

# Photojournalism as Psychologically Aware Seeing

7 March 2010 | By Paul | [paul@mindparts.org](mailto:paul@mindparts.org)



There has been a push from inside over the past couple years to do more "meaningful photography." What I mean by "meaningful" is work that speaks to my own experiences more fully. Put another way, I want to do photography that is psychologically aware.

I got interested in photography around the time my kids were born; that was more than a decade ago. And since the kids were the focus for so many years, photography had been mostly about happiness and documenting happiness.

It didn't take me long to realize that photography was about seeing and not just looking. For someone who had lived a life based on dissociation, this was a real breakthrough and insight for me; a small first step in healing and becoming aware.

I have developed what was a small hobby into something a bit larger. I do some portrait work professionally, but my main interest has been photojournalism and sports which I shoot for local news outlets. Portrait work is intensely personal and requires a huge amount of "presence," engagement with the subjects, and directing. Sometimes I am simply not able to do that, which poses a problem if people have made appointments with me. So, I tend to minimize those kinds of assignments now. I sometimes become

scared and forget all my skills and the images come out quite lousy, at least by my standards. It's too unpredictable, because sometimes I can be perfectly "on" and sometimes I can be "not at all there."

Photojournalism, in contrast, is a style of photography that is more detached and a bit less personal, but one could argue has a larger payoff because the images look spontaneous. The idea behind a photojournalism style of photography is that you become an impartial observer and document the details of the event. Mostly, the goal is to document all the scales of detail that you "see", from those that most everyone would recognize as the describing the event to those small elements that nobody really pays any attention to (e.g., the little kids poking their heads out from under the Bride and Groom's head table). It is really the only way to shoot live sports or any event where there are people going about their business.

Photojournalism is a microcosm of what healing from dissociation is all about. To see an event photographically, you must be prepared to do it from an "all of you" perspective. From this whole perspective, you can capture not only the range of length scales (from macro to micro) but also the range of human emotions. Sports is one great example, because there is always "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." Another is a wedding. And a third is any news event.

The photograph above was taken at a local elementary school's art show. I took many real-life people pictures at this event. But as I was looking at some of the art on display done by children, I stumbled upon this scene. In a self-portrait of a boy, I saw the reflection of other framed artwork several feet away. There were rows of art on display, and if I had to do this over again, I would have swapped out the reflected images that weren't self-portraits with ones that were. One of the tricks of photojournalism is that if you can unobtrusively change the scene, you assume you have the authority to do so, granted to you by your press badge, and just do it.

The obvious composition of this image would have been to focus on the boy, and the reflected images would blur. But that's what you see with your eyes and that would be boring. That image would scream "amateur mistake" because who would want reflected images in the background? Since there was no way to remove the reflections from the fluorescent lights, I had to think about it in a different way and see beyond the obvious.

This is an image I would never had been able to make just a few years ago. I took me a while to get the meaning of what the reflections were telling me, for my eyes did not see this interpretation. Once I did, I composed the frame with the boy and the green background, focussed on the reflected images and opened the aperture to wide open at f/2.8, knowing that would blur the boy's face. Then, of course, the other trick to photojournalism is to not be shy to shoot because with digital, images are essentially free. So, I fired off about 30 other frames with various compositions and exposures. Then later I can decide which image works best.

There are multiple meanings behind this image. On one level, it could say that nobody really sees the boy as he is (i.e., he's a blur). On another, it could say that behind the boy is a complex world with various compartments and other selves.

What does this image say to you?

For those who are interested, there are some excellent books on photographic "seeing" and composition. They are:

- Andreas Feininger, *Principles of Composition in Photography* (1972, not in print so you would most likely find it at a local library)
- Michael Freeman, *The Photographer's Eye* (2007)
- Freeman Patterson, *Photography and the Art of Seeing* (1985, but updated in a 2004 edition)
- Bryan Peterson, *Learning to See Creatively* (1988, but updated in a 2003 edition)
- Henry Poore, *Pictorial Composition in Art* (1976 and still in print)

For other psychologically meaningful photographs on Mind Parts, see my [Photography Gallery](#).