

Fred Picker's Legacy

If the world is a just place, Fred Picker will be remembered as one of the best teachers of photography in the history of the medium. His methods enabled anyone to learn the craft, while his emphasis remained on the art. "Don't be creative when you should be mechanical," Fred constantly said, "And don't be mechanical when you should be creative." He tried to clearly separate the technical aspects, the craft, from the aesthetic, the art, finding ways to make the craft easier and more consistent, so that it took less of the photographer's attention. Ideally, that attention, freed up by routines and habits could be applied to making better pictures. "The hardest part of photography," Fred admonished, "Is finding the right place to stand." Meaning that the technical stuff is really quite easy, while finding and framing pictures worth making is a life's work. His emphasis on simplified equipment, using one film and developer combination, and making habits of processing and printing were liberating, because eliminating choices freed the imagination to more closely explore the world. Some examples:

I got my view camera at Christmas of 1984, after I attended Fred's Zone VI Workshop. I was intimidated by its newness, bigness and seeming fragility. How would I ever learn to use it? The tripod alone was intimidating, and I had worked in film and TV with cameras and equipment costing many times what I had just credit-carded. There was some other factor at work here. And it had to be overcome.

When in doubt, call Fred. I did. He laughed at my predicament, always the sensitive soul, and told me that when he had started using a 4x5, he wanted to be the fastest one alive. So he took a clipboard and pencil, went out to his car with the equipment, and proceeded to put it in and take it out of his car, setting up and leveling the tripod, mounting the camera and lens, and focusing the lens to infinity. Then he took it all apart, put the camera and lens in the camera bag, folded up the tripod, put it all in the trunk, and closed the trunk. He marked a tally on the clipboard. Then he took it all out and set it up again, as before, and took it apart and put it back in the trunk. Another tally mark. And again. He said he did it 100 times, adjusting what he did each time to make it smoother and faster than before. He wasn't hurrying, he was just learning what he needed to do to be as efficient as possible. That's what I needed to do, he told me. Then I would no longer be intimidated.

Well, I made it to 50 times in the late December Chicago cold, and was so crushingly bored I couldn't do it any longer. But boy, did I learn, and I was no longer intimidated! And 10 times wasn't enough to learn it all. I was still making adjustments after 25. Was 50 times enough? Well, there isn't an absolute answer. But I'm pretty good at it now. It's a great exercise, especially if you do it constantly thinking about how to do it better. Now when I'm out in the real world, I can think about the photograph I'm about to make, and in most cases fleeting light or changing conditions pose little problem. I've learned it is not like riding a bicycle. After a long hiatus from photography I had to relearn my ways, and I'm not as smooth as I was. I should do it 50 times. Or 100. I should do the same with my 8x10, but I haven't. Lazy.

Fred advised making habits, almost like rituals, out of equipment handling. To make a large format exposure: Close the lens. Set the f-stop and shutter speed. Cock the shutter. Test fire (that proves that the lens is really closed). Cock shutter. Check f-stop. Put in film holder. Pull dark slide. Shade lens with dark slide. Wait for magic. Fire shutter. Insert dark slide. Breathe. I was so excited when I got my 8x10 three years ago that I forgot this ritual during my first dozen exposures. Two of them came out completely exposed. I closed the shutter *after* I pulled the dark slide, and didn't even know it. Idiot. There's value to these habits, especially at \$2.50 a sheet for Tri-X 8x10. Not to mention that it might, possibly, maybe, have been a worthwhile picture that I ruined. Fred was right.

I recently made Polaroid portraits as a fundraiser at my son's school. I finally got in the rhythm of my exposure ritual, but not before I had ruined 5 or 6 \$2.25 Polaroid shots by forgetting to set the f-stop, or pulling the film envelope out with the lens open. After the first 10, though, I didn't miss for the rest of the 85 I made that day. Rituals can pay their way.

Fred had said that 4x5 Polaroid was a great way to learn large format, so I decided to use only that for my first year, and make no negatives. I had used Polaroid 667 with an old Polaroid Land Camera at the Workshop, and found it to be a great learning tool. The immediate feedback let me make another picture better than the first, or a third better than the second, or even a fourth better than the third. I had 4x5 Type 52 out in Chicago's severe cold, coating them

with mittens on and hoping wet coated ones wouldn't stick to the inside of the camera bag (most didn't, not sure why). Used my armpit as a developing place. Developed 2 minutes and more in the cold.

That summer I returned to the Workshop at Fred's invitation as unpaid junior staff member (which meant my duties were: go-fer, wine hauler, and darkroom swabber). I went out photographing with my Polaroid Type 52 one afternoon and came back with what is still the best picture I've ever made. I showed it to Fred and Lillian Farber. They both thought it was wonderful. "I can't wait to see what you do with the negative," Fred said. There was no negative, I replied. He looked at me, shocked. Why not? Because, Fred, you said to shoot only Polaroid for the first year. I haven't made any negatives with the camera. None? No, none. He was shocked, and so was Lil. No one had ever done that. He patted my shoulder, laughed (again, the sensitive soul), and told me to start making negatives.

Years later, when I moved to Vermont, Lil complimented me on that same picture, seeing it on the wall of my apartment and not remembering it from four years before. Then she looked closer: "This is a Polaroid!" she exclaimed. I told her the story and we had a good laugh.

Fred used to have people out to Vermont, where he would "put pictures in their cameras" as he later told me, taking them to places where the pictures begged to be made. The first time I visited him, he took me to a beaver pond where the soft early morning light was stunning. I was nervous, being out photographing with Fred Picker! I set up my camera at the car, then collapsed the tripod and put it over my shoulder. He looked at me a little funny and turned to lead the way down to a lovely view of the pond. I put my head under the dark cloth and looked at total moosh on the groundglass. Puzzled, I looked around at the front of the camera. I had forgotten to put the lens on. I looked at Fred, who started chuckling: "Thinking about maybe using a lens today?" I moped back to the car and got my lens. It was like showing up to my first cello lesson with Yo Yo Ma and forgetting my bow. To his credit, Fred never said another word about it.

It got worse, maybe. Mounting the lens, I grunted and worked and sweated to put something in the groundglass worth snapping. I finally did, and asked Fred to take a look. "A little stiff," he said, "but go ahead and make it." I did. Then, without a word he panned my tripod head 90 degrees to the right with his finger, never even looking through the lens. "Take a look at that," he said. It was almost perfect, and radically better than what I had just done. He only smiled. I made a minor adjustment and readied the exposure. The sun was behind a cloud. "Wait," said Fred. The sun began to peek out and the whole scene took on an airy glow. "Now," he said. I snapped. The proof is lovely, but I have never printed that negative, because it isn't mine. It's his, since he literally put it in my camera. The experience probably answers the issue that my 50 camera setup times weren't enough. And, nowadays before I make the exposure, I think of Fred and turn around to look behind me to see if there's anything better there. Sometimes there is. Sometimes not. But I find that the habit is good for my head. I can always turn the camera after I make the first one and make another.

Fred loved and hated critiquing prints. He loved it because he truly had an interest in seeing people's work improve, and his ideas were always useful – he enjoyed his role as a teacher. He hated it because he always wanted to be encouraging and helpful, and sometimes there was little positive to be said. The Zone VI catalog had an offer where one could send six prints and a check for \$100 made out to any environmental organization and Fred would critique the prints. It says much about all us photographers that the takers were few and far between. When prints did arrive, Fred usually met them with a groan, but then typically spent several hours looking at them and writing a critique that would be enclosed with them and returned. The critiques were unfailingly encouraging, and his emphasis, as always, was on the photographer's vision and creativity. Most prints that arrived had few technical flaws, so a critique on technique was of limited value anyway. His most frequent observation was given to 35mm photographers who were photographing subject matter that begged for large format: encouraging them to take the plunge and get a 4x5.

Fred loved photographs, and believed that much could be learned from studying the great photographers' work. He was especially partial to Strand, Weston, and Atget. And while he admired Ansel's contribution to the medium, and believed no one could do the grand landscape better, he ultimately put Ansel a notch below the others. He often recommended intensive study of the masters' work in books: "Go through and look at Weston's upper right hand corners first, then go through again and look at upper left corners," and so forth, he would say, recommending close study of how the photographs were constructed. We couldn't study composition enough, he said. And then he

would start talking about studying the great painters. Then he would say to take one last time through the book, taking a deep breath with each turn of the page, and just looking at the image as a whole, appreciating it for what it was.

Fred had little patience with those whose objective was to have the most or best camera equipment and with those who chose to bury themselves in the craft rather than the art of photography. He would listen while “workshoppers” (which came to be a slightly derogatory term) expounded on how many film/developer combinations they had at their disposal, and when asked, he would reply that he felt it would probably take his entire lifetime to truly understand what Tri-X and HC-110 would do, and that he didn’t have enough time to test and learn other combinations. He believed that we photographers, as a species, failed to understand our materials well enough. Good gamblers knew when to discard, he said, and the key was keeping the choices simple and discarding everything unnecessary.

Fred’s approach to exposure has often been criticized, many saying that it was good enough for beginners, but “more advanced” photographers would find it insufficient. Not so. It is simple and foolproof provided one has done one’s homework. Fred tested for true film speed to understand the proper exposure to get Zone I. Then using that ASA he tested to determine the proper development time that would yield a Zone VIII print value when the negative was given the minimum exposure in the enlarger to print black through clear film. Now, knowing the lower and upper limits of the materials, it was easy: find the brightest thing in the scene, expose it for Zone VIII, and take what there is in the shadows. That way one used the fullest range of the materials. The world was rarely too contrasty for the things Fred photographed to where he needed minus development. He also tested his development time for placing the high value on Zone VI½ and developing N+1½ to get more contrast in flat scenes or those for which he knew he wanted expanded range (like many of his snow scenes, which he saw as abstract and needing to have very high contrast). He coached that when in doubt, make both negatives so that there was a choice in the darkroom. Why N+1½? With graded paper, he could split the difference in paper grades, and have more choices when he printed. Why not expose for the shadows and develop for the highlights? Too hard, and it made exposure and development creative rather than mechanical. Expose for the highlights, know exactly how much development to give, and adjust shadow density through a limited set of alternatives. Keep It Simple, and Mechanical. Fred never believed that metering a scene should be an out-of-body experience, I still follow his advice, and I can’t remember the last time I made a bad negative unless I was just sloppy, which is rare when things are this simple.

Fred’s idea of the Proper Proof was contrary to conventional wisdom at the time, but has genius. Most photographers were adjusting proof exposure to see what the image looked like. First of all, having to adjust proof exposure implied making bad negatives to begin with. Fred thought that the purpose of the proof was twofold: to see if the image was worth printing, and to see if the exposure and development were in the ballpark. No adjusting proof exposure. Proof at the minimum exposure that gives maximum black through clear film. Record all the enlarger settings, and proofing becomes quick, consistent, and easy. And if one has done film speed and development time tests, and exposed properly, the proofs will look gorgeous.

Fred often told the story of a prominent photographer who riffled through a set of prints from one negative and pulled one out: “This is the best print of this negative that I’ve ever made,” he said. Fred thought that was wrong, and that every print should be identical. From that idea Fred worked out his system of printing in 3-second bursts of light, calculating dry-down percentages for different papers, and developing his notation system. “I watched this photographer print. He wrote the 6 or 7 steps he was going to do on the back of the piece of photographic paper. Then he put the paper in the easel and didn’t do what he wrote when he exposed it.” Fred wrote the steps on a separate piece of paper on a clipboard so anyone could follow his “recipe” to make identical prints, and filed the recipe with the negative so he had a starting point if he ever reprinted the picture. Oh, yeah, the prominent photographer was Ansel.

Fred believed in the value of failure to help us learn. He said he rarely got more than 5 out of 100 keepers, and believed that the best way to learn was to be hard on one’s self: he said he saved all his printing for the two weeks before Christmas, when he would print the best ten or so negatives from the year (he was photographing in the field about 100 days per year). He would mount and spot all ten, and then, he said, on New Year’s Day he would pick five of the ten and feed the woodstove. Having seen his output of work, the story is a goodly bit of fiction, but Fred was trying to make several points: we don’t spend enough time in the field (he recommended 10 days photographing for each day in the darkroom, and believed most photographers got it backwards), we’re not tough enough on ourselves in editing our own work (we fall in love with our images and print way too many of them), and once printed, our images

were immune from our own criticism and further editing. From these ideas, I learned how to fail gracefully, and to see my lousy pictures not as lousy pictures, but as experiments that didn't yield desired results. I now always consciously try something I have never tried before, or have tried and found unsatisfactory. In that way, photographing remains an intellectual as well as emotional challenge, and I don't take the lousy pictures as personal failures . . . as often.

Fred had habits of language that bred habits of the head. One never "took pictures." One "made photographs." One "went out photographing," or, with humor, he'd say: "Let's cruise for snaps," but he'd laugh and it was clear he didn't think of it that lightly. He would ask someone if he could "make his or her photograph." It sounds stilted, and it is, but the habits of language become habits of the brain, and the consistency and formality of the language gave the endeavor of photographing a note of underlying seriousness that Fred believed in. He liked Isadora Duncan's phrase: "Take your work seriously, but never yourself." Photography, he believed, should be serious work. "No frivolous pictures!" Fred would say, wagging a finger.

Fred pushed people to expand their own aesthetic boundaries, and push their creative limits. Only by doing so did he believe we develop as photographers. His love of the medium drove him to always be a stern coach: "You MUST GET THE PICTURE!" he would tell us, driving us never to be lazy, and to have as deep a commitment to beauty as he had. Simplicity of equipment and technique, unswerving emphasis on making "pictures worth looking at." Clear separation of craft from art, and proper understanding of mechanical means and creative ends. Fred Picker's legacy still stands as a challenge to all who undertake the practice of this medium.