

*Essays on the Frank Espada Archive*

*by Jason Espada*

## Introduction

The notes and essays that follow were written over the last decade, as I've prepared for events, and communicated with scholars, curators, and representatives from universities. In a few cases, I've included something just because it has a family story or two in it. Perhaps all together these will help someone who is interested to get a fuller idea of who my father was, along with his own writing, and his art, of course.

Jason Espada

San Francisco,

February 2nd, 2020

Updated March 2nd, 2025



## Contents

{The linked essays in this collection and also be viewed online,  
accompanied by my father's photographs.}

1. The Artist As An Activist
2. The first thing you need to know about my father
3. My Father's Son
4. A Sketch of of Frank Espada's Life
5. From Eugene Smith to Frank Espada
6. Two stories by Frank Espada
7. Opening remarks at the Tribute to Frank Espada, hosted by John Santos,  
August 9th, 2015
8. Towards a Useful Definition of Latino Art
9. The Puerto Rican Diaspora - Documenting the Puerto Rican Experience  
in the 20th and 21st centuries
10. Reframing America's Modern Day Colonialism - 2017
11. Puerto Rico Update - A Personal Reflection - 2019

12. Frank Espada's Social Documentary Photography in the 1990's
13. The Glory of the Good Fight
14. The barest outline of a Master
15. How things change
16. I Become We - A Confluence of Rivers
17. Twenty-three sixteen - a letter to the future
18. Questions from Carmen Ramos - with responses
19. Questions from Nicole Hernandez - with responses
20. Notes from an interview with Jason Espada
21. A letter from my father to his mother, 1988
22. A letter to students, 1996
23. On the process of darkroom printing
24. Stories - The Thread of Celebration
25. We Are Heirs to All This

## The Artist As An Activist

I would like to introduce my father as an example of *the artist as an activist*. This is so important, not only for students and teachers of Latinx and Puerto Rican studies, but for all artists, activists, educators, and aspiring documentarians...

My father was a minority *within* a minority. He was both Puerto Rican, *and* a progressive, or a radical. And not only have latinos and Puerto Ricans in general been marginalized in this country, discriminated against and excluded in this culture, but as you can imagine, *the progressives* among them are even *less* visible.

This is understandable, after all. To be a progressive, by definition, is to be anti racist, and anti colonial; it is to fiercely oppose the rich and the powerful that have exploited people in the past, and that continue to do so today. Of course, this isn't exactly welcomed by the government, and by institutions here, including its universities and museums. In fact, we all know it's resisted.

It may be that this is slowly changing, but these historical forces are real, and they need to be contended with to even begin to speak about such things as human rights and social documentary work.

When it comes to the current state of Puerto Rican studies, I am told that it has largely been subsumed under what we now call Latinx Studies. And so, I have to question:

*To what extent has the loss of Puerto Rican studies been an erasure of this unique history and culture?*

As I wrote to one scholar here in California:

My father always had a very strong sense of himself as Puerto Rican. When asked if he was Latino, he made it clear that he didn't feel this label described him and other Puerto Ricans well enough, if at all, and for those who don't aspire to assimilate, as with simply becoming 'Americans', the dangers of marginalization, being co-opted, and erasure, are always present.

When he came to California in 1985, my father faced a new set of challenges to maintaining his sense of identity, and finding ways to support others in remembering their history, and celebrating their culture.

As various groups now gather in 2023 under this new umbrella term 'Latinx' it's as clear to me as ever that we need *to choose* to maintain our unique cultural and historical identities.

Going forward, as distinct groups, we are all lifted up, and made stronger by our individual histories and cultures being maintained in manifold ways, and honored.

This, to me, is where we find the United States at its best - as the realization of a harmony and a mutual enrichment among different peoples.

How can we then begin to speak of our struggles, and triumphs, our dynamic unfolding histories, and daunting challenges today? How can we communicate them in a way that values these histories, and our lives now?

If a story is just told in its bare form, as with so much news, or bland, perfunctory education, we are left unchanged by it. Something more is needed. We need the arts, to paraphrase Kafka:

*Art must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.*

I know I have an ally in every scholar who understands the necessity of using art in education - poetry, drama, photography, film, music - all are needed.

Without the depths and power of what artists help us to see and to feel, history and the events that are happening *now* remain abstract when they should be compelling; they remain just one thing among many competing for our attention, when they should be our priority.

Ideally, someone coming away from viewing Frank Espada's work, and hearing about him will understand his story;

and because of this, and because of his documentary, they will know something more about the Puerto Rican experience in this country;

they will experience the beauty and power of photography, and of social documentary photography in particular,

and they will understand that it is essential to use art in education.

In a word, they will be inspired.

The vitality of a culture is its educated people who are educating others, and so, pass it on. What people may then do with their creativity and intelligence has no limits.

We can use this encouragement, as my father did with his teaching, to encourage others, to help them to believe in themselves, and to point out that we have the resources to change things for the better in our lives, in our communities, and in our world. It may not be once and for all, but this is the essential work.

The first thing you need to know about my father

The last few years, I've found myself in the curious position of having to introduce my father, Frank Espada, and his work to people who have never heard of him. To do this, I've had to step back and say some general things, of course, but I've also wanted to speak of the heart of the man.

My thinking has been that you can hear the details of his story, see some of his beautiful photographs, and maybe even find some of the larger patterns in his life and work, without necessarily knowing what motivated him. So I've tried to add what I feel was his defining characteristic, which was his compassion. To me, this is what made him the unique and powerful figure he was to so many people.

My father loved life, good music, good food, good pitching, and film, but most of all *he cared about other people*, especially those who were neglected, or exploited and abused. He became an activist in the 1960's, an organizer and educator, and a leader in the East Coast Puerto Rican community, and throughout his life he was an advocate for human rights and social justice. He didn't look to get rich or to become famous, but instead, wherever he went, he used his talents to help others.

As a photographer and teacher, he was not merely a social documentarian, as in - an objective reporter of events and people's lives. Instead, he had a very definite point of view - and an agenda. He wanted to lift people up, and he did this exceptionally well. What he did, he did out of love. If someone is new to Frank Espada's life story and work, this is the very first thing they should know.

## My Father's Son

In the Fall of 2013, I started what I thought was going to be a simple project that would take me a few months: I was going to organize my father's photographs. I had no idea at the time how this would lead me into a deeper relationship with the man who was my hero, and role model in many ways.

I wanted to help my parents sell some of my father's fine work, as they often struggled to make ends meet, but we didn't know what we had, or where it was. The method my father had used to identify photographs was very much like him. He called the prints by their names, and we got to be familiar with quite a few: The Ballerina, Paloma, The Man by the Fence, Margarite, Confessor, Jaime Jenkins, Willie Collozo, and others. This works well with maybe a few dozen photographs, but it doesn't work when you want to have a comprehensive record.

My father's photography was produced over 60 years, and for reasons that I could see played out time and again, the prints from different projects were all mixed together- like shuffled decks of cards, I would say. When I helped my parents move out of their home in San Francisco, part of that labor was packing their photographs, and as I tried to get my father to help me determine what print went where, he'd pick one up and look at it, and get this far off look in his eyes. He'd last about fifteen or twenty minutes before saying, 'that's it' and going upstairs. I ended up madly tossing everything into boxes and sealing them up, maybe to be sorted at some future time, or maybe not.



I had this sudden flash back in 2012 that what we needed was a visual record of what they had. I even started photographing his photographs with a card in front of the first print in a box, but then I let that drop and went off for a year. When I came back to California, I picked up where I left off. It took a bit of forethought to figure out a system that would account for more than two thousand prints, but I finally figured out that by using a large format scanner, I could scan 95% of his work, and assign a box letter and number to each print. Then I could print out a catalogue with thumbnails and we could see what we had, and where everything was. Sounds easy, right?

I finally convinced my parents to let me start scanning them. At first my father resisted - he didn't understand what I had in mind, but after a couple of months I was able to show him what they looked like on his computer, and that I could print out contact sheets, box by box. It looked like we were getting somewhere. We had even begun identifying our favorite photographs, to be taken around to galleries. The fun part was within sight, at last.

On February 14th, 2014, my father had a major heart attack. I was with him in the hospital that night, and the next day, and he passed away on Sunday, the 16th. I think he knew he wasn't going to make it out of the hospital that time. Quietly, he said he wouldn't be able to make our meeting to choose the photographs together with my mother and I, like we had planned. And so another chapter began, one I didn't see coming at all.

I always had this image in my mind that grieving was something a person had time to do, in quiet, solitary moments. Little did I know that after a

person passes away, it's something you do when you can find a sliver of time. There is so much to attend to, not the least of which is caring for and comforting others in the family.

We needed to move my mother from their place in Pacifica, to an apartment, and find a way to store the archive. I asked a family friend, Karen Ande, what the best outcome could be for an artist's work, and she said, the ideal would be for it to all land in one place, where it could be seen and appreciated in times to come.

By that point, I had almost finished scanning the vintage prints, around 2000 of them. I'd been communicating with gallery owners, universities, and collectors. It was discouraging for a while until a family friend, Willie Vasquez, told me that the Smithsonian had a Latino Center, and that he had been in touch with someone there, and had given him my father's book on *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*. I spoke with Randal Woodaman, who told me the general impression in the museum world was that Duke University had gotten most of my father's work. When I told him that, no, actually what they had was less than twenty percent of it, he was surprised and delighted. He sent out a message to curators across the Smithsonian network, and several of them responded, expressing interest in visiting to see the collection.

In 2014, we had visits from curators from the Urban Studies Museum, the American Art Museum, and the American History Museum. The National Portrait Gallery and the American Art Museum each acquired a select number of prints, and *in June of 2016, the American History Museum welcomed into their permanent collection Frank Espada's Puerto Rican Diaspora*

*Documentary Project* - some 800 prints, with 140 recorded interviews from across the country, all made between 1979 to 1981. I couldn't be happier about this. It means that artists and activists, students and educators in this and coming generations will have access to his inspiring work.

This is the story so far, that anyone can see. There is a public record of it. What I'd like to tell now is how this whole process changed me.

### My father's first student

When we had the memorial for my father in March of 2014, people turned up that we hadn't seen in some cases in twenty years. These were his students, and they remembered my father and his teaching like no time had passed at all. He had that kind of an impact on people. A few remarked that they were his earliest students out here, something they were proud to say. After a while though, I remembered something I hadn't thought about much before, and that is, that *I* was my father's first student.

In 1970, we moved from Brooklyn to Valley Stream, Long Island, and in the basement of that house was a large cedar fur closet, that my father transformed into the first darkroom he ever had. Up until that time, handling his Nikon was a challenge for a young boy like me. If there are pictures taken of my father, they were likely done by my mother, who got to be pretty good at it herself.

By the time I was ten years old though, I started taking photographs, and I remember the first time we went into the darkroom. It was beautiful in there: red safelights, trays all lined up, an impressive enlarger, and most of

all, I was with the master, my father. We projected an image onto the light sensitive paper, and he had me take it to the developer tray, and move it around by the edge with rubber tipped tongs. What happened next is something I'll never forget. Slowly, the image began appearing on the paper. I can still feel my father standing behind me, and smiling at my wonder. He was very wise about not saying anything, but just letting me see for myself what this was all about. This is probably why I remember it like it was yesterday.

I lasted as his student for about five years. Around the time I was fifteen, I discovered music, girls, and partying, all at once, and so I set photography to one side. We always had this language we could share, though.

I remember years before, learning to use a black cloth bag to roll our own film, and how to put exposed film onto spools to be developed, going by touch alone. I also saw how meticulous he could be when it came to his system, which was very much his own. The chemistry, the temperature of the solution and water used, the timing, right down to the number of times to shake the film canister - all this was engrained knowledge for him, and written down for it's own sake. Maybe some day in the future others could learn from it.

He also taught me, and later his other students how to 'push' film - that is, to expose it at a different rate than its marketed setting (pushing ASA 400 to 1200, for example), and to develop it in a unique way to get the best possible negative. There are a lot of ways of working with a poor negative, I learned, but, he told me, if you have an excellent negative, most of the work of making a good print is already done.

When I stepped back from taking pictures and got more into music, I felt nothing but support from my father. What's more, a lot of the things he taught me carried over. For example, he showed me that art is not about competition. Although he was prolific, remarkably, he never compared himself to anyone else. He was humble, and for an artist of his calibre to be like that made a deep impression on me.

Most of all, when I think of him as a photographer, I think it was his refuge. He'd go into the darkroom for hours, put on some classical music, and more often than not produce something wonderful. I think of him also as someone who did his art for it's own sake. He didn't make a red cent from his work until he got his grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to document the Puerto Rican Diaspora. I was out here in California at the time, and I remember the phone conversation we had, where he said, Imagine writing a grant for yourself, for everything you do well, and for everything you want to do, *and getting funded*. This was 1979.

Identity is a deep thing

I never saw myself as Puerto Rican, or recognized that my father had been looked down on or mistreated because of the color of his skin. That was inconceivable to me, a boy who was loved by his father. Growing up, I didn't know what he was involved in either. We were too young in the 60's to understand much. It wasn't until later that I began to piece together what he was doing, and to see how the past, and the events of that era shaped the man I knew.

I have this image, of being so close to someone, that all you see is their eyes. This is how it was between my father and myself. I always felt close to him in a way that didn't allow for me to see anything other than his love. You can see this in the photographs Dave Heath took of our family, one Summer's day in 1964. I needed some distance, paradoxically, to understand the man my father was more fully.

When I started organizing his photographs, I had no idea that I would need to know where they were taken, or their context. I didn't know I would need to be able to trace out a history of my father, in order to be able to describe what took him into different communities with his work, and with his camera. But this is what happened. Thankfully, I have my mother to ask questions, and gradually I began to be able to put together his remarkable history. I've realized, looking back, how I knew that person dearly, loved him and was loved by him, without knowing the events that made him. Now that I know more, it only adds to my esteem for him, and to the feeling of being blessed to be my father's son.

I see now that I inherited some part of his clarity, his joy, his sense of humor, his creativity (just a small part, mind you), as well as his impatience, anger, and our family tendency to depression. I know I took to Buddhism and meditation on account of this feeling that this is what my family needs more of. We inter-are in this way, I'm sure of it.

I remember one time in the early 1990's when my father was getting ready to give a lecture and slide presentation here in SF, and he was getting frustrated with the process of trying to select some slides. They were scattered across the big wooden dining room table, and he was about to

give up. I told him, Da, when I look in the dictionary under the word 'generosity' your picture is there - so why don't you just focus on that, and think of this event as a gift you can give these people? You know, most of them have never seen your best work, why don't you just share some of it? I'm glad to say that worked that night, and I went with him to a well received event. It wasn't unusual to have people ooh-ing and aah-ing throughout a slide show, and that gave my dad a lot of joy.

My father did his art whether or not it was going to be received. As I said, he did it for its own sake, and it kept him sane, most of the time. I got something of this dedication, stubbornness, and love of art from him. I also got some of his right values - compassion and caring for others, and his fearlessness and passion for social justice, for which I am eternally grateful.

When it came time to figure out what to do with his art, to be honest, I wouldn't have trusted anyone else to handle it. For one thing, almost anyone other than a close family member would have mixed motivations for promoting his work. Another reason is that I learned his language from an early age, and I was lifted up by his art from the time I was in grade school. I remember laying on the floor of our house in Valley Stream, and looking through some books of photographs. I came across one that was all scenes at a racetrack, and went through it all, thinking it was very good before seeing that it was by my father. I realized then that he was right up there with all those other artists whose books we had. I've been his biggest fan for a very long time.

It seems that all this just sort of fell into my lap, and it was a good thing that I had the time to give to it. It took almost three years, nearly full time,

and with the support and encouragement of dear friends, to accomplish the task of getting his Diaspora work into the National Museum. And so one chapter ends, and another begins.

Some gifts unfold over time. It's certainly been this way with my father's gifts to me and to others. I had no idea that what is given opens in this way. Now I know how it is. This joy continues.

Da -

you may be surprised to know  
how something of what you left behind  
jumped up and shook me by the shoulders  
how some of it pounded on doors until they opened,  
how some of it told me what to say,  
and how some of it continues now –  
reviving the stricken,  
answering our needs  
just as it was when you are you were in your prime,  
and as it will be



## A Sketch of Frank Espada's life

The following was written in 2014, in preparation for visits from curators, who were coming to view the entire range of my father's work, within the space of a few short days. I took this as an opportunity to touch upon the most significant events in his life, and to celebrate the man I had come to know more fully through organizing his archive.

My purpose was two-fold: first, to introduce Frank Espada's photography, produced over 60 years, by telling his life story. Second, I wanted to communicate something of what I have come to experience in working with his art. I feel now that each component complements the others, and that when the individual photographs are viewed in the larger context of his life and work, it is a richer and more powerful experience.

A sketch of Frank Espada's life, set down by the main time periods, with a few details

Here are the subject headings, followed by a description.

1. Early life: 1930 to 1949
2. Marriage and the post-war years, New York, 1950 to 1960
3. Years of activism, New York, 1960 to 1973; and Washington, D.C., 1973 to 1979

Interlude: Becoming disillusioned with politics, and turning again to art

4. The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project, 1979 to 1985
5. Moving to San Francisco, the Y. E. S, and Chamorro Documentaries, and his years of teaching, 1985 to 2005
6. Publishing the book, The Puerto Rican Diaspora, in 2006, at the age of 76 and,
7. Later years, some late recognition, and his color work, 2006 to 2014
1. Early life: 1930 to 1949

My father was born in Utuado, Puerto Rico, on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1930. From what I understand, his family there had some social position – his grandfather, Buenaventura Roig, was mayor of the town, and his father was successful enough to own property and support other family members. Some events transpired that made it so that Frank's father needed to leave the island. He went to New York to look for work, and after a time sent for his wife, my grandmother, and their two children, Frank, and his sister, Luisa.

They crossed from Puerto Rico by boat, went back the island, and then came back again to New York. The story goes that the boat they came over on, the San Jacinto, was torpedoed on its return crossing by German U-boats.

We have a few family stories that have been passed down. One is of my father seeing his father cry at night because he couldn't get a job to support his family. The signs said "No Puerto Ricans need apply". The other story is of my dad being taken to his first baseball game in New York and seeing no black or brown skinned players on the field. He had grown up watching great ball players in Puerto Rico, including members of the Negro League who would come to the Island in the Winter to play.

My brother also writes about my father working carrying ice up flights of steps in the 1940's. See "The Immigrant Ice boy's Bolero", my brother's first book of poetry.

I remember one family story of my father as a young boy standing up to a bully. The story goes that Frank was being regularly terrorized by a neighborhood bully, and that one day he decided he'd had enough. The next time he saw the boy coming at him, my father picked up a huge rock and the other kid turned and ran and never bothered him again. The next day, the story goes, my father went back to that same spot, and couldn't even lift that rock.

This story was always part of what was behind what I remember my dad telling us as we were getting ready for school in New York in the 60's – he'd say "Don't take any shit from anybody". You could say we had standing up to bullies bred into our DNA. I know that the images told me we have strength we only seldom know about, but that will be there when we need it, so we shouldn't fear, especially in the face of some oppressor.

The last weekend of my father's life, we talked about how as a young man he made his way into the City College of New York, which was considered

a top notch school. He told me that he remembered reading the plays of Plato, among other things and said he knew he had found a home in the Humanities. I asked him how many people of color there were in his classes, and he said the ratio was about 1 to 200 white people. He said he was told by more than one instructor there that he shouldn't waste their time, essentially that he wasn't good enough to be there. That he proved them wrong in the end is bittersweet. He was awarded an honorary degree by Lehman College, CUNY, in 2008.

In my mind I round out this part of his life with him not being able to afford books, being discouraged by his teachers, and, with his parents divorcing, him joining the Air Force in 1949, something he regretted for his entire life afterwards.

On leave from basic training in Texas, during the Christmas break 1949, on a bus on the way to New York to spend the holidays with his family, he was arrested in Mississippi for not moving to the back of the bus. My brother tells this story well. When he went in front of the judge, the judge asked him how long he had on his furlough, and he answered that he had one week off, whereon the judge sentenced him to one week in jail. As my father told it, that was the best week of his life because in that week he decided what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

Many people who go on to become activists in one form or another have one incident that galvanized things for them, and certainly there were other events that were to bring out the radical in my dad, but this stands out among them.

I've often thought how close my father came to losing his life back then. In the 40's in the South, people of color "disappeared" all the time, and no one was held accountable. He must have known this when he was refusing to move to the back of an empty bus late at night, but at some point, anger and dignity rise up in a person, and, even if it were to cost them their life, they make their stand. There were no witnesses, but, for me, that event resonates to this day.

## 2. Marriage and the post-war years, New York, 1950 to 1960

Frank met Marilyn in 1951, and they married in 1952. My mother has some interesting stories to tell of how she viewed my dad, how her family viewed him, and all non-Jews back then for that matter, and how she came to know something of the anger at being discriminated against that he carried with him. My mother also tells of their being Dodger fans, and particularly fans of Jackie Robinson, and his significance at that time.

After a second stint in the military, my father went to the New York Institute of Photography on the G.I. Bill. He also met the to-be renowned photographer Dave Heath, who he regarded as a mentor and friend. Dave introduced him and a small group of like minded photographers to Gene Smith, and they studied with him in the late 1950's in New York.

My brother, Martin, was born in 1957, I followed in 1960, and my sister came along in 1961. Looking at the photographs my father took in those years, I have the sense that he was developing what I call "his loving eye". My mother says they were all scenes of affection that he was photographing, and we can see this is true. Looking at them now, I see in

the pictures how he looked at us, with joy himself, and with the warmth and love he felt for each of us.

My mother tells a story of being woken up at 2 am one night by Dave Heath and my father, who had been out drinking, and Dave insisting that my father quit his job and become a photographer full time. My mother can tell you exactly what she said, but the gist of it was, “can photography pay the bills? We have three small children, and if the answer is no, then forget it” – or something to that effect...

My father worked as an electrical contractor for a company called T. F. Jackson from 1955 to 1965, of which my dad would say bitterly were “The best years of my life”, regarding that time in some ways as a complete waste. I would later tell him the sense of it I had was that it was a thrust block for him, as an artist, and an activist, and that when the way opened for him to use his talents in creative and constructive ways, he took to it with a real power that came from knowing how soul deadening it is to work for a paycheck alone.

Back then, my father would send us to bed at 7:30, whether it was dark out or not, and cover the windows with frames covered in black fabric that he had made. He would then print on the kitchen table, “with a \$29 dollar enlarger, *including the lens*”. One photograph he made, of my mother, is on our wall now. Ma remembers that it was taken in 1961, shortly after the birth of my sister. When she saw it, she said, ‘But oh, look at my hair’, and my father said, ‘Never mind. Some day you will love it.’ And he was right.

During these years you can see my father's artistic and humanist qualities in his Fountain House and Racetrack series, from 1958, and 1959, respectively.

From the earliest days in his photography, my father's composition and printing skills were simply there. All that remained to be developed, from what I could see, was his personal, signature quality that I recognize now in all of his work from the early 1960's on.

In his photographs from the 50's, it's quite likely the people had no idea that he was taking their picture. From the early 60's, though, and on through the rest of his life and career, another quality enters into it, one I associate most of all with my dad's work. In almost every photograph of people, he is engaging them, often in conversation before and during taking their picture.

One friend referred to an intimacy that can be seen. My father knew how to make people feel respected, and cared for, and they relaxed with him. So, even though my father didn't talk about himself much in later years, or about what made his photographs special, those who knew him can look at his images and say, as one did recently, that "they are full of Frank's heart".

3. Years of activism, New York, 1960 to 1973, and Washington D.C, 1973 to 1979

The racism in this country, in particular before the landmark civil rights legislation of the 60's, was pervasive, and something that needed to be fought against at every turn.

We were approached recently by someone who has taken on the task of documenting the role of Brooklyn CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), and highlighting what he sees as this organization's central position in the achievements of that period. My own sense of how things unfolded back then, however, was that what took place during the civil rights era was very much a de-centralized movement, with many local, grass-roots organizations cooperating and gaining power and legitimacy, but most of all achieving greater and greater results for minorities.

My father had an important role in this time, as a natural organizer. Many people cite him as a trailblazer, and mentor. He founded East New York Action, on Blake Avenue, ten blocks from where we lived when I was born.

As I've heard the stories about what they set out to do, I have the vivid sense of what it means for something to develop organically out of the needs of a community. East New York Action organized rent strikes, educated people on welfare rights, and registered voters, among other things.

In her book on welfare rights in this country, Felicia Kornbluth cited East New York Action being one of the first organizations to develop the tactic of rent strikes as a political tool.



As important as all this was back then was the fact that groups worked with other neighborhood organizations. Witness my father's association with Evelina Antonetty, at the United Bronx Parents, Cesar Perales, and others who cite him as a leader and inspiration. Such was the activism of the time.

In 1965, Manny Diaz gave my father his first paying job as a community organizer, with the Puerto Rican Community Development Project. They remained lifelong friends and allies.

I've told his San Francisco students who knew my dad when he was in his 50's and 60's that they got the more mellow version of my father. That got a laugh. They knew him when he was a lion, but that back when he was younger, in New York and in his 30's and 40's he was a dragon – a really imposing figure. It didn't hurt that he looked like a movie star, a claim we can back up with pictures, and that he had a booming voice when he wanted to. He was both brilliant and charismatic. As one person who encountered him back then put it, his presence filled the room.

Two things that came out during the East Coast memorial for my father, concerning those years: how he was respected by black leaders in New York, and that in the early 1970's he was the first to arrange meetings between Puerto Rican and Mexican activists.

Like many other important figures of that time, my father was part of many groups, often simultaneously: he was the founder of East New York Action, a Vice President of The New York Urban Coalition (I remember wearing a "Give a damn" button to school back then - their ad said, "Give a damn

about your fellow man"). He was also a Deputy Commissioner of The Community Development Agency of New York City.

### The Drug Abuse Council

My earliest recollection of telling friends what my father did was to say he represented minorities on a Nationwide level in the drug abuse field. I had no idea what I was saying, beyond that, or what it meant at the time. I later learned that in the 1960's, corporations were being approached for funding for drug treatment programs, and that they quickly realized they didn't know who was a legitimate advocate, or where their resources would be best used. For that reason the Ford Foundation and others founded The Drug Abuse Council, that had Fellowships for advisors. In its second year, I believe, my father was a Fellow, and it was this work that took us in 1973 to the Washington D.C. area.

In all this time, my father did not earn his living with photography. He was an organizer, and, as I remember one person telling me, he always had his camera with him. We have images, then, of East New York in the 60's, rent strikes, the famous school boycott of 1964, the March on Washington, the Young Lords, and Lincoln Hospital's drug treatment program in the 70's where acupuncture was used to help people who were dealing with addiction.

Interlude: Becoming disillusioned with politics, and turning again to art

My father had a life-long disdain for politicians, bureaucrats and hustlers of all kinds. I can hear his already clear sense of disagreement with his

activist colleagues in an interview in 1980 with the future Secretary of New York State Cesar Perales. In it Frank asks him about the legitimacy of appointed representatives, who would supposedly advocate for minority rights, but who had no grassroots, or community level recognition or support. Cesar answered that there was a place for such people who, “knew how the system worked” and could get things done. Clearly this is so, but you can imagine this situation at its worst as well, where professional politicians moved in and took over the process. I think this is what my dad saw happening more and more to minority representation in the late 60’s and early 70’s.

Others, such as the family friend Willie Vazquez can tell this chapter better than I, but, as I understand it, my dad gradually moved away from what he saw as the corruption of democracy and the disenfranchisement again of the underclass in this country.

#### 4. The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project, 1979 to 1985

By the time my father got funding to work exclusively as a photographer, his art was already fully developed. His political philosophy as well was completely developed, from almost two decades of activism. Receiving a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1979 then, gave Frank the opportunity to realize the long held aims that he had for both his art and activism. I remember the phone conversation we had where he said to me, “Imagine writing a proposal for everything you do well, and for everything you want to do, and getting funded for it.” The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project took him across the Continental United States, to Hawaii and to Puerto Rico. He conducted over 140 interviews, in

some cases with people he had known for decades, but mostly with people who came to know him as an advocate.

There has not been a project before or since of the range and consistency of my father's project documenting the Puerto Rican experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nothing even comes close. The project culminated with 45 exhibitions over a ten year period, brought to local galleries in the second phase of the project by *Padrino*, or patron, organizations. Twenty years after the exhibitions, a book would be produced with photographs and framing accompanying text.

For me, the book is passionate, infuriating, depressing, uplifting and beautiful all at once. It represents what art can be in the hands of someone committed to social activism, in other words, a full human being. This is a work that awakens the best in us all.

As of this time (August, 2016), the oral history interviews from this project, "Voices from the Puerto Rican Diaspora", have yet to be transcribed, translated, and published.

5. Moving to San Francisco, the Y. E. S, and Chamorro Documentaries, and his years of teaching, 1985 to 2005

Michael Lesser at the UC Berkeley Extension gave my father his first opportunity to teach, and right away word began to spread of this extraordinary teacher. Reading the testimonials, even from his fellow teachers, they all say that my father offered something that few, if any other teachers had to give. Technical expertise aside, by that point in my father's

life, he could easily focus on the aesthetic and social vision that could be accomplished with photography. Many students asked for private lessons, and so began the famous workshops my father offered from their home.

From 1989 to 1991, my father also worked for Y.E.S., or Youth Environment Studies, founded by Harvey Feldman. In those years, Frank documented their landmark efforts to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS in San Francisco among the underclass of IV drug users. The aim of Y.E.S., according to Jerry Mandel, was to address all of the problems associated with drug use from a sociological perspective. Frank's connection with both Jerry and Harvey went back to the Drug Abuse Council, where they were all Fellows in the early 1970's.

Y.E.S. had a national reputation because of Harvey Feldman's long involvement in the field of policy and drug treatment, so when the AIDS crisis hit in the 1980's Harvey recognized that a second wave would be coming that would effect IV drug users in particular. His organization started the then unheard of method of handing out first bleach, and then needles, as well as condoms and encouraging life-saving changes in people's regular drug using behavior. As Jerry put it, AIDS went in that time from being a death sentence, to a life sentence. Y.E.S. also developed the concept of the compassionate Community Health Outreach Worker (or C.H.O.W.) who could engage an risk population. Their model programs went on to be replicated on a nationwide level. This is what my Frank documented in those years, and his powerful images were used for education and fundraising purposes.

## The Chamorro Documentary Project

In 1990, Frank was asked by his friend and colleague from Chicago, Samuel Betances, to photograph the Chamorro people of Guam, Saipan, Titian and Rota in the Marianas Islands. Modeled on my father's Puerto Rican Diaspora documentary, their aim was to chronicle the culture, as well as the social challenges faced by this group.

My father's teaching continued in the 90's at the Berkeley Extension, and the Academy of Art College, where he encouraged and helped to develop the careers of a number of magnificent photographers, including Ken Oppram and Karen Ande.

After decades of living with potential that was yet to be realized, my father had an instinct for his students artistic and personal vision and he was fully committed to helping them each fulfill their aims, and to go beyond what they thought was possible. He delighted in teaching, as it brought together his art, political conscience, gift for communicating and love of people.

When I would pick him up at school after class, or would stop by my parents' home when there was a workshop going on, I would smile because I knew his students were getting something very special.

At his memorial here on the West Coast, many former students came, decades after they had studied with him, and all of them spoke of how his influence has remained with them, guiding and encouraging them over the years. It has been a great comfort to my mother, sister and to myself to hear this.

## 6. Publishing the book, *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*, 2006, at the age of 76

When lifelong friend Julio Rodriguez called my father on New Year's Day, 2006, and told him "It's time to get your book published" he thought he was kidding. It turned out he was serious, and he made the offer that day to support making that dream a reality. There had been a few false starts with proposals to have the book done. Most of the time my father wasn't satisfied that it would be to his standards, and his feeling was he'd rather not do it, if it couldn't be done right. Over the course of the year working with the book designer, Doug Da Silva, my father was re-invigorated. He was viewing again images taken in some cases more than 40 years before, but many of the stories he remembered as if they had just happened.

When I was in the process of cataloguing his darkroom work, I noticed that the name of the person photographed was often on the back of the print. My father not only remembered their names, but their stories as well, and this brought up a lot of memories and emotion for him. An artist has a lot to deal with, and the real work, from what I've seen in my father's case especially, is being that sensitive and feeling so fully and also keeping one's balance. We all did what we could to help, but on a number of levels, exhilarating as it was, we can also say it was not at all easy on any of us. I'm glad he did it, of course, more than I can say, but what an effort it took!

## 7. Later years, some late recognition, and his color work, 2006 to 2014

In 2008, Frank Espada was awarded an honorary degree from Lehman College, in New York, and this was something he was proud to receive.

Many of his long time friends, such as Willie Vazquez and Julio Rodriguez turned out for the event.

The Library of Congress purchased 75 of my father's prints in 2009, and in 2010, Duke University acquired many of Frank's papers, teaching materials, and a good number of his documentary photographs. Their aim is to continue to use this material in their Documentary Studies Department, as well as in their courses on History and Human Rights.

We can add now to this list of accomplishments, the acquisition of the Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project by the Smithsonian American History Museum in 2016, and their American Art Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery having also acquired a select number of his prints.

In his last years, my father turned to color photography, making beautiful digital prints of the sky and ocean from his home studio. I took his move to color as his needing another photographic challenge to surmount, technically, which, astonishingly, he succeeded in with each new mode of printing.

I also take the art of his later years as absolutely being on a continuum with all that came before. In it, he is focusing on what is positive, always new, tangible, and all of our common heritage. He was always the humanist, and a day didn't go by when he wasn't aware of both the beauty and the injustice in our world. He lived his life as the most eloquent and persuasive answer to those facts.



In his latter years, my father had a number of health problems that limited his mobility. Fortunately, they had an amazing, ever changing view from their balcony in Pacifica, and all of my father's Pacific Skies images were taken from the same vantage point, although, owing to their diversity you would probably never guess. My mother heard me telling someone that when Frank Espada couldn't go out to beauty, beauty came to Frank.

My father also had trouble hearing others, even with high tech hearing aids, and I know this was isolating for him, and yet he persevered taking beautiful images until the last weekend of his life.

I like to think that in his later work, my father is looking into the face of eternity and eternity is smiling back. Of all his photographs, some of these of the sky, the light, and ocean are the ones I choose to have around me in my room. They are uplifting every time of day and night, which is as my father intended, his last gifts from his great heart to us all.

### From Eugene Smith to Frank Espada

As soon as I heard the photographer W. Eugene Smith's voice, in a documentary produced for Japanese television, I recognized him immediately as a spiritual ancestor. It was not just what he said that was so moving, and familiar to me, but his fierce love and commitment to the people he photographed.

Called 'the father of social documentary photography', Smith refined his craft with essays for Life Magazine, and raised the standard for journalists by bringing the full power of humanist photography to his narrative.

My father, Frank Espada, was introduced to him by another great photographer, Dave Heath, in the late 1950's, and they were part of a group who studied with Smith in New York. Up until that point, my father was already technically accomplished, having studied at the New York Institute of Photography, and, as part of the Puerto Rican minority in this country, his values were formed early on. He brought to their meeting at the age of twenty-nine a commitment social justice that came from his own experience with discrimination, and what he witnessed all around him.

I imagine that their encounter galvanized something (was a catalyst) for Frank Espada, as he saw in Eugene Smith's work how profoundly moving art could be when joined together with the advocacy for universal human rights.

In speaking with Dave Heath years later, and asking him about the materials they used, bridging the 1950's and 1960's, he replied that they

didn't talk much about those things. He told me they mostly talked philosophy, which was really something to hear. I know my father revered both Dave, and Gene Smith, not only for their accomplishments with their chosen medium, but for their deep love of people that is tangible in their work.

Surely all this was communicated in their first meetings, that happened right in the middle of the Civil Rights movement, and before Frank Espada would photograph the early 60's New York rent strikes, school boycotts, and voter registration, the March on Washington, and his own renowned Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project.

Eugene Smith's philosophy of art and life made a deep impression on him, and this is what he in turn communicated to me, and to all of his devoted students.

W. Eugene Smith said:

"Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes - just sometimes - one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses to awareness. Much depends on the viewer; in some, photographs can summon enough emotion to be a catalyst to thought. Someone - or perhaps many - among us may be influenced to heed reason, to find a way to right that which is wrong, and may even search for a cure to an illness. The rest of us may perhaps feel a greater sense of understanding and compassion for those whose lives are alien to our own. Photography is a small voice. I believe in it. If it is well conceived, it sometimes works."

When the Smithsonian curator Carmen Ramos visited us here in California to view my father's work, she was impressed by the fact that the names of the children my father photographed were written on the mounted prints. To her, it was something special that they were unique to him, and not just 'subjects'. *Of course* they were precious to him, and he felt a responsibility to tell their stories, and to advocate for them, and others in our community.

In 1963 he founded East New York action to organize and work with the poor and marginalized in our neighborhood, and he kept that same motivation as he became a well respected activist and people's representative in New York through the 60's.

That whole time he continued taking photographs.

As much as Dave Heath continued Eugene Smith's artistic vision, producing deeply moving portraits that show the inner life of those he photographed, Frank Espada, more than anyone else, continued Smith's humanist vision of documentary art.

He said to his own students

"The purpose of showing my work is to get young people thinking, to stimulate their minds and hearts, to make conditions known, and to attack injustices wherever they exist."

In the fifteen years he taught photography here in San Francisco, he found fulfillment, as it brought together all he'd learned with his love for people, and his astonishing ability to communicate. Continuing the precious

legacies he had received both as an artist and activist brought him the greatest satisfaction.

W. Eugene Smith is well known as a master printer, and for his compassionately engaged social documentary photography. Dave Heath is known as well, primarily in the art world, but the name of Frank Espada is seldom mentioned alongside them, and it deserves to be. His gifts continue through his students, and I am proud to say I am one of them. As it is with so many others, his teaching, and his values, and those of Eugene Smith are with me, as a creative, uplifting and sustaining force, lighting the way.

## Two stories by Frank Espada

{A few months before he passed away, my father wrote out a few stories from his youth to pass down to us. These two stand out.}

### The Beast

His name was Joe Fleming. He was the neighborhood bully, 18 years old, about 6'3" and 200 pounds. He got kicks out of terrorizing the younger kids - his favorite instrument of torture was his cigarette, with which he burned his victims' arms. Most of us avoided him like the plague. Seeing him approach was enough to break up whatever games we were playing, still, he always managed to get a smaller, slower victim.

I was about 12 years old, skinny, and not very tall, so I was in his sights as much for my size as for the fact that we were the first Puerto Rican family in a working class Irish neighborhood on Manhattan's west side.

We had moved from Brooklyn in 1942 about a year before to a small apartment at 216 West 108th Street . I slept on the couch in the living room, my sister in the small bedroom, and my parents in the other.

So, one day we were playing against the school wall, a baseball derived game, with a "Spalding" (a pink rubber ball used for all such sport, primarily for stickball - more on this later) when we saw him lurking behind a car, sizing up the group, probably selecting his prey - we scattered like wildebeests in all directions when becoming aware of a predator.

We lived right across the street at 216 West 108th Street, across the street from my school, P.S. 165 - so I made a break for it - to no avail - He cut me off and grabbed me from behind - I yelled "let me go you bastard" which, naturally made him angry. "You skinny little spic"! he said trying to twist my arm to burn me, at which point I pried myself loose, turned and gave him a well-placed knee in a very sensitive spot - he yelled as I freed myself, running straight to my stoop. For some reason I still haven't out, I turned around and yelled "215 tomorrow, after school!! Translated this was a challenge to fight.

215 was the building across from the backyard, was enclosed with a 10' high wall, effectively creating a space similar to a boxing ring. Here was where fights took place, and there were several basic rules. First, there was to be an impartial "referee" whose only task was to halt the fight when it became one-sided. Also, there were to be no weapons other than your fists.

I had watched a fight between two evenly matched kids, who beat each other pretty good for a good ten minutes, after which the ref called a stop to it. They then shook hands and the spectators cheered and everyone went home satisfied with the results. I didn't think this would happen with me and "the Beast"

I decided I couldn't mention this to my parents for fear they (especially my mother) would forbid me from going through with my challenge. Were this to happen, I would be tagged as chicken, a tough thing to deal with. The first night, I remember, I had a hard time falling asleep. School is now a blur in my memory, all I could think of was the fight at 3pm, which came

pretty soon. I walked through the basement at 215, past the coal bins and the garage cans, and entered the brightly lit "arena". Along the three walls it was totally filled with spectators, mostly young kids who hated Joe Fleming. This made me feel a little better, although I was still very nervous.

Joe Fleming was doing a bad imitation of shadow boxing - he looked huge- Archie Smith was to be the referee - I don't know who appointed him, but I didn't really care. He shouted "start"!, and before I had a chance to get set, the Beast was on me with a shot to the top of my head and several to my stomach and back. Something then happened - a very strange slowing down of time, coupled with a fire in my gut, which translated into a desire to kill the bastard.

The rest of the fight, which I guess lasted no more than 5 minutes, was all Fleming. Essentially, he beat the crap out of me. I heard Archie yell "OK, enough"! and, also strange, no one cheered, or clapped - it was pretty weird, the silence - The Beast, smiling, walked away, grunting as he was leaving - "I hope this teaches you a lesson" or something to that effect. Suddenly, I heard someone say "Tomorrow, after school" - then I heard a cheer from the spectators - for that was my voice challenging the Beast to another "round" - He turned, surprised, said "I'll kill you tomorrow, you little shit", and strode off.

I went home, my mother was at work, a sweat-shop where she was paid 24 cents for making a blouse. My father, a CPA in Puerto Rico, was at his job with an export import house, where he was a clerk and made \$30 a week. Of course, they were surprised to see my face, which had several black and blue bruises, and a bump on my forehead, the result of a direct hit. What



they didn't see were the bruises only body, nor my aching ribs (which really hurt when I took a deep breath). I refused to answer their questions, all I said was that I wasn't going to be anyone's punching bag.

That night, I slept very well.

The following day, I was anxious to get back to 215. And, this time, the word had spread - there were easily twice as many spectators. Also, this time I was there first. The Beast swaggered in, with a cigarette hanging off his mouth, just like George Raft.

I remember that I couldn't wait to get it started - I wanted to kill him too. "Start" yelled Archie and I went right at him, running right into the hardest shot to my face I had ever experienced - it knocked me to the ground, and I saw stars (really). I heard a groan from the crowd and saw him coming at me as I was about to get up - he wanted to finish me off. I timed my shot perfectly as I rose- I brought my fist back and landed a beauty to the pit of his stomach. I heard a cheer, which for a moment felt great - until he got me in the ribs (again). I bent over and he hit me in the back of the neck, throwing me again on the deck -

Now I was furious, seeing red, (really!) and attacking with whatever I had left - I got to him, finally, with a shot to his Adam's apple, which shook him up for he had to stop to catch his breath. All this took, I think, less than 5 minutes. Archie called a halt - shouting "a draw" which brought a great cheer from the crowd. The Beast looked up at Archie, disbelief in his face, and cursed him.

Again, he started to leave, entered the basement, at which point I, again, offered another challenge, "tomorrow at 3"! The crowd loved it. I saw him stop, and without turning around, muttered something vile under his breath -

That night, I was again drilled by my parents. My mother was very excited, my father only wanted to know what was going on - I finally told them the story, and that there was to be another fight tomorrow. My mother totally forbade me, but after a quiet conversation with my father, looked at me and said "Pared que te vas a hacer hombre" (It appears you are about to become a man). My pains suddenly vanished. My sleep was sound.

I was up early, very sore, but ready for whatever came. The crowd was even larger, with some arguments over the spaces on top of the walls. Archie winked at me, others shouted words of encouragement "Go get'm Frank" and "Let him have it".

It looked like I had packed the joint with my friends - actually these were simply kids that hated the Beast. 3 pm came and went - then 3:15, then 3:30 - the crowd was now really into it, sensing what was happening, yelling, hooting, singing ditties, like "Where have you gone today Fleming"? Well finally after waiting for 45 minutes, Archie rose and announced "Frank by default"!

Then they really went wild, calling the Beast all kinds of nasty raunchy names - It was a sight to see and hear. At first, I couldn't believe what was happening - I kept looking at the door to the basement, expecting to see him. Then it began to sink in - He quit - he chickened out - He is really a

coward. This seemed to be what we were all thinking - no one would be afraid of him ever - for he had disgraced himself, he had exposed who he really was.

I don't recall getting back to my place, other than several kids walked me back to my stoop, patting me on the back - some of these love taps hurt - but I couldn't care less.

My mother came in first - she took a look at me and said "Que paso"? What happened? To which I answered "He didn't show" - then she sat down and cried, laughed, cried - my father came home in the middle of this - he was very surprised, thinking something awful had happened - Then mama said "Tu hijo complio" Hard to translate - the closest I can come is "Your son did what he had to do"

### Postscript

Joe Fleming became a New York City cop. He was kicked out after about 3 years after several police brutality charges, which were settled out of court. Some accused him of burning them in their arms with cigarettes. He died in a fire some years later, started, some say, by his smoking in bed.

## Stickball

Baseball at 12, was life. My father took me to my first game when I was about 7, and I was hooked. This was in Puerto Rico, where it's the national pastime, even though Puerto Ricans were excluded from the major leagues, not being white enough.

At 9 we migrated to New York City, where we found a cold-water flat in Brooklyn. Naturally, we immediately became Dodger fans, especially when they signed Luis Olmo, a Puerto Rican outfielder, who apparently was white enough.

Over the next several years, I indulged in many varieties of the sport (sand lot, PAL, stoop ball, stick ball, Base Hit (a board game)).

We had moved to Manhattan's west side when I was about 12 - a working class Irish neighborhood. We were one of the first P.R. families on the block. The first few weeks of the summer of 1942 introduced me to American racism.

I was called a spic, a nigger, and a few other creative names.

For awhile I was lost, lonely, and very miserable. I had no friends, no one to pal around or play ball with. That's when I became a reader - astronomy, science fiction, the Civil War, Dickens, Kenneth Roberts, Mark Twain, and more.

Stick ball was a big time game then, 3 sewers defined the field, each one about 50 feet apart. One was home plate, followed by 2nd base. The 3rd

was the outer limits of the playing field - anything hit past this, according to ground rules, was an automatic home run - a "3-sewer shot" home run.

Saturdays were when the big games were played - and 2nd base was almost even with my stoop at 216 W. 108th Street, from which I watched. Games were usually played for money - anywhere from \$5 to \$20 per player.

Teams would come through from other parts of the city, so the competition was serious, and sometimes fierce. The street was cleared of cars - car owners (there weren't many in those days) co-operated, parking either beyond the 3rd sewer or on the next block - (and we had an appreciative audience, fans leaning out of windows).

The game was played with a pink rubber ball (pronounced Spaldeen) with broom handles for bats. The pitcher had to throw the ball on one bounce - the batter had 2 shots at it - fowl balls counted as a swing.

Stick ball was played all over the city, and survived until the end of WWII - probably good economic times killed it, for suddenly everyone seemed to have cars.

Anyway, the story goes on. One very warm Saturday in the summer of '43, word got around that a big-time team was coming in to play the locals, who styled themselves "The Shamrocks" - to us small-fry. They were also "the Big Guys" -

I parked myself on the top step of our stoop, sucking on a popsicle, ready for big action. The game was about to begin when I saw a Shamrock

huddle. The game called for 7 players: pitcher, catcher, first, second and third basemen, a “short” fielder and a “long” fielder who played right on the 3rd sewer.

Well, fate struck. They were short one man. There was more huddling, then I saw Marty leave the group and head straight for me. I looked around thinking he was looking for someone, but he looked directly at me and said “Hey, kid, you wanna play?” I froze, like a deer under headlights. I never expected anything like this to happen. He looked at me with a quizzical expression, as if I hadn’t understood him.

“Well whadayusay?” I nodded yes, to which he hollered back at the group - “Play ball!”

They sent me out to deep outfield, and I realized that they had been watching me play with the “Little Guys”. He had faith that I could catch a fly ball. They put up my share, which was \$10, and away we went, as Jackie Gleason used to say.

The rest has become a blur, except for the last inning - We were winning by a run, with two out - they had men on 2nd and 3rd. The fly ball was atmospheric - it kept climbing up, up, up - it was far above the roof of the 4th floor apartment buildings, where it reflected the late afternoon sun - then it began to descend - I held my breath as I tracked it, just inside the 3rd sewer - all of a sudden I felt incipient panic, for someone had parked a car right along the 3rd sewer line - and, of course, the ball was heading right for it.

The rules stated that a hit ball was fair no matter where it hit, as long as it was past 1st or 3rd bases - I headed for the car, looking at the ball, and without hesitating, climbed on the running board - stretched as far as I could, stuck my hand out and felt the ball land nicely in my hand. It was a tremendous catch, a game saver, and my passport into the consciousness of the group.

I was a momentous hero, slapped on the back, screamed good things at, but most of all, I gained their acceptance - for the first time. It was a memorable day plus they awarded me \$20.00, which was a small treasure in those days

My mother didn't understand at first - then she caught on and let out an "Hay que bueno"! for we were behind on our payments to Dr. Tarregrota, a sadistic, alcoholic and very unhappy man, whose only quality was that he was a Dodger fan. And never used novocaine. But that is another story.

Opening remarks at the Tribute to Frank Espada, hosted by John Santos,  
August 9th, 2015

Good afternoon, welcome everyone, and thank you all for coming. We have a very special event planned for you today, and I'd like to say a few words about what you are going to see.

The last two years I've been on an unexpected journey of discovery. We all grew up with my father's photographs all around, and so I thought I knew my father's work, but it turns out though that there was a lot more to it, that I didn't even know existed.

A few months before my father passed away, I began organizing his archive, and I kept finding things that I liked as much as his better known work. There were times when I would literally run up the stairs to ask him about a print I had never seen before.

Many of the photographs you will see today have never been displayed, or published, and so, again, thank you for coming. You're in for a treat.

For those of you who never met Frank Espada, and are not familiar with his life and work, there is one more thing I would like to say up front, and that is, that my father was a human rights advocate. He was *a radical*, from before I was born, and right up to the end of his life. In ordinary times we would call a person with his politics a progressive, but then, these are not ordinary times.



I have two quotes from my father's photographic mentors, that I would like to conclude with, on the relationship between art and social action. The first is from Dave Heath, and the second from Eugene Smith, who Frank Espada met and studied with in the 1950's, and who has been called The Father of modern photo journalism.

First Dave Heath: "What I want of the work is lightness underlined with disquietude, where the viewer can enter and expand his or her emotional being, not in the character of catharsis perhaps, but in a sense of assuagement, the touching of the compassionate core of one's being, the infusion of another's moment in time into one's own."

And, Gene Smith:

"Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes - just sometimes - one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses to awareness. Much depends on the viewer; in some, photographs can summon enough emotion to be a catalyst to thought. Someone - or perhaps many among us may be influenced to heed reason, to find a way to right that which is wrong... The rest of us may perhaps feel a greater sense of understanding and compassion for those whose lives are alien to our own. Photography is a small voice. I believe in it. If it is well conceived, it sometimes works."

Thank you, and enjoy the show.

## Towards a useful definition of Latino Art

Latino art is art that is informed by a unique history. That history includes coming from, or having family roots in what is broadly referred to as Latin America - the Caribbean, Central and South American countries and cultures. The particular history that is a part of and that informs all Latino art also includes the experiences of being an outsider, of racial discrimination, the struggle for human rights and dignity, of stereotyping, marginalization, and underrepresentation in this country's politics, media and education (schools, libraries, and museums).

For a term like Latino to serve a useful purpose, while keeping these common elements as part of its definition, it would also have maintain the distinctions of the various groups it refers to. If these precious, unique histories are not given the enough emphasis, then the term Latino can become almost meaningless, cut off from diverse people's ancestry, from their adversity, and triumphs. There's the risk ironically that such well intended language can move us closer to the very assimilation and loss of identity which progressives, activists and those of us who would honor and draw from our past fight at all costs to avoid.

No doubt there is resistance to history. There are plenty of people and institutions even now that would rather not face up to the deplorable way minorities have been treated in this country. There has been tacit and overt cooperation with injustice. The legacies of colonialism, slavery, legal discrimination, and stratified class are in fact with us today, in compelling ways, but they are only seen as such when we have a historical memory.

Latino art, if it is to function as more than merely art produced by a person of Latin American descent, is informed by this history and perspective. What form that then takes has all the latitude contained in the word art, which is of course boundless. The aesthetics and values of such people speaks of their experience, and their aspirations in light of what they've known. By Latino art, we are enriched and moved towards the more just and beautiful world that was our ancestor's dream, and that was their wish for their children.

The Puerto Rican Diaspora - Documenting the Puerto Rican Experience in the 20th and 21st centuries, by Jason Espada

Imagine if you will conceiving of a project that would document the Puerto Rican experience across the United States... Imagine further that this project would be undertaken by someone who is widely respected as an advocate for these people, and that this person, in addition, is a first-rate photographer. Now let's say that this project, by some extraordinary miracle, were to get funded, that all the doors open, and that across the continental United States, in Hawaii and in Puerto Rico, over 140 oral histories were recorded, beautiful and moving images were captured, and that a traveling exhibition as well as a book were to result from this project; that in the end a comprehensive and moving portrait of a people was produced....

Such a project, you'd be right to think, is rare in its conception, and the likelihood of accomplishing such a vast and complex undertaking would seem to be very small indeed. And yet, this is exactly what has happened. For those of you who do not know, The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project was conceived of by my father, Frank Espada. His proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities was funded, the photographs were taken, the oral histories recorded between 1979 and 1981; this exhibition then traveled for fifteen years throughout the United States and Hawaii, as well as to Puerto Rico; and, in 2007 an award winning book of photographs and narratives was published with the title, The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Themes in the Survival of a People. This last stroke of good fortune only happened as a result of a generous gift from a lifelong friend and ally of my father's.

Scholars and students both of the modern Latino and Puerto Rican experience are basing their deep research in every case on the labors of those who have come before them and done the work, with vision, with passion and with skill. No one would deny that the finished work of those who have come before us is the cornerstone of any comprehensive scholarship we would do today.

In the interviews, Frank would almost always begin by asking people to tell how they got here, and in turn, more often than not, they would start by telling their family's stories. In that way, from multiple angles, the entire 20th century's history was covered. Modern scholars could do no better than to base their efforts on achievements such as this.

## Reframing America's Modern Day Colonialism - Puerto Rico in Context in 2017

Originally published on Latino Rebels



*Castillo San Felipe del Morro, the 16th-century citadel overlooking San Juan Bay in Puerto Rico (Harvey Barrison/Flickr)*

At times, we here in these United States barely register the meaning of words that should make the hair on the back of our neck stand on edge. This is because we have not been taught our history, or else it has been so watered down.

Take the word colonialism: to be a colony of the United States sounds almost benign; a paternalistic paradise, to be cared for by a big brother superpower. The fact is however, that colonialism has been an unalloyed evil visited on most of the world's population by Western European powers for the last 500 years.

When words lose their history, they lose their meaning, and when words lose their meaning, they lose their power. When the history is not taught, words such as 'colonialism' or 'genocide' can be spoken without them raising an alarm; the historical memories and the associations such terms *should* trigger do not come to listeners minds. We've been deprived, the lot of us, and were it not for the continued tragedies that are unfolding now, brought about by neocolonial and neoliberal forces, all this would be regrettable, but unimportant. But there are very real consequences to forgetting, and so, now more than ever, some history is in order.

Up until the latter part of the 20th century, American and European racism and the expansion of territory was a given, accepted as '[manifest destiny](#)', and '[the white man's burden](#)'.

We may consider America's history, and our original sins of genocide and slavery in isolation, but it brings it more clearly into focus to see it as part and parcel of world wide colonial history. It has ever been infused with the same perverse ideals, and heavy with the same burden of vast crimes against indigenous people

## European Colonialism - Beginning with Spain



*{The Conquest of Tenochtitlán, Public Domain}*

Starting in the fifteenth century, greed and barbarity drove the Spanish and Portuguese in Central and South America and the Caribbean to decimate the population in the quest for gold, silver and spices, and raw materials to feed a growing empire.

*The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world. - David E. Stannard, and,*



*By then [1891] the native population had been reduced to 2.5% of its original numbers and 97.5% of the aboriginal land base had been expropriated....Hundreds upon hundreds of native tribes with unique languages, learning, customs, and cultures had simply been erased from the face of the earth, most often without even the pretense of justice or law. - [Peter Montague](#)*

The priest Bartolome de Las Casas documented for posterity crimes of a then unheard of barbarity. Greed had slipped its leash.

In A Brief Report on the Destruction of the Indies, Michael Curtotti [writes](#), *Having set out a general description of the oppression the Spaniards were visiting on the Indians, Las Casas then details case after case where such methods were used, tracing the invasions from the Caribbean, to Mexico, Central America and Peru. In every part of the Americas that the Spaniards reached they would violently subjugate the people, generally committing brutal and genocidal massacres, extracting tributes of gold and then reducing what remained of the the population to slavery.*

For this reason, for indigenous people, the names Columbus, Cortez and Pizarro are anathema to this day.

## England



*Map of the world showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886. British territories colored in red. (Public Domain)*

Over the course of its 400 year [colonial rampage](#), the British saw the people of India, and Africa and the Pacific as [subhuman](#), and felt entitled to the wealth of those places and people. For centuries, they too practiced racist brutality without remorse. They profited from [the slave trade](#) (routing Africans to the Caribbean), [created concentration camps](#) (in the Boer War), allowed the [mass starvation](#) of colonial subjects (in India), and engaged in the systematic destruction of cultures.

British colonialism is something many in England are [still dumbfoundingly proud of](#), despite their having committing what we recognize today as one abomination after another.

## Belgium



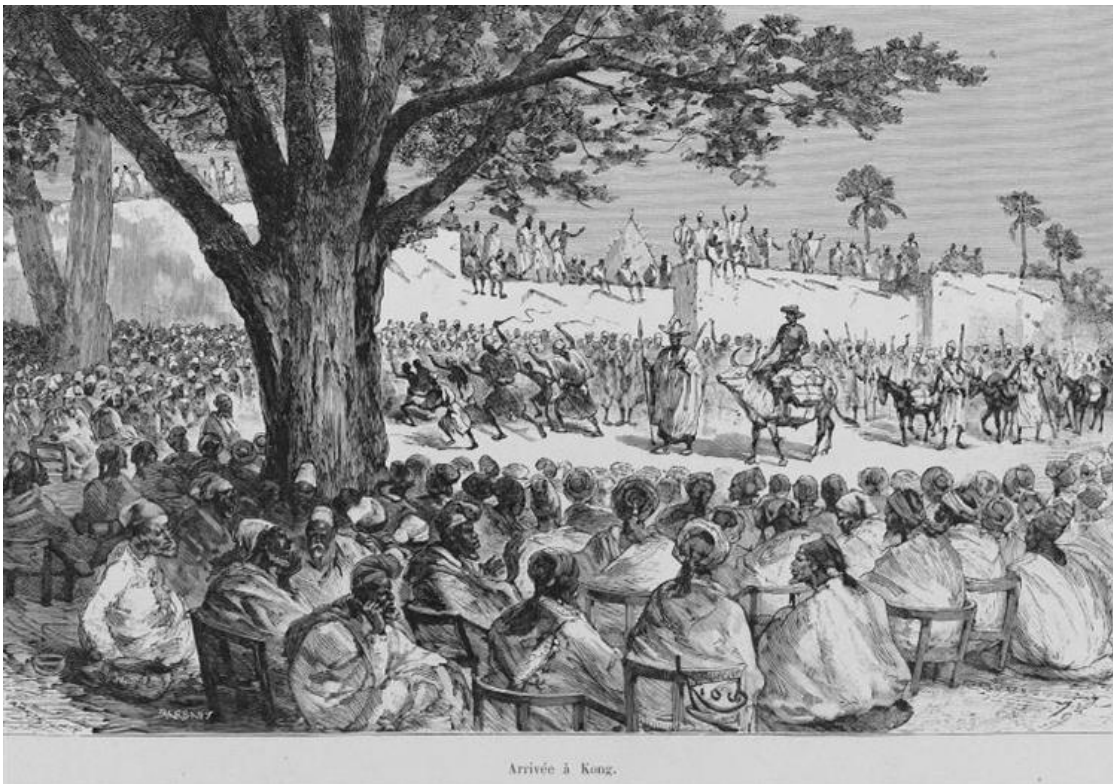
*Congo Balolo Mission (ca. 1900-1910/Public Domain)*

In the late 1800's, in the so-called 'Congo Free State', Belgian forces engaged in what we recognize now as unimaginable cruelty, extracting resources and subjugating the people there. All this was quintessential colonial activity, as described in [a review](#) of King Leopold's Ghost by Richard Abernethy:



*“To terrorize the population into gathering rubber, Leopold’s men would take women as hostages until their menfolk brought in a sufficient quantity. Villages that resisted the system were attacked and destroyed. Individuals who failed to reach their quotas were killed, tortured, mutilated. A practice that came to symbolize cruelty and horror of Leopold’s Congo (as it does the chaos in Sierra Leone today) was chopping off hands.”*

## France



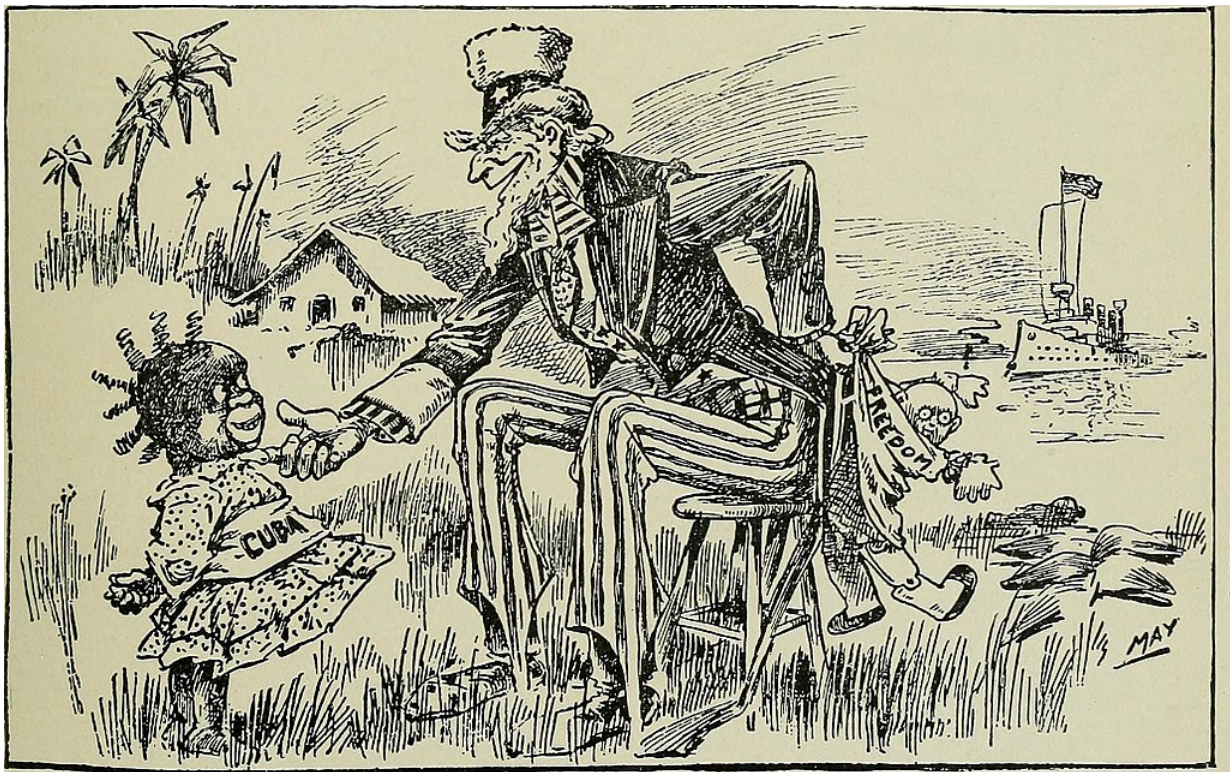
*Arrival in Kong of new French West Africa governor Louis-Gustave Binger in 1892, in northern present day Côte d'Ivoire. (Public Domain)*

At its peak, France had one of the largest empires in history, reaching from Africa to the Middle East, to Asia and the Caribbean. And don't believe the persistent bullshit about the French being 'a civilizing force'. Ask any of the

people they 'civilized.' They enslaved a third of the population of the African Countries they occupied. They were responsible for the deaths of 1.5 million in Algeria and half a million in South East Asia before the Americans arrived there.

The colonial mentality, everywhere you find it, has not changed its character at all to the present day. It has always been profoundly ignorant, racist, arrogant, and brutal.

The latest entry in the world's would-be empires



*1904 cartoon (Public Domain)*

America came late to extending the savagery of imperialism beyond its continental borders. It wasn't until [the annexation of Hawaii](#) and [the Spanish American War](#) in 1898 that the US extended its rule by force overseas. Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and The Philippines became 'possessions'.

Were we to know even the bare outlines of history, I'm sure a majority of Americans would see the attitudes and actions of imperialists everywhere as morally repugnant, and the memory would be a marker guiding our thoughts, and our politics. Instead, this history is hidden from us.

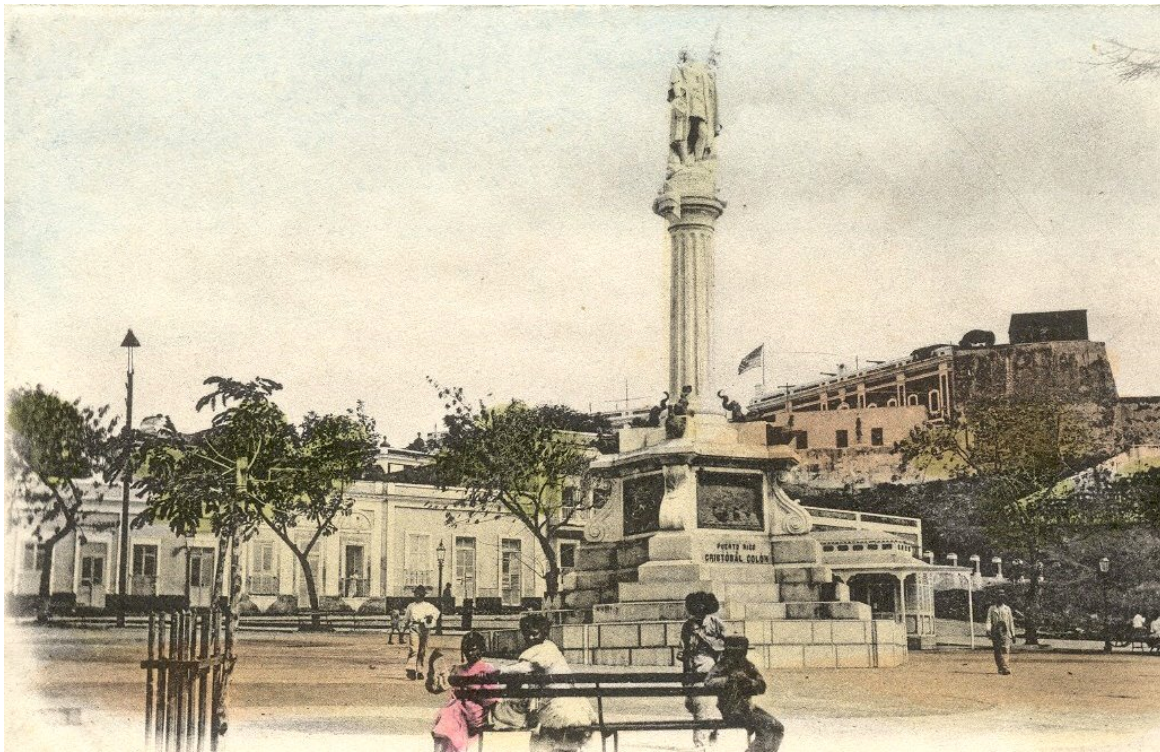
American racism and avarice has been no less abhorrent than what was exhibited by the French in Asia and elsewhere, the Brits in India and South Africa, and the Spanish in the Americas. It's only in the absence of such basic knowledge as this that we can hear the word *colonialism* spoken, and not shudder now in the recognition of what it represents.

In the twenty-first century, being overtly racist is not universally accepted, as it once was, and so the same motivation to claim resources and power needs to hide behind a different set of terms. We speak now instead of helping countries 'develop democracy', even if self determination is the last thing [those in power](#) want in this or other places.

We also speak of colonialism these days as if it were something effecting only a few people long ago. We feel it to be a slight matter, to refer to Puerto Rico as a colonial possession. We unthinkingly accept the presence



of American power in far flung territories of Guam, the Virgin Islands, the Philippines, Hawaii and Alaska, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Samoa. [American propaganda](#) would have us believe that the presence of the United States in these places has been an unalloyed blessing.



*Christopher Columbus monument at Plaza Cristobal Colon in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. (c.1900-1915/Public Domain)*

Our past has brought us to where we are now in Puerto Rico

From its founding to the present day, this country has followed the path of an imperial power. There has never been self determination allowed, except as a means to dole out manageable amounts of local power, as a means of social control. This time tested model of giving small favors to puppet politicians, under the pretense that they represent noble democracy in

action, allows us to believe we are all part of a great humanitarian enterprise, that offers the best hope to struggling humanity, while the truth of it is something quite different.

Puerto Rico has never had [representation of any consequence](#) in Washington. It has no say in its economic development, and is barred by [the repressive Jones Act](#) from trading directly with other countries. In a place where, as my father bitterly said, 'you could throw down a seed and a plant would grow', people instead [import 80% of their food](#), and pay [exorbitant prices](#) for simple items.

[Forced sterilization](#), and [medical experimentation](#) were also part of America's colonial history in Puerto Rico;

The inhabited island of Vieques was used for 55 years for Navy target practice. The pollution and disease in that place, [the legacy of environmental racism](#), will continue for generations;

The people remaining in Puerto Rico are [poorer than those in Mississippi](#), the poorest state in the country; their [rate of diabetes](#) is higher than anywhere else;

Finally they are in the brutal grip of [millionaire and billionaire speculators](#), being strangled by [unpayable debt](#). Now that Hurricane Maria has destroyed what was [already third world infrastructure](#), the [vulture](#)



[capitalists are circling](#). Not having caused enough damage, they are now brazenly angling to take over what little remains of the public assets.

*delirious they rampage,  
with their dead eyes,  
and insatiable hunger...*

Look at what this country, the United States, has done from the point of view of the colonized and you will see the seizing of territory, the extraction of resources, and using the population to fight in the nation's wars. Wherever you find colonialism, you will see extermination, or near extermination, and cruelty and neglect of the people. You will see everywhere that *the colonized have never had any rights, except those the colonizer gives them*.

The universal characteristics of colonial mentality, the racism, greed and cruelty, I do not hesitate to say, have been on full display on the Island, and it is something we should all be repulsed by. It is something we should all respond to with outrage and with unequivocal condemnation.

Only in the absence of knowledge of world history can we continue to accept America's presence on the island of Puerto Rico as anything other than blatantly racist and oppressive. The mirror of this history needs to be held up for all to see. It's a statement of faith in humanity from that point forward, to believe that justice will then finally come to our people.

Looking at 21st century politics in a way that is historically informed is radically different than hearing the same events described without this essential context. It also yields sharply different conclusions about where we should go from here.

In the case of Puerto Rico, the United States should admit all of its past crimes, cancel the barbaric engineered debt, get the hell off the island posthaste, and pay reparations for the 119 years of extracting its wealth, and abusing and exploiting its people as a cheap labor force.

Beyond Puerto Rico alone, America has dug into other nations and cultures, worldwide. Its colonialism is still with us, hiding behind such neutered terms as globalism, and [neoliberalism](#). The evil is identical however, with the same warped values, greed and aggression now normalized as ‘preserving our interests’.

We can place our advocacy for Puerto Rico in the larger context of the universal struggle for human rights, and we gain greater clarity and strength in doing so. As [Ana Livia Cordero wrote](#) in a letter to Malcolm X in 1964, *“the most important world-wide struggle is between the colonial and ex-colonial segment of the world and the imperialist segment”*. For our elders, and the men, women and children of Puerto Rico and elsewhere then, the fight is equal parts truth telling, and organizing and educating without pause to put an end to empires.

- From *Ending Racism - A Buddhist View*, Great Circle Publications, 2018

*Jason Espada is a writer and classical musician living in San Francisco; a steward of his father's photography, and the founder of [abuddhistlibrary.com](http://abuddhistlibrary.com). These days his focus is on the connection between spirituality and social action. His new website is [jasonespada.com](http://jasonespada.com).*

## Puerto Rico Update - A Personal Reflection



*Man with flag in Washington, D.C., 1981 (photographs by Frank Espada)*

If we want to talk in any kind of meaningful way about Puerto Rico in 2019, we need to know its history. Our present is on a continuum with the past, and when we know where we came from, we can identify those forces that are at work now. Now more than ever when it comes to Puerto Rico, we need this kind of knowledge.

Hurricane Maria laid bare the general ignorance in the United States about the island, as well as the specific racist indifference and cruelties of neglect of those with political and economic power. The current exodus, with little hope of recovery on the horizon, let alone sovereignty, represents a slow

moving cataclysm for the people there. None of this happens in a vacuum, and so now more than ever we need to know what has led us to this point. The history of Puerto Rico is one strand in the oppressive colonial History of the United states.



*Gilberto Gerena Valentine, during the 1964 school boycott in New York City*

As my father, Frank Espada put it in the introduction to his Magnum Opus The Puerto Rican Diaspora:

*'We are part of a great, invisible and historic national tragedy, a moral catastrophe which some ascribe to abstract historical forces, thereby neatly ignoring the suffering and exonerating the guilty.*

*'Thus the need, as this writer saw it, for this work. It is an attempt to give voice to those who must bear the brunt of the failed policies of a power-hungry, greedy elite; to the victims of faded dreams of the glories of empire; of the so-called "accidents of history," a smokescreen for racism, petty ambition and incompetence; of the cynical travesty which makes us "citizens" fit to fight and die in disproportionate numbers in this country's wars but not allowed to vote in federal elections if we happen to live on the island, a fine definition of "second class citizenship." It is an attempt to document the victims' pain, fears, disillusionment, anger, and sorrow. But also, and perhaps in the long run more important, it is an attempt to honor their defiance, courage and determination to endure, survive, and eventually to overcome.'*



*Daniel and Raphael, natives of the South Bronx, Barrio la Pica, in Maunabao, Puerto Rico, 1981*

My father was 49 when he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to document [the Puerto Rican Diaspora](#). To that point, in many ways, he had lived the history he set out to record. He could say with Langston Hughes that [America never was America to me](#).

Compared to other documentarians, he had an agenda that he was upfront about, telling David Gonzalez for [his New York Times piece](#):

*"I was not pre-programmed by some know-nothing editor to bring back more proof as to the miserable lives we were living. It was to be as loving a document as I could produce."*

Lillian Jimenez expressed it this way:

*"As community activists we had to turn to visual imagery to capture the reality of our disenfranchisement in this society. We had to tell our own stories and honor our friends and families who were mischaracterized as depraved and as criminals. We had to visualize our humanity and our empowerment."*





*Frank Espada, at East New York Action on Blake Avenue, New York City, 1963*

The project led him to unexpected discoveries, such as the presence of Puerto Ricans in Hawaii, in Chicago, Lancaster Pennsylvania and in Hartford Connecticut - all elements of the larger story. All along the way he worked as an artist and advocate for these people, bringing together his skills as an organizer and all his strengths and talents.

He said:

*The purpose of showing my work is to get young people thinking, to stimulate their minds and hearts, to make conditions known, and to attack injustices wherever they exist.*



The funding for the first phase of the documentary project took him across the country, where he photographed and recorded interviews with more than 140 people from every level of society - artists and educators, fellow activists and working class people, gang members and clergy. He then traveled with an exhibit titled *The Puerto Rican Diaspora* through 1996.



*Christina, Barrio Tokio, P.R., 1984*



*Bi-lingual classroom, Reading, Pa., 1981*



*Going to Puerto Rico for the first time,  
New York, 1972*



*Regan Robas', Washington, D.C., 1981*

Preparing [his book](#) a decade later - and twenty years after the Diaspora Project began, he would reflect on how little progress had been made for Puerto Ricans, and how in some cases what little gains were made were lost:

*The first phase, the photographs and interviews, led me to other, more dynamic and unexpected possibilities. Being an activist and organizer most of my life, I concluded that this story could become a positive force in the struggle for justice and equity being waged in countless places by courageous, committed individuals.*

*One constant stood out however: the third-class status, which has kept us at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder for over a hundred years.*

*All indices of social pathology point in the direction of a stigmatized community, which has been marginalized, discriminated against, exploited and victimized. Our poverty rates between 1980 and 2000 have, if anything, worsened. From there follow all the attendant ills of an abused class: poor health, deficient schools, drug addiction, depression, and adolescent suicide. Puerto Rican children have by far the highest rate of lead poisoning, and suffer from the highest incidence of asthma of any group in the country. And they are often hungry - here in the United States of America, the richest nation in history. This is a powerful indictment of the system under which we live, where the top 1% own more than 90% of the wealth. And the gap between the "have mores" and the rest of us is widening daily...*



*Man in doorway, New York City, 1965*

And yet, his great heart found reason to go on working for justice:

*In spite of this dismal outlook, I was encouraged by the spirit I found, defying the establishment, attempting to deal with the causes of our problems at their roots, refusing to accept the status quo. These compatriots are my heroes, I will always carry them in my heart...*

Since my father's passing in 2014, natural disasters have compounded the hardships faced by people on the island. We're still under colonial rule

there, with the complicity of the political class. As I put it in [Reframing America's Modern Day Colonialism - Puerto Rico in Context in 2017](#):

'Now that Hurricane Maria has destroyed what was already an extremely poor infrastructure, the vulture capitalists are circling. Not having caused enough damage, they are now brazenly angling to take over what little remains of the public assets.'

*'delirious they rampage,  
with their dead eyes,  
and insatiable hunger...'*

The hundreds of thousands who have come to the mainland since Maria, compared to previous times, have less hope of return. For now, and for the foreseeable future, they are a dispossessed people.

(next page)





*Jack Agueros, with the Santos de Palo exhibit, at El Museo del Barrio, New York, 1979*

When Edwin Rodriguez was working on my father's archive at the Smithsonian American History Museum, he asked a question I'm sure many of us who knew him are asking these days, [\*What would Frank Espada Do?\*](#)

With a racist president, a distracted or apathetic population, and so many causes competing for our attention, it's easy to feel overwhelmed at times. But this is just where we need our ancestors and our great artists to remind us of all we are naturally heirs to; to remind us of our history and strengths, of our beauty, and courage and creativity. We can then get back to work as

far as we are able, advocating, and caring for the needs of the neglected peoples of our time.

As Edwin says in his essay:

*I think of Frank Espada and his work, both as a photographer and as a community leader, and comprehend his vision of the world. He saw beauty in every photograph, but understood that the most important thing he could do was help others through their struggles and listen to their stories when the world surrounding them chose to turn a blind eye.*



*Five kids on a country road in Puerto Rico, 1967*

\* \* \*

For further reading:

[A Sketch of Frank Espada's Life](#), accompanied by his photographs, by Jason Espada

His photographs:

[thefrankespadagalleries.com](http://thefrankespadagalleries.com)

[Let America Be America Again](#), by Langston Hughes

[The New York Times - Lensblog: Showcase: The Puerto Rican Diaspora By David Gonzalez Nov. 5, 2009](#)

[Reframing America's Modern-Day Colonialism: Puerto Rico in Context in 2017](#), by Jason Espada

[What Would Frank Espada Do?, by Edwin Rodriguez](#)

[The Puerto Rico tourists rarely see, and the U.S. role in Puerto Rican poverty](#), by Denise Oliver Velez

[Our Fellow Americans](#), by Frances Negron-Muntaner

[The Emptying Island: Puerto Rican Expulsion in Post-Maria Time](#), by Frances Negron-Muntaner



Jason Espada is a writer and classical musician living in San Francisco; a steward of his father's photography, and the founder of [abuddhistlibrary.com](http://abuddhistlibrary.com). These days his focus is on the natural connection between spirituality and social action. His new website is [jasonespada.com](http://jasonespada.com).

## Frank Espada's social documentary photography in the 1990's

In the early 1990's, Frank Espada continued his social justice work on the West Coast, using his photography to advocate for marginalized communities during the AIDS crisis.

Access to health services has always been a struggle for the minorities in this country, for the poor, and disenfranchised, and in the late 1980's "an inordinately high proportion of IV drug-related AIDS cases occur(ed) in the black and Latino communities."

The *Youth Environment Studies* (YES) program effectively used community health outreach workers to connect with at-risk groups, the poor, addicts, and the homeless; and The *Out of School Youth* project (OSY) sought to educate a vulnerable population in San Francisco on the dangers of HIV transmission. A majority of its subjects were African American, Latino and Filipino youth.

The photographs taken in those years by Frank were used for educational and fund raising purposes. They show programs that were responsive to needs of people *across lines of race and class, gender and sexual orientation*. Reaching beyond the stigma of poverty, addiction, homosexuality, criminalization, AIDS, and at times homelessness, they aimed to foster understanding and compassion.

Beginning with the photo essays on Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx in the 1970's, (included in the Civil Rights Era photography acquisition) and Promesa, in the 1980's, (part of the Puerto Rican Diaspora Project) *these two*

*projects continue Espada's documentation of sociologically based minority drug treatment programs in the United States.*

As with his previous work, these profound essays show the power of social documentary photography to awaken our humanity.

## The Glory of the Good Fight

To join in what my father's generation called "the good fight" was to enter into the timeless struggle for human rights everywhere, with like-minded, courageous souls. It meant to stand with them, to march with them, to raise your voice with them, to fight along side them, and perhaps most of all to be inspired by their dedication and action, and to give your encouragement at every turn.

It means even now to set yourself apart from those who would turn their backs on compelling causes, those who live only small lives of callous self interest, and with all our strength and to our last breath to work to see that no one is denied their rights or dignity, that no one is exploited or abused, excluded or forgotten.

In this time we need more and more dedicated souls willing to act on a vision of humans and life here that is noble, and that we have not yet realized. Isn't it clear with all the extraordinary waste and shallow, narcissistic self-indulgence in American culture, that to become a mature human being is just this – to take responsibility for each other, however far we can reach? In other times we may not get to see this value so keenly, but in these times especially, a compassionate life is like water in the desert or light when all else is an impenetrable pitch of night. Against this sad and confused backdrop, the tremendous value of such an aim couldn't be more clear.

We may not make a living as activists, or become famous, but we are all called to do our part here, and there is noble worth inherent in that,

something no one can take from us. We're all seeking meaning with our lives, even if we don't put it in those words, and we won't feel fulfilled and satisfied until we find it.

The way is well marked for those who would take it. A few steps in, and we enter this mighty stream with our greater family in this land and generation, and in other places and times; we become larger, and we receive renewed strength and vision. We go from time to the timeless, from evanescence to what has eternal value.

*In memory of our father, the photographer, educator and human rights activist  
Frank Espada, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014.*

## The barest outlines of a Master

We don't have to see a lot of the work of a master craftsman to know we are witness to extraordinary quality. It is like this in all the arts: the way a wood worker turns the lathe, a few stokes by a painter, the posture and fully articulate hands of a dancer... In each, in a moment, we enter their world, that is rich and complete to overflowing. With just a few simple gestures from them, we enter into their vision and their nobility, which is the treasure-house they draw from to share freely with us all.

For every one true master, many more are left grasping for words to describe the ineffable, that which transcends language. Our response to their work is elemental. When we meet art that stirs up wonder, we still somehow have to exult, even if it can never reach the majesty of what is shared, and the feelings that are awakened in us. At their best, our praisesongs can only point to the presence of something great and profound among us. If it does just this much, the light of our seeing moves from one to another, and the gift has been shared.

Where do you begin if you have discovered a true artist, and if that person also happens to have been your father? A few of his photographs should be enough to convey his mastery, that he grasped the significance of his art, and achieved its full expressive power.

A small sample shows also that he was a master printer, accomplished in his craft, his methods fully in the service to his art.

But where to begin, I ask myself, when there is this much to show? I so want to do him justice, that I usually don't feel up to the task of introducing his work, beyond letting the images speak for themselves. And so here we are: a son with a heart full of love and gratitude for these and countless other gifts; feeling himself to be an inadequate messenger of the sublime and ennobling, of this life affirming work.

I realize that I can only do this much. I can just give the barest of outline of what my father created, but I think this should be enough to begin to grasp the dimensions of an extraordinary life and art.

*I can only lead you  
to the crest of a hill,  
where the vision is waiting...*

## How things change

(number 59 in a series)

If you set out to write the most optimistic words you can manage in hard times, you have to start with what we're up against. And so, piled high on one side of my desk, I have the latest news about Monsanto, corporate control of the media, puppet politicians, and a shallow and distracted American public;

if we want, we can add the seeds of violence that are being sown every day by the use of unmanned planes dropping bombs, with 'every innocent killed, a victim with family and friends' – I said I was going to write optimistically – I didn't say it was going to be easy.

Actually, it is amazing to me that people face down these facts every day, and put themselves to caring for a world that looks set on self destruction. I saw how one commenter to a post vented that trying to change a corporation was just an ego game some people play, to feel better about themselves, but that we're 'outnumbered 50 to 1', *and I thought, Are those really the odds? Why not 500 or 5000 to 1?...*

I remember laughing the first time I heard the cut that 'old people don't have to learn history – they remember it'. Well, here are a couple of things I remember:



I remember wars with little or no protest, inequality before Occupy, factory farming and fast food consumed without questioning if it was any good for us;

I remember thinking this county would never in my lifetime, elect a person of color to the white house, and, even if O has been a complete washout, I think, if this is possible, what more can we do?

I have an image in mind, several in fact, just to chart more fully where we are now, on the way to where we want to go.

My father was the great documentary photographer and educator Frank Espada. In the 1960's, while we were in grade school in New York, my father was helping to organize voter registration, and although it was many years before he launched his career as a photographer and teacher, my dad always had his camera with him.

Recently, I found some of the pictures he took of a voter registration drive and voting machine demonstration. In them, we see a young white woman holding up a sample voting box, and explaining to people lined up how to punch holes to cast a vote. To me, the most amazing thing in these pictures is the determination we can see in people's eyes. Although it was late afternoon and starting to get dark out, something in their look said they weren't leaving until they understood how to take that step toward greater self determination that was in front of them.

It's important to remember other times when things looked impossible to change: America in Vietnam, blacks excluded from lunch counters, parks

and libraries, the pre-war apathy of the left and middle America: If we don't remember the world wide anti war protests of February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003, for example, and keep it vividly in mind, we have nothing to guide us when things start to feel really oppressive.

History moves slowly, but it does move. Listening to Dr. King's speeches, we can't help but wonder what he'd think of the changes in our country since the 60's. There is still *a lot* of work to be done, everywhere you look, but there are also large and small successes that we need to draw from, and use to build on to move forward.

Take for just one example the development of microfinance. This movement started in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, in response to the overwhelming unmet need for poor people to have access to small loans to improve their lives. The organization Kiva, and others like it have picked up this simple concept, of directly lending small amounts, and millions of people worldwide have benefited and will continue to benefit.

As I write this, we have a lot of knowledge that wasn't available 20 years ago. More of us know more now about the food we eat, and how it's grown, about our history, and about global economics. We also have the internet, which has immense potential as a tool for social change. I hope to live a while more to see what we'll do with it.

My first reaction when seeing the '50 to 1' comment was briefly one of agreement with it, and despair. But then something else kicked in. It goes back to another family story. This one relates to when my father was a young boy, growing up on the island of Puerto Rico. The story goes that

there was a bully who was terrorizing him, and that one day he decided he'd had enough. The next time he saw the bully coming at him he picked up a big rock, and scared the living shit out of him. The bully, he says, was never a problem again for him after that. What's more, as the caper to the story goes, my father went back to the spot where he had confronted the bully the day before, and he says, he couldn't even lift the rock. After hearing this, or repeating it ourselves for the umpteenth time, there is usually a dramatic pause, to let it sink in...

Now, I don't know what other kids' parents told them when sending them off to school, but I do remember my father telling us, 'don't take any shit from anybody'. That I do remember. Point being, I see, all these years later, that when you're threatened, you'll have strength that you didn't know you had in you, so don't be afraid. After a while, you go out looking for bullies. This has been the trajectory of my father's career, and, in our own ways that of my brother, sister and myself.

You want to know how change happens? It starts by looking the bully in the eye, and saying, that's it, I'm not going to back down. This is something bullies are not used to hearing. Nixon wasn't used to it; neither are corporations, high government officials or military men. But they do fall.

If we know ahead of time that bringing life saving changes, or some improvement in human rights isn't going to be easy, we won't give up so easily.

So what if politicians are bought and paid for, while people here are distracted by silly cat videos on their so-called 'smart' phones? or by reality tv, or the latest food and shopping? There are also these days more informed, dedicated people than ever before. I have to remember this, or else reading or even thinking about the news would be too much to bear.

I remember now: Aung San Sui Kyi was released from her second or third extended period of house arrest last year. She lives in one of the most oppressive military dictatorships in the world, and has been their steadfast opponent for decades. This reminds me that things change, not by themselves, but because some people don't give up when it's hard to keep hope. So make your own list of heroes and heroines. Think of what they have done, or are doing now to fix the hurting world we live in. Share what you know with your cohorts.

I was thinking the other day how no one of us gets to work with anything more than a part of the whole, and to think otherwise is just our pride talking. And yet it is important that we do our part as well as we can. This very work we are doing now will be our legacy. Just as we received an unfinished work from our ancestors, so also the work will be unfinished when it leaves our hands. No matter. 'Ours is the labor, but not the fruits thereof', says the Bhagavad Gita.

Just this is how change happens: we hold the dream in our hands, and carry it forward, with all our courage and care.

## I Become We – A Confluence of Rivers

I was surprised recently to hear the phrase *'I become we'* and it reminded me of something important, especially in these times. This is an idea that's been made use of for generations in the Civil Rights and Labor movements, as well as in religious teachings. Whether we hear it as *'There is strength in numbers'* or *'Together we will be heard'*, or, *'when two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them'*, the phrasing may change, but in one sense the message is the same. When we shift our identity from being an isolated self, struggling against the forces of the world, to one of a part of a great body moving through time, with a purpose that has brought us this far, and will take us forward, all the way home, we are reclaiming something essential.

Though I don't often think of myself as a Christian, I do appreciate many of the deep teachings that are found in that tradition. As a Westerner, I recognize the values laid out in their canon to be the foundation for our culture. Along with other religions, Christianity invites us also to reclaim our noble heritage, with language that may sound mysterious, until we see it at work in our own lives.

It's reported that Jesus said to his disciples, who he was sending out into the world to teach, *'he who receives you, receives me; and he who receives me, receives Him who sent me...'*

In this verse, I find all that is essential in understanding the profound nature of transmission, where a tradition is communicated across generations.

My father was the great social documentary photographer, educator and activist, Frank Espada, and my mother, who is still with us, is a deeply spiritual person. For these reasons, my brother, my sister and I grew all up in what I would call a socially conscious household. We were aware that there was injustice in the world and that we each had a responsibility to stand for people's rights. We may have processed what we heard from them as children in our own way, but those ideals were certainly there for us from an early age.

Whether loss of a parent or teacher results in our renewed working for others, I think depends on the relationship we had with them before their passing. In my case, with my father, the three of us were each given something precious by him.

I think the word that best describes the feeling of receiving a gift that carries some responsibility is 'legacy'. It's not just something we can place on a shelf and forget. We have to do something to honor that gift. My father's life was all about art and activism, and the struggle for human rights, and that is something I inherited and intend to continue in as many ways, and for however long I can. I think my brother feels the same way, and my sister too, in her own way. He's a poet, and she's a lawyer.

My father said,

*"The purpose of showing my work is to get young people thinking, to stimulate their minds and hearts, to make conditions known, and to attack injustices wherever they exist."*

Now that he is no longer here, who will continue the essential work he was part of? Who will stand up for the exploited and abused, for those who are pushed aside and forgotten by society? Because my father is not with us physically to do this anymore, it's imperative, now more than ever, that we continue the work.

In 2014, one of my teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, had a stroke that rendered him unable to speak. We have to ask, who will speak now that our teacher is silent?, and I have to answer that all of us who received his wisdom will speak. They will continue through us.

The movements for human rights this last century has suffered so many losses, from environmental activists, to social justice leaders. In some cases, they lived long lives, but so often their lives were cut short. In each case, those of us who were inspired by them felt the need to continue their message and their work. *We take the part that does not fade.* When we look at what we lost, we are bereft, and desolate. But when we look at what we were given by them, their great gifts of vision and courage, intelligence, and powerful commitment, we can't help but be lifted up by it, and empowered to take the next step on the path, and the next, together with our brothers and sisters. When we really see things as they are, we break down the imaginary barriers between 'I' and 'them'. I then becomes *we*, and we are empowered to continue this work.

A friend of mine recently shared a poem by Dawn Markova, called "fully alive", which really resonated with me. It has the lines:

*I choose to risk my significance,  
to live so that which came to me as seed  
goes to the next as blossom  
and that which came to me as blossom  
goes on as fruit...*

That's it, exactly. When we are part of a tradition, it's a great gift, a privilege. The traditions of progressive social activism and true human values we have received continues with us, and through us.

I have no doubt now that when someone meets me, and we talk politics and social justice issues, they are meeting my father, and my teachers, and all those who came before them and taught, and nurtured, and inspired them. All this is being shared. *Truth be told, we are a confluence of rivers, meeting one another.*

This is true of me, and I know that it's true of you as well. We have each received great and precious gifts that have been passed down to us through the generations. We are each part of a noble heritage, and this is what we share now with one another.



## Twenty-three sixteen – a letter to the future

I am writing this to my friends and family in 2316, three hundred years from now. If you are receiving this, it means we have somehow survived the threats to our collective existence, environmental destruction, and large scale war. I've heard only recently that the population of bees has been declining, and in our fragile ecosystem, this effects many crops and other forms of life. We're witnessing the rapid loss of species, mostly due to human beings encroaching on natural habitats. We also seem intent as ever on war, and our weapons now are more powerful than ever. So my writing to you now can be taken as a gesture of hope on my part, that these words will somehow reach you.

Given all that's going on these days, personally and in the world, it might seem that writing a letter to possible descendants, 300 years in the future is the most impractical, irresponsible thing I could be doing just now. From another point of view, however, I'm thinking that it's really the most practical thing I can do, and hopefully my reasons for saying this will become clear as I go.

I am writing this for you, and for myself also, truth be told, because it's of great value to me. I don't know how it will be centuries from now, but in these times, people are mostly materialistic in their aims and how they see themselves and others. I would like to write out at some length how these values express themselves, but first I should say that, in future times, what follows may be of interest not only to anthropologists, but to philosophers as well, those who are seeking to understand the perennial questions of human nature, and how best to live.

Writing and reflecting like this, then, is a relief to me as well, to step out of the narrow confines of how I usually view my life, and see it in this broader context.

One of my teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, suggested that when we are having a problem with someone, we close our eyes, and imagine them one hundred years in the future. He went on to say that we would open our eyes and see them very differently. We will naturally have more love and appreciation for each other, and much less of a tendency to get caught up in pettiness, or with things that are ultimately unimportant. Contemplating our mortality and the preciousness of our lives here can have such wonderful effects.

Some biography here will perhaps illustrate the values of my era, and my reasons for writing.

I am a 55 year old man, never married. I've played classical guitar since my mid twenties, though I don't do this as a profession. I'm also a Buddhist these last 25 years, and this is something I spend a lot of time thinking and writing about. Again, not as a profession. The last couple of years I've managed my father's collection of photography, and earned enough from sales to museums to get by, and help support my mother. My father passed away in 2014, at the age of 83, from a heart condition. Frank Espada was an artist, activist, community organizer, and educator, as well as a social documentary photographer. To me, most of all, he was a noble human being.

My father thought a lot the last few years of his life about his legacy, feeling mostly that he had failed. He had some success as a teacher, and was loved by his students, but as far as his art and documentary work were concerned, he didn't feel it was appreciated or acknowledged as it should have been. In some ways, he felt like a failure for this reason, which at least in part was financial, or the material side of it. Most years, my parents struggled to make ends meet.

I was quite close with the creative side of my father. He took me as his first student when I was ten, and even though I set aside photography when I was a teenager, and pursued music instead, we always had this language of art we could share. He knew I was a great admirer of that side of him.

I've often thought of how he did his photography even though he didn't get paid for it for decades. He did it for the pure enjoyment of it, and because he knew it had value all by itself.

He didn't do a lot of marketing for his work, and had a hard time putting a price on his photographs. He would rather give them away, which he often did. When a university curator and his agent at that time came to select photographs for an acquisition, he couldn't bear to be there to see it. These were like his children.

I learned a lot about materialist values, art and the spiritual life from watching my father. There are a certain class of what I call 'gate keepers' in any art – such as writing, music, poetry, or photography. Gallery owners, curators, collectors, agents, publishers and critics, all taken together couldn't produce anything near what a creative person does, and yet in

some ways they hold the keys to their recognition, and perhaps even survival as an artist. They can also be antithetical to a person's art. It's no wonder my father wanted nothing to do with them, for the most part. He got by thanks to the support of his most loyal students and friends, and later in his career due to one agent who took up his cause for a while.

I can only imagine my father going into a gallery with a portfolio of his magnificent photographs, and asking permission to show his work. After doing this and getting rejected no more than once or twice, my father withdrew to work on his craft for its own sake.

In this country, when people meet each other for the first time, one of the first things we usually ask is 'What do you do?' (for work), which is a way of trying to get at how much money a person has, their social status and value as a human being defined by what they are worth materially.

I have a girlfriend these days whose parents own quite a bit of property, and referring to me, they ask her, Why doesn't he like to work? It's a very common attitude to have in these times, and yet it misses so much.

When a person focuses on material gain so much, it narrows their perception of beauty, truth, and any better purpose to our being here, other than accumulating wealth. They gain little satisfaction from their possessions themselves, but it has an insidious way of taking over people's lives. Look at the sad, desperate insecurity of even slightly famous people, and you see the deep poverty of materialism, when it gets to the level of self identification.

One of the reasons I'm writing this, as I said, is to step out of these motions, of seeking personal meaning in work or possessions, getting money or the fear of not having or losing the same. It seems at times like this can crowd out every other human value, and then what a loss it is!

If as a group we've survived long enough for you to get this letter, I'm sure part of the reason is that more of us have been able to go beyond such shallow and destructive views. When we and others are reduced to a number, and our utility as producers or consumers, we lose sight of a transcendent dimension we all share, our common humanity, and our great and noble inherent worth. If we don't know ourselves as we are, how could we ever treat ourselves and others properly?

*This morning, shortly before waking, I dreamt of my father. He was sitting in a big easy chair, and we were talking. I asked him, if it was possible before to bring about meaningful changes in our society through activism, shouldn't it be possible to do again?, and he said, yes, it is possible...*

Looking ahead 300 years, I know there are some things we would have in common. Although I have no idea how you will communicate, travel, and enjoy your days, what struggles or challenges you will have, I do know there are some ways you all will be the same as we are now. I have to reach down below the level of just this one time I'm living in, but it is here with me now, this common basis for our understanding each other, and being able to share something of our lives with each other.

Three hundred years ago, we had composers like Bach, Handel and Vivaldi, whose music we continue to enjoy. They tapped into something

universal, beyond any one time and place. The same could be said of painters and writers, sculptors and deep thinkers from that century, and reaching even further back in time. There is something immediately recognizable in art from any era. It speaks to us on a deep level that we forget too often when we are caught up focusing on work and money. If we identify too strongly with the material side of us as who we are, we miss the depths, the enjoyment, and the purpose of being alive on this earth, which is to delight in the treasures that are all around us, naturally and produced by men and women, and to care for and support one another as much as we can.

I forget, then I remember again, and the whole world changes for me. I write this then also as a warning to you, our descendants, our to-be-born brothers and sisters.

In our DNA we have the full range of options for living here on earth. I know that in the generations between now and when you read these words, out of this fundamental potential, we will have produced artists and businessmen, leaders and followers, saints and criminals, confused people and wise ones too. We have unlimited possibilities, but we forget this, because of how we limit ourselves. We sometimes focus on the wrong things and so we doubt, and despair, feel impoverished and desperate. We reduce ourselves to something that barely resembles a human being any more, but this too can change. We can regain our noble stature.

It's said in the sciences, that crops such as potatoes and apples have the inherent potential to adapt to circumstances such as a new environment or

invasive species. Within the DNA of a plant is the potent ability to change and continue to thrive.

As humans, we have the same creative, adaptive potential in us, if only we knew it, and made use of it. There are things we can do to block our knowing, such as drugging ourselves, or letting our mind relentlessly scatter and become shallow and numb, or succumbing to depression. These are very difficult states to correct, and so we struggle against self fulfilling prophecies of isolation and failure.

Art can remind us of who we are, on a deeper level, as can meditation, if it's done well. There is a level of our being we can know directly that shifts our entire experience, and what we know for ourselves is possible.

This experience of our deeper nature is of something that is not conditioned, and caught up in the reactivity of thinking about our material circumstances. We should all be able to glimpse, at least from time to time, this dimension of natural peace and perfection. Our innate light is how we know each other, beyond the temporary conditions, which are the various guises and roles we take on, or project onto others.

What is called 'the natural sphere of great perfection' is beyond any one time or place, and seeing it, even briefly, shifts what we think of the relative world, of time, of our work and our assessments of self and others. We can find this common, profound identity, free of change, free of sorrow and distress over conditions, and live from that awareness.

I hope that by the time these words reach you, you will already know these things, and you will have been teaching them to your children. Who knows? It may be that way in your future.

In these times, we fear and loathe death so much, seeing it as a total loss, an absolute disruption to our lives here and the lives of our friends and families. This has to be because we don't understand life, and, embracing materialism as our basic philosophy, we turn away from these deeper meanings of our being here together. We have made things much more difficult for ourselves and each other than we needed to, and what's more, we've too often missed out on celebrating each other's beauty and gifts to the world.

Our lives consist both of greater worth and meaning, and that which is only incidental and of small importance to our being here, like what hat we are going to wear today, or perhaps what we are going to eat. If we learn to appreciate our natural and inherited treasures, the provisional right away takes *its* rightful place, as supporting our essentially spiritual lives here.

Perhaps I will write more to you later, my future friends and family, but for now this is all I want to say. I thank you all for being there, in my thoughts at least, and I hope that wherever this finds you, you all are dwelling in safety and in peace. May you all be well and at your ease. May you all have every happiness.



Questions from Carmen Ramos, curator at the Smithsonian American History Museum, with responses

2018

Carmen, here are our best answers to your questions, which follow in italics. I've numbered the questions, so if we communicate about them, we can go by the numbers. I've also included a few links, and attached some items I mention in my responses.

1.

*Do you have a list of the exhibitions Frank Espada participated in since the inception of his career? Were his Puerto Rican Diaspora exhibitions that were presented at El Museo del Barrio and traveled to other sites his first exhibitions? Where did this exhibition travel?*

{Here is our [list of exhibitions](#), as of March, 2025.}

2.

*Frank Espada was an activist since the 1960s. Were any of his photographs used in publications or paraphernalia issued by the organizations he was affiliated with, like the New York Urban Coalition? I'm especially interested in the decades of the 1950s through the 1970s.*

In the late 1950's, my father photographed a half-way house in New York, called Fountain House.

Here is [a gallery](#) of those fine photographs.

They were exhibited there for a time, shortly after being produced, in 1957 or 1958;

In the 1960's, when working for the Lindsey Administration, my father and Carl McCall were sent to five European Cities: London, Paris, Moscow, Stockholm and Helsinki, to document "New Towns", a progressive urban design movement aimed at relieving over crowding in the cities. The color slides from that project are now part of the Smithsonian American History Museum's Civil Rights Era Collection;

And in the 1970's Frank documented the work of Lincoln Hospital, with the aim of appealing to the Federal government for funding. Lincoln Hospital pioneered the use of acupuncture in drug treatment.

I'll attach several of my father's photographs from that series.

Here is [a document](#) that describes their work, and those photographs.

These projects were used 'in house' - for presentations, and the sake of education and outreach.

3.

*Can you please let me know the dates of the pictures in the Civil Rights section of his website that has the protest signs in Spanish. Are they from the "famous school boycott of 1964" mentioned on the website? Is it this boycott? <https://www.wnyc.org/story/school-boycott-1964/>. Does the Bayard Rustin photograph in the civil rights section come from this event?*

Here are the locations / events documented on the [Civil Rights Era Photography page](#) of [thefrankespadagalleries.com](http://thefrankespadagalleries.com)

From the upper left of that page, photographs 1-13 are from the School Boycotts of 1964. There were two, the the first, on February 3rd was the largest in history. A second boycott took place on March 16th.

This set includes the photograph of the woman holding the Jewish Currents magazine.

[This photo](#) is of Shelly Zinn, the brother of the historian Howard Zinn. It is calling for a march on the Mayor's office on Sunday, March 1st, between the two protests;

14 to 27 are my father's photographs of East New York Action's voter registration, and voting machine demonstration, in 1964, in Brownsville, and East New York;

28-35 are of East New York Action;

36-49 are from the March on Washington. I recall my father telling me he was on the Lincoln Memorial steps while Dr. King gave his famous speech.

50-52, 54 and 55 are from NAACP Conventions, in Albany New York, in 1963 and 1965;

This includes the photograph of [Bayard Rustin speaking](#),

(also in that photograph, seated on the left, are James Farmer, and Roy

Wilkins)

and the one of him with a young John Lewis

as well as the photograph of the great [A. Phillip Randolph](#)

(#53 is of Dona Pura, requesting assistance, in Manhattan Valley, from the Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project)

4.

*Did your father attend the March on Washington in 1963? Some of the pictures on his website are from that event, right? For example, the picture with the woman holding the journal Jewish Currents?*

(See above)

5.

*What were your father's thoughts about the Young Lords? I know he documented some of their activities. Are those pictures available on his website? If not, can you send me some jpegs for use in my presentation?*

My father admired the Young Lords, and they looked up to him.

His 1979 interview (in Spanish) with Young Lords founder Cha Cha Jimenez is part of the Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project. I can send a copy of this to you if you like.

He was something of a hero to many in the Puerto Rican community in

New York by the late 60's, owing to his work in the earlier part of that decade.

I will attach 4 of my father's photographs that I printed from his negatives for a show on the Young Lords at El Museo, in 2015, as well as the captions they used.

I'll also attach the scans of contact sheets I have of the Young Lords Church Takeover, December 28th, 1969, and of their Breakfast Program.

I shared these with Pablo Yoruba Guzman who was able to identify several people in them, including Hiram Maristany, David Perez, Maritza, and Elena Gonzalez, the sister of Juan Gonzalez.

The Church Takeover photographs show Denise Oliver, and Luis Garden Acosta, who is now the director of El Puente, in New York.

6.

*How did your father identify racially? I'm not trying to be intrusive or judgmental here; I'm simply trying to understand how he viewed himself.*

Frank identified as Puerto Rican - totally.

I would let [his own words](#) in the Preface to his book, about the history of Puerto Rico, and how he saw himself speak for themselves.

7.

*When your brother spoke at the Museum, he mentioned a conversation between your father and Cornell or Robert Capa, where one of them told your father that “no one was interested in pictures of Puerto Ricans.” Where can I find a reference your brother’s poem or essay that references this exchange? I’m short on time before my presentation. Would it be possible for you to scan and send it to me? Do you know anything else about how Frank Espada met the Capa brothers?*

“No one wants to look at pictures of Puerto Ricans, Frank” -This was a quote from Cornell Capa. This is in Martin’s book - “Vivas To Those Who Have Failed” as an introduction to his poem Mad Love.

8.

*Did your father associate with any other well-known photographers besides Dave Heath and Gene Smith and Cornell and Robert Capa?*

Yes. Besides Dave Heath and Gene Smith, Cornell Capa, he knew and admired Tim Kantor (McKinley Kantor’s son).

I also found among my father’s prints, one of the photographer Imogen Cunningham, that was taken here in San Francisco in the early 1970’s.

9.

*What prompted his move to San Francisco?*

We felt it was time to move on (1985) - and to leave the Washington DC area. San Francisco was a good change.

*Frank Espada Activism and Organizational Timeline: Can you provide some more detail about these affiliations?:*

10.

*East New York Action (what year was this founded?) How long was it active?*

East New York Action was founded in 1964 to help local residents with rental problems. Signs were put in the windows in English and Spanish. Probably was active until we moved out of Brooklyn. (in 1970)

I place it's founding a little earlier - perhaps 1963, owing to their organizing in the neighborhood prior to the March on Washington.

I'll link to one document called [The Sign in the Window](#) that places their work in historical context.

11.

*Puerto Rican Community Development Project (community organizer starting in 1965). How long was he affiliated with this group?*

Given the date of his appointment to the Community Development Agency of New York, I'd estimate he was with the Puerto Rican Community Development Project for about a year.

12.

*The New York Urban Coalition, Vice President. Was this a job or was he on the board? How long was he affiliated with this group?*

Frank was the Coalition's Executive Vice President for Economic Development and Housing - it was a paid position.

I'd say a year or less. He had a lot of irons in the fire by that time.

13.

*How long did he serve as Deputy Commissioner of The Community Development Agency of New York City?*

Unsure. A year or less.

For your information, among my father's papers I found [a press release](#) from the New York Community Development Agency, dated October 20th, 1966. Of special interest is a list, on the second page, of the organizations my father was a part of leading up to that appointment.

14.

*He was a Fellow at The Drug Abuse Council (funded by the Ford Foundation) from 1973 until? How long did your family live in Washington D.C.?*

The fellowship with the Drug Abuse Council was for one year. We lived in Washington DC area - In Rockville, Gaithersburg, and Potomac, Maryland, and in Reston Virginia, until 1985 - when they moved and joined me here in San Francisco.



15.

*He was affiliated with Y.E.S., or Youth Environment Studies (founded by Harvey Feldman) from 1989 to 1991. Was this a job? What was his role?*

Yes, it was a paid position. He not only documented their work, but was almost certainly a consultant to them as well. His relationship with Jerry Mandel and Harvey Feldman went back to the late 70's, and their time together in Washington as Fellows at the Ford Foundation's Drug Abuse Council. They shared a common philosophy when it came to drug treatment in minority communities.

I'll link to [one document](#) that shows some of their work.

16.

*One last question: Do you know which Mexican activists Frank Espada was meeting with in the early 1970s?*

Speaking to a family friend today, I learned he was instrumental in organizing the first UNIDOS Conference, in Arlington, Va., in the early 1970's.

My father mentioned Jose De La Isla as being the Chicano activist and educator who recommended him to the Drug Abuse Council.

Here are my father's words:

'Through my time in Washington this is when I first came into contact with the Chicano leadership, and eventually, I became a conduit between the

Chicanos and the Puerto Ricans. We did a lot of organizing in the Southwest. And we organized something called the Hispanic Manpower Association and a number of other national organizations, dealing with the first time that Chicanos had anything to do with Puerto Ricans and vice versa. So we had a very, very successful conference in Washington the Unidos Conference that drew about two thousand people from all over the country...

'Let me point this out, too: I was a liaison between the Puerto Ricans and the blacks in Manhattan, in New York. I made a number of very good friends who became very powerful and very influential, like H. Carl McCall [the former gubernatorial candidate], Frank Thomas, and a number of others - Roy Innis, etc., etc. These were top people in that movement.

'I was a person who was always trusted and I played the same role with Chicanos nationally, as I said previously. And I was involved with the Chicanos in a number of movements in the Chicano community...'

He had a rich life. I'd like to see a substantial book about him and his work.

## Questions from Nicole Hernandez, with responses, 2023

Hi Nicole - here are some brief answers to your questions. If there is anything more you would like to know, feel free to ask.

### *1. What would Frank Espada be photographing today?*

This is hard to say. I think my father found even greater fulfillment in his photographic career as a teacher.

If you are asking though what he would encourage others to photograph, I'm sure he would want documentarians to show us the human side of the current migrant crisis. For all the reporting, these stories are not being told in the mainstream media in a way that moves people. There is a pervasive ignorance and racism in this country that must change. That's one.

I'm sure he'd also be inspired by the protest movements in Puerto Rico this last decade.

There are so many needs, so many worthwhile causes, and as a teacher of the art of documentary photography, my father encouraged his students to record the stories that were their lived experience, and that they felt an urgency to tell.

### *2. Looking back at the life of this archive, what has been its impact overall and in specific cases?*

I think the archive is just beginning to have its impact.

When I contacted the Puerto Rican Studies Association in 2014, I was told by a professor that, 'If a person is not published, or talked about in academia for about a decade, they fall off the map'. You can imagine my surprise. Because of the advocacy of scholars like Yomaira, and Elizabeth Fernandez, this is changing, but we have only begun.

*What effect do you hope it has in the future?*

There is a two-fold significance to this collection, as I see it. The first is that it records in depth the Puerto Rican experience across the United States in the twentieth century. To my knowledge, this is the only time a project like this has been attempted, and realized.

It presents a progressive, anti-racist, anti-colonial point of view as well, which is something that should be known by every single Puerto Rican, and especially the young men and women with roots in that place and culture.

The second way this is an important collection is simply because it is great art. This needs to be seen in person, of course, and exhibited. My father was 'a photographer's photographer', a master printer in his own right, and someone whose work, as art, is a great contribution to all humanity.

*And how does this DSL project fit in or contribute to those hopes?*

It was always my father's aim to transcribe, translate, and publish the interviews. The photographs taken for the Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project just tell part of the story.

When he was preparing his book in 2006, he had long discussions, or arguments with the book designer, about how much text to include. He knew that without the words of the people he interviewed, much would be left out of the experiences he intended to communicate.

He eventually settled on using just short quotes in the book, to go with the photographs, as he did in his exhibits, but he always felt that the full interviews are an essential part of this documentary.

*3. What does it mean for you to preserve and keep the archive going?*

It's a labor of love for me. In his lifetime, my father never got the recognition he deserved, apart from his devoted students. All that he did remained in boxes for decades, and I think he stopped believing that his work would matter, or that it could make a difference in people's lives.

The history he recorded, and the art he produced is needed, now more than ever, and I've only done my part, as it has come to me. I think anyone in my situation would have done the same.

These are such needful times. There is so much ignorance and despair that we need what inspired documentary work offers us, and we all need the light that art brings to our lives.

*What have been recent challenges? I'm thinking about your essay on the years it took to organize and prepare the photos for showing/selling.*

It's been a challenge at times to do this by myself, but as I said in the essay *My Father's Son*, I wouldn't have trusted anyone else to do it.

I'm also still taken back by the suggestion that this work is without any value, and should simply be donated whenever it's asked for, much like clothes being given to goodwill. I don't like to get angry, but it happens sometimes.

*5. Why is the collection relevant today?*

Because we need art in our lives, all of us; we need to see what visual arts, photography, social documentary work, and fine printing can be;

and, we need to know these histories, such as my father recorded. So much depends on it, going forward.

What thematic through-lines do you see from when the photos were taken to today?

I see the social activism of today in a direct line with what has come before in this country - from A. Philip Randolph, to Martin and Malcolm and Medgar, to my father's generation of activists, to the Young Lords and Black Panthers, to BLM, to today - when we know this connection, we will have more fortitude for social justice work.

*6. Did your father keep in touch with any of the families in the photos?*

He and my mother became friends with Confessor Rivera, in Hawaii, and visited his family there, with my sister. They also remained friends with Tony and Emily Diaz, also from Hawaii, who visited them in Reston, Va. I have a set of photographs from that visit.

Alfonso Texidor and Piri Thomas here in San Francisco were family friends, and the family of Edelmiro Huertas got in touch with me in 2020. I shared with them the recording of my father's interview with him, and they wrote:

'Truly you have given us a priceless gift. Our grandfather/father was a very special man that was dearly loved and respected.'

'My cousin Melissa (Edelmiro's granddaughter) also wrote to me that tears began to flow as soon as she heard Papa's voice. We are all deeply touched. Gracias...'

I also went to meet with them in Daly City, which is close to San Francisco.

*7. I noticed that you had written several books on Buddhism. Can you talk about how your Buddhist practice and archiving intersect?*

As a Buddhist who is dedicated to seeing everyone's worth, and helping others to see, my father's artistic legacy is truly precious. He really did look at everyone with the eyes of love, and made people feel appreciated.

Just to know how art can transcend barriers, and affirm each person's dignity, and be a celebration has been a great blessing for me. Most of all, I try to keep with me the respect my father had for everyone, and the willingness to stand up to injustice. We all need examples such as this to follow.

*8. I see your father model an [ethic of love](#) in his work/activism; did he have a spiritual practice?*

I remember one conversation we had back in the early 2000's. My sister, and I, my mother and father were talking, and I think it was my mother who asked him if he felt he was spiritual. We all knew the answer already, but he said, Yes. There is a depth to his life and work that shows me the meaning of the word.

As far as a spiritual practice goes, I know that creating beautiful photographs was something that restored him. We all saw it many many times. He would go down into the darkroom, put on classical music, and emerge a few hours later renewed, with a completely satisfied expression, and ready to meet life once again. More often than not, he had created something magnificent.

*9. You alluded in the piece, Artist As An Activist, to the power of art to transform the abstract into teachable events. Can you explain how you employ an activist orientation as a curator of your father's work?*

Well, it took me a few years before I felt comfortable asking people directly where they were on the political spectrum. I respect others, but this



documentary art belongs with educators and curators who share his convictions. Anything less and it won't have its intended effect.

We can never be sure what will happen to a collection after it goes to a museum, or to a university. Curators change, priorities change, anything can happen. All I can do is try to present this work in its fullness, and then hope that it will be carried forward by other passionate, committed people.

*10. Did your father feel particularly connected to San Francisco?*

He had a few friends out here when they moved to California, in 1985. I had also been here for a few years.

*What drew him to stay there and raise the family?*

I wouldn't say, 'raise a family', since I was already 25 when they came. But there is much about the San Francisco Bay Area that is praiseworthy. And once he began teaching in the late 80's, he found his place. His students adored him, and he was able to inspire a generation of photographers.

*Do you feel a specific connection to SF or CA broadly?*

I do appreciate this place for its diversity, and culture. It's a very supportive place to be for a creative person. It's also such a beautiful area. I feel very fortunate to be here.

*11. What is your relationship with Puerto Rico?*

For me, it is the place where my father was born, and I feel I have roots there. Unfortunately, I've only been there once, when I was young. I hope to go back one day. Not speaking the language well enough, there is a great distance, of course, but this history is part of who I am.

Also, as a steward of my father's work, I feel a responsibility to Puerto Ricans, to educators, and to students in this and coming generations. I'm committed to sharing this as widely as I can.

## Notes from an interview with Jason Espada

Frank Espada was born in Utuado, Puerto Rico in 1930, and came to this country with his family in 1939. He was an organizer and activist in New York in the 1960's and 1970's, as well as an accomplished photographer.

In 1979, he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to document the Puerto Rican experience across this country from the Island of Puerto Rico to Hawaii. This was a one of a kind project - something that had never been done before.

He called this work *The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project*, and his photographs then traveled throughout the country, with more than 40 exhibitions between 1981 and 1996.

The documentary tells the unique story of Puerto Ricans here. It is a celebration of our culture, and it affirms our identity as a people.

In one of his interviews, my father said,

What is going to save us is our inner strength - the strength that I have found in this community, and that's going to be based on self-identity, on identifying ourselves as a strong people...

For those who don't choose to assimilate, as many do, and just become American, but who want to keep their identity as Puerto Ricans and take pride in it, this is a gift.

It's also important to note that Frank Espada did this work from a progressive point of view. Although these *are* beautiful photographs, my father was also a lifelong activist.

He saw and experienced a great deal of discrimination growing up in New York, and he had a commitment to social justice everywhere he went - in every phase of his life, including his time as a documentarian of the Puerto Rican experience, and a teacher.

He said:

The purpose of showing my work is to get young people thinking, to stimulate their minds and hearts, to make conditions known, and to attack injustices wherever they exist.

So there was this aspect to his project as well. He was an advocate for the Puerto Rican people, and the interviews and photographs, and the book that followed all carried forward this intention.

This documentary then stands as a model of resistance. It is resistance to erasure, to despair, to being not known, or appreciated. For me, it is uplifting, beautiful and inspiring work, a model for documentarians, artists, and educators of all kinds.

A letter from my father to his mother

December 23, 1988

My dear mommy:

What a pleasure to talk to you yesterday! It was better to be there sharing, but at least we were able to share a little. And how time passes, it seems to go faster with age, but at least we are in good health, and quite satisfied with our lives.

I am completely recovered from the throat problem....{it was a trial...} Here too we have incompetent doctors, all they know is to get money out of people. The idiot messed things up in me, in the process of doing a biopsy he took out a piece of my vocal cord. What do you think? Anyway, I cured myself, naturally, and without drugs or anything. And that is how I will do it from now on, to hell with doctors.

... But, as they say, there is no evil that does not bring some good. I was unable to communicate for several weeks, with enough time to consider my situation, what I have done with my life and what I would like to do with what I have left.

I came to the conclusion that I was not going to do anything I didn't want to do. As you know, I have always wanted to dedicate myself to my photography. Only once in my life was I able to do it properly. The result, the Diaspora project, has been the great success of my life.

I am convinced that I should have dedicated myself to documentary when I was young, but I still have a few years left, and I finally reached the point in my life where I have realized the importance of following what my heart tells me. That decision was the result of that introspection during my convalescence. \*\*

I have always known that I had this talent, but I always had to fulfill my responsibilities. In the end, I had to sacrifice my art for my family.

{Perhaps}

So now, With the time I have left, I'm going to devote all my energies to this. \*\* {my photography}.

It will not be easy, because it is difficult to get funds to make documentaries about the things that interest me:

the poor, injustice, the ongoing struggle of those who yearn for freedom; things like AIDS in our communities, the result of the use of needles to inject drugs, etc., etc., but I have always followed this path, and I will follow it to the end.

So, from now on, if you're asked what your son does, *you can say that he's a documentary photographer, focusing on issues that affect the unfortunate people of this world.*

We'll see.

\* And I'm finally going to finish my book. It will be published next year, probably in the fall, and I think it's going to have an impact because of what I'm saying:

It's a polemic against most of the establishment, including the politicians, the powerful, the rich and the hustlers. They are the vast majority of our great leaders.

So I don't think that many copies will be sold, but I think that the few that are sold will have some effect.

So I've launched myself into a new direction, after old fights, I don't feel old at all.

I have a lot of confidence in my abilities, I know that I'm a professional and that the products are going to be first class. What I need now is your blessing so that the Lord gives me a few more years of health. And I will promise you several works dedicated to the elimination of injustice in this world.

I ask God to protect you and take care of you.

And to my dear sister, and my nieces, and to all the children, lots of hugs and many kisses.

May God bless you all.

23 de diciembre, 1988

Mi querida mamita:

Que gran placer hablar con ustedes ayer! Mejor estar alla compartiendo, pero por lo menos pudimos compartir un poquito. Y como se pasa el tiempo, parece que mas aprisa con los años. Pero por lo menos estamos bien de salud, y bastante satisfechos con nuestra vida.

Yo ya estoy completamente recuperado de la cuestion de la garganta. Aqui tambien tenemos doctores incompetentes, lo unico que saben es sacarle los chavos a la gente. El idiota me hizo una gran porqueria, en proceso de hacer una biopsia me saco un pedazo de una cuerda vocal. ¿Que te parece? En fin, me curé yo mismo, naturalmente, y sin drogas ni nada. Y asi lo hare de ahora en adelante, para el infierno con doctores.

Pero, como dicen, no hay mal que no traiga algun bien. Estuve sin poder comunicar por varias semanas, con tiempo suficiente para considerar mi situacion, lo que he echo con mi vida y lo que quisiera hacer con lo que me queda.

Llegue a concluir que no hiba a hacer nada que no quisiera hacer. Como tu sabes siempre he querido dedicarme a mi fotografía. Solamente una vez en mi vida pude hacerla como se debe hacer. El resultado, el proyecto de la Diaspora, ha sido el gran éxito de mi vida.

Estoy convencido que debía haberme dedicado al documental cuando joven. Pero todavía me quedan unos añitos, y por fin llegue al punto en mi



vida donde he realizado la importancia de seguir lo que me dice el corazón. Esa decisión fué resultado de esa introspección durante mi convalescencia.

\*\*

\*\* Siempre supe que tenía este talento, pero siempre tuve que cumplir con mis responsabilidades. Al final, tuve que sacrificar mi arte por mi familia.

Así que ahora, con el tiempo que me queda, voy a dedicar todas mis energías a mi fotografía.\*\*

No va ha ser fácil, pues es difícil conseguir fondos para hacer documentales de las cosas que me interesan:

los pobres, la injusticia, la lucha continua de aquellos que anelan la libertad; cosas como la SIDA en nuestras comunidades, resultado de el uso de agujas para inyectar drogas, etc., etc.

Pero siempre he seguido este camino, y lo seguiré hasta el fin. Asi es que, de ahora en adelante, si te preguntan que es lo que hace to hijo, puedes decir que el es un fotógrafo documentál, concentrando en questiones que afectan los infelices de este mundo.

Veremos a ver.

\* Y por fin voy a terminar mi libro. Se publicará el año que viene, probablemente en el otoño, y creo que va ha tener impacto por lo que estoy diciendo.

Es una polémica en contra de la mayor parte de la estructura, inclusive los politicos, los poderosos, los ricos y los buscones. Que son la gran mayor parte de nuestros grandes lideres.

Asi es que no creo que se venderan muchas copias, pero creo que las pocas que se venderan van a tener algun efecto.

Asi es que me he lanzado en nuevo rumbo, despues de viejo fiiras, no me siento nada de viejo.

Tengo mucha confianza en mis abilitades, se que soy profesional y que los productos van a ser primera clase. Lo que necesito ahora es to bendicion para que el Señor me de unos años mas de salud. Y yo le prometeré varias obras dedicadas a la eliminación de la injusticia en este mundo.

Le pido a Dios que te proteja y te cuide.

Y a mi querida hermana, y mis sobrinas, y a todos los nenes, un monton de abrazos y muchos besitos. Que Dios los bendiga a todos.

A letter to his students, October 1996

A note to one of my classes on the final meeting of the course

Once in a great while we experience an event which transcends the expected. There was a moment, during our last meeting, of spiritual joining, a melding of a multitude of universes into a single super star - bright, glowing, beneficial in its warmth to all participants. The whole, as in a fine photo essay, became greater than the sum of its parts.

When asked to reflect upon what you have learned as a result of the experience, you delved into the ultimate purpose of art: to make us whole. You spoke of sharing, of learning from one another, of support, of understanding, of love. Lifetime friendships are in formation.

And, although technique is essential in the quest for realization of our artistic vision, there was an absence of technical issues. I believe this happened because, ultimately, it is the vision which is the expression of our of our essence, a process which is elusive, a quest for our inner being, touching on all aspects of our internal world. We seldom if ever truly understand this inner reality, or even try to express it to ourselves.

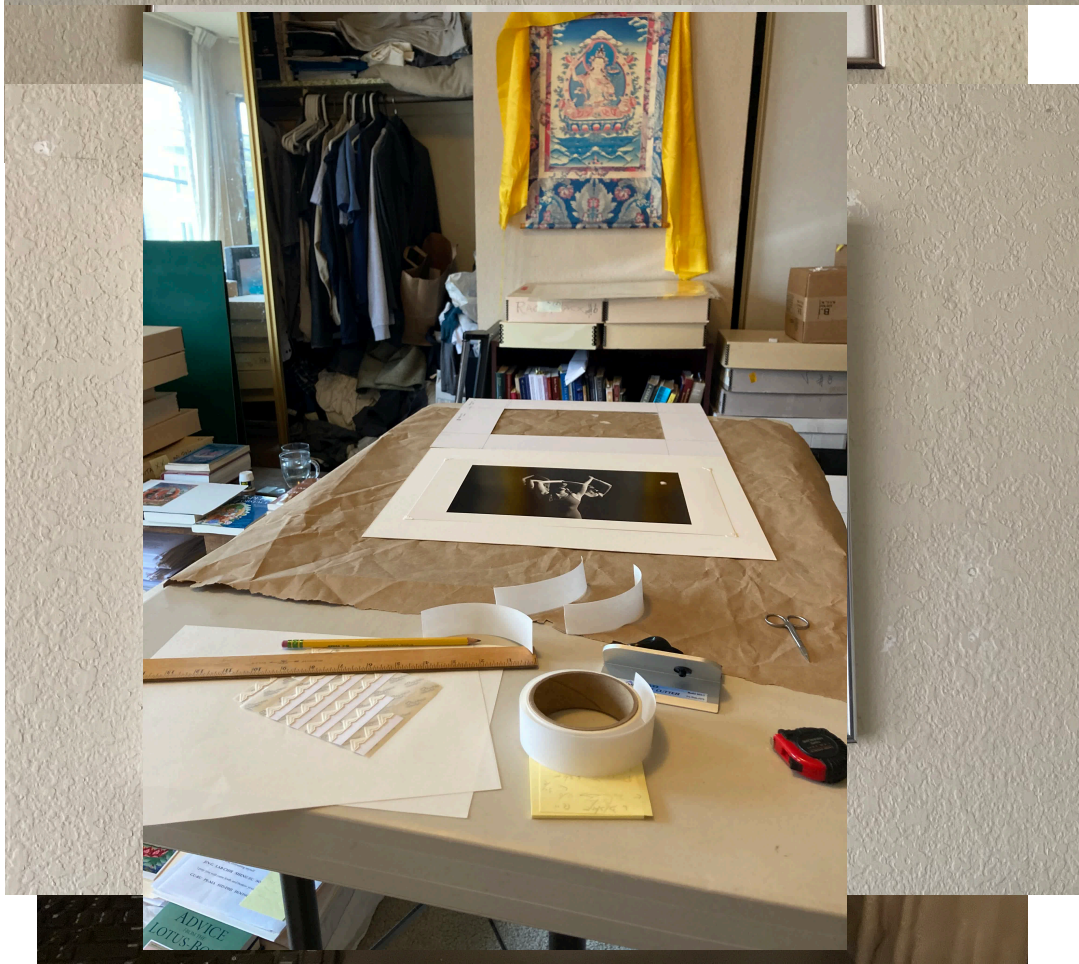
We then, as artists, must find a way to express this inner world in terms of the outer reality, leading some of us in a life-long search to find the definition of our personas through the impermanent, ambiguous world in which we must function.

Photography - that most difficult, peculiar, and unforgiving of all art forms - contains enormous potential for self-expression which has barely been realized. For it can be a siren's song, deceiving us with its technical wizardry, falsely complementing our efforts, taking us on a joy ride which can only lead to a vast wilderness full of other wandering souls. For many, there seems to be no exit from this photographic limbo, never realizing the deception of the condition, blissfully ignorant, remaining forever in one of Dante's infernos, "wallowing in the mires of desolation".

We therefore need to find a base which will provide a way for constant self-examination devoid of the lures of the craft. It has to do, I think, with the awesome task of confronting ourselves, of reaching a point in our lives where we can be absolutely sure we are completely honest with ourselves, no matter how much it may hurt at first. For, otherwise, how can we be true to others, to those we love, to our ideas, beliefs, foundation?

To achieve clarity of expression requires clarity about how we became what we are, who we are today and what we hope to become. The past needs to be examined honestly; conclusions must be drawn which will become lessons for the present and the future, then laid away, perhaps forever. There is nothing which will deter growth and understanding of the present as much as the interference of past events. We should learn from it and move on.

The present is by far the most important of these three time elements. For it is where we are. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but here and now. Zen masters talk about the mind as a clear blue sky, clouds will pass through



now and then - memories of the past or fears for the future - but these will pass, and the sky will be clear and blue again.

Our sole distinguishing feature over all other life forms is our humanity, our ability to love and to feel compassion for others. Art, in its purest state, is the ultimate expression of this humanity. For it singles us out in the universe as we know it, as not just another life form but as a miracle not yet understood, a magical event.

So we must place our art in a very special niche, for it will then comfort us, and provide a channel for all manner of creative things: good, and lasting and true. It is the touchstone to our inner beings.

It has been my privilege to have shared this experience with you, and hope you have learned from it as much as I.

I wish you all a happy, creative and honest journey.

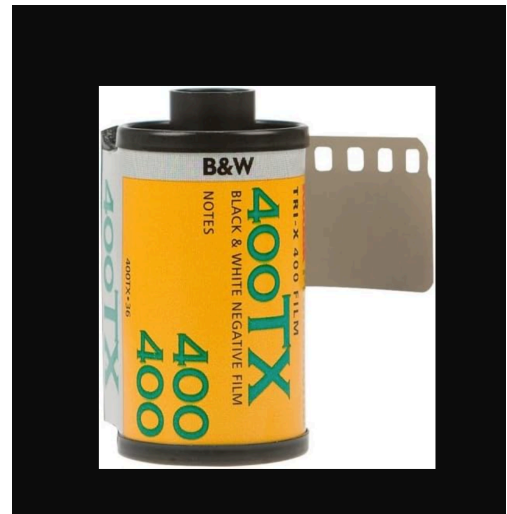


## On the process of darkroom printing

I'm pretty sure the art of darkroom printing is something of the past now, and that most people don't know what was involved in making a fine print, so I plan to make a short video introducing the steps. I count about 18 of them, more or less.

Like everything else, there were levels to this. A person needed some natural ability, and then it would take a few years to get to be any good at it at all. It was a different world, for sure.

One of my earliest recollections of my father's art was that (1) he would *buy canisters of film- in bulk - rolls of 100 feet*. This would have been the early to mid 1960's.

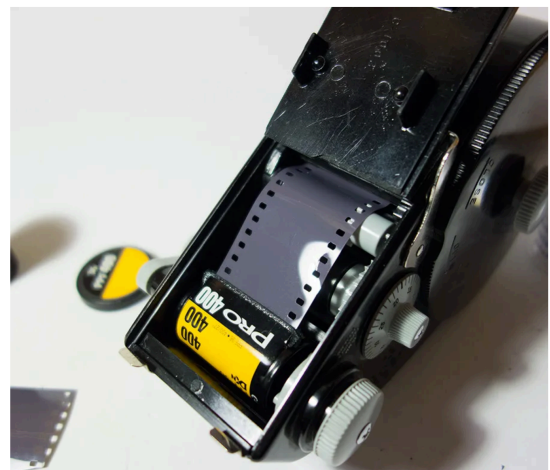
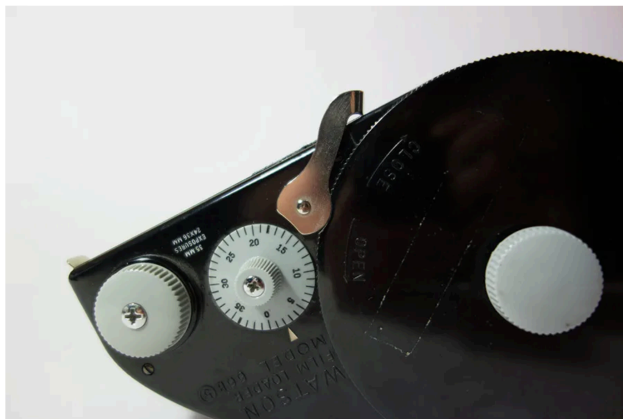


and back then, a roll of tri-x with 36 exposures was about 3 dollars, so this was done in part to save money.

Then we used a specially made, light tight black bag,



and inside it, along with the film, we placed a film loader, and reloadable camera cartridges.





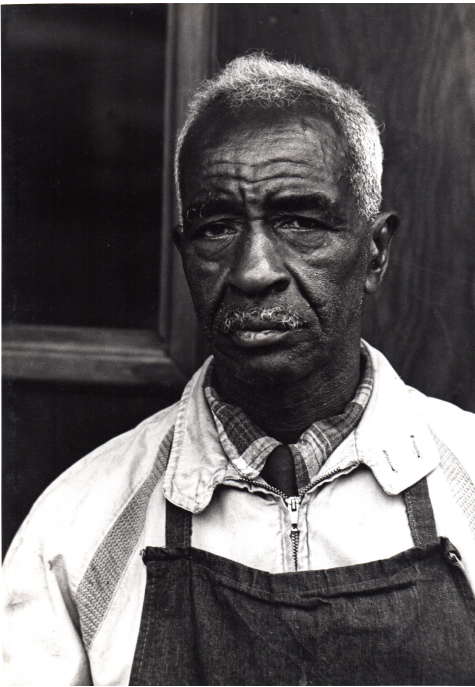


(2) *The film would then be loaded going by touch alone.* I remember as kids laughing and making a game of this. The device inside would click as one exposure's worth of film was loaded, and we had to count the clicks out loud until we got to 36. Once this was done, the cartridge was taken out and closed up - all while still being in the bag - and another was loaded. Once we loaded a number of rolls of film, the bag could be opened with a zipper from the inside.

Ok, then, after the photographs were taken, this same black bag was used to (3) *take the film out of the cartridge and put it onto stainless steel spools, again going by touch alone, and put into a developing tank that was in the bag as well.*



(4) Taking out the tank, *a developing solution was then added*, which could vary as far as its chemistry, as could its concentration, its temperature, and how long it would be in the tank. All of this was settled science for my father., and that was important. As he would tell his students years later, once you have a good negative, half the work is done. As with these...



but first, there was this...

And I remember he made developing negatives fun for us to watch or to be part of. We learned how many times to shake, or to invert the canister, and then turn the tank right side up.



After some time, this solution would then be emptied out, and another would be put in to stop the development process, and that would be emptied and the film would then be rinsed with water, poured into the top and emptied out a few times. Then, the tank could be opened.

The 36 exposures of film would then be carefully taken off the spool, and it would be maybe 3 feet long or so at that point.

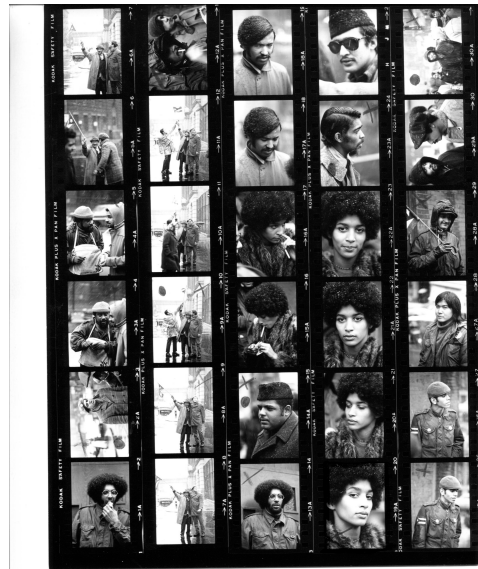
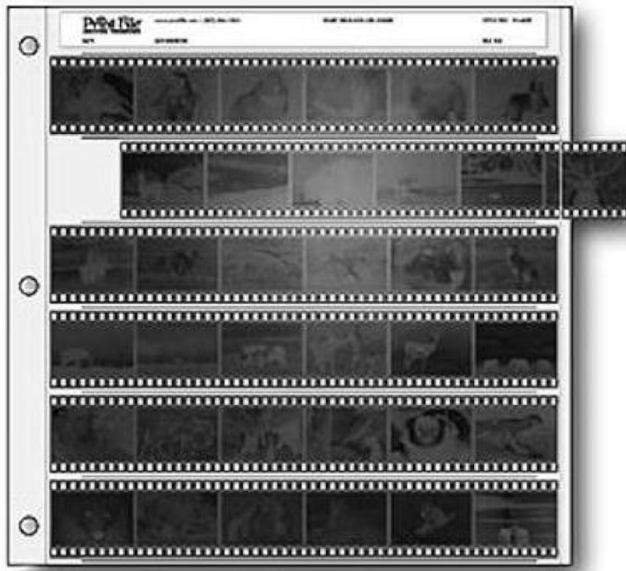
*(6) The film would be clipped at one end, and hung up in our bathroom.*



Anyone who developed film at home would see something like this often in the bathroom. It was just a part of life for us.

(7) Then, once dry, *the film would be cut into six exposure strips*, and (8) *a contact sheet could be made* from that in the darkroom (more on the actual darkroom process in a moment).





My father would look at the contact sheet with a magnifying glass, and (9) *choose and mark any that he liked*, and thought would be good candidates for printing.



(10) A next step would usually be to make 4 x 5" *proofs*, and he would then select the prints he would make from those.



(11) Now, *the darkroom printing process*, in brief, involved having an enlarger, safelights - usually orange as I remember them - trays and solutions, beginning with the developer, then short stop, to stop the development process, a fixer, then one called hypo, and finally a larger tray with water. The prints could be left in this last one for a while.





I recall that my father kept a thermometer in his darkroom, and would sometimes put ice in a measuring cup and that into the solutions to keep temperatures stable.







Frank Espada in the darkroom on 29th Street, with Ken Opprann

Of course, many things could go wrong, or shift, such as the freshness of some of the chemicals, and that could throw everything off and he'd have to start again, but most of the time, my father got it right without too many unpredictable things happening.

Again, this is just the briefest description of what was in the darkroom, and the process. I'll only mention here a few more of the variables every darkroom photographer would be familiar with:

There are different types of papers, with different qualities. My father had his favorites that he used in each era for his printing.

A darkroom photograph is also sometimes called a silver gelatin print, since there were different amounts of actual silver in the paper, and the price would go up and down accordingly. Photographers could sometimes be fanatics about the paper they used. I have heard that when a favorite paper was discontinued, mad photographers would empty out their refrigerator, and buy up the stock. There are things that are more important than food, they'd argue.



Then there were different colored filters that could be used when making a print..

*The film strip would be put in the enlarger, and instead of printing an entire image, some part of it would often be selected to make test strips, with different numbers of seconds of exposure.*

With the safelights only on, *light sensitive paper would be taken out of its box*, and if needed cut into strips, *and those would be developed*, only turning on the white light and evaluated after the strip was fixed.

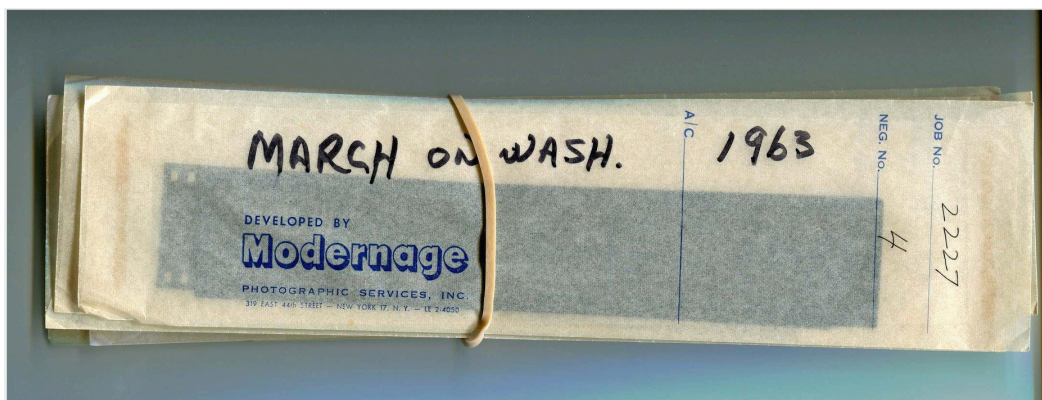
If my father was making proofs, perhaps he'd just make one or a few at different exposures, and then use the time that gave a good enough result for the rest of what he wanted a proof of.

(12) Those would then be developed and *washed* in a big tank (I remember a metal drum washer we had, like this) and then dried, and from those, my father would select which images he wanted to print.



It's been an interesting process to catalogue his work, which included looking through a lot of proofs he never printed, for various reasons.

Sometimes the negatives got separated, as happened with his photographs from the March on Washington. I found the proofs with a card on them that said, 'March on Washington, Negs?' Eventually I found them.



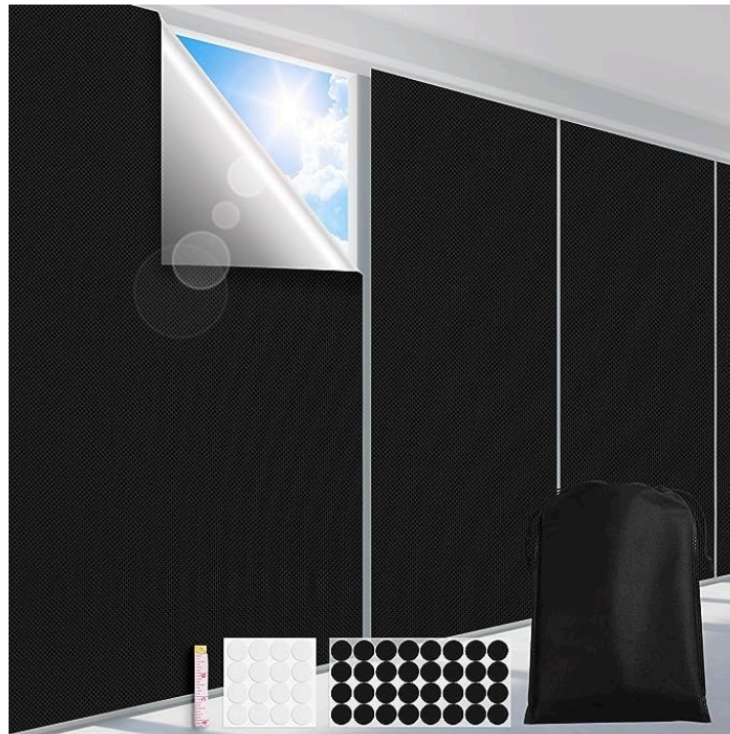
In his later years, my father looked at the photographs again, and said how in some cases he would have made other photographs from those he selected.

Once he knew what he wanted to print, he'd go into the darkroom, and go through the process I mentioned.

I note here that my father didn't have his first real darkroom until we moved to Valley Stream, Long Island, in New York, in 1970. Before that, he would print anywhere he could manage.

I do remember when we were living in Brooklyn in the 1960's, my father would sometimes send us kids to bed at 7:30, whether it was dark out or not, and cover the windows with frames covered in black fabric that he had made. I remember thinking, Eh, what? It's still light out!





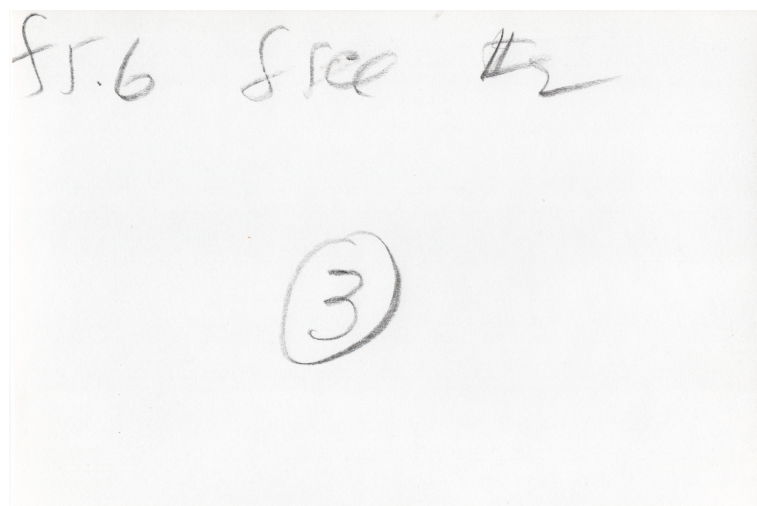
Roll over image to zoom in

He would then print on the kitchen table, “with a \$29 dollar enlarger, *including the lens*” as he would later proudly say. He’d print until 3 or 4 in the morning, get a couple of hours of sleep, and then go to his job as an electrical contractor. The life of a photographer who was an artist was sometimes like this.

One photograph he made back then, of my mother, is on our wall now. Ma remembers that it was taken in 1961, shortly after the birth of my sister. When she saw it, she said, ‘But oh, look at my hair’, and my father said, ‘Never mind. Some day you will love it.’ And he was right.

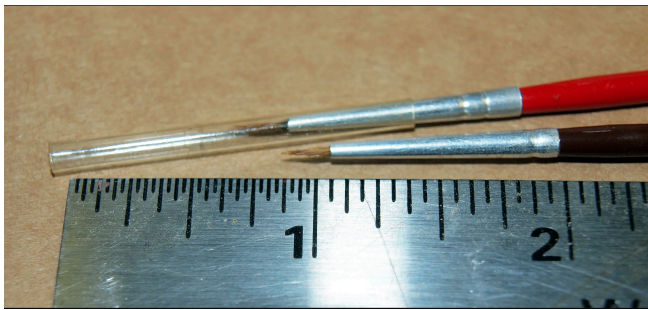


When making prints, my father followed the practice of writing on the back of the photo paper with a grease pencil, indicating the print number, circled, the aperture, the filter used if any, #2, for example, and how many seconds of light was projected through the enlarger.



In each version he would attempt to make some improvements, perhaps adding what was called dodging or burning, lightening or darkening an area of a print, until he got it right.

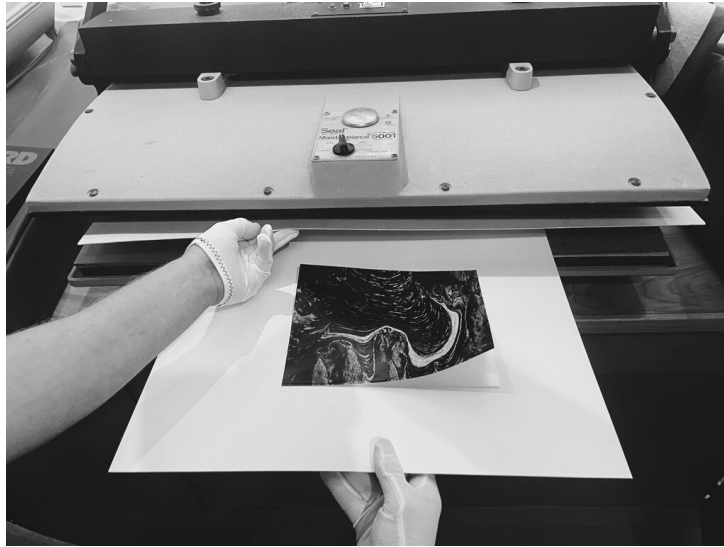
From there, after the print was washed and dried, it would be *finished* (13), first by what was called 'spotting' with a small brush if needed, removing the white specks that could come from dust on the negative; Then, (14) highlights could be brought out with a very fine brush and a subtle technique my father used and later taught.



After that the print would be (15) *trimmed*, and (16) *mounted*, with adhesive tissue, using a dry mount press, onto an archival print board.







Then, in my father's preferred style, (17) he'd *cut a window* in another board, and this would be placed on top of the first board.





(18) Ideally, a photograph should be then *mounted* on a wall, with good light, and enough space around it to appreciate it. Like so:







I remember my father telling me, *when you look through the camera, imagine the end result* {a fine composition, beautifully printed, mounted, and framed, and on a wall, either at home or in an exhibit}.

I'm sure this is a mystery and a wonder for the modern generation who have never and will never be in a darkroom! These days, as we all know, taking and sharing a picture can be done just in few seconds. I only wanted to point out how it was done back in the day.

I can understand if people would think they have it better now, but I really do think that much has also been lost, and most of the time people don't even know it.

In the past it took more time, and in what I've recounted in brief here, everything had to be done with precision and attention to detail. Any carelessness would show, resulting in something inferior.

Making a darkroom print took time and energy, and money, yes, but most of all, it took love. I'm sure every artist feels this way, and what they put into the process can be felt.

Perhaps then, instead of all this work just being a curiosity from a time long ago, we can look at darkroom photographs now, both those done by my father and by other maestros, with an appreciation for that went into their art.

This is something I hope for all of us these days.

## Stories - The Thread of Celebration

So much hinges on this question - What stories will we tell today? Our stories remind us of who we are. They tell us where we have been, they remind us of unfinished work, and they tell us who we may yet one day become. Our stories remind us that our family is with us even now. Our ancestors' warm breath and encouragement lives in us. Their fearlessness, vision, and most of all their great love is with us even now, and this is something we can draw from to live our lives. We are always just a turn, and one short step away.

Frank Espada's life was a story in itself, and he was a story teller. As a human rights activist first, and then as a documentary photographer and educator, he knew his history. Those who knew him will tell you he lived with purpose, and was generous with everyone he came in contact with, and he could only do this because he himself had first received and loved people's stories, and because he knew where advocacy could someday lead.

To me, all this beauty derives from hope. We gather strength and light in the seeing and listening. And so, what stories will we tell? Right up to today, isn't this a most important matter? Here then is a continuum of gifts received and given. It is at once a recollection, and a vision full of promise. And it is, all of it, a celebration.

\* \* \*

**About the photographic projects featured in today's program:** *Fountain House* was a half-way house where my father volunteered, and photographed in 1958;

*East New York Action* was an early Civil Rights organization he founded in 1963;

*The New York School Boycott* of 1964 was the largest boycott of its kind in this country's history. At issue was the state of the segregated and inferior schools;

*The Youth Environment Studies Project* (Y.E.S) San Francisco, 1989 - 1991, aimed to draw attention to at-risk populations in the Tenderloin and Mission Districts and to elicit support for HIV and AIDS prevention;

*The Chamorro Documentary Project*, 1990, sought to record the history of the Chamorro people of Guam and Saipan, to strengthen their sense of identity, and promote greater self determination;

*The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project*, considered by many to be Frank Espada's masterwork, was initially funded in 1979 by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The resulting exhibition traveled for fifteen years throughout the United States, and in 2007 an award winning book of photographs and narratives was published with the title, *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Themes in the Survival of a People*;

*The Marisol and Pacific Skies collections* feature landscape photography from the Pacific Coast, from 2005 to 2014.

Taken together, this is a luminous history of compassion and community involvement, of generosity, and ultimately of optimism and joy.

- From A Tribute to Frank Espada, Hosted by John Santos, at the SF Jazz Center, August 9th, 2015

We are heirs to all of this

We are all heirs to this magnificent world

My father had a gesture that he would make with a smile.

I'm not sure of the first time I saw it, only that he would do this from time to time over the years we were both here in San Francisco:

Without words, with his palm up, he would extend his arm, and indicate what he wanted me to see. There's a time when we reach the end of all our words, after all.

Whenever I saw him make this sign, he was saying, *Look... Isn't this something...*

and time would stop for a few moments, looking together...

My father touched that wonder in life, and in his art. I know it was something as natural as breathing for him, and also, as a creative person, it was something he diligently sought out over the years; such beauty and wonder can be elusive, and enthralling, we can say.

For him, this was a kind of secret food, and I could tell my father was fed. I saw again and again over the years how he would emerge after printing for a few hours in his darkroom, renewed.

Any of the Arts can do that for a person.

In sharing his vision, he invited others also to see, and to receive these gifts in their full...

When I realized that the collection of his photographs I've lived surrounded by for the last decade would no longer be here like this, I thought about what I might like to keep. Then, as I was walking to the store one morning, I looked up at the sky and clouds and I realized how much of it I've internalized, *but more than that*, the gift my father gave me is that *he taught me how to see the beauty of this world* that we live in.

{And, don't you know, right *here* is where the arts and activism meet}

This world is more so much more than the one of war, and greed, and inequality and indifference; it is so much more than we think of when we're taken up with personal and collective struggles...

It is also a world with cool forests, rich with life, it's also a world with with Chagall, and Matisse, and Picasso and Rembrandt, Bach, and Mozart, and artists like Hilary Hahn, and poets like Hafiz, Pablo Neruda, and Rumi

It also has oceans, and the Northern Lights, and fields of flowers, and remarkable animals we know a little about, and those we've never seen before, there is friendship,

and O there are libraries, and teachers who help us find treasures;

It has children's burgeoning joy, and lineages of activism, of people doing beautiful things for each other...



There is, in fact, an ever flowing river of creative works, almost all of it unseen...

What my father taught me is that we are naturally heirs to *alllll* the wonder and beauty around us- not because we have a rich relative somewhere, but simply by virtue of our having been born on this remarkable earth at this time.

That others don't see is a loss that can only be measured against what could be in their lives, and in our communities, and so we work.

Where else does the impulse to protect, to shelter and to lift each other up come from? It comes from knowing in some way the grace of this world, and then wanting others also to share in this beauty, to know their richness, and their noble ancestry

I think of activists who stay away from celebration too long, and how tense and anxious they can become over time, and how many of them finally give out.

But here's the truth of it: We need the arts to sustain us -

*And all the poetry, and literature, music, dance,*

*visual arts, film, and theatre*

*are here for just this purpose.*

There is a super abundance always happening...

All the ways of art teach us about our belonging, and humility, and gratitude, and generosity

And how whatever we manage to create during our precious years on this earth comes into being because of our many teachers, and hidden springs...

It carries the dreams of our ancestors, and our children...