

Remember to Remember: Nicholas Hlobeczy by Richard Whittaker

I had the pleasure of getting to know the late Nicholas Hlobeczy over a period of several years. He had the gift of seeing things with fresh eyes, almost like a child. And yet he was a thoroughly trained photographer having studied with the legendary Minor White. They were close friends right to the end of Minor's life. The interview that follows is a testament to a wisdom born of experience and a long quest. We met at Nick's home in Corvallis, Oregon.

Richard Whittaker: In one of my notes I have a quote you gave from Robert Henri. "The object behind every true work of art is the attainment of a state of being."

Nicholas Hlobeczy: It is as he says. I believed him when I was going to art school and I still believe him. I think he worked for the Art Student's League in the early part of the twentieth century. And also, if you don't work out of love, then it's not worthwhile. There's a certain quality of nourishment that can appear, something that people search for their whole lives and never find, as frightening as that may sound.

RW: It is frightening.

NH: Work can be pawned off as art and be nothing but a total misunderstanding of art and its function. Art does nourish us, and without this nourishment there can be no transmutation, no evolution of one's soul.

RW: Now you used this quote and others when you were teaching at Western Reserve?

NH: In 1970, when I just began trying to teach, I said all kinds of things. One time we had a workshop based on Mount Analogue, the Rene Daumal book. He had some very fine instruction on how to climb mountains, which is relevant to the work we do as artists.

RW: Make that connection for me, if you will.

NH: For example: when trying to work creatively things can begin to go down hill. All of the sudden you find yourself down in the valley, down in the doldrums. You wonder how in the hell you got there. Inattentiveness plays its part, stepping on a place where the gravel is loose and whoosh, you're launched. You could kill yourself. This can happen in the pursuit of art. I have done that. You can get so enthralled with what you're doing that you stop being attentive and you step on a bad place. You begin doing insecure things and away you go. You get identified. One can get so caught up—in a sense we fall from grace.

RW: What would be an example of that getting caught, or "falling away"?

NH: I forget the sense of myself. I forget me sitting here now. One is pulled by automatic feelings, thoughts, the wish to accomplish, to do something good, and all of the sudden there is absolutely no experience of my being here, having a conversation. And that's a pity, because only when I'm here, is it possible for all of me to address this or that question, so that my feelings are involved, and my mind and my body. All these are contributors when I'm here. If I'm not here, if I'm caught—it's difficult to talk, actually. First of all, I need to be more awake to see it. This is my experience. To answer a question, one has to be in question.

RW: To answer a question, I have to turn back towards myself and wait, in a way— right?

NH: This also is a key. It's something that we're constantly overlooking. You have to wait for the answer instead of putting your hand in the jar like a monkey. You won't get your hand back out because the jar's neck is too narrow. But there's a danger also to being more open. In a way, it can be dangerous.

RW: Do you mean something like "casting pearls before swine"?

NH: There's a strange key here as well, because in that moment, I see the swine are present in me. I already know when I'm trying to speak from that place. I know that I ought not to do it, because something in me is there that really is not appreciative in a right way. It's true, but it's so subtle you can hardly communicate it.

RW: Well, returning to the possibility of gaining a new state. In your book *ms.* you write that, "through craft people are enabled to experience a different state. It's as though a light were turned on." I wonder if you could say a little about that.

NH: One thing about craft is there has to be some intention. It can't be just automatic. How could you train your hand to move in just the right way if there's not a mind there to direct the hand, or if there's not a feeling to bring the energy to stay with it? These are all aspects of the craft. There has to be the body and the feelings, and there has to be control. Now it's true you can learn to do certain strokes—like in calligraphy. You can fill a canvas full of the right strokes and have nothing there. I think real craft is connected always with the idea that there are three parts connected: the head with the intention, the body accepting the direction of the head, and also the connecting link with feeling. Without the feeling you can not sustain an effort. You know that yourself.

RW: Without a certain quality of feeling you can't even see, in a certain way, don't you think?

NH: But it's a different level of feeling than we ordinarily think of. It's more aligned with thought. Generally the feelings we experience are not connected with thought. I've been trying for years to understand what this quality of feeling is. When you're out in the woods working—winter time and it's cold. You've got a camera with you. Your hands are cold, everything is cold, and yet there is this little spark of something that takes you further up the stream bed looking, looking... And one is even lifted by it. But there is thought there too, not only the day-dreaming. It's not the ordinary kind of emotion. The feelings make the connection somehow. It's like an adhesive. It's what keeps you there and keeps you at it, don't you think?

RW: I'd say there's a certain feeling that perhaps I bring to the effort already, and that sometimes something happens which involves a change in my state which brings another kind of feeling that wasn't there when I was beginning my effort.

NH: It's the second kind of feeling that I refer to. I start out with ordinary feelings. But if I can stay with that, the thing that makes it possible to stay with it is really something of a higher nature, something more true. I don't really know it thoroughly. I'm still exploring. I'm still discovering. I hope it remains this way always. But I do know that craft, if you pursue craft, will return you again and again to this creative state. To pursue the craft means to endeavor to bring together the intention of the mind to the hand, and an invitation to feeling—an invitation to a new kind of feeling. It's a funny thing about joy and sorrow. It's closer to real feeling when you experience both. It's hard to talk about.

RW: And one doesn't want to speak wrongly about it, yes?

NH: Right. In the quiet hours of my own desperation, in the middle of the night sometimes, this comes out: yes! That's the way it is! However in a conversation, which one also needs to bring craft to, we can't talk about perfected art. We can only talk about the process of trying to be more creative, more whole together. We're talking about being more whole aren't we?

RW: I think so. You see the practice of photography as a possible avenue to such moments of greater wholeness. Is that a fair statement?

NH: It's one of the crafts that enable that, but there are other crafts as well. Working with photography indeed can be that. You know, you always come back to that big thing, conscience, in one's work. And one doesn't have much conscience.

RW: Is it possible not have some mix of all that?

NH: I don't know. Some things I've done because it's just a joy to have done them. Then I'm surprised afterwards—"Gee, now wasn't that something? Did that really come out of me?"

RW: The constant is the pursuit of the craft.

NH: In some way working with craft changes your day-to-day life. It shifts. You don't shift it, but it does shift. What you value shifts.

RW: Over the years you've learned to recognize and trust that voice in yourself?

NH: Oh, yes. One can't even call it a voice. It's like an impulse, in a way. One could say taste. You see something and you turn away from it. You go down a certain path and something becomes apparent. Not just through your head, but through your whole body—including your feelings. Decisions are reconsidered.

RW: Body and feelings can both be a source of information. But in this culture we tend to learn to trust only our heads.

NH: Right. It's the one thing we could trust, but because people have so bombarded us on the emotional and the physical level those levels have become even more

inaccessible.

RW: Say more about that.

NH: To live an ordinary life, we have to trust our heads because everything is run that way. But the head also uses the body and the feelings, rather than the feelings and the body contributing to the direction to take. As much talk as there is against the head, you really do need to be in your thought though. You really need to be centered in some place in yourself that is very strong—just to be here and to see what the hell you’re doing. It’s a different sort of mind than people are talking about all the time.

RW: Not the inner jabbering?

NH: Not the inner jabberer, jabbing at me. [laughs] But it’s wonderful to see this broken machine bumping along, in a way, isn’t it? If you can begin to see it from a different place, you can also begin to see how observing it somehow mends things. That brings us back to hearing this voice. There are moments when you see yourself saying something or doing something, and you say, no to that. You don’t do it.

RW: If I’m interested in such things, maybe I can have this experience of how the body or the feelings can inform the mind.

NH: Right. There’s the thing. Because the mind is always using the body and the feelings and everything to do what it automatically wants. It’s the mechanical part of the mind doing this. But the real mind is an observer. It simply looks and sees the situations as they really are rather than how it imagines them to be. There is something about how to be inside, in a way that you can receive something. It is all craft. It is practice and the love of that path as you keep to the path. It takes a lot of courage, and the older you become, the more difficult it becomes, in a way. More rewarding in another way, but it is difficult. When I was a young chap in the fourth grade, in the summer time when it would rain, we would always go up on a friend’s porch. It was one story above the street. We would sit there all in a row, enjoying ourselves just sitting there looking out at the world, hearing the rain come down. All I knew was that I loved that experience. And once, when I was meditating, I thought, "Why not just be inside myself like that, just looking out?" And by God, it was just like sitting on the porch, looking out at the rain! That was, for a moment, a real experience of being much more whole, much more present, experiencing one’s sense of being... Art can bring you there, but if you do art to get there, you won’t get there. [laughs] I hate to tell you that, but it’s true.

RW: To change direction, I’m wondering what some of your memorable experiences are with photography.

NH: Well...there was an experience of going photographing with Minor White in a place called Lost Harbor, Maine. I couldn’t find any photographs at all. It was very difficult. But there were three images I took on that day. I knew the images meant something, but I didn’t know what. The only thing I knew was that I should hang on to them. This was at least ten years after having met Minor White. I met Minor in 1961. For me, they were very important. I had reached an obstacle where I couldn’t go forward. I was trying to be someone, to "do something", or to be as important as Minor’s other photographers were. Then these three images came. It was a breakthrough for me because I began to understand a little bit better about this "inner voice." It came from someone who had some other idea of what to photograph other than "what Nick wanted

to photograph."

RW: How did you happen to meet Minor White?

NH: In a round about way. I lived in the projects when I was young, and I had a very close friend there, Jasper Wood. He was something of a photographer and an "intellectual." He always ribbed me, "What do you know about philosophy? What do you know about psychology?" . . . which I knew nothing about at that time. He asked, "What really interests you, Nick?" and I said, Death. He said, "Okay, I'll give you a book to read." It was Moby Dick. I'd never read anything serious up to that time and I was 24 years old. Every night I would go over and we would talk about the chapter I'd read. Jasper was a very fine, contentious, difficult person, but he was very important to me. I'd just had cancer, and had almost died.

RW: And where was this?

NH: In Cleveland. We became friends and began to go photographing together. He was an amateur photographer and had set up his kitchen as a dark room. He collected the Minor White magazines from the very beginning, Aperture. I'd go over and read them all the time. I wrote Minor a sob-story about ten years after that about my struggles and not being able to get anywhere. He invited me to meet, and I met him in Jamestown, New York. We spent about four hours just looking at my photographs and talking about art. He invited me to come up any time, but said "be sure you have a question if you come." What the hell did that mean? But two weeks later I was up there at Rochester New York and I had many questions. [laughs] It was quite something. I would go up some weekends and there on the coffee table would be a big bottle of Armagnac, crackers and cheese. We'd sit up practically all night talking and looking at photographs-candles burning. We became very close friends. It was from the experience of reading Aperture that I got in touch with Minor White.

RW: How many years did your association last?

NH: I met him in 1961 and knew him until he passed away in 1975. In fact, when he had his first heart attack he had just stopped in our place on his way home.

RW: Was Minor the founder of Aperture?

NH: Ansel Adams and Edward Weston might have been with him when the idea came up. I think Minor was elected to carry the ball.

RW: So when you met him, your interest in photography had already begun?

NH: Oh yes. My interest really began when I discovered Camerawork in the library of the art school, The Cleveland Institute of Art. That would be around 1949. It was a very interesting thing, because although I was a mediocre art student, when it came to photography—almost from the beginning—I was winning first and second prizes almost each year at the Cleveland Museum of Art show, what they called "The May Show." But I began to know about photography as an art form through the photo-secessionist magazine Camerawork. I didn't know anything about the philosophy of it. I learned that much later. It's a very special thing, you know.

RW: Tell me something about that.

NH: The idea that art and the work with the camera can lead to inner growth?

RW: Do you know who came up with that name, by any chance?

NH: It was Alfred Stieglitz himself. R

W: Did you ever meet Stieglitz?

NH: No. But in a way I did. Jean [Nick's wife] and I went to the Library of Congress to see the Stieglitz collection there. I was so taken by these images that when I left the Library of Congress I felt like I was walking on eggs. I didn't want to do anything to disturb the state I was in. Everything was so alive and wonderful. Of course it disappeared, but it was very inspiring. I was convinced from that point that I really wanted to pursue photography.

RW: Do you think there's a philosophical thread coming down through Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, Adams and so on?

NH: Definitely. I don't know where it began really, but in a way the idea was carried by Stieglitz. He was a vehicle for a tremendous movement in this country, the one who brought an entire new body of art here. In a sense he was used. He was aware of people like Arthur Dove, John Marin and certainly Georgia O'Keefe. He was the one who recognized Ansel Adams. He also was very appreciative when he met Minor White. He was kind of the father, a catalyst for some very important happenings. He was also certainly a big influence for the F64 group. Minor knew personally Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Ansel got Minor his first job at the Art Students League in San Francisco. They were all connected in so many ways—ways they didn't even know themselves, I think. We used to talk about that, about some kind of stream or chore of effort. And that people come in from the side and would join that stream. You would either contribute something or not, just suck off it—which a lot of people did.

RW: It's shocking to hear that you, at the age of 24, had gone through cancer. I wonder if you'd talk a little about that, and about your conversations with your friend about death.

NH: Well it was an awesome experience that's very hard to communicate. First we read Moby Dick. Then we read Death in the Afternoon by Hemingway, and many other Hemingway books. There were also a whole series of French writers. At the moment I do not remember all their names. So I began reading these books about death and about rebirth and the wonderful Saroyan stories of family. Every night we'd get together and have some wine or tea and we would talk about them. It was just a lucky thing. He took the time, took an interest.

RW: It sounds like he was a great gift in your life.

NH: A found friend in life is a gift. And he took me out to do street photography. He took me into the black neighborhood to photograph black children and so on. And I had some marvelous images from those days, but most of these negatives are gone now.

RW: He sounds a very unusual man. I'm wondering about your years with Minor White. What moments stand out?

NH: I remember that I got quite emotional that he never criticized my work, and I

couldn't understand that. He was always criticizing people's work, but he never did that to me, and I really got very emotional and was almost in tears one time. I said, "Why is it Minor, that you never criticize my work?" He said, "Why should I do that, Nick? You're my peer. You have no idea what you're doing. Just keep doing it."

RW: Was it Minor White that had the idea of equivalencies?

NH: Yes, and I think originally Stieglitz said it and Minor focused on the concept. I work with that idea of "equivalence." It bears some relationship to the notion of photographing things for what else they might be, what they could be equivalent to. That could lead to the notion of being a symbol.

RW: What do you mean by "higher mind"?

NH: The idea that there is a more central place within us from which one can see, simply observe, whose language, by the way, is symbol.

RW: Have you, from your own experience, any impressions to go along with this idea of form? You've spent years and years looking at things.

NH: To me the most interesting and most profound thing of all is that this creative process goes hand and hand with the growth of one's sense of being. That is what interests me. That takes me down many avenues—a study of form and sequence, symbols, but all these things are just keys to where it is I wish to go. At the same time I am not all that sure what lies behind that door. It may be a looking glass world. Probably the best thing is simply to be in that place in oneself in which one can simply observe. You move this here and that there, and put things into places, and you just observe it. What is it doing? Why is it doing it? I don't even know the why of it. You can get into diagnostics and that can be a trap. Everything can turn into a trap. But this is what interests me. I've spent most of my adult life, from that fateful event, of my own possible death at 24, trying to come to something. I've had fifty years in this journey of trying to find a path in life. Does being a painter help? Does being a photographer help? Yes, they seem to. And even writing bad poetry, does help. These things help along the way, perhaps in how to live.

RW: At age 74 you're still a learner, a seeker. Do you think that's unusual?

NH: Some think it's unusual. I think it's normal, so I don't know. It's just a fact. I'll tell you one thing. At this age, you're very much more aware of your limitations, but you're not limited in your appreciation of truth. It's quite exciting. At the same time we eventually are going to pass away, and the most important thing I can see right now, is transmission. If I can say or do something so that someone will not be misled and their lives made more useful for themselves, then good. When I was in high school, I was a fairly good at art. One Christmas my mother gave me a set of oils in a beautiful box. I was a sophomore. I was absolutely enthralled. They arranged so that I could go to night school down at the Pittsburgh School of Art and I was going down there and drawing from nude figures. I was in love with Rembrandt. I read about painters. We did portraiture. I used to go on Saturdays, life drawing. So part of my sophomore year, my junior and senior years in high school, I was also attending the Pittsburgh School of Art. When I was in the Navy I also painted and sketched. When I got out of the Navy I had a portfolio that got me into the Cleveland School of Art, a pretty good school.

RW: Going back to your thought that certain things seem to have gone underground in the art world. Do you have any other thoughts about that?

NH: That's the only place where something can grow and find new forms of expression. The new forms come out of the sub-conscious experience—the sense you come into the world with, rather than coming out of my doings in society, being involved in all the fashions—ought to and ought-not.

RW: You were talking earlier about your practice each morning of making a photograph, and how the practice calls upon an attention one doesn't have, that sometimes it's like raising something from the dead.

NH: Both the Lazarus story and the story of the Good Samaritan are so connected with why we're alive, why we experience such a thing as life. You see someone and you begin to see what's dead in them. And you can be helpful to them because you see what is dead in yourself. This is all connected somehow with the idea of Self-development. It is also a question of attitude, and if lucky perhaps a wish.

RW: You say, "Self-development." How do we self-develop?

NH: You don't. It's the way you take the words. It means the development that takes place as the result of self-study. It doesn't mean that Nick "develops himself." It means that which is a higher in ourselves, comes down into us because of a change in attitude.

RW: There's something suspect about that phrase "self-development" isn't there?

NH: It's very suspect. Because people right away take it as self-development. I develop myself. Rather than that I make an effort to be clear enough to see what is going on. This seeing, then, has a transformative power. And that somehow heals, somehow does something that I don't really understand. This latter approach is what brings about a balance. No one is going to "engage" in it, because they can't "do" it. It's very peculiar. You have to let go of doing. And I think this is what we can find in art. This is what I loved—painting in the impressionist style. I didn't know how to "do" it. "What will happen if I put this or that down on the canvas?" You begin seeing these things move, and creating form. Up close and it's nothing but a bunch of paint—I love paint, but you move back and it comes together and is materialized. However there's this question of formulation. If you know a lot of what to do it becomes formalized. Things become harder, they crystallize in a way that you are unable to move.

RW: What do you think of these people out there who give workshops about the wonders of creativity?

NH: A gathering of people to work together and to explore together, to paint or make photographs or to write together, I think is a very valid thing to do. In the Edo period in Japan, when they would finish a scroll, all the artists would get together and they would have wine and each person would write something at the end of the scroll, some calligraphy or a little poem. They would respond to this creative thing, creatively—and it was a sharing. But you can't have a workshop that way. You can't get people together in our society and say, "well, let's share." In our society you have to find a new way to find people. There's the job of attracting people, and then there's

the pursuit of keeping people there, which can go wrong. And before you know it, someone is behaving like they're "the teacher." That's what's wrong with most all of those workshop situations today. Minor White told me something very interesting. He said that one needs to become more and more of a student. The person who conducts the workshop needs to come at it trying to learn how to be a student even more so, more and more, deeper and deeper. That's how I approached my teaching. It was "I am pursuing this. Let's try it together." The students did like being around me. I would say, "Let's have a workshop, and it could be based on magic." What is magic? Or "Let's base it on Mount Analogue. Everyone learned to love that book. Let's really look at this book. And let's derive what we're doing out of that experiencing. And of course, I was learning. I'd do things where I'd just put myself out on a limb. I didn't want to teach—you know—this finger-pointing teaching. I learned to steer clear of that because of Minor White's influence. Of course, I did a lot of teaching, but the right kind hopefully.

RW: Can you give me an example of putting yourself out on a limb?

NH: Well, I didn't really know what was going to come out of the question of magic. I mean all these various people coming—they're going to bring their own notions of magic. I had my own. I knew that mine could not be complete, so I was there to learn. It wasn't put your money down on the barrel head, and you'll get so much at the end, you know. Generally, when we charged for the workshops, what it did was cover the cost of the food, because we made our own meals and we listened to music and some times we'd end up having to build the table that we ate off of. We had a number of these workshops at our cottage. One year we read Rilke, *The Eulogies*. We would sit down to breakfast and there was a fellow who could read German and he would read a verse in German, and then I'd read it in English. At each meal we'd read something and then ask, "What could we photograph that might evoke something of this feeling, this quality? Can I find some image that would be some equivalent?" So here we are, back at Minor White and his "equivalencies." These weekends were all very wonderful. They have become a model for what I wish for. Four photographers came out of those work periods, one who teaches at Cornell University, one who was the director of an art school in Maui, Hawaii; another went to the Guggenheim where he is head of their photography department. The fourth one is a commercial photographer, very good at what he does. One of my students became a cabinet maker and wound up teaching at the Road Island School of Design. I feel a certain pride for all of them; they are all artists.

RW: I think you said that to be an artist, art has to come first. In your case, you have a loving wife and two loving children, but you said you also had this mistress. You'd come home and have dinner and right afterwards you'd go down into the basement and work late into the night.

NH: I did that. Maybe it was ego to begin with. But we need to distinguish between what is ego-driven and what is driven by the muse within—a big distinction there. So you begin turning your back on ego motivation because you've seen it so deeply. I'm not saying ego-motivated is a bad thing, because in those days it began with that. It must have been. It drove me to distraction. It was my mistress. But that can end in disaster or in a different kind of suffering, the suffering of just seeing yourself. In asking yourself what the hell are you trying to do? What do you really want? Do you really want to be a famous photographer? Is that what it's about? Or is it something else? In this way I found my way to the muse. So having the good fortune of not becoming famous, I had a different opportunity. I learned a lot of crafts over the years. At age fifty I learned how to build a house. I wanted to build a house and I knew if I was ever going to learn to build

one, I had to do it now. And I built a cottage. I actually built with friends.

RW: You know Carl Jung said that every man should build himself a house.

NH: He did? I love Carl Jung. It's a wonderful experience. I'll never forget it. It took me years. It wasn't really quite finished when I sold it twenty years later. You know that's an interesting story. In the early 60's I had seen some reproductions of some of Edward Weston's 1936 nudes of his wife on the sand dunes. So I wrote to him and bought two of these prints. They cost me \$25 a piece. In 1978 I sold the two of them for a total of about \$10,000 and with that money, and a little more I'd earned from side jobs, I built my cottage. This money bought all the lumber and then some. It was a grand experience—something real.

RW: That's a great story.

NH: It just happened that way. Even Jean loved them. I got them because I loved them. And many years later, I sold the cottage for \$72,000. It was on protected land along a river. That money helped me to get settled here in Corvallis. You mentioned Jung. Memories, Dreams, and Reflections. That's a wonderful book. We used to make a list of books that were worth reading and that one was on the list.

RW: Well, some books are really worth reading, as you say. And earlier you gave an example of kids not having a book to turn to. That's something else.

NH: Right, you're present with it. I remember once being on a quarry pond, ice skating, and the ice began moving up and down like this. I refer to that as a conscious moment. Really, it's a moment when I am. There are no words for it, actually. I remember once having an accident. I was about to go head on into another car on a snowy road. Everything slowed down. There was plenty of time. I was absolutely cool and collected. I steered the car right across the road in front of the other car to the other side of the road instead of trying to get back, in which case, I would have just slid into him. I was able to avoid getting killed. But, it's like my teacher said to me, "Nick, you don't want to wait until the car is upside down, to be awake." It's too late, then. One has missed one's entire life. Like quicksilver, it has vanished. Sometimes it takes another person to give you a prod. But then it's up to you to find out how to do it yourself. Hopefully there's this chance of being resuscitated. I really wish people would know that, would really see that they're not alive. I wish that I would see more often that I'm not alive! Because the difference between one and the other—you might as well be buried in the ground. Don't you think it's that strong sometimes? There is another thing. Talk about mentors. I asked myself, who was my first mentor. I remember this man, his name was Mr. McKim. He was a very old chap. When I was sick, I would have to stay home three or four days. He taught me how to play chess out on his back porch. And there was our landlord, an old codger who played flute, beautiful flute. Well, I was a rowdy kid running up and down the stairs, and he couldn't play his flute. He said, "Nicky I'll bet you can't sit still for two whole minutes." "I can!" [hits table with fist for emphasis] Just two minutes, and then I would get the two cents. He had a big leather couch and a great big clock that went tick, tock. And I sat on that couch quiet for two whole minutes. Didn't move or twitch a muscle. Talk about fortuitous things to happen for a second-grader. I had that experience of sitting there hearing that clock. It's still easy to recall that. One has mentors all the way through if you're lucky enough. That's luck. It's only luck that I had those moments of remembering, sitting on the couch. You remember those moments and those are conscious moments. There are moments when one really is awake.

It's not that other thing that we call "life."

Nicholas Hlobeczy died in 2007.