

# CREATIVITY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

# 2

**TAKING GREAT PHOTOGRAPHS** requires more than following seven magic steps. It requires becoming someone new. Great photographs flow from who we are. And great photographs are fueled by new ways of thinking, seeing, and living. To be creative we need to tap into new sources and simultaneously let go of convention. Picasso said it best: “The chief enemy of creativity is common sense.”

In much of our culture and in our day-to-day lives, common sense works well. It’s an easy path to take, and we’re drawn by the initial simplicity and safety. Yet, it only takes a brief time to realize that common sense quickly dries up anything within its reach.

Creativity is vibrant, vital, and ever changing. It’s contagious and unquantifiable. You can’t even really define it. Wikipedia says, “Unlike many phenomena in science, there is no single, authoritative perspective or definition of creativity.” Like water, creativity is something that fuels our growth. It’s something that we always need. The more dried out we are, the more wonderful it is.

Finally, regardless of your current circumstances, my hope is that this chapter will revitalize you. And ultimately help you become like the proverbial tree, “...planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.”





## Breathe

“To photograph is to hold one’s breath, when all faculties converge to capture fleeting reality. It’s at that precise moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.”

—Henri Cartier-Bresson

There is something incredibly invigorating and inspiring about photography. And to inspire literally means to “breathe in.” That breath of air brings new life. It deepens your senses and awakens you to discover new beauty, irony, metaphor, pattern, color, and more. And it is an incredibly exciting time to be interested in photography as more pictures are taken, shared, and printed than ever before. What was once limited to the elite is now accessible. Images are everywhere and photography is easy. All you have to do is push the button!

But then you download the photos or look at the prints. And what started as genuine enthusiasm has become a disappointment as you sift through the hundreds and hundreds of mediocre photos. How then can you create better, more compelling, and lasting photographs? What’s the secret?

## Effort

Ask anyone who has recently bought a digital camera and they’ll tell you the answer to everything is digital. You can see the results instantly; you can take many photos and delete the ones you don’t want. As a friend recently bragged, “When I was in Australia, I took 700 photos!” Are more photos always better? Does it lead to creating more engaging photographs? Isn’t the point to keep photos rather than to delete them?

The technological advances and the affordability of digital cameras have generated an exciting swell of creativity and previously unachievable results. But

the goal isn’t quantity, it’s quality. If you’re interested in digging deeper and going further, the path you’ll need to take isn’t the effortless one but the more difficult one that will change who you are, how you think, and what you see. That path will remind you that some of the most valuable things in life require the most effort.

**Great photographs flow from who we are. And great photographs are fueled by new ways of thinking, seeing, and living.**

## Curse or Cry

The secret is effort. It’s brute force, grit your teeth, put your shoulder to the grindstone, push, shove, GO! Or maybe not. Maybe there’s something more. As the author Anne Lamott once said, “You can do brickwork as a laborer or as an artisan.” The task is the same, yet the process and the result vary. The laborer works long days looking forward to it all being over. He sweats and toils and the final results are often average.

The artisan works even harder, because it’s a labor of love. He sweats, toils, and is engaged in the process. He loses track of the hours and can’t believe it’s already time to pack up and go. Finally, when the job is done, there is a quality about the essence of the artisan’s brickwork that is intangible, inspiring, warming, and full of pride. And then, imagine if the brickwork was tragically damaged. The laborer would curse, while the artisan would cry. Which one are you?





The farther you stray from the harbor, the better the view.

## Become

How then do we become creative? Some argue that creativity can't be taught—it's a gift for the privileged few. Based on my own experience, I couldn't disagree more. Throughout every step of my journey, there have been people, books, movies, classes, and workshops that have helped me to become more creative. Creativity is not something only a few are born with. It is an aspect of life that some nourish and others ignore. I stand with Paul Arden who says, "Creativity is imagination and imagination is for everyone."

Imagination is the lifeblood that fuels our vitality. This is especially true in our information-rich age. Imagination isn't something that can be held captive, retrieved at will, or Googled. That's the value of imagination. It is limitless.

When we were younger, our imaginations were limitless and unfettered by practicality and qualifications. Once when I visited my wife at the local elementary

school where she teaches, I asked her class, “How many of you can draw?” The entire class raised their hands. Then I asked, “How many of you can sing?” Jubilantly the entire class raised their hands and they all began to sing different songs. It was a chaotic and wonderful sound.

When I am teaching, I ask my college-age students the same questions. In each class, sadly only a couple of brave people raise their hands. You see, the students have added a self-imposing qualifier to the question. While I asked, “How many of you can sing?” they heard, “How many of you can sing well?” Picasso said it: “All children are artists. The problem is to remain one when you grow up.”

## Who

There is something inspiring about living near past or present artists. The proximity of their presence challenges, invites insights, and awakens your creativity. That struck me a few years ago as I stared out the window of a Carmel beach bungalow. My thoughts drifted to Ansel Adams’s home just down the way, and the poet Robinson Jeffers’s stone house around the corner. John Steinbeck lived in Monterey, the town next door. The cold, damp fog drifted through the moss-covered oak tree, and at the moment I realized I had a choice.

Who would I be? Would I be an observer or a participant? Would I disengage or engage? Would I let life’s complexity overwhelm me, or would I choose the path of craft, creation, and art?

Now, the story once again turns to you. You may not live in a town with famous artists, but the old limitations of geography are diminished in today’s small world. In many ways, the artist’s voice can be heard even more clearly—challenging, inviting, inciting, and awakening our creativity. Who will you be?

## Ease

Back in our Carmel bungalow, I sat down next to the fire and read John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*. I was lost in the details, the characters, and the story. And then it happened—I read something that transformed this novel from a bestseller to something that was hand typed just for me.

Steinbeck was describing one of the main characters, a scientist named Doc. Steinbeck wrote, “Doc was at ease with himself and that put him at ease with the world.”

On most occasions, I would have simply skimmed over such a detail. That night the words traveled beyond my mind and all the way to my heart. Steinbeck’s words, because they were embedded in a story, got through. They reminded me that what I do matters less than who I am. And that’s the case with creativity.

## Factories

My mom is an artist, and she lives like an artist. Artists find, discover, look, listen, and engage. When I was child, my mom would take us on summer field trips. While other kids were slumped over their gaming systems, my mom took us out into the world. Some of our adventures included tours of different types of factories. We saw how grape licorice was made, how fortune cookies were folded, how pasta was cut and stretched, how jellybeans got their flavor, and how animal cookies were coated with colorful sprinkles.

The highlight of all the factory tours was visiting the Hostess factory. There we learned about one of the great mysteries of childhood: how Twinkies were made. As a reasonable adult you may think Twinkies are disgusting. Remember to a child, Twinkies equaled power and respect. A Twinkie in



your lunch box meant that you could trade another child for practically anything—first game on the tetherball court, two cartons of chocolate milk... you name it!

I'll never forget being in the factory and watching how it all began—the mixing of the ingredients, flour and sugar. Next came the process of shaping and baking the dough. Finally, that glorious moment when the tour guide led us around the corner to see hundreds of freshly baked Twinkies. The skinny cakes marched down the conveyor belts and were being filled with whipped cream. The tour guide casually said, “Feel free to take a Twinkie or two off the conveyor belt. There’s nothing that beats eating a freshly baked Twinkie.” Our jaws dropped and my brother, sister, and I looked at each other in complete disbelief—there truly was a God!

During those trips, I vividly remember being struck by the process. The Twinkies started with the same flour and sugar that we had in our kitchen. Those field trips were one of my mom’s ways to teach us about the creative process. She showed us that many of the greatest and most creative inventions of all time started with ordinary ingredients.

To this day, thanks to my mom, I believe that creativity is taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary. No matter what the situation there is always more than what is in plain view. This has led me to look for what others have overlooked. It has helped me realize that I want nothing other than to live a full and creative life. The camera, among other things, helps me do this.



## Apple Pie

One day in class, after I told the Twinkie story, a few of my enthusiastic students said, “So it’s all about positive thinking!” My response disappointed them. “No, not at all. In fact, I couldn’t disagree more.” And I proceeded to share another story.

In college, one of my brother’s best friends was an incredibly talented athlete and all-around inspiring person. He grew up in Colorado, yet he and his brother had always wished they had lived in California. In fact, when they were on family vacations, they would lie and tell people they were from California and that they were surfers. They wanted nothing more than to be the surfers they saw in the movies.

Winter would come around and their dreams for surfing grew stronger. One day they had an idea. What if we surfed the mountains? Without skipping a beat, they took apart an old picnic table and turned it into a mountain surfboard. And the rest is history. These two brothers, along with a handful of others, invented a new sport—snowboarding.

When you really stop to think about it, isn’t it inspiring that a global, competitive, and even Olympic sport has been invented in our lifetimes? And this new sport wasn’t just the result of positive thinking. They didn’t say, this situation is bad, but let’s call it good. They honestly squared off with their frustrations and dreams. They were unwilling to settle for the commonplace. They applied a bit of ingenuity and voilà!

The story is reminiscent of the old parable that divides people into two categories. One category says, “Life is like an apple pie with a limited number of slices—get yours while you can.” The other category says, “Life is like an apple pie with a limited number of slices. If you run out of slices, find another apple tree and bake another pie.”

## Contagious

Fishermen notoriously tell stories about the one that got away, or about the fish they caught that was as long as a telephone pole. Well, I’ve got a fish story that tops them all.

After a romantic dinner at a small Italian restaurant, I asked my then-girlfriend Kelly if she would like to go fishing. It was a surprisingly warm evening and she agreed. We made our way to the coast and walked across the old wooden pier. I spread a blanket, baited the hook, and threw our line in. The ocean waves crashed and I suggested we lie down to gaze at the stars. After a few minutes





there was a tug on our line, the pole bent, and I jumped to my feet and reeled it in. We both cheered in excitement. Amidst the celebration I said, “We have to kill the fish.” Kelly responded in anguish, “Oh no!” I swung the fishing line around. The fish slapped on the wood and was still. Being an environmentalist, I suggested that we had to gut the fish in order to throw the remains back into the ocean. As I gutted the fish, Kelly spotted something shiny. “It’s a key! I’ve heard of this happening. Sharks swallowing tires. Wow!” We saved the key.

Unbeknownst to Kelly, my friend Martyn and I had purchased a freshwater rainbow trout from the local grocery store. We placed the key in its stomach. That night Martyn paddled on a surfboard under the pier and hooked the fish on our line. He was right beneath us and he gave a tug and then paddled away. When I reeled in the fish I made it flop by moving my hand. Rather than watch my hand, Kelly watched the fish on the end of the line. It was the magician’s classic sleight of hand. My plan was working perfectly.

Our date had to end early as my hands were covered in fish guts. I dropped Kelly off and said I’d be back in a few minutes. I returned and we sat in the living room of her apartment. From my bag I pulled a 3-by-2-foot book with a wooden hand-carved cover. It was a book I had written and illustrated just for her. Because the book was wood, I engineered a system so that it was locked with a small padlock. I asked Kelly to open the book. It didn’t budge. I said, “No, try the key.” She replied, “What key?” I said, “The fish key.” She tried it and asked in disbelief, “How’d you get the fish to swallow the key?” I was all smiles.

And that began a week of activities that led up to one of Kelly’s favorite things—a porch swing. Again, Martyn and I had collaborated. We built a porch swing and hiked with it up to a cliff overlooking the ocean in the middle of nowhere. I blindfolded Kelly as we walked out to the ocean’s edge. I set

**A view of the California coast from the porch swing.**



her down in the swing and got on my knees and asked her to marry me. She said yes. It was one of the best days of my life.

As you can tell, our engagement was quite a story. And many people have asked me, “How did you come up with such a creative way to do that?” The answer is actually quite simple: “I listened to other stories and then created an experience that Kelly would cherish.” You see, before asking Kelly to marry me, I asked people how they got engaged. I began to collect outlandish and inspiring stories. And my friends began to create their own stories. It was amazing.

Creativity doesn’t just happen. You have to go searching for it. You have to develop the skills of seeking, looking, and listening. Had I only heard the classic engagement story of dinner and dessert, that’s all I would have known. The creative stories I heard were so contagious that I wanted to make my own.

If you want to become a more creative person, take time to stop, look, and listen for stories. Become a “story sponge” and start to spend time with people who are creative. Ask a local photographer if you can tag along on a shoot. Ask a local painter if you can come by her studio. Most important, start searching for stories in your day-to-day life and you’ll be surprised at what you’ll find.

Stories are about perspectives and decisions. As Yogi Berra said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Stories are found everywhere, even on the evening subway commute. Within just a few moments you can collect a whole range of photos.

## Bold Mistakes

I completely agree with photographer and digital guru Julieanne Kost who once said, “If you want to be creative, you need to continually become a beginner.” This means stepping out of your comfort zone. And anytime you get uncomfortable you are bound to learn.

When I left the United States to live in Spain for one year, I remember being without many of my comforts: language, shared sense of humor, family, and friends. Everything was invigorating. And the travel I did overseas was intoxicating—from hiking the Swiss Alps to watching snake charmers in Morocco. I was enthralled.

While travel is a wonderful way to go, it’s equally valuable to seek out experiences in your regular life. That’s why last year I decided to take cello lessons. I had never played the instrument but was always enamored with its deep and resonant voice.

My goal was simple; I wanted to learn how to *play*. When was the last time you dedicated time, money, and effort to learning how to play? The experience



was both excruciating and enlivening. I was so excited I couldn't contain myself, celebrating small steps of progress by playing songs for my friends and neighbors. I would call my sister and make her listen to a new tune.

Then I would go to my lesson. My teacher would introduce a new technique or a new song. At first, I would timidly try something out and the sound would be horrible. My teacher would rally, "Chris, make bold mistakes. Commit to it. Make bold mistakes!"

She was teaching me about music, but I was learning about life. In the days that followed those lessons, her words have taken permanent root in who I am and how I live. If I am to live, to grow, to learn how to play, I can't hide or play half-heartedly. The only way to find the note is to play boldly. And yes, it will sound bad, sometimes really bad. But in a strange way, you have to go through that pain in order to find and experience harmony.

## Penguins

Many beginning artists start off by imitating the masters. And it is a great place to start. But it's just that, a starting point. In music, it's called being a cover band. And cover bands end up playing at weddings and parks. If you want to play in a sold-out stadium, you have to write your own original songs. As Paul Arden perfectly states, "To be original seek inspiration from unlikely sources."

In other words, you have to look outside your own realm. This is true with almost any line of work. In photography, start off by looking outside of your genre. If you're a fashion photographer, study still life or nature photography. Then go even further.

My greatest source of inspiration is literature. A good author is able to create a picture using words. Recently, I was reading about penguins. One author described penguins as the best-dressed birds.

Another author described penguins as the flightless bird. Now if I were ever to go and photograph penguins I have two pictures in mind. The best dressed is easy; I'd use a zoom lens and capture the penguin on top of an iceberg waddling or dancing like Charlie Chaplin in a tuxedo. For the flightless penguin, I'd use a wide-angle lens. Then I'd get close and lie on the ground catching a penguin looking up at a flock of geese flying overhead as if the penguin was thinking, "If only I could fly."



The written word gave me those two pictures. I enjoy reading books on all sorts of topics. It requires that I use my imagination to create visual pictures I cannot see. Ultimately, what I read filters into how I see.

What I am saying is that you need to begin to define what inspires you. Then you need to dedicate time to that endeavor. I have a friend who loves music. There was a song with a haunting melody he couldn't get out of his mind. His solution? He put his iPod on shuffle and drove to some abandoned warehouses. He listened to the song as he took pictures and he used the song as a soundtrack for the shoot. The set of photos was evocative.



This oak tree is part of my childhood backyard where I learned about crossing creeks, catching frogs, and climbing trees. Take photographs like this to remind you who you once were and who you want to become.

## Bad Art

I'm often asked, "How did you become a photographer?" My response always begins with childhood. I grew up in a creative family and we lived in Northern California in a home that was designed and built by my father and filled with art by my mother. Our backyard opened up to rolling hills with oak trees, rope swings, creeks, cows, llamas, and lizards.

It was there that I developed an insatiable desire to explore and a knack for creativity. And in many ways, being a photographer is simply a continuation of my childhood. Even now, I consider myself someone creative who happens to have a camera, or crayons, or wood, or words in my hands. It's creativity first, and second, the means I use to create.

My mom informally tutored us in her artistic ways. She was always bringing home art supplies and creativity was part of the mix. As we painted, made ceramics, and built tree forts, my mom used to consistently tell my brother, sister, and me that there was no such thing as bad art. Being an impressionable kid, I believed her.

I have no doubt that her lie was intentional. It was an artist's way to encourage us to experiment, to play, to grow. And it worked incredibly well. We had no fear and creativity flowed.

Now as an adult, her lie is one of my deepest and most valued truths. It is the "lie-truth" which, in the right context, becomes a "true-truth." It reminds me that in art, regardless of the outcomes, the process matters. It reminds me to not hold on to the results too tightly and let go. It reminds me that if my photographs turn out badly, it doesn't mean I'm bad or that all is lost. Instead, I accept the mistakes and move on. This empowers me to take risks, to experiment, to express, and to explore.



## Favorite Color

Having kids opens you up to new worlds. And that happened recently when my bright 4-year-old daughter asked my mom a question I had never thought to ask: “Grandma, what’s your favorite color?” I was curious to hear how my mom would respond.

“Oh, that depends,” she said. “In the spring I just love green, pink, and yellow and all those Easter egg colors. Remember the color of those faint yellow marshmallow candies? I love that color. But then, in the summer how can you not love the bright yellow of the sun? And of course there is the fall... Oh, in the fall my favorite colors are those strong earth tones; the reds, pumpkin oranges, and faded yellows. And I just love all those colors of the leaves...”

Their conversation continued as they talked back and forth about all of their different favorite colors. Thanks to my mom, my daughter now has more than one favorite color. Who wrote the rule that says you can only have one favorite color? And why limit our response? Life is much too short to live with such a small palette.

## Draw a House

In my classes, I often start off by asking the students to draw a house. Inevitably, they draw a square with a triangle on top. I then ask them to tell those sitting around them about the house. The conversation is dull and flat. There’s not much to tell.

Then I ask, “Why draw that house? Would you want to live in that house? Is that house appealing to you?” They all shake their heads. “Forget the first house and let’s try it again. This time, draw a house you’d want to live in! And I want to see some sense of geography. Is it in the mountains, the desert, by the ocean? Are there any people at the house? Do you have a barn you converted into a photo studio out back? Is there a hot tub, a redwood deck, and an organic garden? What kinds of cars, motorcycles, and bikes are parked in the driveway? OK, go!”

This time the students passionately draw a scene that includes a house filled with more character than you can imagine. The results are stunning. I ask the students to tell those sitting around them about the house. The dialog is loud, full of smiles, laughter, and oh-yeahs.

Then we have a discussion about the house. The second house was obviously more enjoyable to draw. Yet it required more energy and effort. But because you were more interested in the project, the drawing came effortlessly. And the second one was so much more fun to talk about.

I tell them in this class and in your career, if someone asks you to draw a house, take the challenge. Draw a HOUSE! Throw yourself into the project. The more “you” you put into it the better it will be. Sure, you can give your clients what you think they want, but don’t stop there and always deliver more. Not because the client will be happy, but because anything less falls short of who you are and how you want to live.



## The Dead Sea

My brother was studying business at a world-renowned university in southern California. In one of his classes they learned about the Dead Sea in the Middle East. Why is it dead? There's no outlet. Water flows in and gets stuck there. The lesson—if you want to be something other than dead, you need an outlet. You need to let go. In more particular terms, you need to figure out how to give away at least 10 percent. And the justification wasn't religious, it wasn't moral; it was good business.

As I've gone through life, I've found this Dead Sea principle to be true in all areas of life, including creativity. There is something invigorating and enlivening about letting go, and I've experienced this firsthand.

For a few years of my life, I could only walk a short distance and spent much of my time in a wheelchair. My condition was worsening and I didn't anticipate a change. It was an extremely difficult season of my life.

During that time, a good friend was having a back-country bachelor party up in the Sierra mountains. That's my kind of bachelor party—getting out in wilderness, fishing, hiking, and camping. The first night was car camping so I decided to go—at least I could do that.

That night around the campfire I mentioned I was going to return home the next day. One friend said, “Nope, you're coming with us.” Others joined in and agreed with the idea. I replied, “Yeah, right. Like I'm going to get my wheelchair up a mountain trail!”

The next morning the guys built what became affectionately known as the “chariot of pain.” They took a low-profile lawn chair, two poles, sticks, rope, and duct tape and built a chariot. It took four people to manhandle this contraption. Hiking up thousands of vertical feet was grueling, but they pulled it off. Some guys wore two backpacks, ran up the trail, and then ran back to take their turn on the chariot. Occasionally, we would pass other hikers on the trail. I was riding high like an Egyptian pharaoh. I didn't really know what to do, so I'd wave and smile. You should have seen their faces and the looks of surprise.

What started out as an ordinary backpacking trip turned into something extraordinary. Deep friendships were forged. The accomplishment of getting to base camp and back was truly astonishing. It changed our lives. Those guys gave more than 10 percent, and it forever convinced me that the quickest path to creativity is to look beyond yourself. For at the end of the day, it isn't all about you.

What can you do today to integrate this business school principle into your own life? It may be something as simple as buying someone lunch, writing a letter by hand, or maybe even carrying a friend up a mountainside.

## Guest Speaker



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### Pete Turner

Pete Turner is often referred to as one of the founding fathers of color photography. His photographs are graphic, dynamic, and alive. He uses color in vivid and striking ways. The last time I spoke with Pete I marveled at the joy in his voice as he reflected on his career. He truly is a living legend. To view more of his work visit: [www.peteturner.com](http://www.peteturner.com).

#### *What inspires you?*

Painting inspires me. And black-and-white photography was a huge inspiration. Another inspiration was the wonderful black-and-white photographers of the early to mid-1900s. I loved their work when I was a student, but it was color that captivated my mind. Color was still very new and there wasn't much history. In a way, we were writing it ourselves. I'd see other photographers' color work that looked like they put in a roll of black-and-white and expected the color film to do the work for them. I see in color and I wanted to capture that. Color is in my DNA.

There were always times when I felt *shot out* and needed to recharge the old batteries. This happens to everybody. At the height of my commercial career I remember feeling this. Then I would go off and shoot for myself. I realized that my assignments took me to great locations, so I'd save a few days to shoot and to please myself. Or on an assignment, I would see something else. It is amazing how one thing leads to another.



***What makes a photograph good?***

That seems like a simple question, but it is really a big question. Anybody who presents a student with a list of instructions saying that this will make your photograph better is crazy! I agree that you have to start somewhere. Though all those rules whet your appetite to break them. Why can't you turn your camera upside down? You have to take all those rules and instructions and find ways to be creative and to have fun. Many times you'll be working on a photograph and you're not looking around you. You have to pull back and look at what's happening on the sidelines.

And back to the question: When editing your work looking for the good photograph, it is difficult. I'm considered a good editor, but there have been so many times that I've submitted work and the client would pick the one I didn't like. A good photograph has to be something that pleases you, that you like. That's the most important thing. Does it pass your litmus test? If so, you're well on your way. Having projects and continually reviewing legacy work keeps me inspired, as it can lead to other projects. Frankly, 50 years of shooting is a lot of work, and you're liable to overlook things that have been important. It gets harder because there are too many things to do. Somehow it keeps pushing me on. Now, with digital shooting it is very fast and the ease to press the button is amazing. Overshooting is a real problem. It is too easy and it is hard to trash it and you end up with terabytes of images. The trick is to not let it bog you down but to edit your work as you go along.

***What character qualities should the photographer nurture?***

Thinking back to when I was in school and those who were successful, they were at R.I.T. in 1956, they were on the button back then. Guys like Jerry Uelsmann, who was very surrealistic with his floating monoliths and crawling vines. And Bruce Davidson was creating amazing work. Those students, the ones who survived and excelled, followed their instincts of what they wanted to photograph. Many were not constrained by formulas. And ultimately, that is key—what's fun to shoot. And that's a great thing about being a photographer. If you listen to your feelings, you get to shoot what's most interesting to you.

***What advice would you give the aspiring photographer?***

There really is no crystal ball answer to that question. It is a tough field. There are so many schools and workshops. To stand out in the field is very difficult. So it is important when you are starting to have some projects that you want to do that you stick to your guns on them. And this is not contingent upon being in a type of photography—commercial or fine art or whatever. You need to have a project that you want to work on that inspires you and keeps the creative juices flowing.

