



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK TWENTY THREE.

Seek Critique and Feedback

Mastering a craft takes a long time. It takes a commitment to putting in the hours of deliberate practice and a willingness to trade praise for constructive feedback. We all want to hear how good our work is, which is one reason the social networks thrive as they do; they offer constant praise. As good as that praise can feel to our egos, it's often not the kind of feedback that helps us move forward.

Finding the right kind of feedback can be difficult. My suggestion is to find the best voices you can and listen to them early on. Those voices will do different things for you and should be chosen accordingly.

The first voice you need to listen to is your own. Only you know what you are trying to accomplish. Only you know your vision for your work and what will constitute success for that

work. In the beginning, it will be enough that the photograph is sharp and well-exposed, but you'll soon want more than that from your images; you'll want those photographs to tell stories, to evoke something in others, or to express something of yourself. To judge yourself by the same criteria used by a 20-year craftsman would be foolish, and probably destructive. Be patient with yourself; this is a long road. Find the balance between pride in your work and the humility to accept where it falls short.

The second voice you need to listen to is a qualified mentor of some kind. I say qualified because not all voices are equal. For example, what does your mom know about photography? If the answer is “nothing,” then be encouraged when she says she loves it, but don't let it speak to where you are as a photographer or how you can improve. Find someone who creates work you admire and respect—someone who will hear you when you talk about what you want to create—and then listen. I know how hard this is; finding a mentor is not easy. Over the course of your journey, you'll probably find many. When you do find someone you admire, be shameless in asking them for feedback. They can always say no (and often will), but be more hungry for that feedback than you are for praise.

Most of the time it will be that first voice you listen to. I suggest you train it. This is one of the reasons these lessons have thus far included 23 photographers for you to study. It *is* possible to assess your own work. You'll have to. But on what criteria? That's the hard part. As I said, it begins with an honest desire for improvement, not accolades. Then it takes a growing understanding of the visual language and how other photographers and visual artists have used the elements and choices at their disposal to create their work. Forget what camera they used; it doesn't matter. Ask instead how they used line, light, and moment. How they used juxtaposition or perspective, colour or tonal contrast. Be diligent in those first two things and constantly ask the following questions of yourself and your work, and check in once in a while with others you respect.

- What did I want to accomplish with this work?
- What did I want this photograph / body of work to say or to express? What questions did I want it to raise?
- Visually, how did I do that? Colour? Contrast? Scale? Balance? Tension? Choice of elements included or excluded? Choice of point of view (POV)? Choice of optics, shutter or aperture? Break it down. If you accomplished your vision, it will be there in the visual language.
- Was it worth doing?

- Is it better than my other/previous efforts at the same thing? Am I just repeating myself?
- On an individual basis, does it contribute (or add something) to a larger body of work?

These questions are important, and the longer I do this, the more valuable the questions become to me. I can't always answer them, but I've found it's the constant asking that makes the difference to me—it keeps me honest, keeps me open, keeps me growing.

There's an old sermon I'd like to return here because I think it's relevant to any effort at self-assessment or self-critique: don't be seduced by your subject. I mean, be seduced, fall in love, be fascinated, but don't expect it to carry the image. When I return from diving with sharks or dolphins or a safari in Kenya, it would be very easy to judge my photograph not on how well I used the visual language to accomplish my vision, but by how beautiful the leopard is, or how fond I am of the memory. The truth is I have hard drives of images of beautiful things that will never be more than sketches. **Learn to distinguish between your sketches and your best work.** Some of us will think back to how long it took to get the image, or how hard it was to make that one photograph. None of those things matter. If they aren't in the photograph, they aren't a consideration. A beautiful dolphin is not the same thing as a successful photograph of that same dolphin. A hard-earned photograph is not the same thing as a successful photograph.

Creative Exercise

This week it's just exercise but you'll probably have to get creative about it all the same. Take some time to go back to some of the thoughts I raised in Week One. Where is your vision? What do you want your photographs to accomplish? Only when you get a sense of this will you be able to evaluate the work for yourself.

Once you've done that, find one or two photographers who create work you respect. Call or send them an email this week and ask if they would be willing to give you an hour a month to give you feedback on your work. Then make a date and prepare for that hour. Here are my suggestions:

- Don't overwhelm them. Give them no more than 12 images. Fewer images allow you to go deeper.
- Don't be defensive. Someone can punch all kinds of holes in the work you love without you being discouraged. Remember you're doing this to learn, not be told how good you are. If you were that good you wouldn't need to learn. We all do.

- Be prepared to ask good questions. “I was trying to express this one idea or emotion; do you feel I did that?” “Is there anything that pulls you away from that idea or emotion in the photograph?” “What choices might I have made that would have made this image stronger to you?”
- The value of critique is how you digest it. Take notes. Think about the feedback. Keep what is good, put the less helpful stuff away for another day. Good notes can be invaluable. “I often don’t get close enough; is this one reason my images lack energy?” or “John feels my subject isn’t really clear; what can I do to isolate that better?”
- Make the feedback actionable. The next time you go out to photograph, be intentional about one thing: getting closer; isolating more intentionally; or being more careful about your choice of moment.



Study the Masters

Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) died from the effects of Parkinson's disease the year I was born. In her 67 years, she accomplished an astonishing amount in one lifetime for anyone, let alone a woman of her generation. She is worth studying not only for her work but an intentional life intrepidly and well-lived.

“The camera is a remarkable instrument. Saturate yourself with your subject and the camera will all but take you by the hand.” ~ Margaret Bourke-White

Bourke-White was an American documentary photographer, known for several things connected to her photography. She was the first foreign photographer allowed to photograph within the Soviet Union, the first female war correspondent, and the first female photographer working for LIFE magazine. What began as a career in commercial photography was marked by a willingness to work—and thrive—in places where women were traditionally denied access. One of her first clients was Otis Steel, and despite a battle to get onto the factory floors, she created some of the best steel factory photographs of that era before moving on to work with LIFE, where she documented the unfolding human drama of the Soviet Union (1930) and the American south before World War II began, when she became the first female war correspondent accredited by the US Army and the first woman allowed to work in combat zones during the war. She then returned to the Soviet Union to document life there, giving the West its first real look at life behind the Iron Curtain. She was in Moscow when Germany broke the pact of non-aggression and invaded, and was the only foreign correspondent there at the time. Eventually, she was one of the first photographers sent to document the Nazi death camps, about which she said, “Using a camera was almost a relief. It interposed a slight barrier between myself and the horror in front of me.”

“Any photographer who tries to portray human beings in a penetrating way must put more heart and mind into his preparation than will ever show in any photograph.” ~ Margaret Bourke-White

She seemed to have a knack for being in the right place at the right time, but I have a feeling it had more to do with dogged determination than luck. To wit: one of her most iconic photographs was one of Gandhi sitting at his spinning wheel, two years before his assassination in 1948. Before she could make the photograph, Gandhi insisted she learn to use the spinning wheel, which she did. She became one of the most effective chroniclers of the violence that erupted at the independence and partition of India and Pakistan (1947).

You can find her amazing work still in print in [***Margaret Bourke-White: Moments in History***](#) and read more about her life in [***Portrait of Myself \(autobiography by Margaret Bourke-White\)***](#).

Final Comments

I know this week's lesson was a long one, and if you're taking all of this seriously, the real work is only just about to start. I know finding someone to critique your work well is a challenge; mentors are not easy to find. But if and when you do find one, they're gold, so they're worth the search.

As always, if you're looking for me, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#).

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin