

# Tribute to Leo Holub

by Peter Brown

*Originally published in Leo Holub - A Lifetime of Photography.*

Leo Holub, who was my teacher at Stanford for three years in the late seventies introduced me to photography - and perhaps just as important, he introduced me to a way of life within photography and thus to my life's work. If I had not met Leo I would not be the photographer, the teacher or the person I am today and my life would be incomparably poorer.

I know other people will write of Leo's generosity, humility, and care and I will as well. These are qualities that are rare in the art world, rarer still in academic life and generally are given short shrift in our limited time on earth. But as we all know, they are the forces that make life worth living and they are the treasure house of all creative work. And they make up Leo's currency. And he spends this currency profligately. He hands it out with the ease and the spirit of a gentle force of nature.

Other people will write of his talent as a photographer, and I will as well. Leo's work is subtle, funny, humane and complex and it grows in texture and in meaning over time. As his work ages it mirrors those qualities that are intrinsic to Leo. It is a photography that in unsentimental ways celebrates the sweetness of life, a care for others and the good and creative work that people may do. And if these photographs are about work itself (and many of his photographs seem to be) the work that Leo focuses on, is work that honors those qualities that he himself seems to own - care, balance, reverence, and a respect for life's full potential.

People will write of Leo's qualities as a friend, and I need to as well. I've had no comparable teacher and none that I've stayed in contact with in the ways I have with Leo. And it's simply been fun. Leo and Florence are the easiest people on earth to be with. One of the high points of my year is a visit to their home in San Francisco. The ritual: the hugs, the talk, the lunch, the looking at work, the catching up, the reminiscences and then, as I begin to leave, the photographs of all the ex-students who have also continued to stay in touch - their spouses, their kids, their lives, all are pulled out and exclaimed over...

Two very different personal examples of his generosity that still seem extraordinary to me: On the long term - Leo spent an entire June with me typesetting and printing the letterpress text for a portfolio of mine. He drove down from San Francisco to meet me at eight each morning and he did this for the month. He lent a knowledgeable hand; he introduced me to a gorgeous process, and most important, he buttressed me up and listened to me, as a long term relationship of mine ground slowly to a halt. Once the portfolio was published, without telling me, he recommended it for an award which it won. On the short term - he visited me in Houston years ago and as we drove around in my ancient VW bus, a tire went flat. I was about to have the sad thing patched for the third time (little money that first year out of grad school),

when Leo pulled out his wallet and bought me a new tire on the spot. He also bought me a can opener which I still have. There is a practical side to Leo that cannot be overemphasized.

Others will write about his way of being, and I will as well: Leo spends time. He does not rush things - whether it's looking at a photograph, contemplating a problem or thinking about what to say, he takes the time to get it right. And if there is a criticism, there is always that head, cocked to the side, the rueful smile, the slight shake. You know that whatever is being considered could have been done a bit better, or whoever has just been mentioned simply did not reach down deeply enough. In all cases though, (apart from his feelings for the Bush White House) there is the understanding that a better result will occur the next time. Leo has a charity in regard human failing that seems coupled with a flip side: the expectation that the best will always be done.

And finally, he is just funny. He is a genuinely funny man. One short and final story. Years ago, just after I had decided to become a photographer, Leo came over to my parents home on the Stanford campus. This was on the occasion of a show of his, and my mother said that she was curious about his philosophy of teaching. A glint came into his eye. He stood up and said something along the lines of: "When students are just learning to become photographers, they're like little plants, tender green plants, and just as they begin to put their fragile little heads above the ground, something happens. And what happens is this." And he proceeded to stomp around the living room like a madman. "There's another one! Stomped that one. Here's another one, stomped that one flat! Look out! Look out! Here I come!" Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp.

"That's what I try not to do," he said, "but that's what happens. These kids are smart, but they're sensitive. And they need to be watched carefully as they open up to the world and to themselves." And Leo taught, what was it? Four thousand students over his ten years? And I don't know one who didn't love him.