

Considering the “Why?”

Recent discussions on various online communities, specifically by Craig Tanner on the Radiant Vista (www.radiantvista.com), and Mike Johnston on its popular counterpart, The Online Photographer (www.theonlinephotographer.blogspot.com), have brought a fundamental question to the forefront of photography discussions: that of asking ourselves why we shoot the photographs we take.

Whether you are a newcomer to photography, an enthusiast, serious hobbyist, or professional, this question of “Why?” at some point will ultimately present itself to you for analysis. What these two prominent resources have done is taken on the challenge of trying to answer the question in a thorough and authoritative way. Due to the presence of varying points of view though, as seen in the forums and comments that followed the contributing authors posts, there seems to be really no definitive answer to the question of “Why?”

While there are varying degrees of perspective along the entire philosophical spectrum, from the mix of the many are two predominant theories from which people approach the answer to this question of “Why?” The first of these, which I will call Communication Theory, suggests that photography is a form of communication. In this perspective, the printed or viewed image is the medium, the photographer is the artist (or person wishing to communicate through the print), and the viewer, who is looking at the image, and divining their own interpretation of the message communicated by the photographer.

The polar opposite to this philosophy, which I will call Object Theory, is that a photograph cannot communicate, because it is an inanimate thing. Sure, inanimate objects can elicit an emotive response, but that is a function of the recipient or viewer of the object. As one poster commented on a forum, photographs occur “in the dynamic flux of life that we encounter and that generate subjective effects within us”. Without meaning to put words in someone’s mouth, the logical conclusion to this would be that the photograph, or object cannot force an effect, rather the effect is initiated by the recipient. What is interesting to note here (from strictly a personal perspective), is that from a cursory review of the thoughts and ideas on various online outlets and repositories, there is not really an alternative answer to the question of “Why?” rather this is a refutation of the Communication Theory as presumptuous and inaccurate in assigning the semantics of communicating on inanimate objects, which ultimately sounds like an accusation of anthropomorphism.

This is all pretty deep stuff, and to the newcomer or beginning enthusiast, this discussion surrounding the question of “Why?” really doesn’t carry the same weight as the technical questions that are more pressing in their minds. Newcomers are often wrapped up in the technical questions like “What aperture value should I use?” and “What ISO rating is good for this shot?” as opposed to “Why am I shooting this subject?” To this audience, the answer to this deeper question at their juncture is simply “Because I want to!”, or what I would call the Theory of Self. This is a legitimate point because photographers at this level simply have not worked in the craft long enough to master the technical and free themselves from those obviations. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule (I would consider myself an exception as I clearly am an enthusiast as I certainly have not mastered usage of any technical awareness, but nevertheless I am recently delving into the “Why?” thought processes), however, these only serve to illustrate that the answer to the question of “Why?” evolves and changes just as the experience and awareness of the photographer grows and evolves and changes. In theory, as we all aspire to

better our skills (and by extension, our imagery) and become more astute in both execution and comprehension, our answer to the question of “Why?” can change and evolve as we explore new thoughts and ideas along the entire spectrum of the philosophical range, from Communication Theory, to the Theory of Self, and the Object Theory.

For those that have advanced their understanding of photography beyond the technical and are really focusing more energy on the creative and artistic questions, agreement can still be found on some very basic concepts though, regardless of which end of the spectrum you find yourself. The most fundamental concept is that as we evolve in our understanding, eventually we will begin to ask ourselves “Why am I shooting?” as well as the corollary “What purpose do I want to achieve?”

Rather than become ensnared in the sometimes fractious and polarizing discussions, here it seems more germane to simply acknowledge that if someone wants to take their skills (and images) “to the next level” (however that level is defined), asking the “Why?” of yourself is critical in defining your creative endeavors and objectives. Regardless of the answers you find, or what direction the answers take you, the mere exercise of considering the question of “Why?” is critical in becoming better at your craft.

To that end, the Radiant Vista podcast [Journaling as a Creative Ritual](#) by Craig Tanner, has definite merit inasmuch as the practice of regularly sitting down and actively trying to answer create questions of goals and objectives can benefit anyone regardless of their state of photographic skill or development. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the “fringe” ideas associated with the process, the process itself will always have merit and should not be discarded out of hand. Any analysis can be beneficial, whether these analyses are directed inward or outward can help inspire those who aspire to better understanding of photography, both from the perspective of the viewer and the photographer.

One key point that was mentioned, but not fully developed was the statement he makes about creating a mission or personal statement. This part is actually brushed aside to get to the more creative side of the discussion of “Why?” The danger here is that the questions that must be asked to develop ones personal or mission statement can allude or be important catalysts in answering the “Why?”, and segregating them seems counterintuitive.

Here we are getting to the crux of the discussion here, and before continuing though, it should be noted and acknowledged that any creative analysis is fraught with troubles because by its very nature, the creative process is subjective and thus will differ from one person to the next. To minimize subjectivity, any analysis whether directed toward creative or technical thought processes, can include some fundamental questions that can act as catalysts in the entire process. The ironic thing here is that in pursuing the ultimate goal of answering the question of “Why?”, we find ourselves asking other questions to refine our thought processes as we consider the answers. As Craig himself mentions, these other questions that define the mission statement are answered long before we get to the “Why?”

While this may seem like a discussion that would ultimately end in a chick versus egg scenario, it does help to note that there is another fundamental question to be asked in conjunction with “Why?”, and that is “What?” More specifically: What do I need to consider to most completely answer the question of “Why?”? Searching for these answers will not only reveal the key components of any personal or mission statement, but the practice of actively considering such

questions will also stimulate the individual to think creatively. It's kind of like a snowball on a hill...give the brain a push, and it eventually will start snow-balling, gaining momentum, until in a flurry, you have what Craig refers to as a sudden rush of intuition where it all makes sense – to you. At that point, may I humbly suggest to quickly press the shutter lest you lose the image you've been composing internally! (In other words – write it down!)

Often times, the technical and mundane questions, if asked routinely of oneself, will stimulate you to explore the questions more deeply each and every time. For instance, consider the following evolutionary thought process:

1. What (or who) is my subject?
2. What kind of lighting is present?
3. Do I need a flash?
4. Where is the sun?
5. What is the background like?
6. Where am I?
7. Does my composition fit what I am trying to achieve?
8. What am I trying to achieve?
9. Could I achieve this under “better” conditions (return later)?
10. Am I pleased with the current conditions?
11. What kind of mood do I want to create?
12. How will my mood affect the mood of the photograph?
13. What kind of mood am I in right now?
14. Are these two thoughts synchronous?
15. What do I want the end product to look like?

This is just a quick example of how one might pose questions and either direct them inwardly or outwardly as needed or appropriate. You can see that by asking the “Who, What, Where, When, and How”, can lead us to the “Why?” indirectly. As long as we are critical and follow through with this routine regularly, the “Why?” can be revealed to us. Keep in mind that the answer to the question of “Why?” may and likely will change as you start this practice, and as the practice becomes more second nature, patterns can evolve, thereby revealing your own personal answer to “Why?” Just remember, we must actively pursue it and keep our minds open to the answers that might reveal themselves. The creative journaling process, as Craig calls it, is simply an extension of such thought processes into written form. It's just that the medium has changed. Ironically, this could be seen as analogous to a concept we should all be aware of: the process of taking light and converting it to the printed form...otherwise known as photography.