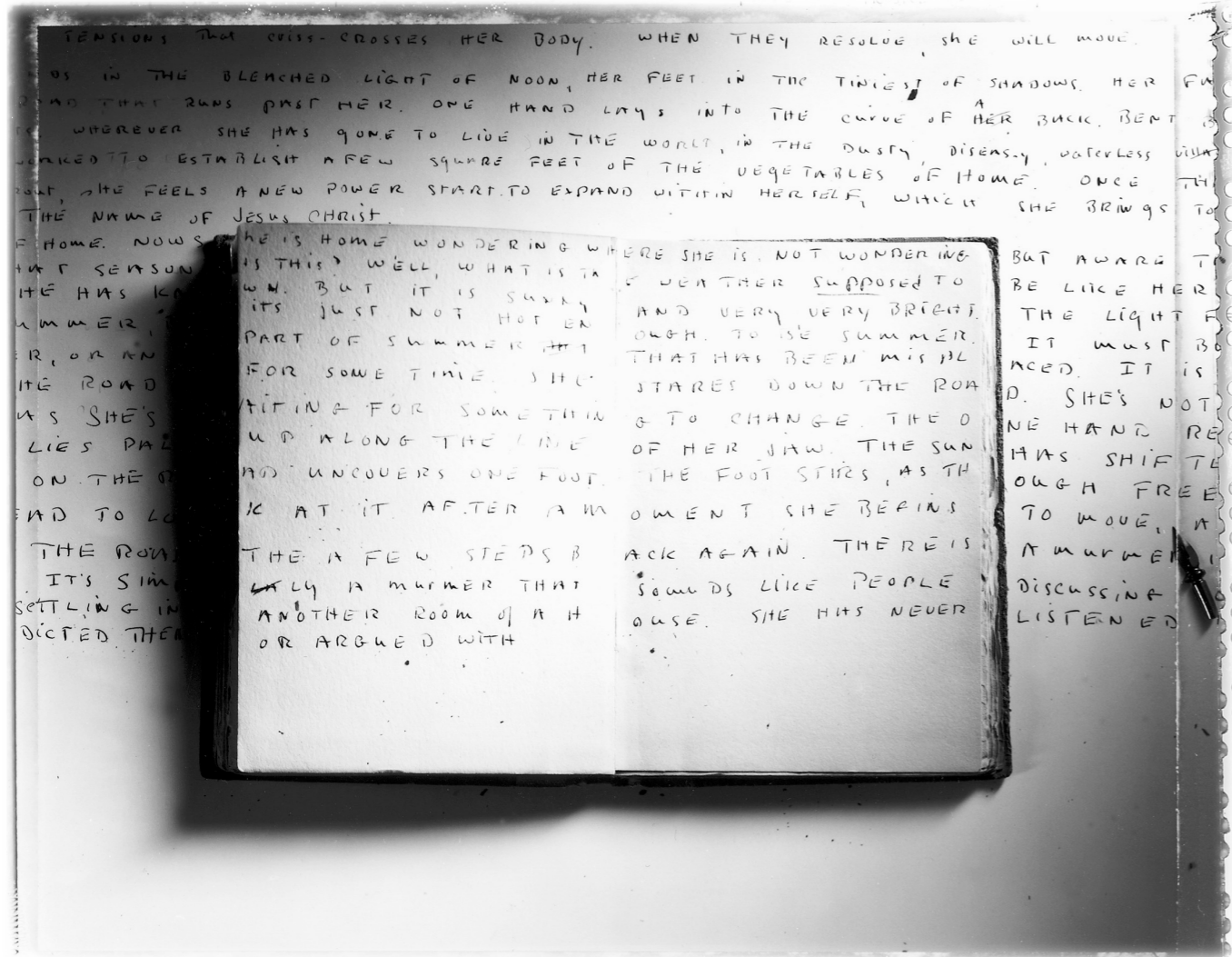


How This Book Works, And Why



Wanderer, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.

Antonio Machado

This book is for people who have looked through a camera and been changed, as I was.

It is for you if you have been making pictures for a long time or have just begun. It is for you if you work with a camera or paint, words on a page or sounds in the air. It is for professionals who do work that fulfill clients visions and would like to regain the magic of finding their own.

It is for people who sense that there's more to be had from creating than just the things we create.

And it is for teachers to use, alter, and pass along.

The book started to form when I began teaching photography, but over time I've seen the thoughts and exercises in it work for artists of every kind. Doing them can bring one to the the things that surprise us and make our art live — the light, relationships, poetry, musicality, and pure emotion.

They bring alive the thrill and revelation of working beyond what you know.

If art works like a mirror, this book is about the mirror itself, not the reflections.

The book does not focus on cameras, software, or “technique,” although those things do come up. Instead it send us out beyond the making to the deep roots of our creativity that are there in us long before we click ... or paint or write or do anything at all. Talking, reading and thinking can point to where to dig, but to reach the awareness from which art arises we need to move around, to act, to do things.

How the book works

It begins from this thought: creativity is not so much the things we make as it is the state in which we make them. In it we get to things that just don't yield to thinking. And we don't *have* to produce anything. Just being in it fulfills us.

I realize that that may be an unusual view, so to begin I'll explain the notion a bit, and after that we'll try it out. I'll also give a short glimpse of how the brain acquires perceptions and what it does with them.

After that the book will mostly be exercises that give us a direct experience of our own creativity and a chance to actually see it at work in us. Done with focus and commitment, the exercises provoke us to work that surprises us and grows us.

I'd been doing creative pursuits from childhood through my schooling and early working years — writing at first, then theater. One day in the theater I picked up a camera with nothing much in mind and stunned myself by taking some pictures that were somehow larger than I was, clearer and more resonant. They weren't great, but the outcome felt like a miracle ... or a mistake. Within months I'd left theater and taken to the camera, and after a few years I began to teach college students to take pictures. But I sensed something was ticking just below the surface. So I began picking the phenomenon apart, hoping I wouldn't kill it in the process.

One surprise was that this creativity was present in non-artistic disciplines — science, engineering, medicine, history. It seemed to be a part of every-

thing we did, and was both very profound and completely quotidian.

And innate.

It actually seemed that creativity might be a way that we learned things, that it began when awareness began in the womb and really started to blossom at birth.

The Chihuahua's Visit

Join me in a thought experiment here and imagine a newborn infant in a hospital room. To those gathered — enfolding mother, solicitous father, and murmuring visitors — everything might seem hushed and tranquil, but the child surely feels it's been ejected into a raging world of light and sound. After the amniotic world the baby has just come left, this place is a screaming hell.

The baby can't come to the hell metaphor, of course. It has never heard of hell, has no experience, makes no constructs.

But what it does have is awareness.

And that is everything it needs to start right in on the great labor of becoming itself. and grasping the world. With awareness, with simple seeing, the child can begin to map its world and its make its meaning.

Here's how I think this might work: the infant brain is primed to notice whatever it has not encountered before, which for a newborn is everything. It can't integrate the data because it has no database, but it can notice.

Now imagine that baby a month or so later, at home and beginning to focus on things around it. One day an aunt comes to admire and brings ... a dog, a Chihuahua, energetic, expressive, and yappy!

The baby stares and stares. And somewhere inside its baby brain synapses respond to this new input by swaying and pointing toward each other and finally knitting together to make a place, a little neural nest, for this furry yapper.

Then the dog goes away and the child's brain settles down.

But not all the way down. Because of the encounter there is now impressed on it an image of this new creature. The child's brain is different! Its mind has been changed ... literally! No idea yet, but a perception and a memory.

This is a transformative event, and it is the kind of thing that goes on all day, day after day, for babies. No wonder they need to sleep so much.

Of course none of this is my idea. I got it from the pioneering neurobiologist Antonio Damasio, who was one of the first to use fMRI imaging to map what happens in the brain during different kinds of events. He describes it very simply in his book, *The Feeling of What Happens* (Yale University Press, 2009).

Events change us, he says, and “we become conscious when the organism's representation devices exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge — the knowledge that the organism's own state has been changed by an object.”

Wordless knowledge! Of course. We sense a difference that we don't articulate, but we somehow know that something has changed!

Notice that he is not talking about encounters with things that are momentous or artistic or even interesting, just things that are new. And he's not talking about *understanding* them.

And certainly he's not talking just about infants. This transformative effect continues throughout our lives.

I may be getting out ahead of Damasio's intention here, but I think he points to a kind of knowing that is different from understanding, though not at all inferior to it. In fact, it is primary. The ignition of art in us doesn't come from understanding, from art history, from parsing what other artists have done, or from technique ... not even from talent, for that matter. Those things can prompt or shape it as it manifests, but artwork starts with awareness,

Creativity starts with being aware in some new way, and knowing it.

with perceiving in some new way and then looking for ways to convey that awareness into others.

Is this transformative awareness artistic? Not necessarily. After all, it produces no concrete result — nothing on paper, no songs or colors or words. Still, we've had that change of brain/mind. We are enlarged. The view through us is wider, deeper. And if we make art in this condition, there's a chance it will be wide and deep. The same thing can happen if we engineer a new kind of airplane wing or a theory of economics.

All right, back to our little infant, who has been rocked by its meeting with the dog. A perception has arisen in its brain's right hemisphere, then it is handed over to the child's left hemisphere, whose job it is to decide what shelf it belongs on. (More about this hemisphere business in a moment.)

The child can now begin to fit the dog into the matrix of meaning it is starting to weave. ("It doesn't feed me, so not Mother. Looks kind of like that other furry thing I see around here. Maybe this

'dog' thing is a kind of Cat.") So a stab at conceptualization, though not perfect. But that's the way we use our other hemisphere, the left, to find or make meaning out of what the right hemisphere apprehends.

As children get older they get more focused on this structuring project, and more adept. And most of our education serves that process. We analyze things, see where they fit into other things. We test our structures against other's, and we knot them into the vast web of structures that is our world. We call this *understanding*, and it's part of what makes us human, or so we think.

And there's no question that it's the way to build and understand structures and systems.

But as a hammer needs nails, the left hemisphere needs input to make structure of. And that comes from the wide-field holistic awareness of the right hemisphere as it perceives.

(A fascinating aside here: it has been observed that when people have suffered damage to their right

Into the Hemispheres

Let's spend a moment here on brain lateralization. The notion that different cognitive functions are seated in the two hemispheres of the brain (lateralization) has been around since the 1860s. As it developed it was shorthanded to say that the right hemisphere was visionary and creative while the left managed the analytic, structural and conceptual tasks. So:

Statistics on the left. Poetry on the right

Facts on the left. Feelings on the right.

Reality on the left. Mindless fantasy on the right.

A perfect arrangement!

In his book his book, *The Master and His Emissary* (2009), neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist lays out a more complex and complete model of how we gather perceptions.

A stimulus is first apprehended in the right hemisphere. It is a raw impression, uninterpreted but real. We can't describe it, name it, compare it to anything, but we *know* it.

The perception is handed off to the left hemisphere, where it is named, analyzed, compared to what we already know, and put on the right shelf. And now we can speak (or think) about the thing, describe it, metaphorize it, fit it into the world that we know, and think about it. Now we say we "know" it. (There's an interesting notion that we don't experience things directly, only the ideas that we construct about them, the memories.)

McGilchrist laments oversimplification, and he is adamant that the hemispheres are not alienated. They collaborate in such a way that they really are functionally one entity.

hemisphere, the left continues to work without any input, cranking out absurd tautologies.)

So what does this tell us about how art work bears fruit? Here's my semi-informed guess.

First we perceive something, an empty room or a splash of light, a litter of kittens or Yosemite Valley, the shadow of branches on the snow, the sound of wind — in other words, anything at all.

Let's say we hike up a hill in fall and come across a maple tree glowing a fiery red in the valley below. Our first response is ... wordless. Or maybe *Ah!* In our brain it is a perception floating in our right hemisphere, real but not in an expressible form.

Our next response might be *Beautiful*. Then perhaps, *Tree*.

Then, *Maple*. Then, *Sugar...or Norway?*

And as we compare and construct, the experience becomes something we can think about and communicate. We can be taxonomic or we can be poetic and express what the sight/perception *feels* like.

But if we're artists it can be best just to hold it in awareness for a while before we do anything. We might just stare, or we might move closer, view it from different angles. We might move around and watch the visual elements change in relation to each other until some harmony arises.

If we were a poet and wanted to express the “oceanic feeling” that can arise at such a moment we might do well to follow the advice of poet Charles Wright and just let the impression float as long as possible without trying to pull it down and onto the page, let its resonances establish and extend. This allows our creative aspect time to fully soak the thing up before we start to talk it out.

So there you have my home-brewed notion of how the mind/brain works in the creative state. This idea underlies much of this book, and the chapters

A perception is...what? A thought embryo? In the shape of a blowing cloud? I don't know, but until we can name it, compare it, decide what shelf it belongs on, it seems maddeningly indefinite.

that follow leverage it to make us more trusting of the phenomenon.

By now it should be clear that this book doesn't aspire to teach you Creativity ... and that it doesn't need to. But the exercises and the thoughts in it can lead you to new experiences and view over the world and the self, and they can perhaps stir up some "wordless knowledge" that will sign a change in you. You can then work with that experience, in photography or anything else, or you can just walk around with your mind's eye open and glory in seeing.

When Art takes you over — let it

There are things I like to do and things I ought to do, and all of them get flung aside when I am making photos and, lately, films.

Why am I so overcome by the sudden onset of creative action? Is it the dopamine? Is it the hope that I might be carried once again beyond my ideas? Or is it the way that making really new work stretches me into a new shape? Or is it something else altogether?

Whatever the reason, I still like to try to grasp the workings that underlie this compulsion. Understanding them or at least noticing them brings me to put more weight on this invisible process.

Our best results seem to be ones that we only get to by doing. And the doing may involve some undoing, some setting aside of what we think we know.

The finished result of a creative act, the piece itself, can be ordered, but we all know that the experience of wandering, getting lost, getting found, and finally emerging with something new is an unpredictable process. The tracery of a creative outworking seen from above would look more like a maze than a path. Yet one outcome of wandering through this maze is that you emerge as someone else, more awake, more aware. Done repeatedly it becomes a practice.

What does the creative state feel like?

Being in the state is not necessarily comfortable or serene, not for me, especially when something gets going. Nervous, excited, confused, and insecure are

more like it. I may be aware that something is happening, but I'm not conscious of it in any detail. If a good photo comes out of it, it surprises me every time.

I think that such a picture is the sign of a mystery that is present in us all the time. It reminds me of the way a cloud chamber deep in a salt mine reveals the passage of invisible neutrinos by the vapor trails they leave. When a creative event flashes through us, the image we make is the visible sign of its passage.

The phrase *empty cognizance* describes the state perfectly. It is a term used in Buddhist psychology, and it suggests an emptiness which yet holds all possibilities, any of which we can manifest.

We are so trained to analysis and structure that it is hard to imagine something so central to our being as creativity doesn't start with thinking. But as a medical researcher friend pointed out, there are any number of functions that pass entirely around our brain. *Like what*, I asked. He told me that the next

time I put my hand on a hot stove I should see how long I take to decide what to do.

Nothing to learn

As we grow up, it is the left hemisphere that becomes the focus of most of our education, while the right hemisphere is more or less left to take care of itself.

Which is fine. You can't tell it anything anyway. But if we don't exercise creativity it can seem to atrophy. Still, at any point we can revive it, stand it up, and right back to work it goes.

And when it does resume, the "dark matter" that makes up so much our art and our lives comes back to us again.

We all travel on two legs, conceptual thinking and nonconceptual awareness. And if we ignore either one, we limp.

Making your way through the book

This book is not necessarily something you work straight through, although you could. It's stochastic, i.e., randomly determined, having a random probability distribution or pattern. Its job is to coax your creative functioning out into the open where you can see it. It gets things to happen, creative manifestations. It lets us float in a state of not-knowing like children.

At this point your left hemisphere might be jumping up and down and saying, "Hey, what's wrong with analysis, structure, understanding?"

Not a thing in the world. I want my cardiologist to know everything there is to know about hearts, to be deeply knowledgeable about my problem and to have solved it dozens of times. Improvisation in the arts is great, but not in surgery. But if my doctor finds an anomaly, I do want him to be able to start thinking, *What else?*

When we are inspired,
rather like when we are
in love, we can feel
most unintelligible to
ourselves and most truly
ourselves.

Adam Phillips

In fact I had just such a cardiologist in a workshop. His specialty was to take on the outlier cases that colleagues couldn't crack. With these cases he used a kind of broadened awareness to discover what might be causing the anomaly.

Lately I've done presentations for several medical organizations that are interested in coaxing young medical school students who have been trained toward certainty to allow openness to linger a little longer so that unexpected possibilities can occur. The problem seems to be that younger doctors rely on technology so much that their subtler powers of observation lie unused.

I see something similar in photography. Since the introduction of digital technology, people have begun to think that creative work starts when a file is brought into a program. And given the incredible polish that digital tools bring to the process, it is easier than ever to make something happen that is all surface with no center, no heart. The technology tempts one to leap to solutions based on what a

computer can do. But when we're making art, polishing is not the first step. Creative work begins when we encounter anything that calls us out beyond what we know, and we go to it in a state of awareness and let it work on and in us.

Breakthroughs can begin before you touch the camera, and they can look like nothing you've ever seen ... and should, if you're doing it right.

Don't take my word for any of this. Start to work it all out for yourself.

The creative process is like a long hallway of doors, any of which will open out into a new space with more doors. You might well feel disoriented. This book is meant to get you comfortable in these spaces, exhilarated to be in such hallways and rooms.

