

PIPER MACKAY

Creator of Magical Moments

Wondrous things happen when Piper Mackay is on African soil

By Marlene Caroselli, Ed.D.

Edward Lorenz coined the phrase “the butterfly effect” to describe how a seemingly insignificant event (such as the flapping of a butterfly’s wings) can have a substantial effect in some other situation (the formation of a hurricane, for example). Giving credence to the theory is research done by educational psychologist John Krumboltz which found nearly 70% of university graduates revealed their career choices were significantly influenced by an unplanned event (Krumboltz and Levin, 2004).

Now consider one person’s serendipitous career choice. Imagine, for example, that you work in the fashion industry, dealing with design and textile. You decide to go to Africa on vacation. The trip is organized by the Sierra Club, which sends you a list of what you should bring, including a 300mm lens. You have never held a camera in your entire life, but you buy it. Those butterfly wings start flapping and the next thing you know, you have a whole new career—wildlife and cultural photography.

Such is the story behind Piper Mackay’s vocation. “The minute I arrived in Africa,” she recalls, “the magic began.” Within six months, she had returned for two additional safari adventures. Call it “magic” or call it “the butterfly effect,” but wondrous things happen when Mackay is on African soil. For example, on an expedition in the Omo Valley, Mackay handed her business card to one of the women grinding grain under a hand-made canopy. Nearby, a Kara boy named Gele saw it and asked if she knew John Rowe. Rowe, it seems, had personally funded the boy’s education. Rowe and Lale Labuko, a member of the Kara tribe, have joined forces to establish Omo Child (<http://omochild.org>), an organization dedicated to improving the lives of Kara children.

As it happened, Mackay did know John Rowe — they had met while filming horses in the Wyoming snow four years earlier. Upon her return to the states, she reconnected with him and now has devoted a page on her website to his organization. She explains that photography has enriched her life, has filled her soul, has helped shape the way she views the world. That is why she has the Giving Back page on her blog. Mackay uses it to highlight some of the organizations,

like Omo Child, that are making a difference in so many lives.

That magic Mackay repeatedly speaks of is passion-based. It is entwined with the purpose behind her magnificent images. “My love for wildlife and art,” she asserts, “gave me a passion to transform my images into a reckless beauty, using a painterly style.” She strives to create “powerful glimpses of another world,” connecting animals’ personalities to human compassion. Concerned about human, cultural, and environmental extinction on the African continent, Mackay tries to “live the stories” she is trying to tell. She actually participates in the lives of her subjects. And she has them participate in her photographic life. To illustrate, Mackay will often hand her subject the expensive photography equipment she uses, thus allowing them to have a literal “hands-on” experience with the creative process.

Mackay acknowledges that a camera “is really an excuse to hop on a plane and discover a world so different from my own. When the discoveries lead to powerful and emotional images as a result, that is a bonus,” she affirms. Mackay has learned she was born to take photos. Her images have appeared in in-flight magazines, National Geographic, and in various galleries, including the Smithsonian, the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, and (in June) the G2 Gallery in Los Angeles. Proceeds from that exhibit will be donated to the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (also known as the Elephant Orphanage) in Nairobi. Mackay’s personal “butterfly effect” has benefited several other environmental projects. (Those interested in donating and/or interested in joining Mackay on a safari can visit her web site to learn more.)

Buckminster Fuller once noted that there is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it’s going to be a butterfly. There was nothing in Piper Mackay’s first career that spoke of cultural photography. Fortunately for those who love beautiful imagery, the butterfly emerged from the metaphorical caterpillar, flapped its wings, and created powerful and arresting images of faraway places for all of us to enjoy.

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