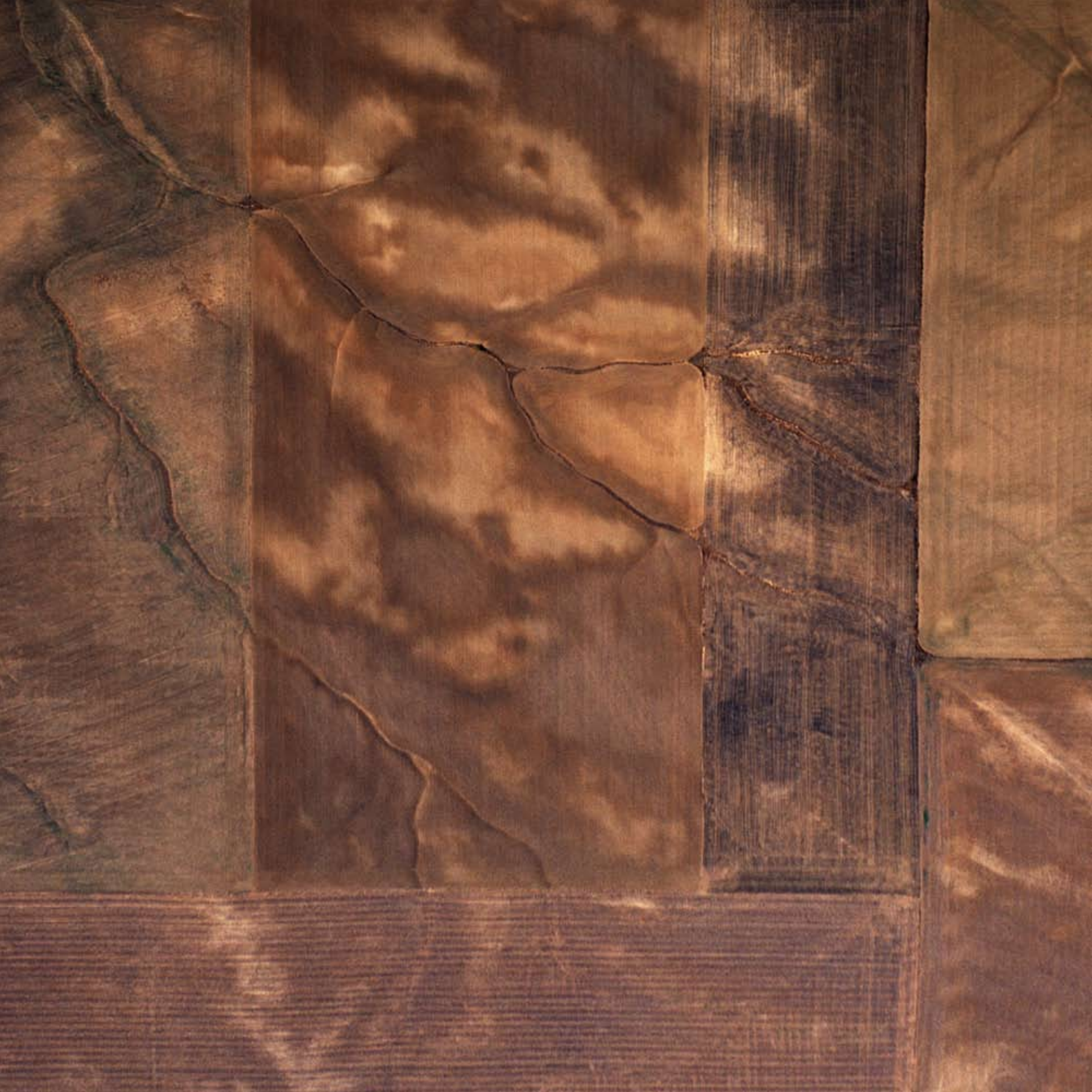
The Art of Creative Thinking

London to San Francisco, 2004



The Art of Creative Thinking

Denver to San Jose, 2003

1. Master your tools.

I grew up in a household that was both creative and technical: my mother was a painter and printmaker; my father was an engineer whose hobby was photography. It was a fantastic combination of left- and right-brain pursuits.

I watched my mom draw and paint and then turn those images into beautiful, pin-registered, silkscreened works of art. At the same time, my father explored the landscape with his black-and-white photographs and converted the laundry room into a darkroom so that he could master developing and printing. While both of them honed in on their creative goals, they also developed the technical expertise to achieve them.

The first time I remember photographing with my parents, we were in a ghost town in Nevada. My mom had always taught me to look at things in my own way, and I remember the only important thing to me as I followed them through the deserted streets was making an image that was different from theirs. I'm not sure if I accomplished it, but once I had shot, developed, and printed an image for the first time, I knew I was hooked. By the time I reached junior high, I was a photographer on the yearbook staff, and my room was covered in hundreds of photographs. I was making a collage of my life on the walls.

I think the most valuable lesson I learned from my parents was that while their approaches and the techniques they used to express themselves visually were different, they each had to master their respective tools from a creative as well as a technical standpoint in order to produce the images they wanted. Whether I like it or not, I realize that to achieve the results I'm after, I must master not only the camera, but also computers, software, printers, scanners—a whole host of various technologies. And, needless to say, those technologies will change as fast as weather patterns over Denver.

2. Listen to what your life is trying to tell you.

Although I loved making images, I went to college at the University of California in Davis to become a psychologist. I enjoyed helping people who were at a disadvantage and who might prosper if only they had the information that they needed to make a change. I was also a highly competitive college athlete, so I supplemented my major in psychology with a minor in sports therapy.

In retrospect, it was a great contrast: the unquantifiable study of the human mind combined with the far more literal study of biomechanics. However, an understanding of the way the body behaves and the physical stress it can take didn't prevent me from injuring myself. I broke my foot the first year, shattered my wrist the second, and fractured a rib the fourth.

After being injured three out of the four seasons of my college career, I started to wonder whether sports therapy was the right choice for me. Certainly I had been through enough

Tampa to Denver, 2001

Los Angeles to Sydney, 2001

physical mending to have the necessary experience, but at the same time I was extremely disappointed at having been unable to compete. So, although I graduated with a B.S. in psychology, it was quite unclear to me what I was going to do after college.

Instead of returning to school to become a doctor of psychology, I attempted to persuade my parents to shift gears and send me to photography school instead. They didn't take the bait (and even to this day, I can't say that I blame them!). Although I could have pursued a higher degree in psychology, I wanted to find a way to help people while pursuing what I was interested in: photography.

Ultimately, I took six months off and went to work in a one-hour photo store while taking courses in photography at a local community college. In 1991, I was hired as a photo technician at a medical imaging company. There I captured images off Betacam video tapes and removed color casts, noise, and patient names from ultrasound images. At the same time, I completed an associate's degree in art at Foothill College, where I studied with Stephen Johnson, an internationally recognized photographer and pioneer in the field of digital photography.

When we met, Stephen was working closely with Adobe, giving feedback to the Photoshop development team about their product. Through that connection, I was recruited by Adobe in 1992 to serve on the technical support team for Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Premiere. When Adobe acquired Aldus in 1994, my role changed and I became a graphic designer in the technical publications group, working on the Classroom in a Book series, "Beyond the Basics" tutorials, and the user guides for Photoshop, Premiere, and Illustrator.

3. Be open to whatever comes your way.

In 1998, a twist of fate put me on a stage for the first time. Fellow Adobe employee and mentor Luanne Cohen asked me to speak in her place on "What's New in Photoshop 5.0" at the HOW Design Conference. At first, I was absolutely terrified, but I quickly realized that the people in the audience weren't really watching me—they were watching the screen. What they wanted to know was something I knew inside and out, and all I had to do was relay that information to them as clearly as possible.

As I did the demo, I saw light bulbs going on in the minds of the audience. It was so inspiring. What surprised me was that it wasn't even the most advanced feature that elicited the biggest response from the audience—instead, it was the simple tip they'd never heard before that could help them work more efficiently every single day. I realized that day that Photoshop training was what I wanted to do: it

Chicago to Dallas, 2002

London to San Francisco, 2004

Miami to New York, 2002

London to San Francisco, 2004

was the perfect pairing of my desire to educate people while using a tool I was passionate about, and I loved it.

With the help of Russell Brown and George Jardine, I soon became a "Photoshop Evangelist," which essentially meant that my job was to be a conduit between the engineers developing the product and the diverse group of people using it. Over time, the role has expanded to include customer education, product development, and market research for photography, design, digital imaging, and illustration.

4. Share what you know and learn from others.

The people I've been fortunate enough to meet—and it's been a diverse group, ranging from designers to photographers, fine artists to scientists—have had a profound influence on me. They constantly expand my notions about what digital imaging means and how Photoshop is used. They expose me to new ideas and ways of thinking and problem solving, ranging from how best to photograph wildlife on a glacier to capturing a criminal using an unimaginably blurry photograph. We connect because we're passionate about what we do and because we share information to help each other achieve our respective goals.

The people I see as being the most successful (personally as well as financially) tend to share everything they know. They don't fear that giving away technical information puts them at a disadvantage. In fact, because they realize that they can't possibly know everything, this is the only way to go about their work. Their biggest assets are who they are, how they think, how they view the world around them, and how they solve problems. They prefer to talk about what the content of the image is communicating, rather than the techniques used to capture it. They realize that sharing technical information can help craft a mechanically proficient print, but having something to say with an image is something else entirely.

5. Collaborate with other creative people, especially the quiet ones.

Collaboration can be tough in a creative environment since many creative people tend to be a bit more introverted and may not press their ideas in a group. In fact, I've often witnessed firsthand how email has changed working in a creative group, since questions can be asked and answered without the pressure of a group setting. People often feel that they can be more open about their opinions via email or when instant messaging. Also, many introverts need more time to consider their responses. A group meeting may require them to respond to questions immediately, sometimes stifling their ideas and opinions. Having creative people around is a wonderful asset, so it's such a loss when an opinion isn't heard.

Sharing your work with other people is also important—especially as you're working on it. Sometimes, I just need a sounding board, someone to talk to about a piece in order to clarify the direction of the piece. I'm fairly

Denver to Tampa, 2002

Denver to Tampa, 2002

confident that just talking to myself would help a little, but talking to another person really brings what I'm trying to say into focus. By verbalizing a concept, it becomes that much more real and helps me to keep going on a project when I'm stuck in a rut.

6. Be flexible. Learn to negotiate.

This is one I struggle with daily. Pick your battles. Fight for the things you care about most and let the rest go with as much grace as you can muster. In short, recognize what you can and cannot affect.

We all know how wonderful we feel when everything goes well with a piece, but for every time artwork flows from me, there are at least twice as many times when it just gets stuck somewhere. It's important that I have the flexibility to put a project away for a day, a week, or a month. A piece of art is destined to become what it's meant to be in its own time, and you can't force it into being anything else prematurely.

As for negotiations, if you can't negotiate on your own behalf, you will miss out on getting all of the things you want and deserve, whether it's a bigger paycheck, additional time to work on a project, or more time off. It's worth learning how to effectively ask for what you want. This also enters into the world of "managing client expectations." Clients will want the world—they want it now, and they want it for free. Set realistic expectations and deadlines. Then, when and if you have the opportunity, you can "over-deliver."

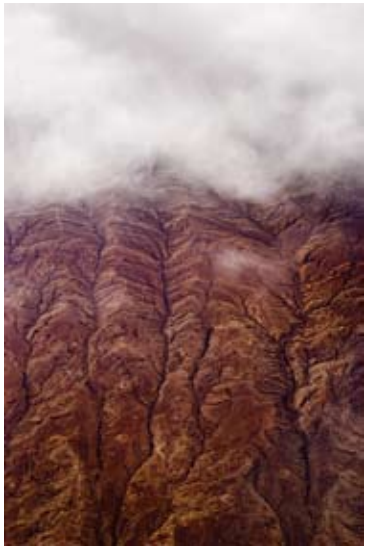
7. Fix whatever you complain about the most.

If you can do this, it will have a profound effect on your life. Take a good look at yourself and your life and see what really bothers you. Whether it's your job, your computer, how much rent you're paying, or how long it takes you to get to work, the things that keep you up at night take your focus away from being creative. Some things can be easily remedied; others—like bad habits—are harder to change. All of the energy you expend on those things can be spent elsewhere in more creative ways. We tend to want to "do it all," but choosing what to spend time on is a huge step toward getting more out of your own creativity.

I suppose this is just another way of saying "figure out what your priorities are." What is truly important to you? Is it possible to let those other things go so that you can devote more time to what you enjoy doing? What are your short- and long-term goals? Have you ever put them down on paper? I would highly suggest that you give it a try.

Once you've settled on what's important, keep those goals close at hand so that you can refer to them as you need to throughout the day, week, or month—or until the goal is met. If necessary, break down those large, overwhelming goals into smaller, manageable, and, most importantly, *attainable* goals. Make sure that the results are quantifiable; don't make your goal something like "I will get in shape." Instead, tell yourself, "I will work out three times this week." If you don't succeed, don't give up—just try again. And when you do reach your goals, don't forget to reward yourself!

Chicago to San Jose, 2004



Chicago to San Jose, 2005

8. View every challenge as a possible discovery.

Ever heard the saying, "There are no problems, there are only opportunities"? This is an attitude worth cultivating, and you can make it work in your own life. My friend Tracy has taken this attitude to the next level. She says, "If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door!" Don't fight change—it's the one thing you can be sure will occur.

9. Take 15 minutes for yourself every day.

I struggle with always putting work (i.e., obligations) before creativity. I have a very difficult time allowing myself to enjoy being creative unless everything else is done. Specifically, I abstain until everything else has been checked off my list of obligations. It's as if I'm Cinderella and I have to get everything done before I go to the ball. If you have this tendency, make sure you do eventually get to the ball, even if it's just for 15 minutes.

10. Figure out what you need to do to reach your "zero point."

Your "zero point" is the point at which you can let go of everything—when you stop thinking about life, work, and the things that make up your daily routine. I can't mix creativity with daily stress. I need to unwind from work pressure, change my environment, and even do some mindless domestic tasks, such as laundry, before the creative process kicks in (or before I allow myself to focus on it).

You must find your own form of meditation. I tend to picture meditation as the practice of sitting in an uncomfortable position on the floor, but I think people meditate more than they realize. When I used to commute about an hour each day, I noticed that the stress I had been feeling at work was washed away during the commute time. It was a transition period, a kind of meditation. Now that I no longer have a commute, I like going for a long walk in the morning—this exercise serves as a meditation and keeps my body and mind active.

11. Integrate work and art; both will benefit.

Photoshop isn't just my occupation; it is also my preoccupation. In my personal work, it has become my primary creative tool—the most powerful implement in my toolbox. It is what I use to make the images I see in my head. It is the translator of my thoughts into my visions. For me, a computer isn't merely a shortcut for accomplishing what is possible with a camera and a darkroom. Instead, using a computer to create art is about exploring that which is possible in no other medium and taking advantage of its flexibility and advantages for the purpose of creative exploration.

There is a lot of crossover between my personal work and the work I do for Adobe. This suits me perfectly. I feel very fortunate that practically everything I do for my job helps me to move forward in my personal work. I like to think that the line between the two is drawn with water-based marker on wet tissue paper, my two lives blended delicately together. Not only does my professional work push me forward, but I also use what I learn from my personal projects to do a better job at work.

Vancouver to Victoria, 2005

San Jose to Chicago, 2005

Being so involved with the product on a daily basis—for Adobe at work and in my own projects at home—helps me understand how, why, and where customers can use particular features. I also see the ways in which Photoshop profits them financially (saving both time and money) and gives them satisfaction with their work. Essentially, I have a symbiotic relationship with the people I speak to; they learn from me just as I learn from them.

12. Take up an interest in something you know nothing about.

I call this my "become a beginner" slogan. It flips the "learning switch" on and expands your mind in a new direction. Besides, it's fun—you don't have to know anything about it, and there's no such thing as a stupid question. I've found that as I get older, I habitually fall back on the things I already know, and I am perhaps more resistant to new experiences. The occasional class in encaustic painting, ceramics, or scuba diving keeps my brain busy and, hopefully, well exercised.

13. Look at new stuff—and at what you already know—with a fresh perspective.

Pay attention. Don't go through life in a daze. We're creatures of habit—we drive to work by the same roads every day, we eat the same foods, we tend to solve problems in the same way time after time—and it's very tough for us to break out of our molds. But if you do something different every day, you simply expand on your base of experiences.

(On the other hand, we're so overwhelmed with information—some of it significantly more useful than the rest—that learning to filter is a valuable skill to acquire as well. The camera is my filter—filtering in what I want to see in the world and filtering out what I want to ignore.)

If you really want to get a fresh perspective on things, try spending some time with a child. The children that I know aren't afraid to ask questions or say what's on their minds—for better or worse! You might be surprised by how honestly they respond to your work and how much you can benefit from their perspective.

14. Keep a journal.

The most difficult part of keeping a journal is starting the first page. It's a bit like the opening scene in the movie *Adaptation* in which Nicolas Cage's character is thinking out loud. In my case, it sounds like this: "I don't know what to write. If I did write something, I might not like it. What if it's not written well? What if I misspell something? What if my handwriting looks poor; I have never had very good penmanship. If I could just write one page…if I write one page, then I'll feel better. I'll reward myself—maybe a piece of chocolate. Yeah. If I can write one page, I'll eat a piece of chocolate. NO, not chocolate, because then I would want a second piece when I write another page. I have no self-control. If I could control myself, I'd be a better person. No, if I could control myself, then I'd be able to write." And so it goes. My advice is: just start writing, and then keep going.

I use two different sketchbooks—both without lines—and I carry them with me everywhere. One of the books is for work-related topics; the

Denver to San Francisco, 2000

Denver to San Francisco, 2000

other is for my personal thoughts. This seems to work for me; I can create all of my to-do lists in my "work" book where I can make a mess and cross things off of my list.

The personal journal is a kind of catchall for random thoughts, sketches, diagrams, and scraps of things I come across that I want to remember. I have sections for advice and words of wisdom I encounter, movies that people recommend, websites worth surfing, and bottles of wine I've enjoyed and would buy again. Really, anything I don't think I would remember otherwise. Some entries are simply humorous, while others are things I know I need to give more priority to.

Here are some of my favorite notes from the "quotes to remember" section:

"Genius is the ability to edit."
—Charlie Chaplin

"If you don't have your camera with you, how are you going to be ready for the first shot?"
—Jay Maisel

"There is no conceivable law by which a man can be forced to work on any terms except those he chooses to set."
—Ayn Rand, The Fountainhead

"Making art is hard! Remember that when you want to quit, don't. Just stop for a while. You can begin again after stopping, but not if you quit."
— from Art and Fear, *by David Bayles and Ted Orland*

"Sometimes it's way faster to go a bit slower."
—Jim Krause

"I leave it to other people to live on the edge; most likely, I'd fall off."

"As a photographer, do I change the precise moment that I'm trying to capture by my presence? Am I changing what would have happened by trying to be perfectly objective?"

"It's better to get hurt by the truth than comforted by a lie."
—Khaled Hosseini

"There are no shortcuts to anyplace worth going."
—Beverly Sills

PETRICHOR /'pɛtrike(r)/: the smell of rain on dry ground

"We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are."
—Anais Nin

George Carlin once said that when he notices something, he writes it down. Not everything he writes down is necessarily funny, at least not at the time. He'll come back to his writings later and see whether his perception has changed. I often thumb through my old journals to jog my memory and see relationships between events that were not always evident when I was busy living them.

15. Visualize first, Photoshop second.

Don't let the computer suck you in; do your mental homework first. Make sure you have the bigger concept of your work before you reach for a mouse. When I'm trying to solve a prob-

Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, 2001

lem or come up with an idea, the best tools I have are a pencil and paper. Don't be afraid to look for two or three good ideas—don't stop after one. Take a risk and go out on a limb. After all, you already have those first few ideas you can always go back to, but if you stop, who knows what you might be missing? If the creative juices are flowing, grab a bucket. And don't let your tools get in the way—learn the technology so well that it becomes an asset that allows you to focus on creativity and the ideas behind the content.

16. Replace your thoughts with intuition.

In graphic design—ideally—you learn design rules and then strive to break them when you can. It's very tough for me to leave the rules behind, but I find that when I do, something much more interesting happens. In the art world, there are no rules. So, instead of thinking about the piece, the message it conveys, what it's "for," and why I am creating it, I just focus on what's in front of me and follow my intuition. Go ahead and try to let go; run with a piece and see if it lifts like a kite in the wind. Remember, if you don't risk anything, you risk everything.

17. Play! Play! Play!

Give yourself assignments. It's a good habit to have a clear idea of what you want to achieve before you sit down with Photoshop, but there's no substitute for just sitting down and playing, experimenting, practicing—or whatever you want to call it. Some assignments I give myself, for example, are to make book and CD covers. After I read a book, I occasionally attempt a "better" design for the book cover. I try to create a cover image that better matches how I visualized the characters in the book, or what I think the book is about. Find something you'll enjoy doing, and keep in mind that you don't have to play by yourself. Play "Photoshop tennis" with a friend. Start off by combining a few images in Photoshop, and then send them to a friend. Your friend then adds his own ideas to the file and sends it back. And so on. Crazy as it sounds, just sitting down with someone else to practice using Photoshop can teach you volumes about shortcuts and techniques.

18. Know when you're done.

The hardest part of working with the digital medium is that because it offers so many options for exploration, you must learn discipline. With Photoshop, the paint is never dry, the exposure is never fixed, and the print is never final. All of it can be done differently at any point, so part of the art form is knowing when to stop—realizing when you've said what you set out to say.

Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, 2001