

Seeing In the Dark

I thought I would follow Stephen's lead and share something I have learned through my own photography as well.

In the darkroom, there is very little light. It comes from what's called a 'safe light', a low-intensity red light, which does not expose the light-sensitive paper used for printing photos. However, the little illumination it provides interferes with my ability to assess the outcome of the images I'm printing during the exposure, which is also not very bright, and is more easily seen in the dark. So my solution, after much trial and error, is to work in total darkness. The rooms where I print my photos are completely light-tight, and pitch black. Most people have never been anywhere so dark, and it takes quite a bit to adjust to it. Working blind provides important experiential lessons about being in one's body: about mental visualization or imaging, body-knowledge, and about trusting oneself.

Mental imaging is the ability to recreate in the mind's eye a map of a space, such that one is able to follow that map to locate objects instead of locating by sight, as most of us normally do. To do this, you need to take in the details of your surroundings and pay close attention to them. I have had the experience of knowing where something is, but not in what position it is, which can make the blind grope a frustrating experience. Pay attention, look closely while the lights are on, map your space mentally, and then turn off the lights and follow the light of memory.

The second element that allows me to work in the dark is body knowledge, or unconscious competence (see Stephen's October newsletter article here: <http://www.optimusperformance.ca/pdfs/2006/Habits%20archived.pdf> for more), something you have developed if you have ever learned to swim, to ride a bike, or to type, for example. The best typists, those who can type the fastest with the most accuracy, are those for whom the handwork has become a passive process; it takes no thought whatsoever. The hands, through practice and learning the proper methods, know their job so well that they – the muscles, the nerves, the pressure-sensitive finger pads – do the thinking for you. Again, the key is paying close attention to your behaviours, or motions. Not being a person with a high level of manual dexterity has been a challenge for me in the darkroom. I have had to learn to move slowly and smoothly in the dark, instead of relying on strength, pressure and momentum to manipulate objects as I normally do. I mentally plan out each movement before I make it, instead of rushing in,

and continually evaluate the success of the movement in a purely physical way in each instant. Often I only find out if my movements were properly controlled after

my print is processed – that's when I can see that my hand strayed an inch too far, and consequently ruined my print.

Once these two essentials are in place, internally, I have to turn to the other tool I carry within me for darkroom success; the most important one. Trusting myself. I need to trust that I can accomplish my goal despite the fact that I am working blind, and cannot use the same means I would in normal circumstances to modify my behaviour in a moment to moment way. I need to take a leap of blind faith that my work will emerge intact. And the thing about that trust is that it doesn't need to be proven by results every time to exist and to be useful. Demanding success on every occasion before placing trust in oneself is self-defeating. Not all my prints work out. But since I stopped using the safe light, my rate of success has gone up. So, through careful attention to detail, good planning, creating good habits, and trusting in my abilities, I have found a method that is safer than the 'safe light' approach.

It has been a great learning experience for me; one that I believe can be applied to other aspects of life and work. Security has a place, but the security derived from knowledge and competence rather than from (self-) enforced controls is one that seems to be longer-lasting and that may bring greater rewards.

Article by Sabrina Rowe info@optimusperformance.ca