

The Artist, Lost and Found

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I'm an artist who got lost on his way to work.

I make photographs for the world of business-advertising, annual reports, that sort of thing.

But the art and the commerce fight, and the fight takes place in me.

A lot of us in visual communication come to it fresh from a young encounter with our own artistic impulses. We may study painting, then, because we need to earn a living, become illustrators, or designers or anything that will pay us a little something. And we wind up a tug-of-war between our work and our art...as the rope.

For the first many years of my life I didn't even know I was an artist, in the same way a puppy doesn't know it's a dog. But everything I did had some element of creativity in it—the games I played, even the messes I made.

My working life began at a theater. I acted, built sets, lit shows and stage managed them. I was in pure, true love, full of passion and energy and the self importance of the overworked. I had no time to think, and that was the part that appealed to me most.

What I mean is that after so many years of studying, I was doing things. I could explore things with my own imagination and body and voice. I could try to make my experience into something that spoke to others.

It was the love of exploration that really drove me. I had all these things I wanted to try. You couldn't have called them ideas, really. They were just loose bits of light, words, sounds in my head. They meant nothing. I just wanted to see what would happen if actors stood in complete darkness on a stage before an audience for a long, long time. What might it feel like if they faced the audience in the dark? What if they faced away? I thought it would be fascinating to know.

But to find out I would have to make others think it would be fascinating too. And at age 23 I didn't have the stature or focus or charisma to do so.

Then one night before a picture call the theater's photographer showed me his gear. The cameras fascinated me, black machines so capable and precise. I had a camera inside of a week. On my next day off I took some pictures. One was of a glowing window in a dark old house.

That was it. I was out that window, gone from the theater within a few months. I was out on my own.

Now I could wander around, look at things, wait to see what happened as the light changed, wait until something in me shifted and revealed what was hidden. There was no need for the pictures to come out in any particular way. They just showed me what I had

seen. It was the doing that was working on me. I couldn't have explored like this in theater, at least any time soon. Changing media let the exploring impulse in me go right to work.

I wanted to pursue those explorations because I was, without choosing it, a creative person (insofar as I was anything at all). I lived to do this kind of thing. It was my food, nothing less. Photography was the means, the pictures were the evidence, but the creating was life.

I think creativity functions in everyone to some extent, but for some of us it becomes virtually our whole existence. We are, God help us, the artists.

And it wasn't long before the problem that presents itself to artists (and to everyone else, for that matter) presented itself to me. My explorations weren't very interesting yet. They were rather like finger exercises, and no one pays for exercises. I needed to earn some money, yet I didn't want to leave photography behind just to make a living.

Let's look for just a moment at this need we have to create, so we can better understand the problems that arise when we use it to earn our living

The defining thing about the way that artists work in our era is that they depart on major journeys with no clear destination in mind, no maps, no plans that are worth much. They try to find out what lies beyond the visible and obvious and logical, and they can only find it out as they go. Understanding of a work arises from the work itself as we make it. And understanding it isn't even the point. A composer doesn't try to explain why two certain notes played together make us sad. He just uses those notes to take us into the sadness. Then perhaps he may change the notes to a major and lift us to resolution.

Writers use the same words everyone else does to make us feel something new. Painters use lines and colors and shapes to create whole worlds in their minds and then put them out for us to see. Whatever the means, the work takes its maker out of his own life and enlarges him. But always the experience happens in our hearts and minds. As Wallace Stevens said, "Music is feeling, not sound."

So the artist goes spelunking in the caverns of his or her own human feeling and experience, trying to find somewhere a key that will help fit the pieces of the world together, and then he brings what he finds back for others to try as well. The artist's very mind is like a flashlight taped to the end of a plumber's snake poking around the cosmos for things we need to know (though we may not want to).

If this whole process of making art seems mysterious and arcane it is because it doesn't so much make things-books, paintings-as it takes clear forms from a nothingness that is all potential. Artists are transformers, taking from the intangible and giving it shape and expression.

Now, I know my version of the process all sounds rather romantic. No one feels that noble as he works. Being in the throes of artwork is like being dragged around by a huge invisible kitten. The great director Josh Logan once said to me, "If anything will keep you from theater...let it!" He said that knowing that if I could even make a choice, then art was not for me. Others may romanticize the artist's work, but Van Gogh nailed it when he said, "This is coal miner's work."

Still, the artist's work serves him as much as he serves it. It serves him by yanking him in contrary directions at once, stretching his imagination, letting him resolve wrenching contradictions into opposites, into yin and yang. And through this he becomes more whole and more himself.

And his work serves others by doing a certain kind of exploring for those in whom the exploratory impulse exists but faintly. They respond to what the artist makes and are completed by it. They are the lawyers, business people, engineers, teachers, mechanics—the audience. They in their turn serve the artist in their own ways by making the rest of the world. Things get made, things get done, bridges don't fall down. The symbiosis is complete.

Sound's great doesn't it? Lofty, with a hint of lonely suffering? So if I was born to do this how did I wind up trying to photograph a lineup of fifteen mixed drinks as they melt away, or a jet engine or a family that's happy because now there's a breakfast cereal for all of them?

It's an old story, of course. Since no one came forth to support me while I roamed the world with my camera looking for the capital-T Truth, I had to find a way to support myself. And someone did come and ask me if I could take some pictures for a little ad they were doing.

The pictures came out well enough, but the best part was that they gave me 500 dollars for a few hours of work.

Five hundred dollars! This was more money than I'd seen in one place, ever. If I could swing this a few times a week I could have all the time and money in the world to pursue my own work.

The rest will be familiar. Like most people in our line of work, the situation rose around me like kudzu. As with kudzu, I never actually saw it grow, but in time I could feel its constraining effect. I continued to do my art work, had shows, published a few portfolios. But I began to spend more and more of my days on commercial assignments. It let me buy a loft, health insurance, a car, that sort of thing.

In time I became ever so vaguely unhappy with the balance of what I was doing. I began to think about it more and more. I began to talk about it—to myself in the shower, in my car at stoplights, then with other photographers and designer friends, and illustrators and

commercial directors. They were all feeling the same thing that I was. It was like talking to echoes.

Well, whenever we're not grumbling we are commercial artists. We have taken our sensibilities and imaginations and put them at the service of the economic system. We put our ability to work with the insubstantial to further someone else's economic designs...and our own. We show, not the cereal or the family but the happiness. And we do it by our own choice, and we choose it again and again.

Is this a devil's bargain? Not necessarily. It's certainly not bad or wrong. We're all of us tied to the economic system by thousands of threads. We participate in it daily, all day long. Anyone who thinks that the fine artist doesn't truck with the commercial hasn't dealt with a gallery lately or tried to publish a novel. But its effect on those of us in visual communications is profound.

Think for a moment about what actually happens when an artist works in the commercial arena. Remember I said that the artist doesn't know where he's going? Commercial art is different, in that the destination is known and the outcome decided before the work begins, decided before the artist is even chosen, worked out in weeks of meetings, in rounds of layouts and revisions of copy. It has been passed through committees, perhaps even tested by focus groups.

In the commercial arts the end must be decided before the departure. Even the designer, who gets the first creative crack at a project, is told pretty much what the result should be, and before his work begins he has to describe to his client exactly what he'll do, and how much it will cost. This changes everything.

Here's how. We-the designers, photographers, illustrators-are hired to make a product or service clear, but also to make its superiority subtly evident, whether it's a machine tool or a cat food or a child at play. We light it beautifully, we illustrate a moment full of vitality, we design a ground that is harmonious and resolved. We use our artistic knowledge to take a tangible thing and carry it into the intangible, where we are used to working. Then we use the intangible to create a pleasant feeling, a sense of harmony or completion, so that it may be inserted into people's minds pleasantly. We bring feeling to the project, our feeling. We make things desirable. It is our work. People see what we do and they feel...right.

This joining of commercial and art work by its very nature sets up a tug of war within us, and in that fight we tend to see all compromise as losing. We want to give our life and our hope to creating and understanding, and instead we give ourselves up to worrying about whether the client will approve the model, or the typeface or the PMS color we know is perfect. So, in the end, our work takes us away from the very thing that drew us to art in the first place. We have excluded the critical part of making art---the terror and pleasure of departing for the unknown. We have stopped asking "Where can I go?" We have started asking, "What do they want?"

It doesn't kill us. But something in us really is in danger of dying. That something is the mysterious presence that, when we picked up a camera or a brush or a pen in the first place, whispered to us, "This!"

The loss is one that many of us feel acutely. Yet when I identified the problem I had to face the fact that while I admire people who decide to live as they must in order to pursue their art, it turns out I'm not one of them. It was a paradox. I was a professed artist who spent most of his time doing other things, and I thought that there had to be a solution other than throwing up work and family to live in a trailer and work on a novel.

The question that I finally came up against was: can I stay creative when commerce is pulling at me, threatening to pull me under? How? I've thought about this more or less constantly for years. As it turned out, the answer was nearly under my nose.

But I only saw it when I ventured outside of my field of photography and indeed outside of the commercial arts altogether. It happened when I kept a vague promise I'd made to myself to return to the writing I'd done when I was younger as a potent means of making myself into someone other than the school kid I was. So I signed up for a writing course at a nearby university, and during a whole semester I worked to the discipline of having to create something every week without knowing what. There were essays, short stories, and, at the end, some poems.

Something about the poems caught me. For one thing, I didn't have to know when I began how they would end, and yet they always came out. (If not well, so what?) The best of them did so in ways that surprised me. They didn't always make sense, but somehow the ones that didn't worked the best. They would only point to sense and yet they were perfectly complete. A reader could take the images and thoughts in them and complete them in the crucible of their own experience. I got the nourishment that always comes from taking the creative journey. This was great! This was what I'd always wanted to do with my art. This was why I'd first spent hours and days at a time photographing. This was what was in danger of disappearing completely from my photography work.

Then came the big surprise. One day during the writing course, I was in my studio alone looking at an old book that had been in the family for generations. My father had given it to me and I'd not known where to put it, so it had been lying around for some time. That quiet day I noticed the book's beauty-pages lightly foxed, little blooms of stain, the sharp cut where the type had bitten the paper. On an impulse, I walked to a closet and got out four smooth black river stones from Japan. I lay them on the pages of the book, this way and that, finally in a simple line.

The arrangement was evocative, moody, and not at all linear. It was beautiful. I couldn't say why. It meant something, but I couldn't say what. It looked somehow unfinished. Then I realized it was like a poem. It was a poem. It pointed to something, and anyone seeing it could look for that something if they wished. I didn't have to simplify it because a client thought a consumer somewhere might not get it. People could figure it out if they wanted to. No loss if they didn't. Just as it was, it was enough.

The elements of that limpidly clear moment—a book, four stones and an empty head—had let me resume my journey of exploration in my chosen medium. And it continues to resonate in ways that surprise me. For one thing it was the beginning of a series of photographs of books that now numbers about 50 good images and about 100 that miss. Together they are a meditation on knowing, on death, on transcendence—all things I don't get to address at work. And they are about to become a book of their own.

While I was working on the series, I wrote out a few paragraphs just to make a page of text for a photo. It was an intriguing little fragment, and the only way to find out what happened next was to keep writing. This has led to a 400 page novel, a fantastic story set in a magical library. It's now in its third rewrite. It's called *Labyrinth of Glass*. Look for it in bookstores sometime around the millennium.

The old books I was photographing were so beautiful in their age that I began to pay attention to how age made other things beautiful. I found an old rodeo rider's glove and took its picture. This picture grew to a series of what I think of as "Portraits of Clothes". Something in them attracted attention. In one case a client, who I'm pretty sure would have turned down the idea if it had been described to him, used them as the basis for a wonderfully produced paper sample .

Still another thing came from that moment with the stones. I began to find that for certain clients there was something more that I could do. I could take their project further than they had intended. I could bring exploration into my commercial work

Not all of my clients wanted it, of course. This is the day of tightly comped computer layouts. The boss wants what the boss orders, not something else or better. But a few of them did want something more—an exploration, a collaboration to make something that surpassed the given. As I worked on these projects my satisfaction with my work and its quality began to rise.

My personal work began to be published in magazines and annuals, and people around the country who saw it called me up and commissioned me to explore ideas. They hired me to do what I wanted to do myself. Imagine that!

But by far the most important thing that has come of all this is that I have turned back in the direction toward which I'd gone in the beginning, the direction I'd lost. Commercial work still supports me. The balance is still tricky and I still fight the lopsided weight of habit, but the point is that I work as an artist again.

Here's the model I've come to in order to explain the phenomenon of creativity to myself. I think that there's a space, something like a vast room, that we could call creativity, and I think that there are many doors into it: writing, painting, music. For one reason or another the photography door had become stuck for me, clogged with ambitions, work, half-examined thoughts, ego, rubbish of all kinds. I was flinging myself against it and nothing was moving. But then one day, with nothing much in my mind, I walked around to the

writing door and simply pushed-and it just gave, just swung open. I had no particular hopes or ambitions for what I was doing. I just wanted to see what would happen. Once I was in that creative space again, I was able to open the photography door...from the inside.

So it's not one medium or the other, not poetry or photography or painting, it's not even commercial versus non-commercial. It's just the doing itself, the exploration. It had always been the thing that gave my life shape, and I was in true danger of losing it altogether.

I more or less blundered into a second chance to save my creative life. But since then I've given a lot of thought to how others might revive their relationship with art, and I have a few ideas which I'll share here. The thing to remember is that they will be based on doing things, not on figuring out why you're not doing them.

Return to an exploration of your own artistic impulse, not as an adjunct to your commercial work but for its own sake. No one at all is going to come along and tell you it's time to do this. You'll have to make it a part of your week, schedule it. Set other things aside for it. Do it not for what it will show to others but for what it will yield for you. Let it be your practice.

Work without trying to say anything. Then see what you say. One poet said, I don't want to write about what I already know. Another said, I write to find out what it is I have to say.

Will working without a goal get you anything at all? I studied Chinese calligraphy for eleven years. Though I neither read nor speak Chinese I kept at it for no reason at all. I just did it. But now I see space and line and energy with an eye refined by that practice. Everything I do, I do better for having studied calligraphy.

Do something creative that has nothing to do with your work. (This is a big one.) Write, paint, sing in a chorus. Commit to it, take a class, do whatever you have to do to make a structure for yourself. Act on it every day. Let a rhythm build. My friend, photographer Jay Maisel, talks about this kind of regular work as rehearsal. No musician, he points out, would dream of setting his instrument aside until concert day. And yet I know people in the communication arts field who do nothing at all creative unless it is part of a job. What happens to such people is that their work becomes governed by expedience. To be sure, some work is expedient, but there's not much nourishment in it. And if we aren't nourished by our work we begin to hate it, while being tied to it.

Change your time scale. In our business we tend to work in rather short increments-projects last months at most, then we're on to something else. But all real work, like building a house, raising a family, making any lasting thing, is long, long work. Robert Frank's recent retrospective at the Whitney Museum was made up of single images, but it was, in a real sense, one large piece made over a lifetime. The novel I'm slogging away at may not be very good in the end, but in working on it I've gone from someone who

worked in sixtieth of seconds to someone who can spend years to construct a big, intricate, coherent structure.

I don't think one should undertake this kind of work in order to improve one's commercial prospects. That would probably be a sure way to kill the whole process. But there's something that comes from artistic work that gives to the abstractions of one's life the rasp and texture by which the heart and mind might grasp them. And when you put out work that engages your imagination you will call in clients who want to engage theirs. Your commercial work won't be like your exploratory work, but it will have something real in it.

For myself, I have felt out of balance only when I'm completely bound up in commercial work and not pursuing anything artistic. Doing something that feels alive, uncomfortable, insecure and exhilarating is necessary to my balance. The whole reason for stepping aside from one's job and writing stories, for taking photographs or making music or listening to it, for blowing perfect smoke rings or gazing at the sea is to project from ourselves something in which we might catch reflected a glimpse of who we really are. Once we learn something from that glimpse, we can take it back to work with us...or do anything at all!

- Sean Kernan