Light celebrating place: West Texas road trip

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Dear JT,

I am going to explain my dissertation in this Introduction in the form of a letter to you. I want to say it in my own voice, to a real person who cares, not to some nebulous public in the dry traditional form. I hope it will be personable, interesting, and accessible to you and anyone who wants to understand what I have been doing and why.

This letter, like the dissertation, is in many interwoven and overlapping layers of my thoughts. Not linear, the layers have no clear beginnings and ends; they swirl together. I have interspersed it with images and quotes that present similar ideas hoping that a few will resonate. You know, JT, I see things all the time. I see little pieces of
light that are silent, intriguing, and a sort of secret that only I see/know. I call these “light vignettes”; I have seen them for many years. Each one is different, fleeting, and some never occur again. Sometimes they are small, metaphorically like one clear note in music, a bell. Sometimes I see a simple melody, a violin. If I am very lucky I get to see a light symphony. Every one is beautiful, and I am grateful to be able to see them. That this beauty exists gives me hope in spite of this difficult life that we humans insist upon living. Hope because, if I keep my eyes open, I can find them, and they always touch me. I feel them in my heart, an intimacy (embodiment); I feel less alone in a small celebration (light) of that moment in that spot (place).

I think we are afraid of beauty because it is foreign to our linear rational minds, and you feel it. I find many are afraid to feel. I don’t know why. Some say they feel beauty in their souls or hearts, and it can elicit involuntary tears: it is in us. But we don’t have an organ called the soul, and we can’t quantify what we feel in our hearts. Whatever the sense--visual, sound, etc.--beauty is most strongly experienced “live”: you have to be there, like the difference between a live concert and the CD. Beauty stops us, and we forget about linear measured time, maybe for a second, but that second can last hours and take us somewhere. Ok, JT, that’s the first piece: light vignettes are celebrations of the beautiful, and we don’t see enough beauty in the world.

Once you told me that what I did was show others the ordinary in a different way, but these vignettes are not ordinary to me, although I see them regularly and in everyday places. The light vignettes fall into four categories: shadow, reflection, color, and glow. These are my own personal properties of light and why I find it engaging. This is what I see.

1. Shadow

The other morning, running out the door, I saw the curved shadow of wire mesh projected on the front and the back of an oval-shaped plastic pitcher. It made me slow down and stop for a moment. I saw the mesh, and the pitcher, plain and ugly, become interesting, and, for a moment, beautiful. I see the arc of the shadow of a metal spoke wheel on
the cylindrical body of an old steam engine so graceful, stretching like a
cat around that curve, and only for me to see. I am grateful.

I see the shadow of a post turn the twined wire black in an old fence.
I see many lines of light because we build in 90- and 180-degree angles.
The lines, especially if they fall on a curved surface, come to life for me. I
like light through holes, a camera obscura. This is the same as the
sunlight through the spaces between the ramada, on the hammock
strings. A scientist might say that all these are examples of light acting as
both a particle and a wave, which is true, but I would rather see the
beauty of the shadow and feel it. Sometimes I think it might be fun to see
only in shadows, which give so much information, like the intricate
cross-bracing of a tower. Isn’t it odd that by looking at the ground I can
tell the condition of the roof? The bumpy jump rope shadow reveals the
uneven sheathing. Shadows tell me secrets, and I become aware of
things I don’t notice in sunlight; look at the line of the edge of the metal.
The trio of the tree, roofline, and wall are united in the shadows on the
brick. I notice that a flat wall has lots of texture. All of these light vignettes
make me smile.

I also have a category called “fat shadows.” Fat shadows happen
when the angle of the sun is very low in the sky. Fat shadows are a little
ridiculous; like the puffed up chests of banty roosters, they seem all
proud and prance-y, on display. Has that rebar ever been so bold? Is
that an antelope? The rippled shadow makes that plain iron bar dance.

Sometimes I see chance occurrences of lines and shadows
together that look like they were staged. I didn’t place that snakeskin,
shadow, and stick together; I just found them. It was a wonderful joy of
discovery, a surprise.

2. Reflection

Reflection is the opposite of shadow but more fleeting, maybe
because I see reflections most often in the flash of sunlight on water,
both ever changing. I call refection “glitter”: the shimmer is especially
enticing, mesmerizing.
Mirrors, of course, are the strongest example of reflection, especially when the surfaces are irregularly angled. Did you wonder if there are two telephone poles? We have all kinds of metaphors for mirrors and reflections. Remember in the fairy tales how looking in mirrors foretold the future: “Mirror, mirror on the wall . . .”? Crystal balls are round magnifying mirrors of reflection (Pendergast, 2003). Prehistorically, the Maya used mirrors as a metaphor for portals to the underworld (Freidel, Schele, and Parker, 1993). For me, reflections let me enter that place inside myself where it is quiet; the flashes communicate hypnotically.

Reflections, like shadows, give a lot of extra information. The reflections of the sun on the dead grass tell me the direction of the wind. I think reflections, like shadows, are seen best with lots of contrast, i.e., surrounded by the darkness (its opposite), as illustrated by the sun coming in through a small hole of a smushed, storage area of a truck. I notice reflections more often than shadows because they are brighter and catch my eye. A scientist might say this is because we are phototropic, meaning light-seeking, and that our attraction to light is in our DNA. Since we have evolved to spend most of our time inside, I don’t think we get enough light. Reflections can be “ordinary,” where an aluminum soda can projects its label color onto the table. I see a lot of straight lines in reflections, too. Sometimes low-angle reflections light things up for just a few minutes at certain times of the year, depending upon the angle and position of the sun in the sky. Look how the underside of metal beams blaze for two minutes. The orangey pink of the horizon at sunset, both vertically and horizontally, on the wall. The rainbow seems to go up under the door, but in reality it is reflected from the floor up onto the wall. The silver spaghetti strands are tinsel; my steps make it shimmy, just for me. I love that.

The greatest light symphony I have ever seen was in Chicago in May; it happens at the same time every year. Different types of glass and window dimensions reflect across the street onto three different facades. Don’t the reflections look like Japanese characters? That day I decided the characters were a secret code that only I could decipher. I couldn’t believe I was the only one who could see them, five stories tall and very bright. I was excited, happy. I wanted to tell others on the street, but they
would have thought I was a nut; sad that we think that beauty is only for lunatics.

3. Color

. . . and what a reception:
Red jade cups, food well set on a blue jeweled table,
And I was drunk, and had no thought of returning
And you would walk out with me to the western corner of the castle,
To the dynastic temple, with water about it, clear as blue jade
With boats floating, and the sound of mouth organs and drums
With ripples like dragon scales, going grass-green on the water
Pleasure lasting, with courtesans, going and coming
With the willow flakes falling like snow,
And the vermillioned girls getting drunk about sunset. . . . (Lo T’ai Po)

Color, to me, is the daughter or son of light; without light there is no color. Without light there is nothing. That is why we love flowers, intense vibrant color. At night I think we are deeply drawn to color because we only see in black and white. A scientist might tell you that is because we use only our rods for night vision; rods see shadows and work best peripherally, and our color-reactive cones don’t work at night. Color, like light, is a combination of itself and the surface it is projected upon. Notice how we mostly see the color in the white?

The sky and rocks are reflected in the plastic water bottle. The brightness of the Chihuahua desert tells me that beans aren’t black in West Texas. The grayness of an overcast day makes colors pulsate and glow instead of being washed out by the sun in the matte surface of rust.

4. Glow

She looked at the lump of amber, and looked through it to its core.
Nobody would ever know the difference between the radiance that
was the surface and the radiance that was inside. They were the two worlds. There was no way at all to put a finger on the center of light. And if there were a mountain the cloud would not touch its heart when it traveled over, and if there were an island out in the sea, the waves on its shore would never come over the place in the middle of the island. (Welty, 1980, p. 256)

My favorite kind of light is glow, or radiance. A scientist might tell you that all light is reflected, but I disagree; reflected means bounced off, and glow passes through. Compare the glass in the top image. The light is reflected, but it is not anywhere as compelling as the light seen glowing through the same pieces below. Now, compare the reflected light in the glass beads above with the same beads, glowing below. They look very different, and they feel very different. I think that to get to that introspective feeling with light, it has to glow. I tell my students to get to “God” (whatever your definition of “God” may be): it’s gotta glow. I think the combination of very low light levels and glow elicits the deepest and strongest connections to our inner selves. Glow makes me want to follow it inward to another place, and that place is in me. In one of my earliest memories I wanted to follow the glow of the red light of the record player into the music. I think that may be why I love the color red.

Ok, JT, are you still with me? These light vignettes are another layer and beautiful, which is the first layer. None of these layers can stand alone; they are all swirled together. I have shown you many of them to demonstrate the wide variety and that they happen everywhere, all the time. I am hoping that you found them beautiful and would like to see them. I have talked about the qualities of light as I have come to understand them. Light needs a surface to reflect on; this surface is the next layer, place.

5. Place

I wondered the hardest about the paradoxical contrast and affinity of red rock desert and turquoise ocean, the seduction of certain
geographies that feel like home not by story or blood but merely by their forms and colors. How our perceptions, as someone once said, are our only internal map of the world, how there are places that claim you and places that warn you away. How you can fall in love with the light. (Meloy, 2002, p. 210)

When is the last time you saw the stars? I mean really SAW them? Did you feel them in your heart? Did you gasp? Were you speechless? Did you find your face wet with tears? Did you feel a connection to part of something larger? Did you feel peace? Relaxed? Was time suspended while you drank it in? I think you probably have seen the stars in this way, but many people never have. The stars--big, outward, and expanding--were also small, introspective, and in me. To me, this is the essence of place, a difficult concept to try and put into words, but its essence is that you feel it. Place can be a physical location, a place in your heart, a memory; it can feel like coming home or a connection with a vastness that is unfathomable. I think it is important to remember/feel the vastness of the stars. Stars are the best light symphonies I have ever seen.

Ok, JT, now we have the beauty of the light vignettes in shadow, reflection, color, and glow, interwoven with place. Neither place nor light can exist without the other. The surface is the place; the light is in/of the place. This combination can elicit strong feelings of connection.

So then, FINALLY, I realized that all my postcards from the history of lighting design research were examples of making a place in/with light. Both a physical outside place that took you to an inside place largely through light's power. Everywhere I looked I found light able to express often opposite concepts and emotions. Light is the medium and the language--the language that lets us get inside, that lets us feel in our heads and hearts--and in this feeling is the connection to whatever concept the light portrays. Got it? Light is the universal language of emotion. So why couldn’t I do the same thing? Why couldn’t I make places of light? Large-scale light vignettes custom designed specifically for that place, where the viewers could access their hearts to feel a
connection to their surroundings? And that is what the dissertation attempts to do. I united the aspects of wind and glow and simulated the proposed illumination of the wind turbine farms in this video. The turbines are 350’ tall and assembled together in “farms.” The work could be experienced on foot, from an interstate freeway, or from a plane.

I hope you found this letter enjoyable and that it gave you an understanding of the all interwoven layers. I hope that the quotes and pictures provided delight. I know that you understand about beauty, and I hope, in a small way, it has added beauty to your world and that you might start seeing these light vignettes and feeling joy that I do. love, jill

References Cited


