



THE VISION COLLECTIVE. WEEK TWENTY FOUR.

Grow the Artist

Craftsmen and artists are not so much born as created. None of us ever get where we hope to be on this journey without several factors coming together. I have met some very talented photographers who flounder, and some who perhaps have less recognizable talent at first but push their way through, find their own path, and flourish. And those who do share some characteristics.

The inner life of the photographer gets very little glory. People want to hear about tips and tricks and the latest gear, but those things are just substitutes for the hard stuff, none of which has to do with what's in your bag. That doesn't mean skill doesn't matter; it does. But skill comes only by sustained deliberate practice. This is not the norm. Our popular photography culture honours the dabblers and the attention deficit. Consider the words of Edward Weston:

“The fact is that relatively few photographers ever master their medium. Instead they allow the

medium to master them and go on an endless squirrel cage chase from new lens to new paper to new developer to new gadget, never staying with one piece of equipment long enough to learn its full capacities, becoming lost in a maze of technical information that is of little or no use since they don't know what to do with it."

So before I talk about the inner life, I urge you to consider how you work. Not how *much* you work, but *how*. I encourage you to avoid the peripheries, the gimmicks, and the latest "it" thing to ask yourself whether those long hours spent in Photoshop are just a substitute for improving your camera work and clarifying your vision. Perhaps a year spent studying composition and working diligently on a body of work and learning from failures would be time better spent than yet another workshop. Or buying another lens. Only you know the answer, but I know that focused, deliberate practice trumps bouncing around on a "squirrel cage chase," to quote Weston.

Below are three other commonalities I see as more important than the one factor upon which we laud too much praise: talent.

Patience

Nothing comes easy. When I see all these young photographers, so new to the craft, hanging out their shingle as professionals, I worry for them. You need skill (not talent; there's a difference) to be valuable to the world. You need to pay the dues and put in the time. Even if you have no intention of doing this for a penny in return, a lack of patience will be discouraging and will affect your commitment to the work. Be patient with the work. Be patient with yourself. Go after it with all you've got, but it's a long game. Do not overestimate your talent and underestimate the need to put in the hours. You'll get there. But remember, it's not how many hours alone that is a factor, but how you use those hours. It is said it takes 10,000 hours to master something. But it is assumed that those 10,000 hours consist of intentional and deliberate work, not half-assed flailing around.

Courage

Art is hard. When you put yourself into your work—when it's this important to you—it's not easy to do without becoming aware of the emotional cost of it. You can't create anything, even learn anything, without risking failure. But failure is your best and most reliable teacher, if not also the one that demands the most from you. Have courage. Every artist or craftsman (whichever you identify with) does the work and learns the craft in the context of the unknown, which is where fear operates. You can't escape that. But you can choose to move forward despite it. You can choose to take risks. You can choose to do the work even though you don't know it'll be successful. To my knowledge, no one has ever died when their work has failed. But if they're wise, they've learned. And their work has improved.

Stretch

I didn't know what else to call this one, but I think stretch covers it. If you want to get better you have to be willing to go beyond what is comfortable to you. You have to push yourself and intentionally engage in activities a little beyond what you are able to do. Soon those activities will become easy, either by muscle memory or emotional familiarity. Don't plateau there; move forward. Every year for the last 10 years I have undertaken an area of serious study—leaning into an area in which I have no real expertise—focusing my efforts, reading as much as I can, trying new techniques. And each time I feel like I'm drowning a little at first: not my favourite feeling in the world. But slowly I gain new insights, things that were once hard to recall become familiar, and mastery (or just competence) eventually comes. It helps if you have a sense of humour, courage, and patience. Don't sit still. There is always something new to learn—some way to take your study deeper—and to bring your photographs to those same depths.



Creative Exercise

I honestly don't know how to get others to honour or pay attention to their inner life; it's way easier to tell them to use the Rule of Thirds or some other bullshit. Sorry, but only you can do this. It probably starts with learning to hear the voices in your head and trusting the best of them. I have been journaling since I was a kid, and keeping my thoughts in a notebook helps me sort them. It's not the keeping of the notes so much as the writing of them, the hashing them out. You might want to keep a creative journal in which you take note of the things that excite, inspire, and frustrate you. The questions you have. The ideas for compositions and bodies of work. The things you learn from the masters you study or the ways in which you would do things differently. My notebooks fill a shelf and they continue to be a vital part of my life as a growing artist.

Above: A collection of some of my notebooks from the last 10 years. They aren't pretty, and re-reading earlier ones now is a little painful, but using them has been a foundation of my creative process for many years.



Study the Masters

[Josef Koudelka](#) (1938 -) is a Czech-born, French-dwelling photographer with a long and distinguished history with Magnum. What draws me to Koudelka's work is how stark and dark it is. It has a feeling of unvarnished reality, which is different from his Western colleagues, whose work always seems more heroic. Koudelka's photographs are very much his own and are recognizable as such: beautiful, of course, and his composition and sense of moment is sublime, just a little darker. I like that the work is so good without polish and pretense. Koudelka demonstrates that photography can be powerful and beautiful without being pretty.

In my personal library are [Exiles](#), and [Gypsies](#), both of which I highly recommend.

Further Study

Here are a few resources to follow up on as you have time:

- [A Beautiful Anarchy, When The Life Creative Becomes The Life Created](#). Within these pages is everything I know about living a creative life. Available in PDF or a paperback.
- [The War of Art](#). A true favourite from Steven Pressfield. It's a classic that's worth reading once a year, as I continue to do myself.
- [Art & Fear: Observations On the Perils \(and Rewards\) of Artmaking](#). An excellent read if you're fighting the fear that almost always accompanies breakthroughs in creative endeavours.

Final Comments

We're in the homestretch; only two weeks left. As always, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#). And if you're looking for previous weeks of The Vision Collective, [you can find the entire archive here](#).

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin