



WHAT I'VE LEARNED SO FAR

FOUR DECADES IN PHOTOGRAPHY

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The Struggle To Make THE Picture Is Far Harder Than The Struggle To Make A Picture

Remember getting your first camera. Remember working the dials and trying to figure out what all the technical terms were? ISO? Aperture? OFC, ISL, Sunny 16.. or 17... what is that? It was a struggle to get a decent exposure, let alone a shot worth showing to someone.

I grew up on film. Learning the myriad ways to process PlusX, pulling and pushing and zone this and zone that. The technical challenge was huge. Just choosing the wrong film for a day in the desert could mean the difference between having something halfway good or nothing at all.

And while some things are easier with digital, there are absolute challenges to learning digital exposure and the technical operation of the camera/software.

We spend time focusing on these challenges, and working toward creating the technical expertise to allow us to make a 'perfect shot'. One where exposure, sharpness, composition and color are all exactly as we think they should be. And we can create that precision time after time... woohoo.

But the search for excellence won't end with the 'perfect picture'.. that is only the half way point.

You now have to take that technical expertise and use it to make photographs worth looking at.

No... a perfectly exposed, wonderfully sharp, compositionally acceptable and color correct image of something that is boring as hell, or simply sucks, is of no interest to anyone. (Well, there are some forums where they dissect pixels, but then this article is not about them.)

We now have to say something with our images. We have to produce something that is both technically correct AND of interest to those who view it. To be sure, not everyone will be thrilled with what you make, but there MUST be significant numbers of those that do to in order to be able to make a living.

If you think it was tough to learn how to make something on the camera when you first started, learning how to make something worth viewing at all is even more of a challenge.

This will take strength and commitment, an understanding of aesthetic and good, old fashioned hard work. You will need guidance, a mentor or two, solid support from friends and family and a sharp, closely held personal vision of what you are wanting to do.

It will be the hardest thing you will ever do as a photographer. Or as a designer, writer, coder as well.



Partners Maybe - Maybe Not

There is nothing better than a great partner. Finding someone who fills in those blanks in your business acumen can be a life saver. Whether it is a rep, or a second shooter/first assistant, or a full business partner, working with someone who helps you stay focused can be one of the most enjoyable experiences of being in business.

A great partner takes hold of what you don't do well and runs with it. And your creativity helps them do their best at what they do as well. Synergy. Power. Growth.

My best assistants were ones who understood how I worked. Some even better than I did. They knew where the damn meter was even when I had no idea where I had left it. They knew what I was thinking when looking at the Polaroid with that sort of look I get that says... WTF is THIS? The best would be a step ahead, or at least ready to spin on a dime to "make it so". They were partners.

My reps (only had two in my career) were also great people who completed the parts of me that were as yet unformed. Yeah, I could handle my way around an 8x10 but bidding a three day shoot on location... well, my ADD kicked in and I would find it a great time to clean the dark-room. I eventually learned from them - and them from me. Partners.

The best of them know how to make you smile when all you really want to do is to kill the art director slowly and with as much pain as possible. They knew how to break the tension, and let me refocus on the part of the gig I was working the hardest on.

However... there is also the possibility that what you thought was a good mix, a good partnership, was not that at all. Sometimes people can

deceive, be dishonest, or simply change. If you are not paying attention, the ramifications of a bad partner can be as small as a gig going south and you having to pick up pieces while still delivering a smashing job to losing three quarters of a million dollars. Three quarters. Of a Million. Dollars.

I have learned that while good partners are great, nothing is as bad as a rotten one.

I have no partners at this moment, although I do work closely with some folks that may be limited partners on some deals coming up.

If I have another partner, these will be my rules:

1. All checks must be signed by both of us. Both. Of Us. Inconvenient for sure. Absolutely necessary for damn sure.
2. Monthly meetings over cash flow, accounts payable and receivables. It isn't a game, it's business.
3. Outside accounting firm to handle all taxes, regulation oversight and money.
4. All meetings with accounting must be attended by both partners... or there is no meeting. Period.
5. Partners must agree in advance on who is in charge of what areas. This can sometimes become an issue.

Notice these all deal with a non-photographer partner, not a photographer partner. You will also notice that they all deal with money... most of them anyway. That's because it is always about the money. Always. The other kind of partner is another photographer.

Don't ever do that. Ever.

It rarely works out, and rarely ends happily for either photographer.

If you absolutely MUST be a partner with another photographer (because you KNOW it will be fine and I am full of crap) then consider this:

1. Make sure you are both deeply ensconced in separate genres. You shoot people and fashion, they shoot architecture and product. Two fashion shooters will lead to some sort of violence in the workplace...
2. Don't mix gear. You have your gear, they have theirs.
3. Strict, unbendable, totally unbreakable rules on leaving the studio clean and tidy. Create a fine system with money going to the other photographer. If you mess it up, and they have to clean it up for a shoot, YOU pay them for it.
4. Don't share clients. Period.
5. Don't share money. You make your money on your clients, they make their money on their clients. Go 50-50 on expenses and 10% from every gig into the kitty for all those things that will break and need fixin'...

You can choose not to do it this way. And perhaps you will get lucky. Good for you.

However - be warned - if it doesn't work out, the pain of the failing process can take quite a toll.

Cynical? Me... nawwww....

Experienced.



You Can't Please Everyone

Not only can you not please everyone, you shouldn't even try.

Why? Because all those "anyones" can't even agree what they like anyway. The first seven or eight years of my photographic career were spent trying to figure out what "they" wanted to see. Should I have more black and white? Should I separate out the black and white from the color? More product / less people or more people / less product?

It was a quandary every single day. And trying to dial it in seemed impossible.

Out the door to an agency showing... book is tweaked and ready. Agency CD looks through it quickly and mentions that they mostly do more 'produced, big set shots' which I knew - intellectually - was pure bullshit. I could see the work they did on his FKN OFFICE WALL. And it was the kind of work I was showing. I was a fit.

No matter... back to the studio with one burning thought... "must do more big set productions, must do more big set productions..." A new mantra was born.

The next meeting with a different agency would find an AD saying - "wow, I like your food stuff but you are a fashion photographer right?" Well... uhh... I am showing you food and you are discussing images you haven't seen in a book that has never crossed your desk. And - you didn't hire me for the food stuff, even though you said you should, because you heard I was a fashion photographer?

"Need more fashion, need more fashion, need more...."

And on and on it would go. Always taking a random thrown out statement as some sort of 'golden nugget' of advice and a solid lead on what I needed to do to 'get the gig'.

Sad. Lonely. Maddening.

Then one evening the local ASMP hosted a "round table" of some of the big name ADs and CDs in the area. There were four of them sitting there and we got this kind of stuff:

AD 1: *"Never send me direct mail. I hate direct mail... goes right into the can."*

AD2: *"Direct mail is the only way I will see your work. I rarely look at the annuals and we will only call in books if we have worked with you before."*

AD3: *"Direct mail... eh. We occasionally will bring all the ADs together to look over a couple of week's pieces, but honestly it is catch as catch can on that stuff."*

AD4: *"I LOVE direct mail. Keep it coming, guys..."*

Seriously?

AD1: *"The only kind of portfolios I like are loose prints. If I can't spread them around the table, I am not really gonna look that hard at them."*

AD2: *"Small books are best. 8x10 - 9x12... and not more than 30 images, please."*

AD3: *“I like the really big format... even 16x20s are cool. Book or loose prints, it doesn’t matter much.”*

AD4: *“We prefer to find the work we like in the annuals, and if we need to see a book we will ask you send it over for us to look at on our leisure. We don’t care much for large books, but we do love when they are super designed.”*

Seriously seriously?

There was no consensus on anything that evening. We heard that direct mail sucks and keep it going because it is effective. We learned that design of your portfolio was totally unimportant except when it was absolutely a dominant force. The enlightenment continued with the admonition to separate black and white from color and oh, BTW, never separate black and white from color, only separate genres except when the book has a more flexible, organic flow.

I realized that I was trying to please a ‘them’ where there was no ‘them’. There were only individuals, and they all had different criteria for what they wanted to see.

I stopped worrying about them. I started worrying about me. What the hell did I want to do? When the taskmaster of madness is lifted and all you have to worry about is the work you LOVE to do, it can suddenly dawn on you that you are not really sure what that is.

After years of trying to feed the beast, it became abundantly clear that it was a faux beast to begin with... and it may be too stupid to be fed.

I learned that I had to be comfortable with what I shot, and build that work from the ground up without checking in with the Blackbook or the Workbook or any other ‘hip’ annual to see if I measured up to what everyone else was doing. I wanted to measure up to what I WANTED to do.

Within a year the book was totally different than it was a year before, and the clients I was shooting for not only liked what I was doing, but wanted me to do more of it.

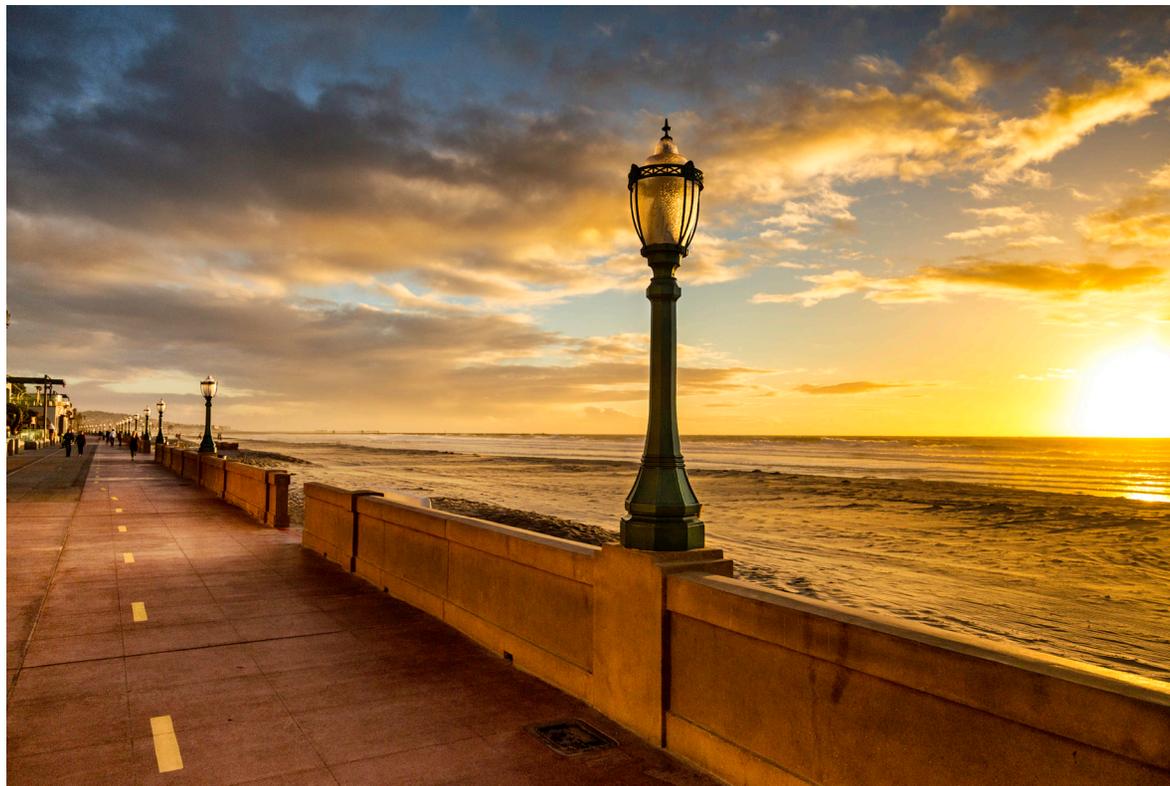
And no, it wasn’t every agency in town. It was a few agencies, and a few designers, and a few corporate MarComs... but they added up to busy weeks and lots of billing.

I was shooting exactly what they loved because I was shooting exactly what I loved and the individuals who hired me were in sync with that. Trying to please everyone will end up with you pleasing no one.

I remember one of Avedon’s assistants telling me one of the things that surprised him was that Avedon didn’t get every gig he tried for. Sometimes they picked someone else. For all sorts of reasons. Can you imagine?

*You simply cannot please everyone.
You shouldn’t even try.*

(And if you ever hear someone say, “this is what they all want to see”... well, consider that full-on, totally awesome **bullshit.**)



Step Up or Step Aside

In photography, as in most things in life, there are moments when you hesitate for reasons you may never know. Those small hesitations can be driven by fears, or unknowing, or simply because you had too many beers and are partially paralyzed from playing some sort of adult game that you cannot remember the name of BECAUSE your good buddy John and his girlfriend decided... wait. We aren't going there.

Suffice it to say we occasionally hesitate.

And when we do, we leave the door open to a lot of other people to hit it before we do.

So it was for me and Polaroid transfers. I watched a photographer do one while on a roadtrip in Colorado. I LOVED the look, and he was very gracious and walked me through it.

Back in Phoenix I tried all sorts of Polaroid transfer techniques: Hot press paper, cold press paper, original images shot in camera, slides projected on Polaroid film... all sorts of methods.

I was the only one in the area doing it and I wasn't showing anyone because I wanted to have this massive book of imagery to show. I wanted to blow the walls down with a half dozen different techniques that would rocket me to stardom.

Once I had the portfolio put together, I wanted to start showing the agencies... but I hesitated.

“What if no one likes this stuff,” it suddenly dawned on me. And I began to question whether the technique was really something they wanted to see.

I hesitated.

A few weeks later, I decided to hell with it, I wanted to share this work with folks who may think it was as cool as I thought it was.

And they loved it. In fact the first agency told me they had just hired a guy the day before to do a big Annual Report with the technique. A second and third agency all said “yeah, we have been seeing this a lot in the last two or three weeks...”

Seriously?

My hesitation meant I lost first opportunity by a few lousy weeks. By the end of the year, everyone and their brother were doing them and in another year or two they were passe'... only a few opportunities to do them.

(Which, as an aside I will say - NEVER set your style on a technique. Technique can be learned and borrowed. Vision cannot.)

“He who hesitates is lost.”

“Strike when the iron is hot.”

“Carpe Diem”

All very important for photographers. No matter what we are doing, it is important to not hesitate unless there is a good reason. Wondering if they will like what we do means we weren't sure about it to begin with.

Do you have an idea for a shoot? Do it.

Been wanting to change your style a bit? Do it. Now.

There is only now, and you and your work.

In the words of a great captain, simply *“make it so...”*

*Waiting for that perfect moment is
a fools folly.
There is NO perfect
moment.*



Self-Sabotage and The New Photographer

What is “self-sabotage”?

It is the premature destruction of a talented photographer... and it comes from within.

It starts when we accept the judgement of one person as the gospel truth of our work. Usually that voice is one of negativity. We can have a huge bunch of people who tell us they like what we do, a cadre of clients who continue to support us, and yet one lone voice can carry so much weight.

When we let it.

I taught for a while at a photography school in Phoenix after my celebrated return from LA - (LOL, more on that later). It was part of a modeling school and we had a very good facility with students from all over the southwest.

One day the director called me to discuss a great idea she had about doing a show of the students work. It would be like an opening and there would be food and drink and making merry.

She also mentioned that she wanted to get one of the local photographers to come in and ‘judge’ the work. I was sort of mixed about that since this was student work and it would take a judge who knew what the parameters were to be able to do the work justice. When she told me who she was going to invite... well, that sort of took a lot of the fun out of it.

Egos can be a problem in this business. They can blind one to all that is outside their orb of ‘kissassness’ and provide a faux quality of relevance where none really exists. This photographer had that... trait.

This may sound braggadocious, but it is the honest truth. We had a hell of a school and we had some simply astounding photographers. Some of these guys are still shooting and kicking ass all over the country. The show ended up with 38 prints and all of them were stunning. The instructors and some of the local photographers came in to help hang the show and were simply blown away at the quality of the work.

On the day of the show, he came, he saw, he yawned and then - with almost a sinister smile singled out one print hanging on the wall. A landscape/industrial shot and began to destroy everything about it.

He was dead wrong, to be sure. It was a terrific image and all of us in attendance knew it. But for that ‘judge’ the need to decimate someone who had made a wonderful image was simply too much. He gathered his sycophantic little entourage together and railed on and on about some nonsense that made him sound smarter than anyone else in the room.

And then he turned and left.

The photographer who had made the image had waited for days for this guy, who was one of his heroes, to come in and see his image. His look of despair was something I will always remember.

He quit taking photographs a month or two later and moved back to his hometown. His talent lost to us.

I don’t blame the arrogant ‘judge’ photographer for being a smug and arrogant douchebag - that is who he was. But the young man who walked away from that talent based on the judgement of one naysayer was simply sad. No matter how many people told him that he indeed had the

chops, the self doubt in his head was so amplified by douchetographer that he couldn't side step it.

Now to be sure there are many other ways to self-sabotage your career;

1. Buy too much gear and make too few images.
2. Focus on technique instead of connection.
3. Make images "just like that other photographer..."
4. Intently work on making images "they" want to see.
5. Party.
6. Chemistry... you know what I'm talking about.
7. Forget to bill - yeah, it happens.
8. Forget that April 15 is coming up faster than you think.
9. Cheat clients, assistants, vendors.
10. Have rates far below the local standard.

But the one that is more mighty than all of those is the one we call selective hearing/self doubt. Putting all that weight on one negative remark and setting aside all the other people's support is the quickest way to becoming a stocker at Walmart.
(Not that there is anything wrong with that.)

There will always be negative things said about our work. No one can please everyone. But knowing how to handle that negative feedback is as important as it can be.

- Realize that there will be negative people. Some will have their own

reasons and some will simply be trolls.

- Decide to go with the general consensus. If more people like it than don't you're fine.

- Accept the fact that we have control over what we think, how we react and what we decide to respond to. They don't - we do.

- Know and love your own work enough to know when it is authentic and true, and that the naysayers are wrong.

It can be an amazing moment when you hear a sad-sack troll say something awful about your work, and you respond with 'meh', I don't really care what that guy says, I know my work is good. The first time you have that inner dialog, you will feel amazing.

The self-saboteur is fading.

Now stop drooling over that expensive lens and go out and shoot something.



Gear Envy Sucks

Gear envy takes two major forms:

1. *“I can’t do what I want with this crummy gear.”*
2. *“I can’t believe that guy/gal has such great equipment when their work sucks so bad.”*

Actually envying someone by what their gear collection is - “I so wish I was him, I would be so awesome with that gear” - is more a sign of needing some professional help. Please see someone straight away.

So let’s look at number one first, the thought that you cannot shoot with your current crummy gear.

I have absolutely no sympathy for you at all. Crummy gear is better than NO gear, and it is probably better than a lot of photographers who are smoking your butt daily. Why? Because they are shooting instead of worrying that their edges are too soft if the image was blown up to the side of a house, or that awful purple fringe that no one can see anyway, or how there is a chromatic aberration when the lens is pointed at a 36 - 46 degree angle to the sun in the afternoon on alternating Tuesdays!

Give it a rest. You can make great shots on an entry level camera. You can make great shots on point and shoot cameras if you know how to make a good photograph. And understand the nature of the tools. And have spent anytime actually MAKING images instead of talking about them incessantly.

Think about this:

1. If you cannot take a good photograph with an entry level camera and a kit lens, what makes you think your work will be better with a shiny new D760D-X NiKanon?
2. If your pictures suck with what you have, they will most likely suck with a new camera, but now have the added fun of sucking after spending a boat load of cash.
3. Your results may vary. Listening to some photograph blather on about how the new camera from ---- simply sucks the suck out of suck means only that he/she lives in a bubble somewhere since there are thousands of photographers doing amazing work with every kind of camera on the face of the earth.
4. Perhaps it isn’t your camera, maybe you suck at making photographs.
5. If your camera is not working ‘correctly’, it could be “user error”... just sayin’.
6. Bigger file sizes means bigger file sizes. That’s it.
7. Focus is not a substitute for connecting with the viewer. (Neither is pixel counts or dynamic range, but we don’t want to get too crazy.)
8. Yes, yes... that guru on all the awesome YouTubes shoots with some terribly expensive gear, and his pictures are awesomer than yours. Here is something to think about - give them your camera and watch them make the same awesomer shots.
9. Camera manufacturers pay extraordinarily big money to make you think that their new wizbang will turn your pathetic throw aways into gallery ready pix. You let that crap take hold and you will never have enough gear... ever.

Worrying about gear is a form of resistance. It’s an excuse. I ‘need’ this or I ‘need’ that, and without this or that I am in no shape to make a photograph. The gear won’t let me.

The gear doesn't care. The gear is simply that... gear.

What matters is that you take that gear and make images that move people, and express emotion, or tell a story, or show us something we have never seen before... THAT is all that matters.

I shot a Rebel on the first CreativeLive I taught. The same Rebel I used for a lot of my workshops. I wanted to always be the lowest tech guy in the room. It was part of my teaching that no one in my workshops thought the quality of the image was something that came along with a great camera. Making an image is light and composition and heart. As to the second form of Gear Envy - the one where you wonder how someone so terrible can have great equipment?

That's easy.

They have a credit card.

EDIT:

I want to make sure we do not confuse GAS - "Gear Acquisition Syndrome" with Gear Envy. GAS is an out of control urge to collect and own vast amounts of gear for no clear reason other than it is cool. "Gear Envy" is when you think that another photographers awesome gear makes them superior photographers while your slightly dated prosumer is pulling you down. There is, as they say, a difference.

Photography is indeed an art form that depends on some form of gear to create our final work. And that gear can be extravagant and expensive

or simple and inexpensive. The resulting image doesn't care where it was created, only that it WAS created.

Now before you go off thinking I don't like great gear, well... nothing of the sort. I LOVE great equipment, and work quite hard to keep my gear in excellent condition. They are my tools, and therefore they are an extension of my own hands. And eyes.

But I don't give gear as much power as the manufacturers think I should. I give the power to the photographer who can make images, good images with most anything you give them because they ARE photographers.



It Ain't Brain Surgery

When I first started I met a photographer who was what I call a “prima-donna”, or asshat in today's world. He would rant and rage while shooting. All of his assistants would cower as he belittled them, humiliated them and treated them less than anyone should ever be treated.

I met one of his assistants who quit after he threw a 4x5 film holder at him because of some perceived offense. In the day, he was quite an influential photographer and had lots of work. At first, the rages were done after hours, but they slowly became visible to clients. And that was sad. The clients would talk about his screaming and ranting and raging with a shake of the head... but they used him anyway because he was a good photographer.

The problem I had with it was three fold.

1. No one should ever be treated with that level of disrespect.
2. It was supremely less than professional... after all, the staff was HIS, and HE was ultimately responsible
3. He was taking pictures of fkn TOWELS FOR A DEPARTMENT STORE!!!

Now yeah, I got it - being a professional means doing the absolute BEST towel shot, or box of crap shot that you can. And you tweak it till it is perfect. Feeling that it warrants rage and deep, moody brooding is - well - mental illness.

Seriously.

I only worked for him one day, and never went back. He eventually left

the industry when digital came in. I sorta figured it was because throwing a compact flash card at assistants wasn't impactful enough.

I was reminded of his idiocy a few years after the one day I assisted him, when I photographed actual brain surgery for a regional hospital chain. The mood of the two surgeons and four nurses was relaxed and respectful. They were focused on the task at hand, and broke tension with humor and good natured comments.

Brain surgery. Screw up and someone dies.

Photographing towels. Screw up and... photograph them again.

The difference was absolutely staggering... and it has stayed with me since that day.

Yes, we work very hard to make the absolute best image we can, we push those around us to perform even better than they think they can. And we do it with respect. We take great pride in presenting an absolutely perfect photograph, but that should never come at the expense of those around us.

Things have changed a lot since those days, and I don't hear much about the “angry prima-donna drama queen” photographers. Oh, they are out there, but probably not as prevalent as they were because social media could be disastrous.

It really is important to do the best we can at what we do, but it ain't brain surgery and no one dies if we mess up... and believe me, that is a good thing. :-)



Life Through A Lens

... is different - depending on what lens you choose. Choose wisely.

One of the joys of photography is being able to use a different lens for a different perspective. Something very far away can be brought 'closer' by a long (telephoto) lens. We can add depth to a flat scene with a shorter (wide) lens.

Interesting though that the scene itself doesn't change. Only our 'perspective' of it does. The scene is a reality that exists whether we are photographing it or not, and all we can do with it is choose our POV.

Kinda like life.

A very talented photographer who is just starting out recently noted that he may be a failure after spending a year and not making any money at it. That was his lens of the moment.

For the last few years he has spent a ton of money on getting the best equipment that he could afford - without being extravagant or a gear-head - and working at his craft with great commitment and passion. Hell, I wish I could shoot as often as he does.

But work had not found him, and he was feeling the pinch of that telephoto lens. That's the one that reaches out and magnifies the small things on the horizon making them look quite large to the viewer. Large and formidable.

In reality they are hardly noticed when standing there without the camera and scanning the scene ahead for a possible composition. We choose the telephoto to reach out, grab that small, insignificant element

and by doing so elevate it to the "hero" of the photograph. The isolation of the subject removes much of the context, so it is without a relationship to that which is around it.

Kinda like life.

In life we put those telephotos on our minds and reach out to find the small things, the little incongruous parcels of our life and we magnify them to 'fill the frame'. What was a single incident is magnified into 'the way it is' in our minds. What was small and perhaps inconsequential becomes elaborately framed and presented as THE star of our focus. Now if we stayed in that telephoto mode, most of our lives would be filled with small, tiny fractions of our life enhanced by magnification into massive failures, huge challenges and a resignation to defeat.

Hey... let's not do that shit, OK!

Let's put on a nice normal lens. Like a 50MM f1.2 (hey, why not). Now we can see far more of our life and those things we were looking at with the 300MM we actually have to find and pinpoint in the distance. Guess what? They are tiny in the landscape of our lives laying out in front of us. In fact, the reality in front of us has changed their meaning and importance immensely. What was large and in charge is now small and sorta, well, blurry. (I did mention that it was an F1.2, right?)

Sure looks different in reality land.

There are more choices for us to see, more context available, more in our viewpoint than small details - even though the details are important. The details help provide the context and the context may be vastly different

than the details would indicate one by one.

Kinda like life.

Details help us define the fabric of ourselves. The perfect stitching, the smooth thread, the tightly designed patterns. But taken overall, the fabric is a mosaic of those details and flies with unbridled passion in the wind. We aren't the stitching, we are the cloth rippling and flapping in the stiff breezes of our world.

Hey - what about that wide angle?

Ahh - my go to lens has always been the 35MM (FF) which is only a bit wider than the 'normal' lens. It helps me define context. It helps me see what I SEE when I am looking. I call it my "real" lens, and I could simply shoot that lens forever if I had to.

I am also fond of the 24MM and 28MM. I used to use the 20MM a lot, but now it is beginning to look a lot like snapshots with my favorite smart phone, so they only get used when I want to add to the context of reality before me. Using a wide angle lens helps push distant things away, and pull the smaller things that are most important toward you. While the use of a wide angle can isolate like a telephoto, the isolation is within the context of all that is around it.

Kinda like life.

Sometimes we need to see those details in the context of pure focus, and remove the distractions by bringing the details front and center. Nothing like focusing on what needs to be done while keeping an eye on what

surrounds us.

Whether it is our business, our marketing, our personal relationships, the "wide angle" view helps make it easier to spend the time where needed. Yes, we are keeping an eye on all around us, but the detail in the center is consuming most of our attention.

There are times in our lives where we need to see the context of our lives through these different lenses. We can use a telephoto approach to finding and isolating challenges to be met, a normal length perspective for making sure we are grounded in the reality and a wide angle approach to focus on those areas that need to be approached while keeping our attention elsewhere as well.

Wide angles also show us options, more of what lies ahead and the dangers we may not see when zeroed in with that awesome 300MM mindset. Oh, and my photographer pal... he took off the telephoto in his mind and realized that there were more wins than losses, and that - in context - he was building something amazing.

Hey... change the lenses in your mind once in a while. It is good for the soul.

And if you have an extra 50MM f1.2L Canon laying around, I am totally willing to take it off your hands. No, seriously, I am



Loyalty Should Be A Brand Asset

I am a pretty strict believer in loyalty. I live it and I demand it. Not in harsh, 'kingly' sort of way, but more of a gentle 'I am way too busy for your call' way.

I can list loyalty as one of my strong traits. I may sometimes be loyal to a fault. I have always felt it was something that was valuable not only to me, but to those around me.

Loyalty to my friends, coworkers, vendors, and clients is a powerful part of my personal brand.

Expecting that loyalty to be returned is not something I can expect, but it is something I do recognize as being very important to me.

What is loyalty?

To me it means I can trust those around me to be considerate when they discuss me and my business to others. It means lying and gossiping about me is limited to the good stuff. No, I'm not kidding about this. I do not gossip about my friends, although I may be candid about situations that we have mutually agreed. Telling someone that my bud Dave doesn't like the 'snapshot' aesthetic which I do enjoy is not the same as telling some dark and potentially damaging bit of knowledge I may know about him. Arguing over aesthetics in photography is fun, and it is open for all.

Those things that are private are easily known. If you know something about someone and have a question as to whether you should share it, you already have your answer. No. You should not.

Loyalty to my clients means billing correctly and on time. It means

plugging them at every opportunity. It means arranging a meeting between them and another client who may be a perfect fit for their product or service.

And it means I do the best I can at every single thing I do with them. Loyalty means honesty too. You cannot be loyal to someone and lie to them at the same time. Not. Possible.

I find that loyalty begets loyalty in most cases. The people around me are those who recognize this attribute as being something that is important to them. And they expect the loyalty they give to me to be returned. It's a win-win deal for both sides, and it brings great rewards. Both in business and in our personal lives.

What about those who do not understand loyalty or how important it is to me? Well, they find me less responsive to them. I do not want drama in my life, and loyalty or disloyalty is one of the fastest way to create drama. Gossip, bad information, lies and distortions can create more problems than you can imagine.

People recognize loyalty when they see it, and experience it. And most of them appreciate it as though it was a rare and precious gem.

It is.

Working in a creative business means you need people around you to want to put in some extra work, push you to do your best, support you

when you begin to falter, and above all: they have your back when things start to go dark. Like the loyalty of so many of our fictional heroes, this trait can help define who you are, and who ends up being part of your group, or tribe. Your loyalty can inspire others to offer their own. Some ways to identify loyalty:

1. Are you tempted to gossip about those who are your friends and allies, or do you find yourself defending them against the pettiness of other people's gossip?
2. Do you think of your clients when you see something that could benefit them? Do you make that call or just let it slide?
3. If you hear something of a substantial nature is being said about someone you know, or a client you work with, do you give them a call and a heads up. Perhaps they are unaware of this situation and need to follow up on it.
4. Do your friends give you heads up on things that you may not know, or situations where you may need to pay special attention to?
5. Do your clients want to work with you on gigs even if others are bidding lower rates? That is a great sign of loyalty.

There are other ways to be loyal and to identify it in those around you, but the most important thing to do is to BE LOYAL where you can. Not just because it is 'good business'. Not just because of what you can gain from it.

But simply because it is the right way to be.



Listen To Your Gut

... it knows what the heck is going on. That place deep inside you where you just know something is not right. Listen to that feeling. It is right more than it is wrong.

Now I know that your head will be arguing with you the whole time.

There is a reason for that; ego, romance, “passion”, a fondness for gazing at one’s own navel... the list is too long to imagine. But all of those things make it difficult for that ‘gut feeling’ to get through. And it is the one that is the most important.

And perhaps your initial gut instinct is wrong. Fine, by listening to it you can make better choices, investigate the situation and come to a more rational conclusion.

For instance...

I often see posts by people who have gotten an email that reads something like; “I have seen your work online and it is perfect for us for our project. We have not been able to find a photographer that we like as much as you and we need you to do this for us...”

Right.

Because we know how difficult it is to find the ‘rare photographer’ out there in the world.

And when the email comes from somewhere in LA or New York, it of course makes everything perfectly clear. There are no photographers in LA that can shoot ‘the project’ like you can. This is true even though

you have never met the ‘clients’, they do not know anything about you, you live 2400 miles away, and no one has even mentioned what the damn project is. Nope - YOU and YOU ALONE are perfect for this ‘project’. It says so on the email.

Your gut says... “WTF” and your ego says “Wow, this major corporation/agency thinks I am better than all those LA photographers. Yeah! Sucks to be them!” A good thing to do is to ask your FB friends how to proceed now that you have been anointed into world class at-least-better-than-them-LA-fools status. They will offer loads of good ideas on how to land this big fish client.

But your gut says “wait - this doesn’t make any sense. All I have is a Model Mayhem account with 11 hand-bra shots of girls in stripper heels posing on railroad tracks with caution tape wrapped around them and there are certainly better photographers out there in LA who have done this ‘project’ work before...”

Yes... that is absolutely true - however your head is all wrapped in the stars. And your ego.

Now. Listen. To. Your. Gut.

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The guy was dressed impeccably. He sat in the studio with a beautiful custom leather briefcase, wearing some very expensive shoes, and a Pierre Cardin suit jacket casually thrown over the back of the conference room chair. He was spreading layouts and marketing stuff all over the conference table. This was going to be the next big thing. This was gonna rock the world. This... thing... that he needed photographs of for “marketing and investors and other PR needs.”

This was looking pretty damn good. I could hear fees that would pay my expenses for over a year or more being bandied about with casual flair. Oh man... I wanted this job.

And then - I got it. He called his partner, told him I was the guy. Awesome.

I walked him to the door and he turned to me and said "We have been looking all over town, talked to the agencies and met a ton of photographers but we want to go with you because we couldn't find anyone who was any good in town."

BAM... and there it was. My gut knew it... my bullshit meter exploded. There are fabulous photographers in this town. And while I was pretty good, I was not the top of the totem pole. No way.

I asked who he had seen, and he tossed out a few names as being uncooperative and not the kind of photographer they needed. I knew those guys. And I knew right away something was stinky like fish in Denmark.

When we get to his car, a brand new Mercedes four door, he begins to explain their 'cash flow' crunch. Yes, they needed these images right away, but the first round funding had a snafu and they were waiting for funds to come in from their investors and so they were unable to post any upfront money for the gig and can we shoot tomorrow?

At this point my brain was conflicted with my gut. Damn it was a great gig and of course I would be paid... next... week or month... and damn... he likes me better than those top shooters and - shut up gut, this is a great

thing and Immagonnaberich...

After he left, I had a long talk with my inner feelings and came to some realizations.

My gut won. I called him later that day and told him the expenses for film and processing had to be covered before the shoot (Approximately \$900... what... you think 8x10 color and Polaroid was about the same price as a 16GB card?) Something didn't feel right, the comments about other photographers, the new car and 'funding' snafu... I just didn't feel that it made sense to me. I didn't share that with him, I just became a little more protective of my thousand dollars.

He said "oh, no problem" and told me he would call his partner, work something out and get right back to me.

He didn't. He found another photographer in Mesa who was thrilled to be considered better than all the other shooters. And, no, he didn't mind fronting the gig and paying for expenses.

Do I have to tell you the end of this story? How the 'funding' didn't come in, but the company was sold and another company (with the pictures this guy had done) who didn't pick up any liabilities and since there was no contract with the new company... do I really have to explain that?

Photographers for some strange reason have this affinity for being fawned over and praised. Playing the ego of a photographer takes the same skill

levels as playing the radio it seems. And our egos are, collectively, idiots.

A few things about real life to keep your ego in check when somebody is getting ready to play you like a cheap violin:

1. If they do not have the money to pay you today, they will not have it tomorrow.
2. If they tell you that they couldn't find another photographer, you know instantly that they are lying. There are photographers EVERY where.
3. If it sounds too good to be true, it is actually too goddamn good to be true! Is that hard?
4. Business people have business things... like, you know, contracts and timelines, and a plan.
5. Emails who want to hire you without a conversation first are suspect INSTANTLY. Check them out right away. It can and does happen... but it is sorta rare. (A lot more rare than a photographer in LA, that's for sure.)
6. Praise is great - Bullshit is for lawns. KNOW the difference or be prepared for a tough journey.
7. The moment you think you are 'all that' - you aren't. There are better photographers out there no matter WHO you are.
8. If the 'client' is wearing a suit that costs more than your 85MM f1.4 lens and says they have no money, that is code for "you a damn fool to take this gig."
9. Crooks and shysters leave a trail. Ask for references... and call around.
10. Never let your ego over rule good old fashioned common sense. There is nothing to be lost in doing some research, asking questions and putting your 'self esteem' aside.

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I had a partner once.

Once.

Along the line things started to 'feel' wonky to me. I brushed those feelings aside and attributed them to the stress of running a million dollar business. A year or so later I found out that I should have listened to my gut. At least I would have asked some questions and sought some clarification.

Perhaps I might have even called our accountant. (That would have been an enlightening call.)

It cost me a lot, including some major hits to health and finances. I recovered, thank you... and I take responsibility for not listening to the feelings inside that were telling me what I didn't want to see.

These days I listen to those innermost feelings, those little pangs of WTF that are sometimes merely a vibration deep in your stomach... and I ignore the ego stuff. That crap is for kids.

And hey, listening to your gut always works for Gibbs - and he always gets his man... or woman.



“They Don’t Pay Me Enough To...”

Have you ever heard someone say this?

“They’re not paying me enough to do my best work.”

Possibly some variation of that?

What a terrible, awful, self-defeating way of doing anything. It’s an amazingly stupid, self-absorbed sense of entitlement that brings nothing but disappointment and failure.

When I hear someone saying that I can only feel a twinge of pity for them, and a sharp desire to smack them up side the head.

And fire them on the spot.

Why?

Because they agreed to do the job. At the rate that was offered.

The “job” is to deliver the best image possible. The rate was there to accept or deny and they accepted it.

Did they tell the client “Well, I will do it for \$200, but I am only gonna give you 50% effort cause it is worth more than \$200?”

No, of course not. They took the job and then did a crappy job because they felt entitled to more than they charged. And that is not only a deceitful, petty way of cheating the client, it is unethical and will lead to eventual failure of the photography business.

Look, no client wants a crappy job. They want the best they can get. That is what they are expecting when they hire a photographer to do the work.

The photographer wants to project an image of being the best available creative. They want to be seen as the solution to the problems and challenges that clients have.

So along comes a gig.

The client has a budget - sometimes as a matter of client expectations, and sometimes just pulled from their nether regions. And they need a solution.

You are the photographer that gets the call. It goes something like this; “Hey, Don. How ya doin’.. we got a gig for you.”

“Cool. What do you have in mind?”

“We have a client who needs four shots of their facilities over in Glendale. These are beauty shots of the buildings for a new facilities brochure.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. What are the particulars?”

“Well two of the buildings face East and two face West. We need to have them shot with great light and hopefully with a clear view of the entrances and new signage.”

“Cool, I can scout it later this week.”

“That’s great. We have a budget of \$1000 for all the shots. I know it is worth more, but the client gave us this budget to work with.”

It is at this point we can go two different ways. And it is ALL on the photographer to make that choice.

VERSION ONE

“Well, OK. I can do that. I am a little concerned about the different directions they are facing.”

I go out for a quick scout and find that the parking lots are a mess of bad parking lines, oil puddles and cracks. I instantly add a few hours of retouching because there is no way to shoot the facades without getting some foreground in and they look terrible. What was going to be a simple post process now has some extraordinary additional post processing.

Now I discover that my fears about the different facing facades was dead on. The renovated buildings are painted a dark, earthy maroon so whichever side is shot in the shade is going to look far different from the ones shot in the direct sunlight. This means that in order to do it right, I will have to shoot early in the morning for the East facing and late in the day on the West facing... so a two/three-hour shoot is now an all day shoot. I note that there are some issues with the roofing on one of the buildings and will bring this up with the client in the call I have to make later.

“Siri - call client”

“Hey, how did the scouting go?”

“Good. I have some questions?”

I share the concerns about the parking lot, the roof, and the added time for getting the facades in the best light taking a lot longer than the fee worked for. The client takes the concerns to the client who says the budget stands.

I know I cannot do a good job with this budget, and am not interested in doing a full day so I say, no problem and do the gig without worrying about the parking lot, roof or super blown out sky on the shadow side of the building.

“Screw them”, I say, “they aren’t paying me enough to do it right.”

Those images are now MINE. Those terrible, ugly parking lots are MY product. As is the roof and the over exposed sky on the shadowed side of the buildings. The images as a group suck.

And my client and his client KNOW they are mine. They accept no responsibility for the crap that was created. Why should they.

And that is a terrible, awful way to build a reputation as an excellent photographer.

VERSION TWO

Scouting completed and I call the my agency contact.

“I have some concerns about the buildings facing opposite, and not matching in the final shots. Also, the roof on one of the buildings needs

repair and the parking lots are a mess. I can shoot them as is, but with the budget there is no extra for retouching. In fact, I cannot do a good job on this assignment at the present budget. Adding in the retouching and the full day of shooting instead of a half day, the gig would have to be in the neighborhood of \$1800 - \$2000. Can your client make a new budget? I just emailed over some iPhone shots and a detailed list of concerns if you want to send them on to them.”

Client says he will... now we wait for one of two return calls:

Call A: Client agrees to budget increase and I shoot the gig.

Call B: Client does not agree to budget increases and I must make a decision. ME.

I will either not do the job, or I will do it right... eating the extra time, and doing the extra Photoshop work so that the job is EXCELLENT when delivered. I have no other option. Doing it poorly, or not doing what is needed for excellence is NOT an option. It is MY WORK.

The client has \$1000 to spend and had to scrape to get it. It may be all they have, or they may be simply unaware and uncaring of the reality of the business.

They may not have much in the way of ethics.

But I do. And so should you.

So if I take the gig for \$1000, I am saying that I will deliver the best possible images to the client that I am able to make. I will be ME and do the highest level work that is possible, and I AGREE to their pay rate of \$1000.

I SAID I WOULD DO IT. AND THAT MEANS
I WILL DO IT WELL. PERIOD.

Look. I am not saying don't do the gig for less money than it's worth, and I am not saying that you should do the gig for less money than it is worth. That is your call, bucko.

What I am saying is that if you agree to do the job for ANY AMOUNT, you go all the way and do it as best you can. YOU MAKE IT ROCK. It has your name on it. It is YOUR work and no one else gives a damn what you got paid. It is YOUR work and it represents you.

Be proud of all you do... or don't do it at all.



“Nice Shot... Who Cares?”

Back when I was first starting out in this business, I shot nearly every day. Maybe for an hour or two, maybe only for a few minutes. When I wasn't shooting, I was in the darkroom developing film, making contact sheets or printing.

Lots of printing.

There was a lot to learn, and the curve was sort of a hockey stick configuration. It was fairly easy to learn how to spool up a roll of film and develop it in chemistry as the directions explained. But once that hurdle was passed, creating more beautiful and tonality-laden negs began to be something that resembled alchemy and magic - and a lot of damned hard work fraught with failure after failure.

And then that image gets printed - the one where I finally got it right. More tones, more depth, more feeling... magic.

After what seems like a lifetime - and tens of thousands of dollars later - the work was technically meeting some measurement of success.

I assembled a “portfolio” to share with the advertising exec a few doors down. He had hired me for my first ever gig, and I wanted to show him my brand new portfolio.

He took the book from me and sat down. He then flipped through it at a pretty fast clip, closed it and handed it back to me.

I sat there waiting for him to say something and finally he did. “Hey, you wannanother beer?”

I was kinda dumbstruck and asked him if he had anything to say about my book, my baby, the culmination of a few years of hardass work? He stared at me with a kind of a wry smile and said, “nice shots... who cares?”

He must have seen my face fall about a mile down to the ground and he sat down, handed me a beer and let me in on something I will always keep close.

Good photography is all around us. It is everywhere. He said if he wanted a good photograph made, he could call a couple of dozen photographers in his rolodex (remember this is pre-digital) and get all kinds of good photographs made.

“Your photographs are good too,” he said, “but I am not short of good photographs.”

I was not getting it.

“What I am short of is great photographs. Photographs that captivate me and show me something I hadn't seen before. Something more than regurgitated “Black Book” stuff.”

Well, I was kinda stunned for a moment or two, but it started to sink in. I picked up my book and opened it up. Damn - he was right.

They were good... who cares? They were sharp... who cares? They were crisp and tonal rich and composed to the rules... who cares?

That stuff was a dime a dozen. It was everywhere - from the wedding shooters to the commercial industrial guys. Really good, sharp, well composed, colorful photographs of crap... good stuff, but of crap.

He challenged me to show him something he hadn't seen before. He challenged me to show him a photograph that would make him WANT to look at it as an image, instead of an example of how I can make 'good' photographs.

And in that moment he changed my life. Seriously changed how I looked at my work, what I wanted to do, and how I would see my work in the context of the millions (today billions) of images that are 'good'.

I would love to tell you that I took my marching orders and went out to make those shots that would totally make him want to see them. I would love to... but...

Damn! That was much harder than I thought it would be!

He was very good about letting me know that he would gladly look at my photos again when I felt I was ready, but I struggled so hard I didn't see him for about seven or eight months. We bumped into each other and he asked if I was ready to show him some more work. I smiled and said that I was finding it a harder challenge than I thought it would be.

He then laid this little bombshell on me; "If you have to force it, it will never come. Let the images be an extension of your vision and stop trying so hard. Push yourself for opportunities, not for perfection."

Two months later I knocked on his door with four prints that I loved. Deeply loved. Portraits taken of Navajo Medicine Men on the res for a local magazine, I had opted to bring my 8x10 and made a dozen exposures in the soft light of the open doors. They were not 'commercial' or 'editorial' or whatever, they were MY images and composed to show the room they were in as well as the majestic faces carved by the side light of day. He took them from me and went through them kinda quick. "Damn," I thought to myself. Then he started again to go through them much more slowly.

He grinned and looked at me.

"This is what I mean by great imagery," he said. "You are letting me see something from a POV that I am not familiar with, and yet it makes me feel very comfortable - as if I have somehow known this work before." That made my day, for sure.

And it has helped shape my view of photography and context ever since. At Project 52 the students always hear me say "show me something I haven't seen before" and "make the photograph, do not 'take' the photograph."

It is not easy to do, and please do not think that every shot I have done since then is great, or meets the highest criteria of great... LOL. NOPE. It is damned hard to do, but I work at it on every shot. I want to make the shot surprise someone, push their level of understanding a bit, provide

them with a bit of information or simply entertain them.

Good shots are all around us. And really, who cares? Good photography is now a given - even for smartphones and newbies with D800's. Good is simply expected.

That moves the bar up a bit for great. And we cannot make 'great' photographs every time we shoot. Many times good is what matters to the client or agency.

If we put all we can into the image, pulling from our knowledge base, our heart and our vision, then we can be pretty darn sure we gave it every bit of effort possible.

No one can ask for more than that.



Life's Too Short for Asshats

You know, it really is too short for most things.

Life. Four letters, and yet it means so much to our very souls.

One of the things I loved about being a photographer was all the amazing people that I got to meet. I photographed the guy who invented the mechanical heart. I photographed God - well, actually it was George Burns... but, you know. I photographed Kevin Johnson and several mayors, a Senator or two and lots of musicians.

I photographed a porn princess and a Supreme Court nominee in the same week. I turned down an 'opportunity' to photograph some tennis guy named McEnroe (who needs that BS in their life?), and spent an enjoyable afternoon with Phyllis Diller. Tatum O'Neal was a pure waste of air, and James Garner was a hell of a nice guy.

So many fascinating people.

But I never wanted to be a celebrity photographer. Seriously, I do not see how anyone willingly submits to being treated as badly as some celebrities choose to treat those around them. I simply don't think that much of celebrity, or pop culture for that matter.

After a while, I only wanted to shoot real people - scientists, authors, astronauts and auto mechanics. And fashion models. I shot a lot of fashion models.

In those days the studio was always full of people dropping by; models between gigs, MUA's, set builders and friends in the business. It was a safe place to go, and we had sort of a 'family' thing going.

But as in any family, drama and asshattedness would occasionally raise its ugly head.

I used to try to fix people who couldn't seem to fit in or do the right thing. I felt I had an obligation to help them get better, be better, and hopefully save their careers. Or at least maintain a softer trajectory for the inevitable crash that we all saw coming. No. I do not know where I got the idea that it was up to me, but standing idly by and watching people crash in flames was a more objectionable route. So I gave it my best shot.

I think I helped some, and others became such a serious drain on me and what I was doing that one fateful afternoon I simply felt empty. Nothing left to give.

And I stopped. Just like that.

I stopped being the intermediary, the mediator of dramas small and large and the confidant for yet more indiscretions and bad, bad choices. It was difficult to do, and it was an emotional time. I had to tell someone who was a long time friend that his negativity was toxic, and it hurt. Him and me. I said so long to someone who had been in my life for nearly ten years as it became such a drag on everyone when she was around. I felt cruel and mean, but I also knew that her toxicity was taking a far greater toll on me than the 'breakup'.

Seems like being a photographer also meant meeting a lot of people who actually end up being rather unsavory types.

Photographers who wanted to share space with me so they could hang with the models, maybe 'get lucky' in the process. Models who felt that

they needed me to make photographs that would satisfy some narcissistic foible that gave them a reason to live. Assistants who really wanted a chance at my clients, and to take a short route to exemplary success.

One night as I was falling asleep I suddenly remembered that I had left something very important at the studio and would need it the next morning for a project I was working on. As I drove up to the studio, I was very surprised to see nearly a dozen cars in the parking lot. Loud music was blaring through the open door and I walked in through a bunch of scantily clad models to find my assistant shooting for a hair salon. He had not asked me, nor advised me of the gig and when he saw me his face fell to the floor.

I smiled, told him to have a great shoot (I wasn't really going to be a jerk and embarrass him in front of clients), grabbed the thing I needed and headed home.

Was I mad? Hell yes. I am responsible for what happens in my studio - both from a reputation standpoint and a legal standpoint.

Next afternoon I fired him.

Nicely - but firmly.

And the funny thing is, I would have told him it was fine to use the studio

for the salon shoot had he asked. Not a gig I was interested in, and it would have shown some ethics on his part to ask. By not asking, he also showed his level of ethics.

Another time a photographer I was sharing space with decided he didn't need to bother with his own lighting, but would use mine after I shot and while I was awaiting film. Rule was we NEVER tore down a set until the film got back. If something went wrong at the lab, we would not have to redo the set. So a set from one afternoon would be torn down the next morning after picking the film up at the lab - unless there was a problem that necessitated a reshoot. Rare, but rare is not never.

I found out through a model who was very loyal to me that one of the photographers at the studio was booking evening shoots and simply using my lighting.

Now let me explain something... I am not a prima donna about what I do, but in some cases what I was doing represented a lot of investment in time and money. My twice yearly trips to NYC to shoot and learn and assist fashion photographers netted me ideas and lighting that I was using to build my client base in Phoenix. And if another photographer wanted to spend a couple of thousand a week on a trip to NYC to learn, that was fine with me. But using what I had busted my ass to learn was NOT on the menu.

We parted ways.

Last I heard he was in refrigeration school... and there is certainly nothing wrong with that.

One of my personal challenges (flaws?) is dealing with those who betray the trust and loyalty I give as default. I rarely give second chances.

I know I should consider it, probably in some cases it is warranted. But I don't. And yeah, I think it may be a bit of a character flaw and not one I am fond of. But early on I found that second chances usually led to being taken advantage of a second time, and so I simply stopped. Life is too short to spend it worrying about or fighting with asshats.

If you are focused on problems with your friends, cohorts with sociopathic tendencies, or trying to protect your IP on a daily basis it will grind you down and leave you creatively broken.

Let me assure you that the drama of being a photographer is enough for any sane human. Adding to it those who act in deceitful ways is simply "piling on" and should be avoided at all costs. Instead surround yourself with good people who you trust, and who trust you. People who have your back - without a target on it.

Let's face it. You will be happier, and they will be happier not having to live with the knowledge that they are cheating or 'getting over' on you. So it's a win-win.

At least that is how I look at it.



Rolling With The Punches While Dancing On a Wire

One of the challenges of commercial photography is that you are obligated to hit a home run every time your number comes up. You are the clean up hitter, or the “go to” guy when the team needs a guaranteed win.

It can be a little stressful at times.

Like standing on a set with 11 professional models (\$1250+ rate for each), 4 MUAs (\$650 rate for each), two assistants (\$450 rate each), a digital tech (\$1100 rate), two assistant art directors, one senior art director, five (5!) client reps who flew in for the shoot from Singapore, and three Hollywood trained dogs (\$1000+ rate each). Let's not forget the stylist (\$2500), her two assistants (\$900 per) and the catered munchies/lunch (a little north of \$1100).

And of course in a rented studio with rented lighting gear and a set that ran approximately \$15,000 to build. The props bill was nearly \$5000, and wardrobe had been purchased/rented for about \$4000.

And by the way, the shot has to be - HAS TO BE - made and delivered by the next morning to make the deadline for insertion - which was already an extension.

The art director, set designer, stylist and photographer had spent at least a couple of dozen hours together on the set design, casting, and various other challenges this shot would create.

The cast was hired, the set was built, the lighting was in place and the tests had been made and approved.

And then... “Excuse me,” says the client representative, “on the flight over we have made some changes.”

At that moment the world becomes a very quiet place, and the music that was blaring a moment ago is now drowned out by the thumping in your chest. Three things pass through your mind.

1. He really didn't say what I thought he said. (Denial)
2. I can do a couple dozen years for homicide. (Anger)
3. What the hell, I have always loved Walmart, might as well welcome people to the store. (Acceptance)

Now remember that the production is in full swing. The models are in makeup, the set is made, the tweaks to the lighting are being finished off, and the team is about an hour or so from first Polaroid.

And they had some ideas on the flight over. That needed to be heard.

Now. At this moment. Here.

The AD (who was still in denial mode) ushered us all into a corner of the studio where the meeting table was and as we sat he began telling them that changes would be... awkward... at this point.

AWKWARD?!?!?! Are you kidding me? AWKWARD?

And here we go... the paper sketches come out and the first one is a minor change to the headline. Whew... no problem really.

The second one is a casting issue.

Really. In the middle of the day we are going to do a casting for a couple of hours from now? In THIS universe?

Then the kicker... changes to the set.

At this point the AD is starting to turn red... see, these are changes that while being made are not something they can lay off to me or anyone else. Their client wants changes to the set an hour before “showtime” and he is losing it in a situation where not losing it is a much better option. There was talk of scrapping the job, sending everyone home and regrouping after they had made all the changes to the layout that were wanted. The client people were frustrated, the agency was frustrated and the photographer just sucked it up and got started fixing what was broken.

A photographer is somewhat used to dancing on a wire and changing directions. It is how photographs are made. A quick meeting was made with the set director and the clients. The clients showed what they wanted changed and the set designer calmly listened and offered a compromise that would keep us on schedule, and not add significantly to the billing. The client reps then understood the problem that their changes would create. They asked for the some suggestions to add changes and in the end they got 50% of their changes applied and with no slowdown in schedule. And they were happy.

As to the casting, the photographer told the clients that finding someone of that description would not be difficult, but having them be able to do a call for 5 or 6 to choose from would be impossible. They understood, but were disappointed. The photographer told them to trust him, he would get them someone perfect for the image. A call was made to the agency and the booker who the photographer normally worked with, and in an

hour there was the talent, suitcase and wardrobe in hand. He was perfect for the shoot, and the client reps were very happy. The agency booker had listened and knew exactly who to call.

The photographer can't really help with the headline fix. Just sayin'... The point is to go from 'denial' and 'anger' (normal traits) as quickly as possible so you can get past 'resignation' and on to 'just fix the damn thing' mode.

And then just fix the damn thing.

This is not planning for contingencies, more on that later, this is being able to keep your head, and focus on the problem and the possible solutions. The photographer knew the clients were not wanting to sabotage the shoot, and their ideas were simply a zealous commitment to making the ad better in their minds.

Once we realize that the other people want to do just as good a job as we do, the panic moves off and we can focus on the camaraderie of being “in it together”.

And that means being able to change directions, while dancing on a wire between failure and historic awesomeness, and then roll with all the punches thrown and come out smelling like a rose.

(That's a lot of metaphor there Don; ed.)

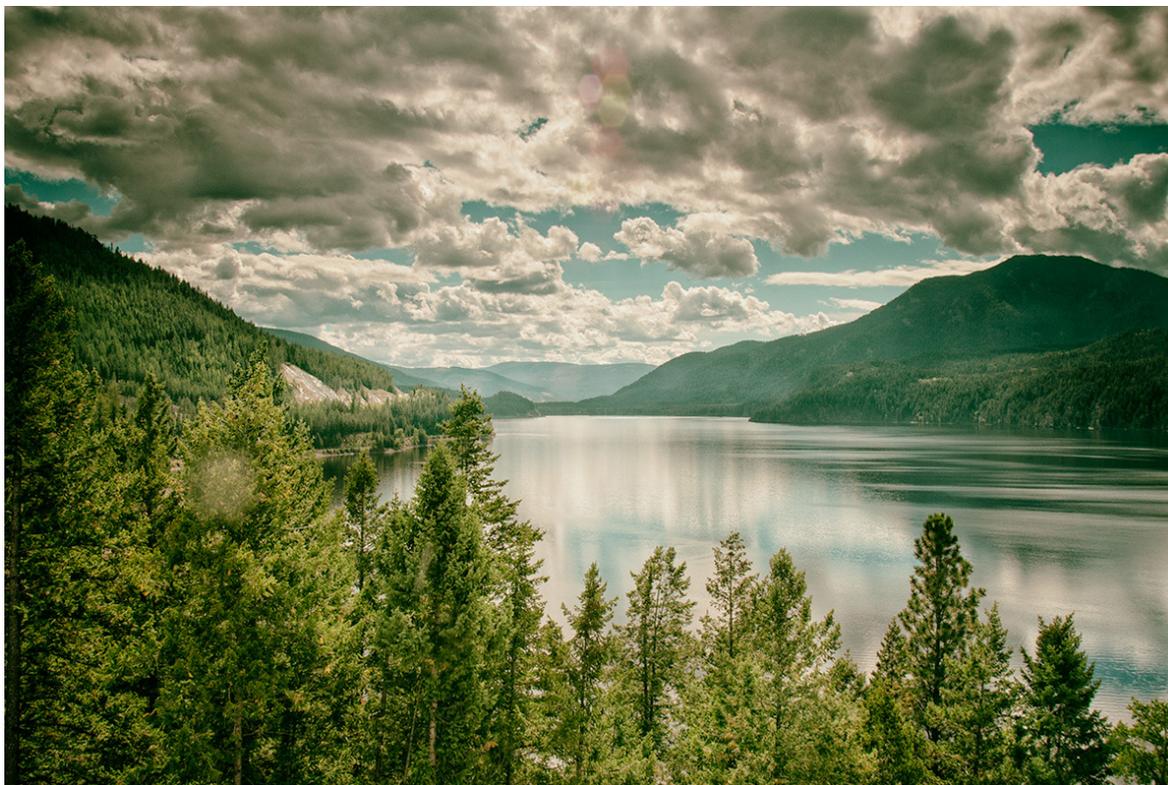
If the photographer had not had the skills to make stuff happen, and quickly, the entire job could have gone south in a hurry. How does one practice doing this precision chaos focus?

You just do.

1. Don't get rattled on set. Whatever it is, fix it or replace it with a backup and keep on working.
2. Don't get mired in what went wrong. Focus on what went right and how that can be repeated.
3. Don't blame anyone else. That creates instant pushback, anger and a loss of focus in the people you need most to help you get through the problem.
4. Don't bring attention to it. Screaming and throwing a fit so others can see is a stupid and self aggrandizing way of seeking sympathy and whatever... do it on my set and you are gone.
5. Smile. Yep. No matter what, keep that air of "we got this."
6. Do not relinquish the control of the set to anyone else while you screw around with something that went wrong. Let someone else do that minutia crap and you stay on top.
7. Think fast, think creatively, think temporary if you must. Whatever can be done must be done, so roll with it and make it work.
8. Trust that the members of your team want to make this right for you. They may over compensate... that is normal. Smile, move on.
9. Never let 'em see you cry. Or whine. Or be petulant or complaining or blaming or shaming or anything other than a supremely in charge leader.
10. Accept responsibility. It is your set. If you get all the credit on a win, you get to take some heat if things are screwed up. Pull on your big person pants and accept the responsibility for getting it right.

If you let it, the microcosm of all the stressful possibilities that can seem insurmountable will kill the creative inside you. Learning to roll with it, find solutions, dance on that wire while balancing a huge team - well, that is what makes it one of the more exciting professions I think.

Be proactive, be creative, and keep on dancing.



“Own Your Set” - Or Be Prepared for Chaos

As a commercial and advertising photographer, one of the most important responsibilities you have is to be in control of your shoot. It can mean the difference between a very successful shoot and one that gets by. (Keep in mind there are no failures - it isn't an option. Ever.)

I refer to it as “Owning Your Set” and it applies to location as well as studio work. It usually applies even more when you have a cadre of artists, talent and agency people working with you to make the shot. The more ‘cooks’ you have, the more everyone wants to add their pinch of spice.

And that can be a deal killer in the creative endeavor we call photography.

Now being in control of your shoot doesn't mean you cannot delegate, nor does it mean that you must micromanage (something I have to remind myself of from time to time. It is also not a license to be a big asshat either. It only means you must take all responsibility, and MAKE decisions promptly and with clarity and decisiveness.

Remember that this is all your responsibility. Remember that this is what you signed up for. THIS is the big show.

And whether or not you maintain control, the end product is one you are responsible for. It is always better to be responsible for a great shoot and lots of accolades for you and your team than one that is passable and unremarkable.

At this point you may be asking if you are really ready for that responsibility.

You had better be. Seriously - if you are not, then you are not ready period. Get back to the basics and make sure you can control the creation of a photograph.

I can speak from some experience on this... heh.

I remember the shoot where it dawned on me that I had lost control and had to make a choice of either wrangling it away from the person who now commanded the most respect on the set or go with the flow and make the shots the best way I knew how. I chose the latter, as getting in a pissing match with a member of the team in front of the client is NOT something I will ever do. And I realized that my reticence and lack of control left the point position open. Nature abhors a vacuum and if I wasn't at the helm, someone else would step up.

I had been up very late the night before on another shoot. The shoot this morning was a last minute OTR (off-the-rack) fashion thing on seamless paper and I was still thinking about the shoot last night. Questions were asked and I gave lackluster, sorta answers. I was preoccupied, and that left the door open for someone to start making decisions that I usually make.

And she stepped right through the door. The stylist, who had a very large presence and was very well known, simply hijacked the shoot. I was now following her ideas, and playing catchup to what was happening. As I was thinking of making a grand comeback with a couple of grandiose statements about my complete and utter mastery of my own domain, the client came in with two of her bosses. I knew it was best at that point to

simply STFU and go with the flow. I worked hand-in-glove with the stylist to complete the 15 shots and never mentioned anything to her.

I hated the take. I didn't like the poses she arranged nor did I like the makeup. I didn't even like goddamn white paper.

They weren't my shots. They didn't have my signature on them at all. I never mentioned that episode to her nor her to me, and we worked together for many more years. With me in control of every shoot.

I wish I could say that was the last time I lost control of the set, but it happened a few times after that. Hey, it takes practice to get it right.

A few things that are universal.

When you lose control of the shoot, you cannot get it back without a fight (no, no hitting or screaming, but a fight nonetheless). Fighting takes energy that should be focused on doing the absolute best you can under the circumstances YOU just created. And if you work hard and focused, you will certainly pull out a good shoot, even a great shoot. It just wont feel like your shoot.

Who takes control when you don't?

In my experience it is first the stylist if one is on set, or the MUA (make-up artist) if it is a beauty/headshot sort of shoot. If the client takes over, that would not be a big surprise either.

None of them are photographers, so they are now directing the photography and you are no longer the master of that part of what you do... and

that is WHAT YOU DO. And fighting with the client is usually never a good idea, although I have been lucky to work with some ADs who welcomed a spirited defense of my creative direction. Without profanity. Which is hard for me sometimes. Just sayin'...

If you are not the photographer, you are the "camera person".

Now I didn't go through all I went through to be a camera person. And I am certainly not wanting to default to that by my own hand.

Camera persons don't make much money compared to photographers. Camera persons don't have reputations because they are camera persons and are interchangeable with any other camera person.

I am in control of every aspect of a shoot. From MUA/Hair to model selection (I insist on being in the selection team). The stylists and I work tightly using private Pinterest boards and sketches to make sure we are all in sync. On set, we have music that the talent loves (Good God... what?) and all hands are on deck for shooting. I have stylists watching the clothes, and MUAs watching the tethered capture for lipstick in the teeth/hair stuck to lips and all of the other things I may not be seeing at the time I am shooting.

That is what they are there for after all.

I also do not allow texting or cellphone surfing while the shoot is going on. If I am not shooting, then play away if you have time, but during the shoot it is everyone involved fully.

Never had a complaint yet.

Same thing for product and still life too. By the way, it is simply easier to maintain control of that set than it is when there are more people involved.

1. Be certain of what you want
2. Be certain that what you want is what the client wants
3. Create an atmosphere that is friendly, but business like
4. Keep conversations focused on the gig at hand (time for shooting the breeze over Coronas after the wrap)
5. Make sure everyone seeks your approval, and make sure you are available to give it
6. Never be afraid to ask for suggestions. If I am not sure which pair of ear rings I like, I ask for input from the stylist, client, model. That's fine and it doesn't make you look weak
7. Making decisions for the sake of being 'large and in charge' actually DOES make you look weak
8. Be complimentary to all who are working with you when they do something exceptionally good
9. Make the team feel important, and part of the process. Everyone one respects a respectful leader
10. Never make your problems someone else's problem. If there are challenges, handle them with the appropriate people and do not spread unneeded drama

It is a very uncomfortable position to find yourself in when you lose control, or have an unresponsive or unhappy team. Keeping that from happening takes a bit of guidance and leadership from you, but it is damned worth it.

Always enjoy the work, after all it is an amazing life to be able to do what you love to do and get paid for it. And your confidence is one of the things that makes that all possible.

“Own Your Set”... always.



Devil's In The Details / Don't Sweat The Small Stuff

Two old sayings people like to throw around a lot without really listening to what they are throwing around;

“The devil is in the details” means pay very close attention to the minutiae... it is where the challenges will be hiding.

“Don't sweat the small stuff” means getting caught up in the minutiae can be problematic, and not productive.

These kind of colloquialisms will fall from the lips of many creatives, and occasionally within a short amount of time. Makes you kind of wonder how many other ‘sayings’ we have are diametrically opposed? Or just plain silly.

“Patience is a virtue” / “Carpe Diem” (“Seize the day”)

“Haste makes waste” / “Time waits for no man”

Really helpful stuff there old guys... thanks for your, uh... wisdom.

In commercial photography the devil IS in the details unless it isn't. And not sweating the small stuff is easy unless the small stuff will kill the shot. So “don't sweat the details unless the details are of great importance because they contain the devil...”

Got it.

The most interesting thing is that both are true... and that is where it becomes a bit of a tricky choice for the photographer. Do we start sweating the small stuff or let it go - do we get into the details of the shot

to dig out the devils or are they just fine being left alone?

Yes.

Sorry, I am starting to sound like my own oxymoron, but it is so very true.

An example:

Shooting for a swimsuit designer catalog on the shores of Zuma Beach one Friday afternoon was a hot mess. Three of the five models were riding together and had gotten lost. Now they were stuck in traffic and we were already an hour and a half past call time. The MUA was new to the catalog type shoot and was busy making every eyelash perfect. On five girls, three of whom would be late... my calculations showed we could comfortably get the shot by oh, midnight or so.

She was looking for the devil in the details, and I was noting that the trajectory of the sun does not care about how much more time we need for perfect faces... in full length shots running on the beach.

To me and the photograph, the devil in the details was small stuff compared to the fact, scientifically accurate by the way, that the sun always sets faster when you are on deadline. True... look it up.

Make them look good, get the hair nice and full and we gotta go... gotta go go go.

In the end, the late models had enough time to be primed a bit, sprayed with about 4 cans of cheap hairspray and begin frolicking for the whir-

ring of that old F3 motordrive. The MUA was not happy, but later we explained that there is a huge difference between making the model up for a headshot or a beauty ad, and getting them ready for a full length 'lifestyle' shoot with a setting sun. The perfectly detailed make up is of no consequence once the sun goes down... we would have missed the shot. She got it... I think.

Working on a liquor shoot for a national ad, the art director and I were having fits. The label of the imported Courvoisier had metallic text and script, and the layout called for the bottle to be shot dead straight on. This means that the light had to be reflected perfectly back from where the camera was. Using a Deardorff 8x10 gave us enough 'rise' to get rid of a lot of it, but there was always a tiny black reflection at some point in the bottle due to its rather unique shape.

We spent a full day on it and by 6PM we were exhausted, but determined. I went to the darkroom to process yet another "fauxlaroid"* (we only had 40 sheets of 8x10 Polaroid and were using them very conservatively) an idea struck me on using a blended exposure with masks. Another couple of hours and we had a perfect color Polaroid and were ready to shoot the film. Shooting the bottle took a little over a minute for 6 sheets of film.

The small stuff, the devil in this case, was that small black area on the type that could NOT be there. Liquor manufacturers spend small fortunes on the design of their labels. It is a defining brand component for them, and it had to be - absolutely MUST be perfectly presented.

As did the image on the film. We did not have Photoshop. This was back when even the Scitex was a gleam in some inventor's eye. In this case the devil was indeed in the detail, and the small stuff that didn't matter was

how long it took to get it right.

Shooting for a major LA department store was a gig that always had residual benefits of being on their 'list' and getting fairly steady work for a while. When I finally got the nod from the AD, it was for a series of POP counter and end-cap display shots for the cosmetic department. 6 shots larger than life - beauty shots of some very top models.

Oh man... oh man oh man... THIS was one of those assignments where you just know that it is all about the stars lining up and the karma coming back around and that it is certainly proof that you are some HOTTDAMNSHIT!!!

Or something.

The agency did the casting and I was invited in to be an equal in the choice. The MUA was one of the best in LA at the time and someone who was extremely influential, as was the stylist. We all hit it off pretty well and when shoot day came and the 6 amazing women showed up at their call time it all came together.

I used a clamshell with two 24" umbrellas in very close. No fill on the sides, we let the models' perfect skin fall off on both sides. The AD was there and she loved what was happening. Shooting a 6x7 camera meant big glorious Polaroids and I went home feeling pretty damn happy. Pick-

ing up the film the next day, I was greeted by roll after roll of some of the best work I had done. PERFECT color. PERFECT composition. PERFECT models and expressions and it all felt so wonderful.

Later that afternoon I was standing next to the CD of the agency, as she put the film on the light table.

“Your lighting is kind of sloppy...” was what she said in that now instantly vanished magical moment.

I was kind of at a loss... my mind racing and brain scanning for words that were not there. Time stopped moving.

“Uhhddreerrdbfff...” or something like that came out as I was visualizing how I would look in one of them McDonald’s aprons hawkin’ fries to retirees in Sun City.

“I like it when the umbrellas are perfectly aligned in the eyes...” she explained.

Me = now doing my imitation of a deer in headlights just before becoming roadside venison.

“But they are lovely... and they will look smashing...” She smiled at me and went into her office.

Time began moving again.

What she was referring to was the fact that in the clamshell, I had not made absolute sure that the points of the umbrellas were EXACTLY the

same top and bottom. In my shots, they were just a little bit off... just - a - little - bit - off. And when the images were blown up to four or five times lifesize, those small umbrella catchlights would be very visible. (I asked all my friends if they could see any problems with the images and NO ONE saw it... but I saw it every time I looked at them.

And she saw it immediately.

The devils.

That has never happened since... EVER. (And I did a lot more work for them for the following year, so it still ended well with me learning a valuable lesson on being a monster over detail.

Unless it is an eyelash out of place on a full length active shot taken with natural light when the sun is 1/8” above the horizon and you still have one more model to go...

Ya know.

Finding that balance between the devil in the details and not sweating the small stuff is the challenge for every artist and craftsperson I know. Thinking the problem through from all vantage points will help you decide the prioritization of your attention.

Devils:

1. Make sure your gear is accurate and true - faulty gear is a disaster
2. Be meticulous and detailed with your invoicing and billing
3. Exposure is not a guessing game or an ‘approximation’ - if you have

to chimp more than three times, use a meter

4. Consider each shot from the client's perspective
5. You know that reflector you left in the car back on the road, the one you know will make the shot better... yeah, that one. Stop what you are doing and hike your ass back up to get it. "Making do" is making crap
6. When shooting products, labels matter. A lot. A lot lot
7. In beauty work if the makeup is not right, send it back. Ask for perfection when it is called for
8. If the food looks crappy on set, it will look crappy on the screen... you know that. Don't accept it - nobody likes terrible photographs of food that looks inedible
9. Be meticulous in your correspondence. Bad grammar, mis-spellings and terrible language will make you look like you took a home study course titled "How to Right Good"...
10. Never show an image that you do not stand behind. Never let an image leave your studio that you wouldn't stand behind. Be a raving asshat if you must, but NEVER let a bad image go out into the world with your name on it.

Small Stuff:

1. What kind of camera you shoot - (in fact, brand name *anything*)
2. How many Facebook or Instagram followers you have
3. What that other photographer, the one with the amazing online lifestyle does. She ain't you - you ain't her.
4. Bokeh... seriously, give it a rest will ya
5. How much money other people get for their work
6. Worrying whether 'everyone' likes you. I can help with that; No, not everyone likes you. Deal.
7. Not making a great shot every time you shoot... get out and shoot

more and that will change

8. Other people's drama. OK, it may not be small, but isn't your circus and it isn't your monkey
9. Workflow... find one you like. Do that.
10. Worrying about how it is "supposed to be done"; anyone who tells you they know how it is SUPPOSED to be done is either lying to you or trying to sell you something. There is no one way, find YOUR way.

Happy shooting.



“Funk In, Funk Out, Funk Off”

I know that being a professional photographer should be a bed of roses, a magical place where unicorns and rainbows are interspersed between the Bentleys and mansions. A place where creativity is simply something that everyone has in spades, and no one is ever without a great idea.. or three. Yeah... I imagine it is wonderful there.

I have never been. I live in the other part of the creative world. The one where crap happens, and creativity doesn't always drip off the fingertips. Where I live people have to work hard to deliver, practice hard to get it right, and push themselves to deliver better and better work every time.

Sometimes a funk moves in. It could be a creative funk, or a business funk, or simply a malaise at the end of a particularly busy and stressful period. There can be many things that wrench our creative energy from us and leave us, well... sort of flat feeling.

The funk moves into our heads and sets up a little flat, meaning to stay for a while. And that, we simply cannot allow.

You see the problem with funk is that it can take over, create patterns of destruction, and make it more and more difficult to get out of. So we have to be proactive and kick that bastard out... evict the funk.

Each of us have ways to do that and work well for us. If you have ways to get the batteries charged and knock the funk from its roost, do it without hesitation.

For those of you who wrestle with it, I can share a few ideas that I use for banishing the funk outta my thoughts.

1. Create an Excitement “Folder”:

Make it easy to save work for your portfolio - and provide an interesting idea gallery.

I can't believe how many times I will be working with a photographer and ask to see some new images, or to send some images for a portfolio, and be told “Let me see if I can put some together”, or “I'll look for them.” That is not terribly efficient. Or wise.

I use a shortcut on the desktop to send any and ALL portfolio possibilities to a folder on an external drive. When I am working on an image, and I feel it has consideration for the portfolio, it is simply dragged to the shortcut and sent to the folder for later review. Keeping the drive external means a copy of the image is sent, so the original is still in the working folder.

When I feel a funk coming on, I go to that folder to explore and review work that I thought cool when I shot it, and now I use that work to trigger new ideas or scenarios I want to work on. Note: this is my folder of work, and not other photographers work. The images in there range from commissioned work, to personal work to iPhone snaps, and experiments. They are loosely catalogued in those titles.

I am sometimes very motivated to creating new work when looking at older/less structured work.

2. Create a Journal - then USE it

Pencil, pen, quill... who cares? Just do it on paper, not on a screen.

A Journal can be a fantastic way to spike creativity when nothing is going on. And I am not talking about a “diary” or a “blog”, I am referring to a paper journal for image ideas, fun ideas, creative ideas. I put snips of conversations, imaginary play lists, and simple sketches of ideas in mine.

Feeling in a funk? Pull out that journal and begin to make some chicken scratches on a shoot idea. Add some real world info like lens choice and lighting schema. It doesn't matter if you are ever going to make that shot, the act of doing the sketch is sometimes enough to get something else firing in your synapses.

Next thing you know you are making some images. They may or may not resemble your sketches. And it doesn't really matter.

3. Refresh the Portfolio:

Sometimes just the act of working on the portfolio gets the juices going. When is the last time you added new work to your portfolio? I am hoping new work goes in constantly, but alas I also know how notorious photographers can be about not getting new work into the book.

If you haven't worked on adding new images and deleting older ones in your book, take some time to do it. That simple, yet important project can put you back in touch with your best images... and can work as a

strong catalyst to make more.

As you begin to work on your portfolio, you will see the gaps, ideas for new shots will begin to flood in. Grab your journal and make some notes.

4. Start and complete a project:

Even a small one. Concept it, shoot it and produce it.

Yeah, a project. Done. Nothing like it to get the creative juices flowing and stimulate growth into a new project or set of images.

Choose something that can be done in a weekend. Shoot in a day or two, edit and do post on a set of images and add them to your book. Keep it simple if you haven't done it before or are so busy with all kinds of scattered projects that you feel it is impossible.

A few ideas from my current journal:

- Fake animals as decorations
- Roadtrip up 395 to Canada
- My daughters sea shell collection
- Jazz... portraits/instruments - whatever
- Antique wardrobe/edgy models
- Cafe Racer Motorcycles on Rte 66

I don't know if I will get to all of them, but they trigger more ideas all the time. And I hope to do the 395 roadtrip next Spring.

5. Two words for you. Road Trip:

Whether with a photo bud or alone.

Me, a car, the road. Instant creative flow. New places bring freshness of seeing for me. I want to shoot everything I see.

It doesn't have to be a long trip, just an afternoon could be fun. Go somewhere you don't normally go. See things you don't normally see. Take a friend, to share the journey can sometimes be stimulating to both. Creativity starts to flow and it can become quite an adventure.

Three rules:

1. If you like it, shoot it.
2. If you see it, stop the car, (or turn around) and shoot it.
3. Have fun with your photography.

6. Research some new resources, art, photography, music:

We get used to the same inspirations. Find some new places to recharge. I have so many different sites I go to for inspiration. Some are "new music" sites, some are photographer's reps sites, some are stories and articles and of course there are a few photographers I love to visit from time to time.

I also recommend the art museums, art galleries, coffee shops in your town. Here's an idea - the next time you want to go for coffee, find a little independent coffee shop at least 5 miles from where you live - a different part of town would even be better - grab your iPad or laptop and spend

some time there. Different faces, different music.

Different coffee.

Do that same exercise with other forms of art you interact with. Always listening to rock? Great: Go to Pandora and listen to some Classical.

Always looking at fashion photographers work? Cool, now discover the Renaissance painters and what they did with light.

If you specialize in food, view a bunch of lifestyle shooters. If you shoot lifestyle, check out the formal portraiture of Hollywood's "Golden Era". It really doesn't matter... just change it the heck up.

(Journal? Yeah... here too)

7. Rent a Film Camera for a Week:

It can be very zen-like to shoot a nice medium format camera.

Get an RZ, or a Hasselblad, or one of those monstrous Fuji's and make some images. If you have never shot film, get a quick lesson on how to load the camera, and make sure you understand the workings of it. RB's take two actions to get ready for the next shot, RZ's only one. If you are a telephoto shooter, rent an additional lens to keep you in that zone.

Shoot a couple of rolls, or shoot a lot. Getting the film processed will be more of a challenge in some areas than learning to shoot the camera. But you will find a place - the rental folks will tell you where to take it.

My favorite film for medium format is color negative film in the ISO 100 – 160 range and black and white in the ISO 100 – 400 range. This is not the time or place to get into all the different films, and if you haven't shot film, it may not be a discussion that would make sense at this point.

I would suggest a tripod, and use your digital camera to check exposure if you don't have a meter. Have fun with a new way of taking photos that is actually an old way... of... well, you get the picture.

8. Find a Mentor:

They are out there. Find someone who will take some time to lead and encourage you.

Sometimes all you have to do is ask. Ask for some assistance. Many photographers will be available to help. And those that aren't... well, they would probably suck at being a mentor anyway, right?

You can find people willing to help at associations like ASMP, APA, and APPA. Local chapters will be filled with folks who may take time to advise you.

Suggestions: If the photographer who wants to help you is some ol' grumpy dude who wonders why you are getting into this god-forsaken business cause it has all gone to hell and there is no hope... well... maybe he ain't the right guy to advise you in your endeavors.

I have had several wonderful mentors in my life, and all I did was ask.

9. Find and Critique Great Images:

Write three paragraphs of what you see. How does the work relate to you and your vision.

Seriously. We look at photographs all the time. But it takes time and energy to actually see them. See them.

Go online and find some great photography. Adams, Caponigro, Avedon, Penn, Weston, and Cunningham are some of the 'Masters' that I love. Take an image that you particularly like and write about it. Write three paragraphs on what it is that you like.

This is probably the hardest of all the suggestions I have made. It will force you to confront the image, your understanding of it, what it means in and out of context and more. But it also makes you see the delights that are inherent in wonderful images – of the great ones, and of your own. And writing them down reinforces what it is you find exciting about photography. Do it for an hour... creative block gone.

10. Photograph Someone who usually is not the subject of a photograph:

Make an image that they love and you love.

We can always get models. They are into having their picture taken. Sometimes they can actually stimulate the image and bring it forth. But making a cool or wonderful picture of someone who isn't used to being photographed can have it's own creative rewards as well.

I don't have any pre-conceived ideas about who and where to shoot, but I know when you read the paragraph above you instantly thought of someone you know. That person... yep, that is the one.

So from talking them into the portrait, to the shoot, post and presentation, you will be thinking creatively. It is incumbent to be creative when working with someone who may not bring any creativity to the image.

Or... they could surprise you. I love it when that happens.

Look... the funk is always looking for a place to live. Don't let it live in your head. Get it out as soon as you can.

We all have some funk in our lives, and those times are not the ones to define us. We are defined by what we accomplish, not by the funk that keeps us from accomplishing. Be strong... and kick the funk the funk out of your life.

What are some of the ways YOU deal with those bouts of funkdom that rob us of creativity and productivity?

Write them down and do them.



“It Costs What It Costs”

Have you ever purchased a car? From a dealership?

All the run around they do, the “let me take this to my manager” BS, and the “hey, what do you want to spend per month for this little honey...” makes me cringe. I am a marketer, and that stuff makes me laugh. But it also annoys the hell out of me.

I recently bought a new car (Sonata - loaded). It was pretty painless. I told them straight up that I had no time or energy for haggling (and they actually do not do that either). I wanted their best offer and if it was good I would take it and if it was not good, I would walk. Simple. I wanted their best effort and price and I got it. They came back with three proposals, and I took the middle one.

I had done my due diligence, knew the trade in value for the old blue-rocket, knew my credit score and the rates that should accompany that, and also knew the markup of the vehicles both used and new. Research is a bitch, but a beautiful bitch for sure.

I kinda laughed to myself, as the ‘three price guideline’ is something I teach a lot. And true to nature, I took the middle offer. I haggled a bit for an extended warranty (got it) and for an interior package option (didn’t get it). Why? Because they could not afford to make that deal.

Drove home in a new car. And a new car payment - something I wasn’t really used to. The monthly bill was less than the monthly mechanics bill on the blue rocket, so it evened out for a while.

The whole experience reminded me of something I read by Danielle LaPorte - a very good read for all of us in the commercial arts. “It costs

what it costs” she said. And she is absolutely right. People will always try to bring down the price. No problem with that, as we do it too. The problem is when they want to go below the price that makes sense to our business model. What we do cannot cost less than what it costs, that is an old joke.

“I lose money on every sale but make it up in volume.” And that is funny, until we are asked to do that very thing.

You know what...

“IT COSTS WHAT IT COSTS...”

No more.

No less.

In Danielle LaPorte’s book, “The Firestarter Sessions” she describes a situation where she had a brilliant idea – one the big bosses loved.

However, after she started costing it out, she found that it was a lot of money. All those hidden costs and travel and rentals and such. She feared that the proposal would be shot down.

When she next saw her boss he asked her when she was going to get started and she was a bit surprised. “Did you see the cost estimates,” she asked?

He shrugged his shoulders... “It costs what it costs.”

You can get the book on Amazon. I recommend it wholeheartedly.

So what does that mean to us?

How often have we been asked to create a bid, give a cost estimate, reply to an email with a figure that would be ‘in the ballpark’ or otherwise prepare a budget for someone else’s money?

It can be one of the scariest things we do. But do it we must.

And we have to do it well. We have to do it professionally. We have to do it without soiling ourselves and curling up into a fetal position whimpering for that simple time when the cubicle was our friend.

In other words, we have to get it done like a professional.

Just remember that it costs what it costs.

Client to you: “... and we need two shots from above the second story patio area, shot down and with a lot of angle to it. Shoot it from the middle of the foyer area.”

You: “Well there are no structures there to stand on, so we will have to bring in a scissor lift. I will get an estimate on the rental for a day.”

Client: “Well, we don’t want to spend any more than the estimate I gave you.”

You: “I understand, but scissor lifts cost more than half of this estimate.”

Client: “What, you don’t have one?”

You: “No, ours is in the shop in Milan, so we will have to rent. If you want the shot from the middle of the courtyard, it will have to be from a scissor lift. And they cost what they cost.”

Ya know...

Now for sure it is a good plan to always try to help your client budget well, but budgeting yourself out of the tools you need to do the job the right way is just plain crazy. You will remember they said no scissor lift, and so had to improvise with one of those silly kite things.

They will not. They will only see the fuzzy images from the hanging camera.

It costs what it costs.

Does that mean that you can’t find areas in the estimate to shave a little here and there? Of course not. Find them and whittle them away, but always remember the shot you want to get – need to get – must get – in order to satisfy both the client AND your own vision.

And that shot costs what it costs.

We have spoken at length about the line item approach to bids, and how they benefit both the client and the photographer, but it is so plainly clear that the costs are what they are when you see the items so plainly listed.

And remember that the top line – the “Fee” is not adjustable without a giving up something on their end. It is YOUR FEE,

and it is non-negotiable. You cost what you cost.

If this makes you feel strange or somehow uneasy, I would suggest you re-examine this part of your business.

You have spent untold hours practicing and honing your craft and learned the skills you need to pull this gig off. Even if one of the skills you learned is how to pull the gig off without really knowing how to pull the gig off. Yeah... it's an art.

Your value is set in stone when you say that you cost what you cost. That the image costs what it costs. That the production costs what it costs.

These value propositions are not frivolous, they are immediate and palpable. They help steel you against those who would devalue your work. The value you put on yourself is a deep and exciting venture... it can define you to your client.

It can define you to your crew.

It can define you to your mom (who always wanted you to be a doctor like your cousin).

And, most importantly it can define yourself to you.

When you know your value proposition, the value of the work that you do, and how others see that value, that fear and loathing thing about doing bids goes away.

Mostly.

How do you redefine your value?

Find out what others think about the type of work that you do. Ask your clients what they value most in the work you do – and in the work they get from your competitors.

Take a mental note of what you are currently charging and ask why? Are these numbers you simply pulled out of your... well, out of thin air? Or are they industry standard issue run of the mill prices? Cause, you know, you are just a standard issue run of the mill photographer? And we all know how much in demand those runofthemillboringassplainvanilla photographers are. Yeah, baby. They are rockin'..

Or not.

What is the value of your work?

What you demand for it?

Does this mean you can skip the part where you bust your ass to make really incredible, better than most, over the top creatively killer images?

OF COURSE NOT!!!!

At this level in your career you know you'd better know how to make the shot a little bit better, an edge over the plain vanilla crap, with your own style... so DO IT.

We are accepting the fact that you are already a better than average photographer. You are a talented up & coming shooter that needs to be

charging what you are worth.

Assistants are important. They hold lights. They build sets. They carry heavy stuff when you are deep into the “OMG, what was I thinking when I said I would do this shot without seeing the location first. Where’s the nearest bridge... OMG OMG...” thinking.

They are part an integral part of your team.

Assistants cost what they cost.

Sets are a valuable part of the shot. They can be shoddily constructed and fall apart every time the model steps up to it, or built right so the shoot can smoothly move ahead.

Sets cost what they cost.

Yeah, we shoot digital. That means that sometimes we need to see what we are doing right at the shoot. Digital techs make the shoot go smoother, and keeps you assistant doing what they do so well.

Digital techs are important and, surprise, they cost what they cost.

If you need something to make the shoot go smoothly and with less problems, it probably has a cost associated with it. That cost is generally set by the vendor, service, technician or talent that provides that special something.

They all cost what they cost.

Exercise:

Plan a big shoot and line item all the things you absolutely need to do the shot you planned. What do they cost?

Can you do the same shot without them?

If the answer is no, then you have your base.

(Look, we can always find ways around some costs. Borrowing a motorcycle instead of renting one is great if you have a bud with a Harley. But if you don’t, then the headaches associated with trying to find one to borrow or rent is a cost item for your client to have itemized.) Clients know this stuff too, you know.

Sure they want the least expensive way to go... saving money is a good thing.

But they also know that scrimping on art will never win them another client. Doing good work does that. (And if you are thinking... “yeah right... not the clowns I work with...” then stop working for clowns and step up to the clients who do value the work well done.)

And they can see through a poorly executed bid. They know what things cost to do it right. And they want to be sure YOU know them too. So the next time you start to put a bid together, just remember... “It costs what it costs.”

Bid accordingly.



It Isn't What You Shoot, It's HOW You Shoot What You Shoot

In the 'business' of photography some things have changed drastically since I started out a long time ago. From "day rates" to "snip tests" some of what we did as a normal part of our creative lives have either vanished or have been recreated into some new language - "TFP" will always be 'testing' to me.

What you shot helped determine a lot about your style, and helped clients understand what you do.

Don Giannatti: Landscape photographer

Don Giannatti: Fashion photographer

Don Giannatti: Architectural photographer

Hell - we had those designations ON our business cards... it was WHAT we shot.

And for a wide swath of the industry, it was enough. Clients wanted a photographer to do THAT thing - and you did THAT thing so you got the gig.

But not anymore. It is no longer good enough to simply shoot what you shoot. It is far more important HOW you shoot what you shoot.

Style.

One of the most difficult and challenging things we deal with as photographers is style. It is a defining point of our work. It is one of the things that will set our work apart from the other photographers out there. Style will be our calling card, the incredibly complex nature of our style will be the simplest thing people see. Our work.

And yet style cannot be taught, nor would you want it to be. It shouldn't be contrived, forced, manipulated or fake. It has to be authentic. And that can be one of the biggest challenges a photographer can face.

Let's get a few things out of the way first. You must be a shooter first. That means that the technical stuff isn't getting in the way. You can light what you want, and can create a shot under duress and deliver an excellent result every time. Well, if not excellent then really really really good.

We have to discover what it is you love to shoot. That may sound easy, but it can take a lot of personal introspection to find that inner driving point that makes it all come together. We will look at a few ways to get yourself directed toward the kind of work that you really love to do. And doing what you love is such a great way to make a living as a photographer.

Question:

What do you shoot? Are you a glamor photographer or an editorial portrait specialist? Do you like to shoot landscapes or still life or architecture? Or is fashion your focus? If you already know what you want to do, that's great. Are you doing it? If not, what is getting in your way and preventing you from doing what you want to do? Take the time to note what you are doing to sabotage your images from getting made if you aren't currently making them.

Is it time? Could you cut out some television, or weekend projects? Could you get one shot a weekend done while still spending time with family or obligations? Can you plan very tightly to keep yourself focused on a shot per weekend?

Is it money? Are there ways to do what you do without spending money? Portraiture or street shooting shouldn't cost at all. Can you find people and partners who can work with you to get what you need without spending money? Are there ways to piggyback tripods out of town with a few hours or a day shooting?

Is it gear? Naw... that doesn't fly with me. If you have a camera, you can make photographs. Now, sure... you may want to create rockstar shots with 12eleventy lights and trestles and gaffers and grips. Well... that ain't gonna happen. But if you have a camera, you can use available light, bounce cards and great ideas to get to *done* on the making pics thing.

Are you lacking ideas? Well, this is a tough one. If you are unable to find ideas to make photographs, then you may find this a difficult business to work through. However, if you need to prime the pump so to speak – and we all have to do that at some point – hit the bookstore, grab a coffee and start looking at magazines. Look at magazines where the interest focus is NOT what you are interested in. You want stimulation? Try magazines that you have not much interest in... then when the image captures you... BAM! That is a great idea... right?

Inertia. Getting moving. The first step. Work on it. Your subject is not your style.

I'll say it again. Your subject is not your style. Your subject is your subject. It is what you shoot. It is your choice to aim the camera in the direction of what you like to photograph is a personal choice. A choice of subject. How you shoot it is your style. What the image looks like is your style. How it engages the viewer and creates an emotion or reaction... that is attributable to your style. You could be a classic fashion shooter or a clas-

sic architectural shooter or a classic portraitist. Classic means you have a style that you apply to what you do. If you are wild and crazy, and that look carries across the subject matter, then you have a strong style.

You will be hired for *How You Shoot What You Shoot*, not just **What** you shoot.

Let's take portraiture. You can go to department stores and get a "portrait" made. You can get a portrait made at a photobooth, or a church fundraiser, or from that nice lady who lives across the street - the one that used to sell time-shares - she has a really good camera and can snap a pic or two.

A portrait.

Or you could hire Dan Winters to make a photograph of you. Or Emily Shur. Or Scott Toepfer or Platon. The work would be the same thing genre wise... a portrait. But it would certainly not look like those department store pix. Each of these photographers would bring their style to the work... their way of seeing, their way of making an image that does more than simply capture your image on a sensor.

And let's be perfectly clear; if your images look like they could have been taken at the local department store, there is no way in the world you are going to be successful on any level but that... \$29.95 packages of forgettable pictures.

I had a photographer who was quite frustrated come to me once and ask "what am I doing wrong?" He could not figure out why he could not get an account that for him should have been an easy cash-flow money cow.

Youth sports team photos were a great way for him to stay busy in the traditional slow times in his city, and he was totally confused as to why he couldn't get in the door.

"Look at these shots," he said, "they are exactly like the other guys work and I can't get in the door."

I asked him to repeat what he had said because he had nailed it... that was his problem. And it wasn't that he couldn't get through the door, it was that his work looked just like the other guys work. Period.

And it was schlock - ten steps below what my friend was capable of doing.

I told him to make HIS shots, his way and see what happened. Take the lights and the batteries, take the booms and the stands - go the extra mile on making images that stand out. That are YOUR images, and see what happens.

He did nearly \$40K that season alone.

His style resonated with the kids, and they in turn begged mom for more photos... cause they were cool.

As to how to know what your style is... well, that is a challenge. And I don't think you should go out and seek a style. Rather your style is some-

thing that is revealed the more you shoot. We tend to gravitate toward those things that intrigue us about our own and others work.

Clarke Terry's marvelous quote about jazz always resonates with me: "*Imitate. Assimilate. Innovate.*" And I think it is true in photography as well. Naturally gravitate toward someone who's style you love and find if it works for you. Imitate.

Learn to shoot in that style until it is second nature. Assimilate. Break through and add your own twists, turns, runs, and personality to the work. Innovate.

Imitating and assimilating are easy. There are so many clones of great photographers it is sometimes difficult to see past the facade. Innovating his hard.

But necessary.

Your style is revealed by looking back, not determining forward. Style should not be contrived or artificial, it should be an organic part of your process.

And it is NOT what action or plugin you are using in Photoshop or Lightroom. C'mon... if your style is dependent on a \$60 piece of software, you have no style at all. You have a gimmick.

Take ten of your favorite photographs by someone you admire style-wise

and in your journal make comments on the following:

What kind of lighting is predominant?:

- Natural
- Appears natural
- Dark and Moody
- Single Light
- Multiple Lights
- Location Heavy
- Studio Heavy

Add any additional criteria you want to add.

Note all things that are the similar in the work.

How does the photographer handle composition?:

- Classical
- Funky
- Off Kilter
- In Close
- Far Away
- Horizontal Prominent
- Vertical Prominent
- High Angle
- Low Angle

Add any additional criteria you want to add.

Note all things that are the similar in the work.

What kind of post production do they do?:

- Heavy Post
- Medium Post
- Minimal Post
- No Post.

Add any additional criteria you want to add.

Note all things that are the similar in the work.

At this point it is important to note that we are not caring about subject matter. We are looking at ways photographers create a style. It may not be a style that you are interested in or it may be such a blast that it makes you want to shoot like that. Cool. You can't copy, you can only work through it as an inspiring model.

And that is so true. Taking the time to do this with a couple of the names above is a great way to see how photographers work within parameters they set themselves. Don't do all of them, but do a couple for sure. I suggest that you use one or two of the photographers you love. And do one or two of those shooters who may not be your cup of tea. It is a great exercise. Sharpens the mind.

NOW DO IT AGAIN WITH 10 OF YOUR IMAGES.

This can be quite an eye opening exercise - and it can be done by photographers of every level.

If you have been shooting for only a couple of years, it may be entirely possible that you do not have a style yet. Or if you do you are still in the Assimilate stage. Finding your own voice, one that resonates with your

heart and mind is the most important part of all of this process of professional photography.

There are legions of mediocre photographers out there crying the blues because they cannot get a gig - remember the story of my friend. If your work is stylistically the same as 8 dozen other photographers, there is a great chance that no one cares. You haven't given anyone a reason to care. Give them a reason to note your work. Give them a reason to champion your imagery.

If you cannot do that, then give them an estimate that's \$5 less than the other photographer that shoots the same way you do.

That works everytime. :-)



Gravity; A Force of Nature, Not a Way of Life

One of the more difficult things to wrap our arms around is that not everyone out there wants us to succeed. In fact, the numbers are highly stacked against us. More people will seem to want to douse your flame of passion before it gets lit than to block the wind for you and make it easier.

I don't know why that is. I don't.

But we see it everywhere. Writ large and writ small, the people we engage with seem to be either indifferent to our successes or actively engaged in diminishing them.

The media touts destruction and sorrow, with a steady drumbeat of negativity. Even as gas prices are falling all over this country, there are many pundits who are now saying that will bring ruin. Same pundits who predicted ruin when gas prices were on the way up.

We hear that if the economy is roaring, it is a terrible time to start a business because there are already too many businesses doing well. That leaves no place for us.

We also hear that if the economy is doing poorly, it is a terrible time to start a business because there are too few businesses doing well. Schizophrenia is a terrible malady, NYT... you should see someone about that.

We all know that "haters gonna hate". And trolls are a new level of disgust pooped from the bowels of the internet. Trolls and haters don't count... not at all. My advice is simply given, but a bit more difficult to do: Ignore them. In every way.

Arguing with trolls (which I am guilty of doing in the past) is a losing battle. They are by definition NEVER going to have their minds changed because that is NOT what they are about. They are trolls (reference the "Scorpion and the Frog" story for more clarity).

Haters are even a lower form of life, and need to trouble you not. Screw 'em.

But barring the cretinous haters and trolls, we have many people who will stand in our way with good intentions - and they are a bit more tricky to deal with.

The "I don't want to see you be disappointed" crowd is usually parents and older relatives who really only want to see you succeed but many times bring their own fears and failures forward to stack on your back.

This is of course, unfair, but being angry is not the way to deal with those folks. Let them know that you understand that failure is a possibility, one that you have prepared yourself for. Failure can indeed be in your future, but you will accept it only if you have done every possible thing you can to succeed.

Remind them that Disney was bankrupt twice in his life, that Sylvester Stallone was a bit actor with a screenplay about a boxer. Edison was nearly out of funds when he found the material for an electric lightbulb. And Colonel Sanders was a retired guy with a chicken recipe... and running out of funds as well.

To do anything great, risk must be involved. Otherwise there is no greatness. Only the mundane. Tell them that you appreciate and acknowledge

their advice, but that you must move on with your dream - and the associated risk - if only to prove to yourself it can be done.

When you meet the naysayers group, the “nobody is making any money in that business” folks, you will undoubtedly be in for some long, undocumented, vague and creepy novellas of treachery, deceit, and defeat.

“My sister’s best friend’s brother knew a guy who knew a guy who was the brother of a woman who wanted to do this and she failed badly... nearly sank her whole town.”

Questions regarding what exactly went wrong are met with shrugs, and vague guesses, but then it isn’t really a news story they are telling you. It is a fictional report of a made up failure to illustrate their own fears.

Which are probably not your fears. (Not that we don’t have fears. No, we got entire rooms full of fears but they are also probably not relatable to their fears.)

Let them know that a lot of people who are unprepared want to go into business right after buying a zoom lens or a Mac. And that unpreparedness is more likely to have been a big contributor to their massive fail than anything else. Let them know you are prepared, you have completed your research, and have your ducks in a row.

Being prepared means the risks are mitigated. Not gone, just made a more palatable percentage point change. They may be a little more understanding, but there are still residual concerns.

Dealing with the obviously and truly jealous is also problematic. Some of them are not even aware of their envy and how it is manifesting itself in comments and little actions meant to demean what you are doing.

“Yeah, those big contracts come along now and then, but be careful... they will probably try to rip you off, and then you will be left holding the bag.” Well, probably not, actually. But your success worries them because if you are successful they may have to face the fact that they were either not ready, not very good, or completely confused by the business. That makes them feel their loss doubly hard, and they see it as a failure all around.

Now we have our last troublesome group, the ones who feel that your success directly creates their failures. These are the “zero-sum” folks - and the world is full of them. Unfortunately.

They see success as a limited quantity of something... and if you have more, someone else must have less. That is NOT true, never has been.

Your success can breed more success for others. You being successful can inspire someone you may never have met into doing something they may never have thought about doing. Being great at what you do can be the impetus for someone else’s greatness as well.

Gravity is such a powerful force of nature. Pulling something down is always easier than lifting something up. Not only in the real world, but in the psychology of our daily interactions.

Now you have seen some of the habits and traits of people who may be bringing others down. You can recognize those traits. And if you are exhibiting any of them, you can stop that right now.

Be a mentor. Be a sponsor. Be a friend that inspires, cajoles, pushes and expects greatness.

Be a positive, uplifting force for good.

It is, in the end, a hell of a lot more fun!



Don't Be A Clone

Nobody likes a clone.

A clone is a copy, a non-authentic 'ringer' that has no soul, no guts, no passion, no quirks or guilts or pleasures.

And it is way, way too easy to be a clone. Just copy something or someone and do that as you.

But it is you.

Case in point.

A very talented media person who I work with spent many, many hours researching her WP theme. Upon deciding on it, she spent many more hours customizing it to be a perfect 'magazine' for her publication. With the added coding required for special posts, it is a very nicely done site. Another one of the people that worked with us saw her site and asked a bazillion questions about the custom post types and what was done to create such a marvelous looking site.

Then went and got the same theme and built the same custom post types for a nearly cloned site. Although the content is different, the look and feel is identical... and this caused a problem.

The person who had built the original site was miffed that she had been 'ripped off' and the person who had appropriated her site felt that since it was a WP theme, all was fair.

Both are actually right. It is indeed a commercial theme - and there is no copyright or proprietary ownership of custom post types and fonts and

such. And she wasn't really 'ripped off', but more like appropriated.

But what is inherent in the original site is a feeling of authenticity, of originality. Something only found when you are on the front lines of trying to make some goddam thing work - and work well for you and your specialized needs.

And there is a feeling of a win as you wrangle those problems and shards of ideas into something cohesive that is exactly what you wanted.

Copying it, however, is simply copying it. "Command C/Command V" is not a win. It is a non authentic approach that has no passion or desire or plan. It's a no heart, no guts approach.

Now for sure others who do not know of the existence of the original site will NEVER be any more aware, and the clone site does indeed look pretty nice - but not because of anything special the clone did, but all to do with that original site designer busting her ass.

After it all settles, something has been lost.

The struggle for excellence has been sidestepped in favor of the damn "easy button" and what could have been discovered was not. To think that someone else's approach to something would so perfectly match your own that it is a slam dunk is to miss the idea of unique and authentic.

He needed to struggle with a theme... hell, even that theme. He needed to stay up late and look at font combinations again and again and again to find the ones that were so perfectly his that they screamed at him from every H1 tag. If you have never fought through a design struggle, then you will never learn how to fight through one.

And you just may have to do that one day. Especially if you are a, you know, designer.

Photography is very much the same way. Finding out what actions a photographer in your town uses may be wonderful for that imitation phase (school/beginner - NOT in business yet), but by the time we are into innovation and creating an authentic vision, that is simply not acceptable anymore.

How could the 'style' of a forty seven year old mother of three who photographs children in natural light wearing old people's clothes' be the style of a 20 year old hipster in a NYC loft working with 'alternative' talent? C'mon... it may be a rare coincidence, but very rare.

You must speak from your authentic self every time you make a photograph, chat with a client, invoice a gig, post a blog article or - and this is important - talk about another photographer.

Let me make a bold statement here: Authentic people are not petty people. Authentic people are not jealous or envious. Nor are they gossips or naysayers. They spend their precious time making their authentic work,

not disparaging or stealing the work of others. That is truly a waste of time and effort and results in a badly made clone if it results in anything at all.

And clones are easy to spot, actually. There is a bit of lifelessness in their eyes, they are not fun to be around and they cannot dance the Tango. Which is an important part of all life on planet earth. Trust me on this. We are oftentimes presented with opportunities to simply cut and paste something else and call it our own. And there may be times when we are tempted because of the banality of what it is. But think long and hard about what that does to YOUR creative muscles.

It cheats them from a solid workout. It is taking your creatives to the gym all excited to work out and then spending the afternoon in the doughnut store next door. Too easy. No challenge.

Do it once... and perhaps no harm done. Do it twice and we are now seeing the beginnings of a trend. Do it a couple more times and it is now a defining way of doing business and you are no longer pushing for excellence.

In the consumer side of photography we have seen some major players lose a lot of their credibility from that ol' cut and paste habit. Big names at the top of their game for reasons that are simply lost on me figured they could steal a little snippet here, a line or two there... who would notice or even care.

Somebody noticed. A LOT of people cared. It was a matter of character, or the lack thereof, that was on display that made a mockery of their claims of authentic creativity.

Look. Being authentic is being YOU. It is owning up to your mistakes, challenges and losses. And to pretend that there were none will always bring us back to the pain of being found out as a putz.

I could go on and on about being authentic, uniquely you and how important it is. But I think you may have the idea.

*Being the best you can be is far
better than trying to be the best
someone else.*



Photography Is an Incredible Art

Photography at its best can be a reflection of the world in ways that we have never been seen before. It is the photographer's vision that makes the image become more than it could have been.

But at the heart of the photographer's vision, there is a deep foundation of the art and the technology that is required to create images that transcend the normal.

Photography is one of the most incredible art forms known.

It combines composition, and color, and tonality, and aesthetic sensibilities with technology that is as precise as it is deliberate.

Many art forms can lay claim to that set of parameters - or at least many of them.

But only photography has the element of time. Time frozen in the vision of the photographer. Time that was captured in an instant of the photographers choosing.

That choice made by determining the nature of the subject unfolding in front of them... in a heartbeat or faster, the shutter captures something that was seen, but only in that moment.

Dance can be seen live, and on video or film, but the moments of the dance are blurred to create an entire piece meant to be savored from the beginning to the end.

A painter can paint the dancer again and again and again to get it just right.

But a photographer has no second chances, no video to show a totality. A photographer has a single moment.

A single photograph of a dancer, caught in that never to be seen again moment is all up to the one who makes the decision. The decision to activate a shutter that reveals the light.

At that exact moment in time.

Precisely at the moment the photographer has been waiting for, planning for, working for... that "moment" when it all comes together and makes something extraordinary.

And then it is gone. Forever.

But for the image that was caught, that moment is lost.

Time is the vessel of photography. The print is its legacy.

Imagine the skill involved in making that choice. Imagine the depth of sheer knowledge that is brought to bear on that 'click'... that moment that the photographer has chosen to capture. Imagine photography without the limitations of time.

Skills that develop slowly give way to a comfort in the making of images. A comfort that will inevitably give way to a deeper push for better skills

and understanding of the process.

Like the tall trees on the beach, photography is seen on the surface, but buoyed by the deeper roots of the artist.

And like the trees, artists with deep roots weather the toughest of storms, the heat of summer and the frost of winters. The roots keep them anchored even as they are thrown about on the surface by storms of indifference and self doubt.

At least long enough for them to stalk that moment in time when all come together whether from deliberateness or whimsy, and that tiny sliver of a moment is caught and rendered as a photograph.



On Creativity

Occasionally we run into the argument of whether or not 'creativity' can be taught, or does it have to be born within us? We read all about creativity and how important it is. We award little statuettes to really 'creative' people. Creativity is blessed, cursed, chased, obsessed over, ignored, beaten down and vindicated.

It is a word so over used that we mention Stravinsky and Lady GaGa in the same breathless discussion of creativity. Schools want to nurture it (bullshit). Companies seek it (bull-bullshit). Poets have it in spades (bull... oh never mind).

But have you ever tried to simply define it? Being creative can also be cruel, savage, inhumane and anarchistic. Creativity can mean simply doing something different... so what? If I take the garbage out with my left hand instead of my right hand, as I do every day, is that "creative"?

I rarely think about creativity, as I long ago realized something about creativity that made me wary. Creativity claims to be your buddy, your pal... your roommate along the path to making cool shit. but creativity rarely keeps up his end of the bargain. He leaves the place a mess, hits on your girlfriend, steals your money and drinks your beer.

And then one day, ol 'creativity' waltzes out the door destined to befriend that kid down the street, or the woman downstairs. He hasn't even paid for his half of the electricity.

Bastard.

So here are a few things I know about creativity. And believe me, after being in the 'creative' business for nearly my entire working life, I know

this guy. Here's the skinny...

Ten things I Know About Creativity:

1. Creativity is not something you bestow on yourself, but something that others bestow upon you. Creativity to the creative person is simply the way they work. Calling yourself 'creative' may not mean it is so, and in fact, I find it runs pretty much the opposite. Every time I see the title "creative photographer" I want to mutter under my breath, "says who"?
2. Creativity is not a method or a system or a learned behavior. It is inherent in all of us, but few of us let it be what it is. Out of fear or laziness, self pity or arrogance, ignorance or infinite exploration, we eschew creativity and choose the safer, well worn paths. Ignorance of creativity is a very smart way to get along in some circles. Washington DC for instance.
3. Creativity cannot be taught. It doesn't have to be. It only needs to be unleashed. Getting out of its way is the most difficult of challenges. We are not conditioned to allow creativity to go unchecked. From our earliest age we must walk in a straight line, color inside the lines, sit at our desks, study what some older person deems is important to us. Creativity and schooling is like a fish with a bicycle.
4. Why do we automatically consider creativity good? Hitler was fairly creative in his endeavors, getting farther along the path to madness than most would have been able to go. Some murderous monsters are creative in the ways they trap their prey... while eluding capture. Creativity can be horrific when applied to horrific things. Creativity has no soul other than the one wielding it. Creativity is not good or bad, it is simply its own person, and he does what he wants. We allow him to run free or channel

his wanderings and misadventures. Our call, not his.

5. Creativity can be within specific genres and may not necessarily spill across the entire spectrum of a persons life. One may be incredibly talented in music, but not very good at drawing. A sculptor may be able to see and reveal an incredible masterpiece, while a concert level pianist may not be able to see anything but a piece of rock. This is not good or bad creativity... it just is creativity in different spaces of humanity.

6. Creativity is shown simply and honestly... and not in a good or bad notion. One may be very very creative and turn out pure shit in the eyes of the world. A 3 year old with a canvas and 56 paints could have the time of their lives... being creative and exploding color across the field in ways NO ONE has ever seen.

So what?

Creativity does not necessarily create masterpieces. Sometimes creativity creates shit. And then he stands there smugly demanding that we LOVE what he did... it was so, you know, creative.

7. Work that is derivative can be creative, if the act of derivation ends with something that we think is worthy. It can also end on a bad note if it is not as good as the original. We see creativity usually on the backside, not the front. We see the results not the action, and we rarely see the prelude. Sure "Batman" was pretty creative back when Marvel was cranking them out and we were spending a quarter to keep up with the story. But these days, they are simply worn out 'toons with two hundred million dollar budgets. Boring, predictable and lame.

8. Creativity is a tool. Creativity is a honorarium. Creativity is a joke. Creativity is divine. If Lady Gaga is creative, then what would we call Eliot Carter? Stravinsky? Coltrane? If P-Diddy is creative, what do we call the hordes of rappers that came before and after that sound the same... identical even, to his work? If Copland was creative, how do we explain it to someone who has never heard the music? How about explaining music to someone who has never heard music before... ever? Now that would be creative.

9. Creativity is over-rated. We have turned anything a bit different into "creativity at its finest". If building the space shuttle and twitter are both creative, is there any difference given to the importance of the creation? Can "Cats" be considered as creative as "Othello?" Is a child like presentation of a Chopin Etude be considered as creative as a performance by a prodigy - or indeed the creator himself? If we consider creativity to be some mark on a ledger or tick on a measuring stick, then we have to be able to quantify it.

Go ahead... give it a go. Quantify creativity.

Good luck with that.

10. Creativity is not definable. Not in any way I can comprehend. And yet I know creativity when I see it, hear it, taste it. We all can agree that we know creative people, and yet we may be somewhat dismayed when we discover who each of us believe to be creative.

I rarely think of creativity as something I want to achieve. It is never how I discuss my own work. If my work is creative, others will note and if it is not, then it will be noted as well. To seek it wastes time, as it cannot

be found. It only reveals itself when it is ready, and when the moment is right.

Our job is to make more opportunities for creativity to be revealed. We do that through practice, and study, and work, and effort, and critiques (positive and negative) and friends who are not afraid to call you on the work, and enemies that make you defend, or retreat, or rethink. Creativity is a pain in the ass. It has no guarantee of being revealed. There is no magical criteria (10,000 hours my ass), no 'aha' moment, no grace to be bestowed. It can leave you waiting at the altar after promising you a thousand times that it loved you. It is heartless and loving, cruel and kind, manic and patient.

And often it is disguised as something else. Something more familiar than trendy, more ethereal than processed. Sometimes creativity is disguised as hard work.

Creativity means something to each of us, but it is rarely something that I think we should be chasing. Rather we should be chasing the near perfection that comes from working whatever we do to the heart of it. From shooting every day. From being relentless critics to stalwart defenders of

our work. Creativity needs nothing from us, but we give our all to achieve it.

Sometimes we are awake to see creativity arrive, but we rarely know its name nor recognize its power. Most of the time we are working on our work so hard we never see it arrive, we couldn't care less what we call it and we never remember to acknowledge it. We just keep working. So creativity sits on our shoulders for a while.

Resting in its comfortable by-the-month apartment, putting his feet on the furniture and parking his car on our lawn.

But you can be sure about one thing... creativity can be a mercurial and disloyal pal while he camps on your shoulders. He will come over for BBQ and Corona's, flirt with your wife and hang around long enough to borrow your lawnmower and never return it when he leaves.

You see, creativity rarely moves in, buys a house and puts in a pool.



Photography is a Privilege

Is making a photograph easy?

Good question... although the question should really be;

Should making a photograph be easy?

We seem to expect it to be. I see the ads about how easy it is to “click” and get a picture. Kodak said it decades earlier: “Push the button and we do the rest.” Now Ashton Kucher, the uh, actor or whatever he is, tells us that it is even easier.

I see post after post on forums everywhere that seem to say “I don’t have time to learn this, just show me how to do it really well. I got a minute. I have to do an annual report next tuesday and my ass is on the line. How do I light a CEO?”

To record an image to a sensor is an extremely easy thing to do these days. Point and shoots do it amazingly well. And the new pro cameras are simply awesome. Throw in a flash and a modicum understanding of light and ‘voilA’ - a photograph.

We can post it on Flickr. Stick it on a hard drive. Transfer it to our iPhones.

Easy.

But is it so easy to make a photograph? I mean an image that connects with the viewer. One that means something to the people who see it. Should it be easy to make a photograph? Seriously... should it? Will it ever be?

Not an image. That should be as easy as, well... a click I guess.

What I am talking about is making an image that transcends the ‘pictures’ we make and reaches a new place.

I submit to you that it is easy to make an image, and terribly difficult to make a photograph.

Making a photograph requires more than a camera, or the newest sensor, or gazillions of pixels. It has more to do with the photographer than the camera. The thought processes that got the photographer from the bed to the place where he/she is standing and ready to click the shutter.

So many of us spend so much time talking about lenses, cameras, pixels, lights, stands, whether we should take an umbrella to the beach (heh) and other stuff that we forget about talking about photographers. About photography. As a verb.

Us.

We matter in the taking of a photograph. We make the difference between a capture and a photograph. What we think. Who we are. Our depth of life experience (or lack of it) can make so many differences in the choices we make to commit that moment to a still shot. An image is a momentary snap of reality that is recorded for review. Lots of images are simply

wonderful too, so this is not a slam on simple images or snaps or whatever. However, a photograph can bring us back again and again to a place in our emotions that call up more complexity.

Or not.

Consider this: A photograph by Edward Weston or the snapshot of your parents now gone, taken before they were trampled by age and smiling together - a rare moment - as they went out the door for a party. Which provides more emotion for you. Side by side it is a no brainer. At least for me. Which would I grab and head for the door in a fire if I could only take one? See ya 'Peppers'.

The image can become a photograph by extraneous emotions of the beholder. If I were not there and someone came in to save my things, I imagine they would take the framed 'Pepper' shot and not the little picture on the desk of mom and dad. The difference is what they brought to the image. Not in the image itself. We bring things to the picture after it is taken.

What do we bring to the image before we take the snap? Is it easy? Simple maybe, but easy?

In this fast world where you can board a plane in Phoenix and end up in Atlanta in about 3 hours, take your camera out and make a snap of the concourse and hook up the iPhone for some Coltrane, the thought that making pictures should be easy is probably normal. Yeah, I'm good with that.

But I don't think making a photograph is easy. It is made more difficult

by the ease of creating an image. Does that make sense? As the making of a snap becomes quicker and easier (no film, processing and darkrooms needed) the ability to transcend the mere making of an image becomes more difficult. When everyone can make a picture that is exposed well, lit reasonably well, in focus and with glorious Photoshopped enhanced color, the call is to make an image that somehow goes beyond that set of parameters and touches the viewer, or moves them, or repulses them, or makes them think, do, act... whatever.

That is not easy. That is as hard as any other art form. Hell, maybe harder due to the fact that everyone can reasonably do it. I can sit any person down at my keyboard or drums and if they cannot play... they cannot play. No button to push. No "Easy Button" or whatever. They are gonna have no idea and the learning curve is substantial. Give them a 70D and they can put it on auto and make some reasonably good captures. Some point and shoots will even alert you if the subject wasn't smiling. When they can make decent coffee, I'm gettin' one.

So the ability to make a clean image is just not a big deal anymore. To me that means that making an image which goes beyond that level is made

even harder.

My questions to you is: Do you think about photography as being the result of the gear you have or the thought processes that goes before? Is it the print or the moment? The action or the result? Is it a question of how that you first think, or one of why? Are they both important, or are neither of any consequence?

Is the making of a photograph easy? Or are you challenged every moment that you work at it.

I am. I want to make some photographs as I make thousands of images. It can be such a daunting task. Like triple paradiddles, but uh, different. But every time I grab the camera I think 'maybe this time' and work as hard as I can on the image before me.

To make a photograph that makes someone else feel something is a privilege. And a rare one at that.



Be Deliberate

Be certain. Be sure. Be deliberate.

Now this may sound strange coming from someone who advocates challenging everything, finding new solutions, and experimenting, but they actually go very well together.

When I say be deliberate, I am talking about a process from 0 - 100 with certainty and responsibility at the wheel.

Being deliberate means being responsible for every square millimeter of the image. Every nuance, every gesture, every leading line... every compositional faux-pas.

Every screwed up exposure, or cut off feet, or blown out sky or, gulp, overly HDR'd process disaster.

WE DO THIS - WE DO IT DELIBERATELY.

Well, OK, we don't screw up deliberately, but the screw ups happen BECAUSE we are not deliberate in our work.

Let's start with gear.

Photographers tell me they are hard on their gear. They break stuff all the time. That is certainly their prerogative to continue on that path, but for me it is a lack of deliberate attention that is the problem.

When I was assisting in LA, I worked with a still life / food shooter that was extremely organized and deliberate in how he worked. I assisted him for a two week gig and learned a lifetime of good practices from him. No,

I am not as anal as he was, but I am very deliberate in my work.

He had a cabinet with shelving custom designed to hold his gear. Lens shelves were clearly marked with the lens designation, stands were numbered and hung, and booms were placed in order on a custom stand rack. EVERY piece of gear was numbered, ordered and assigned a place on the wall for easy retrieval next time it was needed. And it was always there.

Cleaning up the studio was a cinch when you knew where everything went, and no piece of gear was ever lost, or gone missing - even temporarily. The very deliberate way he handled his gear allowed him greater confidence in his creativity since not a moment was wasted in trying to find some gizmo that had been put away in the wrong spot. Genius.

There was another photographer in LA that I had wanted to assist for over a year. I loved his work, loved his styling and was very interested in seeing how he lit those majestic headshots.

Finally I got the opportunity and for those four days I also learned how incredible deliberate he was with every part of his work.

White cards around the face were not simply put below, but were cut, and edges bound with white gaffers to create a seamless white environment below the face. Moving the softbox or beauty dish an inch or so would make big differences - at least to him - and were part of his deliberate approach to making imagery that was perfect in every way.

We didn't have Photoshop. It wasn't an option.

And yeah, we have Photoshop today and it is an option.

And being sloppy and not in control is easily remedied with a few layers, a cloning tool and some applied masking.

But why not be deliberate... what would it hurt?

What would be gained is attention to detail, attention to the craft, and the power of understanding the details that separate good from great.

I am certainly NOT saying that we shouldn't use the tools at hand, I am advocating for complete mastery which renders the incredible tools we have even more powerful. Instead of "fixing" we are enhancing.

One more thing... being deliberate in what we do leads to mastery of what we do... and masters get more money for what they do.

When I look at photographs I like to ask photographers why they included certain things in their images; a garbage can in the distance, a parked car behind the subject's legs that ruins the line, or a readable sign in the distance that pulls the eye from the subject.

One answer invariably get is; "I didn't see that when I took the picture."

OK.

Let me get this straight... other than seeing what was in your viewfinder and setting the exposure, exactly WHAT else were you doing that pre-

vented you from SEEING what was in the damn viewfinder... seems to me that SEEING what was in the viewfinder was your single and ONLY job at the time.

The screwed up background is not a mistake seen afterward, it was a deliberate choice you made at the moment you pressed the shutter button. Either that or you were NOT deliberate and NOT in control of what you were doing.

How is that for a great working style? Maybe you could put it on your business card;

"When I get lucky, I make good photos."

"Every Now and Then Memories are Made"

"I don't totally suck."

Awesomesauce... as they say.

I use a light meter for a lot of my work, although after working with the same tools and the same light for 40+ years, I have begun to understand and know the light... not a guess, a genuine understanding. It will happen with you as well.

Like seeing the music when listening to it. :-)

A long, long time ago I took a workshop from a famous landscape/art nude photographer on the west coast, Brett Weston. He was the son of an even more famous photographer (Edward Weston) and I was feeling pretty amazing that crisp morning standing on the side of the ocean near Carmel, CA. I had my Deardorff, and my 14” lens and my big, heavy tripod and we were looking for something to shoot.

I placed the tripod on the uneven terrain and began to compose on the large, 8x10 ground glass, black cloth draped dramatically over my head and shoulders. As I was nearing the moment of making the deliberate decision of WHAT I was going to shoot, the famous photographer Brett Weston drew closer to my setup.

I was feeling pretty amazing that morning... on the same lands that Edward had made so iconic, with his son at our side and making photographs in the hazy light.

I pulled my meter from my belt and, using the ambient dome began to make a meter check for exposure.

Mr. Weston's reaction was one of horror and dismay... and I was on the receiving side of a blistering lecture on understanding the light, and that light was the same all the time and if I didn't understand light, then what the hell ELSE was there to understand?

He was right, of course, but it took the bright and shiny part of the experience and made it a little more rough and sort of icky... for a while anyway.

Being able to see the light in measurement IS an important part of photography. Most of us can see it pretty well, but maybe not as well as others. Weston was right in that we should SEE that light, but many times we do not have the luxury of being wrong - even a little bit wrong.*

I got over it. Fast.

Understanding light IS what we are supposed to do. Cameras do not see subjects, cameras see how light is reflected from the subject. Cameras don't see composition, they see only what we frame and how we frame it, and then they capture on film or card what we do with the light we are given.

Sometimes we are given light that is so perfect for our subject, that it is like a gift from heaven. Other times the light is not what we want, and we must do something to it, or add to it, or detract from it or something in order for our subject to be seen in the best of it.

And how we do it is deliberate, and ultimately OUR responsibility. “The light was really crappy that day” is simply NO excuse. The fact is that we did not use the light that was given to us in a deliberate way. We let our conceived notions of what light should be drive us from what the light is. Or at least what it was on that day, and at that location.

And that is not the way a deliberate photographer thinks. There is no bad light, nor great light, there

is only light - and what WE do with it is as deliberate as the choice of shutter speed and aperture.

My meter gives me absolute measurements of the light I am working with. I take that information and make absolute choices based on what I want to achieve. Could we “chimp it in”? I suppose we could... but that seems sort of a sloppy, ill conceived notion of technology to me.

And even those choices are defining, powerful and deliberate. Some ideas for being deliberate in what you do:

1. Note all lens choices. Write them down if you must, but KNOW them. Be able to ‘see’ through that lens by being aware of what things look like through that lens.
2. Know every exposure, and be able to defend WHY you chose that exposure for the image. If there is no reason, you were not being deliberate.
3. Choose ISO with deliberate understanding of how and why it will affect all aspects of the image you are about to make.
4. Compose your images with careful attention to EVERY detail in the frame. Search the corners, search the background, and adjust accordingly.
5. Use what you have to make what you want. A deliberate photographer is not limited by their gear, but freed from it by total and complete understanding of what they can do with what they have.
6. Don’t censor or edit your work while creating, but be as considerably deliberate as you can while making the images.
7. Expect to fail. Expect to learn from that failure. Failure with deliberate intentions will teach you more than unexpected lucky shots.

8. Choose every piece of gear with complete and focused deliberate intention. What will it do to make your work better... consistently better?
9. Concentrate on what you are doing and close out all distractions. Try to find a working method that allows you to be open to the imagery around you... and then deliberately repeat those circumstances whenever possible.
10. Enjoy the serendipitous moments that happen within a very deliberate approach. They are revealing themselves to you BECAUSE of the control you have put on yourself.

Being deliberate is challenging and can create some angst in those of us who have never had a lot of discipline attached to our work and our working methods.

But trust me when I say it will make you a much, MUCH better photographer.

If you let it.

**Today I can see light in f-stops pretty well. Within tolerances of course, but well enough to get a shot and have the exposure be damn close to what it should be. I worked on that ability by first guessing the exposure based on what I knew (Sunny 16 and ISL) then double checking on the light meter. Not a big deal. Anyone can learn this if they put their mind to it, and practice.*



Baggage Sucks

What do I mean by “baggage”?

I mean the crap we think about when we are making our work, the stuff that goes on between our ears that may have NOTHING at all to do with reality, but begins to weigh on us with false intentions and ruinous decisions.

When I was younger (Jurassic period I believe), I ate a dill pickle on an outing. The pickle was tainted with some hellacious thing and I spent two days hugging the porcelain god.

I couldn't be around the smell of dill pickles for years. The mere mention of a dill pickle would make me want to gag.

And of course, this bore no resemblance at all to the reality that not ALL dill pickles are tainted, or would make me violently ill again. It was just ‘baggage’ that came along and made trips to my favorite deli more dangerous. For those of you who are interested, it was the “Miracle Mile Deli” at Park Central Mall. Best Corned Beef on Rye... ever.

Then there was the time I was shooting a big-time model who was being quite rude and arrogant to me. She made fun of my name, my way of shooting and pretty much everything in my studio. She berated the hair person and humiliated the MUA, while cursing at my assistant for absolutely no reason we could figure. Her local agent was there and was mortified, and the client was standing in the corner with a clinched jaw counting down the minutes to the end of the shoot. To say it was uncomfortable would be to say that -32F is “chilly”.

This model came from a new, and very hip agency in LA and I had been

so excited about working with her that it was very disheartening to have her be such a douche. I tried to let it all roll off of me and concentrate on the gig. The client was a good one, and it was on me to make it work.

After that experience, I balked at using models that I had not worked with and insisted on testing with every model that was going to be considered. I let that one lousy model leave her baggage in my head, and in a move to make sure that it never happened again, I was overly wary of ALL models from that agency and pretty much anywhere else.

And that was wrong.

I had to let that baggage go. And the next model that came in from that agency was delightful and a blast to work with. She also told me that the rude gal had faked getting pregnant by some rich guy who dumped her - after which the agency fired her.

Karma... well, you can get the irony there, right?

But lets talk about one area where baggage can seem a bit harmless, but in reality can be quite a problem if we let it cloud our judgement.

The baggage of the “edit”.It goes something like this.

You plan a big shoot for your book. Models, location, props, MUA/Hair, wardrobe... the whole thing baby. A production. And it is going to cost you some bucks to pull it off. All the work that goes into a production of this size means it is important to you and your team to get something great.

The day of the shoot comes and instead of the bright sunny day promised by the weather gal, you get an overcast day with the feel of rain coming soon. You make some changes in your head and feel pretty confident that you can still make this shot work.

Until you get to the location which is now barricaded by police because of a hostage situation and no, there is no way they are gonna let you go down to your location set until the situation comes to an end. (Offering to drive your car into the house as a battering ram so you can still get the shot done is not an option, so don't ask.)

You quickly change gears and call the crew with a change of venue - one you had thought about initially but had forgotten about when you found the perfect location. The one next to the current crime scene.

Everyone gets the message.

Except the MUA who was waiting at the police line with her cell phone on silent. She had forgotten to turn the sound back up after last night's school meeting with her kid.

Finally she sees the messages piled up and listens to her messages. The shoot is almost three hours behind now, and the light is changing fast. Your assistant works some miracles getting the booms to stand on uneven ground, the MUA works as fast as she can, and gets the model ready. The model is tired and hungry but wants badly to do a great job for you. And finally the shoot comes together.

With a model who is tired, quickly applied MU, hair in pretty decent condition, weather beginning to give you some fits with wind and some

sprinkles... damn.

But you shoot it anyway.

And you get some good shots. In fact you get some really good shots... for the situation at hand.

Edit time comes and you sit and recall the bad weather, the ruined first location, the quickly chosen second location, the tired model and rushed makeup and wardrobe malfunctions and you realize that for all of that, for ALL of that crap you went through, you pulled a shot out that was not half bad.

Fine.

But see - that is baggage. You remember all that went wrong and how you braved it out and how you ended up with a shot that is not half bad at all. Unfortunately being not half bad means it is pretty darn close to being half good.

And half good doesn't cut it.

When you show that image, no one is going to know what went on during that shoot. No one is going to understand all that you and your team persevered through to get it. They will only have a shot in front of them that

is “not half bad”.

And “not half bad” ain’t gonna get you the gig, Charlie.

The baggage of what you went through is part of your editing process and it shouldn’t be. Not at all.

You cannot let the baggage of the shoot experience quantify the work output.

It is either good, or it is not good. It either supports your brand or it doesn’t.

By the way, it also doesn’t matter if the photograph came instantly to fruition or had to be wrestled to the ground like a greased pig - a good shot is a good shot and a turkey is a turkey. I have met way too many photographers who equated how difficult the shot was to do with how good the shot is.

That is bringing a different kind of baggage to the edit process, and not one that will benefit you in the long run.

When I say “baggage sucks” it is because whether emotional or technical, it is simply stuff from a previous time. It may or may not be of relevance in this moment, but it is exerting influence over our decisions.

Leave the baggage home, or better yet donate it to the Goodwill in your mind and forget about it. You are much better off without it.



Overnight Success? I've Got Your Overnight Success Right Here!

I read all about “overnight success” and usually I just smile to myself. Of course I do not believe them, but that’s OK - they are always great entertainment.

I remember an interview with the band “Foreigner” where the gushing interviewer mentioned their meteoric rise to the top of the charts. “Yeah”, the band said, “it only took ten years of playing college venues to get that overnight success thing...”

And that is so true. Not only for arena bands and jazz orchestras, but for poets and photographers too.

Overnight is ten years.

Prepare for a lot of ups and downs in those ten years as well. A lot. They are formative years, discovery years, learning the craft years. Understanding marketing years.

You can rush them if you want.

...

No you can't. I was lying to you just above. You can't rush the process at all. You can work harder and speed it up a bit, but you ain't gonna put ten years into a couple of months. Not gonna happen.

And look, I know photographers who have had some pretty big successes in shorter amounts of time, but it is rare - and it is usually discovered that they were banging around in the craft, or a similar discipline, for years before the camera purchase.

A friend of mine was a designer for eight years before becoming a photographer. He did pretty well his fourth year out, and then struggled for a year or two before getting his feet back under him for a serious run at bigger gigs.

And remember, we aren't really focused on moms with cameras or weekend wedding shooters here. We are talking to commercial and editorial shooters who work the B2B circuit. Budgets are scary in this arena.

And in order to get someone to entrust a budget of \$50K on a photographer, that AD/CD needs to be really comfortable that something wonderful is going to come of it. Too damn much money for newbies who screw up.

You screw up, right?

I do... although I don't on gigs. I screw up when I am testing ideas and shooting for concept. When I accept a gig, I KNOW I can do it and do it well.

Because I SCREWED UP ENOUGH TIMES TO LEARN NOT TO SCREW UP.

And that takes time and effort and a lot of blood, sweat and tears. How long does it take to be a player in this business? Let's look at a typical situation.

It takes a couple of years playing with photography before it becomes an obsession.

And that obsession takes you from clueless wannabee to a confident shooter with a day job. You may not even have a style yet, just a very high level of competency. And that may be enough to start a business. So we are already in to it for about 4 years or so.

Now we quit the day job and get to making some money... and the jobs come from all over. Some industrial work from one client, editorial portraits from another, and a catalog or two help make the rent, buy the food and put a bit away for slower times. If we work hard, market hard, we can see those gigs increase. Of course this takes into effect that you are not screwing up but instead are delivering top notch, A1, killer work. If not... well, it may not progress any further.

At some point a style starts developing. And that style begins to define a lot of what you do. You become known locally as someone who can really do a great job, and especially with the style you have worked so hard on. Local brings regional... and regional brings national.

This can take three to four years IN BUSINESS... even longer in smaller markets.

And we now have 7 - 8 years before we are putting our stuff in front of national clients with national budgets. Our eight years of experience helps give them the warm and fuzzies about our capability to get the gig done, while also providing a solid base for why we are charging very high fees.

IF...

The work is consistently top-drawer, the clients are consistently impressed and there is a plan in place to make something happen. Without a solid

plan, it is simply luck, and unrepeatable. We need repeatable successes to help drive us forward.

And that, my friends, takes a plan.

Just like starting out when you first made the decision to become a commercial photographer took a plan, going from local to regional takes planning and more planning still to go from regional to national.

Strategy and implementation. Marketing and story definition... MAKING something of your work and business is not left to chance.

And sure, look... I know and you know someone who is really scoring big time on Model Mayhem, and knocking them dead in the headshots for actors market. Yep, fine... nothing wrong with that.

But that work will not lead to much of anything without a plan for how to market it into a viable client base.

I have seen many 'glamour' photographers with huge Model Mayhem and Facebook followers. I ask them one simple question...

“Where are there clients for this kind of work?”

Not that it is bad work, or carries any connotations other than what it is, tell me who is going to hire you to make photographs like this?

Answer is that there are few to none. Other models? Maybe, but there is no career there. Local ad agencies? No way... and showing this kind of work to an ad agency, local magazine, design shop or MarCom (Market-

ing/Communications director is going to get you on the fast track to “never come back here again”.

It is not viable in most areas. Yeah, it’s fun, I get that.

But once again, I will remind you that doing stuff ‘for fun’ is not necessarily part of the plan - unless it is alongside the stuff you do for getting clients. And unless topless girls with hand-bras are all you are ever going to shoot, you will have to start creating images that are marketable.

NO, I am not saying shoot what you think THEY will want to see...

NEVER do that.

But know your channels, and know your specific breakdowns within those channels and MAKE marketable work.

I am not a patient person, in fact I am impatient to a fault. But some things take what time they take, and so I live with what I call “Impatient Patience”.

Impatient patience means we work as hard as we can at doing what we want to do, and we expect the work will pay off in time. Impatiently working to create, but patiently knowing that it will not be an overnight success.

Worst case scenario, we DO have some unexpected early success. And that is great as long as we remember the words of the great Han Solo: “Don’t get cocky, kid.”

Keep on the fast track even if you cannot see the next turn... it is there. It is always there. It just takes as long to get there as it takes.

*And never let yourself ask, “are we there yet?”
With a good plan and some impatient patience
you will know when you are there.*



The Overwhelming Mystique of Negativity

“You can’t do that anymore. The market is full of photographers.”

“Nobody is making any money in this business.”

“Why the hell would anyone want to go into the professional photography now, all the clients have dried up.”

I know. We hear that all the time. Nothing new here - especially if you spend any time on Facebook, or the current “photography media” sites. And don’t even mention Photo.net forums... good God what is it with those people?

Now the interesting thing about these statements above is that they were said to me directly. To my face.

In 1978.

Surprised?

You shouldn’t be. The death of professional photography dates back to about the birth of professional photography.

In the early days of the turn of the century - last century - a small company in Rochester, NY had an idea. Put a camera into the hands of every day people and let them make a photograph. What held most people back was the alchemy of it all... needing to develop the film and print in a darkroom. Those things were luxuries only fit for the most astute craftsmen and professionals. The cameras were big, heavy and must be swung and tilted to create an image on the ground glass... very sophisticated you know.

So was born the Kodak “Brownie”. You take the picture and we do the rest... or something like that.

And the caterwalling of professionals began. The thought that just anyone could have a camera meant the end of professional photography. (Don’t believe me, look it up.)

“While it might seem like photography was universally liked, professional photographers were actually against seeing their art becoming popularized by amateurs. Supposedly paid photographers did not appreciate these “Kodak fiends” who became completely engrossed with taking weird and often out of focus shots.”

It continued on through the invention of the smaller professional cameras (the end of photography as a profession).

It continued on through the introduction of the 35mm system cameras (the end of photography as a profession).

It continued on when the camera manufacturers put meters in the camera (the end of photography as a profession).

It continued on through the introduction of auto-focus (the end of photography as a profession).

And of course it is still in full swing with the introduction of inexpensive, pro level digital cameras (the end of photography as a profession). To which I say, ahem, Bullshit!

I cannot speak for you, but I am simply tired of it. It is boring and sad.

Has the business changed? Hell yeah it's changed.

Quick - tell me an art form or small business that has not changed in the last twenty years. (Except for government... no fair using those dolts.) EVERYTHING has changed. Lawn care has changed. Dog grooming has changed. When is the last time you called a travel agent? How about typesetting? Printing?

Publishing... LOL.

See this is the thing... it is all changing, and that is both a challenge and an opportunity. Just depends on how you view it.

"A Pessimist makes difficulties of his opportunities and an Optimist is one who makes opportunities of his difficulties"

-- Harry Truman

Same situation seen by different people.

And it is not all their fault nor are they stupid or silly. They are caught in one of the oldest traps of mankind; the desire for things to stay the way they are and not to change beyond our comfort zones.

Wow - have they changed beyond a lot of folks comfort zones. And that causes angst and anger, regret and disappointment and it will build a tsunami of resentment and blame.

I call it "The Overwhelming Mystique of Negativity". It is so much easier to be negative. It attracts more attention - especially these days when people are nearly begging to be victims. They want to be seen as a "sur-

vivor" in an attempt to feel like they are on Oprah's couch spilling about the most aggrieved violations of their egos.

Notice posts online: Someone posts something positive, or something to share that is pretty cool and it gets from moderate to high hits depending on how good it is. Post something negative and the outpouring of whining and bitterness is nearly overwhelming. As though being negative was in itself a mystique and an element of being a photographer.

The toughest ones hit are the 'old guys/gals' who have been doing it a long time. They are set in their ways and are comfortable and along comes this digital thing and they can't keep up and what the hell happened to film and OMG Lightroom will do WHAT with an underexposed crappy capture?

And so they start with the resentment and the blame. They resent the new ways vehemently... "stupid twitter, stupid Facebook, stupid Instagram. I'll never be caught dead with a blog? Screw Tumblr, it's all just a fad."

But it's not a fad, it's now and it's real and they don't want to change. So out it comes...

"You can't do that anymore. The market is full of photographers."
"Nobody is making any money in this business."

"Why the hell would anyone want to go into the professional photography now, all the clients have dried up."

Sigh...

Look. There are clients out there. There are photographers doing well. There are new photographers in the market starting out who are making ends meet. That is how it has always been. I believe it takes between 7 - 10 years to hit your stride in this business. We start out working to pay the bills and putting a ton of money back into the business. It is NOT a quick start business.

We build traction, get more clients, make more money (invest back into the business and marketing) and so forth.

But now we have photographers complaining that they are not able to get gigs - after being in the business for 6 or 7 months. Meh... they aren't in business, they are still trying to figure out what this business is all about. Time to suck it up and understand some hard friggin facts, Jack.

This is one fkn hard business to be in. The bar is set way high... WAY HIGH! There has never been this much talent behind a lens ever... EVER. So does that mean we give up? Do we just throw our hands up and whine about the 'over-saturated' market or do we get real dirty workin' real hard, and real smart. It isn't always the best photographer, you know.

Sometimes it is personality, perseverance, likability, consistent delivery, and a straight-up approach that makes clients want to work with you. Get some of that. Now.

Or give up. S'all good, and quite frankly maybe you weren't really cut out for self-employment in a devilishly difficult field with competition at every curve. Get a cushy desk job and bust your ass for a 401K and two weeks off. There is absolutely NOTHING WRONG with that. It is noble work.

Far better than beating yourself into the ground over something that is kicking your butt.

Of course some people will try to cover for their inability to make it by blaming others. And there are so many others to blame it is a quite attractive target.

There are newbies. The ones who are just having fun and taking photos... the thought that they would ever want to charge someone something is malevolence incarnate. They will "undercut us"... oh heavens no. Blame them for our disintegrating business.

There are workshop teachers and educators. We all know they are all lousy photographers only wanting to make a buck off of delusional nubes. Never mind that there are some terrific workshop teachers out there, and really, where else would someone learn how to be a pro other than learning from a pro? (Yes there are some bad ones, but for the most part they are pretty darn good.) But what the hell, let's blame them for the fact our business is not growing... and no, we aren't marketing this year - too busy whining on FB to actually market, but it wouldn't do any good anyway because workshop teachers!

And God forbid a photographer have an idea for a product that would help other photographers... that is pure moneygrubbing and should never be done by photographers who should ONLY PUSH BUTTONS AND MAKE PHOTOGRAPHS... Where will the new products come from? Well, from new product engineers who went to college and stuff, and who never ever used a camera cause they make the best camera stuff, by golly.

It is so far off the reservation of rational thought that one cringes from the sheer lack of cognitive reasoning.

So they don't market, make mediocre photographs, spend too much on gear and now they are gonna tell you that there is no business left and it is because of nubes like you that ruined an otherwise healthy (LOL) industry.

And you should quit and get a job at Walmart making videos of poor people for rich college kids to laugh at. (What? Someone makes those videos, right? Probably a nube video photographer undercutting the video market with them new fangled Youtoover things...)

Don't.

Just don't.

Make a stand. Learn your craft. Learn the business. Find a mentor and give it a hell of a shot.

Not a year, with intermittent marketing. Give it a full on killer shot with a lot of effort and spunk and gumption and guts. (Did I just write gumption? Sure... whatever.)

Tell the naysaying nabobs to tell it somewhere else and get after making YOUR dreams come true. Be smart about it of course, but NEVER let them set your boundaries. That is something reserved for YOU and YOU ALONE.

That's what we do, you know. We constantly seek permission. And we

seek it from people who will never give it. We have no idea what their motivation is, but we listen anyway.

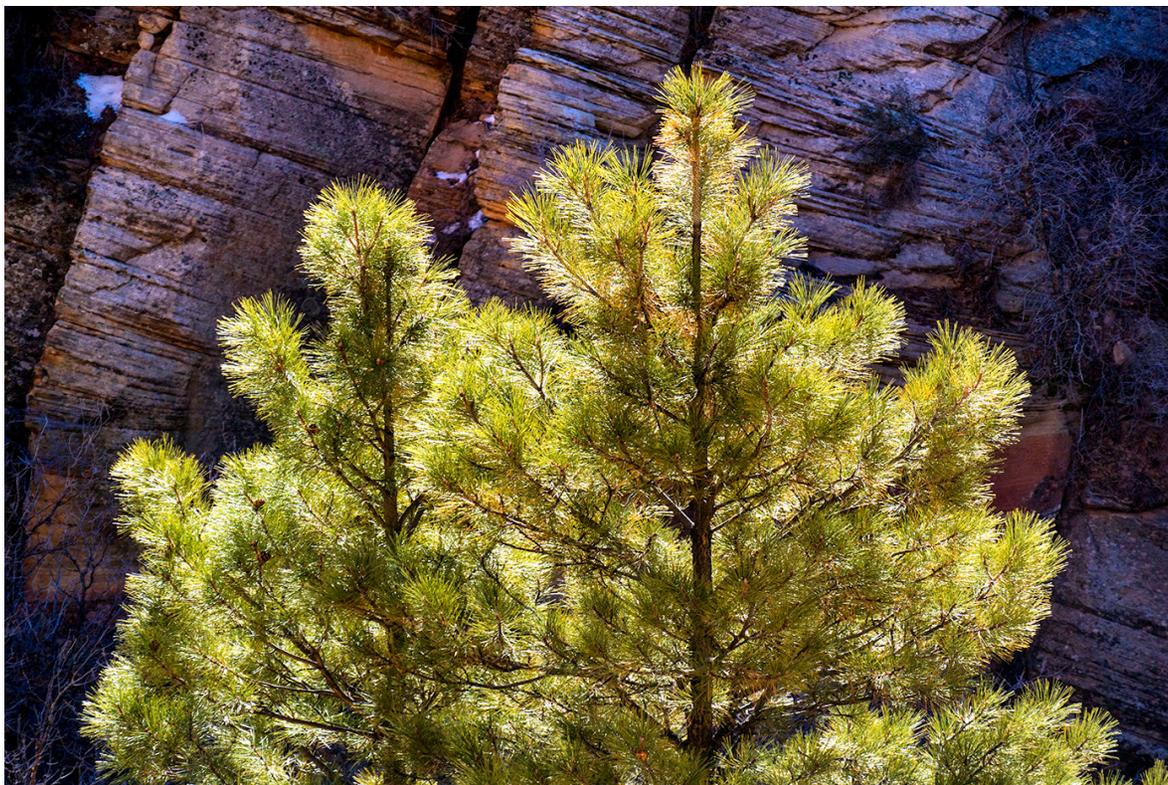
Sometimes their motivation is NOT IN OUR BEST INTERESTS, but in theirs.

If you succeed at photography and they failed... well, that simply can't be allowed to happen so you never get permission from them. And some people simply do not want you to succeed at anything for a vast amount of reasons. Most you will never know, but most are not really about you anyway. They're about them.

So stop seeking permission from naysayers, whiners, complainers and those who didn't make it for whatever reason, and consider your permission granted - from YOU.

It's OK...

Just do it.



I Love Still Photography... I Always Have

I can still remember those *Look* and *Life* and *Saturday Evening Post* magazines that would drop through the mail slot when I was young.

Really young.

I would wait for Wednesday, because that was the day they all came usually. And then I would sit on the floor, and scan every page, every photograph, every ad.

I was simply in love with the still image in a magazine.

I can even remember some of the photographers of those days. Eugene Smith and Eisenstadt come immediately to mind.

Of course as I grew up other interests were added to my love of photography - drums, girls, motorcycles, girls, poetry and girls... What? I didn't get my first real camera until I was in high school. A Miranda with two lenses - 500mm and 200mm. I learned to see with a long lens.

My first subjects?

Motorcycles, bands and girls.

Not necessarily in that order.

My first commercial gig came many years after I had started shooting and making "art". My neighbor was an art director for an ad agency in town and he knew of my interest in photography, I had no idea what an ad agency was, and was not really thinking of being a professional photographer.

He asked me if I could photograph a can for him. A black can. On a white background. He even gave me a drawing of what it should look like. (Later I was to understand these were called layouts. Of course I said yes... how hard could it be?

Took me nearly a week. Back and forth to the guys at the camera store who would all help me figure out why my picture didn't look like his drawing. Camera angle, subject angle, a white piece of curved art board... and light. LIGHT?!?!

I didn't have lights so I had to construct a scrim in the back patio of my townhouse to make softer light.

A week later he came down to see if I had the photograph for him. I had just finished it in the darkroom and he was fairly pleased. He commented that the lighting was pretty nice, but thought the print could use more contrast. Now THAT I knew, so I whipped another print up for him and that was that.

He gave me a check for \$200.

I was, as they say, hooked.

The path I took to become a professional photographer was a very curvy one, with lots of interesting stops along the way... art director, jazz musician, warehouseman... not in that order, but you get the idea. I did all kinds of things while learning about what I was getting into.

The school I attended was called "Hard Knocks", and it was wonderful. Full of characters I will never forget. And some I wish I could.

I started with a small, 900 sq ft studio on Indian School Rd, and ended up in one of the largest studios in the area. I was sort of a generalist, but specialized in people and still life (product) photography. Worked all the studios to the point we were slammed and bursting at the seams with gigs and personnel before moving up, and never, EVER, had a line of credit or a bank loan for operating expenses.

Cashflow was king, and I didn't buy anything I couldn't afford to buy. Being frugal saved me more than once.

I was never famous, never someone out of state would have known. I didn't live in NY or LA (well, briefly) or shoot famous models for *Vogue*. I shot a few celebrities along the way, enough to know that shooting actors and celebrities was not gonna be my specialty. And I spent a few years shooting very high end real estate and commercial properties. Made a ton of money, but soul killing for me.

At one point my art director kicked back in and we took design and advertising for a few specific clients to being the second largest ad agency in Arizona in 2000-2001. Billing over 6.5M. For Phoenix, that was pretty impressive.

Heady days.

Looking back over a long career in photography I can't help but see the various ways it has changed, as has the whole industry of ad agency, graphic design, magazines, publishing, and creation of art.

I loved the good old days, but I keep in mind that these are the good old days of people in their thirties and forties. It is all relative.

My history is not my present, nor does it have much bearing on the present. Those who fight that simple concept become bitter outsiders. I welcome change because if it is changing it is still vitally alive.

Being a photographer, making images mundane and wonderful, and working with other talented people is all I could have hoped for. Would there be some things I would change along the way, of course. But hindsight is always so much clearer.

I took risks, made stupid decisions, took the fall, took the wins, and have always made it through whatever storm came my way.

It has been a good life, being a photographer, and it continues to be a focus in my daily work.

Don Giannaffi

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SPECIAL THANKS TO MY FAMILY AND
FRIENDS FOR WHOM I WRITE.

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PHOTOGRAPH OF ME BY CAROL RIOUX