

LIGHT

As photographers, light is our truth, our source of power. We draw upon the world as our canvas, painting with light itself. Light provides the photographer with the ability to create an instant sketch of light, an instant sketch of life.

You can create a new world in a fraction of a second

Light is information

When I consider light as truth, I think about the way light provides *information*, and gives form to surfaces, shaping our reality as we know it. This past year, I read the book, *The Republic by Plato*, where he provides a very interesting allegory about knowledge and perception using light and shadow.

In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, prisoners are chained to the wall of a cave, able only to view shadows cast upon the wall by objects passing in front of a fire behind them. These shadows become the prisoners' reality, as they know nothing else. When one prisoner is freed and sees the light of the sun for the first time, his eyes struggle to adjust to the bright light, representing the challenging transition to understanding the truth. He now sees objects for what they truly are, not mere shadows on a wall. Eager to share this revelation, he returns to the cave to enlighten the other prisoners. However, the prisoners react with disbelief, negativity, and hostility, calling the freed man crazy, as his view of the world contradicts their own perception of reality. The prisoners prefer to remain comfortable in their ignorance, disregarding the outside world and remaining forever enclosed within the cave.

I find this to be a very profound allegory to draw wisdom upon as a metaphor for modern society and the way that we receive information. Typically, we absorb news and information through our television screens, computers, and iPhones. Social media and the news become our source of truth. The problem with this is the fact that it alters our perception of reality to external stimuli. The news and information on display upon the screen are very similar to the shadows cast on the wall within

the cave. The media and government now determine the truth for us, but maybe we should become more critical of this source of information and recognize how it can be weaponized as propaganda. Even the simplest things like the weather app can be deceiving. Even in this moment as I type this essay right now, the app says that it's raining in Philadelphia, but it's actually not raining at all.

Why does this matter?

We must become more critical about what we give our attention to and how we spend our time. If you spend too much time looking at the shadows flickering upon the wall, you may become deceived, ultimately altering your emotional state of being. We should not allow this external stimuli to determine our emotional state, and become more in control of our lives and what we give our attention to. Some solutions include:

- Go for a walk in nature
- Leave your phone at home
- Disable all notifications, text messages, emails, and alarms
- Make art
- Spend time with loved ones

It sounds really simple or cliché, but I believe in this modern world, it is much easier for us to become distracted from what truly matters in life. Think more critically about your attention, and what you're giving your attention towards. In terms of the allegory of the cave, maybe we should quite literally exit our homes, exit the cave, and simply go outside, smell the flowers, the fresh air, and enjoy the warmth of the sunlight. Another idea:

Is it possible for you to design a life where you are no longer dependent on your iPhone, or a slave to time itself?

I think so. Start becoming more critical about this idea if you truly seek freedom.

Become an observer

As street photographers, we should strive to become the ultimate flâneur of our town.

The word “flâneur” comes from the French verb “flâner,” which means “to stroll” or “to saunter.”

When you walk the street, walk slowly, and simply stroll. Take in the fleeting moments, and become an observer of everyday life. For this is the ultimate goal of the Photographer, to observe life, but not merely as a passive bystander, but as an active participant in life itself. We give meaning to the moments and the mundane through the use of our camera, and the practice of street photography. The industrial revolution and the advancements of technology and buildings, architecture, parks, sculpture, people, places, and the street itself, become our canvas to draw upon. Become the ultimate Flâneur in your hometown, and revel in the moments that are fleeting, giving meaning to your stroll, through walking at a slow pace, engaging with life on a deep and meaningful level.

How do I start my day?

I start every single day with a walk in nature. The more I contemplate my time in nature, I feel as though it is like my medicine. It's very soothing to remove all of the external stimuli and distractions, and simply listen to the sound of the birds, feel the cool breeze, and watch the sunrise. I enjoy waking up early, typically around 4 AM, or 4:30 AM, drink some espresso, 2 L of water, do some simple yoga or stretching, and head out with my new 40-pound weighted vest by Rogue. I walk for one hour, along the Schuylkill River Trail, where I arrive at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, standing upon a cliff, looking out towards the horizon, the Schuylkill River, the Fairmount Water Works, beautiful architecture, Boathouse Row, and a tree canopy. I believe the most critical aspect of my daily routine is visiting this open space, at an elevated vantage point, that gives me a Panopticon view of my surroundings. This reminds me of how open this world is, and how much possibility there is to do in a day, or a lifetime.

Why beauty is important

The world is chaos. It's quite obvious that evil or Satan rules this earth or realm. You don't even need to be religious to see or understand this. In general, the material world is not an ideal state.

So what can we do about this?

I believe the creation of art for beauty's sake is a good idea to start with. As photographers, I believe first and foremost we should strive to make beautiful photographs. One simple solution to achieving this goal is through utilizing a Ricoh GR III and the small JPEG, high contrast, black-and-white settings, cranked to the max. If you increase the contrast, shadows, clarity, grain, and embrace this approach to photographing, not only do I believe it is the most aesthetically beautiful photograph you can achieve straight out of the camera, but I believe it is the easiest, simplest, most innovative solution to practicing photography as of the current year of 2024. Because of this, I believe it to be, objectively, the fastest way to improve your photography.

Think about how the world *should* be

True beauty comes from your heart, or your courage. Courage is what drives my body out there onto the front lines of life. My curiosity follows, through a childlike spirit of play. The photographs we create not only reflect our lust for life, our heart, our soul, or our courage, but the photographs become a reflection of what we believe the world *should be*, or could be. We should strive to photograph what the street feels like. Through embracing the amateur snapshot with these settings, I believe that we can evoke the essence of the streets, the raw, unfiltered, and gritty nature of urban life. When you're photographing this, you photograph what the street feels like, hopefully allowing the viewer to have an emotional response to the work itself. This is the goal of art, to permit the viewer to feel something.

My issue with modern art, galleries, and shows, is that the images are no longer beautiful. When I visited New York City last year in 2023, I decided to visit a few contemporary photography galleries. One of the photographs was from a Magnum photographer, of some sculpture, that was graffiti, and being torn down. You had to

read some long essay, just to get the context of what the photograph was about. The problem with the photographs in this gallery was that the images were not beautiful, and actually quite boring. There were many portraits of people sort of staring into the camera, blasé, not interested. You then read an essay that describes that they're struggling with their identity, blah, blah, blah, and how they fit into society. I want to be able to look at the photograph, the image, and feel something. However, it seems as though we're staying away from beauty for beauty's sake, and contemporary art is moving in a direction that is much more conceptual or not necessarily about the piece itself. I believe the piece should be beautiful, and shouldn't have to rely on some long-winded explanation or essay to convey its message.

Transcend the mundane

Art that is beautiful is good because it creates this ideal state, a higher state of order. Beautiful art reaches for this higher state through the technique, the medium, and the beauty of an image. Art reminds the viewer to reach for this higher state as well.

When I consider my time spent in Florence, Italy, gazing at the sculptures of Hercules, David, and Achilles, these arch heroes, I felt inspired to become like the sculpture itself. While viewing the sculpture of Achilles, dead in the arms of Ajax, it reminds me of the permanent nature of life, and that death can be a beautiful aspect of the human experience. Not only do the sculptures require the viewer to look up at them, due to the sheer size and grandeur, but it gives the viewer the permission to become like them, to transcend this world, to find inspiration and beauty in the stories and myths of these demigods, these heroes, and allows me to seek to go beyond myself.

While in Rome, I visited numerous churches and basilicas throughout the city. I find architecture to be the highest form of art. The constraint of architecture is physics. You're working with gravity and physical labor. While visiting these churches in Rome, I was viewing some of the paintings of Caravaggio. Paintings, such as Caravaggio's work are beautiful and great, but they do not hold the same beauty as the church that they sit in.

Here in Philadelphia, we have access to one of mankind's greatest artistic achievements, the largest playing pipe organ in the Wanamaker Organ. Within the center of the Wanamaker building, which is now Macy's, there's a sculpture of an eagle, the symbol of America, freedom, and power. The sculpture is built of bronze, with every feather wrought by hand. When standing at the center of the building, in front of this eagle, gazing up at a very high ceiling, and listening to the music that sounds from this organ, you experience art in its most transcendental form by standing in the center of a divine space. You quite literally are embodied within the divine itself.

Ultimately, the goal of great art is to reach for the divine. What works such as architecture and sculpture remind me is that if you're going to strive for this divine quality, of course it's going to be difficult!

Who am I?

Dante of Philadelphia does not exist.

Am I my first and last name, the contents of my wallet, my job, my art, my past, my present, or my potential future self? Am I the name I was assigned at birth, through the authentication of a birth certificate, and a Social Security number?

Who are we, and why are we here? When I ask myself this question, I contemplate this notion of freedom, or free will.

Freedom is the elimination of choice.

Should I go left, or should I go right? Should I be a doctor, or should I be a lawyer? Should I eat bread, or should I eat steak? Should I go to the club, or should I go to church?

Perhaps our decisions that we make inevitably become the outcome of who we truly are. However, through eliminating all choices, subtraction, and the shedding of our skin, we reveal the essence of who we truly are. My thought is, we are more

what we are *not*, than what we say we are. We are the things that we do not do, or do not consume.

We are who we are not.

What am I?

When you look into the mirror, what do you see?

We are bipedal, with two legs, a tall spine, with two arms, two hands, two thumbs, one head, and two eyes. Inside, we have two lungs, two kidneys, and one heart. We are Homo sapiens, or human beings. We have evolved throughout millions of years, and have arrived in this modern world, with advanced civilization, technology, in the most abundant time to be alive.

What is the meaning of life?

Perhaps the ultimate purpose of life is to figure out what questions to ask in order to discover the meaning of life. I believe that we all have a calling in life, a divine purpose for why we are here. In order to figure out what this is, perhaps we must transform, evolve, through returning to the childlike state. This past year, I read the book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche. In the book, there are a few main concepts covered, such as the Übermensch, the eternal return, the will to power, and one specific idea that struck me was the metamorphosis, a process towards spiritual enlightenment.

In his metamorphosis, he uses animals to represent the various stages of transformation. You start as a camel, carrying societal norms, and living up to the world's expectations of you willingly. You then transform into the lion, saying no to these norms, creating your own values and morals. In the final stage, you return to the child, saying yes to life, affirming life through the spirit of play and creativity. Consider a child, and how a child is not hardened by society. A child is open, endlessly learning, and growing, and there is no final form. The path to

enlightenment, to understanding the meaning of life, is an endless journey. Perhaps simply recognizing that you are on the journey, and that it is infinite, is enlightenment.

I believe the meaning of life is to forever be a child, to forever evolve, and to forever strive to become the greatest version of yourself, to conquer yourself, to become the Übermensch.

Is anything eternal?

Are we merely human, or something of the divine? Is man permitted to strive to become a demigod, to go beyond themselves, beyond this world? Will my soul live forever beyond death?

I think so, therefore it will.

What is God?

I was born and raised Catholic, and we recognize God to be both man and divine, embodied in physical flesh through Jesus Christ.

I believe in God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

While I do recognize my Catholic roots and beliefs, let us set this aside, and think of Jesus as a philosopher, a teacher, a hero, an archetype for man to strive to become. One of his most profound teachings that I remember is that he describes that you must return to being a child to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Consider a child, with no idea of what is right or wrong. A child is innocent and pure. A child merely listens to its conscience, and follows it.

When I was a young child, around 10 years old, I traveled abroad for the first time, visiting cousins in Italy, for an Easter celebration. I remember attending a small church, handing out holy water, and then returning to the family home to eat food,

and partake in the Italian tradition of Pasqua. All of the children were brought into a room, and given gigantic chocolate eggs. I remember holding a hammer, and standing upon a table, smashing these different chocolate eggs, revealing small toys inside. One of the toys was a puppet, a Pinocchio.

Think of the story of Pinocchio, a puppet, who strives to become a real boy. Jiminy Cricket represents the conscience, who sits within Pinocchio's hat, in his head, helping him and guiding him to determine what is right and what is wrong. If Pinocchio lies, or disobeys his conscience, his nose grows long, and he remains a puppet. There's a very profound scene where Pinocchio and some other boys are brought to Pleasure Island. On Pleasure Island, the boys fight, destroy churches, smash bottles, drink alcohol, and smoke cigars. In one scene, Pinocchio decides to flick away, disobeying his conscience, indulging in a cigar. As he begins to smoke, he grows a tail, and begins to transform into a donkey. All the boys who disobeyed their conscience, indulging in the hedonistic pleasures, transform into donkeys, and are sent to the mines, to be a slave.

Metaphorically, I interpret this very profoundly, as by disobeying our conscience, indulging in hedonism, we become a slave to our addictions, to our pleasure-seeking, base and primal whims. So, what does this story of Pinocchio have to do with God and what does this all mean?

When I was in Rome, I remember seeing Pinocchio figures everywhere. I met a local street photographer, and began asking him about the symbol of Pinocchio, and why it is everywhere in Rome. He was describing to me the etymology of the word Pinocchio as:

Pin - Pineal Gland Occhio - Eye

Another thing I noticed was the symbol of a pinecone, used for the fountains where I drew water, and also there is a gigantic pinecone sculpture at the Vatican. The pinecone is a symbol for eternal life, fertility, and a connection to the divine. Maybe our pineal gland, or our third eye, is the connection between our mind, our body, and our soul? I know for a fact that when I set my natural biological clock, my circadian rhythm, through catching the sunrise in the morning, and sleeping with the sunset, my mind and body feel perfectly aligned. I have a sharp and clear day when I set my circadian rhythm this way. The pineal gland is associated with setting

our circadian rhythms, and plays a vital role in our sleep cycle. It also influences our hormonal functions, which plays a vital role in our overall well-being. The more we are in tune with our physiology, our mind and our body, the deeper and better sleep that we get, and ultimately the more *awake* we are the following day.

God is our conscience?

God is speaking to us through our mind, guiding us through every decision that we make, helping us determine what is right and what is wrong. We can all find God, you just have to be fully awake, and listen to your gut.

Heaven and hell

So let us assume that our souls are eternal, and will live forever. If I disobey my conscience throughout my entire life, then God, will my soul be eternally tormented in hell? I personally do not believe in hell, or eternal torment of the soul. However, I think that you create hell for yourself on earth, by becoming a slave to your hedonistic whims, and disobeying your conscience.

However, we create the kingdom of Heaven on earth, through obeying our conscience, and making the right decisions. I believe that we are the creators of Paradise, right here, right now.

How is this possible?

We can change the world, and create paradise, through becoming the change we wish to see in the world. I don't believe you must partake in a particular religion or subscribe to any dogma. It does not matter, whether you are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian. I believe through obeying your conscience, following the light, and the teachings of Jesus, as a prophet, as a teacher, we find the blueprint for how to live, and we can strive to create the new paradise.

God, tribe, and land

The number one takeaway point I have from my peace corps volunteer experience in Zambia, Africa is that there is a hierarchy that must exist in order for a society to function properly. This hierarchy is, God, tribe, and land. Or, in the context of the United States of America, God, Nation, and land.

Within the village, every member has a role to play, making their individual sacrifice. Mothers are coming home with firewood on their head, and babies on their back. Men are building churches and homes. Boys are building bricks with sand and mud. The girls are sweeping the floors, and preparing food for the day. As everybody makes their individual sacrifice, everybody has a role to play, maintaining and creating a flourishing society.

In every village, I experienced in Zambia, remote, villages, off the dirt path, off the grid, there is a church at the center of every community. At the center of this church, there is an altar, where sacrifices made, reminding the community of the archetype, the hero, to aspire to become like, Jesus. Let us simply consider Jesus as a teacher, a philosopher, or an archetype.

The teachings that Jesus laid out for us, that we can now learn from through the New Testament of the Bible, give us a foundation for how to live our every day lives. One of these teachings or sermons that have a significant impact on my personal life is the sermon on the mount. I will never forget how critical learning about the beatitudes were and the teachings from the sermon on the mount while I was a young boy in Catholic school. We spent so much time learning about these, these teachings, memorizing them, reciting them, and diving deeper into their meaning.

I remember one teaching in particular being to turn the other cheek. I believe this notion to be extremely wise, and something that I have utilized in my personal life.

while living in Jericho, and volunteering there, with a Palestinian family, I encountered one young man, who met me with aggression. I was photographing a group of young men, just hanging out, and enjoying the day. However, one man in particular, decided that he wanted to get aggressive with me, to stunt on me, in front of his friends, by ripping the camera from my neck, breaking the strap. I simply did not respond, looked him in the face, and turned the other way. The elders in the community scolded him, and disciplined him. I then returned to my

friend Mohammed's house, who mended my camera strap, and I went back out there once again to continue making photographs., this unfamiliar place, I made the right decision. If I were to meet this man with retaliation, who knows what could've been the outcome? The other man could've started to gang up with me, and see me as a threat. However, respond, and simply turn the other cheek left this chaotic situation unscathed.

Sacrifice and community

When I arrived in my village in Zambia, my host, father presented a goat, hanging from a tree, for me to slaughter. He gave me a knife, I slaughter the goat, and we feast it all week. This is the ultimate sacrifice, a flesh, Coming together as a family, to feast. I remember my time in Jericho, during eat, aha, or the day of sacrifice. I heard the cries and smell the stench of blood from sheep that were being slaughtered throughout the streets. Everybody in the community, fast all day, making this sacrifice,, comes together as one family, one tribe, Feast in the evening. these experiences remind me of the importance of sacrifice and how it brings community together.

Generation

When I consider the word generation, I consider the etymology first and foremost.

The word "generation" has its roots in the Latin term "generatio," which comes from "generare," meaning "to beget" or "to create."

I was born in 1996. I suppose I fall in between millennials and generation Z, but feel as though it's wise for me to simply identify with generation Z. I grew up in Philadelphia, where I was born in race, in a Catholic family. I attended Catholic school from grades pre-K to grade 8 and had a great childhood and upbringing overall. I spent my days in the summer, biking through the Wissahickon forest with friends, skateboarding in the streets, practicing basketball, or playing video games

like Crash Bandicoot and Spyro on the PlayStation after swimming with my friends in the pool. We had a strict structure in school, wearing a uniform, studying religion, mathematics, science, and learning about history, but also had time for making art, perform in plays, make music, learning to sing and play instruments, and go on field trips to places like the Philadelphia Zoo or various science centers like the Franklin Institute. Every morning we would say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag and say the “Our Father” prayer as a class.

To be honest, the more that I contemplate childhood, and growing up in a Catholic school, it was probably the greatest thing I can recall in my memory. I feel like when I transitioned to a public high school, it was like opening up the gates of hell, to chaos, which is reality, the real world, and I guess that’s inevitable. I guess the portal to chaos opened up a little bit later in my life than most people of generation Z.

When I consider the portal chaos, I think about the Internet, the iPhone, and technology in general. I remember going to GameStop, putting my face up to the glass window of the shelves inside, to pick out a new Game Boy cartridge, for my Game Boy advance, the one that you had to attach a light to it, just so you could see the screen. In the early 2000s in school, we learned a programming language called “Logo” which allowed us to move a turtle around our screens, making shapes, and give directions through basic commands and codes. I think it was around 2004 when the razor flip phone came out, and everybody started to get into text messaging, phone calls, etc. around the time we were 10 or 11 years old. I still remember preferring picto chat on my Nintendo DS, because you could at least draw funny pictures and send them to people near you. With the flip phone, you had to click 1 million times just to send one word, and I really did not enjoy it. We mostly got the phones for safety, for emergencies, such as when I would ride my bike 50 miles away, get a flat tire, and have to call my mom to pick me up .

I’ll never forget when I first saw pr0n. I think I was around this age when the phones came out, around 10 or 11. I was probably in fourth grade. I remember because we went from the first floor of school to the second floor. This is around the time when I first traveled abroad, leaving the country to visit Italy. I mostly hung out with eighth graders at the time, from other schools in my neighborhood, just older students in general, because they were better at skateboarding, and can show me how to Ollie and do new tricks. Around this time, Xbox live first came out for the original Xbox, and I would play halo 2 with my neighbors on summer days.

In between pregame lobbies, they would go on the computer, on random websites like funnyjunk.com, just looking at memes and stuff, but it was there that random pr0n would pop up, woman, models, nude pictures, etc. I'm sure this is something that happens through all of the generations come up a particularly for generation Z, it was much more accessible, just right there, so easy to get to.

Why is this relevant and why does this matter?

I think the Internet is great, as knowledge becomes much more attainable to people, as the information is free, especially now with the advent of artificial intelligence. However, when I contemplate the way in which it corrupts the youth, at such young ages, exposing an entire generation to degenerate culture, there's bound to be long lasting effects. just think of social media, such as Instagram. To me this is becoming like pr0n, or prostitution, where people sell their souls, and their bodies. The more scandalous, more revealing you are in your photos, the more sexy, ultimately the more like you will get. I believe this to be a big problem and we will see this effect generation Z at scale.

So what is the problem with our generation?

I believe the number one problem with our current generation is the lack of production. When I consider production, I consider the meaning of generation, to beget children. We have replaced our biological function of sex, to produce children, with the pursuit of pleasure, and casual sex. We are replacing the potential future generation, with a generation of dog ownership.

I believe that we have become the generation that consumes the most, at an all-time high, throughout all of history itself. We have unlimited yummy food options, Uber eats, robot dogs, that can wipe your butt and deliver food for you, Netflix, Amazon, shopping, malls, etc. While it's very easy for me to see the upside of things such as Amazon prime, and the way that we can have goods deliver to us essentially it instantaneously, I believe this has a long-term negative effect on humanity as a whole. it's very much easier to be a consumer than it is to be a producer. It's more comfortable to sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.

However, what if we are the show? What if we are merely here, actors upon a stage, in a divine comedy, performing for the gods?

Perhaps we should then not take life so seriously, and simply laugh in the face of chaos.