

The Secret to Success Lies Within Life's Lessons

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Can you imagine what your life would be like without traumatic, life-changing experiences? Picture your world without suffering, sadness, or anger. Sounds perfect, right? Now, think about all of the obstacles you have encountered in life and what it required to conquer those intimidating roadblocks. The difficult life events we live through are as vital as the air we breathe, and without them, we would never have the opportunity to grow as individuals or learn how to sympathize with others. These experiences, though often daunting, influence our unique vision of the world, shape our personality, and define who we are as a human being. Throughout my life, I have learned that talent alone is not sufficient; one must possess strong character. This means we must navigate around the challenging obstacles that life places in front of us by remaining flexible, humble, resourceful, and open to learning. These traits, when combined with a person's God-given talents and the various lessons we learn from life, are the secret ingredients necessary to succeed in this ever-changing profession of photography.

After experiencing pain or suffering, a person can gain a new perspective on life that will change how he or she thinks forever. The year was 1965, and the Vietnam War was in its early stages. That year, I graduated from high school, but quickly learned my parents could not afford to send me to college. The best option for me seemed to be the military. Yet, America was experiencing a tumultuous time, and many people were against the idea of war. At the time, I believed enlisting in the army for three years would give me control over my choices, but I constantly faced hard decisions along the way. My initial plan was to join the Special Forces, but I was too young for this plan to become a reality. Six months later, as a part of the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam, my unit was on a search and destroy mission. The unit came under intense fire from a reinforced Vietnamese Army platoon. During the crossfire, I was shot

through the shoulder, and was sent to Yokohama, Japan to undergo three months of intense rehabilitation. While I was recovering in Japan, I had the chance to purchase a 35mm Single Lens Reflex Camera at a good price. Looking back, I just thought the camera was a bargain and a good investment, not the start of my future career. All of my purchases were sent back to the United States, and it would be some time before I would realize the impact that this seemingly ordinary camera purchase would have on the rest of my life. In hindsight, my encounters in the military proved to be invaluable catalysts for my personal, and even professional, growth. I was awarded the Purple Heart Medal and two Army Commendation Medals for my actions in Vietnam, one of which was for Valor. Due to my experiences in Vietnam, I will always have a greater appreciation for life.

Many times, the career decisions we make lead us to unforeseen, yet rewarding life paths. After spending one year in Vietnam, I realized the military was not the career for me. I returned home to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to serve the remainder of my three-year commitment with the 82nd Airborne. As fate would have it, I reconnected with an old friend who served with me in Vietnam and was also serving with the 82nd Airborne in the Information Office. He recommended me for a position with the staff sergeant, who was also the lab chief. The staff sergeant's greatest desire was to join the Golden Knight Parachute Team, but before he could act on that desire, he had to train a replacement for his position as lab chief. I had the rank and the motivation, but as a young soldier, I lacked the photographic experience needed for the job. Fortunately he was willing to train me, and within a month's time, I became the new lab chief. I was grateful to have the rare opportunity to capture events in history, a job that was tremendously rewarding.

For the first time in my life, I felt the joy of having clarity about my future career goals. I soon began to realize that I was blessed with a God-given ability to “see” light using my camera. With perseverance, I knew I could master the technical aspects of photography as well. As a result of my close encounters with death in the military, I learned to appreciate and capture the special moments of each day. Never will I see a sunrise or sunset or the innocence of a young child without remembering to cherish life.

In life, we cannot fear taking risks, for these risks often provide us with more opportunities to grow. Before I embarked on my military journey as a young man, I met Nancy Mason. Nancy and I wrote back and forth while I was stationed in the Vietnam. When I finally returned home, Nancy and I married and began our lives together. I secured a job as a school photographer for a studio in our hometown of Durham. After a very short time, it became apparent that the owner had a problem with alcohol and was not properly managing his business. Concern for my reputation caused me to leave that job, for an opportunity to work as a news photographer. While this was good experience for me, I did not feel completely fulfilled. About a year later, I took a risk and opened my own photography business.

Like any small business owner, my greatest challenge was lack of capital, and this challenge tested my resourcefulness. My first studio was located in a 10 x 10 bedroom of my home for the first year. Then, when my business grew, I moved into the Northgate Shopping Center in Durham, North Carolina. For the next eighteen months I would work hard, network, advertise and continue to be involved with the Professional Photographers of North Carolina and the Professional Photographers of America. The reward finally came when I was able to purchase an older house in a commercial part of the city and convert it to my own studio.

For many of us, love will be both the greatest joy and the greatest sorrow of our lives. One of the most joyous times of my life, witnessing the birth of my first child, was also overshadowed by one of the saddest times of my life, after learning that my wife Nancy had cancer. Like many people who take care of dying loved ones, I felt helpless as I watched Nancy struggle to hold onto her life. We were trained in the military to prepare for the worst and hope for the best, and Nancy's illness was no exception to this lesson. Thankfully, we had family and friends that supported us through this rough time. Nancy's 26 year stay on this Earth was too brief, but it reminded me once again that life is too precious to take for granted. We have to see even the tiniest matter, like drops of dew, as beautiful gifts of God's creations to explore and enjoy. We must appreciate what God has given us because life is too short.

The people we meet at different times in our lives can be just as powerful as the lessons we learn from our life experiences. Shortly after my wife's death, I met my future wife Donna, while photographing a wedding. She caught my eye as I was taking a picture of her and her friend. I suggested that Donna come by the studio to pick up the photograph in two weeks, but I couldn't wait that long. I called her the next day, and I married her eleven months later. Towards the end of the 1970s, my business had a loyal client base, and I began to extend my work to neighboring cities. At that time, Durham's population base mostly consisted of blue-collar workers and university employees—not exactly my target market. After studying advertising methods and deciding on my desired client base, I chose to make another move, but this time, it would not be as easy.

The national economic climate was volatile; interest rates were soaring. I made a decision to build a home-studio in nearby Raleigh, North Carolina. Because of factors beyond my control, the 11 percent interest rate for our mortgage was in jeopardy of being a shocking 21

percent. Again, I was faced with another risky decision. If it had not been for our realtor, Mr. Billy Myrick, who believed in me and in my work, the bank would not have honored the lower rate. It was through this chain of events that I began to search for, and found a deeper meaning to life through my Christian faith.

There will come a time in a person's life when a decision has to be made between family and work. I learned that balance is possible, but not without making sacrifices. As my faith in God and business grew, so did the size of my family. We added three more daughters to our family within a time span of six years. Photographing weddings had always been part of my staple income, and it held a special place in my heart since Donna and I met at a wedding. However, if I wanted to spend quality time with my family and continue to perfect my craft, I knew I needed to stop photographing weddings; I photographed my last wedding in 1981. I was thankful to now have the time to watch my children grow and to take care of my aging parents and to perfect my craft.

We all need guidance in our careers, and I was blessed to have mentors who made formable impacts on my career as I was trying to establish my niche market as an environmental portrait photographer. Hubert Gentry, of Harrisonburg, Virginia, possessed an artful eye, business acumen, and a willingness to share his wealth of knowledge. Donald Jack, Joseph Lust, and Marty Rickard offered their marketing and promotional expertise. Leon Kennamer contributed his ingenious use of subtractive lighting, and Adolph "Papa" Fassbender, a master pictorial and darkroom artist who was far ahead of his time, inspired me. Don Blair, Al Gilbert, Yosef Karsh, David Peters, Lisa Evans, and Paul Tumason all consistently provided exemplary emotion and sensitivity in their work. I will be forever grateful for the contributions they have made to my life.

When Hurricane Fran ravaged many parts of Raleigh in 1996, my family and I huddled together in our basement as we prayed for protection against Fran's destruction. In total darkness, we listened to the horrifying sounds of large, old trees crashing down all around. The next morning we were grateful to be alive and to find that our home had not been demolished. However, our six-acre heavily wooded property was unrecognizable. Over three hundred trees lay in disarray and their limbs surrounded our house, yet our house was completely untouched. Despite Hurricane Fran's devastation of our property, my family and I were able to pick up the pieces and reestablish the landscape to its original beauty. With perseverance and hard work, it took us five long years to rebuild our property. It was during this time that tremendous changes were taking place in the photographic industry. For the past twenty-five years, I had practiced debt-free living. The litmus test that I had always used when purchasing new equipment was that it had to be income producing instantly. Though I was aware of the need to convert everything to digital, the constraints of time and money invested into recovering from the hurricane kept me from doing anything immediately.

The decision to change one's direction from time to time is needed to survive and succeed in any aspect of life. During the digital technology revolution of the 1990s, many of our talented photographers began to leave the industry. Although many of these technological changes that were taking place were positive and necessary, they were also being made readily available to the average, non-professional consumer as well. More and more people were no longer seeing the need for using a professional photographer; they were perfectly happy with the results they were achieving with their own digital cameras. Some of the larger retail outlets were even printing wall-sized portraits from the consumer's file, an additional blow to our

professional image. It was then that I realized I needed to change my direction if I wanted my business to grow.

If I were to thrive in this new professional environment, my artistic style had to take on a new life of its own. I began to analyze the changes taking place in the photographic industry, and observed that some of my affluent clients had as expensive cameras and software equipment as I. It was imperative that I develop my talents at a level that could not be easily duplicated. The creative, artistic side of my profession had always held my interest far beyond the aspect of traditional photography. It was time for me to take my passion for art and creativity to a whole new level. I visited art galleries and museums, collected art books, attended art seminars and workshops with oil and digital artists. Many impressionistic and realistic artists like Monet, Manet, Renoir, Sargent, Pissarro, Seurat, Sisley, van Gogh, Degas, Cassatt, Pino, and Royo served as my inspirations. Perhaps it was their particular brushwork, mood, style, or overall feel from their masterpieces that left a lasting impression on me. A few digital artists such as Helen Yancey, Janet Conner-Ziser, and the unequalled master painter, Jeremy Sutton expanded my mind and have never ceased to amaze me.

Once again our family would face an act of nature; it was June of 2005 when three bolts of lightning struck our property. Fortunately, there was no fire; however about 80 percent of all electrical equipment in our home and studio was destroyed. Although it would take about two years to recover from this event, it proved to be the perfect opportunity to convert and upgrade my business digitally. Despite the challenges of upgrading my entire studio with new digital equipment, the decision to change my focus helped me endure as an artist in the evolving profession of photography.

Very few things are guaranteed in one's life and in one's profession. We all face life-altering moments, difficult decisions, uncertain choices, deaths of our beloved, and the need for change in life. Yet, when we choose to be thankful for having these experiences and open our minds to learning the good that can derive from them, we triumph over life's obstacles and move a step closer to achieving our goals.

I have devoted four decades of my life to the profession of photography, and I cannot imagine a more rewarding pursuit. The places I have traveled, as well as the people I have met along the way, have enriched my life beyond measure. A powerful example of this happened one day, when I was visiting the breathtaking Italian Alps. I was fortunate enough to witness a shepherd guiding his sheep. While this act sounds rather mundane on the surface, I was amazed when, with one word in Italian, all five thousand sheep moved to follow him. I wanted to illustrate my vision of God's people who, like these sheep that recognize the unique voice of their shepherd, can hear God's voice if they only wish to listen. It is times like these that make me as excited about photography today as I was forty years ago. I have no plans of retiring. If God chooses to bless me with a long life, I intend to continue capturing the beauty of His creation. To God be the Glory.