

# Tim Keller

## On Telling Stories With a Camera

I take my photographs where I live, in beautiful, remote northeastern New Mexico. Growing up by the beach in southern California, I read my dad's photography magazines; he had a community college degree in photography but gave up his career dreams to get a "real job" when I came along. At 13 and 14, I shot surfers with a friend's 35mm camera and 400mm lens on a tripod, developing and printing the shots in his darkroom. In high school, I took a one-year photography course in the art department, where I learned composition and the mantra "simplicity is a virtue."

Along the way, I learned to write by struggling through Miss O'Brien's English classes, and I learned to love the country life when I worked summers on a sprawling ranch where my grandpa was the purchasing agent. It was a lot of building fences, and the hardest work I've ever done. I've been edging toward the outback ever since.

I always enjoyed getting good photographs, but I never bought a camera: I used hand-me-downs. At the end of 2007, I dove into photography, buying the just-released Nikon D300 digital SLR camera and some great lenses. I've been immersed in making pictures ever since. By the following summer, I couldn't look at a magazine without studying the photographs accompanying articles. Many of them I admired and envied. With others, I thought, "I could do better than that." That led me to look for subjects for photo essays, writing my own articles to accompany them, and submitting them to magazines.

My wife and I had moved to Des Moines, New

Mexico, in 1999 – we wanted to get as far from civilization as possible without leaving New Mexico – so it hasn't been difficult to find great material to photograph and write: we're surrounded by ranching culture. Our county is bigger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined, yet it has just 4,000 people...and several times that many cows. It's easy to be inspired by both the land and the people.

If my vantage is that of an outsider, it hasn't hurt. I look for a good story, then I try to get close, and ask a lot of questions, until I know how to tell the story. I enjoy leading with my camera: I always process my photographs first, and they lead me into the writing. The photography is pure joy, easy and fun, whereas the writing is hard work. Even when I'm exhausted late at night, I'd rather process great new photographs than sleep. But for the writing, I have to be rested and fresh, with good coffee first thing in the quiet morning. After years of teaching high school honors literature and writing courses, I'm finally practicing what I've preached.

At their best, my photos should tell their own stories. The strongest images can stand alone. Those are the ones you want to frame and hang on the wall. Of course, my favorite of all is the next one, the one I'm about to find.

Many of the photos on the following pages were taken as I developed stories for a variety of magazines. After magazines finish their newsstand runs, I post my features at [www.timkellerarts.com](http://www.timkellerarts.com), where they remain available for viewing, along with the rest of my photography.