

NORTH AMERICAN NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY ASSOCIATION

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE CREATIVE LIFE

with Nancy Rotenberg

**“I hope you never lose your sense of wonder
You get your fill but always keep that hunger
And when you get the choice
to sit it out or dance
I hope you dance...I hope you dance.”**

Mark D. Sanders and Tia Sillers

“In most men,” wrote Augustin de Saint Beuve, “there is a dead poet whom the man survives.” Why does the poet die so young? Why are so many men and women limping along the trail of life, the doors to their hearts tightly bolted? What happened to the light we had as small children when we were filled with awe and excitement? Where or when did we learn that *original* thinking is wrong? At what point did we begin to follow the path of others’ perceptions of who we *should* be? How do you want to travel on the journey that is your one precious life? How do you get home to your one authentic self?

We can’t always find the answers to these questions but we can cultivate a way of living that celebrates uniqueness and we can travel deeper into our seeing. As we journey, we can develop a quality of mind that not only enriches the creative process in art, but results in a return to our true souls and to a more imaginative, richer state of being.

THE DRAGONS:

There are dragons that roam the wilderness of creative quests. If left to run amok, they can inhibit the most determined artist. The creative process transforms you, the artist, into a creative warrior – arming you to slay the dragons or at least keep them at bay.

The first step is to develop the courage to venture into the unknown, to climb into the mode of exploration – of subject and light, of assumed boundaries of photography and on paths that travel beyond personal horizons.

The dragons that plague the creative process appeal to the part of your mind that deals with product and ego. The way to combat these dragons and to discover images that grow from your heart and soul is not by searching in the drawers of your mind.

Prevailing mythology has it that creativity is a gift of some sort, but really it is a state of being – a quality of mind available to all. In a creative mind, the world is unique, has beauty, and is filled with potential. Creativity is an attitude. Creativity is like being in love – with life and with yourself. Creativity doesn’t have a simple definition, but we know that it is an ongoing process and it is about the search to discover the place where truth, beauty and fire live.

Joseph Campbell said, “If the path before you is clear, you’re probably on someone else’s.” Campbell knew that we don’t always know where we’re going or what the path will look like, but on the photographic path, the creative warrior knows photographic technique, owns great optics and good tripods, but that is not where they stop. On this path, craft is fine and necessary, but this is a search for transcending technical knowledge and is the quest for imagination and love.

CREATING A PLACE TO BEGIN:

With the hope of discovering new perceptions, some people turn to monasteries, go on vision quests, or study shamanism. Photographers travel to remote locations, expecting to discover the power of sight. While traveling is great fun and can be a source of inspiration, we need to be careful that we’re not just caught up in an endless need for novelty.

A creative life does not require deep meditation or hypnosis. Acuity of vision is not limited to sages and saints. We all have the same light falling on our retinas. It is the interpretation center that makes the difference. What is required is not running to one place or clinging to another. The fullness of experience and the richness of treasures are only discovered when we realize they are within. Creativity and vision are available to all who are willing to listen to the wise words of Lao Tzu, “Be still and let the mud settle.” Our work is to drop the burdens that obstruct seeing, and, yes, to be still.

In that still place, surround yourself with all that nourishes you. My office is filled with poetry, music, memories and photographs of all those who fill me up and upon whose shoulders I stand. Everything can be inspiration.

What you might be looking for is where you are. If you are already there, there is nowhere to go. You have all that you will ever need. Be aware of the incredible simplicity of this. If you internalize their essence, you will own a great wisdom.

DARE TO BE IDLE:

Learn to slow down and dare to be idle. We live in a culture that looks at idleness as something slovenly, lazy, and non-productive. It is only when you stop and reflect, that you can be filled and recharged. What you photograph today will be the result of yesterday’s “idling.”

TAKING TIME:

All relationships take time. Photographic relationships are no exception. When photographing in the field, take time to get into the relationship. Don’t be a tourist, afraid to get involved. What would you attempt if you knew you could not fail? Honor the resistance, but work to move through the fear. Entering a place of fear is paradoxically, the path of renewal.

For the first frames, instead of saying, “I’m taking this photo”, substitute, “I’m beginning this relationship – I’m starting this process.” Don’t let the click of your shutter end the

relationship or allow it to be a signal to look for the next subject. Eisenstadt said: “It is more important to click with the subject than to click the shutter.”

No deposit – no return, could easily be a photographic adage. No deposit means not taking the time to go beyond the documentary image, not leaping into the interpretive mode – not sharing yourself with your subject. No return means that the image lacks the visual impact that would have emerged had you offered the emotional investment of interaction and dedicated time.

GOING BEYOND THE HANDSHAKE:

We shake hands when introduced to people, but we certainly don’t know them yet. Time, energy and the gift of self are necessary prerequisites before real sharing or intimacy can occur. Artistic relationships of substance require the same dynamic.

Yes, take those first shots but then ask what else can you do. What other angles? What other lenses? What other interpretations? What would Ansel do, or Freeman, or Mark, or anyone else that you admire? Throw another log on the fire.

You don’t have to be limited to a life of handshakes and superficial greetings. Choices give us opportunities. Opportunities ask us to take risks. Risks push us to free expression.

THE EDITORS:

To be on a creative path, we must work at ridding our thought processes of internal judges, worrying about winning camera club ribbons, or impressing editors. Photography should not be a competitive sport.

Let go of product and embrace process. If you give your mind authority to be vulnerable to criticisms, you will impede your freedom to explore spontaneous techniques. In the process of ripping yourself apart and basking in the glow of negativity, you might slaughter your finest impulses.

FEAR or how to survive as an artist without cutting off your ear:

If the Sacred Art Cows own your power, take it back. Grant yourself the passport to travel your own road with the map of your own devising. Create whatever it is you wish to create. Do not permit the weaknesses and compulsive baggage of others to become your weaknesses. Embrace only those who operate as muses to uplift your soul – those who spark creativity and fan the flames of your fire. Set the Sacred Art Cows free. Let them graze in someone else’s pasture.

If you’re constantly worrying about failing, you close doors. Not to have disappointment is not to make mistakes – is not to work. If you’re not failing every now and again, you’re not moving, you’re not growing. Fear can create tormented individuals who become habitually obsessed with overhauling, mending, resurfacing and repairing. While

this behavior is useful for cobblers, handymen and plumbers, it does not bode well for those intent on moving inward and onward while revitalizing their creative lives.

Be careful of becoming enslaved by perceived authority, thereby staying within the confines of rules. Give yourself permission to go out and break rules. Know the reasons behind rules and why they often work successfully, but argue for your art and voice. Is there ever one right answer for anything? Have the courage and conviction to do whatever works for you. Do not let the appetites of those who “need” to stay in the box consume your taste for creativity.

Creative expression requires that you feel free in your art. Clinging to rules and techniques or being stuck in the muck of habitual patterns of thought will not allow for that freedom. Those who challenge their fears – continue. Those who don’t – quit.

Surround yourself with others who validate you and who will understand the flow of a creative life. We can’t blame the people around us who try to thwart our artistic expression. They don’t know any better. We can choose however, to trust what we know and who we are. We can move through fear and soar with the wings of our original creative selves. Eleanor Roosevelt knew this when she wrote, “Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

CONCLUSION:

Life is so precious and we all have but one to live. Make sure that you are celebrating your presence as a gift to the universe. Don’t let life be only about the pursuit of the image – as if it were some trophy to be stuffed and hung on a wall. Keep listening for the music in the heart of your work.

Joy emanates and springs forth from the hope, wonder and enthusiasm of a child looking at the world for the first time and from the first blush of lovers with the promise of romance. You are responsible for this attitude and are only limited by doubt, fear, and lack of appetite for discovery.

My challenge to myself and to all photographers and artists is very simple. Bring back from the journey a mirror image of what you felt – a reflection of your experience – of your path.

Do you bring your poet to your work? This is your greatest asset. Nobody but you can create what you can do. If you put your whole self into the process, you will create images that wouldn’t have existed without you.

When viewers ask the question, “How long did it take you to get this shot?” There should be only one answer – “My whole life.” And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance, make sure that you step onto the dance floor of a creative life and enjoy your dance.