

An Essay on Becoming Exceptional

As we move toward the beginning of our business plan, I want to take this time to discuss becoming exceptional. Being exceptional means you are a cut above; maybe two. Being exceptional means you do things differently, and better. Your business is better, your work is better, your relationships are better, and the clients who expect the mundane are always surprised by exceptionalism. Unfortunately, too many of us shy away from being exceptional. We keep hearing people tell us that being that good is the same as being conceited or egocentric. The movement all across the land is to denigrate the exceptional in lieu of the mundane; no hurt feelings or trauma of having to deal with the fact that you may not be as good as that other guy -- the exceptional one.

What a load of crap. The ones who make it to the top of the mountain are the exceptional ones. And anyone can go up the mountain; they just have to put one foot in front of the other and not quit.

Not. Quit.

Never quitting is one of the prime ingredients in being exceptional.

(I feel I must state that sometimes one must withdraw, whether temporarily or for a longer time. Withdrawing to regroup for a myriad of reasons is not quitting. When we quit, we emotionally destroy any link to the goal we were chasing. And a little part of us dies in the quitting. Withdrawing can be a strategic decision that leads to a different path. Only you will know whether you are indeed quitting or withdrawing. I just implore you to be honest with yourself if you have to make that decision regarding anything that is important to you.)

Sure, some will get there in record time, and others may arrive late to the party and exhausted. So? The feeling that only "special" people are allowed in will be one of the most debilitating thoughts we can ever have enter our mind. And exceptional people are not conceited; they simply know that they are good at what they do. That others may infer that they are somehow elitist cannot be helped these days. The striving for centerline mediocrity seems to be surrounding us on many fronts. I simply believe it is a ruse to keep people from trying to do the hard work. And without the work there is no success. And without success there is no exceptionalism. And without exceptionalism, we can all experience the fairness of lowered expectations.

Recently, a photographer published a "manifesto" on becoming a great photographer. It was full of "don't bother learning" and "just spray and pray" and "sure, you're good enough if you think you are" crap. I hardly think that the words contained within that piece were helpful. To be fair, there was some good advice mixed in with what is such a terrible hijacking of the "becoming a professional" meme, but it was mostly overshadowed by the silly, faux-new-agey approach.

The point is, to be a stand-out in this business, you must stand out. In all ways - from your work to the way you treat your staff and even to how you follow up with those you may not have to ever follow up with.

When we establish a pattern of exceptionalism, that pattern follows us into other areas of our personal and professional lives.

I think our goal-setting exercises from the previous week's assignment must now be tempered with some cold hard facts on how we will do those things with exceptionalism.

And the cool thing about being in the "exceptional" mode is that it is really pretty easy, and it flows so smoothly. I think it is because being exceptional is the normal state for us humans. The extraneous forces that push it away from us are quite powerful. From pop culture to politics to entertainment to where we get educated, to stand out and work to be better is seen as a problem. "Go along to get along" can be the prevailing process. Striving is seen as too ambitious, too "full of themselves", too "arrogant" to think that they could actually do something cool.

Something big. Really big.

So, for this exercise we are going to look at being exceptional and then we can take this exercise back to our goals and further make them real in our minds. How? By envisioning each goal as being something we will achieve with exceptionalism. We will also define some exceptional tactics to help get those goals off the ground and into the air! It's time to fly.

For me there are three questions that I ask myself before beginning any endeavor:

Will this help my relationships be better?

Will this help my business be better?

Will this help my personal being be better?

If the answer is no to any or all of them, I must then rethink if what I am prepared to do is something I should be doing.

A hand in the back... yes you... a question?

"Well, what if you want to just sit around and drink a beer on a Saturday afternoon? That won't help anything, so I shouldn't do it?"

Hold on for a second. Let's look at it closely.

Will it help your relationship to be better? Sure - it could. If you have had an extremely busy week and need to relax, turn the brain off, and listen to some Credence, it most certainly can help your attitude and that can affect the relationships in a good way.

Will it help your business to be better? Possibly yes. Maybe you need to turn your mind off from focusing on a problem - just for a while - and this gives you ample opportunity. You may be surprised what the brain will come up with while you are busy doing other stuff.

Will it help your personal life? Well, if the two above are true, it only stands that this one is as well. Sure - we all need to unwind in the ways that we enjoy.

There is nothing wrong with adventuring, vacationing, lazing around for a while, or taking a nap. All can be of a huge benefit to us. But what if we want to buy that new lens on sale down at the local Camera Quickie?

Will it help our relationships? Depends on where we are financially and how things are going on that front. Could simply be a wash, or it could be a disaster. You'll know instantly when you ask yourself the question. And, no, spending three hours trying to justify it to yourself only digs the hole a lot deeper.

Will it help the business? See above and then ask if it is something you want or something you need. If it truly is a need, then that almost answers number one above.

Will it help you personally? Only you can answer that, but I expect there are times when knowing you have the right tool for the job can help you feel more confident.

First thing in the morning, I work on me. I say some positive things about where I am and where I want to go.

And then I ask myself what can stop me from doing what I need to do that day. I want a mental picture of the people/circumstances that can get in the way of my priorities. And instantly I make a decision to not let them prevail. No one owns my day but me.

Sure, you have to take the kids to school and also that dentist appointment. (See the three questions above... heh.) All's covered there. What do you think not taking the kids to school would do for your relationships, business, and personal life? Yeah...me too.

Understanding the challenges of the day and getting after it with a good, assertive approach will get you from where you are not moving to a track that runs pretty good. We control this track, and we do so from our feelings of whether we are deserving of a faster track or not.

I also think in order to be exceptional you must embrace the work that has to be done. Every day. No matter what, the work must be done.

Overcoming the tiredness syndrome or the apathy that can be a by-product of being tired must be dealt with daily. It is the mantra of the exceptional artist or artisan: "Get the Work Done"

An old friend of mine once told me that to be successful (and he most definitely was) one only had to work half a day. Half a day and done. He then told me to choose which 12 hours that would be. There are 24 hours in a day, and we only need work half of them.

Yeah... kind of like that.

This can be the defining point for you as well, you know: Getting to the work. You either do or do not.

"There is no try." (Yoda)

This can always produce a challenge, of course.

It is how you deal with that challenge that will either make you successful or transform your great intentions into anchors around your neck.

Always look for solutions. Always concentrate on the challenge as if there is a solution out there waiting to be discovered. Never think that any challenge is more than a solution waiting to be found.

Other people love solutions-oriented people. When you are constantly engaged with the possible solutions, others will feel so much more comfortable that they will begin to support you. You gain allies with positive focus on creating solutions. You merely gain hangers-on with a focus on the problems; and they will abandon you faster than rats from a sinking ship at the first opportunity.

One way I think a photographer can do this is to always be shooting, whether for clients or yourself, and always be making images that mean something to you. Whether on iPhone or DSLR or MF film camera - no one cares. Just shoot images and look at/think about solutions.

Be prompt. That is what exceptional people do. They don't put off stuff that shouldn't be put off. They are the first out of the gate to get things done.

Get an email query? Answer it as soon as possible.

Got a friend request for LinkedIn? Accept it.

Return phone calls as soon as possible.

One thing I do that my clients like is “recap.” I take a moment after a business call to make some quick notes - bullets really - and email them to my client. This lets them know that I was, indeed, listening and that I am working actively on a solution.

Own up to mistakes early and often. Do not hesitate to say, “Whoops, got that wrong. Let’s try this...” People don’t see that as failure, they see it as someone who recognizes what has to be done and then gets after it.

Acknowledge others, and recognize exceptionalism wherever you experience it. Bad service at a restaurant will usually result in a dollar tip. That’s okay, though, because I will over tip for great, exceptional service. Acknowledging the exceptionalism of others is a way of acknowledging it in yourself as well. Because we only really want to hang out with exceptional people.

Okay, that may have gotten a few hackles up on some of you. But, well, it’s true.

If we continuously hang with and be around negative, unsuccessful people, their traits will begin to rub off on us. (Yes, I know, I sound like your mom: “Don’t let me catch you hanging with that crowd; they are a bad influence on you.”) And, yeah, we would kick a fit and loudly proclaim that they were good, decent hoodlums and would never ever, ever be able to corrupt us or be a “bad influence” on us because we were such great little kids.

Yeah.

Of course, those are the words of youth. To be taken with a grain of salt and a pound of baloney. Of course hanging out with the hoodlums would be a bad influence. Of course - mom was right.

And I am right at this point as well. Be around losers - and self professed losers - for a while and the loser-dom starts to weigh on you, and you may eventually choose one of two paths:

Path A: You want to save them. You see all the good and just want to help nourish them back to great creative health.

Path B: You acquiesce and start lowering your standards so that they will not have their feelings hurt. This will alleviate you of your guilt of being exceptional, which means you will have to go to the top of this document and begin reading again.

There is another path, though. The path called “I’m Outta Here” and you take your leave with neither pomp nor celebrity. It is a path that may be sad and hard, but it is the only path that will lead you to where you want to be.

This goes for forums and online social media as well. I have found that once I stopped arguing with people, my own value in myself rose. I rarely engage these days. I may pop in to offer my view, my expertise, and my opinion, but then I try to move quickly away and not engage with those who want to simply argue.

Offer suggestions, not harsh criticism. Offer solutions instead of piling on the problem. Offer a helping hand without expectation of a return. Offer your wisdom and insight.

Do not be surprised if it is ignored, nor be surprised if it is rewarded. There are others, like yourself, out there rewarding exceptionalism.

When you choose to do things differently than most; when you put your solutions to work instead of perpetuating the problems; when you offer to be more you than the other guy wants to be him --then you are the exception to the rule when it comes to people.

We call that exceptional. Now.

Take a look at your goals and apply these thoughts to them:

How can I take an exceptional approach to this goal?

How will being exceptional help me reach this goal faster?

What can I do right now to become more exceptional in the pursuit of this goal?

Who can I help to achieve the goal I want to achieve?

Are there places in my list of goals that I may have to focus on with an exceptionalist point of view? Now we continue with a look at the daily questions as well:

What challenges are there to keep me from being exceptional today?

What solutions do I see for providing exceptional service/engagement to those I meet today?

What commitments must I make a priority to let those around me support my actions?

How can I help someone do something even better than they thought they could?

Where will I find exceptional people to meet and be a part of their community? One last thing.

Exceptional people overdeliver. Every time.

Underpromise and overdeliver.

Make it your mantra. Make it your business mission. Make it a habit in all you do. Overdeliver.

Now THAT'S exceptional.