

I want to talk a bit about not thinking. And getting to not thinking without thinking is a bit of a trick, but it can be done, I think, and we'll try it.

When I started doing photography it was a thoughtless process, which was part of its appeal to me.

When started teaching, had to start thinking about the creative process, how it might work. And when I did that, I concluded that a big part of what I had to teach was...thoughtlessness.

What you already know is that there are powerful capabilities in us that work without thinking, starting the moment we are born. They continue to be of great use to any artist or creator. But, useful as they are, perhaps we close the door on them too readily, and in doing so we lose something.

I'd like to play with the notion that we can open that door again in a heartbeat.

I can't possibly say how what we do today might be of use in what you do. leave that to you.

Here's what I want to do:

Talk a bit about the way that artists and infants function

Look at a few photos that illustrate it at work.

Get a few of us on our feet to see if we can very quickly jump into that creative state.

Poet Paul Valery "Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees."

Whenever I quote that there's an inner chuckle. I think it is rueful response to being reminded of something very obvious people have forgotten. Kind of like slapping our forehead.

As a young teacher I wondered what could happen if students hovered in that space between seeing and naming. Would they make photographs that were, not better, but more alive. I suspected that that's where the treasure was.

And I was struck by the similarity in process between small children and artists, AND in everyone else.

Picasso: "All children are born artists. The problem is how to remain one once one has grown up."

I think this hovering state is a kind of pure creativity. It is as though all of us are born at the bottom of a well, and the pure awareness of creativity, is our way out.

I'm not talking about creating works of art but the state in which they are created.

State of awareness that let's us see just what is there, before we begin to think about it at all or try to get something done with it.

And it is a state we tend to shuffle aside when we grow up. It's not what we educate.

But if you think of all that an infant manages to get done so quickly with it, we might wonder why we give it up so readily.

He good news is we don't have to relearn it. Given a poke, it just pops right up again and goes to work. Like riding a bicycle.

So I want to show and tell you how and why I invoke that state in making work.

I am described in the program as a photographer, but I've come to think that taking pictures is the least of it. Photography is really more like a vehicle. It has taken me all kinds of places.

But it serves best as a means for getting to things that I can't really think my way to. The pictures are the footprints.

I think that for me the value of photography is that it revives that wonderful state that existed long before I could walk around looking or even get my eyes to focus.

Photography brings me back to it again and again. And I'm grateful.

I don't remember, of course, but I assume simply looking around was one of the first things I did in my life, and I think it was pure apprehension.

Later, after I accumulated a few experiences, I began to compare things I saw. And when my schooling began this all went to a different level. Even learned to work with things I had never seen at all, only heard or read about. I learned about classifications and sets and comparisons, finding the structure of the world, or maybe making it up.

So thus I developed a capacity to think. At best that let me frame the unruly world, but other times it was like a procrustean bed, that cut off what didn't fit in with what I already knew.

Took me from the chaotic to the linear. (Later I understood that, artistically, at least, the chaos was more riveting. Think back to age 16, when you were trying to learn trigonometry and also experiencing first love. Which did you dwell on?)

Don't want to denigrate my years of education. They let me secure the process of critical thinking, defined as "actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action."

Very useful. Some say this is the thing that makes us human. But it starts with apprehending, with having material. Apprehending provides the "about" of "thinking about something".

So Critical Thinking is of course very useful. But not always the right tool for things like leaps and wonder. (shooting star) And over time dwelling in the critical can function like old varnish on a painting that makes it look cracked and yellow.

And if that varnish is removed, a painting can emerge that is breath-taking in its brightness and clarity.

Which is just what photography did when it came into my life. It restored a kind of unvarnished view, and I loved it for that. I had been working in theater, but had risen from creative work to management: Perfect example of Murphy's law at work.

Photography returned me to the spaciousness of mind of a child, and I could directly

experience things fully, knowing without naming. And as a bonus the pictures let me evoke the experience for others.

So my ambition became to see like a child again.

If a Photographer enters room he looks for pictures.

If a secret service agent enters a room he looks for hiding places and escape routes.

If a 2 year old enters a room he looks for nothing. He simply sees. That's the kind of state that I'm seeking, the state in which I used take 2 hours to walk home from school and, upon being asked what I had been doing, gave the perfect Buddhist reply, "Nothing."

If I has been precocious, I could have made the case to my mother that I was acquiring
Quote "wordless knowledge" Unquote.

What is that? Whom am I quoting?

I'm quoting Antonio Damasio in his book *The Feeling of What Happens*. He says that encounters with any unfamiliar thing change us, change the connections in our brain, that "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.*"

I don't need to explain this to this crowd, but I will point out that he's not just talking about encountering interesting things. He's talking about apprehending any new unfamiliar thing at all, without about evaluating it or placing it in the matrix of what one knows.

Baby and Barking dog

And of course he's talking not just about infants but about something that continues throughout all of our lives. New encounters change us, enlarge us. (Great excuse to go off to Paris, if you need one.)

Could call it non-doing (Taoist term), empty cognizance (Tibetan term). (Also called daydreaming, a term dear to second grade teachers.)

I call it seeing. And when I'm in this state, my vision opens, and my photography frames it.

If I'm surprised, I hover in the space between seeing and naming.

So I go looking for situations that upend me. If I come back with powerful pictures it means I've been disarmed, something has changed, has shifted in me.

I think of these as journeys. A good definition of a journey is that the person who comes back is not the person who left. Journeys are what I'm after, more than pictures.

It's a fantastic feeling---when it's not terrifying. And rewarding. And addictive.

Of course, many photographers just want to make pictures that look like other pictures. But some slip spontaneously past their notions and come back with something they've never seen before, pictures that transcend intention.

Same is true of all art forms. The great works, even small ones, transcend the intentions of the maker and the medium.

Thing is, can't think your way to them, just have to go hang around in unfamiliar places.

Here's an example of something you can't think up, from the poet Gregory Orr.

The way the word sinks into the deep snow of the page

The deer, lying dead in the clearing

Its head and antlers transparent

The black seed in its brain

Parachuting toward Earth

When this kind of thing happens in my photography it is as though a dark stranger borrowed my camera for one frame.

To invoke this I intentionally remove myself to places where I feel lost, disoriented, even a bit frightened.

If I'm lucky I feeling a little exhilaration along with my discomfort. Found my surprises and my photos in prisons, Tibetan monasteries, riot zones, boxing Gyms in Africa, in the human face, and in the recesses of my own mind. These places derailed my ideas and my understanding, but that's exactly what I was looking for.

Samuel Johnson described this as "the unexpected copulation of ideas."

So when I started teaching I went looking for ways that my students could use. Began with Arkin, then by finding music games, Chinese brush work, meditation, anything that would, just for a moment, dam the thought process and send the flow elsewhere. And it has worked, with photo students, but many others, including women with cancer, child soldiers, etc.

I'd like to share with you some of those photos taken when I put myself on shaky ground, that blew me through the walls of my white-bread, middle class life into rooms that I'd never suspected were there *for me*.

(Show photos)

So these all arise from the this creative awareness, but don't have to go to Africa to try them.

I think that people in most areas of endeavor would agree that setting aside what you already know to gain a fresh view can be useful.

Which leads us to us, here. I wouldn't presume to tell you why creating might be a valuable practice.

Nevertheless there are school boards everywhere that have cut out creative classes as superfluous. I think they are central and useful. If we only do what we already do and only move beyond that incrementally, we are decelerating.

When we get tossed into this state we can resent it: A snow storm delays us. The plane is late. Things to wrong, and we are forced to stop and sit there...and sit there.

And if we don't let ourselves check emails and make phone calls desperately fill the time, we might just slip into the space between seeing and naming, where we might find things with no names at all...yet.

Better still, we can do it as a practice.

We can do something seriously, something perhaps artistic, or perhaps not, but something that undoes us a bit and prompts us to be in in the world and not just in our own heads..

Here is a short list:

Take a poetry class,

Or join a chorus,

Or an improve group

Or my favorite: Go to a part of town you never go to.

You can think of these things as a training in which uncertainty is an ally, not an obstacle, and space is something to drift in, not something to fill.