On art as therapy

Photographer Trent Davis Bailey discusses the magic of photography, working across various creative disciplines, and what he's learned from fatherhood.

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As told to Diana Ruzova, 3319 words.

Tags: Photography, Art, Writing, Process, Inspiration.

What brought you to photography as an art form?

I think I inherited photography from my brother, my dad, and my mom. The first time I became interested in photography, I was tied to a tree. My older brother had gotten a high school art assignment to make pictures that included a rope. I was 12 at the time. He tied me to the cottonwood in our backyard, shot a roll of film, and then turned around and walked inside the house with me still tied to the tree. In that moment—in that pause between him coming back out to untie me and me being willing to be tied to a tree for art sake—I realized how the camera is this powerful tool to change the relationships between people, even kin. And so, it shifted the dynamic between my brother and me: we became collaborators.

We were engaging in this artistic act that was based on the reality of our lives, but it was also partly fictional. A week later, I asked my dad if I could borrow his old Nikon that he had in college. I started taking pictures of the neighborhood where I lived. I would bring it with me when my family went into the high country of Colorado’s Rocky Mountains. I would photograph my cat. I wasn’t doing anything particularly serious, but I became obsessed with the process of, as Gary Winogrand famously put it, “to see what the world looks like photographed.” I would skip lunch to work in the dark room and make prints. I became obsessed with the magic of photography, both as an alchemical process and the woodshop-like nature of the darkroom. It’s very meditative.

And then there’s the actual experience of being out in the world with a camera. I found myself walking the halls of my middle school, stopping people to take close-up portraits of their faces. They weren’t necessarily people that I had interacted with before. Photography was teaching me how to be in the world.



How has your relationship with taking pictures changed over time?

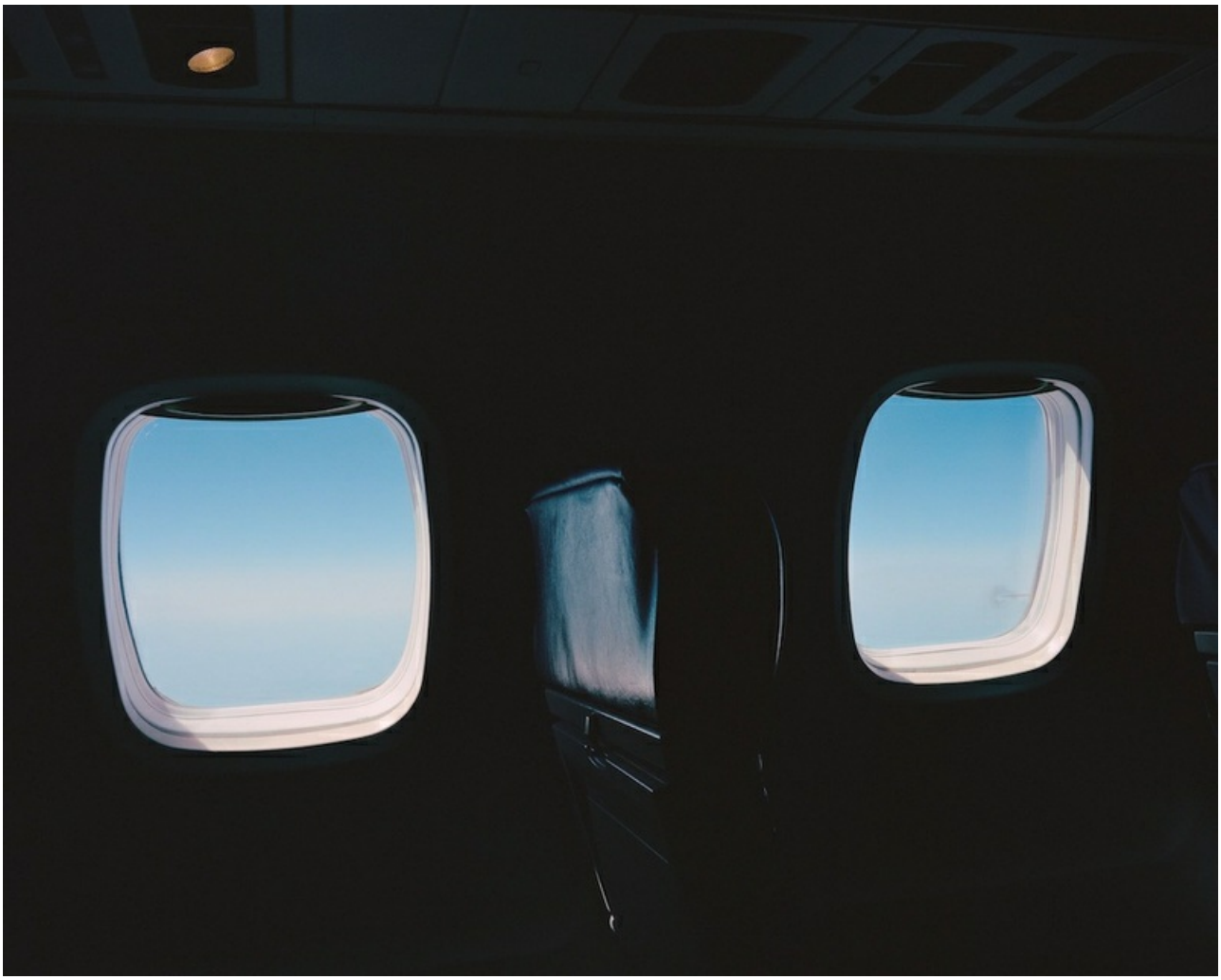
It’s ever evolving just as I am. I look at my first book, *The North Fork* (Trespasser, 2023). I had made those pictures from 2011 to 2018. It was at a very particular searching period of my life. I was in my mid-20s. Thankfully, I had a camera because it gave me a reason to go explore this particular place from my past and see it in the present tense. When I began the project I was trying to convince myself that I had these objective documentary intentions, but this river valley and my experience in it was way too subjective.

I look at that project as a really interesting example to answer your question, because I was trying to reframe notions of family. I was living with my twin brother in New York City. I was longing for the West where I grew up and these wide open spaces. That’s what drew me [to The North Fork] in the first place. I had these core memories of being seven and 10 years old in this particular valley. It had been about 20 years since I’d been there. By returning there as an adult, I was imposing these longings and desires. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was seeking a long lost side of my family, and I found them. I was seeking a sense of community and a sense of belonging, and I found it in that place, and the camera enabled me to be there with a true purpose even if what I’d hoped to find was a bit abstract.

Basically, I met one person, a vintner and orchardist, who let me camp on his land. Within a few days, I’d met a sculptor who was housesitting on a ranch, who gave me a couch to sleep on. He then introduced me to a gardener, who introduced me to a woman who got her photography degree in the ‘70s and had this guest house. She ended up being the sort of interlocutor who cast a wide web in the community for me. I eventually became a part of this community, all because I took a leap and showed up there with a camera. Long story short, I ran into my aunt, my

cousins, and then eventually met my now wife there. When I look at those pictures, they don’t relay that backstory, but they do infer all of the things that I was searching for in my life. I was conjuring these intimate family moments. I was remembering these core childhood memories. I was discovering how the past aligned with the present. I was directed by—a multiplicity of feelings.

When the project was complete, I realized that the resolve really was that I made all of these pictures at a time in my life where I could never make those pictures again. If I went to that same valley now, I would be bringing a much different context and sensibility and feeling. I think it’s still a very rich place for me photographically and communally. I may go back there someday and branch out. Photography is very much about place in time, perhaps more than any other art form. At least the type of photography I’m talking about, where you go out into the world with your camera, and walk around. It’s so present tense that it’s got to be related to who you are and how you feel in that particular moment.



It’s so hard to make a living as an artist. What made you realize that you could monetize your art? How did you do it?

In an ideal world, artists would just exist making their personal work. There are a very lucky few in my generation who get to do that, or have carved out a lifestyle in which that is possible. That isn’t my reality. I’m a father of young children, and have many commitments. If you want to be an artist *and* a parent, there are many things at odds with that in a capitalist/post-capitalist society, and it’s something that I’m constantly grappling with.

In terms of my practice as an artist, I've sold prints through Robert Koch Gallery in San Francisco. I've also taken on editorial and commercial assignments. I've taught adjunct classes and photography workshops. The commissions I seek out or the ones offered to me are generally related to the personal work that I'm making or, in some cases, one art director or photo editor I've worked with recommends me to another. I think having a distinct visual language that you're known for allows for that. So, in my own ecosystem of figuring out my practice, it is my art practice, which is the largest gamble, and then there are these other forms of doing things that generate revenue. There isn't one easy way to do it, because the schedule is constantly shifting depending on my commitments at home and at work. I think there are jobs I would have said yes to in my early 30s that I no longer would say yes to. As your priorities shift, so does the ability to show up in a working capacity as an artist.

How do you make time for creativity as a busy father of two?

Being a parent is its own art form and its own dance. I don't actually like to view them as that dissimilar, because whatever I am committing myself to, I want to put all of myself into it, whether that's parenting or taking photographs. I also don't want to take it too seriously. It's good to make serious art, but that doesn't mean that you need to be serious doing it. It requires play and curiosity, and when you have a three and a six year old, they're way better at doing that than I am. I'm 40, so they're showing me the way. They're reminding me of the tools, the innate imaginative tools I was born with. As I've aged, those tools have gotten duller. I need to sharpen those tools more as time passes, and being a parent helps with that, through the pure act of witnessing my children's improvisation.



I know your twin is a writer. And you recently found your voice as a writer with this essay in *The New York Times* along with memoiristic prose in your new photobook, *Son Pictures* (Chose Commune, 2026). What did it feel like to find your voice as a writer? Do photography and writing share any common ground? Also, is it true, do identical twins really gravitate towards similar professions?

As far as the twin question, I can only answer from my own experience. When Spencer and I were teenagers, we begged our dad to take us to Guitar Center again and again and again. He finally took us, and Spencer came home with a drum set, and I came home with a bass guitar and an amp. Little did we realize the instruments that we gravitated towards were complimentary. We were the rhythm section. And as we became older and more interested in other things aside from rock music, he got into writing and studied English, and eventually got a Master's in Journalism from Columbia, and I started as a business undergrad, and after a semester added a photography degree, which I had been pursuing since middle school, eventually getting an MFA from the California College of the Arts. We had these complimentary pursuits of bass and drums and later writing and photography—and we never really stepped on each other's toes.

We recently did our first commission together for the Leading Hotels of the World. LHW has a new book series showcasing their properties that's organized around themes and the latest release is called *Explore*. It's published by Moncelli, which is now a division of Phaidon books. Spencer is overseeing the editorial direction of the entire book series and his media company The Slowdown is producing it. I also happened to have a prior working relationship with the photo editor who was hired for this book so the stars aligned and he and I went to the Sonnenalp Hotel in Vail. He wrote about it and I took pictures. It was an incredibly special project where we literally got paid to do what we love, in a place that also felt very meaningful to both of us. In a way, it felt like we were teenagers again back in our basement jamming out.

What about your writing?

I came to writing much more slowly, because I was always thinking, "That's my twin's territory." Then I got this opportunity to write an op-ed for *The New York Times* with photos from *Son Pictures*. It was going to be a Father's Day feature, so I had a three month period of time, which lit a fire under my butt. What was remarkable for me after that op-ed, "What a Motherless Son Knows About Fatherhood," came out, I realized that 50% of the people who wrote to me were not even mentioning my photography, they were mentioning my writing. Only then did I realize the importance of storytelling in this particular project was so tied to a linguistic narrative as much as it was a visual narrative.

Since I didn't really have any formal training in creative writing, I signed up for an online memoir workshop. I realized I was doing something interesting there because of the way that people were—once again—responding to my writing. Learning how to craft a good sentence is not that dissimilar from learning how to craft a good photograph. When you're out in the world with a camera, you're going to make bad photographs, and it's okay. That's part of the process. It's about accepting these micro failures, knowing that you're getting closer to the thing that you're trying to pinpoint. And the same goes for writing.

Occasionally, you will have those 'a-ha' moments where you write the sentence correctly the first time, or where you go out into the world and you take that so-called perfect photograph, but the majority of the time you're stumbling and that's okay.

That's part of it.

***Son Pictures* is intentionally nonlinear. What was your intent with this form? Is it meant to mimic the nonlinearity of memory, of grief, of how the past is ever present?**

It completely relates to trauma. And trauma and grief are very much intertwined, especially when you experience a traumatic event on the level at which my family experienced: my mom died in a commercial airplane crash in 1989. My two brothers were sitting beside her on both sides, and she potentially saved their lives by putting her arms over them. She died in the process of the crash. She was a very tall woman sitting in economy, and that may have had something to do with it, too. There were 112 people who died, and 184 who survived Flight 232. I think back

to that event, and it was this dark cloud over our family for the better part of the 1990s, even into the early aughts, and it shaped almost every decision any of us made.

One of the things that I wanted to convey visually is the role of images in memory. These images have existed in my mind forever, but have been sitting in all these disparate archives in Iowa, in my dad's basement, on VHS tapes, in my own museum boxes on the shelves of my studio. By combining all of those together, it's offering the viewer a glimpse into the interconnectedness of a visual narrative, the one that has existed in my mind, but was never tangible until now. I think and I hope in some way that it provides a blueprint for grief. It's possible to find these constellations between images and points in time. How an image from 1987 or 1983 can actually echo a moment in the present in the 2020s. How a film still from a movie can be as real, if not more real, than an actual photograph of the crash. And how when I get a window seat on an airplane and look out as it passes over Iowa, I cannot think of anything else but the crash, my childhood, and my mother.

Photography can allow—even in the most devastating of experiences and stories—one to find beauty by looking back, by being present, by allowing all of those things: the past, present, and possible future to exist together in an image.



Your work is so personal. Why is it important to you to tell these particular stories?

I'd like to think that art can be used for healing. It's kind of a touchy subject in art schools, especially MFA programs. Many shy away from the thought that art is therapy. Fuck that. Art *is* therapy. I'm talking about the

nitty gritty process of artmaking. It's what I was iterating earlier about my work in *The North Fork*. About how I made these pictures that allowed me to find a resolve in that particular period of time in my life. I see writers do this. I see painters, sculptors, everyone does it in a different form. The mistake that I think a lot of viewers make with photography is they feel that it is so real and such a reflection of real existence in the world that surely it must be true. If it's not "Photoshopped," it must be a reflection of the world, but let's be real: cameras can soften and skew reality as much as they can freeze time. Cameras can lie.

For me, a photograph is just as imaginative as an abstract sculpture. I think when a photographer understands the social-emotional aspects of the medium and how to employ the material they're given and the tools they're given, that's where the richness comes in. Because you're allowing the process of making to be therapeutic. It's not the process of *showing* the work, it's the process of *making* the work.

Wow. Yes. Fully agree.

What (if anything) did you find challenging about developing your new photobook *Son Pictures*?

The most challenging thing was my emotional closeness to the subject matter, not just to the crash, but to my own children. It's been hard for me to distinguish how a picture feels when it's not just close to home, it *is* home.

What's inspiring you these days?

I've really been leaning into trying new things, not getting stuck in old ways. I've been taking guitar lessons. I've started to play tennis with my wife, Emma. We've been taking weekly lessons this summer. We also took a bookmaking workshop together last year.

I think keeping things fresh and also continuing to build new skills has been key for me. I'm entering a new phase in my life and I'm just excited to follow some new lines of inquiry in life and work.

Do you have any advice for photographers and artists just starting out?

Find an artist whose work you love and write down what it is that you love about that artist's work. This could be a writer, a musician, or a visual artist. It doesn't need to be the art form that you practice or that you're interested in, but get close. Really get underneath why their work captivates and moves you.

And then, if you feel up to it, use the art form that you are most attracted to, and somehow imitate that artist's work. If it's a folk musician who sings about America, but you're a visual artist, maybe your work can touch on similar themes. If it's a one-to-one copying of an artist who uses the same medium, see how close you can get your work to look or sound like their work. Get that out of your system. Do the mimicking. Allow yourself to figure out how to make the best art that you can that's in dialogue with whatever that artist has done, and somewhere in there you may find a part of your voice. Once you find that, allow your voice to move you forward to the next stage. Candidly and consciously get rid of the mimicking and get to a point where you're living in the work and intuitively feeling your way through it.

Trent Davis Bailey recommends:

The Time Sensitive podcast, hosted by my identical twin Spencer Bailey, especially his interviews with Robert Wilson, Siri Hustvedt, Pico Iyer, Min Jin Lee, and Maria Popova.

Independent art and photobook publishers. Aside from Trespasser and Chose Commune, both of which I've been fortunate to work with, some of my other favorites include TBW Books, Fw:Books, Roma Publications, Nazraeli, TIS Books, Deadbeat Club, Loose Joints, J&L Books, Super Labo, Dais Books, and NECK.

The Japanese knife selection at Carbon Knife Co. in Denver.

The Introduction to Bookbinding Level One course at The American Academy of Bookbinding in Telluride.

Books by Rebecca Solnit. Here's my primer list: *Wanderlust*, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, *The Faraway Nearby*,

Recollections of My Nonexistence, *Hope in the Dark*, *Men Explain Things to Me*, *No Straight Road Takes You There*, and *The Beginning Comes After the End*.

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