

Seeing at the Beach

by Ray Guillette, MNEC

On a beach somewhere on the coast of Rhode Island... crowded on a hot July day... the sun warms us, but not the water. The sand is bright and soft, sloping quickly to the ocean's edge. The surf is up and loud, making white frothy patterns in the turquoise water. Colors and sounds are everywhere. Brightly suited children play with a delightful energy, as constant as the surf. Above it all is a soft blue cloudless sky.

Taking in all this sensory information, it seems that photography, or any visual art, has some basic limitations. Here at the beach, the light and colors are striking, but the un-seeables take over the sensory lead after time makes the visions familiar. The cool, intermittent breeze becomes the dominant sensation. Next are sounds... people, especially children and their yelps of joy... and the roaring, persistent tumble of the waves, the base of this beach.

By creating an image, we hope to convey a sense of place, a feeling in the viewer of being there. Perhaps this all important feeling is produced as much or more by the un-seeables as by the graphics in the image. Perhaps the image is but a vessel to transport "being there" at the beach by recalling memories of cool breezes, children's joy, and crashing waves. Perhaps a photographic image communicates by making unseen associations in the mind, not the eyes, of the viewer. The image, "seen" in this light, becomes a great gift.

A graphic image has the potential to be powerful and moving, even if the ultimate understanding is found in the mind of the viewer. The photographer must not only compose and expose an image. He must first feel something, want to communicate it, and have the skills to do just that, visually. The skills can be taught and learned.

Looking at a scene can evoke strong, unique feelings. We call this inspiration, as universal a human experience as creativity. Inspiration is a natural phenomenon; a gasp, a widening of the eyelids, a connection with something greater than ourselves. It may arise instantly, or it may take time to peel away the layers of our lives to find it.

By looking and seeing we give ourselves time to be inspired. These are basic visual skills, the foundation of our art. They are not inherited traits, but are skills we get better at the more we practice them. A photographer never stops looking. We ask ourselves questions. "What brought me here? What attracts me to this place? Is there something else here I didn't expect to see?"

It does take time to see, at the beach or anywhere. Give yourself the gift of time. Annie Dillard wrote in her book, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", "Spend the day, you can't take it with you". 📷