THE VISION DRIVEN PHOTOGRAPHER
NOTES ON DISCOVERING & REFINING YOUR VISION

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INTRODUCTION

After teaching about vision-driven photography in round-about ways for a couple years now, this particular ebook is overdue, in part because I’ve written about all this stuff in bits and pieces before but never addressed some of the things I really ought to have talked about before now. It’s overdue in another sense because I’m moving on. I think I’ve said everything I want to say about vision, at least for now, and it’s time to start taking next steps. So this is a last chance to address vision from a couple additional angles and then I want to begin connecting the dots and talking about the visual language we use to express that all-important vision. But that comes later, so stay tuned.

Consider this my last kick at the can in an attempt to convince the stragglers that vision matters, but more than that I hope it’s an encouraging step forward for those of you who, like me, sometimes lose sight of our vision and want it back.

**Vision matters.** It is not a peripheral subject reserved for the photographic elite or photographers with a sociopathic bent towards navel-gazing. It is the place we begin, and the road we travel, on the way to our goal - creating compelling photographs that express something we’ve no other means of expressing but through the frame. That’s why we picked up the camera in the first place. **Learning to discover, and then express, our vision will make better photographs through a more fulfilling creative process.**
VISION. The word itself as it applies to photography, is just a metaphor. We aren’t referring to your eyesight, we’re referring to two separate things, and that’s where I think the confusion comes from. So let me suggest the following: there are two types of vision, both connected to each other. One is Personal Vision, the other is Photographic Vision. Let me try to explain.

Personal Vision is VISION IN MACRO. It’s your outlook on the world. It is the reason you have certain opinions about certain things. It’s your worldview or outlook on life and it includes everything - your past, your culture, your faith and beliefs, the things you find beautiful, interesting, ugly, or funny. It includes the things you most value and the things for which you feel called to live your life. If you feel strongly called to protect the planet and spend much of your time in conservation, that’s a big part of your personal vision. If you love sports and spend your free time in triathlons, and reading about health and fitness, that too is part of your personal vision. Many of my close friends travel the world because they are fascinated by other cultures, it’s all part of our vision for what we want to do with our life.

Everyone has a vision, whether you’re a photographer or otherwise. But photographers take it a step further because most of us picked up our cameras to photograph the world, even the thinnest slice of it, through our own eyes. We all have vision, the question is: are we aware of it? Personal Vision is how we see life whether or not our eyes are open. It grows, it changes, it flip flops depending on where life takes us and that makes it the challenge it is. You think you understand it, catch more than a fleeting glimpse, and maybe you do for a while, but one day you wake up and it’s changed for some reason and you have to rediscover it all over again.

Photographic Vision is VISION IN MICRO, and its source - whether we’re aware of it or not - is our Personal Vision. Photographic Vision is how we see life when the camera is put to our eye. And if the word Vision is making your eyes gloss over, let’s abandon the metaphor entirely - photographic vision is the combination of the way we perceive things and what we want to say about those things. It is the intent behind the photograph. It is specific and it is not accidental. Intent matters. Without intent we’re left with accidental photography, and while accidental photography may once in a while generate interesting photographs, it will not generally count as an act of expression any more than hoping that saying random words will result in a sentence that says something meaningful.
WHY VISION MATTERS

Anne Lammot says that “Art, to be art, must point at something.” Without being aware of what you are pointing at it’s impossible to point clearly, or in the right direction. Without knowing what you want to say, it’s impossible to choose the right words. Having vision and being aware of it allows us to, with our cameras, more clearly point our viewers towards the thing we want them to see. It helps us know which words to use, because we already know what we want to talk about.

My friend Jeffrey Chapman says that art must have something of the artist within. Personal Vision is that something, or at least one of those somethings. Photographic vision, or intent, is what puts it there, in the photograph. It’s not accidental, and it’s not even intuitive, at least not at first. It’s an act of the creative will. You make an image in hundreds of different ways, make all kinds of decisions to create that unique image. But make no mistake about it - it was you that made it. We all have vision, a reason for pressing the shutter. The question is, can we identify it, focus it, and express it?

Why does vision matter? It results in images that better express what we want to say, and those are the images that are the most personal, the most gratifying, and the most compelling to the people who will look at our photographs. And for most of us, that’s the whole point.
VISION IS NOT STYLE

Vision is often mistaken for style. Vision is not style any more than a horse is a cart. One propels the other but the two are very different entities. That’s not to say the two aren’t connected, nor to say style doesn’t matter. But the pursuit of style isn’t relevant. The reason I mention it all is that style, as it’s often discussed, is important. You just shouldn’t chase it. A consistent, ever-evolving personal style is the outcome of becoming more aware of our vision, both personal and photographic, and of becoming better at our craft. As our craft grows in its ability to express our vision, our style becomes more and more a reflection of who we are. Style comes as years of making photographs narrows down the subjects we want to pursue and the ways in which we want to photograph those subjects.

That doesn’t, however, mean you can’t be aware of how you express yourself. Creating a consistent body of work over time, is a result of your vision. And if one way of looking at photographic vision is intent, then part of that intentional approach to your work is in expressing that vision in the most consistent and powerful way possible. If you go to the portfolios of the photographers you love best, I’m willing to bet that almost every one of them expressed their vision in clear, consistent, intentional ways that are unmistakeably their own. My own short hit list would be Ansel Adams, Richard Avedon, Elliot Erwitt, Yousuf Karsh, and Joyce Tenneson; all of them with an unmistakable style. Style is not contrived, it’s an intentional and natural result of the ongoing journey of discovering and expressing our vision.
VISION IS NOT A MATTER OF TECHNIQUE

The more I teach about photography, read blogs of photographers, and listen to my students, the more I see two distinct frustrations about this art. These are the Two Frustrations:

*My photographs don’t look like I want them to*
*My photographs don’t say anything/say what I want them to.*

I’ve been there. I’m still there more often than I care to admit to others. But after 25 years my work is getting more personal, more able to say what I want it to, more aligned with who I am and who I am becoming.

Why do I think we’re collectively experiencing the same Two Frustrations on the journey of learning to see and express? I think we’ve been so successfully seduced by the technology and technique - the HOW - that we’ve forgotten our vision or intent - the WHY. We didn’t mean to, of course we didn’t. But if the art of photography lies where craft and vision converge, then it’s probably because we’ve all been so caught up in the maddening learning curve of the craft that we’ve neglected the vision.

Many of us were never told, or in the mad rush to learn all the buttons and dials, we forgot, that photography is not a technical pursuit. Photography, as an art, is an aesthetic, creative, and expressive pursuit. Yes that pursuit is achieved by technical means, but the moment you leave vision out of the equation and make it merely about technique, photography ceases being art and is merely competence with buttons and dials.

Before our photographs can say we want them to, and in so-doing to look like we want them to, we need to understand what we want to say, and how we want to say it. That’s vision. That’s why it matters.

Yellow Series, New York City 2010
Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII, 50mm, 2 Seconds, f/stop unrecorded.
**VISION NEEDS TO BE EXPRESSED**

Before you know HOW you want to say something, you need to be conscious of what you want to say.

The big question here can be expressed in several ways:

- *What am I trying to say with this single photograph?*
- *What am I trying to point at?*
- *What is the subject or theme of this photograph?*

You’re digging deep here, pushing past everything to get to the core. What is your photograph about? If that’s too cerebral, try this: what about this scene makes me want to create a photograph? Is it the light? The moment? The line of the road through the Vermont hills in autumn? Your photograph is a limited two-dimensional creation, it can’t do everything. It can tell, or imply one thing really well. What is that one thing?

In Kathmandu recently I was photographing a blind man at the Boudhanath Stupa (next page) - he was there morning after morning and I was drawn to his posture, graceful and unmoving as Buddhist practitioners walked past him, around and around the circular monument of the stupa. And as I watched him I was further struck by the contrast between his unmoving form and the rush of the people walking by, by his inability to see, and their seeming blindness to him. They saw him everyday and eventually he just blended in. Very few people put anything in his tin cup. The resulting photograph shows the blind man in a blur of people, unseen. The core of the photograph was the idea of seen and unseen - it was about the blind man, unmoving, and the people around him, seeing and unstopping. Every decision from that point on was directed to finding an aesthetic that would reflect that story.
VISION IS EXPRESSED AESTHETICALLY

If we look at photography as first a technical pursuit, then the starting point is the technique or the technology, with nothing to drive our decisions. If we begin, instead, with our intent for the photograph, then what follows is a pursuit of the aesthetic - the look. Technique and the tools of the trade are merely the means to get us there.

Being consciously aware of what you want to point at in an image gives you a starting place to intentionally point at that thing with the best possible aesthetic. You know what you want to say, and that gives you a starting place for choosing the best combination of words.

The look, or aesthetic, of the photograph - ie, every element in the frame - is all I have to tell my story. Back to Kathmandu and my photograph, UnSeen. My decision, to use a shutter speed of ¼ second was not my first decision. My first decision came from knowing the core (intent, vision) of the photograph and what I wanted to say. Knowing what I wanted to say led me to want to imply hurry and anonymity, it led me to a conscious desire to show movement - enough that the passing figures were indistinguishable as particular people, but not so much that I can no longer tell they are in fact people. Only then, knowing the look I want, do I choose a shutter speed and aperture combination. I guess you could call it visualization, or pre-visualization, and it’s nothing new, but it will change your photography when you slow down and become intentional about placing the aesthetic needs of the photograph first, and then allowing those to dictate technical choices.

So the big questions now are:

- What is the best visual representation of what I want to say?
- How can I push the viewer to focus on what I what her to see?
- How can I lead the viewer to feel what I want him to feel?

These questions don’t have one easy answer. Ten different photographers might photograph the same scene differently in the same way ten writers might write about the same scene differently. One might make it a comedy, and choose his words accordingly. One might make it a tragedy and so use an entirely different set of language tools.

The challenge now is to understand what tools are available to us, and while that’s outside the scope of this particular book, it’s not hard to imagine that one framing or crop might imply different things than another. Same with the point of view or perspective we choose. And it’s the same with our use of depth of field, choice of optics, the particular exposure we choose, etc. So many choices. Like the writer. So many words. Which ones we chose is what make our images unique.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

This is a simple exercise designed to get you thinking about the connection between what we want to say and the decisions we make with the camera. Take your camera for a walk and photograph the weather. That’s it. But the resulting images should tell a viewer how you felt about the weather. Is it raining? What is the best visual representation of that rain? Is it sunny? What can you do to make your photograph feel luminous - shoot into the sun, backlit and overexposed? Is it windy? What will a slower shutter speed contribute to the feeling of that in the image? Will it be a B&W or colour image? There should be no question that your subject was the weather itself. Make me feel the wind on my face.
Creating photographs intentionally is not easy; that could be why the internet is flooded with millions of images of snapshots that do little more than say, “I was here and I saw this.” There’s nothing wrong with that, I suppose, any more than some people use the English language to write novels and some use the same language to write grocery lists. But if you’re experiencing the Two Frustrations, then pushing through this is worth it, because it brings us as artists to the place where our photographs begin to align with our hopes for them. They begin to look like we want them to because they are beginning to say what we want them to.

But it’s not easy. By nature, the creative process can be difficult. It’s messy. It’s meant to be. A sterile creative process only produces sterile art. You need to give yourself permission to struggle, to create garbage, to paint the canvas, then scrape it off and try again. My image, UnSeen, and the companion image UnSeen Too, took 4 days to make. I wrestled during those 4 days, went back time after time, photographed them from several angles, and sometimes just sat for an hour and watched. Most of my photographs don’t give me the luxury of sitting and waiting for that long, but the process can be just as messy and unsure. Sometimes the aesthetic you choose to say what you want to say just doesn’t work. The angle is wrong, the light’s working against you, your lens choice needs revisiting. This same struggle can take minutes, hours or days. It’s still necessary.

Look at writers - they sit down, write really crappy first drafts, get it all out, and then sift through it, re-write, scrap whole sections, and polish until it works. Every discipline seems to embrace the messy nature of creation, except ours. We are impossibly harsh with ourselves, thinking we need to get it right on the first click of the shutter.

Moonland, Lamayuru, Ladakh, India, 2010
Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII, 110mm, 1/20 @ f/9.0
Don’t be afraid of sketch images - you might need to make 20-30 images in order to uncover your intention clearly enough that the final frame expresses what you saw in the way you wanted to. Writers don’t get an idea (vision) then write it down. Most of them write it down in order to find/clarify their vision. The rough drafts don’t get in the way of the final story, they ARE the way to the final story.

All I’m saying is give yourself time and grace to not get it right. Don’t strive for technical perfection, strive to express your intent through the best possible aesthetic. Perfect photographs do not move the heart. And if you’re like me at all, well, sometimes you won’t even know your intent until you’ve explored it with the camera, through the viewfinder. I don’t usually wait until I’ve got my vision nailed down before I put the camera to my eye, my process just doesn’t work like that. Sometimes it does, as it was in the case of UnSeen, but with most others it’s a process of uncovering my vision for a scene as I shoot.

Lastly, there’s an argument to be made for not over-thinking this stuff to death. But for those photographers who claim not to need this stuff because they “only shoot intuitively” I’d argue that’s either an excuse for lazy, unintentional, photography, or that they really do shoot intuitively because this stuff is already internalized somehow. Not to get mystical about it but if I go back to my comparison with writers for a moment, there are a great many writers who sit down and write and the stuff just kind of appears - the writing is the means of discovery and they’ll write things they never knew they knew. If you shoot like that already then you’re unlikely to be experiencing the Two Frustrations. I do believe that the more you consciously identify your intent and choose the best possible aesthetic, the more this process becomes, at least partly, intuitive. But we all work a little differently. Like I said, the creative process is messy. Your mess won’t likely look like my mess. And that’s OK. Because it results in your photographs looking not like mine, but yours.
The more I write about this stuff, and the more feedback I get, the more sure I am that it is both profoundly important to photographers, in fact artists of all disciplines, as well as pragmatic on the most fundamental level. But because we’re using metaphors and artsy-fartsy navel-gazing talk, and this stuff is hard to talk about with real clarity or one-size-fits-all answers, it has not been without pushback. The feedback is good because I think the concept of vision-driven photography bears the scrutiny, and questions only lead to better understanding.

You talk about losing your vision but can vision really be lost?
I don’t think it can. Not on a big scale. I think personal vision grows and changes and is therefore something of a moving target over the long haul. But I think you can lose sight of both your personal vision and your photographic vision. It’s still there, like the car keys between the couch cushions, so it’s not gone. But lost in the sense that you’re having a hell of time finding it? Absolutely.

You talk about Vision like it’s the Holy Grail. Is it possible you’re just a little too focused on process?
Vision is not at all the like Holy Grail, in fact it’s quite the opposite. Vision is not magical, nor it it something we chase with no hope of finding it. And it isn’t the be-all and end-all. I’m just saying that knowing what you want to say - even if it’s a simple statement about beauty or the colour red - gives us the best shot at wielding our tools in a way that helps us express that thing.

As for focusing on process, I think process is important if that process leads you to be clear about your intent and to create the work you want to create. What your process is like is up to you but if by “focusing on process” you mean we should simply point the camera at stuff and shoot instinctively, I think intuition is overrated and much less common than we’d like to believe. Intuition is a result of thinking this stuff through and spending thousands of hours behind the lens. For most of us it is earned, not imbued at birth.

If what is behind that question is the feeling that I’m trying to make this all sound formulaic, then I’ve done a poor job of explaining it because I strongly believe this stuff can’t be formulaized or charted. It’s messy.

Sure vision’s Important, but what about the craft and technique?
Expressing in images something we couldn’t do with words or some other medium is why most of us picked up the camera. That thing we want to express matters a great deal, and being increasingly clear on what that is, is important. But so is having a way to say it. That’s why vision and craft go hand in hand. It’s where expression happens. They both matter. When I say “Gear Is Good, Vision is Better” the first part of that is an affirmation that gear, and by implication I mean the craft, matters too.

Can we all just stop talking about vision and go shoot?
Yes, please. At a certain point I really think we need to shut up and shoot. Just stop with the navel-gazing and go make photographs and trust the process to lead you to something that you want to photograph, and then wrestle with your muse (vision) and your tools (craft) and see if you can’t make something you care about, and something that’s got a shot at expressing your intent in the most unique and compelling way you can. Vision is not the goal. For most of us the goal is expression. Vision is the starting place, craft is the means, and expression - when it all comes together - is the end result.

Talking about photography is not photography, but learning this stuff and hashing it out might just save some of us a great deal of frustration, particularly if you feel like your photographs don’t say what you want them to say or look like you wish they did.
We all get to the place where being conscious of our intent is elusive. Some of us, at the beginning of our journey in photography, find it hard to know where to begin. How do we recognize our vision? How do we refine our focus? Vision, because it’s a metaphor for something that is different in all of us, is a slippery fish to catch. But there are things we can do to close the net a little. I’ve used, and still use, the following concepts and exercises to push me forward - to narrow my gaze, to be more clear about my vision, to find clearer ways of identifying that internal thing that needs expressing. It’s the same internal thing that drives painters to paint and writers to write and musicians to play.

**SHOOT & PRINT. THEN STUDY**

Vision-Driven Photography is about mindfulness. If you want to avoid an evolving awareness of your own vision, avoid critical study of your own work.

An awareness of your own body of work shows you where you’ve been, where you might be heading, and reveals the common threads and themes of your vision. Your own passions - the place your vision resides - will naturally come out in some form, even roughly, and if you look at your work you’ll see the patterns.

Looking at your past and present work, you’ll see the commonalities in the subjects, themes, and styles you seem to gravitate to; there are clues here about your vision, and the more aware and mindful you are, the more intentionally you can pursue these.
CREATIVE EXERCISE

Take a look through your entire body of work, or, if that’s 25 years of photographs in shoe boxes, then look at your best images from the last 5 years. Go through them without judgement. Now is not the time to beat yourself up over old work. What you are looking for is the stream. You’re looking for commonalities in your work. Remember this whole thing is about getting a better handle on our vision. I hear over and over again the complaint, “but I have no vision.” Of course you do. It’s just that some of us are less aware of what it is. But your work doesn’t lie.

Of all those images, which are your favourites? Which ones stir the strongest memories? Which ones have friends reacted most strongly to? What themes do you seem to pursue over and over again? Now dig deeper. Why do you photograph these things? What does this stream of similarities show you about what you love and value and think worth photographing? Now dig deeper one more time. What are the similarities in how you express these things? Is there one lens you seem to prefer over others? Certain colours you seem to prefer, or did all your work somehow seem to end up in black and white?

Being mindful of what you have photographed, and how you’ve photographed, are strong indicators of your personal vision, as well as clues to the direction your photographic vision is taking in expressing your personal vision. Being aware of this helps us focus, narrow the stream, and pursue missed opportunities.

Boudhanath, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2010
Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII, 85mm, 1/250 @ f/1.2
DON’T COMPETE OR COMPARE

This one’s not going to find agreement with everyone, but I think we do potential harm to the unique direction of our vision when we compete, even informally without ever entering a contest. Competitions have your place, but they can be equally destructive as we search for the courage to find and express a unique vision.

The first thing competition will do is put you into a competitive mindset. It will remind you that art is not about expression, it’s about winning. But the thing is, your vision may not be leading you in the same direction as these contests, so the more you shoot to win, the more you’re forced to decide between making images for you or images for the judges. Creating art is about pleasing yourself, not pleasing judges.

The second thing competition will do is make you overly concerned about what others are creating. The muse doesn’t work well when it’s a race. In fact for most of us she checks out completely when the pressure is on and we’re looking not to our own intent to determine what and how we photograph, but to others. And when the muse checks out it’s a sure sign we’re about to produce work that’s derivative, uninspired, and worst of all - not a reflection of who we are and what we really want to say.

The last and most damaging thing competition can bring is an inflated ego. Maybe I’m the only one to whom this applies, but I’ve found, in the very few competitions I’ve entered, that winning was worse, in the long run, than losing. The ego has a profoundly distracting effect on art. Sure, a healthy self-esteem is good, but I believe art and competition are mutually exclusive of each other and have opposing goals.

Energy spent looking at others is wasted in the search for our vision; our vision lies within, not without.

 Competitions have their place, and they’re an interesting place to see the work of others, but I’m not sure they’re helpful in the search for our vision, which is a profoundly personal quest that has nothing to do with how we stack up against others. Art is not about winning or getting to the top.

Thiksey, Ladakh, India, 2010
Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII, 165mm, 1/5 @ f/32
OUR BEST WORK IS PLAY

Play leads to discovery and discovery leads to expression. If you want to discover new aspects of your vision, and new ways of expression, play more. Being too serious only suffocates the muse. In fact, don’t just play - risk! The more you play and risk the more you learn about the outer edges of your vision, the very parts that are most hidden and which we’re all in need of discovering.

The muse doesn’t do well when we get too far from the playground. Yes, it’s work. But it’s our work. And there’s no reason it can’t also be play. In fact, it must be play once in a while. Here’s your homework: go shoot in the rain, play with a toy camera, borrow a friend’s tilt/shift lens or Lensbaby. Shoot 100 photographs without focusing, or from an inch off the ground. Make a photograph “just to see what it looks like.” Why? Because our vision isn’t something we always have to conjur up; it’s part of us and play gets the barriers out of the way so it can rise to the surface in ways that no intentional approach can entice it to do. You’ll find amazing things in the images you create while playing, and if you look at them critically instead of just shooting, printing, and moving on (see #1) you’ll get glimpses of your vision that you may not have seen before in your more serious work.

I photographed this absurd amphibious vehicle in Iceland with a new 24mm tilt/shift lens that I had no idea how to use. The unfamiliarity pushed me to play, to photograph things I would normally never photograph, and in ways I’ve never explored. My initial play opened up possibilities that ended up producing a small series of images that have become some of my favourites. Never underestimate the power of play.
AVOID IMITATIONS

If you want to avoid further discovery and refinement of your vision, I can think of few things better than to spend your creative efforts trying to be like someone else.

Imitation has it’s place in the learning process, but only as a waypoint, not a destination. Great photographers have spent a lifetime becoming the photographer they are at their peak. They too have wrestled with the muse, learned from others, even imitated them at some point, but they become great because they move on into forms of expression that suit them uniquely well. Instead of imitating them, listen to them.

The ground you tread as a photographer has been worn flat by the artists that have gone before you. They too have wrestled to discover their own vision and to refine the style that results from it. They’ve written about it, and there are books and books full of their photographs. Their work is the product of a lifetime of learning to express their own particular vision through their own particular style. Study it.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Go to the local bookstore or library or online gallery and look at the work of photographers from a generation or two ago. Dead, alive, doesn’t really matter. Now pick one artist and look at everything you can find that was created by them. Remember this is about vision. Now take out a piece of paper or a laptop and write down everything you can learn about that photographer only through their photographs. It’s there. It’s always there. What do Galen Rowell’s images tell you about what mattered to him and what he found beautiful? What do Dorothea Lange’s images tell you about what she thinks and believes about people and the issues of her day. Look at the portraits of Yousuf Karsh, even just the one of Winston Churchill - what was the intent behind that image? What was he trying to say about Churchill?

Looking to the work of others for this kind of deconstruction can be helpful because we get fogged by our own work; we’re too close to it. But there is always a connection between the work we do and our vision, it always comes out. And if someone were to look at your work, they’d see it to. Perhaps not clearly, but there would be hints of it. The trick now is to make it unmistakable.
PURSUE PERSONAL WORK

This one’s more for those photographers who do this to make a living, even in part. The moment we allow our marketing niche to become the only thing we ever photograph, and our clients to be the only ones who ever call the shots about our work, we fall into a creative rut. You’ll find it easier to repeat yourself, plateau, and finally be free of the pain of growth.

If what you want, however, is to go in the opposite direction, to discover and express your vision with greater clarity, then personal work is a must. We all work within constraints, and you can still work for clients and be true to your vision, but the real work is done when it’s just you and the muse, hashing it out. And if you don’t have clients to please, if you do this all just for you, then you have to be making photographs if your vision is going to grow.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Clients or otherwise, it’s time to put your back into a personal project. Come up with a theme for the year, something you want to work on long-term. Finding your vision for something can take more than a few minutes or a few days. Learning to match the photographs to that vision can take even longer. Photograph your backyard as it passes through the seasons. Document the life of your dog. Spend time at a local hospice photographing the residents. Find something around which you can create a long-term project, but make it something about which you are passionate and curious. The muse often does better in a marathon than a sprint.
STUDY THE ARTS

If there’s one thing photographers seem to do often it’s isolate ourselves against the arts. I’m not saying we all do it, but it seems to be a trend. Some people come to photography with some background in the arts, but many of us do not. What those that come from the broader arts community already know is there are artists in all kinds of disciplines who are daily learning to discover their vision and new ways in which to express themselves. In fact most of the arts, free from the same bonds we have with gear and technology are way ahead of us when it comes to discovering this whole inner-life thing. If you expose yourself to broader influences in the arts, you will expose yourself to new sources of learning and inspiration.

I go to the writers. In part because I write and have since I was a kid. It’s different enough from photography that it gives me a completely different means of expressing myself. But more than that writers actually write about their process - they talk about discovering the spine of their story and how to uncover their main point in an essay. All of this has given me new ways of seeing, looking for, and refining my own vision.

Painters have a great deal to contribute to our education, they’re visual artists who are often faced with the same constraint as we are as we try to create the illusion of a three-dimensional scene on a medium limited to two dimensions. They’ve learned to see light and lines and recreate the feeling of depth all within a frame. They too paint from their vision, paint with intent, and a limited set of visual tools to express that intent. To not learn from them, and be inspired from them, leaves us impoverished.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

The point of this exercise is to keep us thinking about the way vision is expressed, and in some ways to make us a little more comfortable with talking about vision in terms of intent, what we want to say with an image or a body of work.

It’s time to branch out. Go to the local art gallery and spend some time looking at one single painting. Study it. It doesn’t matter if you like it, that’s not the point. The painter probably doesn’t care in the least whether you like it, he didn’t paint it to please you. He painted it to say something. So look at the work and speculate. What was the painter expressing through this work? What about the artist’s choice of lines, colours, composition, and perspective, lead you to think that? Now look at more than one painting by the same artist; look at several. What about the body of work suggests the vision of the artist? What’s he doing with this work? Sure, it’s all just speculative, but the point isn’t to be right, it’s to interact and begin thinking more concretely about the connection between our vision (intent) and our voice (the work we produce).

Toronto Pearson International Airport
Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII, Zeiss 50mm, 1/80 Second, f/stop unrecorded.
DON’T SETTLE FOR REPETITION

Our vision, like a river, moves when it has an outlet. We grow, we change, we have quiet spots in our life, and we have rapids at times. As we grow and move through life our personal vision evolves and that comes out in our photographic vision. But damn that river up and it begins to back up, stops the flow. One of the best ways to do that as an artist is to repeat yourself, stop the flow of ideas and growth by recycling the same, stagnating, water.

To one degree or another we all repeat ourselves with key themes and subjects, key forms and techniques. But how we express ourselves should be growing. I don’t mean you should bounce around and try everything, I mean allowing your use of technique to grow, to mature, to blend with other forms and adopt new ideas. Being receptive to expressing your vision in new ways allows you to peer into corners of your vision that you’ve not seen before, areas of interest and passion that are there but just never came up before.

This happened to me over the last year as I allowed myself to learn from landscape photographers and their use of light and time. As I explored landscapes in my own work I discovered aspects of my personal vision that I hadn’t considered for years, and now my work includes more landscapes than it ever has. It’s a departure in some ways, but if you look at my Iceland images, for example, and then look at the work before those, you’ll see that departure is really just another point down the same line I’ve been travelling. It’s consistent with my previous work because it all comes from the same place. That discovery wouldn’t have happened had I insisted on shooting more portraits in India.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

This is about discovering your vision as you explore new channels and leave aside old forms for a while. You’ve already spent some time looking at your past work, exploring the direction of the stream. I’m not going to ask you to abandon shooting what you love, I’m going to ask you to consider photographing it in a different way.

Do you love the elegance of beautiful light and chiaroscuro in a portrait? Spend some time exploring forms and textures under similar light by shooting still lifes. Or go the other way and keep making portraits but explore the possibilities in dramatic un-diffused light.

Your vision can be expressed in multiple ways and while these experimental images may not end up in a body of work anyone will ever see, they may open your eyes to undiscovered aspects of your vision, or untried forms of expressing that vision.
LET THE RIVER FLOW

To go back to the metaphor of the river for a moment, if our photographic vision is the river, and our expression is the outlet, then the source is our personal vision and the single best thing you can do to stop the flow of that river is to disconnect the river from the source. Compartmentalize your life, keep photography separate and unaffected by everything else and you’ll find your vision dry up very quickly.

To put it in more positive terms, the more you nurture a fulfilling and creative personal life, the deeper the source from which your photography can draw. In this sense it’s important to remember that photography is an expression of life, not life itself. If the only thing you know and care about is photography, then what will the photographs themselves speak about? Your personal life and outside interests feed that source and they need to be nurtured, not neglected.

I get emails often asking me if my faith affects my photography. How can it not? My faith is a deeply personal collection of beliefs about who I am, what life is about, what is beautiful, what is unjust. It affects how I see the sacred nature of the natural world, how I see other people, and it explains why I am so drawn to photographing the things I do. To cut your photography off from this source is to deny the necessity of personal vision. To be unaware of this source is just as impoverishing.

Your other interests not only hint at your vision, they feed it.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

This one’s easy. You just have to have a life outside of photography. For many of us photography’s a hobby, and that’s great, but if photography’s really about life then we need something else to fill the well. A student once asked Jay Maisel what he needed to do to create more interesting photographs. Jay replied, “become a more interesting person.”

The single best thing you can do to find your vision is to lead a life so unmistakably full of things that matter to you that your vision itself is unmistakable. Sure, it’ll still take work to translate that into photographic vision and still longer for that to translate into a consistent style, but it’ll be there. Sometimes the best thing we can do when we’re looking for something really hard is to stop looking so hard. Perhaps it’s time to put the camera down for a while and re-discover the other parts of your life that were once so important. Chances are you’ll find your vision in those things you most love, are most interested in, and have the most to say about through your images.

Kho Samet, Thailand 2010
Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII, TS-E 24mm, 1/5 @ f/22
The most difficult aspect of all this endless talk about vision is that it’s nearly impossible to nail down. Vision is not some tangible thing that can be discovered, catalogued and set aside. It isn’t something you simply get a handle on, leverage into better photographs, and move on. Vision is fluid, it’s organic, it changes and evolves as we do and so the vision we discover and find ways of expressing this year will not necessarily be the same vision next year, and in changing it will require a whole new search to find it, a whole new set of visual tools to express it. But far from being bad news, this is what keep so many of us engaged in this art.

As our personal vision changes so does our photographic vision, and then our photographs. It’s an endless journey and even if it takes us through familiar territory year after year we pass through that territory with new eyes, seeing even old things in new ways and expressing them in new forms.

The subject of photographic vision is not an easy one to discuss, much less absorb. In this short book I’ve not even approached the subject of learning to see things in new ways. I’ve avoided it because I’m not sure myself how that’s done, much less taught. I see things the way I see them and all the exercises in lateral thinking and creativity have only helped me express what I see differently, I have yet to discover a way to change the way I actually perceive.

What I do know is that this stuff is slippery, hard to get a firm grasp on before it slides away. As I said, my own process is messy. I walk the streets of new towns and countries and I mutter to myself. I shoot, delete, go for a cup of chai and write unspeakable things about my muse in my journal. I struggle. I wrestle with it so much a recent commenter on my blog told me my angst was exhausting, leading me to believe that he’d probably found a way of photographing that was simply full of kittens and rainbows, a way that I have yet to stumble upon. For most of us, we’ll always wrestle with this. It’s that wrestling that makes the moment we finally get it right so gratifying and full of wonder. It’s that wrestling that makes our images honest.

Ultimately the exercises in this book are no more than stepping stones to whatever the next stage in your own journey is, and they are no substitute for getting out there and making thousands and thousands of photographs. It took me 25 years to dial in to my vision and even now I wrestle with refining it and expressing it in new ways every time I shoot. Sometimes I wrestle my muse to the ground and create something I never imagined. Sometimes I limp away from the encounter with a camera full of the unimaginative. But even then I’m one step closer, because every frame that doesn’t quite express my intent is one step close to the one that does.

Wherever you’re at, don’t give up. You do have vision. You see this world in ways unique only to you. Finding that path and learning to point it out to others is what makes photography such a thrill. I blog about this kind of thing at on my blog at PixelatedImage.com/blog. The community that has formed around that blog is second to none. I’d love to have you join us.

Peace.

David duChemin
Vancouver, 2010
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