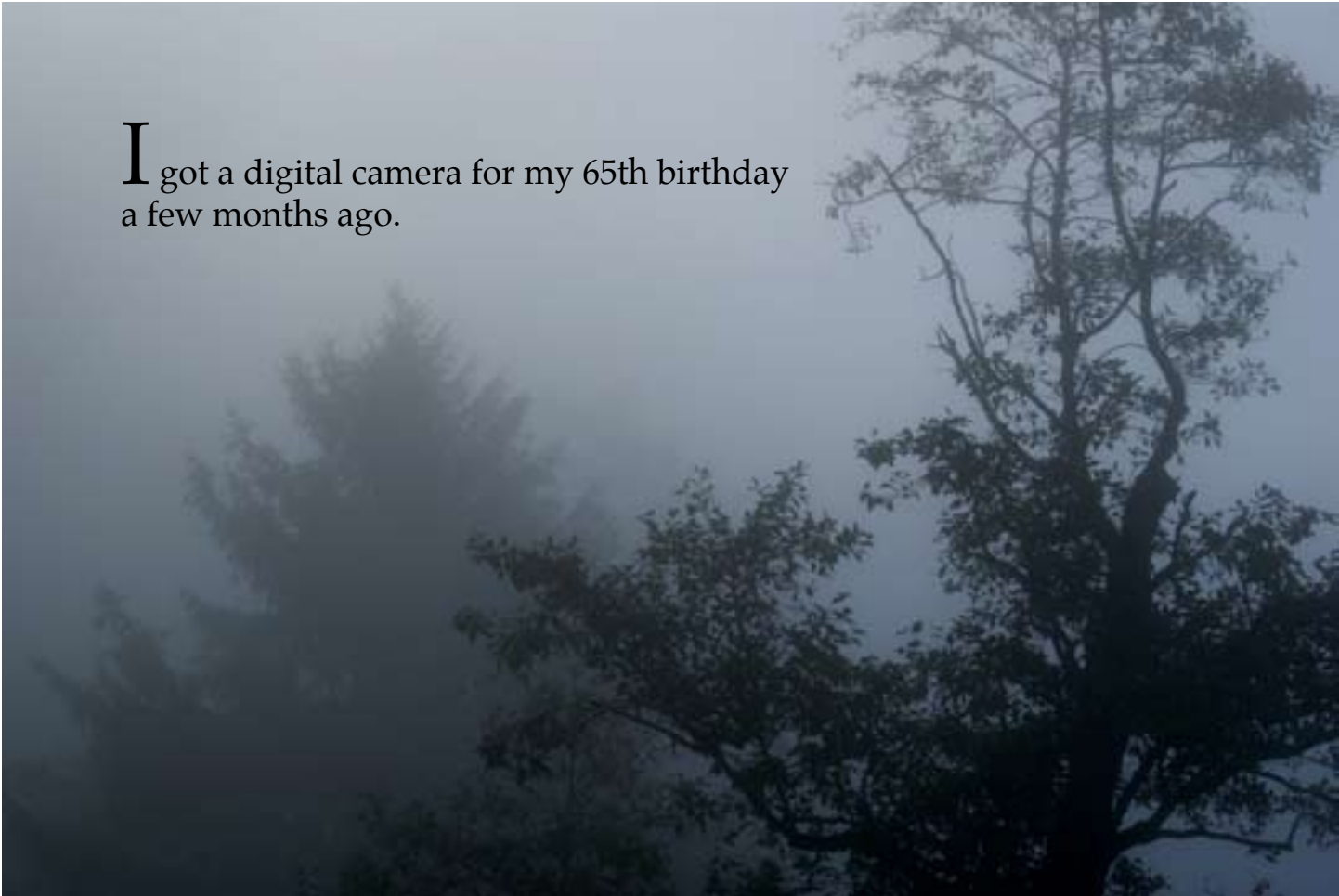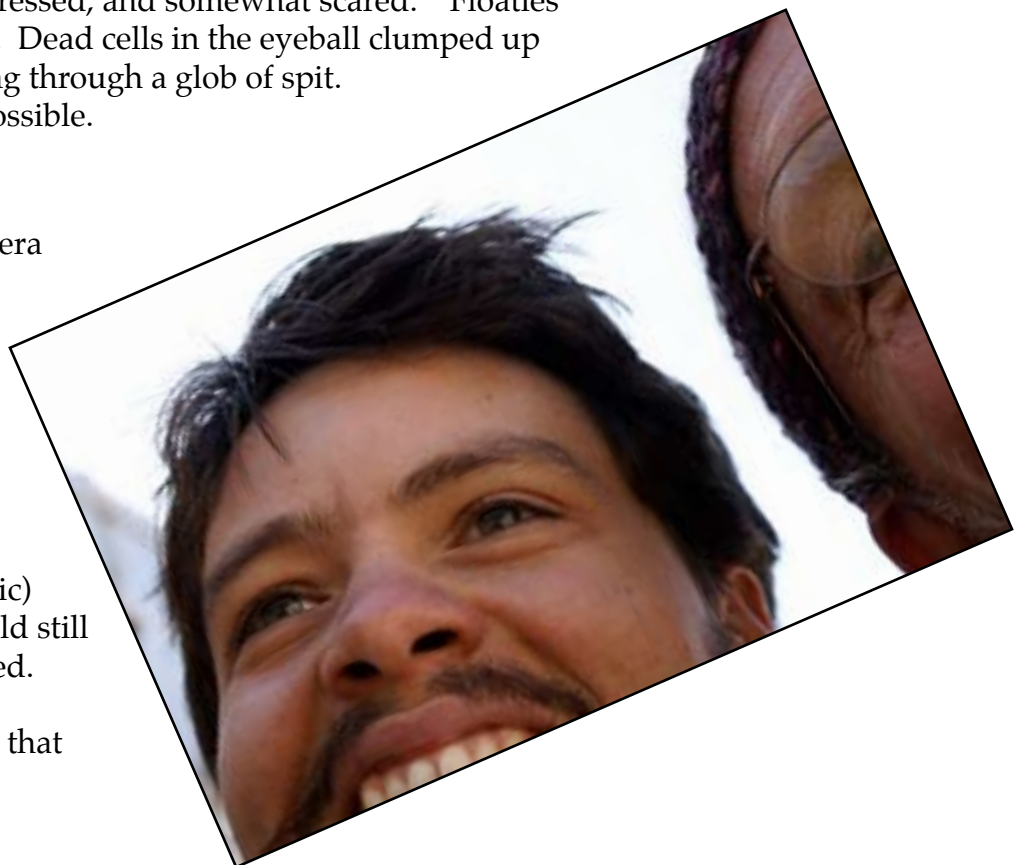# *SHOOTING PEOPLE*

Tom Bender

5 January 2007

I got a digital camera for my 65th birthday a few months ago.

It wasn't a celebration, but an act of faith. My eyesight had deteriorated suddenly a couple of months before to the point I couldn't work, couldn't use my film camera, and didn't know what the future held. I was depressed, and somewhat scared. "Floaties" they said. Nothing can be done. Dead cells in the eyeball clumped up in my line of vision. Like looking through a glob of spit. Sometimes OK, sometimes impossible.

With the digital camera I didn't have to focus, or really see through the finder. All I had to do was point the general direction, and shoot, and put the images on the computer, where I could see them big. It gave me some (probably unrealistic) hope for something I could still do. That's what I expected.

What I didn't expect was that magic would happen.

Suddenly I was taking pictures of people, which I'd never done. The process had always been too self-conscious, so it never turned out well.

Shooting film, particularly slides, you've got to get it right before you shoot. Composition right, focus right, light right, depth of field right. Doing that in front of someone took time, made everyone self-conscious, made the smiles forced, lost the fleeting moment. Every shot cost money, took time to get the results or even to know if the shot turned out. I'd done that, tens of thousands of times, as part of my work.

W ith digital, all that was gone. Click. See what you got. Try something crazier. Click. Delete what didn't work. Tune it afterwards on the computer to get it right. That's part of the art. I could have fun. People had fun with me. We saw the results immediately, and giggled, or said "Wow" or "Ugg". They saw me delete the bad ones (after blackmail threats, of course), so didn't have to worry. We all saw the beautiful, magical moments of us together in community, and had in our hands the magical result of "Oh, I wish I had a picture of that!"

Then I found a place on the internet <www.flickr.com/photos/qibender/sets> where I could post the images quickly, and people could look at them, and download and print out any they wanted. I didn't have to hassle with that, they could pick and choose, and come back, and pass access on to friends.

So suddenly there was something that hadn't existed before. A simple way to hold in our hearts the fleeting moments we so treasured in the instant.

But there was more. Flipping through the pictures in the camera with people at an event, they would invariably love the ones of other people, but feel they looked bad in theirs. That was the opposite of what other people were saying, and I realized how differently we look at things when we're the subject.

If it's someone else, we remember what actually happened, or what appeared to happen from the outside. If it's us, we're more likely to remember what we tried, but couldn't quite do, or feel self-conscious about how we *think* we might look to others. We look at the wart on our nose, but others look at the laughter in our eyes or the love in how we're hugging someone. And we're always more self-critical and unsure of ourselves (cuz we *know* . . .) than others *appear* to be (but actually aren't, inside).

Talking about it together, we're all starting to loosen up and be less self-critical.

Then my wife looked at one sweet picture of a couple of kids with devilish expressions in their eyes. "But you're in that picture, too," she said.

"Yeah," I realized. What I'd captured was part of a game we were playing, and though I didn't show in the picture, I was clearly part of the moment that was caught.

Looking through some of the pictures later, that perception rose to the surface again, and I saw something else. I wasn't separate from my pictures anymore. What I was capturing was a dance and exchange that I was part of. My seeing was changing to an interactive dance, and the immediacy of the images caught that invisible process as much as the visible surfaces.

Then I got goosebumps. Face after face was looking at *me*, behind the camera. I was part of *those* pictures too. And the love I kept seeing in those faces - did it mean they loved *me*? Well, yeah, maybe so! Not necessarily the love of lovers (but maybe . . .), but love as dear friends, or at least as much love as they radiated towards the tree behind me.

Okay, that's another hangup we probably all have. And the greatest gift we can give each other, and the wonderful thing that is reaching a critical mass in our community is living with an open heart. Letting our love show and be shared and break open someone else's heart until all our disconnected fears are washed away by a tidal wave of caring and sharing.

S_o I'm not afraid anymore, to stand up, get in the middle of things, and take pictures.

W_{hen} I move in close to take a picture of the magic of two lovers singing to each other at a gathering, I now feel people behind me are saying, "Oh, hooray, we've got a picture of that!" instead of, "Argggh, he's blocking my view." I feel somehow invisible but part of the process of community sharing and treasuring its joy.

In the midst of these eye problems, we were visiting Lane's dad, whose macular degeneration had just taken a huge jump, leaving him almost totally blind. It made my problems seem so small, yet at the same time raised a fear of what was to come. Yet he continues to paint and sculpt - cursing and agonizingly letting go of detail and color, yet finding something deeper awaiting to manifest in their absence.

And we've talked with my nephew, who has synesthesia. His different senses merge, and he sees written letters in color. He never liked his name, because he didn't like the colors of it! How different our inner and outer worlds are! And so wonderful when we touch each other's and discover new dimensions of life.

My eyes seem better at the moment. Accommodation, some non-conventional therapy, maybe the floaties have just moved out of the center for a bit.

Friends may wonder why I sometimes don't wave at them on the street, but I'm learning to live with the fact that some days I haven't a clue who that smudge is that I see.

But every morning when I open my eyes, and every night when I look up at the stars, I am awestruck like never before at the incredible beauty of this world.

The light on the waves, the halo around the moon, the sunlight shimmering in the raindrops on the trees, the love I see in people's faces.

I've lost the complacency that I'll always see this, and hold the preciousness and treasure of each moment.
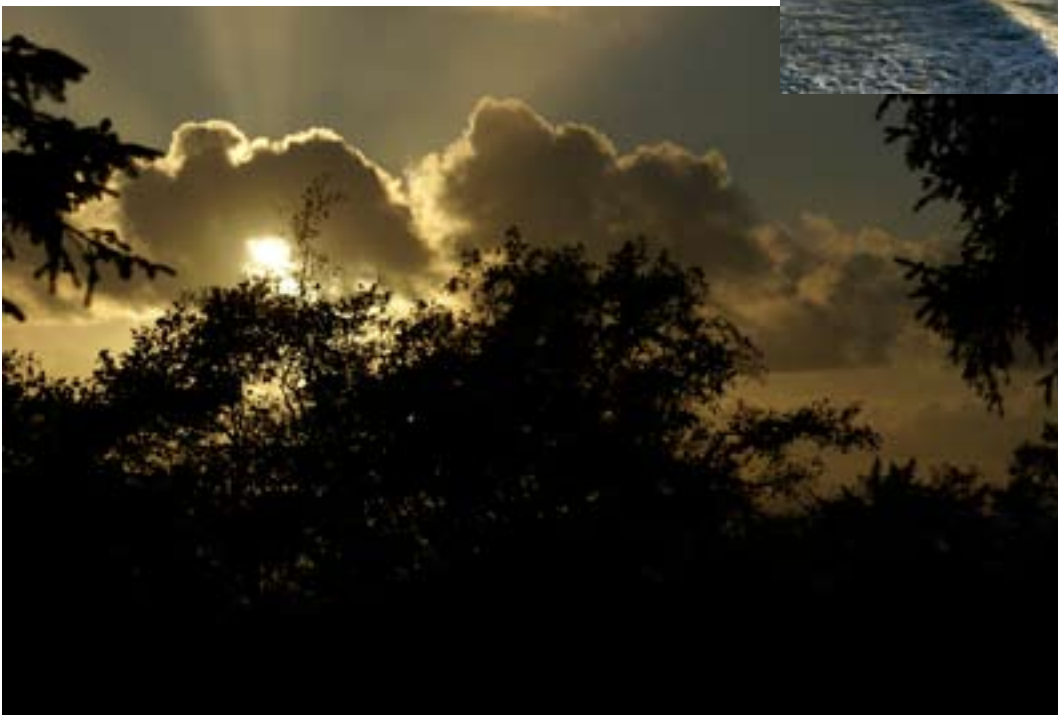
And I'm also seeing with new eyes.

A friend told me that maybe this was all just to teach me to see differently. I really didn't think much of that idea in that moment.

But I *am* seeing differently. I walk down the street, and suddenly a bush by the sidewalk stands out, beautiful like never before, and I connect with it in a way I never did before, and it seems to be trying to talk with me, and I'm almost able to hear it.

I look at a tree outside the window, tossing in the wind, and I see and touch somehow its deep-rooted soul. Almost.

But even that makes me aware of what I haven't been able to see, and open to possibilities I've never dreamed of, yet which people of all ages have said was possible.
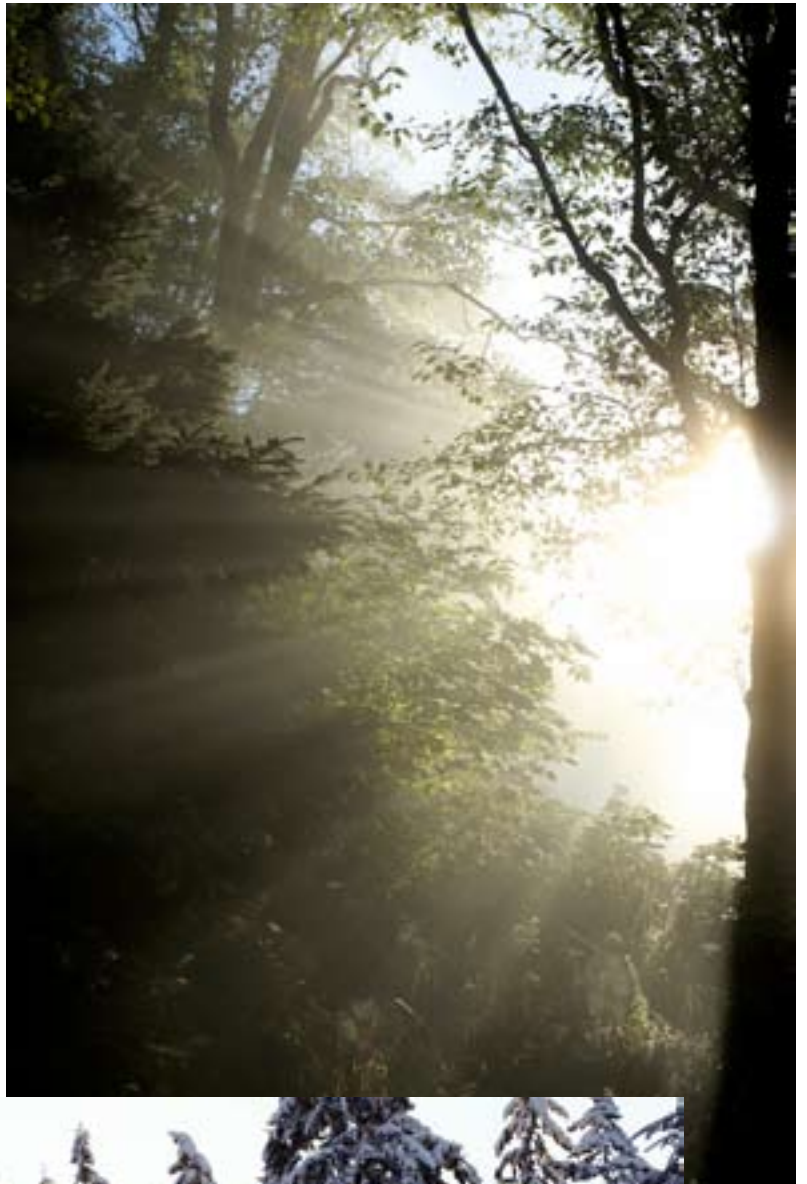
So there's gifts in loss, and there's nothing but change, and we're all breaking through our walls and discovering undreamed of worlds.

What an amazing universe!