

# Work, Work, Work

I ALWAYS THOUGHT the seven dwarves were crazy. All that cheery whistling while they worked. Something about it just seemed sociopathic. But I get it now. They just loved their work. Make no mistake about it: running a business is hard work. A labor of love is no less labor, despite songs like “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother.” I’d carry my brother if I had to, because I love him. But he’s a grown man; he’s still heavy. Even creating is work, and most artists, after a time, come to subscribe to the notion that inspiration comes from working. In short, this is no walk in the park. By all means, whistle and enjoy it. It’s your calling, after all. You should love it. But you still have to put in the hours and log the time. These dreams aren’t going to chase themselves.





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## It’s Hard

We keep getting told by the camera-makers that you just need a newer, bigger, better camera and the rest is easy. Shoot like a pro, they say; all you need is this new camera. It used to be hard, but not now. Now the camera has face detection and autofocus and light meters that Stephen Hawking made with pixie dust and the help of voodoo. Shoot like a pro! Looks like the secret’s out—being a professional is about having the gear. So long out of reach unless you had lots of money and knew the secret handshake, it’s now available to anyone with a thousand dollars and a trigger finger.

Rubbish. It’s *not* easy. It’s hard to master a craft—it takes a lifetime. It’s a journey of many small steps. Companies flogging their gear under the spell of this nonsense ought to be ashamed of themselves. Why? Because we keep believing them and buying their latest gear and latest program, and of course we need it to be better. But it doesn’t make us better, and countless amateurs who passionately loved photography when they first picked up a camera are now giving up in frustration. Or worse, they’re resigning themselves to being mediocre.

Just once I want to hear a manufacturer say, “You know what? This new camera will make a really tough craft just a little easier, and it’ll give you a fighting chance. But in the end, it’s just that: a craft.” It takes a lifetime to master, and while that fact will discourage impatient photographers, it ought to give the rest of us hope—this stuff isn’t cloaked in secrecy, and it doesn’t take a secret handshake. It just takes time, and the kind of work you’d put in if you wanted to play the violin. No violin plays itself—no camera makes photographs by itself. All it takes is time, and in the meantime there’s the thrill of discovery and self-expression for the sake of it.

So if you’re discouraged and wondering why it’s so hard sometimes, know this: it’s tough—in varying degrees—for all of us, for anyone who wants to be good at something. We’re in this together. So settle in; you’ve got a long way to go, but a long time to do it in. We all do. Now, let’s all take a breath, stop buying new gear, and get to work learning our craft.

It’s not just the new photographers, either. Photographers who are new to the craft look to photographers who’ve been doing it for over 20 years, and they only see the results of those 20 years. They don’t see the years’ worth of crappy

images, the number of mistakes made, the books we’ve read, the lectures we’ve been to, the stupidity we have engaged in when buying gear and hoping it turns out to be the magic wand. They don’t see the contact sheets of current shoots, either. What they see is the best foot forward, and they assume that it’s effortless, a result of being hit on the head by the mythical Talent Fairy when we were young and being raised by artsy parents who put a Leica into our crib as an infant instead of a teddy bear.

You don’t see the thousands and thousands of frames of garbage we’ve shot—and still shoot—the visual experiments that we’ve tried and failed at, the stages we’ve gone through to find our vision and master our craft. But this can be your path, too—and because time both speeds by too fast and seems to take forever to get here, I can confidently say, “Be patient, you’ll get there.” If you study your craft. If you shoot and shoot and shoot some more. If you give up trusting your gear to create great images and start trusting your vision instead. And most importantly, if you love putting the world into a frame for the sheer sake of it, for your love of expression.

But there’s something else you need to know. You’ll probably never get where you think you’re going. I know, I said you would and now I’m backtracking. You might well get to where your photographic heroes are—it just won’t be where you think it is. If you believe that great photographers wake up in the morning, wash their face with genius soap, and then confidently make great images one after the other, I can tell you I’ve yet to meet one. I’m not claiming to be anything more than what I am—a photographer struggling to express his vision—but any photographer who is looked up to by any other, well, we’re always looking forward, wishing we could more perfectly express ourselves. Those photographers who look up to us see that we’ve arrived, while we ourselves are looking up to others, conscious that we’ve not arrived, that there are better stories to tell in stronger ways. It is all only a journey. Each day you embark, you move forward, and each night you go to bed knowing not that you’ve arrived, but that tomorrow is a new day to move ahead, to creep forward. It’s the moving, the creeping, that matters. Like a pilgrimage—it’s the journey itself that changes you, not the destination.

And that’s just if you pursue the craft of photography as a hobbyist. If you want to do this as a vocation, it’s exponentially harder because the challenges I just

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listed are still ours in spades—but with the addition of financial concerns and the need to care for current clients, develop new markets and new materials to reach those markets, tend to the taxman, and replace older gear on which we depend to make our living. There are insurance costs and membership fees for professional associations and, at the end of all that, the total absence of any promise that all the hard work will pay off.

Let me go on record. It's hard. At times, it's really hard. There are no rules, and the ones we once had are changing so fast it makes my head spin. The markets are changing, and there is no template, scheme, or other program that will guarantee you the ability to shoot the things you love and make a living at it. This should come as both a warning and an encouragement. If you're on the outside, about to graduate from a bachelor of fine arts program in photography and thinking all you need to do now is rent a studio and buy a Yellow Pages ad, you've got a long road before you. On the other hand, if you're a working photographer and you find this hard, that's okay. Everyone I know finds this hard. It's the price we pay for not taking a job with corporate and pulling down \$60K a year working in a cubicle. But remember, this is a hill you climb one step at a time, not a huge wall you have to leap over in one jump. One step at a time, you begin where you're at and start moving. The greatest barrier to this whole thing is not taking those first steps.

## The First Question

The first question most often asked before making a transition into vocational photography is usually the wrong one entirely.

“What does the market want?” is not the question that will lead you to opportunities shooting what you are good at or passionate about. Had I asked that question first, I'd have ended up shooting weddings. And while I've shot the occasional nuptials, it's not what I love, and it's not why I wanted to be a photographer. For most of us, the point of becoming a vocational photographer is not the chance to play with cameras; it's the opportunity to make a living while creating and expressing ourselves. The money isn't the point—it's purely the means by which we sustain the ability to create and share our art.

Sure, eventually you need to consider what the market wants, because they won't buy what they don't want. But before that question ever bounces around within you, it's important to pursue the most important question.

What do you want?

What do you want to shoot? Why do you want to photograph it? What stories are you burning to tell? At the beginning you might not have a clue; you might be a generalist for a while. Even after you've found a market for what you love, I hope you'll continue to explore your creative gamut, never allowing your marketing niche to become your creative rut. And while what I'm suggesting seems counterintuitive to some degree, you've got to remember that you won't one day awake to find yourself shooting fashion models in Paris if the path you choose now is to be a stringer with a local paper until you “make it.” As they say, you can't get there from here.

Putting first things first is profoundly pragmatic, because the alternative is to become a vocational photographer simply to trade on your ability to press a button and push a histogram around, and few of us really want that.

If the point of all this was just to make a living, you might just have as easily—no, *more* easily—remained in your career as a mechanic, doctor, janitor, oil tycoon, whatever. If the reason you want to pursue this craft, this art, as a vocation is because you love it, then you must at all costs avoid making decisions that will suck the life from it and force you down a road that, when initially setting out on this journey, you wanted specifically to avoid.

Let's go back to the notion that asking the right question at the beginning is pragmatic. When I finally made the jump, I chose a market that was wildly impractical. I chose for my clients the agencies and organizations with some of the smallest, if not totally nonexistent, budgets for photography. It's a market swarming with people willing to volunteer their dubious talents and use that experience as a stepping-stone to something else, and for the most part it's a deal these groups take happily. Mediocre images that cost nothing are better than great images they can't afford. Of course, mediocre images by photographers unfamiliar with international development and the necessity of creating compelling images that communicate key values and benefits to a specific demographic aren't much help in fundraising, but budgets are restrictive and it

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takes a very forward-thinking organization to assign budget to the gathering of specific photographic resources. So it was into this market I leaped.

Had my first questions been about how realistic this might be, and how deep the pockets of my clients were (never mind how willing they may or may not be to pay for strong images), I'd have never made that leap. I'd be shooting weddings or events, and I'd be a miserable photographer shooting second-rate images and serving a clientele I increasingly resented. Nowhere in that scenario is there a good business idea. I use weddings only as an example because they're the opposite of what I love, in the same way that what I love calls to very few people. Not everyone wants to wake up under a mosquito net and worry about dying in a car wreck in India or getting shot by a child-soldier with something to prove. Good wedding photographers, like Chris+Lynn, are good because they love it, understand it, and create gorgeous images because of that.

Your passion for what you shoot—and who you shoot for—will place you head and shoulders above the mediocrity that's so prevalent in our industry. Bono once said that it was easy to rise to the top in the 1980s by virtue of merely being a good rock band in an era of mediocre ones. In a difficult marketplace, your passion and expertise are not a liability or a luxury; they are what set you apart and guarantee a solid, loyal, and well-paying client base. It's not the passionate photographer who specializes in something she loves and does it well who is being unrealistic. It's the one who shoots it all, spreads himself thin, trades on his ability to press a button, and thinks he can build a strong client base that finds value in this. That's not to say there aren't passionate photographers out there who are generalists that serve multiple markets well. I just haven't met one.

If you want to live the dream, as I'm often happily accused of doing, then you need to begin with the dream and never lose sight of it. Let it determine the destination. Then dig in to the practical stuff—the business and marketing savvy that you need to pull it off. Tenaciously learn what you need to, and be wildly practical about your finances and related decisions, but don't lose sight of the dream. Forge your own path, but don't forget where you're heading.



“Allowing your vision to be validated only by dollars is a terrible trap.”

## The Benefits of Hobby

Pursuing your vision and loving your craft have precisely nothing to do with how you make your living. The real photographer is the one who shoots what she loves and is committed to learning her craft well. Money often just makes it unnecessarily complicated. So if you're reading this in order to be a “professional photographer” simply so you'll be someone else's idea of a “real” photographer, then give this some thought: not only does being a so-called professional have exactly nothing whatsoever to do with being a “real” photographer, abstaining from career photography can have advantages.

Abstaining from career photography can mean having a day job to fund the gear you want. Pros are often forced to spend their money on necessities like newer marketing materials instead of the 14/2.8 lens they want. The hobbyist gets the cool lens, the pro gets postcards.

It can mean the flexibility to shoot what you want to shoot without the demands of clients hemming in your artistic impulses.

It can mean being free of the pressure to create on demand, and instead being able to create as you are inspired and on your own timetable. It can mean the freedom to pursue the art of your vision without commercial concerns or distractions. Ideally, a working photographer finds (or makes) the time for personal projects she is passionate about; it just doesn't always work out that way.

It can mean the freedom to love your images without feeling like they're only truly good photographs if someone buys them. Allowing your vision to be validated only by dollars is a terrible trap.

In the best-case scenario, doing this for a living is as good as doing it as a hobby. Sometimes more so. Doing this for a living can mean doing it more, pressing deeper into the art simply from necessity, and being able to write off some cool gear. I love doing this and making a living at it. Right now I wouldn't change that for anything. But the notion that you aren't a real photographer until people are paying you is rubbish. Vincent van Gogh didn't sell any of his work during his lifetime. Sure, he went crazy and lopped an ear off, but he was incontrovertibly an artist. So if following the call to be a vocational photographer allows you to both make a living and pursue your vision, go for it. If remaining a



hobbyist allows you to pursue your vision without the pitfalls of making it your trade, go for it. But be sure you understand there is a trade-off. The moment you make your craft into your career and begin to associate it with financial concerns, it changes. Those changes may be changes you love—or they may not—but it changes all the same.

Making a living through your lens is not merely the same as doing it as a hobby but getting paid for it; it's a completely different beast. Engaging in photography on a commercial level changes why you do it, and it changes how you do it, when you do it, and for whom you do it. Managed well and done with careful intention, those changes are not all undesirable. The creative collaboration that can result in partnerships with great clients and producers can be exciting, just as the frustrations and pitfalls of some collaborative efforts can be hellish. The money that can be made on a well-planned commercial shoot can be as good as the money that can be lost on a poorly conceived job that runs over budget. The time you spend doing what you love can be as creatively exhilarating as the time you spend on delinquent clients can be soul-sucking.

“We shoot best that which we love best.”

I'm not trying to scare you off. Clearly my colleagues and I love what we do so much that we're still at it and still loving it most days, and it's not because we're unable to find work elsewhere. I could still be juggling, after all. I'm just hoping to disabuse you of the notion that “real” photographers must do this for a living. We're not necessarily better photographers; we just want it so bad we're willing to do the hard work it takes to get to this place.

## Know Thyself

As a photographer, you are the product. You might see the final images, prints, wedding albums, or other deliverables as the product, but that's only partly so. The true product is you. Brand You. We'll talk more about the whole concept of branding later, but first wrap your brain around this concept: if you've chosen to be more than a commodity, more than a mediocre camera operator in a sea of mediocre camera operators, but a photographer with a unique vision and voice, then starting to think about who you are and what you have on offer is the beginning of your ability to communicate those offerings to the marketplace.

Imagine for a moment that you are a conventional brick-and-mortar store. Not running a store. You *are* the store. It's a bit Zen, but give it a try. Within you—your skills, passion, vision—are every item on offer, and before you offer it up for sale you have to know a few things.

## What's On Offer?

Before you even open the store, you need to do an inventory and become acutely aware of what's in stock and on offer. Without knowing this, you can't possibly begin to answer questions like: What makes you unique? What differentiates you from other photographers? What unique spot in the marketplace do you occupy? Or more bluntly: Why in the world should anyone hire you? These questions can be answered by asking yourself other clarifying questions, all of them aimed at identifying your inventory.

## What Do You Love?

Generally, we shoot best that which we love best. And spending your days shooting things you love is a great way to make a living. It can energize you, prolong your sanity, and improve the quality of your creative work. Better work, marketed right, can mean better prices. Take some time and look at the work you've done that you take the most satisfaction from. See any patterns? Finding that 80% of your work is with children? That's a good sign you've got a natural love for kids and probably an easy rapport with them. Make a note.

## What Past Experiences Have You Had?

If you've earned a PhD in marine biology, you're uniquely poised to be a marine or conservation photographer. Expertise is not only profoundly salable, but it likely points toward a deeper passion. When stacked against another photographer who shoots food, you have a distinct advantage if you spent years as a chef in Paris, and that advantage makes you more salable than the photographer who just shoots food for the money.

## What Are You Good At?

I love writing. Writing is not photography. But writing about photography allows me to give back to the industry, establish an area of expertise, and develop another area where I can express myself, work in and for the industry, and contribute to my income. For you, it might not be writing. It might be retouching or composite work. It might be video work. Live lecturing. Cleaning sensors. Multiple income streams can free you to be choosier about your work, and they give you a fighting chance when the bottom drops out of one thing. It also provides an outlet for creatives with short attention spans, allowing them to do their best work without getting drained.

## Which Shelves Are Empty?

Alternately, why not look at things in reverse? As long as you're looking at the shelves and counting your inventory, where are the empty spaces? What are the areas you don't like, the areas where you've experienced the least amount of success or creative satisfaction? Those empty shelves likely mean one of two



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things: an absence of passion or an absence of talent or skill. You’ve got two choices in this regard. You can use that knowledge to define the gigs you don’t want so that you can focus on your strengths, or you can put your energies into shoring up the weak spots and stocking those particular shelves.

The truth is, there are hundreds of thousands of photographers out there, skilled and otherwise. It is generally not your singular ability to wield a camera and pick an f-stop that clients want. It is your unique passion, your individual vision and style, and your unique skill set that will determine which clients find a match with which photographer. Knowing the ongoing state of your inventory, selling that particular stock, and doing something about the empty shelves—these make it all significantly easier to put your craft on offer in the marketplace. Hitting a dry spot? Just starting out? Close shop for an afternoon and do some inventory. It’s easier to sell what you know you have.

This inventory is not merely your skill set. It’s everything—who you are, what you are passionate about, what you are good at. It’s all connected, forming the foundation for every foray into the marketplace. Before you name the store and hire a clown for the grand opening, you have to know what you’re selling and to whom.

### Who Cares?

This isn’t just another flippant question. For each item you find during your inventory, there are potential benefits to your hypothetical customer. Look at things from your customer’s perspective. What do they care about?

One of my strengths in the market I am most excited about serving is my experience working in that market. But working for other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the developing world is just one feature on offer in my store. The big question is, “So what?” My experience working in the field with other NGOs means I understand their staff and the limitations within which they work. It means I’ve developed a way to work within those limitations, and I understand the value of diplomacy and the need to maintain tenuous relationships. It means I am not a liability. More than that, it means I understand how the development works, how funds are raised, and how to communicate with fundraisers—a crucial benefit when I’m being hired to create compelling fundraising images for an orphanage.





Let's look at it in another way. What does your market need? What solutions are they looking for? If that's what you provide, you need to know it and know how to communicate that clearly. It begins with taking stock.

## Yeah, But Am I Good Enough?

When I first started writing this book, I asked a lot of people if they had questions about becoming a vocational photographer. The overwhelmingly common question was one for which I have no answer. In fact, I still wonder about it myself.

"Am I good enough?"

I don't know. I suppose it's a tough question because it's incomplete. Good enough to what? If you could, in a glance, survey the work of all the photographers out there in the marketplace right now, I guarantee that you would find a sea of mediocrity. And among those whose work is solid and increasingly good, you'd find enough self-doubt to sink a ship. I tell you this so you'll understand that it's a question that, in one way or another, you'll always wonder about. Don't wait until you can answer yes. In fact, it's the ones who never question if they have the goods who stop improving, who stop finding new ways to ramp up their craft and serve their clients. But for those of you dogged by the constant doubts about whether you are good enough, let me remind you of something—we're all always getting better. Day by day, if you work on your craft you are getting better, closer to being "good enough," which is a standard most artists always feel they fall just short of. Why? Because as our vision slightly outpaces our ability to express it, we're always following the carrot, always feeling that our best shot is our next one, not our last one.

Are you good enough?

Talent is important; it makes all this easier anyway. But talent alone doesn't make you a success in the marketplace. More pertinent questions that often aren't asked include these: Am I willing to work hard at tasks that seem completely unrelated to photography? Am I willing to research and learn and make mistakes? Am I willing to take risks? Am I willing to put my work and my business practices under the scrutiny of a mentor or peers so I can improve? Sure, natural

talent is an undeniable asset. But there are plenty of less-talented but harder-working photographers out there making a living. Better, more direct questions might be these: Do you want it badly enough? Do you love it enough?

I thought so.

You may never be able to answer the question "Am I good enough?" to your own satisfaction, but one client at a time you'll begin to hear the answer. Keep at it. Don't let fear hold you back.

Whatever the next step for you is, take it boldly. These are not times for the timid; there's no reward in tiptoeing through life only to make it safely to death.

## Your Next Step

You might be one of those rare people who maps things out and makes lists in your brain. Most of us are not. For most of us, the act of writing something down is a part of the thinking process. When I suggest taking inventory I'm not being purely metaphorical. I suggest you actually sit down with a pen and paper, or your laptop and a cup of coffee, and make an actual inventory. The questions I've asked aren't just devices to get you thinking; they're actual questions needing actual answers, and the more conscious you are of those answers, the better equipped you'll be to move forward. If I read a book and it tells me to make a list, the last thing in the world I'm likely to do is make a list. But seriously, make a list. Take stock. It might take a weekend, or a whole month of weeks as new ideas come to you and you add to the list, but the more fully you know what's on offer, the more able you will be to take it to market. Not to spoil the ending or anything, but this whole thing is pretty simple. Know your product really well. Know your market really well. Then get them talking to each other.

## Know Your Market

Without an understanding of your market, you'd have no idea what they need and want, how they want it, and how to communicate to them that you have the goods. You wouldn't know how much to charge and still be seen as a professional. Knowing your market is the communicator's version of knowing your audience. You wouldn't stand in front of 100 autoworkers in Mexico and give

"The more you understand the culture and language of that market, the more easily you can communicate with that culture."