian Alps through the kitchen window, trips to Austria and northern Italy as seen from a stroller. *I was in those places, I thought. Are they somewhere in me?*

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Sometime during elementary school, my parents presented me with an empty photo album and gave me permission to compile a record of the family's "German years." It's no accident that almost every picture I selected included me: My wide, welcoming toddler face, gap-toothed grin, and fine blond curls (all traits that had by this time vanished), my older sisters and brother protectively holding my hand or proprietarily lifting me out of a chair—these images made my own past seem wondrous. By now intensely shy, and continually conscious of that shyness as only a shy person can be, I was searching in the photos for what I took to be my other self, the source from which my unimaginable but hoped-for future confidence and ease might grow. I thought the seed that held the rest of me was somewhere else, back there, not sitting on the basement floor looking through old snapshots.

I was given my first camera, a Kodak Instamatic, when I was nine years old, then later a 35-millimeter upon graduating from high school. Like my father, whose work made up the contents of all those boxes, I proceeded over the years to chronicle every Christmas (the family around the tree that was wired to the wall after crashing to the floor), birthday party (the smiley-face cake of '71), and sum-



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mer vacation (Hurricane Agnes's knee-high floods), along with scattered scenes of people caught in mid-chew, tiredly raking leaves, impatiently squinting into the sun.

In college, I turned more seriously to photography, taking classes in which I tended to choose inanimate objects as my subjects—goalposts, a wall with an odd filigree hook sticking out of it, an arthritic wicker rocking chair. One obvious reason was that I didn't feel comfortable approaching strangers to take their pictures, but I also had recently become enamored of the work of the French photographer Eugène Atget, whose still, underpopulated views of turn-of-the-century Paris—a corner newsstand, a Notre Dame gargoyle, the display window of a hat shop—seemed to offer me permission to find the life in things.

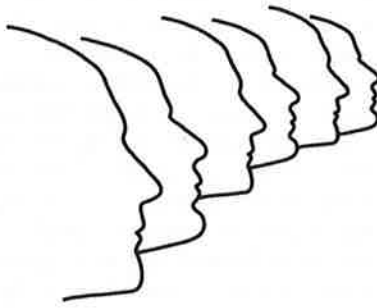
At this time, my sophomore year, I'd occasionally visit a Catholic church on the way back to campus from the grocery store. In church—a place I hadn't attended regularly in years—I was seeking something familiar, something quiet, relief from the letters in my mailbox describing problems back home. Now and then I'd bring my camera along, trying to translate into black-and-white the bleeding islands of color in a stained-glass window, the cool immutability of a marble angel's head, the inexplicable solace of a leaf (indoors!) floating in the holy water.

As unsettled as I felt then, the objects and scenes I photographed called to some calm inside me; peace arose from the composing, the holding. Captured by my camera, they were like a piece of smooth soapstone in my pocket, warmed between thumb and forefinger.

Today, when I view photographs in a museum—whether portraits, landscapes, or life caught unawares—I become intoxicated; my skin tingles, my legs quiver, I feel like I've lived other lives. Alfred Stieglitz's coffee-hued studies of Georgia O'Keeffe's hands; the gentle crag-giness of Abraham Lincoln caught by Mathew Brady's lens; Ansel Adams's Yosemite, dusted with snow and light; Lewis Hine's child laborers, too tired to be terrified—they inspire, breathe into me even as they steal the very air away. Most of all, they have the power to reawaken me to the world.

When I was 20, I lived in Europe for a year. During the semester break, I did the American-student tour of the conti-

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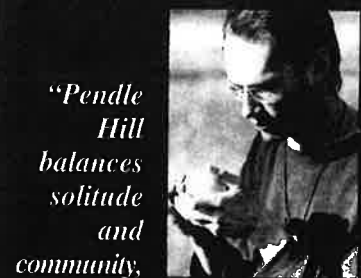
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ment—a day in one place, a new town and a seedier youth hostel the next. Missed connections with friends and other unplanned circumstances conspired to make me my sole—and reluctant—companion for most of the trip. My diary from that time consists largely of grumping about train schedules and roommates who snored. So it was that I found myself one day in Luxembourg, heading for the town of Clervaux, notable as the birth-

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place of photographer Edward Steichen. In the castle there, my guidebook told me, was a permanent exhibition of "The Family of Man," the Museum of Modern Art show that Steichen had curated in the 1950s. The book of that title was my favorite collection of photographs, hundreds of black-and-white pictures from around the globe celebrating the cycle and events of life—from an English schoolgirl sashaying down the street in high heels to a sobbing Korean woman being urged away from a loved one's coffin. On the bus to Clervaux, however, I discovered upon looking at a local brochure that the castle was closed that day. "That was to be the high point of the trip," I lamented in my diary, not at all hyperbolically—the Eiffel Tower and St. Peter's notwithstanding.

I was in need of the nourishment those photos could provide me: a reminder of home, of my passions, and of the fact that I lived in a world populated by more than tourists. Looking back years later, I find that my own photographs of the trip from that point on grew in number—a result, I think, of my camera telling me that my eyes were, after all, open. By the end of my six weeks of travel, I was unexpectedly loving my independence. Part of the reason I was no longer lonely was that I was finally seeing. I had company in whatever my eyes met.

This search for connection—to people, to places, to things, to the self—is the

task of life, and of all art, including photography. To view a photograph is to establish, from deep inside ourselves, a relationship with whatever is inside the frame. On a bookshelf at home, I have a picture of my grandparents, taken 80 years ago. Young and in love—engaged to be married—they are sitting in a field, their arms wrapped around each other, and my grandmother holds an enormous bouquet of flowers in her lap. It's a picture of two people: Nanny, the only grandparent I ever knew, a loving presence in my life, someone who spent hours with me when I was little putting together 500-piece jigsaw puzzles ("Build the frame first and work your way in from there"), and—"Grandpa." I'm not sure what to call him; he died five years before I was born. He's a man I don't even have a name for, yet this photograph somehow not only preserves but creates a relationship I never experienced in life: He's the man who loved Nanny. Through her, I'm connected to him.

In the picture, two pairs of eyes look out at me over the bridge of many years, and I look back through my present-day eyes. But I'm also watching myself through my grandparents' eyes, because this portrait—this fractional convergence of light and shadow, caught by the shutter's opening and closing—is actually a point of birth. Out of it grows their future, their family, my life, the images and music and faces that draw my attention, those boxes of pictures that affirm all of the presences that make up my own. Each time I pass this photo on my bookshelf, more is made of me: my eyes, the unknown photographer's eyes, my grandparents' eyes, my eyes looking back at me through theirs. Photographs allow you to inhabit many eyes at once.

In some ways I'm still the little boy in the basement, amid the boxes of old photos, and each time I look inside them, it's still with a longing, a searching. But the difference is that now I know the photographs are a path along which I reflect on who I am and what the rest of my world means. They're not the source but the sustenance, the ground under my feet. The real source is as ineffable, and as much a part of me, as all of the eyes that see.

William O'Sullivan is deputy editor of *Common Boundary*.