

## **Surviving Critics**

From *Communication Arts*

I got some spam the other day advertising a college degree “without courses, or attendance.” I had some hard times in school, so clearly this was my kind of place.

But lately I have gotten a nice vicarious taste of the school experience simply by mentoring a student who is working on an MFA in photography. Mostly I cheerlead and try to help him sort things out.

I like the whole idea of critical feedback, since I get almost none myself. In the world after school (aka The Real World), the responses we get tend to be more gladiatorial than supportive.

But if I got feedback I mightn't always welcome it, as I was reminded by an email from my mentee after a rough critique. That night I sat down to answer to try and help him make sense of what he had experienced. To my surprise I wrote for several hours. Clearly the critique had hit two nerves, his and mine.

Here is his email.

Hi Sean,

I brought my latest work to the November retreat and displayed my images as projections rather than prints. I felt strongly about wanting to see my photos projected fairly large on a screen. The response to my work was far less enthusiastic than it's been in the past. My "frosted" mirror images took some heavy hits. Nobody seemed to find much to like about the portraits I had done of myself or my family. I think they prefer my street portraits. One teacher said that some of my mirror portraits made him feel ill.

Usually my work gets a pretty good response, but not this time.

I probably should have steered the discussion of my work away from some of my more experimental stuff to the images I felt were my strongest. But some people came after me kind of hard about my less successful portraits, and I felt myself justifying the experiments I had tried. I really liked some of the work I did during this project. I felt like I was trying things that would eventually improve my work, and although some of the images were clearly transitional, I felt like I was making good progress. Perhaps some of the negative response I received was due to the fact that I used a digital camera to produce many of my images, and I projected my images rather than printed them. I sort of felt like Dylan going electric for the first time. It was kind of a bummer.

David

My answer to him was impassioned, but afterward I began to think more about what you can get from critiques, even when you hate them. So here is a further reply, with the same heat but more thought.

David -

Well, well, lots of questions this all brings up! About what you risk when you set out to learn; about what criticism may and may not mean; about what we really want when we show our work; about whether we should even study art in school. Criticism is one of the things you signed up for, and this is pretty much the last place you're going to get it.

Even though I have taught for years, I don't always speak reverently about art education...probably because I didn't have any. Perhaps I think that if I did without it everyone else can too. But in truth, I know better.

The point of school, at the graduate level anyway, is not the tutelage but working with others. You get the benefit from whatever you do and from what they do too.

But you have to winnow the experience. Once you've figured that out you can begin to extract the ore.

Think of it as learning navigation, locating and testing your inner compass. This little metaphorical device may be the best thing you'll take away with you when it's all over.

So you should at least use your time there to find out where North is—your own Artistic North. And the feedback provides a kind of echolocation to verify and calibrate that compass.

The procedure is simple: you make pictures, look at them yourself, and then listen to what teachers and peers say about them. When people respond to your work you're testing the work and the teaching both. And when people find weaknesses in what you have done, their questions can give you your next calibration.

Of course you don't actually want them to find weakness in your work, you want them to love it. But if love it is all they do, there's nothing more to learn.

Of course it always feels great when people love our work. Having some impulse is easy, but making it into art, into a structure of meaning, feeling and craft that communicates, is hard. But it is the finale, where what you've made plugs into the world and lights up. Then contemplation becomes art. When that happens, when others respond to it it's an affirmation, that.

So when people like your work go ahead and feel good! But you should also ask exactly what your good feeling does for your work. Good response could mean that the work makes no demands of viewers and they're relieved—not a good sign.

Having your work slammed usually has more information in it, but its not as easy to see . You can start by asking who is doing the slamming. Why? Are they insightful? Are they fools? Both?

Look, it always feels crappy to be attacked, or to think you are. It's a part of being criticized. But it is not the part with the information in it. And information is what you're after.

So don't let your hurt keep you from learning where your work needs to go. That would be like turning your nose up at someone in the next car who is trying furiously to tell you that the wheel of your brand new Mercedes is about to come off.

Besides, the hurt will exhaust itself and you'll still be standing there. Then you can go slowly back to work. You're going to anyway, right?

You're wondering if it was the digital camera or your projecting the work that people didn't like, but what would you know if you knew that? Nothing. The real question is: Is the work you showed alive? Look at the people who are looking at the work. Are they awake and stimulated? Until you know this, hold off on questions of craft and presentation.

The aliveness of a photo is elusive. When it is there it draws a perfect line from some inner matrix of intellect, emotion and clarity, to the outside. You can tell in other's responses if you've made a door to consciousness, and it won't matter if the door is rough or fully finished...not yet, anyway.

You say, "I probably should have steered the discussion of my work away from some of my more experimental stuff to the images I felt were my strongest." Really? If you just wanted some success, maybe. But to test the leading edge of your vision, you have to show the work done there. Yes, some of your other pictures really went somewhere. But you've been told that, and going back for another helping will not move you to what's next.

So you showed the stuff that you are not secure about. Perfect! This is the work that is still molten, and you can shape it. You also said you'd "been trying things that would eventually improve my work, and although some of the images were clearly transitional, I felt like I was making good progress."

So do you now doubt that progress? Don't.

People sometimes say things because they have real insight. Other times they speak because that's what is expected. And sometimes their responses are useful even if inarticulate. You have to learn to hear what people aren't saying too.

My colleague Bill Westney talks about a kind of critique that he underwent during his years of musical training.

I play my Chopin as passionately as I can, sharing from the gut. The class applauds politely and then silence descends, while everyone tries to think of an intelligent "graduate school" comment to make. Finally someone says some picayune detail like "wouldn't it be better if you started the crescendo earlier in the middle part?" and everyone nods as if to say "good suggestion". I'm thinking "this is your response?" but I dutifully try it with the adjustment. Everyone now nodding vigorously, like 'Oh yes, so much better. What a good class we are having.'

I'm feeling bereft and resentful. Isn't anyone going to say "Bill, I really sense your passion!!?" The main thing goes unacknowledged while we focus dryly on details (which I was happy to change, by the way). I had to play OUTSIDE the school environment to find out that I wasn't crazy, I really was playing with passion and people understood and responded.

Instead of making direct suggestions they should just have said what they received, i.e. "the middle part confused me and didn't seem very clearly shaped." Then I could find 5 or 6 solutions, none as reductionist as "start the crescendo earlier". And all coming from my own resourcefulness. But don't tell me how to fix it!

Bill says that there is something ineffable that lives at the heart of music, and the way to get at it is to dissolve one's self into the music entirely. It is revealed from within the music, and then a number of ways to play it will become clear.

I sought Bill out when I read about the Unmaster Class at he taught at Julliard. Later I attended one at the Yale Music School. Afterward I went up and asked him to work with one of my photography workshops. "I don't see what any of this would have to do with photography," he said. I didn't either, but I said we could have fun finding out.

He came to my next workshop in Santa Fe and took the photographers through the same processes that he used with the musicians. The work that the photographers did was an absolute revelation about the continuum between the musical and the visual. We wound up using projected slides as scores and literally singing the pictures, which had a new clarity and dimension as music.

By the way, Bill has just published a book called "The Perfect Wrong Note," and it is full of his experiences and insights about learning in the arts. It's a fantastic guide for anyone who wants to learn, teach, and make art.

I once took some graduate classes in writing. I arrived at the first meeting shivering involuntarily at memories of school, but I quickly found that no one there was going to tell me what to learn. The teacher taught how to observe but not what to see. Perfect!

Still, the image of the authoritarian teacher lingers, and something in your note caught my eye, which was the teacher's remark that some of your pictures made him feel ill.

Did he really say, "Your pictures make me feel ill"? Wow!

You took it as a slap, and I can see why. But if someone, particularly a teacher, says something that strong in a critique you really have to ask for specifics. And he has to answer. Then you can decide what the answer might tell you.

Maybe he just hated it. If so he should have said why. Maybe he really was discomforted by what he saw, but that could have been your point. Last summer I saw the controversial photographer Joel Peter Witkin screen his work and I actually felt queasy. But knew that my reaction didn't mean it was bad. The paradoxical thing about his photography is that it can be very off-putting at the same time that it is extremely true and powerful. There's real understanding to be had by staying with the work.

In that vein, a psychology professor did a study using one of my pictures, a grim photo of a grizzled prisoner with a kitten. I know this is one of the strongest I've ever done. But the people interviewed said they disliked it. They didn't say they disliked the subject, they said they disliked the picture. Isn't that interesting? It obliquely confirms the picture's power, but if it had been a class instead of a study and the respondents were my fellow students, I might be feeling a bit flamed.

When I look at my own photography these days, I find that it is just too damned nice. There's too much re-enactment and not enough direct seeing. At this point I would like to alarm myself a bit by doing work that I can't imagine myself doing. I'm tired of pictures that neaten up this messy world.

You have seen the Tribal series I am working on (portraits of a group of fictitious people who, among other things, wear only white mud). I showed them to a group last summer, and things got electric. One man saw danger and anarchy in them. Some disliked like them, others wanted to model. It all affirmed that the work was touching something complicated and contradictory. The work makes me uncomfortable too, but, to quote Richard Serra, "If you are not uncomfortable with your work it is because you haven't begun it yet."

So you really have to parse this critique, whether you are feeling damaged or exhilarated. It will clarify over time, maybe a long time. There's no one part what you're doing that is decisive. It's the ever-extending continuum that matters.

Interesting to think that well-known figures once underwent such critiques. I had the chance to ask the painter Chuck Close if he felt it was necessary to study art. His answer was "Of course not." He said that one of the main things he had learned at Yale was how to talk about art, and he pointed out that he and classmates Jennifer Bartlett and Richard Serra all sound rather alike, but that their work is completely different. I gather that Close was a virtuoso paint handler in school so he must have gotten great critiques. When he

graduated he realized that if he continued as he had been, he could get by on facility. So he challenged himself by switching to black and white, using nothing but dots (of paint, of wadded up paper, thumbprints in ink), and working the single theme of the large face. He set aside what was working well and began the investigations that have carried him along ever since. There are lots of reasons to admire his courage, but this may be the biggest.

At any stage of your life, on the other hand, it is possible to do work that dead-ends. I once visited the famous photographer and teacher Lisette Model, and she showed me a project she had been working on, images oddly skewed in the frame. She said her husband, the painter Evsa Model, had been doing paintings in which he cocked everything just slightly, and she'd tried it too. Perhaps she'd hoped that the device would start something going, but it just hadn't. Maybe later she came to like some of them. Or maybe she just tossed them. But I liked her for showing them to me at that moment. (It made me feel a little better about the blistering critique she had just given me.)

So did this critique do lasting damage? You know better, I'm sure. In a few years little or none of the work you showed last week will be in your portfolio. But what will be there is what that work has become and what you have become. Bill Westney points out that musicians don't even get an artifact at the end of a good performance, unless a friend has made a tape. Maybe they just get the knowledge that they are better musicians than they were before it. I sometimes think that the real result of a photographer's work is not the stacks of pictures in the studio but an intensified mind, a clearer eye and greater awareness. The pictures are like footprints.

Don't think that I am not vulnerable. I have been absolutely crushed by not getting some response I wanted. But when I think of these times it now seems to me that I had asked people—editors, curators, peers—to excavate what I hadn't realized.

I had to learn to harvest information from responses. For example, when I was working on the project, *The Secret Books*, I showed it to a publisher. He said he liked each picture but didn't see it as a book. He was right. I guess I was hoping he'd shuffle the pictures and say "Here's your book!"

Another publisher saw it a bit later and said it needed to be more "edgy". I took him to mean it needed to be a touch decadent. I tried to envision what edgy images might look like, but I just didn't see any. So, I didn't take any. But maybe the encounter provoked subsequent work, who knows?

Still we all yearn for approval? And to get it we spend huge chunks of our time trying to get our art to line up and smile.

And that is so completely wrong. We go to new places when our work runs away with us. The last thing in the world we want to do when that happens is tame it and ride it home.

I didn't get nearly the appreciation I wanted early on...and thank God. It's an unsatisfiable addiction. But by this time I have finally started to see that I am the result of my working, more alive and aware than I was before I did it. Not happier, just more aware.

So if your work really explored things that might flower later on, I think you are just where you need to be. And if you didn't get what you wanted you might still have gotten something else. You may not know just what for a while.

It is a wonder that anyone can actually do something called Teaching Art. A friend said it's like trying to teach an owl to ride a bicycle.

“You take the bicycle and the owl up to the top of a long, long hill. You balance the owl carefully on the seat, then you get a good running start, right up to the edge of the hill, and you give the bicycle a good push down the hill. And then you yell after the owl, **YOU CAN DO IT!**”

David, you can do this.

Sean