

## Perspectives

# Joyce Tenneson: Spiritual Warrior

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Exhibitions come and go. Images on the Internet are neither tangible nor of the highest standard. That leaves books as still the best venue for the dissemination of a photographer's work in terms of quality and longevity. And with high-end, on-demand book publishing, photo books have never been more accessible. Few photographers have embraced the book format for the encapsulation of their imagery as enthusiastically and successfully as Joyce Tenneson. The Maine-based, Massachusetts native has more than a dozen books to her credit, and considers them the logical conclusion to each of her many bodies of work.

**But before the** book must come the idea. Many photographers find this a stumbling block, shooting loads of images in hopes of a theme somehow materializing. This has never been a problem for Tenneson, whose



*Joyce Tenneson (Self-portrait, 1976)*

ideas derive from a deeply felt internal imperative. "They've all been very organic and autobiographical, somehow mirroring what I've been going through at that time in my life," she explains.

Similarly, Tenneson trusts her intuition to tell her when a particular project has run its course. "That's when I do a book on it," she states. "It completes the cycle. I recommend to my workshop students that they not sit on projects for ten years. You need to wind them up. It allows you to move on psychologically. It puts closure on a project and a time in your life and it frees you to the unknown, to move forward in your work and in your life. That's why I've always been very book-driven. I love that feeling of completion. I love moving on. One of the most important things in my life is continuing to live and grow. To me Hell would be retirement. Artists never do [retire]."

Tenneson's thorough concentration on her inner psychological terrain marks her as one of the first photographers to systematically use the medium in such a consistently self-reflective and referential manner. Her work, largely portrait-based, is simultaneously probing, haunting and enigmatic, and transcends traditional notions of what portraiture can be. Even when she's pointing her camera at oth-







“When people do their best work it does look like them, perhaps not physically but spiritually.”

cally but spiritually. That was the series that was the most ‘channeled’ in a sense.”

The book *Transformations* (published in 1994) was followed by *Illuminations* (1998) and *Light Warriors* (2000), each project defined by the unique visual and emotional qualities Tenneson is able to import into each image. People often ask if she has some secret, specialized technique to create her prints, but Tenneson insists they are straightforward studio shots with strobes. She credits their otherworldly quality to a combination of lighting, the people she photographs, and her selection of props and fabric.

More germane to an appreciation of the work is the interior journey she undertakes, both with herself and her subjects, who are often her friends. This was particularly true of the “Light Warriors” series. “I see my life as a spiritual journey, and I was wondering at that time if young women felt that way,” she explains. “I photographed them and asked,

‘What is your journey like?’ When I say spiritual I do not mean religious; I’m not religious. It’s more a sense of being authentic to your own journey, to unfold or unravel your own authentic self.”

For *Light Warriors* Tenneson sought an earthier palette by using the 20x24 camera with a brown-toned Polaroid film that no longer exists. All the women in the book were chosen because they seemed to Tenneson to be on some sort of a spiritual journey.

The subjects hailed from all over the world—including Russia, Finland, Australia, Canada, Israel and Slovenia—underscoring the universality of Tenneson’s theme. A particularly striking image from this series of a young woman with a pair of doves balanced on her shoulders resulted from the kind of serendipity Tenneson often elicits.

“I met Dasha at an art opening in New York, and asked if she wanted to be a part of my project. I asked if she had any recurring dreams and she said, ‘I have this dream of a white bird coming out of my heart. I always wake up when it’s flying out.’ I had a similar dream about white birds, and I set out to find some white birds we could use for the shoot. I tried to reenact them coming out of Dasha’s heart, but it looked contrived. So we took a break, and at that point the birds landed on her shoulders. I had one sheet of film, which I immediately exposed. ‘That’s it! That’s a wrap!’ I cried.

“It was a gift. The birds were like sentinels. I think that’s why she was dreaming them: she wanted protection, spiritual protection perhaps. She had come from another country to New York, and I’m sure she was feeling the vulnerability I had felt when I moved there as a younger woman. For anybody going to a new place there are inner expectations and also fear. I’ve said many times that my best work happens through grace. Luck favors those who are prepared. You set the stage, you’re present, you prepare, then you have to let go.”

**This approach proved** successful once again with *Wise Women*, which became the best-selling photography book of 2002. “I was in my fifties and I didn’t have any role models ahead of me,” Tenneson says. “I thought, *What’s it going to be like for me when I’m in my sixties, seventies and eighties?* I asked friends and colleagues to recommend women aged 65 to 100 who were unusual in some



*Nine Roses, 2001*



“My best work happens through grace. Luck favors those who are prepared.”

way. Twenty percent were celebrities and eighty percent were ‘real women.’ In addition to photographing them, I asked what they had learned from their long lives and what advice they would give younger people.”

*Wise Women* was followed a couple years later by *Amazing Men*, a less delicate, more straightforward look at men aged 60 and older from diverse walks of life. With this project she was able to transcend masculine stereotypes, as in the portrait of a bare-chested Ben Kingsley, which powerfully mingles strength and vulnerability. It’s all part of the rapport she establishes regardless of her subjects’ gender.

“I love being completely there with my subjects. Honing in on that moment that is going to reveal something deeper than just the surface. There’s the mystery. There’s no formula for that.”

*Trees of Life*, Tenneson’s latest book, is partly the result of asking herself some fundamental questions when her partner passed away nearly six years ago.

“Who am I? What do I regret? What has meaning? As part of the healing process I moved to Maine to be nearer my son. I woke up one morning here and it was foggy outside. I couldn’t believe how beautiful it was, so I grabbed my camera and went out. Some

spark lit inside me; I was on a wavelength that made me feel like it was part of my destiny to be doing this series. Trees are living things, so you can do portraits of them. And they have different times in their lifecycles. The older ones are very much like the subjects in my “Wise Women” series. I’m still asking questions, like who will I be in 25 years?”

But if Tenneson is still given to asking herself questions, she’s reached the point where she has found some answers.

“I am by nature somebody who’s a giver. I like mentoring younger artists. I enjoy getting to know people, understanding what makes them tick, how we’re all the same, and how we’re all different. I’m a student of human nature and always have been. And I reveal myself to my subjects; it’s not a one-way street. For people to give to you, you have to give to them. I enjoy that sharing.”

#### Fact File

For a deeper view of Tenneson’s work, and to experience the full tonal range of her vision, visit [www.joycetenneson.com](http://www.joycetenneson.com).



Self-portrait, 1968





