

## The Essential Landscape Dealing with the Doldrums and Other Thoughts on Creativity

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**We all know the feeling** – we reach a point in time when nothing seems to work. We walk aimlessly, even in the most inspiring of places, and can't find anything to photograph. We come home with few images, if any, and realize there's not one "keeper" among them. Frustration gives way to doubt and despair as we spiral down, questioning our value as photographers, our creativity, our skill, even our self-worth as individuals.

Sounds familiar? If so – you are not alone. Without exception every single artist I know (photographers, painters, musicians, and many others) has experienced these same feelings. In fact most experience them with some regularity – a *creative cycle*, if you will.

Different people deal with their creative slumps in different ways and alas I am not here to offer a silver bullet. I do see value in these periods, however, which makes them not only tolerable but downright necessary for my creative growth. It is this value that I hope to share. In essence it comes down to one thing – *reflection*.

Two enemies to watch out for during these dry spells are *denial* and *defeat*. Those in denial may blame their predicament on not having the right gear, or on being plagued by bad luck, while those who accept defeat may forego creative arts altogether. Both will lead you down the path to futility. These periods should not be spent dwelling on failure or attempting to justify it. This is a time to look ahead, to re-examine goals, to experiment, to learn new skills, and to recharge your creative energies. Don't waste time trying to find the next keeper. Instead – take the time to make sure you are prepared when the next keeper finds *you*.

The first step to recovery is to acknowledge that the situation is temporary. Many try to force themselves to go out and make images, even uninspired ones. Others try to leave their cameras behind so as not to feel pressured to make images. Either approach may be equally valid but ultimately creative slumps are like the common cold – they last a week if properly treated, or seven days if not.

Garrison Keillor (writer) and Ansel Adams (photographer) are both considered prolific and skilled artists in their respective fields. Keillor once said that he never gets Writer's Block, just like dentists don't get Dentist's Block. This might seem to counter the edict that all artists go through "slow" periods, however Keillor was talking about writing for a living, as opposed to writing *The Great American Novel*. In this sense his comment could be analogous to a stock photographer who photographs for a living. Any stock photographer worth his or her salt must consistently produce large amount of high-quality work. For the most part these are images made to sell and are guided by market demand (buyers' wish lists, standard usage guidelines, ubiquitous subject matter, etc.), which is very different from the more personal creative art many of us associate with our own work.

Ansel Adams is quoted saying that *twelve significant images in any one year is a good crop*. Note the operative word being **significant**. Adams produced hundreds of images in a given year – images made to earn a living, not images that he necessarily considered creatively significant.



Individualism and personal drive – the thoughts, ideas, and emotions that make you unique are the driving force behind creativity. With that in mind, you stand a good chance of awakening your creative energies by re-affirming your personal motives - what kind of images do *you* want to create? While there is much to be learned from those one holds in high esteem, always keep in mind your

own inner voice and the reasons that make you want to create art. Be sure to define your motives for yourself. Saying that you want to photograph like Adams or compose like Mozart is not the same as saying you want to be Adams or Mozart. Learn from their teachings and follow your own calling.

*Writer's block is what you get if you're trying to be Faulkner. You sit and stare at the wall and nothing will come. Once you come to your senses and accept who you are, then there's no problem. I'm not Faulkner. – Garrison Keillor*

So, what is one to do during these long hours, days, weeks, and months, when the creative well seems to have dried up? Once you come to accept the situation as temporary, a number of options present themselves. Treat this time as an opportunity – the slowing down of one activity leaves more room for others. One exercise I find particularly helpful is to revisit and re-affirm my personal reasons for practicing my craft. Photography can be a meaningful endeavor in so many ways – from pure fascination with the technical aspects and all the way to communicating emotions, ideas, or even political messages. Where do you fall on this scale? What do you derive the most pleasure from? Is it time spent in the field? Is it the urge to capture and keep what inspires you? Is it the response your images garner from significant others or from complete strangers? Is it seeing your name in print? Is it being able to relive the moment? Is it the ability to master a complex set of tools and processes? Any/all of the above?

Surprisingly few people take the time to verbalize their motives and fewer still can do so without identifying gaps, conflicts and imperfections when applying these to their “real life”. When the momentum of going-through-the-moves all of a sudden breaks, consider yourself at a crossroads. This is the time to decide on the next turn, to evaluate which way will get you closer to what you were hoping to achieve, and perhaps even to go back and correct past mistakes. Revisit your portfolio to date and ask yourself “where do I go from here?” Did these past efforts achieve the effect you intended for them? Is there a particular skill you’re lacking and could benefit from learning?

Other ways to invigorate creativity may involve expanding your repertoire - go to your local library or book store and page through art books. These may be other works of nature photography you have not been exposed to before, other avenues of photography besides nature, painting or other visual arts etc. Earmark the ones that touch you and see if you can apply new vision in your own work.

Obviously you may choose to focus your attention on other things altogether – personal issues that may weigh on your mind, career goals, other hobbies and interests?

Many refer to the *Creative Muscle* as something that requires training and exercise to grow and perform. By the same token – any muscle needs periods of rest and nourishment to rejuvenate before being ready for its next challenge. Accept it as a good thing – with proper care and feeding you may be surprised to realize your new-found strength the next time you try to flex it.

Regardless of the metaphor – the worst thing you can do is be hard on yourself in times when you are down. You are not a machine – you are a complex being and though you may not always understand the reasons – your creative performance will always have ups and downs. Remember there is no such thing as *Creativity on Demand*. There is little use in trying to chase after it. Trust that when the moment is right – the next great image will be just a click away.

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