DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

Camille Seaman: We All Belong to Earth
by Richard Whittaker

The first thing that captured my attention upon stepping into Camille Seaman's home was one of her stunning photos, a large framed print centered on one wall. And then I noticed two large, wolf-like dogs in kennels. They regarded me silently. About forty-five minutes later, having looked at scores of Seaman's sublime Arctic and Antarctic photos, she let one of the dogs out. It came over quietly to check me out. As I looked down at the animal's long face and erect ears, it wasn't apprehension I was feeling—let's call it mobilized attention. The dog looked up at me and I was mesmerized. I'd never seen eyes like that in a dog before. Yellow, and they seemed huge. Astonishing eyes. I was being regarded by a being from some other world. The dog sniffed me a few times and Camille said, "You're in." That was a relief. By then, we'd talked a good bit and the things I'd heard were more than just interesting. I'd already proposed we do an interview on my next visit.

Camille's story is unusual. Not the least of it is her almost instant success in the art world, something she'd never even thought about. And she's a senior TED fellow. How did it all happen? About a month later I was back to hear more of her story. Before setting up for the interview, Seaman mentioned that she was planning to create a platform online for indigenous stories about climate change. I quickly turned the recorder on…

Richard Whittaker: That's great. Do you see these being traditional stories or current stories?

Camille Seaman: Probably a mix. I want it to be almost like a cross between a news thing and an anthropological archive. I want it to be really dynamic—with people's videos and multi-media pieces and sound pieces and written word and art. I want it to be everything.

RW: And you mentioned that you just got a Stanford Fellowship.

CS: Yes. A Knight Fellowship from the John S. and James Knight Foundation. It starts September 1st this year.

RW: Well, that's fantastic. Okay. I wanted to start out by asking a little about your parents. You come from a Native American and African American background. Could you talk a little about that?

CS: My mom's dad was Italian—like off-the-boat Italian—and her mother was African-American, probably descended from a slave in South Carolina. My father is Shinnecock. And recently, because I've been writing my life story, I've had to do some background research. I was able to very easily trace our family history back to about 1620. It's one of the oldest families on Long Island. So my dad is part of the Shinnecock

tribe. Traditionally, they were located in the area of what is now called the Hamptons—really right next to South Hampton. There is some controversy, because we're in the middle of the Hamptons and have almost 1,000 acres that people want. But it's our reservation. We were just federally recognized by President Obama in 2010. It was the first tribe in a long time to gain federal recognition. So growing up on Long Island, it was my father's family that really had the influence over my upbringing. That meant it was his father and mother, my grandparents. He had seven brothers and sisters and we had tons of cousins, so there was always activity, but we were quite poor.

RW: Did you live there on the reservation on Long Island?

CS: No, we never did. We were quite lucky, because my grandfather lived and grew up off the reservation in Huntington on the Long Island Sound on the north shore. Traditionally it was one of the big ports for the whaling community. Shinnecock is on the south fork of the island, if you look at it like a lobster claw. So we grew up fishing. I didn't hunt. My uncles and my grandfather would always shoot something; a squirrel, a raccoon. That was how we fed ourselves. We didn't go to the store very often for stuff like that. We had our own chickens. We had geese. We had a huge garden. So we really grew up kind of playing with earth.

RW: Really in contact with nature.

CS: Well, it was interesting, because where we lived in Huntington was on a hill. Even when my grandfather was growing up there, they called it Crow Hill. It was this isolated little bump surrounded by the town of Huntington. And the way we were living wasn't like the way other people were living in that area. I don't think anybody else in Huntington had chickens or a garden the size that we did. Or shot squirrels in the woods or raccoons to eat. You know what I mean?

RW: Sure.

CS: So it was already quite different. One of my aunts was put in charge of teaching us about which plants were good for what. Another aunt was put in charge of how to tan hides, how to skin, how to take the squirrel and the raccoon and actually tan the hides.

RW: And your family did that?

CS: Yes. We did everything. And my grandfather was an amazing gardener. We would put the fish heads that we caught into the garden as fertilizer. It was just part of the way we grew up. I mean we all knew what we were. I don't think we advertised very much. It was not in fashion to be Native, or of color, even by the time I was born. I mean my parents were mixed race. They got married in 1969. The year before that it was made legal that mixed races could marry.

RW: That's amazing.

CS: It wasn't that long ago. A lot was happening socially for us. So yeah, that's kind of the background from which I grew up.

RW: When we talked a few weeks ago, you were talking about your grandfather and how important he was to you.

CS: He was pretty impressive partly because he had no teeth left in his mouth, but he

refused to wear his dentures. So everything was [mumbles]. He would even eat corn on the cob without teeth.

RW: Wow.

CS: And he would get so frustrated, if you didn't understand him and he had to repeat himself. And he would even do funny things. He had one of those recliner Lazy Boy chairs. He worked at Sears Roebuck and he would come home after work and get in the chair and start watching something on TV. And immediately, he'd fall asleep. We would go to change the channel and he'd be like, "Don't touch that TV!" He had like this extra-sensory perception.

He was really funny and so incredibly supportive—like there was no inequality between men and women in my family. The boys and the girls were not expected to behave in different ways. In fact, as girls we were really encouraged to be outgoing and be our best. It was my grandfather who encouraged me to play Babe Ruth baseball with boys. I was the only girl on the team.

RW: That's impressive.

CS: In fact, I was the 13th girl in the United States to play Babe Ruth baseball. This was before Title IX. There was controversy about that, but he really encouraged us to not let anyone or anything keep us from being our best.

RW: Tell me that story about sitting out in the field with him.

CS: Well, I was probably five or six years old with a couple of my cousins. He made us sit outside in the hot sun on a summer day. There were no clouds in the sky and he basically just had us sit there. You didn't question Grandpa. You just sat there and after awhile we started to sweat and perspire. He pointed up to the sky where a little white tuft of cloud started to appear. He said, "Do you see that? That's part of you up there. That's your water that helps make that cloud. You become the cloud that creates the rain that waters the plants that feed the animals." So he was illustrating that cycle, that there was no separation. Our water is recycled. Everything in our body is recycled. We are literally part of everything.

He would take me into the woods, just me, and we would go for a walk. He would stop at each tree and introduce me to the tree as if he were introducing me to a person. He would really have me look at the form of the tree and the way the branches were and the texture of the bark. He would have me hold it, and he would say, "Slow your breathing. Quiet your mind and listen. Listen to the tree." And literally you could hear it moving. You know?—this huge, massive thing. You started to understand that this was a living thing. It was moving at a much slower pace or rate than we do as humans, but it was alive.

Of course later, in science, they tell us that we're part of this tree of life. Also another benefit of his introducing me to the trees in the woods that way was I knew those trees. They were individuals to me, not just a tree. And I never got lost.

RW: So right now, as you sit here, do those memories come alive?

CS: Yes. They do.

RW: Isn't that interesting? I think that even children who don't have the benefit of that kind of wonderful guidance, will have moments they remember like that, the smell of a tree they climbed, the birds, the feeling of being in a silent snowfall. I mean those memories are so vivid. It's contact with nature.

CS: I hope. I know that as more and more of the human population lives in urban environments, that isn't every child's experience. It's less and less as we become more of this virtual world of online connection. I'm not saying that that online world is a bad thing, but I think that without having context for it in a real world, our natural world, then it becomes very easy to disregard nature, destroy it and, in doing so, affect ourselves.

RW: Right. Ultimately damaging ourselves.

CS: Exactly.

RW: So this deep experience in your early years with the guidance you got from your grandfather, how is that alive in your work today?

CS: You know, I take for granted that I'm me. I'm just me. I didn't think of it as special. It just was. And I meet so many people who don't have that grounded-ness, or stillness, within them. I was taught that, to be still, at a very early age. I think I told you that my grandfather everyday after school, from the time I was about five until thirteen—everyday, rain, snow, heat, it didn't matter—I had to sit outside and be still. And I had to just sit and observe.

RW: And for how long?

CS: About an hour.

RW: That's really something.

CS: And for a child that isn't necessarily easy.

RW: Not at all.

CS: He would have me come in after an hour and he would say, "What did you see?" And if I was feeling like I wanted to make trouble, I'd say, "I didn't see anything." Then he'd be like, "Go back outside and sit." So it was really a discipline, but at the same time he was teaching me to observe. So I really owe him my ability to see, in a way. So from the very beginning, yes, that made a profound effect on who I am and what I do. There is this incredible foundation that I was given as a gift. Really, I took for granted. It was just the way I was raised. And in some ways, I had a bit of animosity toward it. I was not like the other kids in the community. I had my hair in two braids. They used to make fun of me and call me Pocahontas. You know?

RW: You had animosity towards what?

CS: Being raised that way.

RW: I see.

CS: Not being the model kid like all the rest of the kids. But somewhere in there I embraced my difference. I embraced that I was not like the others. And in that, I think, is strength, especially as a young girl—because then you don't try to fit in. You just live your own truth. That gives you a much bigger head start than anyone who waits until they're an adult to figure that out.

RW: I mean people aren't waiting; they're just lost.

CS: Exactly.

RW: It's hard to find that. The gift your grandfather gave you was tremendous. That's a very strong discipline to have a kid sit for an hour. I mean that would be hard for an adult.

CS: Well, you know, it even got to a point where it was fun for us. I mean my cousins and I lived outside in the woods. And we would pride ourselves that we built a shelter as it was about to start raining. We'd get inside the shelter and we'd be dry. We'd be like, aha! We can do it! We would do things where we took pride in our ability. That was playing, but it was fun for us. And we were quite proud about what we could do. I took great pride that I was really good at fishing. Everyone wanted me to be with them when we were fishing, because I caught lots of fish. It was one of the ironies; I didn't like fish as a child. I didn't like to eat it. And every time my grandfather would shoot a raccoon or a squirrel or even kill one of our rabbits or chickens, I didn't want to eat it. It was too—it wasn't what the other kids were doing. You know what I mean?

RW: Yes. Oh, I see.

CS: It wasn't until I was older did I grow to really love eating fish, but I was amazing at catching them.

RW: Well, that's fascinating. Do I remember correctly that you went to a special high school?

CS: I did. I went to the Fame High School of Music and Arts in New York.

RW: Okay. Let's start moving towards your career.

CS: My art.

RW: Right. How did that happen?

CS: Well, a few things. I have to talk a little bit about my mom who was raised Roman Catholic. She was literally Halle Berry-beautiful, just a stunning woman, visually. I think that was a blessing and a curse. She was used to so much attention just based on her looks that I think it created a deep insecurity within her. Being raised Roman Catholic, there was also the guilt associated with sexuality. It was really a disaster for her. So she moved out to Long Island to sort of get away from her mother. They had some tumultuous times in their relationship.

She came out to Long Island where she met my dad. Probably my earliest memories of her were not good. They were of her pushing me away, saying, "Uh-uh. Don't touch. You'll mess up my hair. You'll mess up my clothes. You'll mess up my make-up." And I loved my mother's hands and I always wanted to touch. "Uh-uh. Don't touch!" I couldn't touch my mother.

RW: Oh my gosh.

CS: So it was this incredibly strange rejection. My dad kind of stepped in and really took care of us. He would get us dressed for school. He would feed us. He would take us to school. It was a very strange dynamic.

RW: He was nurturing, it sounds like.

CS: I think he had to. You know, nature abhors a vacuum. But as things deteriorated between my mom and dad, they separated. First we went to live with my dad back at my grandparents. That felt good. It felt safe. It felt comfortable. Then my mom became born-again Christian. That was really interesting. It was like our own little Spanish Inquisition, because she decided one day, and I quote, “I have to Christianize my heathen half-breed children.”

RW: Wow. Uh-oh.

CS: So she took us from our father. I think he was relieved, because caring for me and my brother, who is two years younger, was a lot. And so then suddenly my mother was requiring us to go to church and kneel and pray every night. Cleanliness was next to godliness, so we couldn’t go out and play unless our rooms were spotless. We went from this incredible freedom to this incredibly rigid structure. And that was just hard.

RW: Wow, and how old were you then?

CS: Eight or nine. And by the time I was 10 and 11, I started to rebel—first by little things. I adopted this punk style of clothing and started doing extreme and more extreme things with my hair. I think I had my first Mohawk when I was 12, and every time I would get in an argument with my mom, I would put another hole in my ear. The rebellion was just because we were so at loggerheads. In the middle there she remarried and had my younger half-sister. And that was difficult, because my mom is not very maternal. So here was this new child that needed to be looked after and it fell on me, as a 12-year-old, to get my sister ready for the baby-sitter. Get her dressed. Get her bottles warmed. Make the formula and change her diaper. I was the mom at 12.

RW: Gosh.

CS: And then my mom really broke down and just stopped paying our bills. After about a year we were evicted from our home. And she had exploited everyone’s good will to the point of no return.

But I should back up. From the time I was about six years old, my mom would never give me paper to draw on. So I ended up drawing in my closet on my wall or under the table in the dining room. One of my aunts saw this and said, “She needs paper. Give this girl some paper!” I mean the creative desire to express myself visually was very early. So by the time I was 12, I was literally locking myself in my room and just drawing, drawing, drawing. And I was really good. This same aunt told my mother that I should audition for this special high school.

RW: I see, yeah.

CS: So we moved to the city. This was really difficult, because my mom really did a guilt trip on me. She said, “I am sacrificing everything for you.” For her to go back to New York City was really a defeat. It was as if she were going back to poverty and the ghetto. And she put that on me. She really emotionally abused me..

I left home when I was 15. I just couldn’t take it anymore. I was going to either really hurt her or myself, and neither of those was an option. So I left. I started sleeping on friend’s couches and that’s how I maintained going to high school. I needed a job, of course, because I had no income and I didn’t want to mooch off of my friends. So my first job was in Woolworth’s as a cashier.

RW: Wow.

CS: I lied and said I was 16. And then I got a job as a bike messenger. I also got a job as a one-hour photo lab person.

RW: And now all this time you were in high school?

CS: Yeah, yeah.

RW: Okay. So you moved out at 15. That's like 10th grade?

CS: Exactly. 10th grade.

RW: Okay. And did you get all the way through high school?

CS: I did. I did. So in high school they recognized that I was at risk of getting into trouble, ending up pregnant, on drugs or whatever. So they put me in this after school program and they gave me a Nikkormat film camera. They took away the manual and said I'd have to figure out how to use it. They taught me how to bulk load black and white film. They taught me how to develop using an enlarger and chemicals, all that. Then they said go out and photograph your experience.

I didn't realize it, but that probably saved my life because I was given something creative in my hands, so I could express whatever anger, frustration or emotions I was feeling as this teenager. So I did. I photographed everything; all my friends, all of our adventures. I realized having that camera in my hands gave me excuses to be somewhere in a positive way. A lot of my friends were getting into trouble with alcohol and drugs and whatever.

RW: How much of that work do you still have?

CS: All of it. I have all of the negatives.

RW: Oh, man.

CS: It's pretty amazing. In fact, my high school yearbook was not representative of my experience. So I created my own with my own photos. It's a huge book. I can show it to you sometime. It's pretty amazing.

RW: When you look back at those, are you thinking, yeah, there's some cool stuff here.

CS: Actually I realized it was quite extreme. You know, I was in New York in the 80s when it was probably the worst time to be living there. You know New York was really in decline at that time.

RW: I would love to see some of this stuff. I bet there's really some great stuff.

CS: There is, like me and my friends standing on an overturned car; just crazy stuff.

RW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CS: And I used to do pretty crazy things with my hair. I would either dye it different colors or I would go sort of Bride of Frankenstein, two white streaks. So I have these crazy

pictures of me with my hair.

RW: That would be fun to see that work.

CS: But having that camera I really didn't think of myself as a photographer. It was just something I did. So that high school was great as far as instilling discipline and practice. And we had great exposure. We were required to go to a museum every week. And being in Manhattan, you know, you have access to some of the most amazing collections of all of art history at your hands. So I didn't take that for granted. In fact, whenever I would go to the Metropolitan Museum, they would say, "Oh, she's back." They would assign a guard to me, because I would get so close to the Rodin sculptures. I would get really right up close to the Monet's water lilies. I wanted to see how they did it, how was the paint laid on.

RW: Yes.

CS: So they would have a guard with me to make sure I wasn't touching it.

RW: That's hilarious.

CS: I had my own guard. And I think when you have that exposure, looking at something of quality over and over, it affects you. It gets in there.

RW: Yes.

CS: So I graduated from the high school and went to the State University of New York at Purchase, which is their art school. And in order to support myself I was an R.A. in the dorms. I had to make sure that nobody got out of hand. And I was kind of the momma bear on the hall, which was fitting. I was used to being responsible. So that's how I went through the university.

Then by the time I finished university, I was so tired of talking about rhetoric, art speak. I just wanted to feel. I didn't want to talk about it. You know?

RW: Right, right. I know.

CS: So I was, "I think I'm done with art." So then I went back to my Native practices. I started doing traditional bead work and quill work and making moccasins and things like that.

RW: I remember you talking about that and how good that work was.

CS: I loved it.

RW: And there was a lot of demand for what you were doing. I mean you were working long hours.

CS: Two months, 10 hours a day, six days a week just to keep up with the orders. I was getting paid well for it, but at one point, my body was just like no way. My hands just…

RW: They gave out kind of?

CS: They did. And it was the first time in my life where I found something that I loved. I was good at it. I was gaining a really good reputation with the Native Arts galleries. And

then it was gone. I thought why would that be taken away from me? I was so happy doing it. And so during that break is when I got this free ticket to Alaska.

RW: Oh, yes. This is a good transition. So talk about how you got up into the Arctic Regions. I remember you were telling me you were headed for L.A. with your boyfriend.

CS: I was on my way from Oakland and they oversold the flight. So they said, if you can wait an hour for the next flight, we'll give you a free round trip ticket anywhere we fly. I was like, I can do that. This was Alaska Airlines. And I have to stress that one of the reasons I left New York was to escape the extreme hot and the extreme cold. I liked that this was a nice average temperature here in on the West Coast. You didn't really have seasons here, and so going someplace cold like Alaska or the Arctic or even the Antarctic was nowhere on my mental radar. It was the furthest thing from anything I could have dreamed for myself.

RW: But you thought, what's the big deal? I'll wait an hour and I'll have a free ticket.

CS: Exactly, free ticket. I should say that I'd been a good global traveler before that. And I knew that when doors opened, good things can happen behind them.

RW: That's right. Tell me about that.

CS: I was a surfer.

RW: Oh gosh. I forgot about that.

CS: Yeah. There's a lot there.

RW: So let's go back a little bit. I mean that's amazing that you were a surfer. How did that happen?

CS: Okay. Well, when I was 18, the very first trip I took overseas was to London with my best friend from high school. She and I saved and saved. We even flew as couriers. Back then, you could fly as a courier. Basically you give up your luggage space for a discounted ticket. We stayed at youth hostels and had this amazing time in London. I came back and I felt so proud— "Yeah, I went to London!" Really, I was the first woman in my father's family to ever have done such a thing. My grandmother, she was so funny. I said, "Nana, I went to London. I was in England!" And she said, "That's great. But what do you know of your own backyard?"

I was like whoa. Like she's right. Oh my god! You think you're so great, but you don't even know what your own country is. So I took the challenge. In Native American philosophy we believe that you can only be a whole person through touching. And touching doesn't necessarily mean physically, but it means exploring, expanding your environment. So for me, it translated as actual travel. So this is about the time I'm in university and I'm really starting to embrace my Native heritage. One of my drawing teachers was John Cohen from The Lost City Ramblers, an amazing musician, photographer. He was photographing Kerouac and Ginsberg and was part of that group.

RW: The Lost City Ramblers. That's back there in the folk days.

CS: Well, and Jerry Garcia was inspired by The Lost City Ramblers. In fact, The Grateful Dead have a song called Uncle John's Band which is about John Cohen. So even though he was an amazing photographer, he was my drawing teacher. We would go out into these

amazing fields in Westchester on our campus and draw. He would talk to me about his trips into the Peruvian Andes with the people there, photographing them and recording their traditional songs. It kind of sparked something in me, “Hey, I have a heritage. I need to pay more attention to it.” He sparked this desire to get re-connected, which is where I started doing the bead work again. So every summer break I would travel to different reservations, different states. I would look for other people who were mixed within the tribe and talk to them about their experience of being not full Indian or not full white or not full black and find out how they reconciled that within themselves. I met some of the most amazing mixes. Like I met this amazing Cheyenne guy who was this beautiful Cheyenne dark-skinned kind of golden-brown skin, but he had freckles and flaming red hair. He was Scottish and Cheyenne.

RW: Wow.

CS: I met another person who was Lakota Sioux and Korean. So I met all these people and we would share stories and talk about our experiences and sort of figure out how we found our space, which is a hybrid. I still feel today that I’m not black enough to be black. I’m not Italian enough to be Italian. I’m not Indian enough to… I’m a mix. I straddle borders.

RW: This is the future.

CS: It is. I mean so many people are entering this community of mixed identity and race and self-definition. And I am definitely part of that group even though it’s not anything new. It’s been happening for thousands of years, but finally now we get to be more than one thing.

But back to the story of traveling. So the thing that really moved me to California was being attacked on the subway train in New York. I was on the subway one night coming back from a concert with my boyfriend who was a White Russian. His dad was a refugee from Russia, and so he was this blond, blue-eyed big guy. We fell asleep right in the first car, right behind the conductor. And I heard this noise coming through the train. And the next thing you know, I feel a blow to my nose.

RW: Oh my gosh!

CS: I was trying to wake up and I see my nose is bleeding. And my boyfriend is waking up. And immediately, just instinctively, I put my out arm, because he was a big white guy. When I looked up there were four or five black guys, young guys. And one of them was really antagonizing me saying, “Oh, if that was my girl, I would this. I would that.” I was wearing a little short kilt, a Scottish kilt. He went to touch my skirt and I smacked his hand away. It’s interesting, because I remember I had no fear at all. I remember being just so angry that this train was full. There were maybe 40 people in there and nobody was saying or doing anything. And even the guy he was with, one of them was saying, “Just leave her alone, man. She’s bleeding. Just leave her alone.” And Issa, my boyfriend, like he’s just trying to get up and I’m like, “Don’t move.” And the guy pulls a knife and he holds it to my face. He’s like, “I will cut you.” I was just so angry, but really contained. I wasn’t scared at all.

And meanwhile I can see the conductor is looking back like, “Oh god. What do I do?” So she gets us into the station and they move around like they’re going to get off the train. And the guy, as he was getting off the train, leans and punches me square on in my eye so hard that all I see is black. And they immediately close the train doors and sound the alarm. The police show up within probably four minutes. And nobody saw anything. The guys got away.

I remember feeling like so paranoid, you know, for weeks and months feeling that somebody was going to hurt or strike me. I was really like on edge. I guess it's PTSD. And so my boyfriend's mother at the time, this was when you could still travel with other people's tickets. Said, "Here's a ticket to San Francisco. Take it. You need a break."

So I came out here and I saw this place. It was like, "Oh my goodness. This is amazing!" So I went back and told my boyfriend, "You can come with me or not, but I'm moving." And I arranged with all of my teachers that I should finish my senior thesis on the road and return and present it. That's when I was traveling from reservation to reservation. It was part of my thesis. It was about making, sharing stories and photographing them and sharing traditions like how do you do beadwork? It was really an amazing experience. And so I got to California.

I know looking back, that was a terrible thing to be attacked on a train, but I'm almost grateful because it was the universe's sharp left turn for me. It was my, "Get out of New York." Otherwise, my life would be very different.

So when I was in my 20's, I had various jobs here in the Bay Area. Then when I was 23, my friend from Long Island, Oliver, came out to live here. He was a surfer. I had just been laid off from my job at an architect firm and was on unemployment for a month or two. He said, "Well, come with me." So I would go and watch him surf every day. We would go out to Bolinas usually, sometimes Pacifica, different spots. Then one day I was just, "I think I want to try that. That looks pretty amazing!"

RW: So you must already have been a pretty good swimmer, right?

CS: Well, growing up on Long Island, absolutely. And I was familiar with the ocean dynamics.

RW: So you knew how to deal with the surf, then?

CS: Exactly. Exactly. But nothing prepared me for surfing. I mean that first time I went out in Bolinas, he suited me up in wet suit, gave me a board, put a leash on and said, "These are the three rules: always come up with your hand over your head so the board doesn't hit you; don't turn your back on the ocean; and relax and don't struggle when you're underwater."

I was like, okay. I started to try to paddle out and my balance was terrible. It felt really awkward. The water was so dark, cold and murky. This was at Bolinas and the Farallons were 29 miles away. And there were all of these great white sharks out there, which meant they could possibly be here. That was all I could think about and I freaked out. I turned to him and was like, "Oliver, I'm scared." He turned and looked at me and then he paddled away. And I was so mad. I was so angry. I was like, "Oh my god! He was my friend since we were like 16 years old and he just abandoned me."

I tried for a while and then it was like, forget this. I got out of the water and just waited for him. I was like you've got to get out sometime. And when he came out and I asked, "How could you? I told you I was afraid and you just left me." And he said something that really resonated. It was really a great truth. He said, "No one can teach you to manage your fears, but you." And he was right.

From that day on, I would go out and I would sit on the board. I got a little better at paddling. I got a little better with the balance. And I still sometimes would freak out. Then I would be like, okay, what's the worst that could happen? Well, a shark could bite you and kill you. Well, is that happening now? No. Okay. You know, you kind of just work through it. What's the worst that can happen? Well, I can drown. Is that happening now? No. So I surfed for over a year every day. And then I was hooked.

I fell in love with being in the water that way. You could just sit on top of the water and feel it and watch it and feel this ebb and flow and swell. It was so amazing. I was

connected. And I wanted more. We went to Hawaii and getting in that warm water. Oh my god! It was probably the biggest mistake I made, because once you step in warm water, it's so hard to put a wet suit back on. So then after Hawaii, I was like wow, warm water! I have to keep finding warm water. So that's when I…

RW: You have to go south.

CS: I just packed up my car with my dog and my surfboard and I headed to Baja. And I lived on the beach for a couple of months. It was a great situation, because I found this spot, Punta Canejo. It was on the southern part California Baja Sur.

RW: Yeah, yeah.

CS: South of Guerrero Negro. There was this little fishing village right there. They would go out and fish every day. And since I was so good at fishing, I'd say can I help you? So I would go out and catch fish with them. They would trade me lobsters for the fish I caught. So I ate lobster almost every night for a month.

RW: And then when did you surf?

CS: You only had to go out fishing for a couple of hours. You'd come in and then you could surf all day and surf in the evening.

RW: Were you alone?

CS: I was alone, but there were some Canadians.

RW: Surfing?

CS: Yeah. I met maybe five or six. And people would come and go. And there were these trees that you could go under. They were low, but they created shade and a little alcove. So you could set your tent in there. It was really quite nice. My dog loved it.

RW: It sounds absolutely idyllic.

CS: Well, it was incredible. My dog, I think he really got his wild on. I always made sure he slept in the tent with me, and some nights you could hear the coyotes just circling around the tent, you know, making lots of noise. My dog would be like grrrrr, like he wanted to get out there. In the morning we would come out and there would just be tracks everywhere. You know?

RW: Wow.

CS: One of the best experiences I remember is one day I went out and there wasn't much happening wave-wise. I was just sitting on my board looking at the ocean and then I turned to look back at the shore. I was sitting facing the shore, and like my friend said, never turn your back on the ocean. I was just sitting there thinking, "This is beautiful and it's amazing." I felt really at peace. And all of a sudden I heard this [whooshing sound] and it rained on me. My board started to lift up and it was a grey whale breaching right under me. It was literally lifting me up and I was dangling and there was this grey whale right there. It was like whoo! It was scary, but it was also like whoo!

RW: Wow.

CS: So it was just stuff like that. Things that I'll carry with me. So this travel thing was in me. Then I came back. I would work odd jobs so that I could save enough money to go again.

RW: So that's fantastic. Now let's go back to the airline. You accepted to go on a later flight and got the free ticket.

CS: Exactly. So I am now this fearless surfing traveler and going anywhere on my own is not a problem. So I got this free ticket. I was like well, I guess I better use it. It was the last week of March in 1999. I did a little bit of research because I wanted to literally walk across the Bering Strait where there had been a land bridge. And I learned that, yes, it would still be cold and yes, there would still be sea ice.

RW: So flew to the most remote place Alaska Airlines went. Right?

CS: Which was Kotzebue, which is above the Arctic Circle. This is above Nome, even.

RW: Okay, okay.

CS: And there is a museum there for the Bering Land Bridge. This was a theory that this is how the Americas were populated; the Siberian people came across this ice during the last Ice Age. So I was going to do a reverse commute.

So I arrived there and the first shock was that they lost my luggage with all my warm clothes. It was minus-30 degrees, probably minus-50 with the wind chill.

RW: And Kotzebue is not a city, right?

CS: No, there is maybe a thousand people.

RW: It's in the snow.

CS: It's white. It's just white. And they even have an artificial runway because it's all permafrost there. So I step off the plane. I was just was wearing polar fleece and some slip-on shoes. The first breath my nose hairs froze, my lungs froze. It's this choking kind of cold. It's like nothing I've ever experienced before then.

RW: Wow. Thirty below zero you said?

CS: Exactly. So I rush into the Quonset hut, which was the airport. I'm waiting for my bag, which doesn't show up. All of the women who worked there were Native Inupiaq women. They were like, "Oh, don't worry. We'll find some stuff for you." And they totally hooked me up with traditional sealskin parka, hat, gloves, boots—everything.

RW: They outfitted you in their Native…

CS: Exactly.

RW: Which is totally adapted to the climate.

CS: Thousands of years worth of technology! And it worked. What's interesting is that when my clothes did arrive, they were nowhere near as efficient as the Native clothes were. But the next day I just woke up and said okay, I'm doing it. And I headed out onto

the frozen sea and started walking.

RW: Now I just wanted to kind of underline this.

CS: Insanity.

RW: Yes, exactly. So here you are. You're in this little tiny place with nothing but snow in every direction. And it's 30 below in a little Quonset hut in a tiny village. And now you're going to walk to the edge of the Bering Sea. So you just head straight out alone, right?

CS: I just headed straight out. Yes, into the white oblivion.

RW: Okay, so there you go.

CS: And I was so euphoric, because as I stepped out onto the ice—and off of what was land, I knew I was on the frozen sea ice—it was squeaky like Styrofoam.

RW: This is the snow at that temperature, it squeaks.

CS: Exactly. It squeaks. And I was like wow! And everything is covered. I've got my face in a scarf and you can hear your breathing. This is my lunar moment. I was like, "This is me on another planet. This is my extra-terrestrial experience." And as I was walking, I was like, "Oh my god. This is amazing!" And I just started walking. There were little twigs in the ice maybe every 10 feet or so. I was like that's a path. Someone had marked that.

RW: Oh wow.

CS: And I was like, that's great. So I felt reassured by that. Then every 10 minutes or so someone would come up on a snowmobile. They'd say, "Are you okay?" And I'd be like, "Yeah, I'm just going for a walk." And they'd be like, "Okay." And they would ride away.

RW: So are these mostly Inuit people?

CS: They were all Inupiaq, yes. So every 10 minutes or so I was like, cool, there's traffic. I don't have to worry. Then I walked for an hour and there was nothing. I could still turn and see the town. It was there. So I kept walking and after an hour, two people came up, each on a snowmobile; a Russian woman and an Inupiaq man. They asked me a different question, "Where are you going?"

I said, "I'm trying to get to where the ice ends and the sea begins." I really thought of it as this clean edge like there would be the ice and then suddenly there would be the water. I was so naïve and stupid. I mean I couldn't have been more wrong. They said, "Well, that's 22 miles away."

And literally, all I had was my film camera tucked in my parka. I didn't have water. I didn't have food. I had nothing—no tent, nothing. So I was like, well, I don't know.

They said, "We're going that way. We can give you a ride, but we're not coming back. So you have to decide."

I thought, "Well, here's an opportunity. I've never been on a snow mobile before." So I got on the back with the woman and off we went. And I had no idea snowmobiles go 60 miles an hour. So we're going for about five minutes, really just zipping along the ice. I'm like, "Wow, this is really cool!" Then I started to realize, whoa, we're going really fast and I did the math in my head, 60 miles an hour times five minutes. Then I was like, "Stop, stop, stop, because I have to walk this back."

And at this time of the year the sun just does this really low thing in the sky. It just dips

down at about 1:00 in the morning. And it comes back up around 3:00, but it's so low in the sky, it just hugs the horizon. It's never high up. So it's this beautiful thing just watching the sun going sideways.

RW: Yeah, yeah.

CS: So they left me off and it was one of the few times I took the camera out. I took a picture as they took off and watched them until I couldn't see them anymore, just into the white. Then I remember thinking, wow, that's pretty amazing to watch them disappear. Then I turned around and looked for the town. It was gone.

All around me, 360 degrees was just white, just white. There was hardly a difference between the sky and the ice. It was just white. That's when I freaked out, because nobody in the entire world knew where I was. I could fall through the ice. There were polar bears out there. There could be a whiteout and I'd never find my way back.

So this was when that surfing lesson came in handy. I just calmed myself down. Okay, follow the tracks of the snow mobile before they're gone. Because if the wind blew them away I would really be in trouble. So I calmly walked back.

RW: Now I think you said there was a moment that occurred right around there that was kind of a pivotal experience.

CS: As I walked back. Because it took five hours of walking before I could even see the town again. But as I walked back everything that my grandfather had taught me was kind of like activated. It was just like aha! I think they call it a satori moment, or an epiphany. It was a confirmation of everything that my grandfather had been trying to tell me as a child.

RW: So what was it that you were realizing in this very real way?

CS: On this extreme part of our planet I was realizing that I was a creature of this planet, that I was literally made of the material of this planet—that we all are. And in those moments, I realized the absurdity of tribe, of border, of culture, of language—because at the bottom of it all, we are all made of this material. We are all earthlings. There is no separation. There is no distinction. None of us were born in outer space. We will all return to the material of this earth.

What was so clear was that I was standing on my rock in space. I understood the immensity, and also the minuscule nature of that. I understood that I meant nothing in the scale of time and space and history of this planet. That it would blow over my cold dead bones without a thought. But the fact that I could stand there on the ice and actually ponder such things was a miracle. That was a self-realization at its finest. It made me realize what my grandfather was trying to show me.

I started to think about that; if my sweat becomes the rain, whose sweat is this ice? How many ancestors ago, what creatures created this? They're all my relations, all my relatives. And in that, I understood the integral nature of this planet—that we truly are a web of life. And how absurd that we're acting and thinking, in this modernity, that we're somehow separate or above it, or can do what we want to. So that was really like, whoa…

I think I told you before that I discovered when I got home that I was pregnant as I was walking on that ice. So my child was in me growing, and she's been with me through this whole journey. So it's sort of this awakening of a mother.

RW: Oh my gosh.

CS: And in a real sense. So I told my boyfriend's mother, who is Kathan Brown of Crown

Point Press, about this experience of meeting my planet. She said, “Oh, I have to go check that out.” So she did. She went on a Russian nuclear-powered icebreaker to the geographic North Pole. She was almost 70 when she went. She was so profoundly moved by this experience that she wanted to write about it. By this time I had my child. And she was like, “We all have to go to this place called Svalbard.” I didn’t ever want to be that cold again. Remember, I moved to California. Alaska was really a cool adventure, but okay. Done, check. You know?

RW: Right.

CS: So I was really hesitant. But she is really persuasive. She’s an incredibly powerful and impressive woman. So we went. By this time my child was born and September 11th had happened. It was part of an activation that happened to me. When those buildings fell, I understood that my daughter would never know those buildings in the way that I had. That was a trigger. I mean when I was a bike messenger, I used to deliver things there daily. It was part of my visual landscape. I knew them, that space. And so when they fell, it was the first time I realized the significance of a photo as a historic document—that these were proof that these buildings had existed. It’s the same way that we have pictures of our ancestors as proof that they existed.

RW: Right.

CS: And the second part of the trigger that activated me to actually becoming a photographer was we were target aerial bombing, I don’t know, some Middle Eastern country, Iraq or Afghanistan. I just remember watching the news and thinking that we were going the wrong way, that there’s got to be another story being told about how beautiful this life is, how amazing this planet is, how lucky we are to have what we have.

And in that moment it was if someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, it’s time. We need you to get your ass off the couch and do something. So when Kathan took us to Svalbard, I had many different formats of cameras with me, because the switch was triggered and I was going to photograph it.

I didn’t have any master plan. I had only heard rumblings of this talk about climate change and global warming. So when we went up there, it was much more an emotional response. I just fell in love with the ship breaking the ice. I fell in love with the sort of muffled sound in that environment. You know, when there’s snow, sound doesn’t move the same way.

So as a thank you to her for taking us there, we decided to take her to Antarctica for Christmas. My daughter turned five as we travelled to Antarctica in 2005—December 2004, January 2005. We went to a place called the Weddell Sea. In that area I saw my first giant tabular iceberg. When I say giant, I mean like the size of Manhattan-like city blocks. And we had this crazy Norwegian captain who would actually take us between these canyons of icebergs. There would be these towering icebergs, 200, 250 feet above the sea level. Some of them had waterfalls coming off.

RW: Oh my gosh.

CS: And some of them had these glowing neon bands just to give a hint of what was below, which was another 800 to 1000 feet of ice. I remember the first time I saw them, I was literally shaking because I was short-circuiting. I was thinking, oh my god, “How much time is this? How many snowflakes is this? How many ancestors?” You know?

RW: Wow.

CS: What process happened that put this in front of me? And what blesses me to have the privilege to witness this as it enters back to the sea? —maybe 100, 200,000 years after the snowflakes fell to become part of the cycle again. I've had some experiences like that since, but that was one of the first where I was just overwhelmed with awe. I recalled this ecstasy of Mary, or St. Theresa or something—this beautiful sculpture in St. Peter's. It was this moment of ecstasy where I was aware of how tiny I was, but how amazing creation is.

So those pictures got shown to an editor of National Geographic. I was just doing this on my own. It was a compulsive curiosity. No one assigned me to go. No one paid me to go. And they said we have to acknowledge your effort. So they give me an award and some money. Just having the National Geographic stamp of approval got me access on an expedition on a Russian icebreaker to the far side of Antarctica. On that ship there was a Russian expedition photographer, Pavel Ochinicov. The whole time Pavel was saying, "How do we do this? If I want to get this, how do I set my camera?"—all these technical questions. He was really sweet. At the end he said, "You know, you should have this job. You'd be really good at it." So he gave me the card for the company and I got hired as the expedition photographer.

RW: For the Russians?

CS: First for the Russians, and then for the Canadians, and then for the Norwegians, and then for the people from Monaco. I got hired for a lot of different companies and I ended up being the girl in demand on the ships as the expedition photographer.

RW: Wow, so you did that for several years.

CS: Yes, from 2006 until 2011. Five years of back and forth; one to three months in the Arctic in our summer and then one to three months in the Antarctic in our winter—every year. That's up to six months at sea in polar environments. So I like to say that I'm bi-polar.

RW: [laughs] Right.

CS: And I really truly was. A few things became alien to me, like trees. Being in polar regions, there's no trees. Then when you get back, you're like "Oh, look at that! It's so beautiful. It's so green. And it's, oh my god, it's sticking out of the ground!" Because I would spend months not seeing anything disturbing the horizon. And another thing that was really interesting was daylight. I was so used to 2:00 o'clock in the morning looking like daytime that when I got home after an expedition and it was night, I would freak out a little. The sky has gone dark! How does this happen? Where did the sun go? Is everything okay? So it was pretty crazy.

So those two things were a little trippy. Then in 2007, the UN announced the climate change was real. My phone started ringing. My first exhibition was at the National Academy of Sciences Museum in Washington, D.C. I told them I had never shown my work anywhere. They said, "We don't care." So they gave me my first ever solo show.

RW: That's amazing.

CS: Then my first ever print was purchased through the museum at the University of Michigan. I didn't know anything about editions or sizes or anything. I said, "I'll call you back."

RW: And you mentioned being mentoring by this National Geographic photographer, right?

CS: Steve McCurry. In the time between going to Svalbard with Kathan and Antarctica with Kathan—from 2003 to 2004 in August I went to Tibet with Steve McCurry.

When the switch came on for me to be a photographer, I was like there is no way I am going back to school. But there are some questions I had. I realized for me the best way to do things was to literally call people who had done things and ask, "How did you do that?"—and learn from them directly. So I called up Sebastiao Salgado and asked, "How do you handle yourself among people who are starving? Like what is the etiquette? Do you eat or do you go away and eat? Like what do you do?" Stuff like that.

RW: You talked with him? Was he okay with that?

CS: Oh yes. But there were some that were, "I can't help you." They felt threatened.

RW: First of all, that's pretty—it's logical, but a lot of people wouldn't have the boldness to make those calls.

CS: I know that.

RW: That's pretty cool that you did.

CS: I think it's because one, I felt that I'd been called to service. There was no time to mess around. It wasn't about me or me being shy.

RW: Okay.

CS: It was like I need to get up to speed to do what I am here to do. And there was no time to mess about like oh, I'm sorry. You know what I mean?

RW: I do.

CS: So that removed a lot of that for me. And still it was not clear to me that I had to photograph the Arctic. It was just I need to…

RW: Right, I understand. Sebastiao Salgado is one of the very best photographers in the world.

CS: Amazing—and an incredible human being, actually.

RW: I know he's got this tremendous project in South America.

CS: Yes. He's planted 12 million trees so far.

RW: That's incredible.

CS: So Sebastiao Salgado, Eli Reed, Donovan Wiley, Paul Fusco—there were a bunch of Magnum photographers, really. It's because they were doing stuff that I want to know how to do. So Steve was one of them. Steve was amazing. He always seemed to get right into the person, like they were not just looking at the camera. You felt they were looking through the camera at you. You know what I mean? There was a communication beyond the piece of glass. And he was incredible at using available natural light. He doesn't use strobes or anything. And he's an incredible color photographer.

I really thought I was going to be a people-portrait-person of cultures. That was what I

had always been interested in. So going to Tibet was incredible, because it was all about Steve's people. He didn't stop to do landscapes at all. It was all about doing portraits.

He was really hard on me that first time. He yelled at me for having so many different formats. "What the hell are you doing with five formats?" He challenged me to use one format for a year. So again, my discipline…

Then he also took the time to literally pull me into alleys and say, "Do you see how the light is hitting?" He wanted me to understand how light worked and how it translated into cameras to create an image. I think Steve and I are both visually appreciative of painting, of using light to create an illusion of dimension—because a photograph is really a two-dimensional surface.

RW: That's right.

CS: Just like a painting. So if you understand how to manipulate light, shadow, shape, composition, you can really do some emotionally powerful things. He was good at that. So it was Steve who really pushed me. And then when I got to Antarctica there were no people, so I decided to photograph everything as if I was making a portrait. And just that simple intention, which resonated with my upbringing—you know, seeing a tree as an individual—worked perfectly. Every penguin that I saw was a unique individual; every hut, every rock, every piece of ice. I could connect with it. And I think somehow, because of my intention, that this communicates through my images in a way that has not for other iceberg photographers.

RW: What you're saying is very interesting. And I suspect that there are levels of sensitivity which we don't have words for. And no one has quite figured that out. In fact, no one even thinks about it, but they exist. And if you're tuned into a certain quality of sensitivity, it is felt, but no one knows how to talk about it.

CS: Exactly, exactly. It's that intangible.

RW: You're good at that.

CS: Yes, absolutely. Part of the magic of an artist is being able to sort of draw from the intangible and create a physical. That's magic, truly, because you're literally reaching into a void and drawing energy and making something. And it's so sad that at this time in our history artists are not revered the way they have been in the past, because it's what is going to save the world.

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You can learn more about Camille Seaman at www.camilleseaman.com/