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ORDINARY: TRANSFORMING PRACTICE  
THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY, SACRED  
LANDSCAPES, AND THE ART OF GEORGIA  
O'KEEFFE

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# FINDING THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY: TRANSFORMING PRACTICE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY, SACRED LANDSCAPES, AND THE ART OF GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

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## Abstract

*As an adult educator for more than 30 years, I have always searched for ways to incorporate creative expression into my teaching practice through engaged pedagogy and student assignments. My major influences came not from educational sources but from the art world and from natural surroundings. In the early 1990's I discovered New Brunswick-based photographer Freeman Patterson. His style and philosophy of photography not only influenced my own photography but also found its way into my teaching and academic writing. Later, in 2001, I visited Ghost Ranch Education and Retreat Center in Abiquiu, New Mexico and knew I had found a spiritual home among the red rocks and wide-open spaces. I identified with Georgia O'Keeffe who painted and made her home at Ghost Ranch for many decades. I taught classes there in creativity and photography but also started bringing more creative energy into teaching master's and doctoral students in adult education. This article chronicles my transformative journey as an artist and as an educator, using original photography and metaphor combined with personal narrative. I offer practical strategies for teaching adult learners and show how photography can be instrumental in teaching for social justice (Brookfield, 2017).*

## Résumé

*Comme éducatrice d'adultes, j'intègre souvent l'expression créative à mon enseignement par la pédagogie engagée et le choix de travaux étudiants. Mes principales inspirations sont venues non pas de l'éducation, mais du monde de l'art et de l'environnement naturel. Dans les années 1990, j'ai découvert le photographe néo-brunswickois Freeman Patterson. Non seulement son style et sa philosophie de la photographie ont-ils influencé ma propre pratique photographique, mais ils ont aussi trouvé leur place dans ma pratique d'universitaire. Quand j'ai visité le Ghost Ranch Education and Retreat Centre à Abiquiu, au Nouveau-Mexique, en 2001, je savais que j'avais trouvé un foyer spirituel parmi les rochers rouges et les grands*

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*espaces ouverts. Je m'identifiais avec Georgia O'Keefe, qui y avait habité pendant plusieurs décennies. J'enseignais la créativité et la photographie, tout en intégrant plus de créativité à mon enseignement aux cycles supérieurs et aux adultes. Cet article fait la chronique de mon parcours transformateur comme artiste et éducatrice à l'aide de photographies originales et de narration personnelle. J'offre des stratégies d'enseignement et d'apprentissage pratiques.*

### Teaching and Learning Through Art

I am first and foremost an adult educator, having been a university professor for three decades working first with an adult degree completion program and later with master's and doctoral students in adult education. As a learner, I never did well with the lecture mode, preferring hands-on and more interactive modalities. To make things more interesting for the students (and if I am going to be perfectly honest, to keep myself from becoming bored) I began to infuse various art forms into the curriculum. For example, I sometimes shared a poem or even encouraged the students to write their own poetry. At other times, I incorporated drawing, painting or collage making as a way to generate ideas for research or jog memory about personal identity development. Music, dance and theatre games were encouraged as ways to tap into embodied knowledge. I never formally studied art, yet teaching through the arts seemed natural.

I have always enjoyed taking photos. I am attracted primarily to landscapes so I always had a camera along on family vacations to capture the beautiful scenery. In 1993, my sister-in-law, knowing about my interest in photography, sent me a book for my birthday called *Photography and the Art of Seeing* (Patterson, 1985). While I am sure she picked the book randomly off the shelf, it changed my life. Rather than taking realistic looking photos to document an experience, I started looking at objects from multiple dimensions, experimenting with artistic techniques to portray what I felt and saw. I understood what Patterson (1985) meant when he said: "Seeing, in the finest and broadest sense, means using your senses, your intellect, and your emotions. It means encountering your subject matter with your whole being" (p. 12). While Patterson's ideas influenced me as a photographer, I also saw many applications for working with students in the classroom and through supervising research. What follows is a discussion about the relationship between art, nature and identity. I then describe some parallels between art and research, offering examples of how to teach research strategies using photography. I conclude with applications for teaching about social justice.



*Figure 1. Symphony in Color. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2014.*

### **Encountering O’Keeffe**

I have always admired Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986), both as a person and as an artist. While she refused to define herself as a feminist, she did whatever she wanted to do, without considering gender a barrier. She was one of only a handful of well-known female American artists in the early part of the 20th century. I love her bold brushstrokes and striking colours. Many of her paintings were enlarged abstractions of flowers. She said:

If I could paint a flower exactly as I see it, no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small. So I said to myself—I’ll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking the time to look at it. I will make even busy New Yorkers take the time to see what I see of flowers. (O’Keeffe, 1976, p. 23)

At some point, without conscious awareness, I found myself taking photos of flowers as extreme close ups with details that filled the frame. Some of the flowers even had the same colours that O’Keeffe used in her paintings. I was surprised to discover that my close up of a rose turned out to be similar to O’Keeffe’s Red Canna that she painted in 1924 (see below). Yet, this was not an intentional act.



Figure 2. Red Canna by Georgia O'Keeffe  
1925 Oil on canvas mounted on Masonite  
H-3 W-2.5.



Figure 3. Labyrinth. Photo: R. L. Lawrence,  
2011.

### Art and Identity

I have previously written about how artistic expression is a way of surfacing unconscious knowledge and learning about oneself (Lawrence, 2005). Both Patterson and O'Keeffe talked about how paying attention to the art they created helped them to better understand themselves. For example, Patterson (1996) noticed that he had been creating images over and over again with the same circular pattern. "A camera always looks both ways. Like all serious photographers I have to accept and deal with this fact—the reality that my images are as much a documentation and interpretation of myself as the subject matter I choose" (p. 74). He continued to observe: "Noting patterns in one's images is a way of bringing to consciousness aspects of myself that I had buried deeply or never examined at all" (p. 79).

Similarly, O'Keeffe (1976) found herself unintentionally creating several paintings with a shingle from an old barn and a white clam shell she had brought back from Maine. She was drawn to their shapes; however, it took a long time for her to realize this. She observed: "I find that I have painted my life—things happening in my life—without knowing" (p. 52). Why was I drawn to create large flower images with my macro lens? Was I unconsciously channeling O'Keeffe? Perhaps enlarging the flowers was a message to myself to slow down and notice the small details. I tend to observe people and things more holistically and rarely pay attention to minute details. Through my camera lens I was able to see and notice things I may otherwise have ignored. My connection to Georgia O'Keeffe would become stronger after spending time at Ghost Ranch.

### Encounters at Ghost Ranch

I visited New Mexico for the first time in 2001. My itinerary included a visit to Ghost Ranch near Abiquiu. I had heard about this vast desert landscape that was home to O'Keeffe in her later years and wanted to see it for myself. The land, a former dude ranch, was now owned

by the Presbyterian Church and operated as an education and retreat center and haven for artists. I arrived at Ghost Ranch in the late morning of a beautiful day in May.

From my journal 2001:

*I am visiting Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu New Mexico where Georgia O'Keeffe spent her summers and got inspiration for many of her paintings. My traveling companion and I decide to hike a trail called Kitchen Mesa. We are attracted to the expanse of rock formations. Near the start of the trail are artists painting or sketching the rocky cliffs, O'Keeffe's legacy to future generations. Many have discovered the serenity of this lovely place and have been inspired to create. The trail winds through large patches of fresh sage. Their fragrance is sweet and pungent. Cacti grow abundantly in this area and there are a few bright red Indian Paintbrush and other small flowers along the trail. As we climb higher we are surrounded in all directions by red rocky cliffs. A small spiky cactus plant catches my eye as we enter a valley. I take out my camera and sit down on the ground to frame the photo.*

*Inexplicitly a powerful feeling of peace and well-being comes over me and I feel rooted to the ground. I can't make myself get up. I just want to stay there and be with this feeling. After a while I get up and we continue the hike through several dry creek beds to some higher elevations. It is almost time for the sun to set so we climb up on top of a ridge to watch the show. There are a few clouds, not too many colors but some interesting lighting effects on the rocks. As I look toward the eastern cliffs, I see a corner of light as the full moon begins to peak over the edge. We watch in awe as it rises over the cliff with the setting sun at our backs. Sunset and moonrise together.*



Figure 4. Kitchen Mesa. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2001.

I always feel spiritual connections in natural areas that could never happen within the walls of a church, synagogue or mosque. Coombs (2003) explored the work of O'Keeffe through the themes of transcendence, self-actualization and creative expression. O'Keeffe talked about "the unexplainable thing in nature" (Coombs, 2003, p. 221). There was

something about natural areas, particularly the Southwest that evoked awe and inspired creativity. There on Kitchen Mesa, I knew exactly what she was talking about. I experienced a liminal state of being, a heightened sensory awareness or a shift in consciousness where I was completely tuned in and more open to various levels of connection. I felt a tingling sensation in my body. My face felt warm, my heart was open and I felt a great sense of peace and a connection to all that is. As I entered into this state of consciousness, I opened myself to the mystery where unexplainable things happened. I resonated with what O’Keeffe wrote in a letter to William Howard Schubert in 1952: “When I stand alone with the earth and sky a feeling of something in me going off in every direction into the unknown of infinity means more to me than anything any organized religion gives me” (as cited in Cowart et al., 1987, p. 263).

A decade later, I had the opportunity to teach a creativity class for artists at Ghost Ranch. They were offering a landscape tour that took people into the restricted area of Ghost Ranch known as the Painted Desert. This space, where O’Keeffe had her home and created many of her famous paintings, was off limits to most visitors. I built the tour into my curriculum and took the students there. We piled into a mini bus and the tour guide pointed out several of O’Keeffe’s painting sites, allowing us to get off the bus a few times to take photos and spend a short time in those spaces. In this place of sensuous red rocks and petrified trees, I found myself back in that liminal space and it was very hard to get back on the bus.



*Figure 5. Painted Desert. Photo: R.L. Lawrence, 2012.*

Fortunately, I made friends with one of the staff members who took me back there later and left me alone to wander around. One of the areas I was most drawn to had an ancient tree that O’Keeffe had painted in 1937. She called it *Gerald’s Tree* after a visitor who had spent time there. I found myself creating several images of that tree while time slipped away.

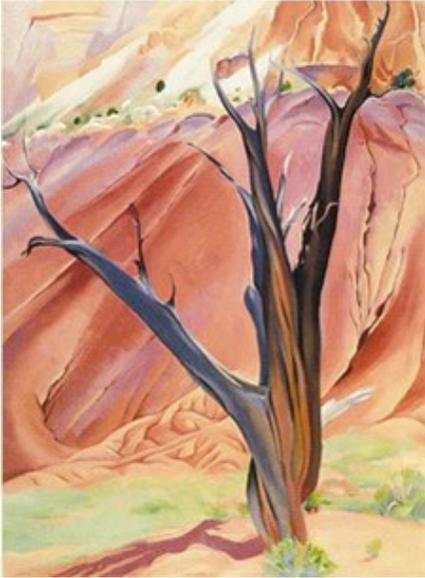


Figure 6. Gerald's Tree

© 1937 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 7. Gerald's Tree Revisited.

Photo: R.L. Lawrence, 2012.

Spending time in this space inspired creativity in unexpected ways. As Linnea (1999) aptly expressed:

Only a return to the grand, soothing, often subtle rhythms of nature—the rising and setting of the sun, the whisper of wind in the trees, the solidness of a mountain, the eternal motion of the sea can draw me back to the well of my creativity. (pp. 49–50)

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes this sensation as a flow state that often happens when people immerse themselves in creative activities. One loses track of time and space. While it is difficult to will oneself into a flow state, Csikszentmihalyi believes that flow can be cultivated by allowing oneself to be surprised every day and by taking the time to engage in creative expression about that which catches one's attention.

### Researcher as Artist

There are many parallels between artists and researchers. In qualitative research in particular, the researcher is the “provocateur of understanding” as expressed so eloquently by Stake and Kerr (1995, pp. 57–58). In an effort to understand the constructivist nature of research, they draw parallels to the surrealist art of René Magritte who juxtaposed unrelated images in order to provoke the viewer to use his or her imagination to make sense of the painting. “The viewer rehanges these images in his or her mind, confronting images already there, reshaping the edges of experience. The able researcher draws attention to expectations and assumptions, shocking the reader out of complacency” (p. 57). The role of the researcher then, is not to express findings as finite knowledge but rather to present

ideas in such a way as to construct new knowledge through the audience's interpretation. A painter, or an artistic photographer does not recreate reality as much as he/she shares his or her interpretation of reality. This helps the viewer to take a closer look, to see beyond what is. O'Keeffe (1976) observed:

It is surprising to me to see how many people separate the objective from the abstract. Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense... The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint. (p. 88)

I have found these ideas to be useful in working with novice researchers to help them to understand data analysis as partial construction of knowledge. As Barone and Eisner (2012) argue, "Conclusions are always partial and temporary" (p. 53), leaving space for the audience to become partners in the construction of knowledge. Interestingly, O'Keeffe was talking about art when she expressed in 1922: "Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things" (as cited in Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 1). Yet, I cannot think of a better explanation of what a researcher does to make meaning of the mounds of data he or she collects.

Arts-based research involves using one or more art forms in the collection, analysis and/ or expression of research findings (Lawrence, 2015). According to Finley (2008), "At the heart of arts-based inquiry is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control of the production and dissemination of knowledge" (p. 72). While not all researchers will use arts-based processes in their research, the arts can be useful in helping novice researchers to understand many aspects of the research process. For the sake of brevity, I will focus only on photography.

### ***The Camera Lens as Metaphor: Ways of Seeing***

Photography is first and foremost about observation. For me, looking through the camera lens has changed the way I see the world. I notice the moss on the rocks and the smallest wildflowers budding in springtime. I see these things even when I do not have my camera with me. Depending upon where I am focusing, I may miss other things. If I am peering up at the clouds, I may miss the squirrel on the ground. If I am focused on the tree roots by my feet, I may not see the bird in the tree. Observation is an important part of ethnography and other qualitative research methodologies. It occurred to me that I could help students to learn observation techniques by using various camera lenses in natural surroundings. Tom Brown Jr. (1983) teaches nature observation as a survival skill. Some of his recommendations include: slowing down, letting go of worries, being quiet, not analyzing, letting go of prejudgment, following one's heart, becoming a child and immersing oneself in nature. Brown views "nature observation as fine art" (p. 265). It is no coincidence that many of his ideas parallel those of Patterson (1985) when he writes about *Photography and the Art of Seeing*.

I taught in a doctoral program in adult education from 1996–2015 that included a summer institute each year for two weeks in June. We took the students to a tranquil outdoor campus by a lake with wooded trails. Residential adult education allows for immersion in learning without outside distractions (Clancy & Holford, 2018). It also provides opportunity for informal and incidental learning to occur. The second summer institute focused on writing research proposals. We held sessions on various methodologies and research methods. For

the session on observation, I began by introducing some concepts of “deepening awareness” (Mealman & Lawrence, 2002). We first talked about barriers that get in the way of truly seeing. Both Patterson (1985) and Brown (1983) talk about tunnel vision. When we go into an observation or photography session only focused on what we think is there or what we expect to find, we can miss opportunities along the periphery. We look at the crowd but neglect to see the individual crowd members. “We seldom try to rediscover the possible value of ignored stimuli, and are reluctant to do so as long as the old ones still seem to be working” (Patterson, 1985, p. 10).

We also talked about labeling as a barrier to seeing. When we think we know something or someone, we often give it a label and then we stop seeing it. For example, I live in Colorado where we have a lot of Aspen trees. I love to photograph Aspens in all seasons. If I were to simply label the tree as an Aspen, I would probably take a photo or two and move on, not really seeing all of the characteristics of that particular Aspen. What is the colour and texture of the bark? Does it have green leaves or yellow ones or no leaves at all? How thick is the trunk? How is this tree different from other Aspens in the area?

Another barrier is ignoring what is in our “deadspace” (Mealman & Lawrence, 2002). Objects that are part of our everyday world like the pictures on our wall or the colours of the carpet on the floor are often so taken for granted that we stop looking at them. If I ask students to close their eyes and try to recall details of the classroom where they have spent many hours, many of them cannot. It is in their deadspace. Patterson (1994) talked about a time when the weather was too cold and wet to be outside. He thought about taking the time to clean his messy porch but instead decided to photograph the contents of his messy porch. He gradually began to see things he had never seen before. He noticed lines, shapes and shadows. Photographically he was able to portray the messiness and confusion that was all around him. I created this image from Patterson’s porch at a workshop. I was drawn to the rainbow of colours in the jackets hanging on a rack.



Figure 8. Rainbow Wardrobe. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2008.

Brown (1983) advises against thinking too much or engaging in analysis when observing nature. When we quiet the chatter in our head, we are able to see more and be fully present in the experience. I have noticed that when I am overly concerned with finding the right technical settings to take a “good” picture, my images are often flat and

uninteresting. If I can get out of my head and allow myself to just be, I often can get into a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), and my images reflect a deeper dimension of creativity. I always advise students to concentrate on observing and leave the analysis for later. Once we begin analyzing in the field, we miss what is in front of us. In the session on observation, we climbed on top of a hill surrounded by trees. The students did not have cameras with changeable lenses so we used our hands to simulate camera lenses.



*Figure 9. Standard View. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2019.*

Thumbs and forefingers pressed together in a diamond shape created a standard lens allowing one to frame an object of interest.



*Figure 10. Telephoto View. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2019.*

Cupping two fists, holding them together and peering through the “tunnel” simulated a telephoto lens allowing one to zero in on a subject.



Figure 11. Close up View. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2019.

Pressing both thumbs and forefingers tightly together became a close-up lens where we could look at a tiny section of an object.



Figure 12. Wide Angle View. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2019.

Palms together with hands wide allowed us to see a wide-angle view of an object in the context of its surroundings.

We practiced using the various lenses to observe our surroundings and then talked about how we noticed different aspects of the same scenery depending upon the lens we looked through. In research, it is important to get a sense of the whole, using wide angle vision as well as zeroing in on specific details. We also engaged in “focused hearing” (Mealman & Lawrence, 2002, p. 8). This involved finding a quiet place to sit with eyes closed to block out all visual stimuli and just listen. Participants found that they were able to hear things that were not at first in their conscious awareness such as the rustle of leaves in the wind and many different bird calls.

Selective focus is a technique in photography that is also useful in research. While it is good practice to begin with a wide angle lens to get the big picture, it is equally important to see the small details. In phenomenological research this is known as balancing the parts and

the whole (Van Manen, 1990). In photography one might practice selective focus by only looking at lines, shapes, colours or textures. This exercise sharpens the sense of observation and the observer-photographer may be surprised at what he or she sees. In the image below, I was looking at triangles.



*Figure 13. Triangles. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2008.*

In observing for research, one might observe a crowded urban street but only focus on certain populations such as homeless people, teenagers, the elderly, etc. Alternately, one might concentrate on the environment, looking at structures, litter alongside the road, or at vehicles. Taken together, these observations help the researcher to get a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, in teaching adults one encounters diverse perspectives relative to race, gender, age and fields of practice. It is important to consider how all of these perspectives work together in the construction of knowledge.

### ***Photovoice***

There are a number of research methods and methodologies that make direct use of photography. Photovoice is one such methodology. Photovoice, a form of participatory action research (PAR), was introduced by Wang and Burris (1997) as a way to involve participants in exploring their worlds. Participants are given cameras and encouraged to create images in their environment related to the research question. Photovoice is most suited to community-based and social justice issues like healthcare, poverty and immigration. As images often reveal what words cannot, the participant-created images are a main source of data. Participants bring their images back to the research group and work together to elicit collective meaning making. According to Mayfield-Johnson and Butler (2017), "Photovoice offers researchers an opportunity to employ emancipatory and participatory research methods in a manner that is reflective of traditional cultures and values" (p. 56). As most PAR projects, the goal is not to produce an academic report but to

create change in the community. The products of photovoice projects often take the form of participant-created exhibits, photo books or even performances designed to educate the community about important issues.

### **Applications for Teaching for Social Justice**

Adult education is primarily about social justice, more so in the informal sense (Horton & Freire, 1990; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009), but those of us who teach in adult education graduate programs also have an obligation to our students. As adult educators we are continually faced with diverse groups of students. How we teach is as important as what we teach. How open are we to diverse perspectives and worldviews? Photography has a place in adult education as we consider looking through different lenses as a metaphor for seeing ourselves and others. It can help us to transcend our cultural filters that limit how we see the world. As we have seen above, photovoice is one way to help students explore social justice issues. We can also apply Freeman Patterson's photographic techniques such as thinking sideways, avoiding labels and looking from a mouse-eye view.

#### ***Thinking Sideways***

Novice photographers are typically taught a set of rules to create a "good" photograph such as the rule of thirds (balancing foreground, middleground and background), not putting the center of interest in the center of the photo and holding the camera steady. While following these rules may result in technically correct photos, they may not be especially interesting. Patterson (1985) advocates for what he refers to as "thinking sideways". He teaches his students to search for new premises beyond what is immediately obvious. To do so one must be willing to break some rules. In photography this may involve jumping up and down, blurring an image out of focus or intentionally over or under exposing the image. Rather than rejecting an image that may not be conventionally representative, Patterson encourages us to embrace "happy accidents" (1985, p. 28). These images while not always what we intended to create may often result in something new and interesting that helps us to appreciate difference. I created this image of Indian Paintbrush, a flower that grows in the southwest United States (see p. 4). When I downloaded the image on my computer, I was surprised to see that it looked like it had been altered in Photoshop, however, I had done no such thing. It was a mystery and a happy accident.



Figure 14. Indian Paintbrush. Photo: R. L. Lawrence, 2018.

Critical reflection is a core component of adult education. Thinking sideways encourages students to look at issues from multiple perspectives, searching for alternate explanations for phenomena rather than accepting what may seem obvious.

### ***Labeling***

We previously talked about how when we give something a name or label, like an Aspen tree, we think we know it, maybe take one photo and move on. In doing so, we miss getting to know the tree in its fullest sense. We do this with people as well. For example, if I perceive a student or colleague as arrogant or pushy, I may create a mental label for them. I see them as not having anything worthwhile to contribute. I tune them out when they are talking. In doing so I create mental barriers and may miss an opportunity to learn from that person. An extreme case of labeling creates stereotypes about people related to race, gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. We relate to them according to their group membership and miss getting to know them as multi-dimensional human beings. In moving beyond labels, photographic exercises can help us to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. Teaching for social justice begins in the classroom. We must model what we hope our students will practice in the greater community.

### ***Looking from a Mouse-eye View***

“The normal human way of viewing the world is just one way of seeing” (Patterson, 1996, p. 78). Patterson was speaking about anthropocentrism—the belief that human beings are superior to other species. He would get down on the ground and photograph objects from the perspective of a mouse or even an ant. *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1960) is one of my favourite stories. In one chapter, Alice eats some magic cake and shrinks to the size of a caterpillar. She walks through a garden where the flowers are taller than she is. She encounters a “giant” mushroom about the same size as herself and walks underneath it, observing the underside. These examples show us that there are many ways to see the world

if we are willing to step out of our comfort zone and see the world as others see it (Lawrence & Cranton, 2009). In teaching for social justice, we can attempt to learn from others who are culturally different. While we can never fully know what it is like to be a person of another race or religion, we can work toward empathy and understanding. Putting ourselves in different and sometimes awkward or uncomfortable positions, as a photographer would, can help us to move in that direction.

### Now I Become Myself

In the later part of her life the poet May Sarton wrote:

Now I become myself. It's taken  
Time, many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces.  
(Sarton, 1974, p. 162)

Writing this article has been a journey of reflection that I could not have taken in my early career. Transformation is only evident in retrospect. I can now see how my teacher, learner, researcher, artist and spiritual selves evolved as interwoven strands of my identity. My images tell the story as well as my words. Georgia O'Keeffe and Freeman Patterson have been my teachers, their art a metaphor for teaching and learning in the field and in the university. If I have inspired a few students to venture outside of their comfort zone, to explore the world in new ways and to take action against injustice, then it will have all been worthwhile.

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