

Some Things I Learned From Photography
And Elsewhere
September 4, 2016

Good morning. One of my favorite lines from Jay Leno is this: “A Midwestern man so loved his wife that he almost told her once.” I say this, not for a laugh, but to tell you that this could apply to my family. We do not hail from the Midwest—my sisters, brothers and I were born and raised in what locals call “the North Country” that is, north of Syracuse and, in my case, about twenty miles east of Watertown.

But my family, like Leno’s Midwesterner, is a reticent bunch. We don’t talk much about ourselves and we don’t say we love each other nearly as much or as often as we should. We certainly don’t brag or boast about ourselves; so as I begin my twentieth year in this beloved community, I am going to tell you some things about myself you have not likely heard during coffee hour.

To be sure, some of you know that I have some trouble with our first UU principle about the inherent worth and dignity of all. Fewer still know, however, that I embrace and love our fourth principle about the individual search for truth and meaning. I don’t consider myself demanding, and I like to believe that I do not discriminate about sources. I can only hope that I have the wisdom to recognize wisdom wherever and whenever I find it.

So, to that extent, I offer the following example:

In its fourth season the twelfth episode of M*A*S*H was entitled “Quo Vadis Lt. Chapman.” For those of you who don’t remember it from thirty years ago, or who don’t watch television at all, I offer a brief synopsis. Lt. Chapman was a bombardier whose plane crashed near enough for his treatment at the 4077th.

Perhaps it was his head wound, or maybe it was something else, but in any event, the good Lieutenant had come to believe he was Jesus Christ. He was convinced and convincing enough that Radar O’Rielly asked for his teddy bear to be blessed. In due course and with appropriate solemnity the bear received its blessing and Radar went away happy.

Dr. Sidney Friedman, the visiting Army psychiatrist had some talks with Chapman and one of their conversations went something like this: Friedman asked Chapman, “You say you are the Son of God. If God answers all prayers, why is there so much suffering and evil in the world?” Chapman thought for a moment and answered in a tone of resigned sorrow; “Yes, God does answer all prayers. Sometimes, the answer is no.”

Now, I haven’t gotten around to reading my copy of “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” The “Friends of the Library” have gently conspired to keep me far behind in my reading—but that is another topic altogether. I think the Chapman episode contains a profound truth and a direct answer to an ageless question.

Certainly in lesser hands the entire episode could have been played broadly for cheap laughs. “Ha ha! Guy bumps his head and now he thinks he’s Christ. Hey, Jesus, walk on water over here and while you’re at it, turn it into wine. Some of us could use a drink!” Cue the ubiquitous laugh track to remind us it’s supposed to be funny....

The title promised I would talk about photography and I will. It is unlikely that any of you know that in my Junior year in High School I became enamored by photography. I was smitten; I wanted to learn everything I could find about it and I

devoured everything I could find on the subject. A few things have stayed with me over these fifty-odd years. I believe some of them have a broader application.

In the first, the author asks you to imagine that you have taken the world's best photograph and, even in those pre-Internet days, that your photograph could be seen by everyone in the world. To a teenager whose ambition was to work for Life magazine, that seemed a worthy goal.

Just imagine, if you will, a photograph so perfectly composed that moving the camera a fraction of an inch in any direction would spoil its symmetry. Imagine, a picture so exquisitely exposed that even grizzled old veterans would marvel at your mastery of light and shadow. Imagine, to use a old cliché, that your subject would be so moving that strong men would weep, and women faint, and innocent little children would gaze in wide-eyed, open-mouthed wonder at it.

And realize that, with all that, fully one-third of the world's population would simply not agree that you had taken and produced the world's best photograph. Oh, some would say, "the composition was good, but couldn't you have moved the camera just a little bit more in that direction, not cut off quite so much of that? And the lighting, really, isn't it really too good to be true? What did you manipulate? And, as for the subject, well, really isn't it a bit overly sentimental, maudlin perhaps?"

So, the best we can hope for is two out of three, 67%, in a phrase older than Cornell, a "gentleman's 'C'." Should we be discouraged? I think not. After all, the gloomiest pessimist has to admit the glass is more than half-full. And many of those third that don't think it's the best will think it is very good.

In my years working in Air Force photographic darkrooms we had a cynical phrase: “good enough for government work.” It meant that an acceptable print could have been better, that if it were personal work, we’d reprint it until it was as good as it could be.

That is my takeaway from this first example. Do not be discouraged by criticism. Always do your best. In Rick Nelson’s refrain from his last hit song “Garden Party,” “You know, you can’t please everyone, so you’ve got to please yourself.” He wrote that after being booed off the stage at Madison Square Garden for singing new material instead of just his hits from the 50’s.

I’m sure you’ll agree that this example of the “World’s Best Photograph” can apply to any creative endeavor: a television script, prose, poetry, music, lyrics, and perhaps even sermons. Always do your best. Those you know and those you unknowingly touch will be better for it.

I also got a great definition from a photography magazine. A true professional is someone who can do their best work when they don’t feel like it. I have an example from, of all places, Hollywood. It is at best quasi-historical, liberally seasoned with artistic license.

Decades before “Iron Man” or Sherlock Holmes, Robert Downey, Jr. turned in a bravura performance as Charlie Chaplin. In the film, a teenaged Charlie Chaplin falls in love with a showgirl in England. She refuses his offer of marriage, and will not follow him to America and an uncertain future.

After WWI Chaplin returns in triumph to his native England. He is not only the world’s best-known and most popular motion picture star; he is also the highest paid.

While riding on a train Chaplin ever so casually asks his old vaudeville manager about the showgirl.

“Oh,” the manager replies, “she married someone else after you left. She died in the flu epidemic after the war.” The train stops just then and the soundtrack begins to play Chaplin’s hit song, “Smile.” You know the lyrics: “Smile tho your heart is aching/smile even tho its breaking/You know that life is still worthwhile/If you just smile.”

Chaplin steps off the train with a broad smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes and greets his adoring fans. He’s obviously in a state of shock, and he’s running on autopilot and doing his best at the worst possible time.

Personally, I have never had such a jarring collision between my personal and professional life. I hope none of you have either.

Allow me, if you will, a small but related digression here. Another author said that if you could see a lens being crafted, if you could somehow visit Bausch & Lomb in Rochester, or the Karl Zeiss works in Jena, or Japan Optical, and see how a piece of rare earth optically clear glass is lovingly cut and shaped and polished over and over until mounted in a lens barrel, you might appreciate it more. Yeah, right... .

With that being said, every lens designer, every optical engineer knows that a perfect lens cannot be made. Part of it is that a perfect lens would reproduce individual photons of light into nano-sized pixels. But the practical part is that, since all lenses have flaws, overcorrecting for one flaw will exaggerate another. Let me give you two brief examples without getting too wonky.

The first flaw, chromatic aberration, sounds more complicated than it is. We've all seen supermarket flyers printed so out of register that it's almost a 3D effect. Chromatic aberration is just that: the lens can't bring all wavelengths of light into focus at the same place. It's called the focal plane—in older cameras, it's where the film was; in your smartphone or camcorder it's where the CCD device is. So, for example, the longest red wavelengths focus behind the focal plane; the shortest blue ones a bit ahead, and the green wavelengths exactly on target.

If the designer over-corrects for that, the lens might have exaggerated barrel distortion. It simply means the lens can't resolve a straight vertical line perfectly straight. That may be all right for some creative purposes, but for an architectural photographer, who wants a building photograph to look like, well, a building this could be problematic.

So: you can't please everyone and perfection is impossible. Some decades ago I had difficult and awkward relations with a supervisor. I was not alone in this miserable state. I still remember a young coworker, who drawled in her North Carolina accent "I guess he's got the rest of *his* life to get over it" after one such encounter. It led me to think; "If you seek perfection, avoid mirrors."

We are not perfect. We are not surrounded by perfection; we will not discover it or produce it. We do our best. I have done my best here. I thought about this topic long before I volunteered to speak in May. I have done my best; I have chosen my words as carefully as I can. I have thought about this repeatedly.

Still, perhaps a third of you are already regretting the wasted moments of your life you cannot recover. Some of you may be wondering just why you bothered to attend this morning, and are contemplating never returning. I have done my best and to you all I can

say is that I will not be speaking here next Sunday. The next speaker next Sunday might just be more eloquent, more learned, more profound. Still, I have done my best and it may be that some of you have heard something you instinctively knew, but have heard it in a way you hadn't thought about before. I have done my best.

Shalom

Insh Allah

Blessed be.