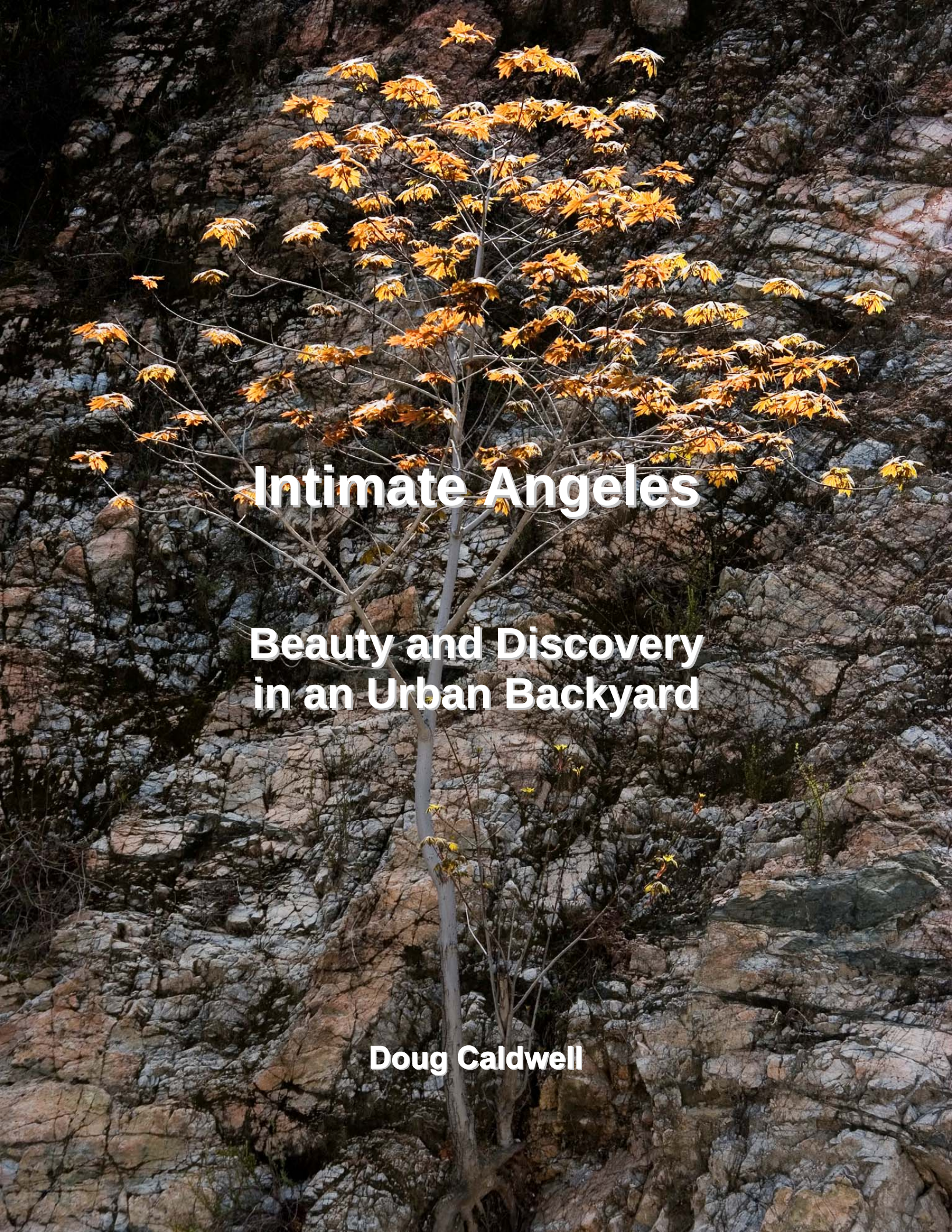


A photograph of a tree with vibrant orange autumn leaves growing against a dark, textured rock wall. The tree's trunk is light-colored and slender, extending vertically through the center of the frame. The leaves are concentrated in the upper half, creating a bright contrast with the dark background. The rock wall is composed of various shades of grey, brown, and black, with visible cracks and crevices.

Intimate Angeles

**Beauty and Discovery
in an Urban Backyard**

Doug Caldwell

Foreword

The online class, “Portfolio Development” with William Neill, was a birthday gift from my beloved wife, Chery Glaser, and my parents. Chery and I have admired Bill’s work since we first saw it at the Ansel Adams Gallery in Yosemite Valley, and had thought that it would be great for me to take a workshop from him. Chery found this class. To her, the class content was almost irrelevant; it was being taught by Bill.

This was a Level 4 of 7 class listed as “Professional Development”, and there seemed to be an assumption that students already had a relatively large body of work that would serve as a starting point. Having returned to photography as a hobby less than a year ago after a fifteen-plus-year hiatus and having started working with nature as a theme only in that time, I was a tad concerned. But it was only eight weeks long, online, and not graded. Nothing except my ego was riding on my performance in the class. How hard could it be?

For some of us, difficulty is not imposed externally. It comes from some deep-seated desire to excel at whatever we endeavor. External inputs simply stimulate the beast within. And, sometimes, such inputs can unexpectedly be revealed to be catalysts for finding answers long-sought or for making changes long-delayed.

For many reasons, I have been seeking answers to some deep questions and searching for how to effect some changes in my professional life. I think I have learned quite a lot about portfolio development from Bill. More importantly, the class has served as a catalyst for exploring nature, my career, and my life. The crossover has been every bit as interesting and educational as the intended purpose of the class.

The final assignment for the class was to create a portfolio on the theme I’d chosen – “Intimate Angeles” – with a particular audience in mind. Although I’ve taken immense pleasure in creating the images, it seemed contrived to pretend that I was creating a portfolio that I might present in the vein of showing off my pictures. In part, this is because I don’t yet feel that the portfolio is good enough for that. In part, I’ve realized that a collection of pictures doesn’t adequately convey what I want to share with others – or capture for myself.

So this is something more than a portfolio of pictures. I want to tell some stories, and it seemed that a collection of short essays would do more justice to the diverse collection of thoughts than trying to force this into some other format. I chose the subtitle “Beauty and Discovery in an Urban Backyard” to focus my photographic efforts. As the reader will see, the “discoveries” range far beyond the natural artifacts found in the San Gabriel Mountains.

My audience is some photographers and some friends. It is also for myself, capturing in a sort of a time capsule a retroactive diary of the last eight weeks of self-discovery. This is not so much a portfolio of photography as it is a portfolio of thought. I hope you enjoy it.

Doug Caldwell
Glendale, Calif.
June 8, 2006

Why Do You Want To Be Good?

I bought my first digital SLR camera, a Canon EOS 20D, almost exactly a year ago, just before Chery and I took a long weekend in Yosemite. In October, I took my first-ever photo workshop, a weekend in the Great Smokey Mountains with Will Clay. Three weeks later, Chery and I went to San Miguel de Allende in central Mexico. I had arranged in advance to get some photography tutoring from Robert de Gast. In an introductory chat over coffee, I presented him with half a dozen photos that represented my style – an early portfolio.



Now, these were the same pictures that I'd shown Will Clay to establish a baseline for his class. His responses included, "This picture would be stronger if the waterfall weren't so centered" and, "If this tree branch [above Bridalveil Falls] is intentional, you need more of it in the picture to keep from looking like it's a mistake." Clay and de Gast are about the same age; both are established, book-published and *National Geographic*-published photographers. When I presented the pictures to de Gast, I expected a similar style of critique.

What I didn't expect was, "So, what's the problem?" I replied, "Well, I want to be good." "Why do you want to be good?" I had no answer.

His seemingly simple question stumped me for five months. And it wasn't that I didn't try. It gently but constantly nagged at me. Riding my bike one day, I thought, "So, why do I race? Why do I want to win?" It got worse. When Chery and I went up to Mammoth in March, I found myself wondering why I was pushing myself to ski better. I wasn't ever going to compete. Being better would have no particular impact on the rest of my life. In fact, trying to be "better" that day was probably detracting from simply enjoying the day. As I stood atop the mountain, looking far north toward Mono Lake and west toward Half Dome, I realized that I just wanted simply to *be* with the Mountain. Not on it, with it. I stopped blazing down the ski runs, instead picking the longest cross-mountain paths I could to

maximize my time among the trees. I found myself going beyond the question of “Why be good?” to “Why do we do anything?”

The first class assignment for Portfolio Development was “Find Your Focus”. That Saturday, Chery and I went hunting for poppies in the Antelope Valley. I kept feeling that I was taking pictures for a future time in which the whole valley had been developed and no one knew what had been lost. At the same time, I struggled with the assignment and the question of what I wanted to accomplish.

The next day, I went up into the Angeles and worked a couple of hours, thinking about the simple things I was photographing and why. There, I had an epiphany. With respect to nature, I want my pictures to convey what I value, often with a sense of discovery. I want others to share my emotions and see that value, so that nature and wild places will be preserved.

Coming down Angeles Crest Highway, I discovered this golden bigleaf maple, top-lit against shadowed rock.



I realized that part of me is a storyteller. I’ve always annotated my pictures, often telling both the technical “how” and the story of “why” I took the picture. That I’ve chosen to write this series of essays is consistent with a need to reach out to others – using storytelling as a way of sharing my joy of discovery and my appreciation of special things.

So I’m finally able to answer de Gast’s question concretely: I want to be a good photographer so that I can tell good stories. I want to master the language of photography so that I can tell interesting, compelling stories and so that I can convey my emotional connections with nature. And this probably summarizes why Bill’s images have appealed to me so strongly and why I wanted to learn from him.

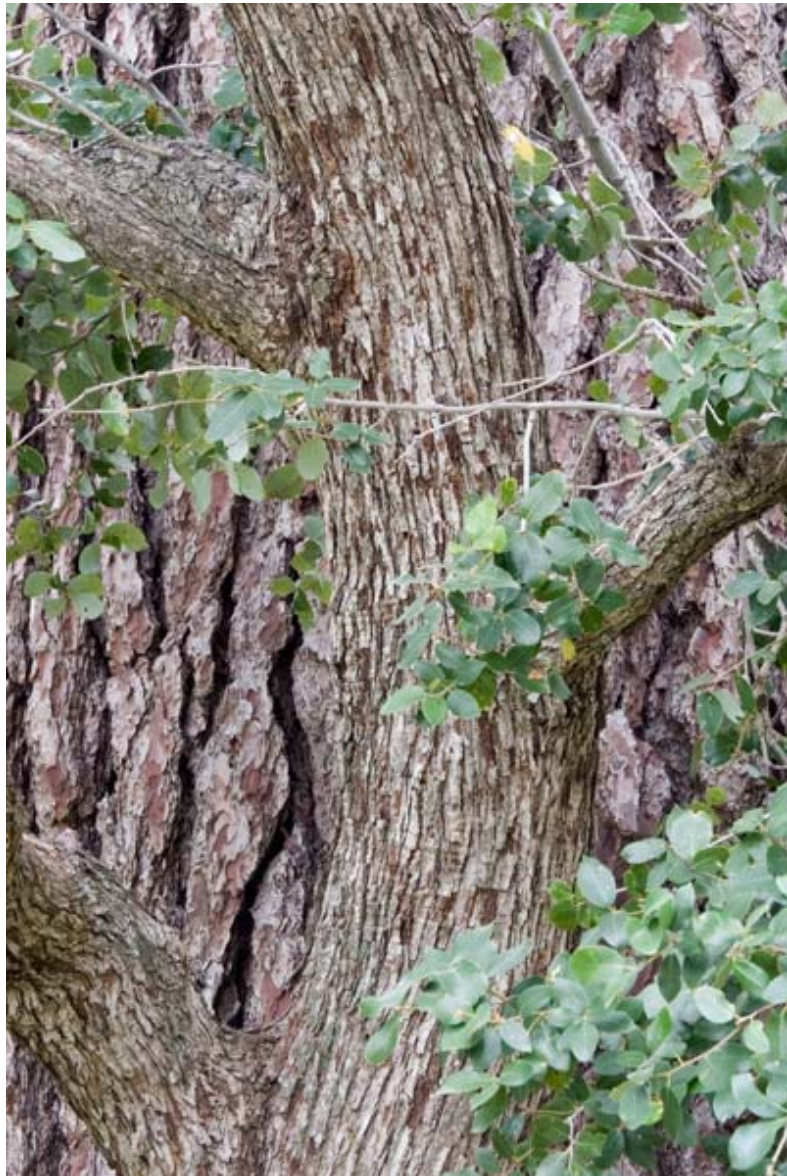
I realize now that a lot of this might simply be that I've worked most of my life at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs¹. I've been fortunate to have had my physiological needs, my safety needs, my love/belonging needs, and my esteem needs largely met all my life. So I've essentially been working on my self-actualizing needs for most of my adult life. Without really realizing it, of course.

Viktor Frankl expresses the relationship between self-actualization and self-transcendence in *Man's Search for Meaning*. He writes:

"The true meaning of life is to be found in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system... Human experience is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization. Self-actualization is not a possible aim at all, for the simple reason that the more a man would strive for it, the more he would miss it... In other words, self-actualization cannot be attained if it is made an end in itself, but only as a side effect of self-transcendence."²

I read these men's works in high school. Funny.

Now I can give de Gast a more abstract answer to his question: I want to be good because photography is an outlet for my innate creativity, and when I do something I want to do it well – simply because that's who I am. It's okay to not have a higher purpose.



I can now take a picture of an oak's branching structure against a ponderosa pine and say confidently that it's worth including in this portfolio simply because I like it (and because it's equal to the others in terms of technical and artistic quality). I'm not sure I would have taken such a picture without the self-exploration provoked by this class.

¹ See, for example, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-actualization>.

² This paragraph copied directly from the above reference.

Springtime in the Angeles

Bill singled out the top-lit golden-leafed maple from my first lesson submission as “a portfolio of one” and suggested that because it is “relatively local for [me], it might be most interesting, and productive for the course, to work in the areas of the NF you are most familiar and close to. During previous sessions of this course, several students have discovered that their local landscapes have more potential than they thought!”

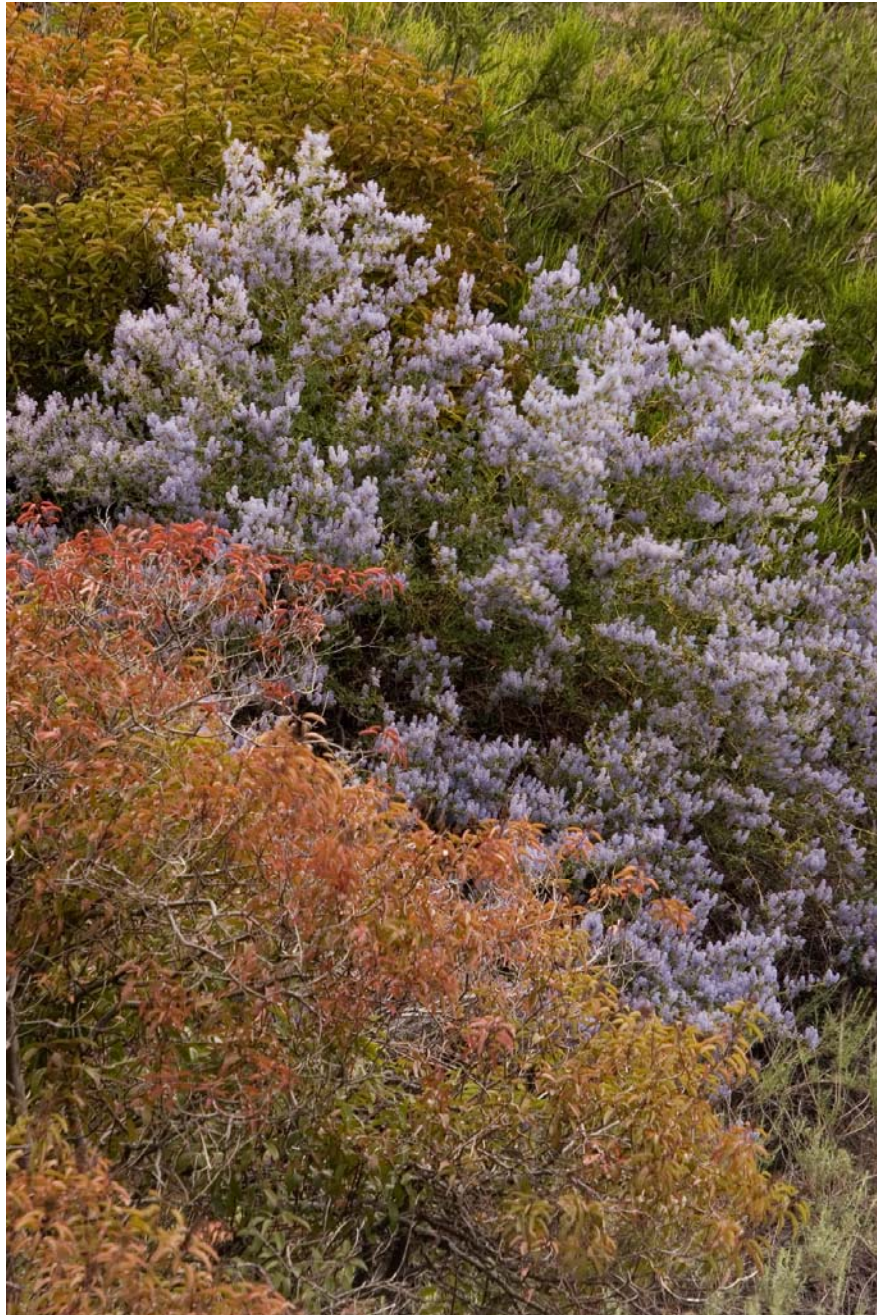
Add me to the list, Bill.

I liked the idea of getting to know Angeles National Forest better. My mom grew up in its foothills and we visited my grandmother there often. The southern face of the San Gabriels has been a daily part of my scenery since starting to work at JPL in 1991 and then living here the last seven years. I’ve appreciated the mountains for remaining undeveloped and for providing me a quiet place to ride my bike. But I never ventured far from the pavement. I never reached beyond an image of grey-green impenetrable chaparral. Despite its proximity, I never explored.

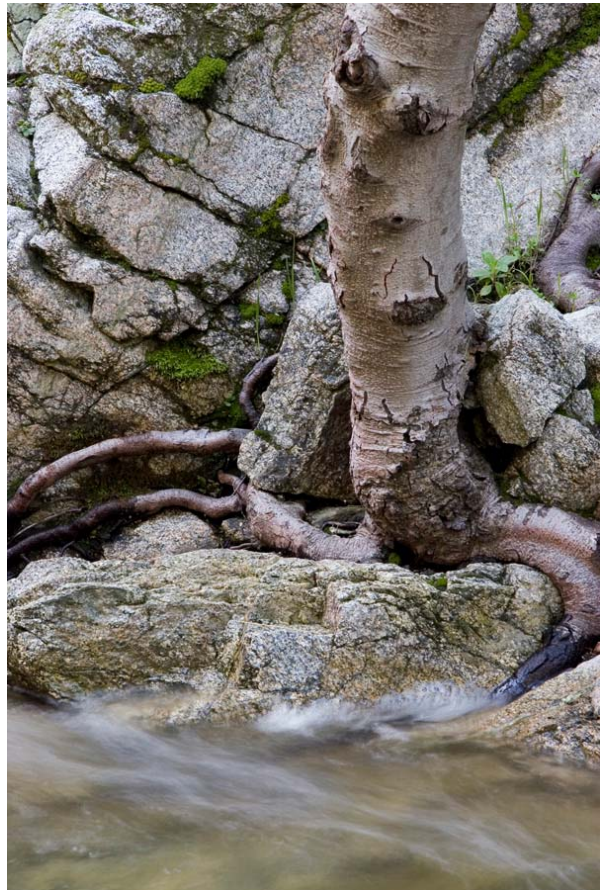
Working on an “Intimate Angeles” portfolio would force me to explore, since I couldn’t see how I would make images there that weren’t dull pictures of endless, uniform chaparral. I didn’t really understand, at a gut level, that places like the Chilao area were forested with pines, spruces, and cedars.



It now seems almost laughable that I thought that finding beauty would be difficult. Once I started looking, there was color everywhere. Yes, there actually is a springtime here! A red laurel sumac with violet ceanothus (California lilac) attests to their being on the cusp of two seasons – the sumac turns red with the last frosty nighttime temperatures while the ceanothus displays its spring bloom.



I had no idea that there were wild currants at Buckhorn; nor that waterfalls thundered with snowmelt, rushing to the desert from Cooper Canyon; nor that alders would seemingly grow out of solid rock to get to water in Colby Creek! Oh! How I wish I had started my explorations sooner! How glad I am to have done some now!



A Graphical Language



*Simplify. Reduce an image to its barest essence.
Strip away all that is not relevant.*

Just so many words in photography how-to-guides
– meaningless without practice. Lots of practice.

Speaking to others through photography requires
learning its graphical language, its idioms, its
clichés – and how to avoid them. Learning to write
a short phrase to capture a single idea.

Pines fog-enshrouded; such different structures.

Incense cedar bark against a ponderosa pine's.

San Gabriel River rapids at sunrise.



This is a new language to me. I'm still
trying out its grammar and its nuances.
Trying to become fluent. Practicing.

Ethics

I've struggled with the question of what's acceptable manipulation of a nature photograph for quite awhile. Articles by Dewitt Jones (Outdoor Photographer, Oct 2005), William Neill (OP, Dec 2005), and Rob Sheppard (OP, Feb 2006), and the observations of Ansel Adams and Galen Rowell in their books show that others have sought their own answers to this, too.

Often, discussion focuses on manipulations after the picture is taken, such as a statement that "nature photographs should accurately reflect the subject as it appeared in the viewfinder." Some photographers tell us how a picture was taken in terms of optics, filters, and film or digital sensor type – justifiably, since without knowing the photo-response of the recording medium, we can't understand the first step in the light-capturing/rendering process.

But I've seen little in the way of what happens before the photons reach the camera. Few photographers seem to document how they manipulated the light, be it with a flash, reflector, or diffuser. With animals, most nature pros will indicate if the subject is captive or otherwise in an unnatural setting. Most seem to stop short of disclosing baiting, e.g., attracting hummingbirds with a hidden feeder. I've seen almost no disclosure of capturing non-animal subjects, e.g., labeling captive, non-wild plants as "cultivated" (e.g., in a garden). How does one determine where to draw the line in manipulating the subject of a nature photograph?



I found this burl in a completely natural state at the base of Cooper Canyon Falls, with sand and alder flowers on it. I composed a shot, but found the litter distracting. If the litter had been man-made, no one would question whether it was okay to remove it – returning the scene to a (presumably) more natural state. But Nature placed my litter. So although I didn't harm Nature, I certainly disturbed what occurred naturally. Blowing on the litter didn't remove the sand and the next shot was worse. So I got out a toothbrush (as I had run into this "issue" the previous week with some moss on a dirty rock) and brushed off the sand.

The result is the strongest composition, but arguably manipulated and unnatural. Is it still a nature photograph? Or is it now a nature-inspired *in situ* art photo? How should such an image be represented in a portfolio that purports to be nature photographs?



In this case, the answer is rather interesting. As I have wrestled with these questions and looked more at the two images, I like the original one better. I like how the alder flowers rest quietly on the one flat area of the burl. I might have liked it better with the twig and pine needle removed and, although I *could*, I can't bring myself to "fix it" in Photoshop; that's a manipulation I'm not willing to do. The next time, I will be more careful with composition.

My views on photographic truth have been evolving. I'm largely at the point where it seems that almost anything is okay as long as a photographer is willing to tell all about the making of the image. I reject the notion that no photograph is "real" because it maps a multi-dimensional world onto 2D based on the compositional choices of an individual (as some well-known photographers have asserted).

I *know* that there are images that better represent how I or another viewer at the time would have perceived the scene. I *know* that I can distinguish between a truthful representation of my perception and a manipulated one. And I *know* that I can intentionally make an image diverge from what might be considered objective toward what most would consider being a more artistic interpretation or a more artistic representation. I should be able to have a pro nature photographer looking over my shoulder in the field or in front of the computer and never hear him say, "uh, I think that action just crossed the line."

So, I will identify as "nature photographs" those images that I feel realistically capture the spirit of what I perceived when I composed the shot. And when I create abstracts, I will know them to be purely art. And I will probably continue to shy away from significant manipulations of either the environment or the captured image. For the time being. Until, perhaps, I have spent ever more time on this difficult issue and reach a different perspective.

Portfolio Development for the Engineer

Walking in a forest – heck, driving an hour to get to special places in the forest – gives one plenty of time to think. When I find a humble meadow, such as at Horse Flats, nature is all around me but my mind wanders at will.



I am working on a photography portfolio, something that every aspiring artist needs. What about aspiring engineers? Why is it that the engineering community never came to expect its practitioners to build portfolios? Why, when I need to hire a senior staff member, does it seem virtually impossible to see examples of prior work? Sure, there's the résumé, but that's just a collection of claims, with little to vouch for its truth. Why can't I expect to see an example of someone's programming, or a schematic, or a system block diagram?

Engineering is a pragmatic art form. We have lots of sophisticated tools, mastered at great expense in college or on the job. We train students on design methodology, analysis, and modeling. But little time is spent stepping back from the technical skills and learning how to “see” solutions. Just as the photographer can develop skill in pre-visualizing good images, we should spend more time teaching engineers how to visualize and recognize good designs, to appreciate that there is an aesthetic of good designs that tells us that they are right.

I'm toying with an idea for a university engineering class. It would be an upper-division design class, exploring the relationship between technology and art in the creative engineering process. The first couple of weeks would be spent with something probably unfamiliar to most of the students: photography. Courtesy of a sponsorship by, say, Canon or Nikon, a number of high-end digital point-and-shoot cameras would be available. The first lecture or so would be devoted to the technical aspects of using the camera. The budding engineers should easily master the concepts of f-number versus shutter speed, focal lengths and field-of-view. Next would come the discipline of using a tripod and always checking the corners for “oops.” Then we would tackle content, focusing on those aspects of graphic design that are common to good engineering design: simplicity, sharpness, clarity of purpose, use of idioms that are readily understood, communication of vision despite the limitations of the medium.

After two or three weeks of working in this unfamiliar domain (not unlike getting thrown into a major development project and needing to learn new tools quickly), we would reverse the process. Working on an engineering project, the students would focus not on the technical skills – those are only tools – but rather on the skills they learned by thinking artistically with the camera. No, this wouldn't be your typical engineering class. But it seems sorely needed.

I'm sure the course description might sound like an easy 'A'. After all, what engineering student doesn't have the arrogance that he's smarter than the liberal arts types? Perhaps the class would help dispel that little myth.

How hard could an eight week, online, ungraded portfolio development course be? Oh, more than 160 hours worth of hard. 1700 exposures and edits to generate 22 good images worth of hard.

Difficulty and reward are correlated. Being pushed by an instructor, a mentor, or one's own demons can allow us to discover abilities we never suspected. Last week, I asked a former student how my teaching made a difference for her. The unexpected answer was, "You expected us to be better than we actually were. And when you learned that we weren't, you didn't lower your standards."

Life, learning, and love are all so many layered. Discovering those layers is perhaps what brings us continued growth and joy.



Layers of mountains, fog, and cloud at sunset from Chilao.

Nature is What Happens...

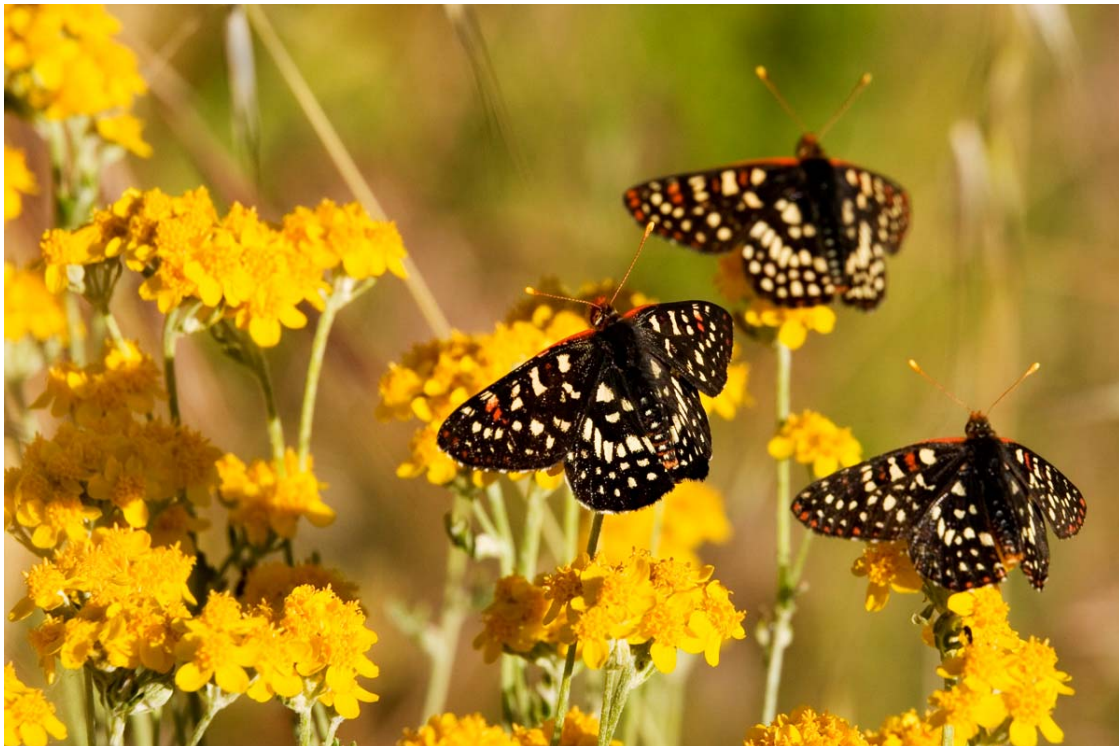
My last day of trying to capture images for class. I'd really like to get up to Crystal Lake, the only natural lake in the Angeles. I'd really like to get to a site before first light – so far, a 100% unsuccessful pursuit. I scrape myself out of bed at 4:00 for the expected one-hour drive to the point where the map shows Hwy 39 to be closed, a mile-plus hike from the lake. I get to where the road is actually closed 10 miles lower than I anticipated. I learn later that it's been closed there since the fire of 2002. A goodly segment of Angeles Crest Highway is closed due to slides in 2005 and 2006, as is Glendora Mountain Road. And Chantry Flats. Nature happens...

I spend some time with water motion studies along the San Gabriel River until sunrise. I decide it's time to hang it up and go for my bike ride. As I drive to the bottom of the road to Mt. Baldy Village, I spot one more chance to capture the rugged beauty of the Angeles in her vibrant spring green. I get out my tripod, move to the edge of the roadway to setup, and lo! Butterflies!



I've read about butterflies needing to warm up before flight. I'd never seen them that way! Snap! I had less than five minutes before the sun hit them and they all fluttered away!

Nature is what happens when we're looking elsewhere. Nature is what is happening in my backyard, the undeveloped mountains so many of us take for granted. Nature is what heals my soul. I'm grateful I've had these weeks to explore my Angeles – intimately.



Technical Notes

Every image in this portfolio was taken between April 9 and June 4, 2006, in the San Gabriel Mountains portion of Angeles National Forest, Los Angeles County, California.

Bigleaf Maple on Rock Face

Canon EOS 20D, EF-S 17-85mm IS @ 56mm; M, f/8, 1/45 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: applied curve w/ gradient.

Oak Against Pine, near Charlton Flat

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 160mm; M, f/16, 0.3" @ ISO 200; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: cropped.

View Across Chilao Region, from Santa Clara Divide Road

Canon EOS 20D, EF-S 17-85mm IS @ 26mm; Av-0.5, f/16, 1/20 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: curved-gradient to enhance clouds and sky.

Ceanothus and Laurel Sage

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 300mm + PL; Av, f/11, 1/6 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: healed sensor dirt.

Wild Currant, Buckhorn

Canon EOS 20D, TS-E 90mm @ 90mm; Av+0.5, f/22, 1/6 @ ISO 200; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: diminished brightness of three of the flower clusters.

Cooper Canyon Falls

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 130mm + PL; M, f/32, 0.25" @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: healed sensor dirt.

Alder in Colby Creek

Canon EOS 20D, EF-S 17-85mm IS @ 85mm + PL; Av+0.5, f/11, 0.5" @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: cropped slightly.

Pines in Fog, Santa Clara Divide Road

Canon EOS 20D, EF-S 17-85mm IS @ 33mm; M, f/11, 1/8 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: cropped to remove excess sky.

Cedar and Ponderosa, Buckhorn

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 230mm + PL; Av-0.5, f/11, 1/15 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: cropped to remove distracting tree, curved to reduce highlights on ponderosa.

Rapids at Sunrise, East Fork San Gabriel River

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 135mm; Av, f/32, 1/6 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: cropped slightly, curved.

Burl, Cooper Canyon Falls

Canon EOS 20D, EF-S 17-85mm IS @ 85mm + PL; Av, f/16, 0.5" @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: added contrast.

Meadow and Pines, Horse Flats

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 70mm; Av-0.5, f/11, 1/60 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: lightly curved.

Sunset before Spring Storm, Chilao

Canon EOS 20D, EF-S 17-85mm IS @ 24mm; M, f/11, 0.3" @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: adjusted contrast/brightness in separate horizontal bands; cropped to wider format.

Rugged Hills in Spring Green, East Fork San Gabriel River Area

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 115mm; M, f/8, 1/30 @ ISO 100; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: cropped slightly, curved.

Butterflies and Flowers, Eastern Angeles

Canon EOS 20D, EF 70-300mm DO IS @ 300mm; Av, f/11, 1/250 @ ISO 200; tripod.
Captured RAW. PS CS2: cropped, curved.