



Finding Inspiration

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I learned... that inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes into us slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must regularly and every day give it a little chance to start flowing, prime it with a little solitude and idleness. - Brenda Ueland

Introduction

How do you find inspiration? This question, which may seem benign at first, is important because inspiration is at the origin of any work of art. As we will see in this essay, and later in the following 3 essays, inspiration is the spark that motivates an artist to create new work. It is the spark that, in turn, will lead this artist to formulate a vision for his work, a vision that will eventually define his personal style.

When I started writing about inspiration about 5 months ago, I believed that inspiration encompassed the entire creative process. However as I reflected further upon the subject of inspiration, I realized that inspiration is only one aspect of the creative process and that this process includes other equally important aspects. Furthermore, I realized that the different aspects of the creative process are all interconnected and that each part of the process depends on the other parts to work.

At the time of this writing, I have defined 4 parts to the creative process. These parts are as follows: inspiration, creativity, vision and personal style. I have decided to devote one essay to each of these four parts. In these four essays, I will be exploring what each of these four parts consists of and how they interact with each other. The essay you are currently reading, *Finding Inspiration*, is the first of them. It focuses on the first part of this process: inspiration.

This series is intended to work as a whole with each essay being a different part of a single metaphorical machine. I like to call this "machine" for simplicity's sake, the artistic process.

The Difference Between Inspiration, Creativity And Vision

Inspiration lights the spark of creativity. Together, if well integrated, they result in a personal vision for our work. In turn, Personal Style allows us to express our vision in a unique manner. - Alain Briot

As I just mentioned, when I started reflecting and writing about inspiration and all that it entails, I thought that I was addressing only the act of being inspired. However, as I reflected further upon the subject, I realized that I was also writing about the act of being creative, about the discovery of a personal vision, and eventually about the development of a personal style.

Why make things more complicated you may ask? Why not keep things under one name –inspiration—and write about all of this at once? Because breaking the subject into 4 parts is really the only way to make this subject easier to understand. Separating what is usually considered a single subject into four parts allows me to study this subject in greater detail than has been done so far. In turn, this approach allows me to gain better insights upon the artistic process and upon how each part of this process dovetails into the other parts. In the end, I believe that this is the only way to truly address this important subject with the depth of thinking that it requires.

At this point, I think it is best to start by explaining the differences between inspiration, creativity, vision, and personal style:

A - One Can Be Inspired Without Being Creative. In other words, one can find a wonderful source of inspiration and be motivated to create art without knowing how to physically translate the ideas generated by this inspiration into a work of art. In photography, one can be inspired by a beautiful landscape, or a stunning sunset, without seeing a specific

composition and without feeling the urge to create a specific image from this landscape. For example, one can stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon and be inspired to create artwork that expresses one's personal experience of the Grand Canyon. This inspiration may stem from the personal experience of admiring the beauty of Grand Canyon, or it may also come from the realization that none of the artwork currently for sale at Grand Canyon expresses in a satisfying manner what it feels like to be there. In this situation, the artist feels inspired to go beyond what other artists have previously created. However for this to happen, the artist needs to transform inspiration into images, a process that takes place through creativity.

B- One Can Be Extremely Creative Without Being Particularly Inspired. This is often the case when first trying new equipment. For example, I can think of many times when a new camera or new equipment made me feel very creative and motivated me to try all sorts of things, without the outcome being particularly inspired. The images resulting from this creative urge were different and new to me. However, my inspiration was derived from the new equipment and not from a personal desire to fulfill a previous idea. In other words, my inspiration did not come from the subject that I normally photograph, in my case the natural landscape. My inspiration came solely from the equipment I just acquired. Also, this equipment being new to me, I did not have time to develop the necessary craftsmanship required to create fine art quality images.

C- One Can Be Inspired And Creative Without Fulfilling A Personal Vision. One can be inspired and have an idea, be very creative in making this idea into a work of art, and have developed the required level of craftsmanship, without the outcome of one's efforts being motivated by the desire to follow a vision for one's entire body of work. Vision is an overriding envelope that encompasses both inspiration and creativity. It is a blanket that covers the entire artist's work - a blanket that often comes later in the life of an artist, after one has perfected one's art and moved beyond the commonplace outcome that most artists have to go through. For this reason, I placed vision as the third step of this process. I placed it there not because it comes necessarily at the end of the process, but because in life it is often something that artists discover later on.

D- Finally, One Can Have A Personal Vision Without Having Yet Developed A Personal Style. One can have vision without having found a style through which this vision will be effectively expressed. Without a style, a vision remains an unfulfilled dream. Without a style, vision remains just that: vision. It remains something that is seen by the artist but which has not taken a physical reality yet. Without a style, vision remains something that exists only in the artist's mind. Vision cannot be effectively expressed through a commonplace style, a mundane style we may say, or a style used by many other artists. When vision is expressed through a commonplace style, this vision does not have the ability to impact the viewer in a meaningful way. This vision does not have a chance to stand out as being different and unique. Rather, this vision blends with the general artistic landscape and becomes relatively unnoticeable. It becomes akin to *déjà vu*, to a vision that has already been seen and a style that has already been done. To truly stand out, to truly be noticed, to truly become meaningful to an audience, a personal vision needs to be expressed through a personal style. To be effective, this personal style must be new to the audience. To be new to the audience, this style needs to have been created by the artist.



Playa Reflections, Death Valley National Park

Example One - Location As A Source Of Inspiration

During a visit to Death Valley in 2006, I felt inspired to represent this location in a way that I had not thought of before. Until then, I saw Death Valley as a place primarily dry and inhospitable. The presence of water on the playa –the dry lakebed that is at the heart of Death Valley - and the presence of clouds, were instrumental in bringing about this change in my perception of this location.

After working the scene for over an hour, I found that the composition which most effectively expressed my inspiration was one in which clouds and reflections shared the space evenly, a composition in which land and sky were a reflection of each other. As I worked the scene, I kept thinking of the poem of Robert Frost, *The Path less Traveled*. In a way, this poem was the inspiration for this image as much as the clouds and their reflections. While the image is not a direct visual metaphor for the poem, in the sense that it shows only one stream of water and not two diverging ones, it does represent a departure from my previous work, a step towards an artistic path onto which I had not previously traveled.

The Muses

Having completed this description of the creative process as I see it, let us now look at the first part of this process in detail: inspiration. I believe it is important to start with a discussion of the Muses, who are the classical reference to inspiration in Western culture. The original concept of the Muses is found in Greek mythology. In ancient Greece, the Muses were the daughters of Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, and of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. The word Muses itself is derived from the Greek *mousai* from which the word *mind* is derived. The root of the word Muses has a direct connection to the human mind and to the activity of the mind.

There were 3 original muses: *Aiode*, the muse of singing, *Mneme*, the muse of memory, and *Melete*, the muse of practice. The choice of these three muses shows that the Greeks placed emphasis on medium, memory and practice. Those were

the three important categories. If we replace singing by another medium, say photography, the two other Muses, or emphasis, remain the same: memory and practice. In other words, one must know his medium, must remember the knowledge he previously acquired, and must practice regularly. The combination of these three areas will guarantee success in the arts.

In later times, the three original muses became nine, each of them being associated with a particular art. The emphasis shifted from medium, memory and practice, which as I pointed out can be considered a system for success in the arts, towards the choice of a specific medium. The original connection of the muses with practice disappeared and was replaced by the connection with a specific art form: Calliope was the chief of the muses and the muse of epic songs, Euterpe was the muse of lyric songs, Clio was the muse of history, Erato was the muse of erotic poetry, Melpomene the muse of tragedy, Polyhminia the muse of sacred songs, Terpsichore the muse of dance, Thalia the muse of comedy and poetry and Urania the muse of astronomy.

Each artist or scientist sought guidance, help, and inspiration from the muse most closely associated with his medium. I believe that if the Muses had continued to be used as metaphorical representation for inspiration in Western Culture, other mediums would have been added to the list, and new muses would have been chosen to impersonate them.

This description of the Muses, and the change from approaching the arts from the perspective of a system designed to insure success to approaching the arts as separate mediums, teaches us an important lesson. This lesson is that, after this change, the arts were approached as medium rather than as profession. One chose a medium, and this choice was the most important. Previously in Ancient Greece, one chose not so much a medium as a systematic approach designed to guarantee success in the profession of artist. After this change, being an artist stopped being a profession and became the exercise of a particular skill.

What I propose in this series of essays and in my teaching approach in general, is a return to approaching the arts as a system designed to guarantee success in a profession rather than approaching the arts as simply the choice of a specific medium. Applied to photography, this means that the choice of doing photography is not the only choice one needs to make in regards to guaranteeing success as an artist. Certainly, choosing a medium is a meaningful and important choice. However, the most important and the most meaningful choice is the choice of approaching this medium as a profession, or if it is a hobby, of approaching it as a serious endeavor that requires training, practice, personal involvement and accountability.

A Lifestyle

I am ruthless about my own pictures or they would never get as good as they tend to. There's very little that's automatic about it. It's mostly just a ton of learning and dedication and work, but built around an idea and a vision and when the pictures look really right, they make me happy. - Joseph Holmes

The Greeks believed that the muses visit you and that they do so whenever they please. In a way they believed that you are not fully in control of inspiration. Instead, the Muses are, because it is their visit that brings you inspiration. What you are in control of is your openness to taking advantage of the inspiration brought by the muses when they visit you. You must be able to make room so that you are available when these visits occur.

Today, few people believe in the Muses being the source of inspiration. In turn, you may or may not believe in the muses. This doesn't matter all that much because the fact remains that inspiration is unpredictable. You cannot pinpoint when or where it will happen. All you can do is be ready when it happens.

Some may say that they do not have time for inspiration. The fact is that when someone says, "I don't have the time," what they are really saying is "This is not one of my priorities." If something is not one of your priorities, you will not make room for it in your life, and as a result you won't have time for it. It is simply not part of your life. You don't need it, won't have it, and couldn't care less about it.

However as an artist you do need inspiration. You have to make room for it in your life, which means that you must make it one of your priorities, even though it may not be the most important priority. You simply cannot leave inspiration out of your life entirely.

This may imply, at the least, allowing space for inspiration in your life, and it may imply, at the most, a lifestyle change.

How you live your life - your lifestyle - is something that you have control over. Your lifestyle can be conducive to welcoming inspiration, or it can be conducive to pushing inspiration away. In other words, you can make room for inspiration in your life or you can close that space and have no opportunities for inspiration to visit and no time for inspiration when it does visit you.

I understand that creating a lifestyle conducive to inspiration can be difficult. Indeed, our lives are full of duties, responsibilities, and demands placed on our time. Our time itself has become our most valuable commodity, and we never seem to have enough of it. Furthermore, no matter who we are, we all have 24 hours in a day and not a second more.

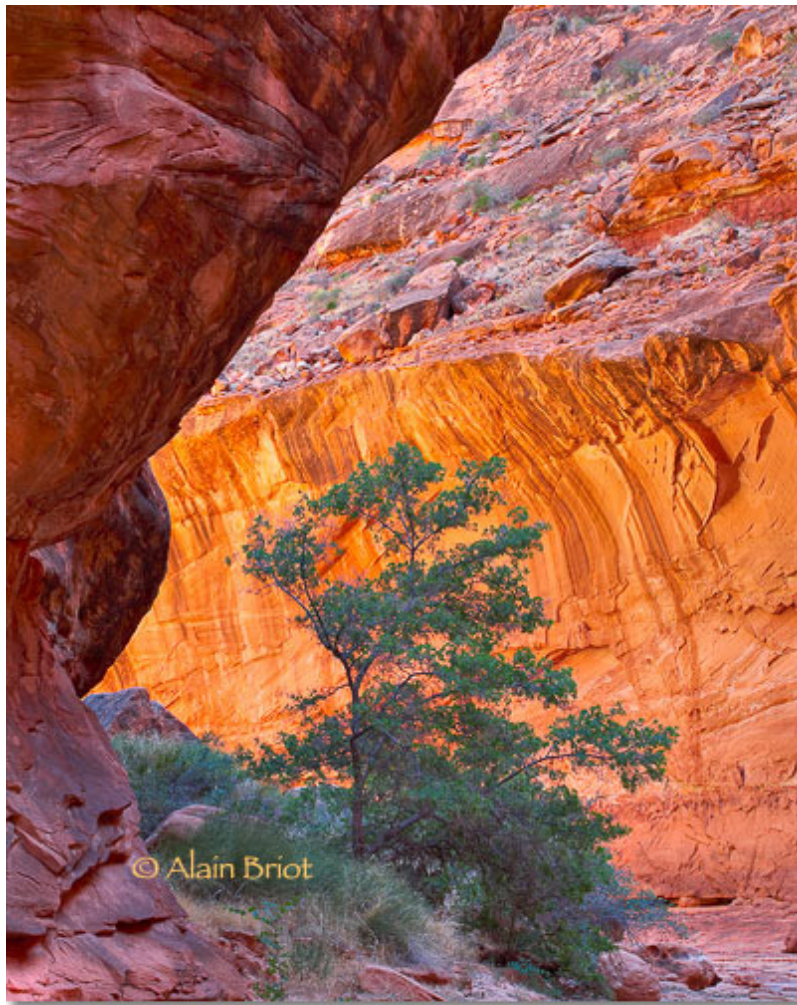
So how do you do it? How do you make room for inspiration when you barely have enough time to do all that you had to do before reading this essay? Simple: prioritize.

The question then becomes: how important is inspiration to you? Where does it fit on your priorities list? Clearly, I cannot answer this question for you because the answer to this question is personal. However, I can answer it for myself. My answer is that inspiration is very high on my priorities list. I won't give you a detailed list of my priorities, because doing so is beyond the scope of this essay, but I can say that it is definitely among the top 5, and possibly among the top 3. Why? Because inspiration is what allows me to do what I do. Inspiration is what allows me to remain creative, to continue searching for new answers to age-old questions. It keeps me in motion. It keeps my mind active. Above all, it keeps me curious and eager to discover new ideas. Finally, inspiration is the metaphorical key that opens the door to vision. Therefore, having a substantial place for this "key" to develop and grow is crucially important.

So how do I do it, how do I implement inspiration in my life? For me inspiration is a lifestyle. I find inspiration in the way I live, in the décor of my home, the landscaping of my garden, the cars I drive, the clothes I wear, the artwork I surround myself with, the people I socialize with, the places I visit, the books I read and much more. Inspiration is a way of life, a way of being, and a way of existing. In a sense, it is somewhat close to existentialism. I like to be in a beautiful setting, doing pleasurable activities, and always with the presence of art in one form or another.

I found a long time ago that it is while doing activities very different from photography that the muses visit me the most frequently. I engage regularly in activities that have nothing to do with photography, and yet activities that are related to photography in the sense that conducting these activities relaxes my mind so that it becomes open to ideas for new images.

For others, inspiration occurs when taking time off, or when visiting places away from home. For some, visiting a place that is special to them or a place they have never been, or again a place they always wanted to go, is a way to invite inspiration in their lives. For yet others, meeting other professionals, attending a workshop, or going to a seminar, opens the door onto new ways of seeing and onto new inspiration.



Canyons of the San Juan

Example 2: Remoteness As A Source Of Inspiration

The location where I created Playa Reflections, my previous example, can be reached by parking along the road and walking less than a mile. By comparison, the side canyon of the San Juan River featured in this second example requires a multi-day hike or a multi-day river trip to be visited. It is one of the most remote locations on the Colorado Plateau of Southern Utah.

Sometimes remoteness is a source of inspiration. The fact that a place is rarely if ever visited, means that images of this location are either few or non-existent. As a result, it is possible to approach these places free of pre-conceptions, our mind unencumbered by images from other photographers, images that visually described the place to us before we ever saw it with our own eyes.

The outcome is images inspired by a direct experience of the place rather than by the work of other artists, images that represent a personal vision of these locations.

New Equipment, Supplies And Software

Just as appetite comes by eating, so work brings inspiration, if inspiration is not discernible at the beginning. - Igor Stravinsky

Inspiration is also brought about by the acquisition and ownership of new equipment. This can be a new camera, a new printer, a new computer, a new piece of software or any other new tool that we use in creating our images. This is not limited to hardware. It extends into software and supplies: a new version of Photoshop (or other software) with added features that have to be explored in order to discover what they can do and how they can allow us to reach a new level of image quality is extremely inspirational because it offers the promise of opening new doors, or of providing a solution to

age-old problems. Similarly, new supplies such as a new type of paper, or a new type of mat board, to name but a few, also offer the promise of an enhanced image or presentation quality.

With a new piece of equipment, new software or new supplies, the artist sees more than the physical objects in front of him. The artist also sees the possibilities offered by these objects. In turn, these possibilities become the source of new inspiration.

With new equipment comes the promise of new doors to open, and with this promise the spark of energy that motivates us to create is brought back to the forefront. In a way, to remain creative we need new tools, new supplies and new software. As they say: out with the old and in with the new. We are blessed to live in a world in which our tools are constantly being improved, our supplies are constantly getting better and our software is constantly offering new options and more effective solutions. We need to take advantage of them, not only for what they can effectively do, be it offer higher resolution images, or a better print quality, or enhanced optimization options, but also for what they inspire us to do.

The only thing to watch out for in regards to equipment becoming the source of creativity, is to make sure that this creativity is placed at the service of a personal idea or vision. As I mentioned in section 2 of this essay, it is easy to be inspired by new equipment solely because of what this equipment can do. While this may be fun, it will not work towards completing the creative process as a whole and working towards achieving a personal style. To work towards achieving a personal style, one needs to use this new equipment to further one's vision by pushing the technical envelope to achieve one's creative goals better than was previously possible.



Totem Pole, Monument Valley

Example 3: Mood As A Source Of Inspiration

I had visited this location several times prior to creating this image. However, each time the light was flat, the sky cloudless and I did not feel inspired to create a photograph.

This particular time, things were vastly different. A sandstorm was blowing through the valley and storm clouds were moving rapidly in the sky. When I arrived at the spot where I took this photograph, the light had taken a soft and almost golden quality, a consequence of the clouds acting as a giant diffuser for the sunlight and of the red sand flying in the air giving a warm color to the light.

Because I knew this location well, I was immediately able to recognize the uniqueness of this lighting situation. I also knew that it would not last long. The minute the clouds cleared up, or the minute the sand stopped blowing, this unique light would be gone.

I immediately set to work, inspired by the light, the cloud formations and the constantly changing patterns of light and shade that were cast on the sandstone spires in the distance. Because I did not have much time to narrow down the exact final composition, I created images using several lenses, slightly varying how much of the landscape I was including in each image. I also created images with different clouds and shadow patterns. Later, in my studio, I selected the image above from all the ones I created that day because it best expressed how the scene felt to me when I experienced it.

Become The Expert In The Work Of Artist Whose Style Is Comparable To Yours.

Without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind. - Johannes Brahms

Sometimes, finding inspiration in the work of another photographer is intentional, in the sense that you are looking at books, visiting exhibitions, or again browsing online with the purpose of seeing new work and finding fresh ideas.

However there is a second situation, one that is just as important to know about. This situation occurs when you discover, or when someone else points out to you, that unknown to you, your work closely resembles the work of another artist. This may be an artist that you are aware of, or it may be an artist that you have never heard about.

At any rate, this situation presents itself frequently, especially if you are just starting in photography (or in any art for that matter) because at such time you are less likely to be familiar with all the artists that have worked in the same medium and have addressed the same subjects in the same stylistic approach as yours. It also occurs because originality is something difficult to come by at the beginning of a career, and this regardless of age. Finally, it happens because all work with the same types of subject.

What do you do if and when that happens? Simple: you become an expert in that artist's work. You become an expert in their work so that not only are you familiar with their work, you know more than most people about their work. You study and master the techniques that this other artist used. You understand where their inspiration came from and how their vision evolved throughout their career. You find out how far they have gone in the specific style they chose and with the specific subject they worked with.

Finally, when all this is done – and it may take years to do all of this—you try to go further than they have. You pick up where they left off and you go beyond what they have achieved. This may or may not be possible. Some artists leave room for others and some artists push the boundaries of their approach so far that their work is an end in itself, a final statement in a way, a total exploration of a particular artistic possibility. If it turns out that you cannot exceed their achievements, that the road they started has come to an end, it will then be time to reassess what to do next. However, you will not know this until you familiarize yourself with their work, their technique, and the source of their inspiration.

External And Internal Inspiration

In study, theory or practice, knowledge is undoubtedly the keynote to individual thought and originality in painting - Edgar Payne

For many years, I found immense inspiration in the work of other photographers whose work I admired and wanted to emulate. I was inspired by their images and I sought to find the source of their inspiration. I wanted to find out how they translated this inspiration into a powerful vision and personal style.

At that time, I thought that inspiration was solely something external to me. I thought it was something I could go out and find. I believed that once I found it everything else would progress from there.

In a way, I was right. However, my understanding was incomplete. On one level, inspiration is something external, at least at first. Inspiration is a spark that lights up when we are confronted with something truly inspirational, something that makes us look at the world in a new way, something that opens a window onto a new landscape, one that we had never imagined before.

However, back then I did not realize that there is a second level of inspiration. This second level of inspiration is our own work, the work we create following the spark of inspiration I just described. At that time, when new work is being created, this work in turns becomes the source of inspiration, of new ideas. This work starts to generate ideas for more work. It

becomes the motivation for going further into a specific direction and for continuing to explore a specific subject.

I vividly remember the day that I found my work more inspiring than the work of the masters that had so far guided my steps. It came as a shock and at first it felt sacrilegious. But the feeling persisted and revealed it to be a lasting fact rather than a passing impression.

As time went by and as my work progressed, I became more and more inspired by my work and less and less inspired by other photographers' work. Today, I continue to find inspiration in the work of artists but as time goes by this inspiration increasingly comes from artistic mediums other than photography. I find inspiration in writing, painting, music, architecture, and in the design of functional and beautiful objects, be it cars, ceramics, tableware, light fixtures or a multitude of other things. I love to discover objects that demonstrate a seamless relationship between form and function. In turn, I like to collect and own such superb examples of artistic design to which practicality and art have been given equal attention.

Inspiration Is Asking Why, Not How

Of course, there will always be those who look only at technique, who ask "How," while others of a more curious nature will ask "Why." Personally, I have always preferred inspiration to information. - Man Ray

Inspiration comes out of a personal curiosity accompanied by being able to afford to wait for the answers to come to you. Asking why something is done, why something happens, or again, why something is the way it is. It is very different from asking how something is done, how something works, or how something came to be.

The answers we receive are closely related to the questions we ask. In a sense, the question contains the answer. If you ask, "Why am I fat?" and if you are indeed overweight, you will find many answers as to why this is the case. On the other hand, if you ask, "How can I lose weight?" and if you do indeed need to lose weight, you will get answers pointing to how you can regain a svelte figure. The first question leads to finding the cause of the problem. The second question leads to finding solutions to the problem.

Once you are aware of the power of questions, it becomes easier to find out which question is best to ask in order to find the specific answers you are looking for. In the example above all you have to do is ask yourself, "Do I want to find out why I am overweight or do I want to find out how to lose weight?" The answer to this question immediately tells you which question you need to ask yourself.

The same is true in photography. Asking "how" leads to answers that point to technique, to a series of steps, or to an itemized list of operations. Asking "how" is asking to learn how to do what someone else knows how to do. It is asking to learn the technical knowledge required to achieve a specific result. How do you do this? How can I achieve this result? How does this software, camera, or other tools work? The person who asks how usually has an end product in mind and usually a very specific idea of what this end product is going to be.

Asking "why" on the other hand, leads to answers that have to do with motivation instead of technique. Asking "why" leads to answers that are about the reasons why people do what they do. Asking "why" points to what inspires people, because inspiration is the motivating force behind any creative endeavor. Why is this artist painting only people dressed in black? Why is this photographer so in love with color? Why not use a more subdued palette? Why not work in black and white? The answers to these questions, when asked about a specific artist and a specific body of work, immediately generate answers that address where this artist's inspiration comes from. They lead to answers that have to do with what inspires this artist.



Antelope Swirls

Example 4: Regular Visits To Favorite Places As Inspiration

I regularly visit the same places over and over again. I do so because I do not tire of visiting these places and because I continue to find new inspiration in these locations.

This approach works for me because these places hold special meaning. These are places that I continue to see in a new light each time I visit. These are places that are both complex and challenging to capture in photographs, and each new visit gives me a better understanding of how to approach these challenges. Finally, some of these locations are photographed extensively, and creating new images there is difficult because so many images of these locations exist already. By becoming intimately familiar with these places, I can move away from superficial images and create images that represent a personal vision.

One cannot see the entire scope of a location in one visit. One can only see certain aspects of it. Furthermore, there is renewed inspiration associated with visiting a favorite place over and over again, just like there is renewed inspiration associated with listening to a favorite musical piece over and over again, or admiring a favorite painting or artwork regularly, or reading a book several times. Repetition brings a deeper understanding of a specific location or artwork. One develops a personal relationship with it, a relationship that becomes more intimate as time goes by. While it is possible to create original art after a single visit to a location, I often find that it is after several visits that I am best able to distance myself from the representations I previously saw until I can start creating my own images.

Memories Of What I Have Seen And Experienced

The real voyage of discovery consists of not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes. - Marcel Proust

Our mind stores an amazing amount of memories. These memories are not just about facts and events. They are also about the feelings and the emotions our mind recorded at the time specific events took place. These memories are about sounds and scents, about how specific objects feel to the touch, and about the feelings we experienced when the original events we personally experienced occurred.

In *The Bourne Identity*, Jason Bourne, played by Matt Damon, suffers from amnesia and seeks to find his identity. A trained secret agent, his skills automatically reaffirm themselves whenever the situation calls for them. The problem is that he has no control about how this happens.

Although it is unlikely that any of us will find ourselves in Jason Bourne's situation, I believe that our mind does retain

memories unknown to us and that these memories are brought back when specific situations occur. I also believe that many of us have far more skills than we make use of, and that some of these skills are hidden away in our mind, waiting to resurface. When it comes to art, many of these skills were acquired when we were children or adolescents, and then buried under new obligations as we engaged in various activities later in life.

Within these memories is stored priceless information about how we see the world and, indirectly, about how we can represent the world in photographic images. The further back we go into these memories, the closer we get to our initial memories of things we have seen and experienced: our first snowstorm, our first walk into a forest, our first glimpse of a desert landscape, our first sight of towering sandstone cliffs, our first hike into a canyon, our first experience of spring, just to name but a few. Within these memories are countless pieces of information recorded with the vividness of a first experience. If we can tap into these memories we will have access to valuable data about how to represent similar events that we photographed more recently.

How the mind records information is, to me, both a surprise and a revelation. A surprise because, for me, what triggers a specific memory is rarely, if ever, the event itself. Rather, it is almost always an object or an event associated with the memory I seek to recall.

For example, I vividly remember wearing a new leather jacket for the first time one early spring day when I was about 9 years old. Today, when I think of this jacket I experience the feeling of that spring day all over again. However, if I try to remember the spring day alone, nothing comes to me. I have to go back to the jacket laying on my bed, and me picking it up and putting it on, in front of the open French-window which swung outwards towards the yard with the cherry trees in bloom, to experience again the warming weather of spring, the birds singing in the trees, the new grass emerging from the darkness of winter, the strollers pushed by young mothers, my friends playing outside, and me eager to wear this new jacket hoping they would notice.

In these memories, I find inspiration for the photographs I create today. My memories go back nearly 40 years. Yet they are as fresh as if the events they recall occurred yesterday.

The question is, how do you recall these memories?

Tough call, I am tempted to say. Yet it is entirely possible, once you find the key to open the door behind which these memories are waiting to be brought back to life, metaphorically speaking.

For me, these key are objects that somehow bring me back to a time past. Which objects brings which memory is not possible to determine *a priori* because it varies greatly. However there are some general rules. Let me try and enumerate some of them, as they come to me.

I have found that objects that are somehow related to my childhood are most efficient in this endeavor. At first I thought I had to have are the exact same objects I owned and used in my childhood. However, this has proven not to be necessary. When I hold an object from times past, I often find out that while memories come flooding back they come to me unsorted, so to speak, with both good and bad memories rushing in at once. I have also found that some of these memories block the way to others, making me think of certain things that I would rather not remember.

What I've found to work much better is to use new objects, or new experiences that somehow trigger a positive memory of things past. In other words, and perhaps to follow Marcel Proust's approach, I use pleasant experiences to bring back memories of things past. I do, as an aside, love Proust's writings, though I am usually unable to read more than short passages at any given time. I found that his books are best approached the way leftover cake is approached, by eating the most appetizing piece first and seeing what happens next. Sometimes, just a bite is enough. Sometimes, more is necessary.

For example the leather seats in my car remind me of the leather jacket I wore on that spring morning I described a few moments ago. The car itself, being of European make, is far more efficient at generating memories of things past than an American car, simply because I grew up in Europe and rode in European cars when I was little. Certainly, today's European cars are different from the cars I rode in when I was 9, but the "make" of the car, the layout of the controls, the way the vehicle "feels" has not changed, or at least has not changed in certain cars. Those are the ones I seek.

I can go on and on, but to keep this to a reasonable length let me say that I delve into these memories the way a starved

man goes after food when it comes to finding inspiration. You may say that I live in the past. Nothing could be further from the truth. I live today, right now. I live as I type these words. But I know that my most powerful memories, when it comes to inspiration, lay in the past, in my memories of things that happened to me for the first time. These memories, at least the memories I seek to remember, are about feelings and emotions.

Skill Exercises: How To Bring Out Creativity, How To Invite The Muses

Genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration. - Thomas A. Edison

A- Take Time Off For Inspiration. During that time, ask yourself where your inspiration comes from. Try to pinpoint previous times when you felt inspired to create. Work towards remembering exactly when that happened, where you were at that time, and which other memories are attached to this event. Try to relive these events in order to recapture the source of your inspiration.

Did you act upon the inspiration you received back then? Did you create new photographs that expressed this inspiration? If not, do you intend to create such photographs in the future? If you did, were these photographs successful in sharing your inspiration with your audience? If not, what else could you do to bring these images closer to your inspiration?

B- Listen To The Landscape. Visit your favorite photographic location or go to a location that you have always wanted to visit. While there, relax and take your time. Don't rush and photograph right away. "Listen" to the place, meaning, listen to what it is telling you from an emotional and sensory perspective. Nature talks in its own ways, through the moods it evokes, the memories it brings back, the ideas it generates. Inspiration is, in part, the desire to express through your work what nature is telling you. You may or may not photograph that day, but if you listen carefully you may come back inspired and you may return with new ideas for your work.

C- Listen To Your Favorite Music. Music conveys feelings and emotions in a very different way than photography or the visual arts do. By listening to music, you are opening yourself to new emotions, new ideas, and a new perception of the world. Music is a way to open your mind to ideas and to welcome inspiration.

Music is also relaxing and will help you take your mind away from your current preoccupations. Listen to nothing else but the music. Put all other thoughts out of your mind. Focus on the notes, on the rhythm, on the melody. Try to isolate each instrument, each note, try to understand what the composer, or the musicians are trying to say through their music. What message do they want to share? What is this musical piece about? What emotions does it convey? Is there something in it that inspires you to create a photograph?

D- Try New Mediums You Have Not Tried Before. Try mediums that are not visual art mediums or that are not two dimensional visual art mediums. Try making a sculpture or playing a musical instrument, for example. Do it for the fun of it and see what happens when you work with these mediums. Don't worry about the result or about making mistakes. Just let yourself be inspired by the possibilities offered by the medium you chose to explore.

E- Work With Other Artists And Learn From Them Watch how other artists do what they do and how they think. How different is their approach to yours? What is it that they do that you could do too? What inspires you in their work and in their approach? What could you borrow from their approach and use effectively in your own work?

F- Describe The Kind Of Photographs You Have Always Wanted To Create Do not describe the photographs you are currently creating, instead describe the photographs you have always wanted to create but haven't created so far. Compare these to the photographs you are currently creating. What are the differences? Make a list of these differences. What do you need to do, or change to make your current work into this ideal work that you have always wanted to create? What inspires you in the work you would like to create but which so far exists only in your mind?

Conclusion

Inspiration is an awakening, a quickening of all man's faculties, and it is manifested in all high artistic achievements. - Giacomo Puccini

Finding inspiration is an engaging subject. As we just saw, there are many ways to find inspiration. Yet there is one way that I have not discussed and that is where your own internal inspiration, your "secret flame" so to speak, resides.

This flame, this spark of energy, this initial internal combustion burst, resides within you. It has been there for a long time, most likely since the day you were born, and it is for you to discover if you do not know about it yet.

In this regard, I cannot speak for anyone except myself. But for me, this internal source of energy lies in my childhood that was spent in the company of artists in Paris. I was born in the 14th Arrondissement of Paris, where at the time, many artists lived because rent was affordable and the area was conducive to the arts with places to meet and nearby galleries. My parents visited small cafes on their leisure time, where artists met and socialized, and on one such occasion Salvadore Dali made a sketch of me as a baby. I have no recollection of it, just like I have no recollections of anything that happened to me before the age of five. My mother passed on this story to me and I have always found it to be enlightening.

Similarly, I grew up among circus performers because my mother was a trapeze artist. I was, in a way, part of show business, because the circus is a performance art, one in which the artists are only as good as their last show and one in which one can either shine or kill oneself on any given soiree. I grew up with memorabilia of my mother's days as a solo trapeze artist, playing with her sequin-covered outfits and spending hours looking at photographs of her in flight as well as at Chepperfield, Bouglione, and Rancy Circus posters.

I discovered photography in Paris, first through Le Mois de la Photographie, a yearly Paris event during which, for a full month, galleries, museums and countless other locations offer one-time photography shows of artists ranging from world-famous to virtually unknown. I was motivated to study photography at the American Center in Paris where, in the early 1980's, some of the world's most prestigious photographers offered year-round workshops organized around a weekly meeting format.

This unique experience is still with me today and will remain with me forever. It shaped my life in a way that is unique to me and it represents an essential source of inspiration that I return to frequently. I cannot change any of it because I fell into it more than I chose to experience it. As the saying goes, it chose me more than I chose it. However, I wouldn't change any of it if I could because I do not see a better way to start a career in the arts.

Your inner source of inspiration is most likely very different from mine. If you do not know it I strongly recommend that you try and find it. Doing so may take some time or may be a rather simple process -- it all depends of how close you are to it. For some of us, these origins are buried under years of accumulated responsibilities and concerns that took us miles away from it. Finding back our "artistic roots" can be challenging, time consuming, or both. However, it is, in my view, an important aspect of becoming artists, of finding our true source of inspiration and of creating work that is unique to us.

How your work becomes unique is, in many ways, rooted in how you turn your inspiration into creativity. How this takes place, and how creativity works as a whole, is the subject of my next essay in this series.

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Alain Briot creates fine art photographs, teaches workshops and offers DVD tutorials on composition, printing and on marketing photographs. Alain is also the author of Mastering Landscape Photography. This book is available from

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