



## Understanding Criticism Part 3 of 3: A Few Words On Perseverance

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*Don't be an art critic, but paint. There lies salvation.* - Paul Cezanne

### 1 – Don't give up

The purpose of parts one and two was to understand criticism and to look at effective ways of responding to it. In part three we are going to look at perseverance. Why perseverance? Because an unwanted, yet all too common consequence of criticism, is discouragement.

It takes great time and effort to create world-class photographs. When I started photography my results were far from being what they are today. In fact, my first photographs were quite disappointing even though I had great expectations for them. Until I had the film developed that is. It was then, by looking at my negatives, that I realized I had a very long way to go.

Only through regular study and constant practice was I able to achieve results that were satisfying to me. But again my satisfaction lasted only until I opened a coffee table book by some of my favorite photographers and saw how much further I had to go. For a long time doing photography was a humbling experience, one that constantly reminded me that I had to continue working hard to achieve results comparable to those of the photographers I admired.

While I am now able to create images that I am proud of, I still work extremely hard at what I do. Even though today I am able to create images that satisfy me, I do not assume that I know everything or that my way is the only way. I continue to study regularly with other photographers, and I photograph year-round because constant study and practice, and yes, perseverance, are the keys to success.

During all that time I had to deal with criticism. In fact, I still do. It never quite goes away, it just becomes something you learn to deal with. I learned to not give up, no matter how difficult the challenge might seem. I learned that when we think of quitting we usually are much closer to succeeding than we believe. Often, it is the last final push that is the hardest. If you do give this final push, you will find out that the rewards will greatly outdo the hardships you had to go through.

### 2 – Don't be paralyzed by fear

I also learned to not let fear paralyze me. This is because when fear paralyzes you it prevents you from making rational decisions.

As I reflected upon my fears, I realized the importance of understanding exactly what I was afraid of. I understood the importance of becoming an expert in fear, especially in my own fears.

When I am afraid of "X" I ask myself "what is the worst that can happen if I do X?" I then answer the question as accurately as possible and I quantify this answer. That is, I put a number on this answer, either dollars lost, or hours wasted, or any other loss or risk. In other words, I answer this question with facts, not with opinions. I look for the worst that can happen factually, not emotionally.

Then I ask myself: "Can I live with this if it happens? Will I be OK?" Very often, the worst is not to be feared. It is no big deal. Sometimes however, the worst should be avoided at all costs because it will expose you to serious risks. Knowing what is the worst that can happen if you take a specific course of action means knowing the future as far as this course of action is concerned.

What we learned from this brief study of fear can be directly applied to criticism. If you are afraid of receiving negative responses to a new body of work, ask yourself what is the worst criticism you can receive, then ask yourself if this is OK. In other words, don't wait until you are exposed to criticism to think about it. Think about it now, then think about how you can respond.

### **3 – Don't let Anger control you (too much about selling)**

"Anger: Don't feel it." I remember seeing a sign with this statement in a used car dealership in L.A. where I went to resell my Ford Pinto in 1983. I was angry at the low price the dealer offered me for the car and when I saw the sign I understood why it was there. Probably a lot of customers felt the way I did. The sign made me feel better because it showed me that I wasn't the only one in this situation. It also helped me agree to the deal because the car probably wasn't worth much more than what the dealer offered me.

For a long time I wondered what was meant by "don't feel it." Here is how I have come to understand the meaning of that phrase. Regardless whether you are selling a car and getting next to nothing for it, or whether someone is giving you criticism that you find unfair, you can always say no. You do not have to accept a deal that is insulting to you, and you do not have to accept criticism that you find unfair. In short, you do not have to feel insulted. You can simply refuse to accept what you consider unacceptable. If you do, you will not feel angry.

On the other hand, if you do agree to the deal, or if you do agree with the criticism you receive, you do so willingly. Here too (again), there is no need to be angry because you are in control of your decision: You could have walked away or refused the criticism.

Anger often comes from believing we do not have control over a situation that is not working for us. The fact is, while we do not have control over what other people are doing or asking us to do, we do have control over our reaction to their demands. We do not have to agree with them and we do not have to give them what they ask for. If anger is part of the deal, it is better not to make a deal.

When responding to criticism being angry is not helpful. Always remember that the goal is to be helpful, not to be right. Therefore, instead of getting angry use one of the solutions I provide in this essay. Either do not respond to the criticism, ask questions, or simply say that you disagree. Whatever you do is your call.



#### **4 – Depression**

Regardless of individual decisions, the outcome of misunderstood criticism is often depression. Dealing with depression is something that most artists have to cope with, unfortunately. Some are more prone to it than others, but most, if not all, are prone to it to some extent. There are remedies to depression. Earlier I mentioned the importance of being grateful. Gratitude works. Another proven remedy is action. Depression causes inaction. By replacing inaction by action, you remove one of the main pillars that support depression. Do so regularly, and it will cave in.

Success comes to those who try. Trying is a process in which every step counts. Sometimes we run, sometimes we leap, and sometimes we put one foot in front of the other, slowly, painfully maybe, but one step following the next, as in walking in a blizzard, not sure where we are going, but determined to move forward.

In time, the fog clears, the storm ends, and we find ourselves further than we expected. Our steps, no matter how few, how slow and how difficult, moved us ahead. Most importantly, these steps, taken one at a time, pushed us past the obstacle we were confronted with.

#### **5 - Get help if you need it**

Picking ourselves up from our bootstraps is rarely, if ever, effective. We can't fix a tire with a wooden plug anymore than we can probe the depth of our psyche by reading the comic's page in the newspaper. While it may seem to work at first, in the long run it proves to be ineffective. It may be a courageous attempt, but it is certainly not a lasting solution.

A much better approach is to seek help from an expert. The expert has a purpose and there is a reason why they stay in business. They offer proper solutions. They offer solutions that, when dealing with an emergency, we are unlikely to find. Again, most of the time we react in an emotional manner and look for 'quick-fix' solutions. The expert instead studies the situation rationally and offers long term solutions based on an in-depth knowledge of the subject.

Doing this can be learned. But so can building a car, a boat or a house. Just because we can learn to do something doesn't mean we have the time, the money or the will to do so. In times of crisis our concern shouldn't be learning how to

solve problems by ourselves. Our concern should be getting out of the mess we find ourselves in as quickly and as effectively as possible. That is, provided we want to get out of this mess. Another option is to quit: abandon the car because we have a flat tire or stay depressed because we don't know how to deal with depression. Here too, how we react is personal in nature. Some may seek to get out of it on their own. Others may seek professional help. Yet others may decide to leave things as they are. Seeking professional help when confronted with problems we are unable to solve on our own is, for me, the best approach we can take.

## **6 - Self pity**

Depression, artistic block, feeling 'empty,' having 'nothing to say,' believing that 'everything has already been done' and the like often comes from self pity. Self-pity is a drug. Just like our body can become addicted to drugs, our mind can become addicted to self pity. This happens if we allow ourselves to indulge in feeling sorry for ourselves. This becomes a habit that can take away all our potential, just like drugs would if we became addicts.

Self pity is usually caused by self generated problems: we are not 'empty', we all have 'something to say,' and not 'everything has already been done.' Since we caused this state of mind it is us who can best put an end to it. The approach I found to work best is to move on to new endeavors instead of dwelling onto things past. What's done is done. What is yet to come is undefined still. The possibilities are wide open if we give our future endeavors the opportunity to succeed. For that we need to get started, get moving forward, past the problems that we imagined. We need to get to action. Action is the key that will unlock our potential.

## **7 – Build yourself an armor plated ego**

To be successful as an artist it is necessary to develop an armor plated ego. This is because criticism will come, no matter what. Eventually, we simply cannot argue, debate or answer every critic that comes our way. There's just too many of them and we have more important things to do. So the most effective solution is to build for ourselves, metaphorically speaking, an armor plated ego.

You do this by learning as much as you can about the many aspects of criticism, about what makes people be critical, and about what to do when you are subject to criticism. The purpose of this essay is to do just that. Reading it may be enough, or you may need to do further research and study. However, the goal is the same no matter how you learn. The goal is to be prepared and to know what to do when criticism comes your way.

You want to act, not react. Even better, you may want to do nothing. I recently was criticized by my neighbor. I just looked at him and said nothing. I was quite nonplused by his criticism and did not see any need to respond. However, he expected a reaction from me, and not getting any he looked quite puzzled. I felt I had to say something or we were going to stare at each other forever. Being neighbors, I did not want to create a negative situation, so I told him that in my line of work it was important to build yourself an armor plated ego. He looked surprised. Apparently he had not done so himself.

## **8 – Self worth is internal, not external**

My self worth --what I think of myself and my work-- is internal, not external. It rests with me, not with others. It is something I control, not something others control. While I am open to criticism that makes sense and is politely presented, I retain the right to accept or refuse this criticism. In the long run, I accept few criticisms. Sometimes, I accept none at all.

Why? Simply because most critics are motivated by a personal agenda rather than by the desire to help me improve my work. Under the guise of "enlightening me" about the true nature of what I do, they are really interested in standing on their soap box and having their personal opinions heard. Some are motivated by anger, resentment or frustration generated by critics they received about their own work. Others toil in darkness and find critiquing someone well known an opportunity to shine, be it only because of their flippant remarks. Whatever it might be, it has nothing to do with me. There is no good reason to let it influence my self esteem. There is absolutely no need to let it ruin my day. If anything, it is empathy for the critic that is needed, not resentment or depression about what they say.

## **9 – Nobody kicks a dead dog**

Dead dogs are dead. They do not bother us. Why kick them? The dogs we kick (metaphorically that is, no dog was harmed in the writing of this essay) are those that bark at us, tug at our pants or, worse, bite some essential body part.

These dogs get our attention. They cannot be ignored. That's why we "kick" them.

The same applies to our work (and to our critics). Only work that 'barks' gets 'kicked.' In other words, only work that gets noticed is critiqued.

People react to our work because it gets their attention. Our work, somehow, strikes a cord. It causes people to react. And sometimes it causes them to tell us personally, either verbally or in writing, what they think of it.

I consider this a success because I would much rather hear someone be critical of my work than not have anyone care about what I do. The fact that someone is motivated to express their discontent is proof that people are looking at my work, that this work is having an effect on them, and that it is important for them to share their opinion with me.

We live in a busy world in which time is precious. If someone finds it justifiable to spend some of their valuable time to criticize my work, to pen a letter or an email, or to share their opinion with me verbally, this is testimony to the fact that my work is not leaving them cold. Whether or not I will respond to this criticism is up to me, as I explained previously, because here too I have to decide whether their critique is a dead dog or a barking one. Regardless, I do appreciate the feedback, whether I find it consequential or inconsequential.

## **10 - Not all criticism is invalid**

It is important to keep in mind that not all criticism is invalid. Some criticism is valid, even though it may be presented to you in a blunt manner. While your initial reaction may be to reject it, you may want to take a second look later on to see if there is some truth in it or not. Doing so is important because constructive criticism can help you improve your work by making changes based on the criticism you received.

## **11 – Gratitude**

Gratitude is better than depression. Being grateful is an optimistic state of mind, while depression is a pessimistic state of mind. Today, because of the recession and other ongoing issues, many feel depressed and beat down. Thinking of what you can be grateful for is an effective way to combat these feelings.

Gratitude generates action while depression generates inaction. Action leads to finding solutions and to feeling better about yourself. Simply making the decision to act, to move around and to start looking for solutions is enough to lift your spirit. On the other hand, staying in one place, not moving or thinking that there is no way out, will keep your mind "in the dark" so to speak. Taking action and being grateful goes a long ways towards making you feel uplifted and positive.

## **12 – Keep your Motivation**

Knowing how to stay motivated is an important aspect of being successful in any endeavor. This is particularly true in endeavors where our personality and creativity are at stake. We have to learn how not to get demoralized when our results are not what we expect them to be. We also need to learn how to cope with criticism. As we saw earlier on, one has to develop an armor plated ego to stay in this for the long term! Otherwise, it is tempting to quit at the first sign that not everyone is supportive or because criticism is harsher than we would like.

In the long run, our limitations are not just artistic, technical, or financial. In other words we are not limited only by our resources. We are also limited by our ability to cope with adversity and disappointment. These can surface for different reasons. They may be caused by our actions, or they may be caused by the actions of someone else. However, in the end having to face adversity forces us to ask how hard we are willing to work on this and whether or not we have reached our limits. For some, the answer is "whatever it takes". For others the answer is "I'm done." Yet for others the answer is "Let's wait and see."

## **13 – Conclusion**

Successful artists are able to overcome criticism. Certainly, it is hard not to take criticism personally. However, the goal is

to not let criticism freeze you up and keep you from creating new art and trying new things.

Your confidence must be high enough to not succumb to whatever criticism comes your way. In order to achieve this you must be able to sort out criticism, so to speak, and separate valid from invalid criticism. Push the invalid criticism aside and be on your way. Take valid criticism into consideration and make changes as necessary. All this is up to you. You are the master of your own work, and what you do is your call.

Whatever you do, don't give too much time to your critics. Doing so makes them feel more important than they really are. When criticism comes your way, decide whether it is valid or not, then either take action or do nothing. Following this simple course of action will put you in control. You are in charge of your actions and feelings. While you cannot control what someone else will say or do, you are in charge of what you say, what you do, and how you feel. Only you can make you get upset or frustrated because of the criticism that you receive.

It is the nature of art that we do not agree on what is art. Don't be disturbed if people question whether your work is art or not. In a way, the fact that people debate whether your work is art or not may be the best evidence that it is art.

Always remember that when it comes to art everyone has an opinion. Therefore we need to remind ourselves that negative criticism is just another opinion. We cannot lose our creativity over it or stop doing what we love doing. Because opinions about art are polarized, we have to expect some people to love our work and others to dislike our work. We just need to remember that our audience consists of those who like what we do.

There is a world of difference between creativity and criticism. There is a "no man's land" that cannot be effectively bridged. Eventually, one has the opportunity of becoming an art critic or an artist. However, one does not have the opportunity to be both. When I first realized this I thought it was unfortunate. Now I realize it is really a blessing because I do not have any interest in becoming a critic. My interest is to create art, not criticize art.

Finally, you need to learn how to respond to difficult questions and to criticism. I provide answers to a number of difficult questions in this essay. If you wish to continue studying my approach, I offer additional answers in previous essays such as Being an Artist, Being an Artist in Business, Just say Yes, The Eye and the Camera, The Numbering Affair and more. I also offer answers in my books and during my workshops. You can find information about all of this on my website: [beautiful-landscape.com](http://beautiful-landscape.com).

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