

## It Doesn't Take a Brain Surgeon...

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I'm not a psychologist, psychiatrist, nor am I a brain surgeon (obviously) and I don't play one on the Internet. Heck, I didn't even stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night.

But when it comes to photography and the creative process, I keenly embrace using the principles of a concept called brain function lateralization. In a nutshell, brain function lateralization refers to how the left and right hemispheres of our brains process information in vastly different ways. The right half of the brain is where we feel emotion, use our imagination, and do all of our dreaming, while the left half is where we use language, reason, and apply logic.

This idea is certainly nothing new to most of you, but learning how to utilize this knowledge can help you, as a photographer, better understand the creative process and make images that better express your experiences in the field.

It's important to understand that our conscious mind can only process information from one side of the brain at a time. We are able to switch back and forth fairly effortlessly, but it's not the most productive way for the brain to operate. So in the end, authority is delegated to one half of the brain or the other in deciding what information enters our consciousness and what doesn't. This includes visual information that is transmitted from our eyes via the optic nerve. Alas, the struggle is almost always won by our dominant left brain, while the right plays a much more passive role.

Our right brain is able to smuggle information into our awareness only when the left brain is asleep at the wheel or lulled into boredom. During these times, random emotional and visual vignettes and freely associated images wildly dance and flicker through our consciousness before the rational left brain once again regains control and restores order.

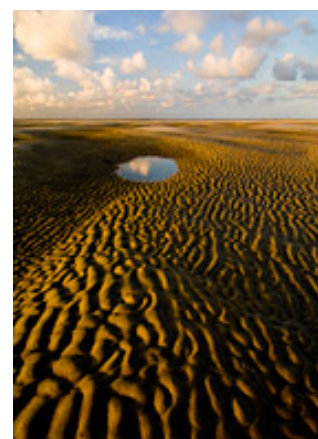
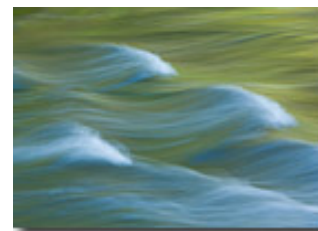
For the photographer, it's in the right half of the brain where the creative spark is kindled, making a connection to the world we see in intuitive, emotional terms. The left half is concerned with more prosaic matters such as exposure, perspective, and composition (I am convinced that composition is more of a cognitive process than an intuitive one although admittedly, I often simply defer to what *feels* right).

I believe that if your goal is to have others inspired and moved by the images you make, you must be inspired and moved by what you see in the field. If you want to evoke a strong emotional response from others with your photography, you must have a strong emotional connection to what you are photographing.

How can you expect others to be moved by your images if you were ambivalent about the scene yourself? How can you possibly expect someone to feel power, awe, tranquility, melancholy, or heartache in your images if you, an actual witness to the scene, felt nothing?

Intuition, feelings, and emotions are all hallmarks of right brain processing. We must bypass the left brain to allow the right side to extract emotional meaning from the scene or subject we are photographing. Making that emotional connection is the first step to creating those meaningful images we seek.

I try to use the following photographic approach when I'm in the field prospecting for images. In discussions I've had with other successful photographers about their approach to image creation, I have found similar processes with some variations.



When I am in the field, I often forget there is a camera with me. I am not thinking about composition, light, or any pressure to make a single image on the trip. I simply savor the experience and try to totally immerse myself in the present time and place with heightened senses and awareness. I don't look for anything in particular, nor do I expect to find anything. Instead, I am fostering a state of mind where I am completely receptive to something finding me.



The late fine-art photographer, Ruth Bernhard, once explained how she approached her craft.

"I never look for a photograph," she explained. "The photograph finds me and says, 'I'm here!' and I say, 'Yes I see you. I hear you!'"

The key is being completely receptive to your environment and passive with your thoughts. I find this to be the most effective way in allowing the right brain to temporarily gain the upper hand. The worst thing you can do is rush into the field with preconceived ideas or images in your head that you want to create. Trying to force things only reasserts the left brain's dominance and ultimately leads to photographic clichés, recycled concepts, and emotionally barren results.

When something in the field does speak to you and you are drawn to a particular scene, you don't want to immediately reach for your camera and start shooting.

Too many times, I have aborted the process at this point and started to take the photograph. As I fired away, my hands would literally shake with excitement as I imagined how amazing the images would look later on the computer screen, as a large print, or even a magazine cover. How could it not? I am feeling it!

Later, however, the only thing shaking is my head as I repeatedly ask myself, "What the heck was I thinking?" Far removed from the emotional high experienced in the field, the images failed to trigger the same response. This is exactly how other people might see these images as well. Whether they actually tell you or not, their sentiment will probably be, "I just don't get it." The right brain provided the creative, emotional spark, but something was obviously lost in the translation.

Instead of instinctively grabbing the camera, ask yourself some fundamental questions. *Why* do I want to photograph this? What is drawing me to this scene? What emotion is this scene eliciting from me and what ultimately do I want to communicate here? What elements within the scene are contributing to this emotional sensation I am feeling?

If you can verbalize some of these answers, they will be easier to act on. Language is the domain of the left brain and verbalization provides the catalyst to left-brain image execution. Remember, we cannot process information from both sides of our brain simultaneously, so this is the start of the transition.

What emotional sensation did we verbalize? Tranquility? Strength? What elements, specifically, were contributing to this emotional response? The motion of the water? The stately tree branches?

Now, what tools do we possess that emphasizes and accentuates these elements? Those tools can be found deep within your camera bag or deep in the well of your accumulated photographic knowledge and experience. Where is the focal point of the image? Do these elements lend themselves to a wide-angle composition that merges the focal point gracefully with the surrounding environment, or does a more simplified presentation communicate this better?

Well, you get the point. We are creating a concept, which is all left-brain processing.

If we remain in right-brain mode without crossing over to left-brain image execution, we are likely to create images with strong emotional content, but with little or no meaning to anyone but ourselves. Your emotional response to the scene must be conceptualized in order for others, who were never there at the scene, to "get it." I know. I've done it far too many times myself.

If we stay only in left-brain mode and never establish any emotional connection to the scene, the results will likely be technically adept, well-crafted images that are essentially emotionally sterile. Unfortunately, I've been there too.

I've always wanted to make other people feel, through my photography, the same emotional highs and lows that I experience in the outdoors. Sometimes an image succeeds using this model and sometimes it doesn't. Not every image will resonate the same way with every human being.

But ever since I began to understand how my two brain hemispheres function and then learned to coordinate the two, I've experienced more creative energy in the field while more images have hit their mark. If it can help my photography, certainly it can help yours as well. After all, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to make this work, only a brain.

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**Richard Bernabe** is a full time, professional outdoor photographer and writer since 2003 and leads photography workshops through [Mountain Trail Photography Workshops](#). Richard's photography website is [www.richardbernabe.com](http://www.richardbernabe.com).



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