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The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Photographer

I first wrote an article with this title approximately five years ago for a mainstream printed photography magazine that I edited. At the time, it seemed like a risk, a risk to write and publish a truthful and honest reflection on the emotional, mental and spiritual realities faced by many photographers within a title supported by camera manufacturer advertising. The article proved to be the most commented on and responded to feature that the magazine published in my three years as editor. It provoked letters from photographers thanking us for raising the issue and one in particular which is now available to read here https://unitednationsofphotography.com/2016/01/22/im-a-photographer-and-i-have-a-problem has in itself provoked a similar level of interest and response.

Five years on and I feel compelled to write again of the realities faced by photographers whose lives depend upon the creation and development of a successful photography practice. In that first article, I wrote of those who succumbed to these pressures such as Diane Arbus, Terence Donovan and Bob Carlos Clarke – I'm sure you will know of others – but those are the high-profile names, the photographers whose names have become associated with the saddest of ends to their careers and lives. There are of course many other photographers whose names and images are less well known who suffer the same pressures and stresses as those headline acts who need our support, understanding and empathy.

A friend of mine, photographer Chris Floyd has spoken about his belief that it was the progression from analogue to digital photography and the subsequent closure of the commercial darkroom that instigated many of the issues of loneliness photographers face today. I agree with him. The darkroom was a social space where photographers could meet and interact, where they could feel part of a creative community. This was essential to a photographer's mental well-being, as you could always be sure of a chat and a coffee, sharing ideas and experiences whether you had work to drop off or not.

Today you could make the same argument for a digital printer but the reality is that photographers have their work printed far less often than when they relied on a lab to process and contact their film and therefore that sense of community is far less vibrant.

So, a sense of community is important and that sense of physical community has undoubtedly been replaced by the online communities of social media. There is no need for me to speak here of the positive and negative aspects of social media and its associated communities but the reality of any online engagement is screen time. Additional screen time to that spent on photographic workflow including pre-production, research, editing, post-production and the general business of emails, marketing, promotion and accounting. That's a lot of screen time, which means a lot of time alone with no friend by your side other than a plastic mouse.

Isolation can easily lead to depression and the role of the photographer is an increasingly isolated one. Add to that the inevitable cases of rejection when applying for grants and bursaries, entering competitions and failing to gain commissions and it is no surprise that many photographers find themselves unable to deal with remaining upbeat and positive.

It is interesting how many photographers I know who have recently taken up running or cycling. The positive effects of physical exercise when dealing with depression are well documented and although none of them have spoken to me about their mental wellbeing directly there is a definite trend that I can see developing. A trend of self-awareness of mental health and a positive attitude towards its relationship with a career in photography.

This is perhaps most evident in the growth of collaborative projects over the past five years. In my previous article, I suggested that photographers who identified aspects of poor mental health within themselves should explore the support networks of CBT – Cognitive Behaviour Therapy – and Mindfulness. Today I would add to that suggestion the many local collaborative projects instigated by photographers to stage talks, exhibitions and meet-ups. These communities share a passion for photography and perhaps most importantly a desire to share work, knowledge and experience. The photographers who attend are invariably at different stages of their careers and therefore invaluable in supporting those struggling with the time it can take to become an established photographer.

These communities are using online communication to promote their projects but the 'real' world to deliver them and that is where the 'real' sense of community exists. If you don't have one near you why not set up your own? Reach out to local photographers and creatives and you will soon find people willing and able to work with you to establish some form of project. If you want inspiration look at the incredible success of the UK based Miniclick Talks – https://miniclick.co.uk – established by architectural photographer Jim Stephenson. A not for profit collaborative enterprise which embraces talks, exhibitions, publishing and one-off events that welcomes all photographers from student to established professional level. Its monthly talks have become the fulcrum of the local photographic community's existence.

So far I have spoken about the physical loneliness that photographers can feel but there is also a mental loneliness that needs to be recognised and addressed. In a medium in which two plus two does not make four the creation of work to meet your personal or client's expectations is mentally challenging. The key word here is expectation and failing to meet that expectation can be a trigger to self-doubt and associated issues of anxiety that can lead to depression.

It takes a strong sense of purpose balanced with a willingness to listen and evolve to work as a photographer but even with these qualities if your expectations are unrealistic or ill-informed they will never be met. It is this failure to meet expectations that I see most often as the foundation for mental health issues in photographers. Whenever I am asked to mentor or advise photographers the first question I always ask concerns their expectations. It is the starting point to understanding where they are on their journey and with this knowledge it is possible to give both informed and honest advice that will allow them to take the small steps required of the long-distance runner. A career in photography is not a sprint or perhaps even more accurately a long-jump based upon a quick run-up. It is a marathon and one that can be incredibly rewarding if the correct training, support structures and precautions are understood and put into place.

There is a joke that goes like this "What's the difference between a photographer and a large deep pan pizza? The deep pan pizza can feed a family of four!" Creating a sufficient income from photography is the hardest aspect of your practice to come to terms with. There are no shortage of magazine articles and online programmes promising you great riches based on workflow, I don't believe any of them and neither should you. Workflow is not the answer and you should not feel a failure if the promises made don't work for you. It is hard to make a living from photography but it is possible. The Twenty First Century photography must be a master of transferable skills aligned with their photography and open to opportunities to expand and develop their practice in previously unconsidered environments. These may include film, moving image, writing, workshops, broadcast and lecturing. As I have said, the level of your success will be based upon the level of your expectation and that expectation can and should be informed by those who are travelling the same road as you.

That journey can be a lonely one but it doesn't have to be, all photographers experience the same issues, anxiety and setbacks just as they treasure the highs they remember the lows and sharing this

reality is the beginning of an essential conversation. Writing this article, I am aware that this conversation is happening without the far of negative judgement globally and that must be a good thing.

I am positive about the current state of photography, far more positive than I was five years ago. However, if you are reading this and feeling that I have highlighted feelings you recognise in yourself, I hope that some of what I said is of help especially if you do not share my current positivity. You are not alone and there are multiple support structures for you to reach out to. A career as a professional photographer is not easy and it is not for everyone but photography is and there is no shame in admitting to yourself and others that you prefer the creation of images outside of an industry expectation. The realisation that professional photography is not for you is not an admittance of defeat but one of success. A success in that you are taking control of your mental health and deciding on a new road to travel with photography as your friend and not your nemesis.