

26 November 1979

Mr. Donald L. Stephens, Jr.
6635 Century Ave. #5
Middleton, WI. 53562

Dear Mr. Stephens:

You may know as much about my career as I know about yours, but you know less about me as a person than I suspect I know from your letters about you. I am not a gregarious person. Ever since I gave up research for photography I have worked alone. I never sought to associate myself with other photographers although I was profoundly influenced by the work of a few. Many people including members of my family and close friends disapproved my decision; They thought that I had abandoned serious work for the life of a dilettante, that photography was a trivial substitute for a career in science.

I had little to say in my own defense beyond the circumstance of Alfred Stieglitz's recognition that determined my choice. What I learned about photography I taught myself by reading, studying the works of other photographers, and long hours in the darkroom. When I took up color photography my work was again disparaged, this time by fellow photographers who regarded this new medium as lacking interpretive potential. Because I am a solitary person and because my commitment to color focused on the photography of birds, a field in which one works alone, I was able to ignore their criticism.

I am telling you all this to convince you that I am not one who needs companionship to pursue his interests, and I suspect, in spite of your romantic aspirations, you are akin in this respect. If you are determined to make nature photography your vocation you will have to learn to do it alone. You will, I am sure, be able to surmount the obstacles you perceive. Some in your position would look for instruction in a school of photography, a course with which I have had no experience and therefore should not comment on.

I am not surprised that university biology departments are not interested in photography as an end in itself. To scientists photography is only a tool for attaining other ends. Scientists are not immune to beauty but they separate it from the pursuit of knowledge. The search for beauty and the creation of works of art belong in the realm of esthetics.

At this late period in my life to enter into the kind of intimate association you seek would put such demands on my time and limited energies as to leave little over for my chosen work.

Thank you for writing to me with such confidence and candor.
Please believe that I wish you all possible success in your search
for a rewarding life with its attendant happiness.

Sincerely,