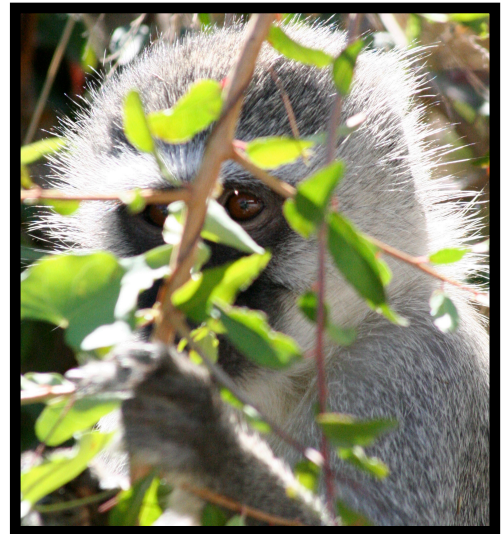


# • A v o d a h •

• D e v a n J o h n s o n •



If a picture is worth a thousand words, then my right index finger talks *a lot*. It has pushed down on many a shutter button, with each click taking a moment from existence and turning it into something two-dimensional. With the click of the shutter button, my index finger has flattened expanses of riverine landscapes and rays of sun diffusing through foaming seas of clouds, compressed the stilling faces of impoverished children and the longing eyes of vervet monkeys. It captures what I see, it exposes what I feel, it turns me inside out.



I was given my first camera at the age of sixteen as a Christmas present from my parents. (Actually, technically, it was my second, the first being a small, round, film camera my mom bought me when I was about eleven, but I think at that point most of its appeal came from the bright colors and mod design of its exterior.) It was a Canon Powershot A540, a small, silver point-and-shoot that fit in the palm of my hand. I remember the first images I clicked into existence with that camera: my brother on Christmas morning, my cat, the lava lamp on my dresser. They, of course, were not the most stunning photographs ever taken, nor would anyone have called them beautiful, well-composed, thought-provoking, or artistic. But on that Christmas morning, a bond was

formed, one that would only evolve and mature over the subsequent years: that between the camera and my body. It wasn't fleeting, like the fickle first crush of an elementary schooler, but a bond of strength, like that of two hydrogen atoms bonding to one of oxygen. It was natural, instinctual, molecular.



In February of 2007, about two months after the acquisition of my camera, I embarked on my first of many mission trips to Nicaragua. It was there that I absolutely fell in love with photography. It was like electricity – I saw the world through my eyes, and that sight – that specific view from my eyes - traveled, like an electrical current, into my body, igniting my heart and my soul, then passed through my finger, being transferred into the camera, through which it reached out and grabbed my version of the world.

I fell in love with many things during that trip. One was photography. Another was God. Both of these loves would last, and both would love me back.

The camera became a permanent fixture to my hand. Like baseball players say to think of the bat as an extension of the hand, the camera was an extension of my finger, which was an extension of my eyes and of my soul. I took pictures of anything that caught my eye – interesting plants, animals, unusual shapes – my favorite thing was when the soft gleam of natural light would hit something just right and make it seem as if it were glowing from the inside. Those were the little occurrences, the subtle, generally unnoticed moments when I could see God’s hand on Earth. Capturing these moments, these little gifts of the universe, became my obsession. I wanted to show other people these wonderful things that God has created, convinced that if they could see the world the same way I saw it, even the most devout of atheists would suddenly see that there was no possible way that all those cells and photons just landed in so specific a form by happenstance. I never told people that, I didn’t search out the non-believers and wave photos in their faces, saying, “Look! Here it is! Proof!” That probably wouldn’t have gone too well for my high school self. But for me, photography was my expression, and my proof. It was my evangelism. It was my worship.



The Daily Star, June 3, 2010.

ONEONTA - Irwin Gooen, 82, passed away on Friday, May 28, 2010.

Irwin was a photographer, writer, outdoor educator, environmental and peace activist, community volunteer, movie buff, canoeist, actor, rock critic, latke maker, road man, and gadfly. Stoner and jailbird. Jewish Taoist: The last of the Cosmic Cowboys.

To be buried on the Shoggi Boghi property which he stewarded, and which has been put into a Wildlife Land Trust.

A farewell party to be held somewhere down the line.

I don't remember vividly the first time I was acquainted with Irwin Gooen, but I think it was about ten years before I was acquainted with his self-written obituary. I was about ten years old. My elementary school did a program called "Fun in the Sun," a trip to Pine Lake for a day when we learned about outdoor safety and responsibility, among other things. Irwin was stationed on a picnic table, poised to pass on his respect and knowledge of the wilderness to the eager ears of fifth-graders. I remember listening intently to his explanations of the Earth, all the while mesmerized by the walking stick he held in his leathery, wrinkled hand. He had carved mazes of intricate designs into the wood over many years. I imagined he must have found that stick around the time I was born.



Irwin became a colleague and friend of my mother, who was the enthusiastic and environmentally-focused teacher of my fifth grade class. In the fall of 2008, during fall break of my first year of college, I accompanied my mother and her class on a field trip to Pine Lake. This was not a "Fun in the Sun" event,

but a project she wanted to do

independently with her

class. She borrowed an arsenal of small cameras from the school to do a workshop on nature photography with her students, and then let them go out and shoot their own pictures (I often say that my mom is like a little sister, because she always gets into everything I get into... nature photography being no exception). She had two helpers/presenters on the subject: one was me, the other was Irwin Gooen.



My mother had printed out some of my photos to use as examples, and Irwin had brought some of his own prints. We spent some time talking that day, about photography and nature, and its significance in our lives. A few weeks later, after I returned to school, I received a package from my mother. It contained the usual things a mom would send: some oatmeal cookies, a nice note written on kitten stationery, the most recent National Geographic. Also in the box was a small envelope addressed to my house in Oneonta. Some yin-yangs embellished the front of the envelope next to my name... classic Irwin. From the envelope I pulled a card with a yin-yang on the front.

On the inside was a rather long letter from Irwin, talking about his work and encouraging me to continue mine. When writing about his “nature work,” he added, “*The Hebrew word for ‘work,’ ‘avodah,’ is the same word used for ‘spiritual worship,’ and I use it in that sense.*” That encapsulated so succinctly the way I had always viewed photography. That summer I had *avodah* tattooed across my right index finger, as a reminder that everything I do on Earth, all my work, and all my photography is for God’s glory. The next year Irwin would be laid to rest under a headstone emblazoned with the Star of David and a yin-yang. His index finger will never make another image, but every time I look at mine I am reminded of what *avodah* meant to him, and what it has come to mean to me.



With each image my index finger creates, I am capturing a moment. It is this, the capturing of moments, that is the essence of photography. I have heard it argued that a camera only keeps one distant from the present, removed from the world around them. That an experience is less full when witnessed through the eyes of a camera. But the camera is not an agent of separation, how could it be, when it facilitates a relationship with the world that is just as tangible as sticking your hand in paint or water? No, the camera does not keep me out of the real world, it allows me to cut it open and dive into its depths. It allows me to remember more clearly, to show more vividly, and to see more fully. These moments in time, my moments in time, are my articulation, my praise song, my work, my worship. They are my *avodah*.

