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Teaching Students To Shoot from the Heart

By Mary Cummings

Rob Goldman certainly seems like one of the lucky ones. Photography, his passion from the day he first picked up a camera, has evolved in his 39 years into something more like a calling than a career. He speaks of it with a telltale intensity, a celebratory, almost manic ardor.

"I love photography," he said during a recent interview at the Siena Spirituality Center in Water Mill, where he will be conducting photography workshops in April. "The truth is I wouldn't do anything else. I'm lucky, but I worked hard to figure it out."

So the path has not been perfectly smooth after all. True, there have been no forks in the road—no seductive alternatives to his first love—but there has been at least one bout with doubt. The way he tells it, his journey was interrupted a few years ago when his road hit a chasm and he tumbled in. It took him "almost a year," he said, to climb back out on the other side.

It was not that he doubted his commitment to photography. That was solid. But just as the word tree encompasses many different species, so, too, he said, are there many ways of being a photographer.

"I knew I was a photographer, but what kind of photographer? Even though it seemed that I had made up my mind early, I had outgrown one phase of my career. I only knew that it was wrong."

So it is that in Rob Goldman's life there is a "Before" and an "After."

Before: Raised in Commack, he was lucky enough to have supportive parents who felt that what mattered above all was not what he chose to do in life, but that he be "committed to something." After high school, his courses in professional photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology put him squarely on a career path leading to advertising.

It was all about the laws of composition and "what makes a good photograph," he said. "When I graduated college I didn't know that photography existed as an art form." He did well in commercial photography, "traveled the world" and was handsomely rewarded. Then he became a parent and his perspective changed.

After: "The big shift for me was when my first child was born," he said. From the new perspective, his work looked "shallow and unfulfilling." Helping others—something he acknowledged never having given much thought to before—took on a new importance. And now, he said, "that is really what I'm about, as a teacher and even as a photographer."

It didn't happen overnight and Mr. Goldman credits his wife for her patience during the months it took him to discover just what kind of photographer he wanted to be.

In a sense, he had to discover something that, at some level, he already knew. "I had already started to teach," he said, "and I loved it." He remembers how he would "glow" after teaching a graduate workshop at C.W. Post.

It was the answer but, like so many people, he resisted what came most naturally. "When it's easy, we don't give the effort any credit," he said. "The lesson I'm learning is that when it's easy, it's right."

Yoga, which he said he came to through "back pain" almost a decade ago—with its parallel message about "the power of letting go" and its concept of "effortless effort"—has been a natural ally in his campaign to release the creativity of his students. On Thursday, April 4, Mr. Goldman will team up the Jeff Logan, a certified Iyengar Yoga instructor, to present a workshop titled "The Yoga of Creative Expression" at the Spirituality Center.



Rob Goldman's photos will be at the Siena Center in Water Mill.

Billed as a "hands-on, intensive workshop," it is designed to enable participants to let go and unleash their creativity, using photography as a tool. At the end of the workshop, photographs that reflect the authentic "creative voice" of participants will, Mr. Goldman hopes, provide "visible, tangible evidence of growth."

"The idea is not to turn everyone into a genius technical photographer," stressed Mr. Goldman, "but to embrace their own artistic genius, let it free."

Likewise, in the course of a five-day workshop at the Siena Center from April 1-5, Mr. Goldman will be encouraging his students "to explore themselves as their deepest source of inspiration, style and development of artistic expression." This workshop, titled "Shooting from the Heart," will allow more time for participants to explore the relationship between photographer and subject as they perform an exercise that Mr. Goldman often relies on to achieve his goals: He has his students photograph the same subject repeatedly until, eventually, "both people overcome their fears and insecurities" and are free to reveal their authentic selves.

"These are exercises that force the participant to come to terms with who they really are, what they stand for, what they love. These loves and these strengths are then, through a process, turned into photographs," he said.

When that process succeeds, "It's astounding," he added. "There's nothing like that feeling, for me to know I have opened them up to so much that is inside of them." In testimonials reprinted in his brochure, one student claims that a workshop gave her "a new way to see, not only what I photograph but why I am photographing." Another speaks of being challenged "to examine who I am and why I make photographs."

Of his own photographs, Mr. Goldman says that they are always about the person he is photographing, "not about me." Always in black and white, often portraits of women who are never posed but rather caught at the moment when they are most natural and thus most beautifully themselves, they have appeared in national magazines and in galleries, including the Stepping Stone Gallery in Huntington, of which Mr. Goldman is a founder and co-director.

Information on the April workshops at the Siena Spirituality Center in Water Mill is available from Mr. Goldman at (631) 424-1650.