

## Rigor and Surrender

My son and I are working with Eugene Friesen, a three-time Grammy Award winning cellist, on his instructional video to teach cellists how to practice. Eugene is a wonderful guy, with an orientation to playing music that's well, *spiritual*. I find that his ideas apply to photography.

Eugene talks of *Rigor* and *Surrender* as the cellist's path. *Rigor*, for Eugene, is all the technique of playing a cello: how to bow, how to finger each note, how to move his hand up and down the neck. I call similar photographic tasks Mechanics (stolen blatantly from Fred Picker): setting up the tripod and camera, determining exposure, setting the lens, putting in the film holder, clicking the shutter. These require no creativity, and in fact, one is helped if they are so well-practiced as to be automatic, performed with as little consciousness as possible. Setting up a camera should not be a spiritual experience.

At a recent workshop, I reminded students that Ansel had five minutes to set up and make *Moonrise*. Do you think he paused to feel the spiritual experience of leveling his tripod? Other students were there in a figure workshop. Some pretty young lady has just taken her clothes off just for you, I told them, do you want to be a clumsy oaf adjusting your lens? Practicing rigor pays dividends.

For Eugene, *surrender* occurs in the performance, where the artist surrenders to the music, and becomes a conduit through which something happens that is greater than the notes on the page. He's one of the best improvisers on the planet, and he says that his best improvisations come from somewhere, he really doesn't know where, when he surrenders himself to the music. He firmly believes that surrender can only happen if the rigor has been thorough beforehand. He can't think about how to hold his bow while trying to bring something universal into a piece. Surrender is, in his mind, a spiritual act. I think he's right, and it applies to making images.

At our workshops, we introduce some terminology to help us along: Head, Hands, and Heart. We credit Rudolf Steiner, who developed Waldorf education, a form of elementary and secondary education with very specific ideas about curriculum and teaching methods. Steiner believed that a proper education for children meant that we teach children to have a balance between head, hands and heart in their lives.

Similarly, our best photographs balance a clear subject (head) with good craft (hands) to elicit a strong emotional response (heart) from ourselves and, we hope, a wider audience. Weaknesses in any of the three are evident in criticisms: "I don't get what this picture is about," (weak subject, lack of clarity in the head). "The print is muddy," (weak craft, hands not properly engaged). "It's boring," (weak emotional response, failed connection to the heart).

We can use head, hands and heart to diagnose where we fall short. I encourage students to examine ALL of their proofs and analyze where each image fell short of the right balance:

Head? Hands? Heart? They always find the imbalance. I also encourage them to be tough on their best efforts: how could you have made it even better?

Hands issues are the easiest to correct, and head issues can be helped fairly easily, too. Heart issues are, for me, far more difficult to remedy. Heart remains the mystery I experience in photography. I think the heart manifests itself when we can surrender. I have trouble surrendering. For me, it is spiritual, and that's not easily achieved. Surrender requires tapping deeply into all of my emotions. Surrender is scary. I have seen many (mostly males) who hide behind equipment and Mechanics to avoid the vulnerability that must accompany surrender. One recent student admitted as much, but then, bless him, he had a breakthrough and went away with a commitment to try to learn to surrender and find his heart.

OK, now let's quickly define art for our purposes.

James Joyce, author of *Finnegan's Wake*, *Ulysses*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and other works spoke of aesthetic experience as an *epiphany*, where the beholder is held in *aesthetic arrest*.

Joyce says that we see a work first as one thing. Then, in seeing it as one thing, we become aware of the relationship of part to part, each part to the whole, and the whole to each of its parts. This is the essential aesthetic factor: *rhythm*, the harmonious rhythm of relationships. And when the artist has struck a fortunate rhythm, we experience a radiance; we are held in aesthetic arrest – that is Joyce's epiphany.

For Joyce, a work that moves us to want to possess the object is *pornography*. A work that causes us to criticize and reject it is *didactic*. Such works may serve their purposes (is all advertising intended to be Joyce's version of pornography? Is most of what contemporary artists produce didactic?), but for Joyce, they are not art. There is no radiance. And, either pornography or didacticism is kinetic – we move towards or away from the work, whereas for Joyce true art is static: a state of aesthetic arrest.

Works for me. I seek the radiance, the aesthetic arrest to be found by combining craft with inspiration that comes from places deep within me. I find that radiance is extremely hard to achieve in photographs, but that its pursuit can be its own reward. And will not come from projecting that which is within me, but rather letting the subject matter *come to me* and touch my heart. Surrendering to the subject and the moment. In fact, the more my ego can stand aside, the better my chance of finding the rhythms and the radiance. And they are best found in the commonplace, everyday things around me, if only I can really *see* them. Do I bat 1,000? Not a chance. I consistently get 5 out of 100 wonderful pictures, with about 45 admirable ones and the rest competent. But I can only get the five wonderful ones by making all 100, and I never know in advance which ones will be wonderful.

Edward Weston, who may have read Joyce, said about his own work:

"Clouds, torsos, shells, peppers, trees, rocks, smoke stacks, are but interdependent, interrelated parts of a whole, which is Life.

"Life rhythms felt in no matter what, become symbols of the whole.

"The creative force in man recognizes and records these rhythms with the medium most suitable to him, the object, or the moment, feeling the cause, the life within the outer form. Recording unfelt facts, acquired by rule, results in sterile inventory. To see the *Thing Itself* is essential: the quintessence revealed direct without the fog of impressionism, -- the casual noting of a superficial phase, a transitory mood.

"This then: to photograph a rock, have it look like a rock, but be *more* than a rock.

"Significant presentation, not interpretation.

"My way of working –

I start with no preconceived idea –

Discovery excites me to focus –

Then rediscovery through the lens –

Final form of presentation seen on ground glass, the finished print provisioned complete in every detail of texture, movement, proportion *before exposure* -- -- the shutter's release automatically and finally fixes my conception, allowing no after manipulation.

The ultimate end, the print, is but a duplication of what I saw and felt through my camera."

-- From *The Daybooks of Edward Weston, Volume II California* p.154

Weston found the rhythms. His work has radiance. He knew how to surrender. We would be fortunate to be as gifted.

OK, let's try to apply all this.

You need to own the book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* by Betty Edwards. She has several more now, including a really good book on color, but the first is the most useful for our purposes. In it, she spends considerable time talking about the two sides of the brain, and how they work. Her ultimate objective is to have us learn to draw, and she does that, in part, by training us to use the right side of our brains.

While the science has matured, and strictly speaking what I am about to describe is not entirely accurate, it works as a way to understand the underlying concept and how we can apply it to photography. Instead of left-brain and right-brain thinking, I'll use left-mode and right-mode to designate the ideas.

The brain has two sides, each of which operates differently. The left side of the brain operates in a linear, logical fashion. Language resides here, as well as arithmetic functions. It's rigorous.

The right side of the brain processes information more holistically. It can process huge amounts of spatial data very fast. I would argue that complex athletic skills, such as hitting a baseball or a tennis serve, use the right side of the brain. Trying to think about what you do to hit a monster tennis serve in terms of language as you try to do it guarantees failure. Language is too slow to keep up with all the things the body has to do at the same time. When coaching tennis, I tell the player to "stop thinking, and let your body do the work." Serving improves dramatically instantly! If I consciously try to shift to right-mode thinking when receiving a fast serve, my reaction time, accuracy and consistency improve dramatically. Many coaches tell players to "visualize themselves doing it right," because it works to visualize the picture rather than describe the activity in words.

In sum, left-mode activities in photography have to do with Mechanical tasks: setting up the camera, stopping down the lens, operating the meter, and so forth. Right-mode activities are more creative: finding the subject matter, arranging the shapes, light and forms in the viewfinder or on the ground glass, and so on.

I think right-mode thinking is surrender. It's where we connect to our hearts. Much has been written about Flow State, Being in the Zone, Being Unconscious. I have Played Over My Head. In retrospect, these are all characterizations of what I experience as deep right-mode thinking.

We can learn to quiet the left side of the brain when composing photographs. Right-mode sees shapes, forms and light, while left-mode applies labels that get in the way of seeing. There are several exercises from *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* that are worth practicing. These exercises can be done anytime, anywhere. I did them in airports long ago, waiting for delayed flights. They will serve to deepen your seeing, to get you past word labels to see what truly is before you as light, shapes and forms. When you compose photographs, all of these exercises come into play. They are, I think, steps towards surrender. And they're fun!

Finally, when photographing, I like to make many decisions beforehand, so that I have few variables and can concentrate on right-mode thinking. I recently befuddled workshop students by discussing how limited I keep my choices in the field: I rarely leave home with more than one lens. Never with more than one film or format. I work in projects, and so usually have a destination and subject matter in mind, and maybe such things as subject-to-camera distance and shutter speed predetermined. Many of those things that my left-mode could worry about are decided in advance, so I can shift to right-mode and make pictures. "How can you do that?" they asked, "Don't you feel constrained?" Not at all, I replied, in fact, it's incredibly liberating to have little left but deciding where to stand and aim the lens. Nothing left but to surrender.

Rigor and surrender. Somebody once said that faith is a decision. So too, I think, is surrender. It is a spiritual act. It's hard. It's no guarantee of success, since I still only net five out of a hundred, but it is a prerequisite. Rigor must precede it.

But surrender as liberation. Now there's a thought.