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[LENS] PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO
AND VISUAL JOURNALISM



Parting Glance: Jerome Liebling, 1924-2011

By James Estrin

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Jerome Liebling, a photographer, filmmaker and teacher, died Wednesday at 87. Obituaries appear on the Web sites of The New York Times, The Daily Hampshire Gazette and Hampshire College, where his students included James Estrin, now a staff photographer at The Times and a co-editor of Lens.



Jerry Liebling's photography classes — at least in the late '70s, when I studied under him — consisted mostly of his lecturing about everything but photography. He would talk about Greek philosophy, German history, Jungian psychology,

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16th-century Flemish painting and French cinema. In the same lecture! Only rarely would the names of Edward Weston or Lewis Hine come into the conversation. Then, a half-hour would be devoted to his tough critiques of our photographs.

While the lectures were thrilling, I was often frustrated. Jerry refused to teach technique. He insisted that it was unimportant. No matter how much I asked, he wouldn't show me how to use a 4-by-5 camera. Learn it yourself, he told me.

I wanted to know the secrets that would allow me to be a great photographer. After all, Jerry had been in the New York Photo League as a young man, with giants like Aaron Siskind and Paul Strand.

But he wanted me to learn to think. He insisted that it was all about what you had to say, not how you said it. With his encouragement, I spent most of my time at Hampshire College studying anthropology and labor history.

Though he was deeply intellectual, Jerry was always most interested in the workingman and -woman. I think he was more excited when I was hired by The Daily News in 1986 — it still had a reputation as the voice of the laboring class — than when I was later hired by The Times.

Dozens of his images are etched in my memory three decades later. They were a turning point for me: photos of the New York City morgue, of handball players, of the Chicago slaughterhouses. His subjects — except for politicians and corporate executives — always had dignity. His images were always about more than what was in front of his camera. They were about life, death and the underlying meaning of being human.



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But I don't think I appreciated him as a teacher; not until I started to teach. It turned out that he taught me to do that, too.

I now find myself telling my students at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism that while you need to learn the technical aspects of photography, that's not what photography is about. It's about the story you have to tell. The camera is just a tool.

I cringe when I talk to students who majored in photography or journalism as undergraduates. That's like majoring in wood shop or metal shop. You need ideas in your head — something to say.

And when Lens readers suggest that we caption each image with camera make, focal length, aperture and shutter speed, I just can't bring myself to do it. Some people might think those specs are what's important in making a great photo. They're really not. I learned that first as an 18-year-old, straining to keep up with Jerry Liebling's lectures.