

“The Land of Tears” with Karina Hagemeyer and Iver Johnson

You are imperfect, you are wired for struggle, but you are worthy of love and belonging.

— Brené Brown

Life is tragic. We live lives of incredible hardship, heartache, sorrow and struggle - and after an incessant battle through a fierce existence, there is no happy ending. From school shootings and terror attacks, domestic violence, refugee camps, and the cutthroat intensity of bipartisan politics, to global warming, birth defects, cancer and freak accidents, life is a brutal battle. Even our attempts at creating something lasting with art or discovering something profound with science are, in the end, mere meager attempts to mask our angst in a cold, dark universe.

Yet, through it all, through all of the strife and the trauma, we have one another - and this vital recognition can be the greatest solace. Our humanity allows us an incredible aptitude for compassion and empathy. However lonely we may feel, we are not alone. We are connected. We are kin. We can understand the pain in our friend's tears and help bring them out of suffering and into laughter and love. We can wrap our arms around the dying. We can bring food to the starving. We can listen to the forgotten. It is our greatest gift - this ability to understand each other's anguish, to relate and to share the experience together. In The Land of Tears, we are not alone.

About This Photograph

The Land of Tears marks a turning point for my Empathy series of photographs. By combining the intense body language of dancers with dramatic outdoor settings in classic black and white photography, I hope to convey the idea of our intrinsic interconnectedness and our capacity for empathy, further bridging the divide between us.

The cornerstone of this outdoor series of dancer shots is authenticity. To maintain this authenticity, my models and I must be in the actual setting being photographed. I however cannot risk the lives of my dancer models in the sole effort to keep my photographs authentic. For this photograph, had I attempted to

position the models on the slanted slick surface while the flood waters raced around them, I would have endangered their lives.

Therefore, to create this image, I photographed the setting without the dancers at the end of a series of storms that hammered California this winter. The waters of Lake Clementine had risen to the second level of overflow which created this amazing scene, but would have been very dangerous for anyone to pose in. After I photographed the setting, I contacted dancers Iver Johnson and Karina Hagemeyer to schedule a shoot during a milder storm 4 days later. At this point the lake behind the dam had receded a foot or two and no longer reached the secondary overflow. This allowed relatively safe passage for the dancers to reach the perfect “stage”. I then perched my camera in the same spot I had several days prior and signaled to them through the rain and deafening noise what I needed them to do - and then I took the shot. I now had two images: one from the flood day without the dancers, and one with the dancers in safer conditions. I aligned and blended the two images together in Photoshop to create this final image of The Land of Tears.

For both my commercial work and my fine art work, I use the Sony A7RII camera. In over 25 years of shooting professionally, I’ve never had a tool that allows me to create the ideas in my head photographically with such ease. When I want to photograph a dancer in a remote part of the Sierra Nevada mountains, I pack the A7RII (less its vertical grip) mounted with a Voigtlander 15mm or 21mm lens. This combination is ridiculously small and amazingly powerful. When I don’t need to worry about the size and weight of my equipment, which wasn’t an issue to shoot this image, I can attach the vertical grip and use incredibly unique lenses like the Canon 11-24mm L series lens. I frequently utilize the flip up LCD screen when I want to shoot interesting low angles. The sensor stabilization allows me to hand hold the camera in situations that don’t permit the use of a tripod. And then there is the image quality. Frequently my fine art photos feature a small subject in a vast landscape. For the full impact, these images must be viewed as large prints or on large screens. The 42 megapixels in the A7RII allow me to fully express my subject’s mood as well as the grandeur of the setting they’re in. The low noise and bit depth of the raw files yield beautiful tonal range in black and white. I have found that the design features on the Sony A7RII not only allow for incredible freedom of expression, but they also inspire new possibilities that I would never have thought of before.

Lastly, I would also like to mention that this pose was inspired by the work of Vadim Stein, who is an amazing dance photographer based out of St. Petersburg, Russia. His work with dancers truly surpasses that of others.

Technical Data: Sony A7RII camera, Canon 11-24mm L series lens, Metabones Smart Adapter

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.

— Pema Chödrön