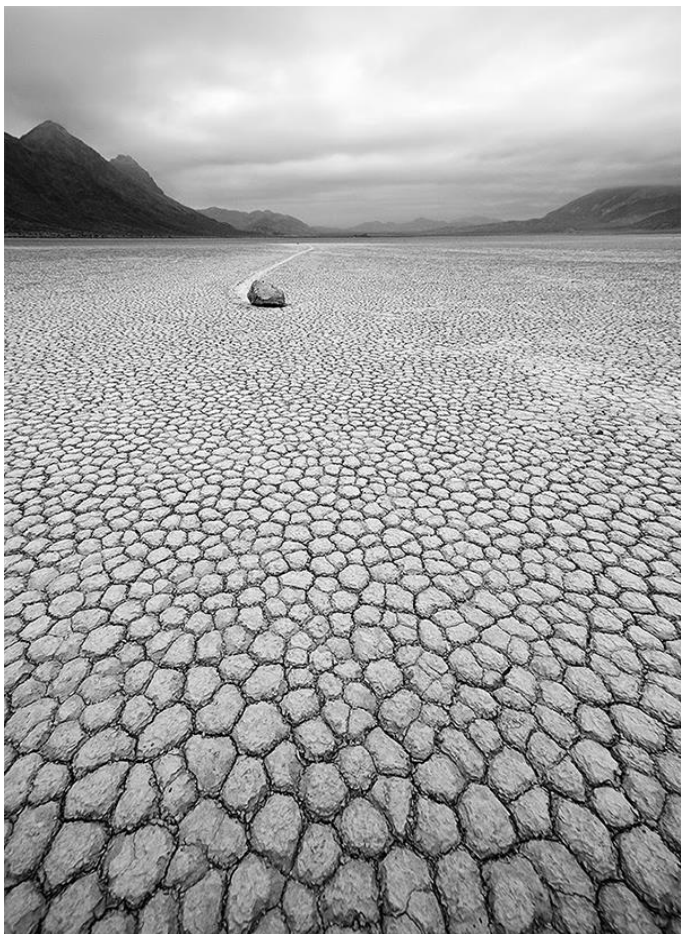


Achieving a state of Flow

Maintaining a constant train of effortful thought requires discipline and mental work. When the brain is overloaded, conflicting and confusing information leads to a block in creativity.

I know that when faced with a difficult writing task, checking facebook and emails become increasingly frequent. I become distracted, frustrated with my inability to be creative. My mind is expending energy on self control and failing in the process. In a similar way, as a photographer, faced with a block in creativity, I cannot see how to move forward, to make a successful or emotive composition. I become aware of many distractions, for a landscape photographer this could be a growling stomach, cold hands and thoughts of a long walk home. Keeping 'focused' in the absence of a feeling of creativity requires effort.

But need it always be this way?



The psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly describes a state of being that is not aversive to mental exertion. People in this mental state can expend considerable effort without even having to exert willpower. This state has been likened to a feeling of ecstasy and has been called a 'state of flow'. Csikszentmihaly suggests that when you are completely absorbed in a task and engaging in an intense period of creativity, you don't

have enough attention left over to monitor how your body feels, to register how cold or hungry you are. Your body essentially disappears and existence is temporally suspended.

So how can we get to this state of flow? To experience this intense feeling of creativity? It has been suggested that blocks in the creative process are due to a lack of sufficient skill and experience. One can imagine that if there were no limits to our technical ability, brain power and imagination, then our true potential for creativity can be unleashed. The author Malcolm Gladwell, would suggest that that it takes roughly ten thousand hours of practice to achieve mastery in a field. But is there a ceiling to our mastery?

I have always been in awe of one of my Cambridge professors who writes so beautifully and eloquently, he has a thorough understanding of endocrinology and extremely well read outside his field which allows him to write freely yet accurately with an unparalleled appreciation of the larger view. This professor not only invests a huge amount of effort in his work but also has been blessed with a high IQ and buckets of natural talent. This magic combination of ingredients enables him to reach an extraordinary level of mastery of his field whereas lesser mortals such as myself, are limited to some degree by our own personal ceiling. Nether the less, enhancing skill levels and experience, will have a huge impact on our ability to become a fluent user of our craft and hopefully unlock the ability to achieve that elusive state of flow.

The psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, has done many studies to illustrate the limits to the amount of information that the brain can process. Kahneman suggests that when people are engaged in a mental sprint they can **become effectively blind**. Many of you may recall a famous study in which a group of participants were asked to watch a video of two teams of people, moving rapidly in a small space, throwing basketballs to each other. The participants' task was to count the number of balls that were thrown by only one of the teams. This engaged the viewers in a particularly effortful and mental task. At the end, the participants were asked if they noticed anything unusual that happened during the task. Surprisingly, most people failed to see a man in a gorilla suit passing slowly between the players, right in front of their field of view! This has important implications for the photographer, who becomes engrossed in the workings of their camera or particular features of the scene that they are interested in. In this situation, the photographer is unlikely to exercise their full visual capacity. They may fail to notice some obvious flaw in their composition, or miss an opportunity to capture a remarkable change in the light, weather or shapes of swirling water in the sand. I can think of many

occasions after reviewing my images, that I have thought to myself, why didn't I see the faults in the image on location, such as a tripod leg in the frame? They were so obvious! For these reasons I now have a mental checklist while making images, I check the edge of the frame and decide what features of the scene need to be in and out of the composition. I review the scene in front of me and keep an eye out for any interesting changes in the light and the weather. I flip the image upside down, which helps to review the image in a new 'light'. I try to focus on the negative shapes, the range of tones and identify any obvious flaws in the composition. Making this behaviour an automatic process, streamlines the image making procedure.

So how can we unclutter our brains to achieve that elusive state of flow in the photographic process. With added experience and increased technical ability, one can become totally absorbed in the creative process without the brain exerting effort to keep your focus. Freeing the mind from having to think predominantly about the important but mundane technical aspects of the photographic craft is the first important step. An incomplete knowledge of your camera's capabilities, a poor setup and wobbling tripod will do nothing to achieving that flow state. The more you practice your craft the easier the process, the more technically accomplished you become, the more the technique becomes automatic and your brain is left to creative thought. Sometimes you can pass technical barriers with a piece of kit or acquire a way of working that unleashes more creativity. My pink wellington boots allow me to stop worrying about wet feet on seascape locations and concern about falling into rock pools and allow me to access locations that would have been off limits. Such a simple 'tool', can allow me to become absorbed in my creative task.

Gaining more field craft experience is crucial so that you can anticipate situations, the light, the sea, the clouds. Even knowing where to park the car near your landscape location, not worrying about personal safety or getting lost will free the mind for creativity. I carry a Gamin GPS tracking device for this very reason.

I have always wondered why I find it easier to make images when I am photographing the outward tide, but now I appreciate that not worrying about the encroaching tide and a drenched camera bag can have a big impact on your 'focus'.

Difficult Interactions on location with other encroaching photographers or holiday makers, can potentially be a creative disaster. I avoid confrontation as much as possible because I know it will take away all my ability to concentrate for a very long time afterwards. It is really important that you give yourself the opportunity to really absorb yourself in your work and think about composition, the frame, the colours and tones and the emotion you are trying to render. I am still stumbling far too much and feel that my distractions and other commitments in life are always limiting my ability to 'focus', but that's life.

Sometimes, just sometimes, everything comes together, you work automatically, with total absorption in the process, your intense focus on your work is effortless and you feel the creative process. You feel excitement and joy and you cease to exist.



Jane Goodall combines a Senior Research Fellowship at Cambridge University with a love of photography. Jane is particularly inspired by the natural landscape and beautiful light. She has exhibited nationally and internationally and judges for the East Anglian Federation of photographers. Jane travels throughout the East Anglia region and beyond, to visit photographic societies and give talks on her photography.

