



PHOTO JOURNAL: ALISON WRIGHT - SPANNING THE GLOBE

By Jim Colton



“I felt myself rise and emerge from the shell of pain lying below and as I did so, realized that leaving the body only ends life, not our interconnectedness with those whom we care about.” -- Alison Wright; on her near-death experience in Laos in January, 2000.

We have heard many stories about “crossing over” to the other side while experiencing traumatic moments or life-threatening injuries. Some recall seeing a white light or the feeling of physically leaving one’s body. Most recall an overwhelming sense of relief...letting go...and preparing for their ultimate destination. If you’re Alison Wright, that experience only confirmed what she already knew; that her journey was only just beginning.

Alison is one of the most spiritual individuals I have ever met. A fact that even His Holiness the Dalai Lama recognized upon meeting her, stating, "Yes, I know....(you have) good intent, very important. Most important in all that you do. Never forget!" Not that we needed his confirmation to realize this. All we have to do is look at her work.

Alison’s passion runs deep and her commitment to what she describes as, “The pursuit of the universal human connection,” is second to none. Her travels have taken her to over 140 countries and her efforts have resulted in the publication of 9 books, including “Learning to Breathe: One Woman’s Journey of Spirit and Survival” with a foreword written by the aforementioned Dalai Lama.



She established a foundation called Faces of Hope; a non-profit that globally supports women and children’s rights by creating visual awareness and donating directly to grass-roots organizations that help sustain them. She continues

to give back to the community by giving presentations at high schools, to corporations and workshops.

Alison just returned from Africa where she has been working on what she calls one of her “big meaty long-term projects,” women at work around the world.

Jim Colton: Please tell us a little about your early years, how you first became interested in photography and who or what were some of your earliest influences?

Alison Wright: My parents gave me the wings to fly. They are from Europe and flew to the states just so I could get dual citizenship. My British mother was a stewardess for Pan Am so I believe I got my wanderlust in utero. My Belgian dad always encouraged travel as part of my education. I’m just not sure he intended my education to go on for this long!

Given my mother’s profession, travel was a part of my life from the time I was an infant, and I obtained my first passport while still sucking a pacifier. I even had a special bassinet to fly in. Mom always knew the pilots, so when I got a little older I was allowed to sit on their laps in the cockpit and watch the world below.

Mom used to take my younger brother and me to the airport and we’d sit on the hood of the car eating straps of licorice watching the planes take off as a recreational activity. I loved the smell of jet fuel.

I got my first little point and shoot camera when I was ten and loved to take photos. I was fifteen and working on the yearbook and school newspaper at Watchung Hills Regional High School in New Jersey when Mr. Lee, my English teacher, took me aside and told me that I could actually make a living as a photojournalist. From the first time I heard that word I knew what I wanted to do with my life. And I’ve never wavered. It was never a place I felt I belonged, so from there I headed out to California with a surfboard tied to the roof of my yellow Honda the day after I graduated.

My earliest influences were women explorers; I wanted to live in extreme conditions (and succeeded, I’d say) like Alexandra David-Neel who traveled throughout Tibet, Amelia Earhart, Dian Fossey, Isak Dinesen (Out of Africa). As far as photographers the great documentarians inspired me: Lewis Hine, Eugene Smith, Dorothea Lange, Sebastiao Salgado, Henri Cartier-Bresson and the great humanitarians that stirred compassion: Albert Schweitzer, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

JC: I've always believed that travel is the greatest form of education as you get to experience the cultures of the world. You've made a living traveling this planet of ours. Do you believe this to be true? What do you gain from your photographic travels...both professionally and personally?

AW: I absolutely agree. I always had an insatiable curiosity as a child. I wandered off and got lost so many times my parents made me wear an identity bracelet growing up. Seriously, I still have it! I’m lucky that I’ve somehow managed to parlay this exasperating attribute into a career. In high school I always had a camera in my hand and even then had a strong sense of compassion and interest in spiritualism. I was so idealistic I thought I could actually make a difference in the world.

I went to college at Pepperdine and Syracuse Universities and I saved my money so I could travel to India. When the time came my father said, “It’s so far, so dangerous, why don’t you go back-packing in Europe instead?” That sounded incredibly pedestrian to me but I agreed just to appease him. I traveled through Europe and when I got to Spain I mailed postcards to my parents telling them how much I loved the beaches there, but what I actually did was hop a boat over to North Africa. It was my first third-world country and seeing those glimpses of poverty, children in need and refugees was a defining trip for me. I knew that’s what I wanted to spend my life documenting and trying to help and create awareness in some way with my camera.

Then I had someone mail my postcards from Greece saying how much I loved the beaches there and what I really

did was hitch-hike all over the Middle East; working in Israel, hanging with Bedouins in the Sinai and Egypt, donning army fatigues and hitch-hiking into Beirut when they bombed the American Embassy. I was twenty-one and I was fearless!

Something funny that I just realized--I only just got to those beaches in Spain and Greece last year. Guess it took a while.

From there I moved to the outback of Australia to photograph the Aborigines and ride with the cowboys for a couple of years. When I returned to California I showed my images to an editor at the *Chula Vista Star News* to see if they thought I had any job potential and to my surprise they hired me on the spot! I lived in San Diego for three years, working my way up from the *Chula Vista Star News*, to the *La Jolla Light* and to the *San Diego Union*, back when there were murmurings of a merger with the *San Diego Tribune*.

I loved living in San Diego because I had a developing country right in my back yard. I did border stories and spent my weekends in Mexico photographing orphanages. One day at work I was flipping through a magazine and saw photos of these beautiful doe eyed children from India. It rekindled my feeling of how much I wanted to go there and at twenty-four worried that I was so old that maybe I would die at this newspaper.

I called the photographer and told him how much I loved his images. His name was John Isaac and he was a UNICEF photographer. He told me if I was ever in New York to come by and show him my portfolio. I bought a plane ticket and flew out the following week. I showed him the photos I'd been taking of the kids in Mexico and he was instrumental in helping me get an assignment in Nepal. John changed the trajectory of my life and I love him for it. It was meant to be a three-week assignment but I so fell in love with the magic of Asia that I didn't leave Nepal for over four years! Meanwhile dozens of photographers lost their newspaper jobs back in San Diego with the merger.

That was a great lesson for me in following your intuition and your passion. I've been freelancing ever since. It's also a great lesson that if a door cracks open for you, throw it open! I take advantage of every opportunity.

JC: Your work is represented by the National Geographic Society. What is that relationship like? What commitments do you have to make to them and what does it mean regarding the possibility of work for other publications?

AW: First, working with them is something you strive for. I'm amazed how many students think they'll work for them right away just because they like to travel and shoot. I consider myself a photographer that happens to travel, not a traveler that happens to photograph. I have no interest in traveling just for the sake of travel. I go somewhere because of the story I want to tell, which has taken me to 140 countries.

My work is twofold, documenting social conscious humanitarian issues and I guess what is called editorial travel photography. My main focus is photographing ethnic tribes and cultures in flux around the world. I love photographing humanity in whatever capacity and I'm always in search of the universal human connection-finding compassion in what can seem like a world of chaos.

After my newspaper days I carved out a career for years living overseas photographing for non-profit and humanitarian organizations. Every morning before I'd open my eyes I'd think I'm living exactly where I want to live, doing exactly what I want to do. And I felt like I was making a small difference. What can be better than that? Then I got a lot of travel assignments because there were more newspapers and magazines and photo agencies that were good outlets.

I did huge beautiful front-page color sections for the *San Francisco Chronicle* on a regular basis and all the magazines including *National Geographic Adventure* and *Traveler*. I worked for the *Travel Channel* for four years as a global web correspondent doing what we called *Photo Journeys: Alison Wright on the Road*. Even then as much as I loved the art of travel, I always had my "in the shadow" stories...such as "Beyond the Temples," showing the

splendor of Cambodia and the beauty of Angkor Wat, but don't forget about the children who have been affected by land mines; or showing the Buddhist beauty of Burma, but interviewing Aung San Suu Kyi while under house arrest.

I once was sent by National Geographic to photograph the stunning tourist areas of Thailand but covered the Burmese migrant workers there in Phuket. I'm thrilled that it was just published on the National Geographic Proof website (See link below) because it's hopefully inspiring the hotels there to improve their conditions. I love big meaty long-term projects and I've done nine books.

I enjoy my relationship with National Geographic. The photographers are like a tribe that can understand my photographic obsession that even my closest friends can't. People tend to think of National Geographic just being the yellow magazine, but the society actually has a lot of tentacles. I've shot three books for them on China, Great Britain and London. I've been in ads on television for them and I distribute images and prints through their photo archive. I've been published in all their magazines and the photo of my Tibet girl was in their latest Taschen book celebrating 125 years of National Geographic.

I lead expedition photo tours, mostly in Asia, and travel photography seminars across the country. I've been part of the National Geographic Live Speaker series and most recently I was named a 2013 National Geographic Traveler of the Year as someone who travels with a sense of passion and purpose.

I also work for a number of publications. I think as a freelancer you need to have a lot of pillars to rely on. I rely on assignments, stock image sales, print sales, teaching workshops, books and public speaking.

JC: I had the great pleasure of meeting you for the first time at FOTOfusion this year where you received a standing ovation from a packed house after your presentation. Does that happen often? And how important are these speaking engagements to you in relation to your other responsibilities? Is it part of your "giving back" philosophy?

AW: That was a really lovely and humbling surprise. And when that gentleman who I'd been teaching with all week, brought up that his wife had my book "Learning to Breathe" (Penguin) on her bedside table during her struggle with bone cancer and it inspired her to walk again, well there wasn't a dry eye in the house. I can't think of anything more rewarding than connecting with another human being like that.

I have to say that the most surprising standing ovation I ever got was the first high school I spoke at. I was a little intimidated as I thought --what do teenagers care about what I have to say? Not only did I get a standing ovation but there were kids hugging me and crying and the best part were their questions--they were so fired up about what they'd just seen and been exposed to. It was so inspirational that I just dedicated the last six months to going across the country speaking to high schools. These kids are already traveling and doing community service so they're the ones that are going to go out and make a difference. I was, after all, fifteen when I decide that I wanted to be photojournalist so you never know what's going to influence someone. I find it very important to complete the circle and give back in that way; I'm even working on a book for young adults.

JC: In January of 2000, your life was almost cut short in a terrible accident in Laos. Can you tell us briefly what happened? And where you are both physically and emotionally since that time?

AW: In Asia, I was living the life I had always dreamed of. That's when life throws you a curveball. On January 2, 2000 I was in a horrific bus accident on a remote jungle road in Laos. I was sitting right at the point of impact, pinned by the giant logging truck that had sheared our bus in half. Of those who survived I suffered the most extensive injuries; multiple broken bones including my back, pelvis, all my left side ribs. Most alarming were my collapsed lungs, herniated heart and multiple life threatening internal injuries that I didn't learn about until later.

The locals brought me to their village and sewed my damaged body together as best they could. There was no hospital, no phones, and no painkillers of any kind available! The villagers continued to worry and care for me as darkness fell. Ten hours passed. When it became clear that I was not going to make it through the night I wrote a

note to my family, telling them how and where I had died. It felt important to assure them that I didn't die alone and afraid. And as I closed my eyes and surrendered, an amazing thing happened: I let go of all fear.

My body took on lightness and I was released from its profound suffering. A bone-deep peace came over me, and calm prevailed. There was nothing left to do, nowhere left to go. You don't get closer to death than lying eviscerated on that roadside and I dipped more than a toe into feeling the other side of my own mortality.

I have spent a lifetime trying to capture the enduring universal human spirit through my photographs and in that moment, I felt my beliefs transform into undeniable truths. As I lay there, I felt how interwoven every being is with every other in the seamless mesh of the universe. I felt myself rise and emerge from the shell of pain lying below and as I did so, realized that leaving the body only ends life, not our interconnectedness with those whom we care about.

I miraculously survived with the help of a benevolent British aid worker and his wife, Alan & Sirivan Guy, who drove me eight hours in the back of their truck to Thailand. After three weeks in intensive care and a medevac back to San Francisco I forged through thirty surgeries and years of rehabilitation, motivated by the desire to return to the work that I love. I wear my well-earned scars with pride. This experience didn't convince me to change my life so much as confirm that I was on the right path. It has since brought a whole new empathy and compassion to my work. I discovered a physical and spiritual strength within myself that I didn't know I had, but more importantly it has inspired me to recognize the resiliency and tenacity of others, something I strive to capture in my imagery. My brush with death has become a touchstone. Not a day goes by that I don't remember, with gratitude, that I am alive because of the kindness of strangers.

From the people of Afghanistan to earthquake survivors in Haiti, people around the world have graciously opened up their homes and hearts to me. Surprisingly, I've discovered that it's often the ones who have the least who share the most. The planet, at times, can seem so vast, with the numbers almost too large for us to comprehend. But when you capture the look in someone's eyes, an intimate stare, a knowing glance, his or her situation becomes a shared experience, a more personal connection. Their eyes seem to radiate a dignity, a claim for a right to be seen, no matter what their circumstances.

JC: Speaking of giving back, you created the Faces of Hope Fund that helps provide medical care and education to children in crisis around the world. Can you tell us a little about that fund; why you created it and why it's so important to you?

AW: Through my photography I strive to create global awareness, and through my foundation, the Faces of Hope Fund (See link below) I hope to give back in some small way to the communities that I photograph. I experienced firsthand what it means to nearly die from lack of access to medical care...so I started my foundation to help women and children and their communities in crisis through medical care and education; so little money can do so much in these countries. The first thing I did was to bring five American doctors from Dr2Dr and \$10,000 worth of medical supplies to the villagers in Laos who saved my life.

As more people travel I believe that they do want to help the communities that they visit in some way and my goal is to connect the spirit of philanthropy and travel. The "faces of hope" I've come to realize are not just the children but the people who are out there starting their own innovative projects to find the solutions to the problems they encounter. The Sally Struthers days are over, focusing on children with flies on their eyes and outstretched hands. Images like that can make the world's problems feel so overwhelming. People are more inspired if you show hope, and present a solution to the problem.

People like my friend and idol, Olga Murray, who founded the Nepal Youth Foundation. At 88 she still works tirelessly running orphanages in Nepal and has almost single handedly stamped out girls being sold into bonded labor in western Nepal by giving piglets to families so they can sell their piglet at the end of the year instead of their girl children. (This is a sad statement to what a girl is worth.) If we're privileged enough to have the unique opportunity to step into the worlds of others, my goal is to inspire thinking about how we can help better the lives of others in some way.

As a photojournalist I hope that making a photo will create awareness and inspire someone to make a difference in the world. If that motivation deems me an activist, it's a term I can live with. Some days though, it feels that my small contributions are digging the way out of the world's problems with a teaspoon.

JC: I consider you to be a highly "spirited" individual. Did this accident change your perspective on life or did you always have a spiritual connection to your life and work?

AW: Ha ha, my dad used to always call me "highly spirited" as a child but I think he meant it in a different sense! Yes, I've always had a strong sense of spiritualism through my work and my life, although not in a religious sense. My curiosity about the philosophy of Buddhism is one of the reasons I was led to Asia, where I lived for many years and a place so near and dear to my heart that it's where I still return to the most.

I have spent a lifetime meditating and doing retreats with the monks in monasteries and the forest, sometimes not talking for up to three weeks at a time. I truly believe that without that skill to be able to center my focus I not only wouldn't have survived such a life threatening accident but the years of rehabilitation and surgeries I subsequently endured. Feeling that connected to humanity and possessing that inner peace and clarity was something I had always strived for on the meditation cushion.

Throughout that journey I discovered a physical and spiritual strength I never knew I had. The best part about getting creamed by a logging truck and lying on the side of the road--nothing else really seems so bad after that. But I'm no one special-- we all have this inner strength within us and I wanted to share that. It's why I wrote my memoir, "*Learning to Breathe, One Woman's Journey of Spirit and Survival.*" (Penguin)

My most recent book, "*Face to Face: Portraits of the Human Spirit*" (Schiffer) also deals with the pursuit of the universal human connection. These large color photo books of over 200 portraits are unguarded moments in the lives of people I've photographed from our remarkable human tapestry. Some are celebrating significant events, while others are simply living out ordinary days or just struggling to survive. Many are from countries where people's lives are in flux due to war, natural disaster or the inevitable rapid progression of modernity. Most are surprised that I actually wanted to stop and photograph someone who is considered in their culture such an ordinary looking person. As an admitted romantic pastoralist, I feel drawn to those who live close to the land; documenting communities that may not last even another generation. I consider Asia my second home and I feel especially captivated by the nomads of Tibet, an area I have visited numerous times over the last two decades.

One of the many things I have learned during my years of global travel is that no matter how unique we may look in appearance, from the exotic to the mundane, we basically have the same universal desires and concerns. Our needs are actually quite simple: to love and be loved; to have a useful place in our society with some meaningful and fulfilling occupation in our life; work that will hopefully provide us with enough money in our pocket to get by; food on the table; education, health and safety for ourselves, our family and our children. The freedom to be ourselves is what connects us as a human race.

This book is a celebration of the spirit within us all. It is what bonds us as mankind, a continued thread, as together we continue on this journey in the pilgrimage of life.

JC: In your book, "*Learning to Breathe*," there is a foreword written by the Dalai Lama. How did you come to meet him and what is he like?

I first met His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India in 1988. I have had the great fortune to photograph him a number of times over the years for dozens of book covers as well as my own book called, "A Simple Monk." (New World Library) We had a lot more time to visit in his earlier years, now he's so globally ubiquitous with huge demands on his travel schedule. Still, he remains a gentle, benevolent and admirable spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people.

One of the latest times I had a private audience with him he exclaimed, "Ah, you again," taking my hand and

holding it as we walked through his garden. He stopped to feed his pet parakeets, and I apologized for taking his time from what is now an incredibly busy schedule of meetings. "Please know that I have the best of intentions," I assured him. He turned towards me suddenly, as if reading my eyes. "Yes, I know...and good intent, very important. Most important in all that you do. Never forget! Whatever your actions, it's what is in your heart that truly matters!" His simple words always made an impact on me.

JC: Please tell our readers something about you that a lot of people might not know?

AW: I love being an aunt to my brother's girls: Claire, Hannah and Erin who each have their own Aunt Ali museum full of dolls and gifts from all over the world.

I love the embryonic feeling of scuba diving and do it all over the world any chance I get. I just dived a crater lake in Nicaragua.

Growing up in the Bay area I was a Dead Head for years and have seen them about 80 times. In San Francisco I lived across the street from the famous rock n' roll photographer Jim Marshall for twenty years and one night he nearly ran me over with his car while in a drunken stupor. He made it up to me by giving me a signed print of Jerry Garcia. I still have it on my wall.

JC: One of the biggest challenges that photographers face today is financing their endeavors. You've managed to do so with grants, awards and commitments from humanitarian organizations. How does one go about that?

AW: With everyone owning an iPhone it's become increasingly challenging to earn a living as a paid photographer. Freelance photography is a business; it's a good idea to learn how to run one.

I'm a huge proponent of personal projects; I always have big meaty themes that I'm working on. My first book, *"The Spirit of Tibet,"* (Snow Lion Publications) took years of photographing the Tibetan culture in exile while I lived in Nepal. I got really sick and spent four months being treated at the Tropical Disease Hospital in London. Not wanting to return to the states without health insurance I applied to UC Berkeley to get my graduate degree. I don't think school is a necessity, but I made it work for me. I used the body of work I shot in Asia (all 57 Tibetan refugee settlements) as my thesis and got my Master's degree in Visual Anthropology, studying cultures through photography and film. We had a big exhibit that led to my first book contract on Tibet which then led to the book on the Dalai Lama, *"A Simple Monk."* I was also awarded the Dorothea Lange Award in Documentary Photography for my work with child labor that led to my book on children around the world, *"Faces of Hope."*

I'm really excited about my new self-imposed project focusing on the global empowerment of women at work around the world. From tea fields to technology I think we have a lot to learn from women in traditional cultures just as they have a lot to learn from us. From International Women's Day on March 8, 2014 – 2015, I'm photographing and collecting stories of the situations of women at work around the world. I've just returned from Nicaragua and I'm heading to Africa for over a month for the nonprofit BRAC. Anyone who would like to support or follow my women's project can do so on www.facesofhope.org and through my social media accounts.

JC: I am sure there are a lot of photographers who would like to do what you are doing. What advice can you give them to help them get started on that path?

AW: First of all, realize that you can't follow anyone else's path. Your path is your own. Follow your own intuition, your passion and your heart. I know this all sounds terribly cliché but there is no other way. Each photographer you speak with will have a different story of how we got to where we are. Find your inner voice and make your story your own, no one can take that away from you.

I suggest adding something else to your tool kit like video or writing. Throw open every door and take advantage of every opportunity. It's all an evolution. I'm still out there hustling every day!

JC: Finally, what last words would you like to leave our readers regarding this profession...or life in general?

AW: Have medevac insurance.