

How to Succeed in Photography The Truth about Talent

In recent years, several factors have come together which have allowed the art of photography to become a widespread form of expression, as well as a form of revenue for many. Among these factors are internet and online communities and organizations, the plummeting cost of entry, and the expansion of the market place into such arenas as stock and micro-stock photography. Today, literally anyone with \$500 and an internet connection can become a paid photographer. As the old saying goes though, the cream always rises to the top. The questions that remain are how we are to define “the cream of the crop”. Many terms have been bandied around to identify the “best of the best”. Some of the more common ones we hear in various outlets are skill, ability, dedication, proficiency, and of course, talent.

In order to really take an honest look at what makes some people more successful than others in any field, we must first acknowledge that those who excel in anything are likely those that have a desire to attain excellence. Without the aspiration to take oneself to a higher level, no advance can be made. For example, if I have no goals set for becoming a concert pianist, I will never become one. This is true whether it be music, sports, writing, teaching, finance, architecture, painting, medicine, or even photography. Without defining some goals to attain, mediocrity will always be the best one can hope for in any field.

Thus, to that end, if you really want to become successful as a photographer, the first thing you must do is clarify what you mean by “success”. How we define things like “success” is always subjective and as such is up to interpretation. While there are likely many variations of success depending on what your goals are, there are still some basic principles that need to be understood. First and foremost, is that the amount of success you attain will be limited to (and a function of) how much time, energy and resources you are willing to put into it.

In a previous life, I played baseball. By “previous life” I mean when I was in my teens (some 25 years ago now...). I could knock a baseball out of the park off almost any pitch without much effort, and I could usually heave the ball from the outfield past the pitchers mound if someone was trying to score on a long fly ball. As I started getting older though, two key things changed: the pitchers I was hitting against were starting to throw the ball faster, and in different positions across the plate (it wasn't always straight down the middle anymore – in fact it rarely was!), and the distance between the outfield and home plate increased exponentially. It now required more effort on my part to continue to “succeed”. Here my success is defined as hitting home runs, and a strong outfield arm.

In order to continue any success as a home-run hitter, I would have to improve my eye-to-hand coordination if I wanted to make contact with the ball, and I would have to get stronger to be able to get the ball over the longer distance. I would also have to get stronger in order to heave the ball that far. Sure, I was getting stronger naturally, but

the natural rate of increase for me was not at the same rate as that of the ball speed or the park size, or the other players for that matter. Some developed more quickly, and others developed more slowly just by the laws of nature. Those that did develop more quickly likely saw an opportunity to continue to excel at something they enjoyed. In the case of the pitchers, these were kids who would go out and practice extra with their dad or best friend or whomever after regular team practice was over. They wanted to continue on with their initial success. By some fluke of nature, they were stronger earlier than others, and that early strength gave them a distinct advantage...they could advance more quickly. It's not that others couldn't advance their skills at baseball because that is something we can always strive to achieve. But skill does not increase without some form of commitment.

Since my strength was not on par with some of those who developed earlier, I would have to exert more energy and effort sooner, possibly including more training, and receiving guidance on things like swing mechanics, strength conditioning, and weight lifting if I wanted to keep my skills on par with my teammates. So, the question became: how much do I want to continue succeeding in baseball? Did I have the motivation, interest and energy to continue to develop the skills needed to work effectively at this higher level?

The answer for me was no. I enjoyed being a part of Little League, but the dream of being at bat in the bottom of the ninth with a runner on base and down by one is not one I embraced. I am not sure I had the ability to be as introspective then as I do now, but the thought of the pressure and stress associated with being in that position was not something that sounded appealing to me: hero or goat? Did I want to set myself up for that "do or die" situation? No thanks!

Similar analogies and anecdotes could be drawn for pretty much any field, whether you are talking about baseball, writing, or photography. You can have all the intuitive ability in the world, but it won't amount to a hill of beans if you don't have either the desire or the drive to better yourself. No one can excel at anything without any effort. Excellence and success are bred by a number of factors, but the single biggest factor is the amount of time and devotion you put toward your goals. In this I am reminded of a great quote from Tom Hanks in the movie "A League of Their Own." Geena Davis quits the league to go home and start a family. He is able to catch her before she leaves to confront her. She counters that "it just got too hard." He replies with a sentiment I will always remember: "Of course it's hard. If it was easy, everybody would do it. The *hard* is what makes it *great*." That is the sentiment of someone who is passionate about what they do. Yeah, it's hard to devote yourself entirely to something, because it involves sacrifice, passion, dedication, and drive. Yet, the **hard** part of something is what makes the **reward** worth the effort.

So, in baseball, as in most walks of life, it is always helpful to have an elevated native ability or predilection toward a specific set of skills. While I realize that it sounds somewhat Darwinian, the truth of the matter is that not everyone will be equally successful. Equal success in every field would mean that we are all given equal

portions of every skill there is available. Anyone could go play for the Yankees if they work at it, right? Of course not, because some of us are just born with stronger arms, faster legs, sharper eyes, quicker eye-hand coordination, etc., etc., etc.

If we did not have predilections toward certain skill sets, then no one would have any strengths or weaknesses because we would all be alike. That would be a boring existence – to have no individuality or strengths that can identify me as a unique person with something unique to offer. My unique vision of the world has value only in that it is unique – something not seen by others. Life would also be supremely boring because there would be nothing to challenge me. If I were able to just sit down at a piano and tickle the ivories like a Mozart or a Chopin, why would I ever bother to practice? If I were able to take out a point-and-shoot camera, press the shutter and instantly create fine art along the lines of an Ansel Adams or Annie Leibovitz, why should I even bother? (Especially if everyone else can see and do the exact same thing I can.)

The point here is that to define success and talent, one must find some sort of challenge and reward. A person can only define success by their own measures of challenges and risks that they take. How successful would you be if you never take any risks or try to overcome a shortfall by challenging yourself to do something you otherwise could not accomplish? If it wasn't hard, how could there ever be any risk or challenge? There couldn't. Without the challenge or risk, there can be no reward. The challenge and the reward of any endeavor is the motivating force behind anything we do. If the reward for something is great, then we are willing to risk taking that challenge, simply because we want the reward. If the reward is not so great then the propensity for motivation (the challenge or risk) falters.

Craig Tanner, from the Radiant Vista, talks about the “Myth of Talent” under the premise that talent is based on a set of skills you develop over time through desire. While he hits close to the mark, the nail strikes a glancing blow, because it avoids the uncomfortable truth that some of us are more inclined toward certain ends. This goes back to a concept I addressed in some previous writings about left-brained versus right-brained thinking.

Some of us are pre-disposed toward how we conceptualize and learn. Some learn best by reading, others by instruction, and other still by doing. In the grand scheme of things though, our predispositions shape our directions. This can be illustrated by the successes of two polar opposites: Stephen Hawking and Wolfgang Mozart. The former is a mathematical genius and the latter is a musical genius. The reason why they are regarded as such is because their brains are pre-disposed toward those ends. They can just “see” the numbers or notes more clearly, more easily, and without directed instruction. This is not to say that you or I cannot become skilled at mathematical calculations or musical performance because we can. If motivated, and **instructed** on proper form and technique, we can attain a certain degree of success reading the numbers and notes and reproducing them as we learn from practice and instruction. Will we ever attain the success of a Hawking or a Mozart? It depends.... On what, you ask? It depends on how we intuitively think. We all have the ability to shift from one

predominant line of thinking to another, just like we can all hold a glass with our left hand or our right hand. But at the same time, we all have a predilection toward one or the other. Just like we all have a predilection toward right-handedness or left-handedness.

This may be an uncomfortable truth to come to grips with, but it's simply a reality within the laws of nature. Some are intuitively better equipped to handle conceptual versus logical thought. There are some notable exceptions though, who exhibit an equal ability to think in both hemispheres with equal clarity, and in the case of handedness, these would be those who are ambidextrous. From the laws of averages though, it seems pretty clear that these are the exceptions rather than the norms,

While Craig is very compelling in his desire to help people achieve their dreams, I have some measure of hesitancy in setting people up in such a manner. At some point in time, we all have dreams that are beyond our immediate reach. While we all have a chance at achieving those dreams, our odds of success are relative to two integral components: first of how we are defining success, and second, of what our natural skill sets are. Again, this is not to say that success is unattainable, because you can achieve anything you want if you believe in yourself. To this end, what Craig does is invaluable, and this is in no way designed to downplay what Craig and others like him give back to the world, because they help people open doors to believing in themselves, and recognizing their own native abilities. By the same token though, the dreams of success should always be tempered with a foot in reality. At 6'1", and 215 lbs, the odds of me being a highly successful Sumo wrestler are not very good. I may have the passion to attain a moderate degree of success, but there will always be someone out there with an equal amount of passion but who is more attuned to such ends. It's all in a matter of perspective and recognizing the areas in which we can natively excel.

What strikes me as most odd about Craig's thoughts in *The Myth of Talent* is that he does recognize that someone can have a natural ability toward certain ends but he immediately discards the notion as irrelevant if that natural ability is suppressed or not nurtured. The specific section is worth repeating in full:

*"People disagree and the old nature vs. nurture argument rears its ugly head. They say 'surely you aren't denying that gift and natural ability exist?' I do believe in gift. Every encounter you have with another person is a sacred encounter with a gifted human being. But the gift of natural ability, without the awareness of it, or without passion attached to it, is either an unknown or unfulfilled potential. Even when the natural ability is discovered and nurtured, it is only good for one thing – altering the trajectory of your learning curve" – Craig Tanner, *The Myth of Talent*, from [The Radiant Vista](#) (2005)*

The idea of talent as an advantage toward achieving your goals is predicated on the assumption that a natural ability toward certain ends are both discovered and recognized. Consequently, those who have a natural ability toward something in "altering their trajectory" simply means that they are operating at a higher, better, or more aware level than their counterparts who do not have the same measure of natural ability. It's not an "either/or" scenario – it's a nature **plus** nurture scenario. We can nurture our dreams and passions all we like, but when we hold ourselves to a standard

or benchmark of success, notoriety, or achievement, the simple fact of the matter is that natural ability does exist, and for the vast majority who are playing catch-up to those with natural ability, we will always be a step behind in our understanding and awareness and ability.

If person A and person B are both nurtured to pursue their dreams and goals, with all other factors controlled for, the person with more of a natural ability will likely be the one with higher scores or greater success. In this instance, the definition of talent is really more accurately defined as natural ability. So, in the interests of actually mincing words and establishing the semantics of discussion, let's discard the "conventional wisdom" that Craig references in how talent is defined (from a dictionary), because this is an esoteric discussion where talent is simply another word for natural ability. By Craig's own admission, natural ability does seem relevant as a means to raise the level of awareness on which you operate. You have altered your trajectory by virtue of your natural ability. For those without that natural ability, for those who are predisposed, they can direct and guide those who are not, but they will always be a step behind and in need of guidance from those who are leading the way.

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with giving guidance or with following the guidance of others – it is simply different points along the same path. The key though, is to find guidance from those further along the path than you. To do that, you must be honest and aware of where your own strengths and weaknesses are relevant to the dreams and goals you wish to pursue. Dreams and goals must be nurtured, developed, and in some cases, even guided. The fundamental realization though is to determine how much guidance you need to achieve your goals. Or as Craig seems to suggest, start by recognizing and letting go of your fears. In this I would suspect that we are in total agreement: only by recognizing and acknowledging your limitations can you start to envision reaching beyond them.