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### **Learn More Words to Make Better Photographs**

As I look back on my career, I noticed substantial advances in image making after learning new terminology and I wanted to figure out why. My personal strongest example was following exposure to Dean Collins videos on lighting. After watching Dean's videos numerous times, shadow and light came alive for me in many new ways and came to add depth and dimension to my images.

When I started to recognize the phenomenon that knowing more words leads to creating better photographs it was anecdotal. I would share this concept with fellow photographers and, at first; they would give me a puzzled look. Then I would share an example or two of some words such as specular highlight or shadow edge transition and their use in making a picture in the brain. Without those words it couldn't be visualized. Then, the light of agreement would show in their eyes and they'd say, "I get it!"

As I considered the subject for this thesis, I believed it would be a no-brainer to document. Boy, was I ever wrong about that. I started my research in the visual realm and found only brief glimpses from other photographers expressing this thought but no concrete research backing up the idea. I had to step far away from the study of photography to the study of how people learn in order to find the proof for which I was searching. I'll leave it to you to decide if this rings true after you have finished this paper.

I suggest people make a conscious effort to learn more words to make better photographs. It's a fairly simple concept that I believe many miss, or at the very least, undervalue. This has a

cost in slower learning and growing time over the life of their careers. Words are the building blocks that enable the mind to think through concepts and visualize ideas. The key word here is visualize. With a larger number of words you have a greater chance of putting together new concepts with this increased vocabulary palette at your disposal.

Vocabulary is the word we use for the words we know. Here's a *Merriam-Webster, Dictionary* definition to put us all on the same page.

**Vo-cab-u-lary** \vō-kab-ye -,ler-ē \ n, pl **-lar-ies** **1**: a list or collection of words or of words and phrases usu. alphabetically arranged and explained or defined: LEXICON **2 a**: a sum or stock of words employed by a language, group, individual, or work or in a field of knowledge **b**: a list or collection of terms or codes available for use. (Merriam-Webster, Inc. p 1320)

From *Vocabulary.com* comes this additional explanation, “First used in the 1500s to mean a list of words with explanations, the noun vocabulary came to refer to the “range of language of a person or group” about two hundred years later. A lot of hobbies, like fishing or knitting, require that you learn their unique vocabulary before you can get the most out of them.” (Vocabulary) Obviously photography has a vocabulary all its' own.

### **Research into Learning**

As I began to research this idea of vocabulary as a way to expand learning I had to delve into the education process and look to see how people learn. In *Vocabulary Development* Stephen Stahl says, “Linguistic vocabulary is synonymous with thinking vocabulary.” (Stahl 14) I found this quote to be of help as it made me feel that I was beginning to find the correct path for the thesis.

In researching how one's depth of vocabulary can help in learning I found many examples. In the book *Edge: How Does Language Shape the Way We Think*, Broditsky says, “...

it can be said that language can affect or shape how people view or perceive things, even time.”

(Broditsky, 2009) From *Building Academic Vocabulary - Teacher's Manual*, Marzano and Pickering posed the following question and answer. “Why, you might ask, does vocabulary instruction have such a profound effect on student comprehension of academic content? The answer to this question is straightforward. People's knowledge of any topic is encapsulated in the terms they know that are relevant to the topic.”

“The more students understand these terms, the easier it is for them to understand information they may read or hear about the topic. On the other hand, without a basic knowledge of these terms, students will have difficulty understanding information they read or hear.” They continue, stating that knowledge of important terms, is critical to understanding any subject.

“Success in almost any endeavor can be traced to vocabulary. The reason for this is simply that the knowledge anyone has about a topic is based on the vocabulary of that information.” (Marzano & Pickering Chapter 1)

Every activity and business, and that includes photography, has it's own lexicon. Here's an example put forth by Marilee Sprenger in *Vocabulary of the Common Core*; see how well you understand the following sentence. “A ductless split can produce the exact amount of energy needed to temper an envelope.” Just reading these words without more contexts, or an engineering background, can easily lead to a wrong result. I know I wasn't close in understanding. Nor was Marilee when she first read the sentence, “(her)...mind started to try to make connections to envelopes and wondered if tempering had something to do with getting or keeping glue on the flap.” An engineer would know that the sentence refers to equipment and its capability of cooling a room. An example could be made using common and uncommon photography terms but I'll let you come

up with your own. I'm sure you have plenty of ideas that a non-photographer or someone relatively new to the business might stumble around for specific meaning.

According to *Wikipedia*, "Focal vocabulary is a specialized set of terms and distinctions that is particularly important to a certain group: those with a particular focus of experience or activity." (Wikipedia)

In *How We Think*, John Dewey shares this thought, "Everyone has experienced how learning an appropriate name for what was dim and vague cleared up and crystallized the whole matter. Some meaning seems distinct almost within reach, but is elusive; it refuses to condense into definite form; the attaching of a word somehow (just how, it is almost impossible to say) puts limits around the meaning, draws it out from the void, makes it stand out as an entity on its own account." (Dewey 173)

I have heard people suggest that they want to be natural photographers, unfettered by study and ideas that have been shared in the past. I would consider that much like reinventing the wheel. I prefer and suggest that we stand on the shoulders of those that have come before and to build on their knowledge as opposed to wheel reinvention. I believe the study of the words of the science of photography is important to the final outcome of images created. As Robert Henri shared in *The Art Spirit*, "In the past every step of human progress has been directed by art and science. These two are inseparable, and cannot exist in their pure sense, one without the other." (Henri 157)

### **More Than Photography-Centric Vocabulary**

The vocabulary that we can put to use as photographers is much wider and more varied than you might think at first glance. We need to understand words that are much more than just photography-centric. Delving into word lists from other visual arts and science can be of immense

help in expanding our photographic visual language and image creating skills. Words are the paint that makes it possible for us to envision pictures in the mind. The more words we have at our disposal, from more and varied sources, the deeper our palette and the richer our vision becomes. Richer images in the mind allow us to visualize images with more depth and dimension. The more complex the thought process the more imaging possibilities will dance in our brains.

Everyone develops a working vocabulary over time. Starting with the words directly associated with basic exposure, including the triumvirate of aperture, shutter-speed and ISO. As we increase our knowledge there comes a realization that it is not just the amount of light but the quality of light and the shadows created that make for a stronger image. We also need to seek the science of photography terminology such as the Inverse Square Law and Angle of Reflection Equals the Angle of Refraction.

How many words should we have at our disposal? What comes to mind when you hear these words: Luminous, shiny, bright, vivid, fluorescent or aglow? Each hopefully creates its own image in your brain. Can you create light that illustrates these words in your photos?

How about words that describe the darker side: shadow, chiaroscuro, shade, gloom or dusk? Words and phrases for different types of shadow and light start to enter our lexicon making it easier to pre-visualize final photographs. These include descriptive phrases such as shadow edge transition and specular highlight. Leonardo Da Vinci said, "Shadow is the means by which bodies display their form. The forms of bodies could not be understood in detail but for shadow." (Richter 1888). As more words are internalized we can tell the difference between the source of a light versus the origin of light, the respective shadows they create, and their effect on our final representation of a scene or subject. Words for light modifiers including soft-boxes, strip lights, and various types of umbrellas have meanings beyond their shapes but how they play in the scene.

The myriad types of lighting available, and their effect on our subject become more and more important as we try to say more with our images.

### **Vocabulary from Other Visual Arts**

We also need, or should I say can, use words from other visual arts such as painters and graphic designers. Understanding and visualizing multiple color palettes and how they interact with one another help tell the photographic story in a more pleasing fashion. How does the use of various colors, whether they are analogous, complementary, split complementary or monochromatic change the feeling in an image? Artist Mitchell Albala says, “A color strategy is like a recipe for harmony - a set of color relationships that are proven to work well and can be used as a formula for building our color composition.”

Georges Braque gives us another thought on the use of color, “You put a blob of yellow here, and another at the further edge of the canvas: straight away a rapport is established between them. Colour acts in the way that music does...” (Braque p 16)

Adding to the color theme, Marc Chagall said, "All colours are the friends of their neighbors and the lovers of their opposites." (Chagall)

Geometry and mathematics also play a much-needed part in keeping a viewer interested in a photograph. Robert Henri in talking with his art students suggests this education start sooner, rather than later. “It is clear to see how a thorough knowledge of geometry would be of value to an artist whose ideas are to be expressed in apparently magical proportions. It would be well for the artist to get his training in mathematics early so his use of such knowledge will be ‘instinctive’ later on. He should know that while studying mathematics the great value the study is to give in his later work. I am not proposing a ‘scientifically hampered’ artist, but one who is unhampered by ignorance, who understands well the means he employs.” (Henri 155)

Lisa Marder gives us some vocabulary on composition. "Composition is the term used to describe the arrangement of the visual elements in a painting or other artwork. It is how the Elements of Art and Design - line, shape, color, value, texture, form, and space - are organized or composed according to the Principles of Art and Design - balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, unity/variety - and other Elements of Composition, to give the painting structure and convey the intent of the artist." (Marder) One of the first and quite simple types of composition we learn is the rule of thirds and moves through a deeper area of composition study that has its own vocabulary including Fibonacci Numbers and the Golden Section. Also known as Phi.

Henri Matisse in Notes of a Painter said, "Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings." (Matisse)

Composition is different from the subject matter of a painting or a photographic image. Every painting or photo, whether abstract or representational, regardless of subject, has a composition. Good composition is essential to the success of creating better images. Done successfully, good composition draws the viewer in and then moves the viewer's eye across the whole of the work so that everything is taken in, finally settling on the main subject.

Claudia Laska shares Gestalt psychology as a theory about perception that states, "...the whole is more than (or, in other interpretations, 'different than') the sum of its parts." Gestalt comes from the German word meaning "shape" or "form" and suggests how we as humans make shape of, or form, in our minds a unified whole out of separate and distinct elements by grouping them into the most easily understood arrangements. It helps us to recognize patterns and make

associations.” (Laska) Gestalt Theory adds to the compositional vocabulary with words like, emergence, reification, multi-stability, invariance and many more.

Having a deeper vocabulary in all areas allows us to understand ideas of photographers that come before us by being able to visualize their ideas through reading. As Marilee Springer stated in *Teaching Critical Vocabulary of the Common Core*, “Cognitive skills are enhanced by having access to more words. It will be *absolutely necessary* for them to automatically know the definitions without using working memory. If they must search their brains to understand what the questions on the assessment are asking of them, they are wasting precious time and brain space needed to analyze their readings and answer the questions.

“Teaching these words is urgent in order to assist students in understanding what is to be expected of them as they tackle complex texts, learn to read more closely, add to their vocabularies, improve speaking and listening skills and become well rounded learners and members of society.” (Sprengr)

### **Best Practices - How to Increase Your Vocabulary**

In an article in *The Telegraph*, David Crystal says, “Vocabulary is a matter of word-building as well as word-using.” (Crystal)

One of the best ways of increasing a vocabulary is reading. I constantly have words in one form or another having to do with photography in front of me. Magazine articles, books and the Internet keep me reading and improving my stock of words.

Shepard’s Software agrees with this idea and recommends, “Read, Read, And Read! - Most vocabulary words are learned from context. The more words you're exposed to, the better vocabulary you will have. While you read, pay close attention to words you don't know. First, try

to figure out their meanings from context. Then look the words up. Read and listen to challenging material so that you'll be exposed to many new words.

“Practice, practice, practice. - Learning a word won't help very much if you promptly forget it. Research shows that it takes from 10 to 20 repetitions to really make a word part of your vocabulary. It helps to write the word - both the definition and a sentence you make up using the word - perhaps on an index card that can later be reviewed. As soon as you learn a new word, start using it.

“Get in the habit of looking up words you don't know - If you have a dictionary program on your computer, keep it open and handy.” (Shepard) I'll add the idea of putting new vocabulary to work through practice and creating an image that puts the new word in action as soon as possible after learning of it.

Inspiring speaker and salesman Zig Ziglar shares, “Your understanding of what you read and hear is, to a very large degree, determined by your vocabulary, so improve your vocabulary daily.” (Ziglar)

### **Using your Vocabulary**

When I mentioned that I wanted to develop my vocabulary to help with my challenges for and against images during judging at PPA competitions I was initially met with that possibly being a negative. I would like you to know that having a deep vocabulary doesn't mean it will be harder for others to understand you rather it will be more easily accomplished. Increasing your vocabulary makes it possible to have yourself better understood by others. If you are constantly searching for the proper word or words to express your ideas you lose credibility, because as you try to find the word or concept in your mind you sound less intelligent. Learning more words does not necessarily mean mastering large, cumbersome, multi-syllabic words. It is an expansion that

allows you to be more graphic, accurate and descriptive in your discussions. For example, you could say blue when referring to a color or you might be more accurate choosing among the words azure, turquoise, indigo, ultramarine or cobalt. All are expressions for blue but each would be different, and more accurately understood, in the mind of others.

American Lexicographer Erin McKean is a proponent of having more words at your disposal. "People say jargon is a bad thing, but it's really a shortcut **vocabulary** professionals use to understand one another." (McKean)

### **Final Thoughts**

As I share this project with others on writing about vocabulary and learning photography, the question I hear quite often is, "Why are you doing this? Why take time away from your photography to teach others?" My reply is to share a quote that I hope it inspires you from Joseph Joubert "To teach is to learn twice." (Joubert)

I encourage you to expand your vocabulary and close this paper with Wilfred Funk's quote, "The more words you know, the more clearly and powerfully you will think...and the more ideas you will invite into your mind." (Funk)

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