

Eye of the Tiger

The Beautiful Life of Ardon Alger

Ardon Alger's remarkable life began on April 17, 1946, in his hometown of Whittier, California. His lifelong interest in photography was apparent by high school, where he became the photo editor of the yearbook. Ardon went on to major in Asian Studies at Chapman University in Orange County. There he explored a fascination with Buddhism and the art of India, Japan, and Tibet. While at Chapman, he entered a program called World Campus Afloat. Students spent an entire semester on a ship, visiting international ports and participating in humanitarian projects. That experience instilled in Ardon an enduring passion for exploration and for philanthropy. After graduation, Ardon went on to get his MFA at Claremont Graduate University. In 1972, he began a career at Chaffey College, where he taught photography until his retirement in 2020.

Ardon Alger was a natural artist. He had an insatiable, inborn need to see and absorb the world around him. It was as though if he blinked, he might miss something. Where others might see the world as snapshots, he saw images filled with detail, nuance, and perspective. Part of the reason he traveled so much in his life was his desire to see the world completely and comprehensively, and to capture what he saw for others. Photos were his language. He sometimes struggled with the written word, but with images, he was eloquent. His photographs communicated in a way that transcended words. He believed in art for art's sake, but he also believed in using his gift to bring awareness of things people often close their eyes to. His artistic life, like his personal life, did not exist in a vacuum.

He soon fused his art with his activism. Ardon became an artist for social justice, using his camera to document both the humanity and inhumanity of his fellow humans. He took photos for Uncommon Good, the Inner City Law Center, the Alliance for Survival, the Catholic Worker, Habitat for Humanity, the South Central L.A. Health Center, and many others. His photographs put human faces to hunger, homelessness, and abuses of power. They appeared in court filings and in the media. He was arrested twice for taking photos of peace demonstrations. His commitment to the disenfranchised was lived, not just spoken. When he chose education as a pathway, he became a powerful advocate for faculty rights, giving faculty a voice, sometimes at the risk of his own career. He continued to stand up for the "little guy," including adjunct faculty who were often marginalized in a system built on tenure.

It was his passion for helping others that led him to the great love of his life, his wife, Nancy. Ardon met Nancy Mintie in 1980, when he was thirty-four years old. Nancy was a young attorney dedicated to work with the desperately needy. Shortly after graduation from law school, she had begun work in the poorest area of Los Angeles, Skid Row. Nancy sought out the Catholic Worker, an organization that lives and shares what they have with the poor. She moved into their communal house and worked in their soup kitchen in exchange for space in their garage to set up her legal practice. She sued slum lords about the terrible conditions people were living in. Ardon was one of the volunteer workers who helped out at the soup kitchen, and it was there that they met. Nancy needed photos to prove her allegations in court, and for an extraordinary first date, Ardon offered to go with her to take pictures of rat droppings.

They fell in love the day they met, and for forty-two years, that never changed. They both considered themselves incredibly lucky to find someone they could spend a lifetime with. Until the end of his life, Ardon remarked to friends that he couldn't believe his luck that Nancy chose him. She felt the same way. They married in 1981, in a courtyard at the Claremont Colleges. Neither of them had much money, so friends brought a big pot of beans to share with everyone at the reception. Ironically, they couldn't afford a photographer, so the ceremony was captured by snapshots from friends. In 1990, nine years after they married, the other love of Ardon's life, Michelle Alger-Mintie, was born, and their family was complete.

Ardon was already a professor when Nancy met him, and teaching continued to define his professional life. He was a natural born educator. Even as a teenager, he had loved teaching his friends about photography. He went straight into teaching from grad school, where he served Chaffey College for almost fifty years. The community colleges were the perfect place for his activist spirit. He jokingly called them the Rodney Dangerfields of education because they didn't get the respect they deserved. He loved that the California Community Colleges served ordinary people such as returning students, Veterans, and those who lacked the resources of typical university students.

Chaffey enabled Ardon to meld two of his great loves: education and photography. His mission was to connect his students with the inspiration, the power, and the light inside themselves. Teaching them to express that in compelling and beautiful images was his great joy. Ardon's genius as a teacher was mirrored in the images the students took. Nancy went to his student shows, and it brought tears to her eyes to see how Ardon had helped his students connect with something beautiful and true inside of themselves. When Ardon and Nancy ran into his students in their daily lives, the students would gush about Ardon's class. He would just stand there with a big, goofy

grin on his face because it meant so much to him to hear their praise. He was very proud when their daughter, Michelle, also became a teacher.

Ardon infused his students with his own need to see and experience everything the world offered. As an academic, he spent the majority of each year in a studio or classroom, but in the summers, he embraced the freedom to see the world around him. His first big trip after the World Campus Afloat was a canoe expedition up the Bak River in the Arctic, which had never been explored before. This was before GPS and cell phones and any kind of safety net, so it was a very daring experience, very arduous and difficult. Ardon loved every minute of it. He continued to travel at every opportunity, and with each trip, he became more motivated. The more daring and crazy the trip, the better.

When he and Nancy got married in 1981, he wanted to go to China for their honeymoon. At the time, China was just opening up after being closed to the West for decades. Nancy was unenthusiastic. She knew nothing about China at the time and thought of it as industrial, communist, rigid, and boring. But Ardon talked her into it, and the resulting trip turned out to be an incredible experience. They saw old China as it was before the massive transformation of the last forty years. They stood on the Great Wall and visited villages that no longer exist. Ardon documented it all. His photographs show a China that few Westerners have ever seen, that is rapidly disappearing from living memory.

For over three decades, Ardon and Nancy continued to travel the world. They went to the Amazon, Nicaragua, Katmandu, Europe, the Canadian Rockies, Australia, and New Zealand. They planned to go to Africa together, but when Nancy was injured, Michelle went with him instead. He went to every continent except Antarctica, since during American summers, it is winter in the south. His photographer's eye, and the cameras he carried with him, literally recorded the world. His passion for exploring, for sights rarely seen, never waned with the passage of time.

Even the relentless onslaught of Parkinson's that began to limit his life in his last years did not dampen his need to see and to do. In 2019, with his Parkinson's well advanced, he began a trip that seemed impossible at that point in his life. Nancy's health no longer allowed her to undertake the trip, so Ardon embarked on his final journey alone. Since his days as an Asian Studies student at Chapman, he had dreamed of visiting Tibet and Nepal and Bhutan, heartlands of Buddhist culture. He had saved the best for last. He made it all the way up to the base camp of Mt. Everest, hiking much of the way. But the true pinnacle of the journey was the Tiger's Nest Monastery.

Tiger's Nest is a working monastery perched 10,000 feet up a mountain in Bhutan. The view from the Tiger's Nest is considered one of the most spectacular in the world and one of the rarest. Few people besides the monks who live there ever make it that high. The monastery can only be reached on foot or by horse for the first part of the journey. Reaching the monastery requires hiking two miles up a steep mountain, a 1700 foot ascent. The trip must be completed in one day, for outsiders are not allowed to stay at the monastery overnight. When the hiking trail ends, pilgrims have to climb another 700 stone steps to reach the monastery. Most visitors don't make it beyond the hiking trails. Ardon was travelling with a group of young people, most of whom chose not to attempt the stone steps. But Ardon climbed all the way up and down, 1400 steps in total, struggling to make his disease-wracked body take him one step at a time. Curiosity and sheer will carried him each step of the way to the Tiger's Nest. Why? Because he wanted to see. He needed to see. He had that photographer's eye, the eye of the tiger, that wanted to see everything while he lived.

Ardon Alger's was a beautiful life, a mission and a vocation. Though he is deeply missed, he lives on in his students, his friends, his photographs, and the family that loves him.