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June 10, 2022 -

As told to Elise McCave, 3817 words.

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On not shying away from opportunity

Photographer and artist Chris Burkard discusses expanding what you do, balancing creative work and family, being vulnerable, and why storytelling is at the center of everything he creates.

Your career is varied. I'm interested in how you describe yourself professionally?

Being a storyteller is at the core of everything I care about. I don't really care about being called a photographer or being called an editor or director or a speaker. I realized a long time ago that I felt so pigeonholed feeling like photography was the only medium or modality I had to express myself. And I started to realize, well, I need to expand that. I need to look into other ways, because nowadays so much of what I do is about telling stories. And some of that is via social media. Some of that is via films, books, some of that is in person events. And so I really try to use all the storytelling modalities to get my experiences across, in hopes that it can change and alter other people's lives, potentially.

Has that shifted over time? If I was to ask you seven years ago or 15 years ago the same question, would you have had a different answer?

Absolutely. When I was young and I started out, all I knew was photography. It's kind of like, you know one language or you reach into your pocket and all you have to eat with is a fork, and you try to make it work for everything. And nowadays I feel like I've got this huge cutlery set. Sometimes I'm going to use chopsticks. Sometimes I'm going to use a knife. Whatever. But all of my tools are very sharp. They're very honed. In the beginning, I did feel stifled. I felt very stifled because all I had was this one way of expressing myself and you know how that is. If you want to tell somebody something that was meaningful or something that you felt, or something that you experienced, you want to have multiple ways of doing it, multiple ways of getting your message across.

You said you felt stifled. Did you have a sense when you were younger of the ways in which you wanted to expand your craft? Was that a clear vision or did you feel your way through that?

It was a bit of the blind leading the blind, because I don't have formal education. I didn't go to college. I'm the last person to try to advise somebody on a conventional path to figuring out what you want. But I felt intuitive about the fact that when something stopped serving me, I tried to thrust myself immediately into the space of discomfort. And what I mean by that is, photography is so fun and challenging and hard to figure out, and so I felt compelled to be like, "You know what? I need to explore this different thing. I want to start seeing what it feels like to direct video." And I immediately felt so insignificant, so out of my league, so out of my element.

I think that there was a natural course of action where opportunities came, and instead of shying away from them, I took those opportunities. I think that's really what helped me. I've never been afraid of taking an opportunity. And it's not so much about faking it til you make it, because I feel like we're always faking it. We're faking it until we do it. That's just what it is. There's no, like, "I'm a confident professional and I know exactly what's going to happen." Every situation I find myself in, there's an element of figuring it out as you go. And so I think that for me, it was a matter of taking opportunities and not shying away from the ones that kind of scared me.

Were there moments in your career where you wondered if you were making the right decisions about what you were doing or what you wanted to do next?

Absolutely. I speak about this kind of intimately during my Ted Talk. I thought at a certain point I had

the dream job. But I would be feeling unfulfilled. I was working for Surfer Magazine, going to places, shooting surfers in remote locations, beautiful tropical places. And I felt in my soul, I felt some element of like, "Well, maybe there's more, but is this it?" And I started to question it. I started to look at other places, more remote, off the beaten path places that could fill me up, fuel me, make me excited about photography, make me feel like I was giving my best work. And it was a departure from what I knew. It was scary. All of a sudden work was scary again. And I think that that is a theme in my life. I need to move towards a place of discomfort. I need to move towards a place of growth. And I don't think discomfort needs to mean you're feeling pain. It just needs to mean that you are in some ways pursuing the path of growth. In my career at that moment, early twenties, I took a hard left turn and I pursued something very different. But there were a lot of years of being like, "Am I moving backwards? What am I doing? What am I doing?" My bank account was starting to suffer. My relationships were starting to suffer. It was crazy.

What was the turning point then after that big shift? What was the moment when that clicked and that questioning went away?

I think that there were some critical moments, for sure, that kind of altered that shift. But if anything, I think that what I was seeing was that it was a big ship. The more successful you get—and I guess it's not even success, it's just the more comfortable you get—it's like the ship gets bigger and it becomes harder to steer. And so it was all of a sudden like I made a small shift, but after a couple weeks, after a couple months, you're all of a sudden way off course from where you were, and you're in foreign waters and you're scared. And it felt new and exciting and immersive and scary. But also like I was seeing new things. And so it's funny because there's almost this balance of opposites where like, yeah, I'm in uncharted territory, but I'm also feeling fulfilled in ways that I didn't really realize, I didn't know.

And that was kind of really wild to me. And I think that that was sort of like, I started to see the benefit because I was coming back happier. Although at the time my bank account maybe wasn't happy...but I was coming back fulfilled. I was coming back happier. And I think that that started to become important to me again.

Would you say that you are pretty in tune with your own gut? Is that sense of intuition and being in touch with how you feel about your work, something that you find easy to tap into?

I think that being intuitive in our careers is really challenging. I hate to evolve these conversations into talks of spirituality or self worth or whatever, but you really can't not. For me, understanding my self worth, understanding my value to myself and to my work, it has played a big role. So to answer your question, trying to be intuitive, what does that mean? It means listening to your inner conscience. It means learning to shut out the voices and do what you want to do. Even if it seems like you're making the wrong choice.

I became more intuitive as I felt more validated in what I was doing. And that's the thing. When I pursued my career in the very beginning, I had to make a conscious decision to very, very much let my parents down. Not go to college. Make my choice. That was the very first decision where I was like, "Holy shit, I'm doing something that people are really not happy with, people that I really respect, people that I really love." And I hate to say it, but that's kind of a big part of this. You've got to be willing to make those decisions despite how they're going to affect certain relationships. And you got to know that, you know what? You're doing what's right by you. And that's all you can really do.

In the first five years, I was just lacking confidence. It was all these small micro wins, small wins that were so, so helpful. It was the random people I met along the way that made me feel like my work was valuable. It was the random photographers, the writers, the editors. So this is for me, a big thing, If you see somebody's work who's great, or who's struggling—who maybe you know, or you don't know—don't wait to reach out to tell them that it's great. Don't wait to reach out, because you could literally change the course of that person's life. So my intuitiveness is a byproduct of others reaching out who weren't mentors or people that I needed advice from. It was just like the random people.

It sounds like following your intuition is almost like a muscle that you have exercised a lot from quite early on. Do you feel like that's a muscle that has gotten stronger through being used?

Yes, absolutely. The word is muscle. Your voice is a muscle. The more you use it, the more you feel confident. If I was going to lift a 20 pound weight over my head, I had never done it, I'd be like, "Oh my God, is this thing going to crush me?" But the more I use my voice, the more I feel confident in what I'm saying, the more I feel confident in knowing that my words are an expression of who I am. And at first I felt very weak there. I felt very timid, very incompetent. And so I think that the key component is your intuition is a muscle. You have to trust it. You have to try it and you have to learn to fail.

You have to listen to it and be like, you know what? I made this decision. It was the wrong decision. Maybe I jumped the gun or maybe my intuition on that was a little off. Why is that? Because your intuition is like anything else, it needs to learn. To think that we're going to listen to our intuition and it's going to tell us everything we need to do, that's not how it works. Intuition is based upon experience. Experience is based upon failures and triumphs. So if you do not have failures and triumphs, your intuition is not really going to serve you very well.

When it comes to your work, are there ways in which you define success or failure for you, personally?

It's changed over time. In the beginning it was like, "Well, I'd like to get stamps in my passport and

then like to make a paycheck.” And that’s super notable and there’s nothing wrong with that. But at a certain point, you spend so much time in these places that you feel a sense of responsibility to either want to protect them or to tell a deeper story or to do something. So nowadays I define success as, “Yes, I want to see the world. But my version of seeing the world is different.”

I don’t just care about traveling to every country. Now I want to go to places that are intimate to me, that mean something. Go back and see people I care about. Put roots down in places and actually form a relationship. So a lot of times that means going back to the same places. It also means potentially speaking out for places that I want to protect or want to advocate for. It also means creating long-lasting, long-term projects that are important, that are meaningful, that have substance behind them, books and films and things like that. So my version of success has altered and changed, but that comes with time.

There’s this thought that every person needs to figure out and establish what their purpose is right away without just spending the time putting in their 10,000 hours figuring it out.

So I think it was last year that you published a book with not just pictures, but words as well. Was that *Wayward*?

It’s a slight memoir. It’s the sixth or seventh book I’ve done. I’ve been lucky enough to work on a number of books. This one is slightly more personal. It has more personal stories, more interjections around my thoughts and feelings on trips. Other books I’ve done have been based upon pure photography or the writers or the journalists that came. But this book is more about my musings.

How did it feel to explore writing, and not just from a journalistic perspective, but actually writing about your thoughts and feelings? How did it feel to explore a new creative medium at a point when you have already established yourself as a successful photographer and filmmaker?

It was terrifying. Any time that you’re putting your own voice out there, it’s terrifying. It takes time to learn to be vulnerable. Vulnerability in our careers and in our lives is critical to formulating real honest relationships. It’s something I’ve always strived for, but you never know how to go about it. I’ve learned how to be vulnerable and how to accept the fact that the way I’ve gone about things isn’t always the right way. The way I’ve gone about things isn’t the way that everybody else would. I’ve made my own mistakes and I’ve learned from those mistakes and that’s a beautiful thing.

Really, *Wayward* was about taking a long way to get to where you want to go. I’ve never been great at taking advice from other people’s mistakes and learning from their mistakes. You have to be really wise to do that. I’ve been more of like, “Well, let me just fall flat on my face. I’ll figure it out from there.”

During that process, were you ever tempted to give up? And if you were, what stopped you from doing that?

I never wanted to give up. I definitely went through some real emotional come-to-god moments, because I was like, “Does anybody care about what I think? Does anybody care about my experiences?” And so I had to embrace the fact that I had an important voice and I wanted to share that.

When you do hit up against a creative block, do you have any go-to tricks, maybe things that you do either physically or mentally, any exercises that you tend to return to, to get yourself a bit unstuck?

I try to look back on a life of yoga practice. I try to look back on some of these more meaningful experiences. I try to look upon my family, friends, colleagues, loved ones. I look back on a lot of those experiences and try to find strengths and try to develop an understanding of what is valuable, what is worth sharing. I look for outside sources to inspire me nowadays and to fill me up that aren’t photography.

It sounds like you were nodding towards some kind of gratitude practice, taking a step back to acknowledge what you’ve had the good fortune to experience.

When I go on a trip, when I go on an experience, when I lift up my camera, I’m almost trying to think about all of the moments I didn’t have the camera to my eye, because those are the ones where you cultivate the story. Like for example, when I started my career, I remember traveling to Dubai. It was the first time I had traveled internationally. The very first time. And I was so shook by the world around me that I filtered every experience through the camera. I had no idea what was going on. And I think that that hindered me in many ways. It allowed me to not experience the culture because I was so nervous. I was so scared and the camera became my filter.

And nowadays I want to have the camera down as much as I can. I want to really just think about that 90/10 rule. Like 10 percent of the time I’m shooting, 90 percent of the time I’m experiencing, because to me it feels equally important if not more important to have moments where you absorb what’s happened, you take it all in.

You have two kids and obviously your work is taking you all over the world all the time. How do you manage to balance those two sides of your life? When do you find they come most into conflict, and when do they align the most?

I think that’s at the root of how you make this life work, because I think there’s two different lives. There’s a life before you have any responsibility for anyone but yourself, and then there’s a life after.

Whether that's a parent or a significant other or children or whatever, everybody at some point, you grow up, you're responsible for somebody. And to be honest, that's when real life really starts. That's when your career really starts to mean something, because you're not just there seeking after things on your own.

When I'm home, I'm really home. I'm a part of that life with [my wife]. I'm helping with the kids. It's not just like straight to the office, straight to some adventure, whatever.

If I want to find time to train and exercise, I have to carve out time around my family, because that's important. I think one of the biggest things is that, what can really be challenging when one partner travels a lot, isn't so much that someone's gone, it's that when they come back, they have had this life-changing, life-altering experience that they can't wait to share. They just want to blast their partner with all of these things, when maybe that person's up in the doldrums of daily life. So how do we get them out of that?

When I come home, my biggest and most important priority is to make sure that [my wife] has time to go experience something awesome and something grand and something life-changing. I want her to go out and experience something that feels like it lifts her up. It fills her up. So before I can unload some of my thoughts, feelings, emotions, I have to make sure her cup is full, too. So I try to prioritize that.

When it comes to kids, the biggest thing is, if you're gone and you come back and they ask you where you've been, you've already failed. I feel like a big part of that is you have to educate them where you're going, why you're going there, why it's important. You can't tell your kids, "Oh, I hate my job. It takes me away from you. I'm so sorry." That's the wrong message to send. You have to tell your kids, "I love what I do. I cannot wait for you to find that thing that you love. I can't wait for you to find that career that you love that takes you away from your family, but you know it's worth it."

With that, I always want to try to be accessible. That requires sometimes spending more money or taking out the time to just carve out a moment to talk. The death of a relationship is text messages, because you can't tell the tone of someone's voice. They could say, "Oh, I'm fine," in a thousand different ways, but you know what it means when they say it. So you need to be cognizant of that and listen to that. A 30-second conversation is better than 30 minutes of text messaging.

When it comes to the kids, I try to just think of how can I make sure they feel like they're along for the experience? Can I send them videos? Can I send them photos of stuff I saw that they like? Not stuff that I like, the stuff that they like, something they can relate to. And so that's been really fun.

So, that opportunity to share it with your family is perhaps easier now than it was when your kids were tiny. Is that the moment where the two sides align beautifully?

Absolutely. When those opportunities come—which they don't always happen, you have to wait for them—it becomes really special. Just because I get the opportunity to travel to some amazing places doesn't mean I always get to bring my kids. I don't think that them spending tons of time in a van in the Arctic traveling with 10 dudes is really what they want.

So I try to be very conscientious of where I take them. I want to be educational. I want to teach them something. And I think that the way that I've tried to travel, given the fact that we live in a very volatile world with very limited resources, it's important for them to realize that I don't travel unless I'm going to work. I don't go to places on vacation. I travel with a purpose and I want them to consider the same thing.

Chris Burkard Recommends:

Essentialism by Greg McKeown. It's a book. It really changed my life, thinking about how saying no is saying yes to what you want.

Noise canceling headphones are one of my five things, because I love to just drown out the world and really get into my own thoughts.

A dedicated flexibility, stretching, strength, training practice has been huge, because I ask so much of my body and I want to give my body back something. So to find the time to give it back something is important.

Really good chocolate is probably a staple. It's my diet and in my life. In Iceland, there's a chocolatier called Omnom and they're the only actual chocolatier in Iceland and they just make incredible, incredible chocolate.

Not so much the camera, but the tool that you have with you to document. A lot of times that means your phone and just having like a way to document life, and it doesn't have to be the best equipment. I think that that's critical to me. I love being able to share my life. So I would say that the thing that is the most accessible, the thing you can reach for, that's the one that you should really consider the most.

Name


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Vocation

photographer

Fact

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