

Ways Photography Works...On Us.

During a talk the photographer Todd Hido paused for a moment, then said, “I think I’m addicted to the feeling of having taken a good photograph.”

I knew just what he meant. It is a part of why we do creative work.

Why do we take pictures? To have pictures? I doubt that. Look at the overwhelming number of pictures that people take and upload every day. We probably have quite enough to last us a long while.

So what, what, WHAT is it that so compels us about taking a photo that is really good, really alive? What does making that kind of picture do for you? Or to you? In you? Does it happen even if no one else sees it?

Is having a wonderful picture occur like what happens when something you’re struggling to write suddenly stands up and speaks on its own? Or when you heave yourself over the edge of a tall rock wall, collapse and lie there breathing the sunset light? Or when you work out a beautiful way to show something that is not beautiful at all?

Where do we go when we do these things?

And who comes back, the same person? Or someone else?

If you've come this far in the book, you know that I'm convinced that something happens in the creative state that is larger and more important than the photographs. I am certainly not the only person who thinks this, but it can be so hard to describe the phenomenon that more concrete don't easily grasp it. I think of school boards that have eliminated arts programs. The arts generally have a reduced place in in school curricula across the country in favor of what this thought of as more...practical, more measurable.

Which is why I sat bolt upright to listen to a recent news story about the principal of the troubled Orchard Gardens School in the Roxbury section of Boston who replaced security personnel with...art teachers!

The school was founded in a poor neighborhood as an arts-oriented middle school, but its art classes had been slowly shorn away, and the school was failing. Then a new principal, Andrew Bott, decided to shift the focus back to the arts.

I was surprised that a principal would be empowered to make that kind of change, and I'm sure that's a longer story than was told on the news. But however he managed it, the result is that the school has gone from a place that kids and teachers feared to a bright building full of painted posters, full of the sounds of music made by the students, and with an increase in the number of children moving on to high school and to graduation.

Over the years I've kept my eye open for such examples of the idea that working creatively can enhance our cognitive ability and expand our outlook. There is, of course, the result of creative work that the world sees, but there is also that inner experience that only the maker has, when things are molten and flowing and coalescing into something larger. And this, I think, is the timeless, dimensionless moment when a new work gets made *and* an actual increase of brain capability takes place. Being in that moment may be the reason to do art work, not only for what is made but for what making it does to us.

The experience may not feel transcendent at the time. In fact, usually people are so preoccupied that they barely

notice it. Still, something can happen in us—a shift, an expansion—and when it does the evidence is in the photograph, that one of the thousands we take that speaks to us the first time we see it and to others after that.

And this is exactly the aspect of photography that we have been working to revive here. It's about the places that making them takes us.

Everything in this book is a series of triggers to set off a direct experience of this. I trust completely that the creative state is there, and I know how important it is. Finding and inhabiting it gave me my life, and I've spent years trying to find out ways to get at it, for my sake and for others.

But I've spent little time studying the state itself. I've been tempted to veer into psychology, but I fear that doing so would devour time that I am better off using to explore and make work. Besides, there are people who do that kind of research with a focus and energy that I could never manage.

About Flow

One of them is the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. More than 35 years ago he began looking at what he called Flow, his name for the state in which we do our deepest and best work in art—and in sports, writing, science, even things like assembly line work, which no one would call creative. He noticed that when we slip into a state of Flow we are so completely engaged in a task that any outside concerns simply fall away (“Is this going to be a good photo? Is it time for lunch?”) and time becomes timeless present, completely filled with the immediacy of whatever it is we're doing. There is usually some kind of outcome we're working toward, but in flow we are barely aware of it. Instead, all of our faculties are fully taken up by the act, the doing.

In Flow there is certainly a sense of satisfaction and depth, but the paradox is that the state itself is usually anything but serene. What we're doing can be extremely hard, physically and mentally, and yet the effort is aerated by a sensation of immediacy that makes us feel complete.

Getting to Flow

Csikszentmihalyi has interviewed thousands of people over the years—artists, athletes, ocean sailors, authors—and each person describes being so engaged in a task that the mind is completely used by the demands of what they're doing, leaving no room for outside concerns. He estimates that our brains have an upward processing limit of 126 bits/second. When our work uses all of that capacity, there's nothing left for wandering, and we become lost in what we are doing. Or found!

So, no concepts, just what is immediate. And when we are cut off from our conceptual knowledge, new ways to put things together emerge in the immediacy.

Of course this the state is full of contradictions. One might expect fluidity and ease, an experience of oblivion, even joy. Not so. A rock climber may seem to be swarming up a rock face, but his muscles can be cramping the whole time, and instead of the crest at the top he can only focus on where his fingers can grip next.

And when the crew of an 8-oared-shell starts to row as one body and the boat lifts and planes on the water, there can be an exultant unity that carries the whole crew to a unitive experience, as the boat starts to plane. The question of the race may return after they cross the finish line and collapse over their oars, but during the race itself they are encapsulated in an experience of Flow.

All of this pretty much aligns with (and, I think, supports) my notion of the creative state, and every exercise in this book leverages it with a simple task that can bring us to it.

Csikszentmihalyi said something else that made me ring like a bell. He suggests that upon emerging from a state of flow we are in an enlarged state. Does that sound familiar? It is exactly what Antonio Damasio says happens when the brain encounters something new and makes new connections to accommodate it. (See p. vii) It is the source of the enlargement that I think results from creative awareness.

So how do you get to this state of flow? Not by trying. You start work on the task itself, and if flowing starts...you let it.

Learning without a teacher.

I am self-taught as a photographer. So are many photographers of my generation and those before, simply because there were so very few opportunities to study it formally. We scrambled around and assembled our knowledge in any way that we could. My sense is that most of us read Ansel Adams's books on the techniques of making photographs and Edward Weston's daybooks for visions of how to live a photographic life passionately. I spent a lot of time studying at the Museum of Modern Art's photography department. I scrubbed like a surgeon and then asked for the prints of Adams, Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Eugene Atget, which I devoured and then returned to the assistants who had brought them. A few friends studied at RIT or maybe RISD, but photography could also be learned outside the academy by cobbling things together on one's own.

That situation has certainly changed, with universities and art schools everywhere offering programs and degrees.

But if you haven't gone for that degree for some reason, can you be a serious photographer by just going at it on your own? Of course! And somewhere you probably know that, because here you are, moving through this book.

Because so many of the people in my workshops come from outside photography and art altogether, this question of spontaneous and unstructured learning is always on my mind, and I look for possible ways to address it in workshops. So when I heard about Sugata Mitra and his work, I practically started barking. He had stuck a computer in a hole in the wall of a slum in Delhi, just out of curiosity. What happened was completely astonishing. Here is a short version:

Mitra was working for a software company, and was assigned to study ways that people might respond to informational kiosks. So he mounted a computer monitor in

the outside wall of his office building. The wall faced onto a lane that crawled with people all day. He also mounted a camera and trained it on the setup, then he connected the computer to the internet, and settled down to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. The children in the immediate area were were not in school, had nothing to do, and plenty of energy to do it with. And although none of them spoke English and had never used or even seen a computer, by the first afternoon the children were actually surfing the web!

How were they doing this? Mitra watched them on the camera he'd set up, and saw that basically they just began hitting a lot of keys until they hit one that made something happen. (Pretty much the same way infants learn, you'll notice. And untrained photographers.)

As his project developed he also saw that the children were organizing into small groups—about as many as can fit in front of a monitor, three or four—and learning as a group more effectively than a single child might.

Mitra knew he was onto something much bigger than how to use a kiosk. He expanded the experiment into villages that were economically and educationally impoverished, designing experiments that made more focused demands on the young students. For example, some Tamil-speaking 12-year-olds in a small village were asked to use a computer and learn whatever they could about biotechnology...in English, which none of them spoke. No one directed their learning, they simply formed small groups and began surfing and chatting together. These groups were a key part of what happened. The children discussed, helped each other, debated the meaning of what they found.

And they learned at an astonishing rate. Within 4 months they tested at the same level as students at the best schools in New Delhi. They hadn't known anything much at the beginning, but they had found out *how to find out*. On their own.

This was all astonishing, and full as it is of implications for the disruption of the normal top-down educational model. But that's not what excited me. What excited me

was the very clear demonstration that the mechanism of learning is inherent in us, and that the outcome of learning is not just knowledge itself but more capacity to learn.

The only thing I would add that Mitra didn't cover, was that I think this ability continues past childhood and throughout our lives.

It also seems to me that the way of learning that manifested in Mitra's experiment is much like what I think happens in creative work. That is, an inborn ability to grasp manifests through a right-hemispheric awareness of, and participation in, whatever is encountered, and is then handed off to the left brain to analyze and connect to the structures of the world.

A lot of what comes out of Mitra's work is discomfiting to our educational system. But the the big positive is an affirmation of people's ability to learn intuitively, when not instructed. I am utterly without background or qualifications, so I can't really discuss the mechanism. But I know that people do it all the time. I think that a large part of the teachers work is to say, "Look over there!"

If you want to know more about Mitra, listen to him delivering a TED Talk called *Build a School in the Cloud* [here](#).

One more story, then we're done.

A while back I was asked to bring some creativity exercises to a workshop for women at the F. Holland Day Center which runs programs for women with cancer.

My fear was that it would take me into places far deeper than I had any business going. I've always intuited that working creatively could increase one's sense of presence and harmony as a part of making better photographs. But what was proposed here was more consequential by far. Would anything I might bring to this group be of any worth? Would my exercises in photography and awareness seem trivial in this setting? ("I'm sick and you want me to pretend I'm walking on a piece of string?")

But the invitation came from the program's founder, Dr. Matthew Budd, who had taken a workshop of mine. He'd taught at Harvard Medical School for years and years, and he had put this whole program together. I decided that if

he thought I could add something, I'd go with his confidence rather than my anxiety. I said yes.

In the group there were, I think, two or three women who had had experience with photography. For the rest, photography was something they did on vacations or at parties, as it is for most people. They were not artists, didn't aspire to be, *and* they had a lot heavier things on their minds. What, then, could art bring them?

The days were full, and my work was only a part of what was offered, so there was no time to do my usual introduction or explain technique to the novices. They just had to grab their automated point-and-shoot cameras and dive in.

We began in the middle of the first afternoon with one of the vision exercises from this book. Then they were given an assignment that had been devised by Connie Reider, who had brought photography to this program. It was personal and direct, more so than what I usually do. They were to "make a photograph that shows what you felt like on the day you got your diagnosis."

We began the meeting part of our class at about 2:30, and it was close to 4 when they went off to shoot. This was in Maine, and it was late October, which meant that the light was already fading. There was enough left for maybe 45 minutes of work.

Now, I've always told students that one of the main things they need to do is slow down, wander a bit, regain some of that spaciousness that was in their minds and lives when they were children. These women had to do that *and* take pictures...in 45 minutes of falling light.

But that was the situation, and, as some old Texas politician once said, "You got to dance with who brung you."

So off they went. I spent the next 45 minutes worrying, until they started coming back with their pictures.

I looked at a few. My worries were over.

These first pictures of the week were strong, direct, concentrated and powerful. By the end of the week this group had made some of the most direct photographs I

had ever seen from a class. And there was no need to coax them out into the open. They started high and moved far.

For example, in response to the first assignment one of the women had taken a towel and rolled it so it looked like a bloated white worm. She then held it in place on her shoulder, turned her face wincing away from it and took a photo. That was her representation of what her diagnosis had felt like to her. The picture hit like a punch.

Later in the week one of the woman made a self portrait standing on a rock with the ocean swirling around her. She had wrapped herself in about 15 or 20 yards of scarlet fabric, and she looked like a sea goddess, standing straight and tall, head high. The fabric clung to her so you could see that she'd had a double mastectomy. That was part of the woman and part of the picture. The photo was an absolute glory.

We went through the week like that, and the whole time I kept wondering why this group had flowered so quickly, so fully. In the end I decided that the powerful and frightening illnesses they were struggling with had come crash-

ing into their lives and flung everything onto the floor. They had had weeks and months of dealing with the real and difficult situations in their lives, and they were way past playing charades.

On top of that, they were all there together in this state of protected honesty, and were no doubt relieved to be with people whom they didn't have to hide things from.

I think that this is the kind of thing that can happen in creative work, particularly when working among others, if not directly with them. But in this case I think everything was amplified by the very sense of not-knowing in the women's lives and by the press of time.

These three stories point to the same thing from slightly different angles. First, the idea of Flow suggests that we can fall into a narrow-band of consciousness that, paradoxically, takes us to enlargement of our work and our selves.

As for Sugata Mitra's hole-in-the-wall experiments, it confirms for me the notion that ways of infant learning are extremely powerful and continue through childhood. These ways begin with experience, with doing in awareness. And my experience with classes of adults has convinced me that this kind of learning is available to us throughout life, and that learning and creating are primordial in us and can be ignited in a moment.

And the women at the F. Holland Day workshop were one of the starkest examples of this. The leap was particularly visible in those who had no photographic background, but even for those that did, it was clear that the shift from a practice that was educated and precedent-based to one that was purely generated in the moment could be had in a moment.