

CONTEMPLATIVE
VISION
PHOTOGRAPHY
AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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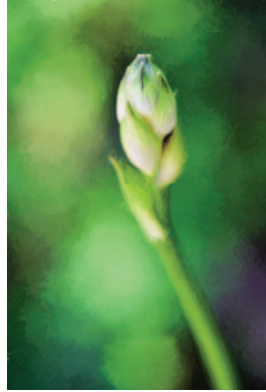
CHAPTER 9

A BASIC APPROACH

This Bud's for You

layers of wrapped tissue
translucent, fragile
shades of pale green
 and slight lavender
small bud,
barely larger than a match head,
growing solo among the ferns
beneath the trees, beside the lake

small grace,
unfolding wonder



Pulling It Together

This is the point when I pull together what we've explored about contemplative vision and share the simple process I follow when my hope/intent is to take photographs from a place of quiet, present receptivity. There aren't really steps to this process, except the obvious ones of choosing a location/subject and preparing your equipment. In fact, it's less a process and more the mental, emotional, and spiritual preparation similar to what one would do to prepare for worship or settle down for quiet prayer. It's more about *being* than *doing*, which makes sense if what we're attempting is a form of meditation.

So, yes, begin with deciding that you're ready to engage in the spiritual practice of contemplative photography. You want to do this for yourself, to connect with yourself in a deeper, calmer way, to have this time with God, to approach and more fully embrace some small part of God's amazing world. How much time will you set aside? How will you free yourself to

focus on photography without distraction? How will you set aside—guard—this special time, which, really, is sacred time?

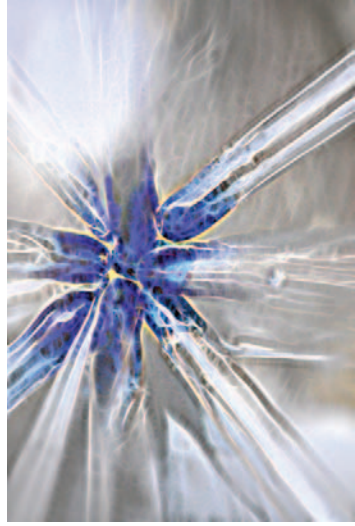
You then settle on where you'd like to be for this. Perhaps you have the house to yourself for a blessed—and unusual—hour or two; as we've seen, your home offers plenty of photo-worthy subjects to explore. Perhaps, while driving or walking earlier in the day, you noticed a certain stand of trees in the neighborhood, a barn in picturesque disrepair, or a restored hot rod in a neighbor's driveway. Perhaps you, like me, have several spots near home to which you gravitate for walks and quiet moments, like a public garden, a lakeshore, an art museum, a quaint neighborhood, a cluster of downtown skyscrapers, an old church, or a trail meandering along a stream. What draws you?

Once you arrive, do whatever it is you need to do to find your place of inner stillness, that place of present awareness (the here, the now), that openness to what comes to the forefront as you patiently wait. What yearns for your attention?

Then begin to notice. Let's imagine it's the holidays, the Christmas tree is freshly decorated, and I'm drawn to a particular ornament I see hanging toward the top, an ornament that once hung on my sister's tree, but became mine after she passed away. I think, "It *is* beautiful; I see why she bought it—it's graceful, unique, ethereal. Yes, I'm going to take some photos of that." But I don't immediately aim the camera and start clicking. I approach the ornament, taking a closer look at it than I have before. I take it off the tree and hold it in my hands, turning it over, viewing it from all angles, feeling its smoothness and lightness. It's round, clear glass, except where, while still hot, points on the exterior were pushed to the interior. Those points either already had molten blue glass added to the hot surface, or whatever tool was used to push in at those points was first dipped in molten blue glass. I place the ornament on the dining room table, with natural light behind it from the dining room window. I've connected with my subject—looked at it and felt it. I'm taking things slowly, allowing the time and space I need to notice, appreciate, and wonder. Now, intuitively, I feel ready to take some pictures.

And I do. I take quite a few, in fact. Below is my favorite from that afternoon of photography:

Is it just a Christmas ornament? I've been surprised what others—who did not get the explanation I offered above—see in it. None guess that it's a Christmas ornament. One sees it as a metaphor for the complexity of the human body—all nerves and muscles. Another sees water. I titled this image *Convergence*; it speaks to me of people and things coming together, as people and things are meant to do.



I continue taking photos, repeatedly pausing to connect, trying not to rush as I move on to another subject—another ornament, another flower, another view of the mountain, etc. I continue until I either run out of time, my energy flags, or I simply find nothing else calling for my attention.

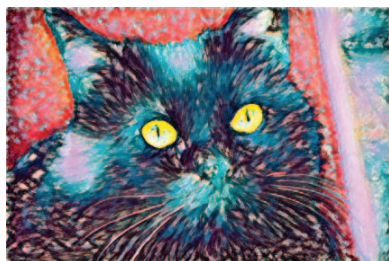
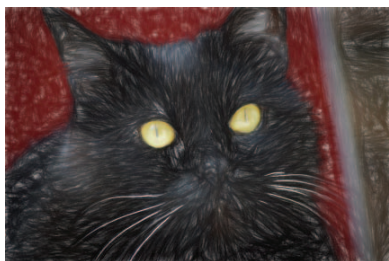
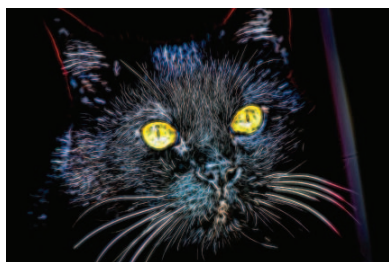
Back at the Computer

A more established process awaits once I am at the computer and have downloaded my new images. Your process will differ from mine, depending on what you'd like to accomplish and what software you choose to use. For me, it looks something like this:

- I download the photos into Photoshop Elements Organizer. I look through the new photos, deleting the blurry ones, the boring ones, the mistakes, the ones I probably won't do anything with. I note the ones I find particularly pleasing. I ask myself, "Of the dozen or so photos you have of this particular subject, which two or three are worth keeping?" I delete some more. (This is an issue for me. Way too many photos live on my computer. The regular deletion of ones

I'll never use could be another spiritual practice . . . clearing out, letting go, decluttering.)

- I select a few pictures that I particularly like and open those in Photoshop Elements Editor, my first choice for editing. (Organizer and Editor are the two parts of the Photoshop Elements software package.)
- I do basic cleanup of these images, adjusting brightness and contrast, possibly tweaking color and sharpening, often cropping for a more pleasing composition. Photo-manipulation programs will do much of this for you at the click of a button, if you wish, but you can choose to do it manually, making your own adjustments.
- At this point, I may be happy with an image and simply save it. Or I may want to add some simple effects, like a vignette or a frame.
- Or I'll flat-out play with the image, experimenting with a host of other filter options and treatments available through the various software programs I own. I offer this taste of what one photo can look like when given four different treatments; meet our cat Romeo:



If such playing with photos intrigues you, give it a try.

What you do with your final images is up to you. Maybe you keep them to yourself. Maybe you share them on Facebook or some other social media site. Maybe you'll print a few to frame and display in your home or office. In any case, may every one of them celebrate and honor your unique, contemplative vision.

Reflect and Consider

From time to time, you may want to sit with a photo you find particularly pleasing (or calming, challenging, healing) and consider why that image holds meaning for you. I offer these questions to guide your reflection:

- What drew me to this subject?
- What pleases me about this image?
- What am I feeling as I connect with this image?
- What surprises me about this image?
- What do I learn about *myself* from this image? What do I learn about the *world*? about *God*? about *desire*? *beauty*? *pain*? *healing*? *hope*?
- In what way does this image serve as a metaphor?
- Based on my response, what might I title this image?

Whether or not you engage in such reflection is totally up to you. As I've said before, the process needs only be the process, without explanation or analysis.

