

The Way It Really Is

How a Master's of Photography Lecture at the National Geographic Inspired This Author to Enter the Washington National Cathedral's First-Ever Photography Contest

By **MARK SINCEVICH**

The familiar whirl of the auto-advancer told me that my 35th frame captured the intricate hand-wrought iron handle I had been focusing on in black and white. It's shape, the circle, was simple yet powerful. It was attached to a gothic door made of dark and weathered wood. The door was interspersed with iron rivets and had two sets of hand-wrought hinges extending around to the outside, each ending in a long and tightly swirling fleur d' leis.

I was peaceful and centered in this cathedral courtyard, but my fingers were stinging and starting to feel numb. The weather report called for morning fog warnings on this gray and cold day. However, behind this gray veil, I saw an inspirational glow, the kind of light that called me to take photographs, the kind of photographs that Sam takes. His words echoed in my head, "Bad weather makes for good photographs."

I moved around to the west wing of the cathedral studying the religious inscriptions, looking up toward the high bell towers and the flying buttresses. As I rounded the corner, I noticed an open door that led off into a walkway with a green courtyard beyond. In front of the door was a thick and heavy light fixture, the likes of which are seen in European Castles. I put my camera with its zoom lens over my right shoulder, and climbed up onto the wall that was on the other side of a small patio in front of this scene.

I inched ever closer for the best possible view. For safety, I gripped the top of the stone wall with my left hand. The tips of my shoes held me in place below. This meant that I had to take my 36th picture with my right hand only. I tried my best to steady myself while worrying about the potential headlines of "unconscious photographer revived by priest," or "pigeon found crushed under photograph-

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er." I was careful to keep the light fixture in the upper left of the picture, the doorway in the center, and then the green courtyard with its decorative fountain in the lower right of the picture. Sam's advice reassured me, "remember the 'S' curve." Another click and I had captured that one too.

I waited to hear the automatic mechanism rewind all of the pictures that I had taken over the past hour. As small flocks of gray birds swirled overhead, their color matching the stone of the cathedral, I heard only silence from my camera. I still had one more picture to take. Sometimes I get lucky and get to shoot this extra frame, number 37. Perhaps this last one might be the contest winner. It was another reason why I woke up so early.

I turned my black and worn National Geographic ball cap backwards on my head as I sat down on the damp and cold mulch next to a small dogwood tree. I could feel the moisture on the ground soak into my clothing. I looked up to see an extra-long aluminum ladder positioned

near my feet and extending skyward. It seemed as if the faithful could climb on it and ascend into Heaven. Sam had said, "look for strong diagonals." This angled ladder coupled with the hard edges of the cathedral's blocks of stone extending both horizontally and vertically fit well into his advice.

I was ready to click the last frame, but I decided to lie on the ground instead. Sam had also said, "low angle, full impact." I knew that as soon as my back hit the ground, I would need a complete change of clothing. I held my breath as my heart beat rapidly. I captured this last image, not sure if it was centered properly. All at once my camera whined and whirled giving away my position, the frames retreating back into their metal canister. A few surprised tourists glanced over in my direction.

As I walked back to my car, it started to rain. The drops stayed in place on my windshield as the sun failed to make its exact presence known. Otherwise, I would have been able to use Sam's last piece of advice, "always keep the sun at your back." But, I couldn't tell for the life of me where the light came from, the fog was so heavy.

Sam's father told him that, "no matter what profession you pick, you always need to do better than good." It seems that Sam has been doing better than good ever since he took his first picture at age eight. Sam's father was also a photographer and they would often go on father and son outings, sometimes without a camera. Sam's father taught him what Dorothea Lange espoused, "the camera teaches people to see without a camera." This was easy for him to say as I kept admiring yet another picture in this Master's of Photography Lecture at the National Geographic Society on November 12th. I was captivated by his rich storytelling, his keen sense of humor and his amazing images.

Sam Abell said that the first picture that mattered to somebody else other than himself was of his father at a train station on a cold and snowy morning in 1960. It won an honorable mention in a Kodak National

Photography Contest. That same year, Sam heard Albert Moldvay speak. Albert was a staff photographer for the National Geographic Society. The only thing Sam seemed to remember from the lecture was the Society's apparent irrelevance, but Sam knew that the Society did matter. He knew that, "the rainforests matter, the deserts matter, and the poles matter."

Sam continued his interest in photography at Sylvania high school in western Ohio where he was both editor and photographer of his high school yearbook. There his journalism teacher, Fred Marlow said, "Sam,



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tomorrow everyone will see the yearbook, but your eye will find all of the mistakes. Learn from them, but don't tell other people about them." Sam had a rare gift. He seemed to be able to take the best advice from the mentors in his life, and apply it going forward.

He went to college at the University of Kentucky with the same drive and enthusiasm that he had in high school. He gravitated toward the student newspaper and yearbook which meant that he graduated in six years and not the traditional four. Sam was more concerned about getting the yearbook out 'right' than in graduating on time! In 1966, the yearbook staff released the regular yearbook and a second book, a compendium dedicated to progressive photography. Perhaps this was Sam's response to the 'predictability' of a college yearbook.

The influence of that 1960 National Geographic lecture never left him and he was determined to secure a summer internship

with the National Geographic Society upon his graduation from college. With this intention, he took off on self-imposed color photography assignment to South America. Sam claims to have taken some unforgettable pictures but the only problem was that no one else ever saw them. The entire collection was lost in the mail, because he had used a water-based ink to address the package to the Geographic. However, Sam's persistence, his outstanding work on his college yearbook, and a part-time photography job for the Rural Electric Administration studying the extreme poverty of eastern Kentucky, landed him a summer internship at the Society in the Summer of 1966.

One of the images that helped him get his internship was a black and white photograph of two dirty and neglected children framed on the bottom by the passenger side car door. He was shocked by the extreme poverty right in his backyard. He felt disconnected from these people of Kentucky and took most of his pictures for the Rural Electric Administration through the car window. Sam said, "there are paths in the photographic life, and this was not one taken by me (to get out of the car and be with the people)." I think he has regretted this ever since.

On his way to Washington, DC, a slight detour to the Museum of Modern Art in New York forever changed his view of the National Geographic. He met with the assistant curator of Photography, Peter Bavel. Sam said that they spoke about photography and it was one of the most seminal conversations in his entire life. Sam was led into a back office where he asked Peter, "What do you think of Life Magazine, Look Magazine and National Geographic?" There was an uncomfortable pause and Peter said, "Oh, you want to be one of 'those' photographers." It was if those magazines didn't employ 'real' photographers. In an attempt to steer Sam towards 'real' photography, Peter gave Sam a book called, "American Photographs" by Walker Evans.

Now, Sam was more determined than ever to prove that being a photographer for the National Geographic Society was more than anyone could imagine. And he had a solid

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base on which to build his desires. His parents were both teachers and while his mother gave him an appreciation for languages and culture, his father continued to instill in him a sense of place through geography and a continuing instruction in photography. In addition, he was surrounded by his parent's extensive library and a large world map feeding his expanding appetite for knowledge and a desire to see the world.

Before Sam was able to work for the National Geographic full-time, he took a teaching position at Rogers High School in western Ohio. According to Greg Magruder, who is the Director of Public Programs and Events at the Geographic, Sam is remembered for skateboarding down the hallways and identifying more with the students than with the other teachers. Greg was Sam's student back in 1969 and now Greg introduced Sam to the audience. Yet another circular theme.

As more impressive images flashed on the screen, Sam conveyed to everyone in the audience that he always feels a simple eloquence each and every day. Perhaps that is why to this day that he keeps a photographic diary of his life. He carries a personal camera loaded with black and white film at all times. He said that he never wants to lose this way of seeing the world (this beauty), especially since he takes most of his professional pictures in color. For him photography is direct and simple and these themes keep recurring like waves on the shoreline, appearing and then receding, only to reappear again.

This simplicity was put to the test on his first assignment in Newfoundland during 1970. He was a new staff photographer at the Geographic and felt that he was sent there because, 'nothing ever happens.' Perhaps it was a test by Robert Gilka, the only man to ever hire him at the Geographic, to see if Sam could find something simple, yet powerful, in a winter wilderness that seemed to go on forever. Sam slept in his car most days and drove all night to be at the right place and at the right time to capture 'the picture.' On this assignment, he met with Christopher Pratt, now Canada's most famous painter. Pratt chastised the magazine for being too

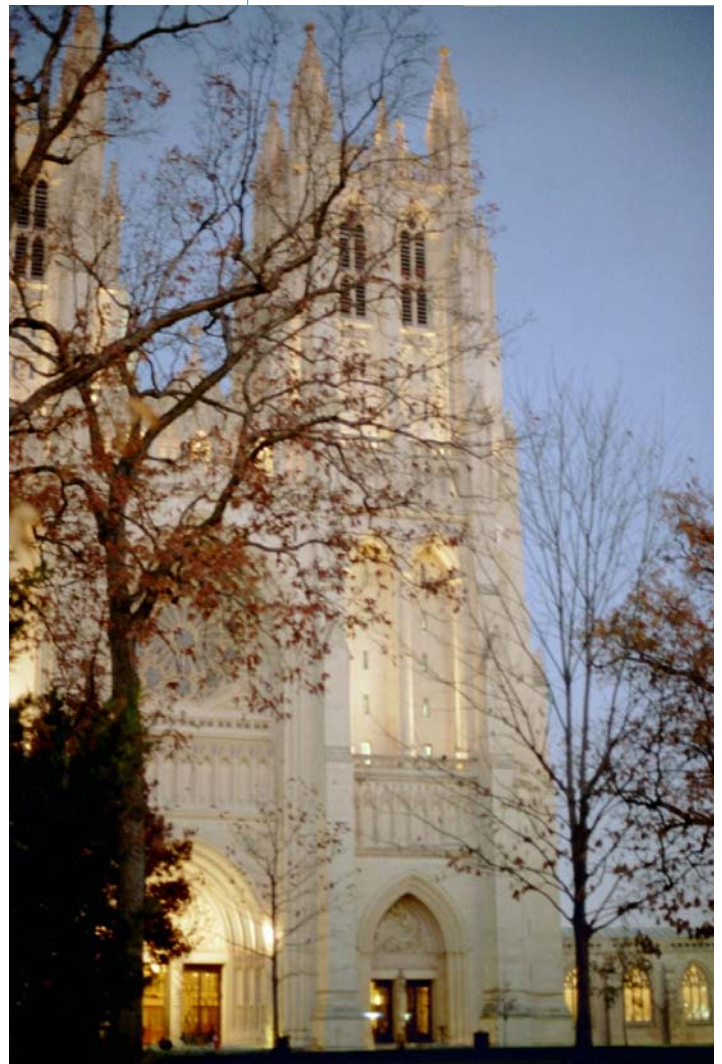
soft on the environment. Since Sam holds the Geographic in such high regard, this criticism bounced off of him like rain on a car windshield.

Once Sam told Pratt that he had purchased one of his paintings, Pratt opened up like a jar of potpourri and showed him his true love of art. In Pratt's studio, Sam was able to 'breathe' the pure art all around him. He held in-depth discussions with Pratt on the subjects of color, shape, light and form, which only added to his understanding of photography. Sam said that in Newfoundland, he learned to think and to see, and he continued to keep his diary of black and white photos. But a constant battle was going on inside of him between color and black and white photography, "which one was the more meaningful, truthful and revealing?" It is a struggle that continues to this day.

After Sam finished his first assignment, he received a cable from Albert Moldvay that read, "Good sharp shooting. A tip of the hat." This comment was in response to Sam's simple and powerful photographs from Newfoundland. In ten years, he went from a member of Albert's audience to a member of his peer group. The circular theme in his life continued to grow, but as good as he felt with Albert's comment, the exact opposite feeling must have inhabited his very core after all 19 cameras and film were stolen from his motel room in Montana during his second assignment.

Even though he was temporarily replaced by another Society photographer in Montana, he went on to photograph people and places all over the world. Remembering one assignment, there was sadness in his voice when he spoke of his weeks in the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. He felt as if he helped speed up the loss of the native culture just by being there. He showed a photograph of their chief, passed out drunk in the largest city. It may not be pretty or what people want, but Sam always made sure that he was doing it the right way, portraying it honest and simple. The way it really is.

Life on the road is often lonely. It might have been in Venice where he met his wife who was also working for the Geographic, Denise Austin. They were secretly married for two hours in 1977, unlike Sam's parents who had to be secretly married for two years in order for them to both work as teachers in



trying to convey simplicity and grandeur

the same school district. Sam was never lonely on the road after that. Denise traveled with Sam for 20 years on all his assignments around the world. It sounds more like a 20 year honeymoon and Sam often said that some of his best friends have been made while working on assignment.

However, in 1998, tragedy struck. His travel companion and wife was diagnosed with Ovarian Cancer and his father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. Having just one of these sudden occurrences would test most people, but Sam's great sense of humor and his photographic career that he describes as, "the greatest profession on earth," gave him a solid foundation that helped hold him together through this difficult period. The good news is that his wife's cancer is in remission, but the bad news is that his father is getting worse, to the point where he no longer recognizes his own son.

Perhaps it was Sam's confidence that his wife was getting better that propelled him to take on one of his last National Geographic assignments with the Executive Editor of the magazine, Robert Poole. They were assigned to the Japanese Imperial Palace and spent the better part of a year there without ever seeing the Emperor, a main part of the story. They saw his footprints, where he might have stood or even what he might have touched, but they kept coming up empty.

Since he had plenty of free time, he went to speak with the Palace Zen Archery Master. Sam said it was impressive to watch the Zen Master hit the target. He was intrigued and asked what the essence of Zen really is? With a delightful smile on his face, the Zen Master responded, "Don't aim, forget the target and concentrate on form. Forget the target, if the form is correct, then the arrow will find its' target. This is the essence of Zen." As Sam spoke these words, tears began to flow as if the arrow of his conversation found the core meaning of life for me. And isn't this what Sam's father had been teaching him all along, to see without the camera, to concentrate on form, only to be rewarded by incredible photographs?

On the same assignment, he also decided to

cover the Master Royal Cormorant Fisherman. This is a man who together with his team catches fresh cormorants, a type of fish, and puts them on a speed train to the Emperor, arriving within hours. Sam befriended the Master and was invited to go fishing. It is entirely possible that no one from outside the Imperial Palace had ever been invited to do something this unique and so closed to the public. Before Sam was ready to step into the boat, the Master was approached by two Imperial Policemen in plain clothes suits looking more like FBI agents than royal dignitaries. They tried to cancel Sam's trip, but a strange thing hap-



... "Certain things matter every day, the paramount of which is light." - Sam Abell

pened. After a brief conversation, the Imperial Policemen left. When Sam asked the Master why this was so, he said, "I told them that I had invited you to fish, and when they said that wasn't possible, I reminded them that I gave you my word." This touched Sam deeply since he operates in much the same fashion, 'by your word and on your honor.'

Sam's simplicity over the year taught him much about Japanese Imperial Life, but still he hadn't seen the main attraction, the Emperor himself. Toward the end of the year and nearly burned out with waiting in his room of rice paper panels and tatami mats, he was told to come at once. He was led to a garden path where the Emperor had just walked in the opposite direction. Sam was intrigued and decided to follow at a safe distance.

Suddenly, the Emperor of Japan appeared out of nowhere right in front of him. The Emperor came closer and said, "Mr. Sam

Abell is everything all right?" Sam wishes he could have said, "Nothing has been right for the entire year," but he exchanged pleasantries and shook the extended hand of the Emperor. Sam said that if he ever had a single meaningful moment in his life, he would retire. Shaking hands with the Emperor of Japan certainly qualifies! Even though Sam never got a picture of the Emperor, he was able to capture timeless images of the Imperial Palace for the Geographic article, "Life Inside the Imperial Palace" in 2000.

His timeless images are achieved without filters because he always wants to do straightforward and simple photography. As Sam puts it, "It's the what you see is what you get" photo without special effects. He feels that if photographers are faithful to photography, they will take the picture, but not force it. He said, "Certain things matter every day, the paramount of which is light, but light isn't the most important part. The most important thing is to grow as a photographer."

This desire to grow, the feeling that I need to always be better than the day before, inspired me to head back to the cathedral to take four more rolls of color film just as the autumn sun was setting. It had been a brilliant blue day with only a hint of cloud cover in the sky. As the sun began to ride the tops of the apartment buildings across the street, the gray stone of the cathedral took on a pinkish hue that caused the building to leap from its gothic black and white roots to the 21st century in dazzling color. I quickly parked my car before I lost the moment.

I took pictures with angles, I lay on the ground for maximum impact, and I made sure that I had the sun at my back the entire time. The only thing that mattered to me was my creativity and my desire to express the beauty of the cathedral in a unique way. I thought about my form and didn't think of the contest or of the final photographs. I felt settled, and this is the same feeling that Sam said that he felt when he took on an assignment to photograph cyclones. The two times that he tried to capture images of cyclones were the scariest moments of his life. Being in the simultaneous presence of beauty and

danger held him in silence and in reverence. He said that the only thing that allowed him to maintain his composure was his desire to take pictures, a trained habit that has settled him ever since he was eight years old. This was the feeling that I had at the cathedral. It was the feeling that I was doing the right thing too by taking pictures. I was in a peaceful place where time stopped.

Sam's latest book is called, "The Photographic Life" which takes the reader from life, to work, to art. His book has themes of duality, of color as time passes, of truth, fiction and honesty, and in the interest of the life behind things. It is a way to show that the things he took pictures of had a life worth seeing. On the cover of the book, there is an early self-portrait of Sam and his father. His father taught him quite a bit about photography.

Sam has been a National Geographic photographer for 32 years and in that time he must have accumulated hundreds of thousands of images. One year Sam said that he took 25,000 images and the Society only used eight photographs! As I flip through my 136 photographs of the Cathedral with the intention of picking only three, my job of trying to convey simplicity and grandeur doesn't seem that difficult in comparison. However, Sam said that the only unfortunate thing about capturing an image is, "when a photograph is published, it gains a life but it loses the life of where it came from."

Sam and his wife are going to be traveling throughout America trying to preserve the life of where American photographs come from in a book called, "Re-imaging America." They had originally collaborated on an earlier book called, "Seeing Gardens." Sam said his new book will not only be a dedication to his friend, Stephen Ambrose, but it will be a book in response to Peter Banelle from 1967 and to the Walker Evans book "American Photographs." It seems that Sam never forgot that original challenge, so he is releasing this book showing what magnificence a simple and honest photographer can create.



Sam ended the lecture with a photograph taken in Newfoundland on his first assignment of a road going off into the distance, perhaps into infinity. He said, "what endless options there are out there, the open road, the photographic life." As Sam finished his lecture, I walked out into the hallway, thinking about one of the pieces of advice that Sam mentioned, "when you walk toward a situation, the potential is there. Photographs come from contemplation. Photographs sort it out and they have meaning. Even in the gray light, everything can be seen." As I go through my images of the cathedral, preparing my contest entries, I think of this advice. I know that I had been pulled to take pictures of the cathedral. The evening setting sun at the cathedral allowed the potential to be there. I just concentrated on my form and let it happen.

A copy of the book, "The Photographic Life" was for sale after the lecture and Sam Abell and his co-author, Leah Bendavid-Val, were going to be there to sign the book. At first I didn't want to stay and I motioned to my wife that we ought to be leaving. After taking two steps toward the exit, I turned suddenly and said to my wife, "I need to buy his book and get him to sign it. Besides, it is my birthday!" I knew I didn't just want to say hello and only get his signature, so I tried to think of something clever to say. The line moved slowly and before I had formed an intelligent response, I was right in front of him. He smiled at me, and his eyes conveyed a calmness and the depth of an artist. I blurted out, "which photograph in your book would help make me a better photographer?" Sam looked over at Leah as he flipped the pages. He said to Leah, "well this is my favorite one, right?" She quickly nodded in agreement.

Sam had turned to page 106 that showed four slides from July 1970 of two fisherman at work in Newfoundland. He wrote, "For Mark - Nearby are timeless scenes; may you see them. Sam Abell, November 12, 2002." According to the inscription in the book, they are of a father and son fishing team. Sam felt that there was no place for a photographer that day, but the fishermen somehow understood that he was working as hard as they were. Sam said, "we were both seeking something." And so am I.

simple!

Simple & Straightforward
Photographic Advice
By SAM ABELL



- (1) *Bad Weather Makes for Good Photographs*
- (2) *Remember the 'S' Curve*
- (3) *Look for Strong Diagonals*
- (4) *Low Angle, Full Impact*
- (5) *Always Keep the Sun at Your Back*
- (6) *Certain Things Matter Every Day, the Paramount of Which is Light*
- (7) *When You Walk Toward a Situation, the Potential is There*
- (8) *Photographs Come from Contemplation*
- (9) *The Most Important Thing is To Grow as a Photographer*