

The Myth of Talent

By Craig M. Tanner

Often people attempt to live their lives backwards; they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want, so they will be happier. The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you need to do, in order to have what you want." – Margaret Young

"Genuine beginnings begin within us, even when they are brought to our attention by external opportunities." – William Bridges

"Talent is long patience." – Gustav Flaubert

I can still remember the looks of incredulity when I left the hospital and made the declaration that I was quitting my job in order to become a nature photographer. I am sure, to the people closest to me, my dream did seem to come way out of left field. Like millions of people, I owned a camera. But I had never done anything except take snapshots. I couldn't even particularly claim photography as a hobby. But there was a connection. I had lived with an overwhelming passion for the natural world for as far back as I could remember. I loved to hike and to backpack. I felt completely alive surrounded by wilderness. So I made a decision in intensive care. I was not going back to an empty life lived half-awake. I was going to arrange my life, as much as possible around what I loved. And I believed that becoming a nature photographer would allow me to share my most passionate connection with the world in the most direct way possible.

In 1988 I was 27 years old and living in someone else's dreams. Up until that point I had not found the courage to truly confront the conditions of my life. I did know enough about myself to know that I was burnt out in my job. When you work at things that do not renew your spirit burn out is what happens. I felt trapped and depressed.

Later in that same year, during a surgery to correct a congenital deformity of my face, the procedure did not go as planned. I was supposed to wake up in a recovery room. Instead I woke up in intensive care with a breathing tube down my throat and with a fear I had never experienced. Life had called my hand.

When it comes down to it, I believe we all know what the next step is to free ourselves. But so much of the time taking that step is seemingly so scary that we do everything we can to avoid even thinking about it. What if we find out we don't have what it takes? What if we fail at the one thing that we believe could be our salvation. What if we fail trying to attain our biggest dreams. Then what?

Conventional wisdom says that it is not enough to dream. You need talent. And definition of talent lifted straight from the dictionary describes talent as “a natural ability of a superior quality”. In other words, you either have it or you don’t. I call this cultural flaw in our self-awareness the *Myth of Talent*. And buying into this dead end myth about ourselves is where it goes wrong for many people – particularly people who have a dream of becoming an artist. We look behind ourselves at what we have been and we see a person defined by everyone else’s expectations and declarations. And since the definitions of the people we have allowed to define us did not include artist, we see everything but. We look ahead to see the artist we could become and we get easily the universal voice of our own self doubt that says – “Who are we kidding – without the physical evidence of any natural ability, how could we ever possibly attain our dreams?”

In intensive care I did not have time to worry about the past and I felt, for the first time in my life, painfully aware that my time in the future was limited. It was the real life version of the hypothetical game – “What would you do if you only had short time to live?”. External events forced me to be here now and that changed my life. It changed my life because what we all need is the presence to practice being the person *now* that we want to become.

We need this presence because the truth about talent is this – ***talent is a set of skills you develop over time through desire.***

People disagree and the old nature vs. nurture argument rears its ugly head. They say “surely you aren’t denying that gift and natural ability exist?” I do believe in gift. Every encounter you have with another person is a sacred encounter with a gifted human being. But the gift of natural ability, without the awareness of it, or without passion attached to it, is either an unknown or unfulfilled potential. Even when natural ability is discovered and nurtured, it is only good for one thing – altering the trajectory of your learning curve.

Your one *true* gift is love and the desires of your heart because love can do what natural ability never will – conquer all of your fears – the fear of being a beginner, the fear of looking stupid, the fear of failing, and the fear of the unknown. Love can do this because love alone is limitless. When we enter the realm of our most passionate desires and remain there, the recreation of ourselves is not only possible - it is inevitable.

The summer after my surgery and 5 months after I put in notice at my old job, my love of nature carried me all over the American west. You see I had a plan. I was going to jump-start my career as a nature photographer by photographing landscapes in national parks for six straight months. So I left Atlanta, Ga. in May of 1988 in a pickup truck which was loaded with camping gear, lots of canned tuna, two 35mm camera bodies, three lenses and a couple of hundred rolls of Kodachrome 25 slide film. I also had a plan for processing my film. I figured there would be very few photo labs in the places I planned to visit. But I knew there would be a post office in every national park. So in addition to the film, I bought Kodak processing mailers. I would just pop the unprocessed film in the

mail as I went and all of my processed slides would be waiting for me in Atlanta when I returned from my career-launching trip.

That summer and early fall were pure heaven. I went to just about every mainline national park west of the Mississippi. And I didn't just go to the overlooks. I hiked hundreds of miles. I immersed myself in each and every location. It seemed I fell in love with a new place almost every day. And yes, I took thousands and thousands of pictures. And then a funny thing happened. In early October while I was photographing in Olympic National Park, I realized I was homesick and unable to process anymore grandeur. I made a beeline cross-country from Seattle and arrived in Atlanta three days later.

And there waiting for me in Atlanta, mailed from the Kodachrome processing plant, was a national monument sized stack of little cardboard, slide filled boxes with all of the photography from my trip..... And when you look up the word disappointment in the dictionary there ought to be at least one picture of me going through each box, slide by slide, desperately looking for, but never seeing – not even once – anything on film that even remotely approached the awe inspiring beauty of my experience. At the time it was the most devastating let down of my life. I had never felt so foolish. The written journal I kept was a better record of what I saw than my photography.

The truth about the images from my trip in 1988 is that not one image from that body of work has ever been included in any of my portfolios. Not one image from that trip has ever been published. I did sell a few awful prints to people who must have felt sorry for me. But the bottom line is that I had laid an absolute photographic egg. I had visited some of the most beautiful landscapes on the planet and in over 7000 clicks of the shutter had not even gotten lucky.

Conventional wisdom would say I had seriously failed the ultimate photography aptitude test. Conventional wisdom would also say I should give up on what looked like a dead ringer for a pipe dream and move on to something else. I clearly was lacking a “natural ability of a superior quality”. In fact my trip was almost proof that when it came to photography, I had something closer to a natural ability of an inferior quality. But *true* wisdom would say that as a beginner I had done the only thing I was capable of doing. And in intensive care, that same inner voice of wisdom had spoken to me and I had listened. And I knew that I absolutely would not, under any circumstance, go back to trading my life away for a paycheck.

After a couple of weeks of recovery from the let down, the ultimate truth about my trip began to settle in - I had the best time of my life creating all of those horrible pictures. The process of being a photographer had allowed me to have the most heightened six months of experience in my life. My whole thought process started to revolve around figuring out a way to do it again. My dream of being a full time photographer was as solid as ever.

I continued to be a beginning photographer for quite a while. Instead of taking horrible pictures all across the west, I did the same thing much closer to home. Because my skill level remained low, I could not earn a living as a photographer. I had to get another job to support myself. But this job was chosen for the flexibility that it allowed me to pursue my dream. I also seriously simplified my lifestyle so that I did not need a lot of money to survive and that gave me more time and money to practice photography. And like anyone who practices what they love, my skill level increased. Slowly but surely for the last fifteen years I have continued to improve my skill level and improve the quality of my work.

Long term, committed, practice powered by the purpose of love leads to amazing transformations. The stumbling beginner becomes the exalted expert. The trapped and depressed become the liberated and empowered. So why do we so easily buy into the limiting mythical idea about talent being nothing but a birthright?

To me there are two big reasons and the first has to do with our most basic fear – the fear of being rejected. The first word most of us learn is no. And from an early age we are programmed to get our rewards by performing as close to flawlessly as possible all of the time. Our outcomes become everything. We will go to extraordinary lengths, like giving our lives away to meaningless jobs that we could do in our sleep after a day of training, just to get a yes and a paternal pat on the back from an external source. So to avoid rejection we absolve ourselves of being responsible for our own creativity by agreeing with the myth.

And I believe the other reason we are frozen by the myth of talent is the talented people themselves. The highly talented do not get our attention until their skill level is so high that no trace can be found of the bewildered beginner they surely have been. Their highly evolved skills do seem to come out of nowhere like a magical byproduct of the magical birthright we have been told about.

Over the last few years I have heard myself being labeled as a talented photographer. Knowing what that means to most people, my impulse is to offer some kind of a clarification because I know better than anyone about the truth of my humble photographic beginnings and the national park sized “failures” those beginnings contained. I can only laugh at myself because I am in on the unintentional joke contained within the myth. Being labeled talented only means we have survived being untalented.

A question I get quite often is what was the one big external break that led to the launch of my career. And you can imagine the looks of incredulity I get when I say the biggest break in my career as a photographer was actually given to me before I was a photographer in an intensive care unit in February of 1988. Ultimately, on that day, I didn't even come close to dying. But I thought I might. And finally facing the ultimate fear was what it took for me to truly wake up and start to live. On the only level that matters - on the inside – I became a photographer because I entered the realm of my most closely held and passionate desires and I was committed to remain there - in that perfect place *where anything is possible*.

Seven Ways to Create Your Own Space for Artistic Growth

1) Breathe - Fear needs a timeline to exist. When we are afraid we are worried about our past actions or possible future outcomes. Worrying about time we do not control robs us of the power we have in the present to transform ourselves. When the fear of being a beginner (or any other fear creeps into our minds) we can respond by simply paying attention to our breathing. Just a few seconds of observing our breathing can dissolve our fears by bringing us back to now and to the presence we need to be the artist we desire to become.

2) Set Goals - Create goals and share them with the universe. Setting goals maximizes our power of choice and our power of attraction. If we have goals we can have a benchmark for the question "Is the choice I am about to make going to bring me any closer to where I want to be as a photographer?" By sharing our goals we are literally saying here are the desires of my heart. Assistance pours in when others know exactly what to do to help us, and when we are clearly open to, and ready for the help.

3) Model on others - Only you can walk your path. But you can help to make it more of a straight line from where you are now to where you want to be. Pay attention to the actions of those who are further along on the road - or enlist the help of a guide.

4) Reflect - Each day create the space for a quiet time of inner reflection. Observe how you are feeling and make choices based on your observations.

5) Recharge - Play or rest ... but definitely recharge yourself each week by taking a day off.

6) Create an artist support group – Surrounding ourselves with people who share in our desires helps to keep us on track by adding accountability to our space.

7) Be your own biggest supporter – Most of us have become our own biggest critic. Here are five ways to be self-supportive.

- Be kind... to yourself - Compassion starts with how we treat ourselves. We all have an inner critic that can do a lot of damage if left unchecked. To bring your inner critic under control, practice balancing all self-criticisms with an immediate, legitimate, self-compliment.
- Suspend Judgment - Quit equating yourself with your artwork. "Am I making progress?" is a much better question to ask than "Is this artwork any good?" The story of greatness is a story that includes many actions that look like failures when judged out of the context of the whole story. "Am I making progress?" is a

question that always allows you to see the potential value of all of your efforts. You are much more than any work or body of work.

- Practice, Practice, Practice!!! - Disconnect from the outcome. Creativity equals conscious productivity. But we often think to be creative we have to make art that exhibits greatness every time. That kind of expectation leads to artist block because it encourages us to wait for the perfect conditions for greatness instead of creating greatness through passionate practice. To be more creative - be more productive.
- Embrace uncertainty - There is no artist Shangri –La. So let go and quit looking for it. Your vision of who you can be is always ahead of where you are. Embrace the uncertainty that comes with following your vision.
- Be thankful and generous - Be in gratitude for what is and **share what you have to offer**. To often we curse what we have and focus on our needs. Turn it around!

The Myth of Talent: A Short Reading List

The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle

The Work by Byron Katie

Art and Fear by Ted Orland and David Bayles

The Artist Way by Julia Cameron

Free Play by Stephen Nachmanovitch