

ADVICE

IN A MELTDOWN

The economic world seems to have become *the* world, and everyone in *the* world seems to have cut back on actual productive work in order to free up time for full-time angst. And so the prophecies of doom are self-fulfilled.

Are there things photographers can do until the meltdown congeals? I think there are—real things that will change our work, our minds, change us.

Here's one, a radically simple idea: take pictures! Like you used to before you were a *photographer* with a capital *P*. Back when you weren't thinking about any particular kind of pictures, when you certainly didn't expect them to pay for what you were doing. If this sounds far-fetched, remember this: it's how we all started!

Normally, when work slows down we photographers try to change our fortunes by coming up with some kind of "look" so market compelling that clients will unfreeze their budgets.

When that doesn't work we revamp our Web site. And when *that* doesn't work we try to cook up some new promos. And refine our mailing lists and start making calls to people who don't really want to come to the phone. All this keeps us busy and gives the illusion of doing something, but it's not much fun.

And if the slowdown is long and deep—as this one promises to be—it starts to feel as though we are using our energy to chase work that simply isn't there. It's the old blood-from-a-stone problem.

When this realization hits, most of us start channeling energy into spinning out pure worry. I know because I do it myself.

But I have a better idea, a concrete thing you can actually do. *Start taking pictures*. Real photographs, which surprise you and transport you and expand you. Pictures that bring back all the early delights of photography.

Think back to when we began. We had no clients, no assignments, and we weren't even thinking about them. We just took a camera and stepped out into the world with a kind of spaciousness in our heads and no preconceived ideas about how to fill it. We wandered around until something stopped us, called to us, and then we started taking pictures of whatever it was. It was the doing that led us.

And then one day we got a picture that was so totally beyond us that it was hard to imagine that we had actually taken it. But we had. And at that point there was only one thing to do—see if we could take another.

So we did. And again.

We had discovered magic, and we thought that it all had something to do with photography. So we got this brilliant idea that we'd

be a photographer. Full-time magic!

That's the point at which we began to look for photographs. And soon we started looking for our photographs, ones that looked like our *other* photographs.

And then someone hired us to look for photographs. But the catch was that they wanted what they wanted. So we switched to looking for their photographs.

You can't blame them, or us, but after a while we were no longer looking for surprises, we were looking for things that we already knew were there. We caught some surprises along the way, but we stopped looking for pictures that weren't already in our heads or in the heads of our clients. And that is a huge difference.

Surprise was what lay at the heart of our first efforts, the ones that transformed us. And the surprise stays intact, even we if neglect it for years.

If you don't believe me, go see for yourself if it's there. Start over! As a photographer.

Forget trying to massage your existing photography/business model into some depression-busting format. Do it while you're waiting for the economy to do whatever it is going to do. I think it's not going back where it was, anyway, so perhaps you can find where it is going and get there first.

Wander around in a state of emptiness, looking for nothing, ready for anything. Take a camera with you, but don't try to take pictures. Let pictures take you.

PUTTING THE METHOD INTO PRACTICE

Does this work? Does it revive that pure impulse, does it bring back the excitement of knowing you are doing something wonderful without any idea of how you're doing it? I can tell you it does. I found out when, out of the blue, my friend Thatcher Cook said, "Come to Uganda." A door opened, and I had no choice but to step through it.

I arrived in Kampala with some ideas about what I wanted to try there, but before I got going on them Thatcher suggested that I drop by the Kampala Boxing Club, a gritty boxing gym (is there any other kind?) down in the bottomlands between the hills of Kampala. So I did.

And that was it for me. I was like Alice down the rabbit hole.

The first day I arrived at the Kampala Boxing Club training room,



A fighter takes a dive, waiting for the bullets to stop outside the Kampala Boxing Club

tucked under Nakivubo Stadium, I just wanted to be there, show myself and get the boxers used to me. Then I waited, hoped and prayed that something wonderful would happen, something I'd never seen before. Within a few minutes, it did.

Things were quiet. There was a single figure shadow boxing lazily in the ring. The head coach sat in a corner chanting from the Koran.

Then sounds. Pop-pop-pop! Someone tossing firecrackers outside. The coach stopped chanting and said something calmly, but I couldn't understand him.

I moved toward the door to look out. The man spoke again. "I can't understand what you're saying," I said. It sounded to me like *bubet*. What's a *bubet*?

I turned to see that the boxer was now lying down in the ring, head raised, looking around. It seemed odd, so I walked over and took his picture, then turned back to the coach sitting calmly on his mat in a corner. "Sound is BULLETS!" he said, patiently.

Oh, bullets! Of course.

The sound stopped.

I kept coming back to the club. I'd hang out, shoot some, get bored and get ready to leave. Then I'd stay a few more minutes, doing nothing, and suddenly something wonderful would happen. Even the setting, so far from my life in every way, kept me alert. So did the occasional gunfire just out-

side. So did the man who grinned as he said, "I want to kill a white man!" (He was joking, right? In fact, everyone was friendly and welcoming.)

As the work emerged I got excited. It looked not at all like my other work. I loved the hot equatorial colors, the eccentric compositions, the new fluidity. It was not like my work at all. Just what I needed.

In the final analysis I took what I think are some of the most alive pictures I've done in years, done without thought or intention, just presence.

When I got home, I showed the pictures to some people. "Great stuff," they said, "What are you planning on doing with them?" I didn't know. "Well, why did you decide to go there?"

The only answer was, to take these pictures. That was enough. Taking them worked on me just like the first good pictures I had ever made. It was as though someone had borrowed my camera, and of course I was that someone.

So that's what I've been doing in the face of the meltdown. I rather doubt that the photo business is going to go back to what it was, and the best way I can think of to prepare for whatever will happen next is to wake up, and making pictures is the way I've always done that.

Maybe it'll work and maybe it won't, but it is better to be a free-range photographer than a battery photographer in a confined mental space that squirts out the same old pictures all day long, forever.

Or as the Spanish poet Antonio Machado said, "Travelers, there is no path. The path is made by walking." ☞