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Preaching to the Choir: Interlude

By Paul Myers, Brooks Institute of Photography

Contents:

[Front Page](#)[Member Index](#)[Latest Headlines](#)[Special Features](#)['Fun Pix'](#)[Message Board](#)[Polls](#)[Educate Yourself](#)[Equipment Profiles](#)[Bookshelf](#)[my.SportsShooter](#)[Classified Ads](#)[Workshop](#)[Sponsors](#)[Special Offers](#)[Our Store](#)

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[Monthly Clip Contest](#)[Student Contest](#)[Annual Contest](#)[Rules/Info](#)

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[Members Area](#)["The Guide"](#)[Join](#)

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[About SportsShooter](#)

Photo by Paul Myers

Photography is easy.

It takes a few minutes to learn, a lifetime of searching.

1. See.
2. Compose.
3. Expose.
4. Repeat.

There is more to it than that, right?

What about photographic meaning?

What is it?

A wisp of smoke might be closer to the point. Might be closer to explaining the nature of photographic meaning.

A wisp of smoke passing through the light of humanity.

Photographers search for meaning in the world. They search to communicate that which they understand as being important. This may be an idea, a concept, a person, an expression, an era, a continent, an emotion. When photographers photograph they say, "See, here it is, look. I saw this."

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And in spite of their best intentions to inform the world of what they have seen, photographers are undermined by their photographs.

Why I heard it just the other day. "Screw you, Photographer," said Photograph. "Screw. You."

Sure, at first this was a bit of a shock but I got over it.

Photographs refuse the photographer's intended meaning because photographs do not mean.

No, really, what is photographic meaning?

The simple answer is that photographs have no meaning.

Simple answers are simple because they are right under our nose, they point out the common sense of our actions and interactions. Hidden in plain sight, they are traditions so engrained we do not notice them, much like the air we breath, much like the best photographs.

Again, photographs have no meaning.

Photographic meaning is the potential to mean.

A photograph potentially means so much because it means nothing.



Photo by Paul Myers

Without a meaning, photographs mean.

Without sensing they sense.

They teach without teaching.
They jump without jumping.
They dance without dancing.

They cry without crying.
They sing without singing.
They smell without smelling.
They remember without memory.
They love without loving
They make a point without pointing.
They care without caring.

Photographs reflect.

They reflect our (subject/photographer/audience) humanity.

...Photographs reflect humanity for humanity.

Perfect in their imperfections as products of humanity, photographs are incomplete objects of meaning.

A photograph means as a photograph when it is in front of an audience.

The first audience is the subject.
The second audience is the photographer.
The third audience is the viewer.

So an audience makes a photograph mean?

A photograph does not mean.

An audience makes a photograph a photograph.

(Paul Myers is a faculty member of the Visual Journalism Program at Brooks Institute of Photography in Ventura, CA. Prior to his arrival at Brooks, Myers worked for a variety of publications including newspapers in Freeport, IL and Marysville, CA.)

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