

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

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We are all creative. We can all solve problems. At it's most basic level, that's what creativity is, problem solving. The creative process has been compared to giving birth, but to me it seems more like a long walk, slowly taking one small step after another until a goal is reached. The goal may seem like a mountaintop, high and far away. But, unlike climbing a mountain, the creative process is, every step along the way, a joy of discovery. No matter what the outcome, it's a pleasure to be on that journey.

Creativity comes naturally to us. Some people seem better at it than others, but only because they give their creative process two priceless gifts, TIME and FREEDOM. We never seem to have enough time. There's always something else to do. But if being creative is important to you, you can always give yourself the time you need. You actually have to say, "This is my time, and this is what I'm going to do with it".

The other essential self-gift is freedom. This is a bit more complicated. Without freedom, there is no creativity. You decide what to do with your time, and then let yourself do it. Maybe you even have to push yourself to get started. But this is a painless process, and the fun starts soon after that first push. The reward of your effort is independent of the result. Even if you are disappointed with the outcome, you will still find freedom in the process, and that always feels good.

In photography there are two basic opportunities to exercise your creative process, the time before and the time after you press the shutter. If we take advantage of both, we can maximize our creative efforts. Film photographers spend all their creativity before they click the shutter. But we now live in the age of post processing, with many tools available to change or enhance an image. Wonderful things are happening here.

The time before image capture is still important, and lays the foundation for a successful creative image. This is the time for pre-exposure creativity. There are several pre-exposure steps that can make the image, and it's message, unique.

What if you pretend that you have to stop being creative after you click the shutter? Then spend your pre-exposure time trying every way possible to make the image say exactly what's on your mind. The result is always a better image, maybe even a final image. Your pre-exposure efforts will pay off in post processing, when you can spend more time being creative at your computer.

Remember, creativity is more than just producing an image that departs from reality. Think of creativity as finding and expressing your own personal vision. Your vision may be accurate and detailed, but seen from an unusual place, at a different time, or in exceptional light. Creativity is taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary.

I am a film photographer, a "Celluloid Crazy", and I love to make creative images. My creativity is essentially finished when I click the shutter, and over the

years I have thoroughly enjoyed “getting lost in the creative process”. What follows are some thoughts on spending TIME in the pursuit of FREEDOM.

EQUIPMENT: (WHAT DOES THIS BUTTON DO?)

The first and possibly most important step in being creative is becoming an expert in what your camera can do, and how to make it happen. In other words, read the manual. More than that, take TIME to make it's contents second nature to you. Think of camera controls as potential distractions to the creative process. Practice using each and every one of them. Let their use become automatic, so you don't have to stop and think what to do next. Pete Turner, maker of dramatic, signature images in the 60's, 70's, and 80's, always used the simplest camera settings and controls. Even a small dose of simplicity will enhance your creativity by contributing to intuition, that collective fund of knowledge that's at your disposal without ever surfacing in your awareness. Knowing your camera controls backwards and forwards will take some TIME, but is a valuable contribution to the creative process.

LEARN AND RETURN

Have you noticed that creative people always seem to be in the right place at the right time? Are they just lucky? Maybe, but good fortune usually finds those who are well prepared. Take the TIME to learn about your subject.

Sports photographers will get better images if they know their sport well and can anticipate where and when to capture peak action. Portrait photographers who get to know their subject will get more natural shots of a relaxed, cooperative model.

Landscape shooters can get a wealth of useful information on line. Important data on weather, tides, sunrise, and sunset, and even detailed maps are just a Google away. If you are visiting a scenic area like a national or state park for the first time, you can usually find helpful information about access, vistas, and trails from guidebooks or on the internet.

I have found that my most creative landscape images are taken close to home, at places I return to often and know well. Our New England seasons give us different looks at the same places. And at a familiar location you will know the right time of day to find the best light. Bright directional sunlight or diffuse cloudy light produce different images. At your favorite spot you will know where and when to take advantage of the light on any given day.

Macro images of flowers, textures, and natural objects will produce progressively better results if you “return” or repeatedly work at this type of photography.

VIEWPOINT: (TAKE A STAND)

One of the most important pre-exposure decisions effecting creativity is viewpoint, the place you put your camera. The viewpoint is the story, the single biggest factor in composition. Camera position arranges the elements of the image in a way that allows your thoughts and feelings to be easily recognized. Even a small change in viewpoint can make a significant change in your story. Take some pre-exposure TIME to clarify your story by thinking about, and then trying out several viewpoints. Then use your viewfinder or LCD to see the scene in two dimensions, as the camera sees it.

Usually the most creative viewpoints are also the most extreme. A high or low vantage point makes a familiar scene look fresh, and grabs the viewer's attention. High viewpoints can reveal unsuspected patterns, and low positions will force the viewer to concentrate on the foreground.

Sports and candid people images benefit from a background that is part of the story and contains no distractions. Camera placement here can make or break the image. It's often best to look for a place that has a good background and lighting, and then let the action come to you. Post processing may fix a distracting background, but if you have a good one to begin with, your final image will probably look more natural.

So keep your camera position in mind, and give yourself the Freedom to look for a different viewpoint, one that might change, or improve your story.

STAYING IN THE MOMENT

"Getting lost in the creative process", and staying there, is not always easy. Creativity requires concentration. One has to forget everyday concerns and lose sight of the usual. This involves letting go of the familiar and searching unexplored territory. It might even be a bit scary at first, but it soon becomes an adventure, a journey, and ultimately, maybe even a quest. The poet Mary Oliver tells us, "In truth, the work itself is the adventure".

Few journeys are as rewarding as creativity. But it doesn't happen just because we want it to. We have to start it up, allow it to develop, and then we have to make it endure. Once again, this involves giving yourself the TIME to concentrate on your own voice.

For me, the best way to stay in the moment is to be alone. The choreographer Twyla Tharpe, in her book "The Creative Habit", writes, "Solitude is an unavoidable part of creativity". There may be other people with you, but creativity happens when you block out distractions and concentrate on your subject. Even so, most distractions come from within. We need to replace self-doubts with self-indulgence. The iconic photographer Ernst Haas tells us "If a photographer loses himself in the act of photographing, he finds himself again seeing the result".

It's helpful here to use your viewfinder, not just the LCD. This allows you to block out external stimuli and concentrate more effectively. While looking through the viewfinder all you can see is the image.

Think ahead about what might distract you. Make yourself comfortable, dress for the season, and be prepared for changes in weather. Maybe you need insect repellent and sunscreen. Travel light, but include extra batteries and a memory card, (or film). Carry enough water and snacks. Hunger and thirst are big distractions. And be sure to turn off your cell phone.

Staying in the moment is a skill, not a gift bestowed upon a fortunate few. Like all skills, we get better at it if we practice. Shooting still life setups at home is a good way to practice staying in the moment. The deliberate process of arranging subject matter, choosing a foreground and background, and then lighting the setup requires your full concentration. If your light source is sunlight through a window, the changing light adds the challenge of time, and your decisions have to be made quickly. You can actually practice being creative indoors, even on a rainy day.

Staying in the moment gets easier the more you work at it. Twyla Tharpe feels that to succeed at creativity, we should make it a habit, a part of our everyday lives. For photographers, a positive habit to develop is to look for the image in everything we see. If we practice looking all day long, not just when we have a camera in our hands, it becomes automatic.

The next habit to work on is seeing not just the actual, but also the potential image, what might be possible if we give it a try, by taking the next step. This is what Twyla Tharpe calls "giving yourself permission to daydream".

FEEL FREE TO FAIL

Failure is an unavoidable part of the creative process. Things don't always work out. In school, failure is the result of a weak effort, and sometimes means the end. But in photography failure is merely one step along the creative pathway. In fact, it may be an essential step, a formative lesson that helps direct future efforts.

In a way, creativity is a form of risk taking. Risk usually involves consequences, sometimes serious, but not in the creative process. Here the consequences can be very positive, giving important information on what works and what doesn't. Pete Turner gives us some good advice: "Don't be afraid of being wrong. By taking the risk initially you will ultimately produce the photograph that no one else could."

Risk taking in the creative process is a safe way to try something new. Here again, FREEDOM becomes part of the process. Freedom, the curiosity and the daring that allows us to step into the unknown, willing to try and maybe fail. We give ourselves the freedom to try something different, not knowing how it will

work out. The freedom to fail is a force that starts and keeps the creative process moving. Only you can give yourself this gift, so be generous with it.

JUDGES RULE ?

We are a society that lives by the rules. As adults we look down on rule breakers. But as children we probably thought of them as daring, even exciting. There are rules in photography, but I think of them as guidelines, choices that, over the years, have helped visual artists express themselves in a clear, understandable way.

Unfortunately, rules sometimes take on a much greater importance, and may be thought of as rigid boundaries within which an image must fall in order to be acceptable. It's OK to think of rules as boundaries, but make them a low fence we step over and journey past in pursuit of creativity. Maybe we should think of rules as the place where creativity starts, and then travels in whatever direction we decide. But first, be familiar with the rules of composition, exposure, technique, and lighting so that your creative process can be a purposeful departure from them.

When we talk about rules, we must also talk about judges. We owe a debt of gratitude to judges because they point out why our images succeed or fail, and hopefully give us alternatives to try in the future. We never forget what the judge said about our image. But remember, the judge is commenting on one single image, and, of course, comparing it to the others in the competition.

David Bayles and Ted Orland, in their book, "Art and Fear" point out that we may be giving judges too much power. They can and do judge images one at a time, but "are seldom able to grant or withhold approval on the one issue that really counts, whether or not you are making progress in your work", in other words, how your creative process is developing. That important decision comes from only one source. Only you can compare your judged image with the rest of your work, and then decide how you are advancing along the creative path. You are the best judge of that. Where does that image fit in with the rest of your work? Are you improving?

So go ahead and compete, not just to win, but to push yourself to improve and to find your potential. If you win, all the better. But keep in mind that winning is not a necessary part of personal growth in photography.

Twyla Tharpe thinks of creativity as "an act of defiance, challenging the status quo and questioning accepted truths and principles". So here's your chance to break some rules, make an impact, and to feel free. Even if no one else ever sees your image, even if you only do it to see what it looks like, that feeling of freedom is your reward. But remember, breaking rules is not an excuse for bad technique. Go ahead and cross the boundary, but do it with good intent and with your best effort.

PREVISUALIZE, THEN IMPROVISE

Inspiration is the spark of creativity. We see something beautiful in nature or see an image that makes us say, "Wow! I wonder if I could do that?" So we give ourselves a goal. Go ahead and try to make a similar image, or to capture the exact look of that beautiful nature story. But don't stop there. Always ask yourself "What's next?" or "What if?" Those simple questions always give your creative process a big forward push. This is improvisation, the essence of creativity. Be thankful for the inspiration, but you will be more rewarded by the improvisation, your own version of reality. The best part of improvisation is that you never have to stop unless you want to.

Twyla Tharpe calls improvisation "your one opportunity in life to be completely free with no responsibility and no consequences. It's you alone with no one watching or judging." So creativity is really nothing more than giving yourself the TIME to play around with your subject, and the FREEDOM to let one thing lead to another. It's your chance to dream, and then to make that dream come true.

Creativity is a celebration, of yourself and your freedom. It is play, and it's fun to ask, "OK, what's next?" And the answer is all up to you. Remember the words of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay.

"The world stands out on either side,
No wider than the heart is wide.
Above the world is stretched the sky,
No higher than the soul is high."