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Newsletter, August 16, 2017

### Thinking about Photographs:



*Omaha Beach (1944) unknown photographer*

This is a very powerful image. You understand it immediately. Its potency comes from what it depicts: D-Day, June 6, 1944. Soldiers have embarked into the water and are seen wading up the beach into a barrage of gunfire. Smoke from aerial bombing has turned the sky black.

Imagine yourself as the photographer. You're positioned in the rear of the LST crammed with soldiers. Your job is to document the action, and you've been taking photos since descending into the landing craft off the destroyer an hour ago.

Suddenly, the gate drops and everyone rushes forward. You think, is there an image here, an empty boat, soldiers in the water, bombs exploding in the distance? Am I staying in the boat as instructed or jumping into the water and following the troops ashore.

What do you do?

Then there's Robert Capa, at the time a well-known photojournalist. He does go in the water, with the second wave, and shoots four rolls. This is one of only ten images that survives:



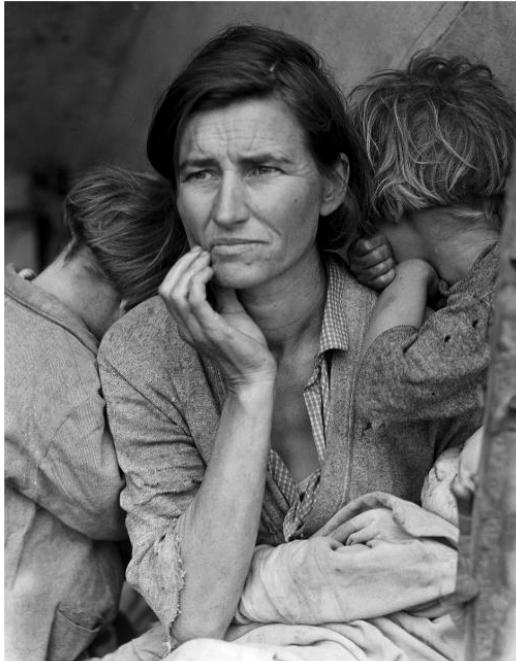
*Omaha Beach (1944) by Robert Capa*

The astonishing power of this image is just as compelling if not more heartbreaking than the empty LST. The lone soldier is soaked through and is now facing the brunt of German snipers. Remarkably, Capa has turned his back on the action to get this shot.

Again, imagine yourself as the photographer. You're hearing and feeling bullets whiz by you and somehow you find the wherewithal to be a photographer first and a survivor second. This is a masterful display of professionalism and bravery.

These are heroic images taken by heroes. They have the power to remove us from our orbits, to take us beyond the borders of our experiences and accept what they depict as universally true. Moreover, they are purely what they are, without artifice; we believe in their unbelievability: an evil had spread over the earth that brought soldiers from far, far away to erase it forever.

We grant photography this power when we sense the truth. There's no denying it when it's so clearly evident.



In 1936 Florence Thompson allowed Dorothea Lange to photograph her family because she thought it might help the plight of the working poor. "She always wanted a better life," her daughter later said.

We are also able to ascribe emotional validity to a photograph like Migrant Mother. There is no falsity here, we feel the desperation of the woman and her children. To do less would be to render ourselves hollow.

Dorothea Lange only took six photos of this scene and left having only gotten the woman's age, 32. She wasn't being callow, she just didn't want to intrude any more than necessary. She meant for the image to represent the harsh times of the Depression, but its underlying power comes from our emotional response which cannot be anything less than sympathetic.



Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath (1971) by W. Eugene Smith.



In a similar fashion, W. Eugene Smith's photograph of a Japanese mother bathing her daughter who was disfigured from mercury poisoning is a monumental depiction of love. We connect to this photograph through our fundamental understanding of this mother's love. This is as nearly a perfect photograph as exists in the world today.

You're the photographer on the scene. What photographic instincts do you have? Do you shy away and not intrude? The intimacy is overwhelming; does your camera come to your eye? Do we relate to it from a safe distance or has it compelled you to feel her touch and empathize with her feelings?

Smith and Lange and Capa and the unnamed photographer in the boat have revealed for us the truth of photography: that the power of a photograph comes from its honesty. We all have core values that maintain our sanity however much the times often seem in opposition to our dreams. Staying true is a mighty fine ambition.

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That's all for this week. Keep your chins up and take good pictures.

*Jonny*