

003 - DIFFICULTY = OPPORTUNITY – CLAIRE BENN

Sometimes we get stuck. The work isn't panning out as you saw it in your head. The fog comes down and you can't see your way forward. Staggering about in the half-light, seeing glimpses in your mind of the vision... but you can't quite get a hold of it. It's a struggle and you're losing belief. What was a full cup of potential is now half-empty. But re-think this – half a cup of potential is better than nothing at all! The cup is still half full. Hold on to that.

"In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity" (Einstein).

When confronted by an imperfect outcome or a problem it's all too easy to become wholly focused on the problem, rather than trying to focus on possible solutions. Remember... you have the power to re-frame things and try to see them more positively. Grab that half-full cup and start talking to yourself. Try hard to suspend judgment. Instead, adopt an attitude of curiosity and start asking very, very specific questions.

Let's say the fog is down on work-in-progress. Put it up on the wall and look at it. Look at it long, look at it hard, examine everything you see – in detail. Try to understand what you're seeing and how it fits with your inner vision of your own work. If it does – establish why. What - specifically is it about the work that sets little chimes of hope going? The colour, the texture, the scale, the contrast, the imagery, the mood (and what is that mood – specifically?) The message, the balance, the focal point, the pathway, the values, the stylistic elements?

Having a conversation with yourself and your work does help as long as you try to keep the questions open, curious and specific – try to establish the needs of your vision and how many are met (so far) in the work-in-progress. For example...

"What's wrong with it, what causes me not to like it, where - exactly – does it fail to meet the needs of the vision?"

"Let's look at what's good about it; the colour is good, I've got good contrast in terms of mass vs void, pale vs dark and the texture's fantastic. So, what's making me unhappy about the whole?"

"Maybe I'm over-reacting - the key element has yet to be put in and that's vital for the overall feel and balance of the piece".

"I'll focus on this then. Let's think about what I originally had in mind... how much impact do I really want this to have, how big does it need to be – how will size/scale impact the piece as a whole, and the colour too?"

And if the Judge moves and hits you with a ball loaded with top-spin, hit it straight back in a curious kind of a way. When you get slapped with "well, from what I see it's not exactly turning out the way you'd seen it in your head", don't get defensive, don't get aggressive, don't get hurt. Use the energy of the to-spin to turn it around. Consider saying something like... "fair enough Judge, what exactly makes you say that?"

Soon, you'll have a conversation going...

Judge says: "it's a bit linear, and I didn't think that would be what you wanted"

You reply: "no, it's not and I'm realising that between vision and reality is a lot of gut-wrenching hard work. .. linear in what way?"

Judge has to get specific and says: "well, you've got a lot of pretty straight horizontals now and everything seems to be in a row – I thought you were trying to convey a sense of crowd?"

You reply: "I was, any suggestions as to how I could still get there?"

Judge now has to coach you: "um – well, how big a crowd did you want - how many people constitute a crowd?"

You get thinking: "mmmh, more than I've got, that's for sure – how big do I want my crowd to be – let me think about that for a minute..."

Above all, try looking at your work-in-progress from a standpoint of curiosity rather than judgement or despair. It's very easy to be judgemental and often, it's an unfair stance to take – particularly when you know you've only got 25/50/75% of the way there in terms of process or composition. Instead, work hard to look at the piece objectively and with curiosity. Every time you see a negative, re-frame it and be curious about it.

There will always be many potential ways forward, and that in itself can be frustrating and confusing. If Jane Dunnewold has driven one thing into me it's to consider all possibilities as objectively as possible. Keep asking – "if I do X, Y or Z, how will each action affect the whole, and what purpose will each action serve – how would the piece be moved forward?" There will always be one "most elegant" solution. Seek and ye shall find.

But you're fraught with doubt – will I make the right choice, what if I screw it up? Remember that the option(s) can be auditioned with cut (and/or painted) paper, sheers, scrap cloth, acetates etc. If in doubt, try it out and see what you respond to. Sure, all of this takes time – but the fog will clear and your work will grow as a result of investing time, reflection, thought and auditioning.

Time is something most of us feel we don't have enough of. Family, friends, children, pets - whatever. You love them all dearly but sometimes you wish they'd just leave you alone. Again, try to help yourself out here. Rather than mope about muttering, sit down with those who matter and have an open, frank discussion about what it is you're trying to do and what they could do to help. Try to avoid whingeing about the way they prevent you spending as much time as you'd like on your passion. Keep focused on ways forward. Seek help, discuss alternatives, agree some boundaries. Establish certain times of day, or days of the week/month that are exclusively yours and be firm in holding yourself and others to them.

Consider turning people into accomplices. Get the kids finger painting – do it with them and some great stuff could come out of your hands. Tape lining paper down on the drive and get the kids - or even the pets - to walk, cycle or trot across it. Drop a load of dog/cat hairs on to the scanner/copier and

see what happens. As for the mother-in-law, 'borrow' her false teeth, photocopy them and then blow them up 25-50-100-125-150-200 times. Scary.

Do whatever you have to do to get out of the fog. Blast your horn, "*sound your barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world*" (Whitman). Smell your way forward, take small steps, use the knowledge and skills you have. Ask yourself non-judgemental questions, come up with possible ways forward, ask "what if", make experiments, play, take risks, be curious, re-frame things, look at the positive and not just the negative, laugh at and learn from dodgy outcomes and acknowledge and celebrate that you can clear the fog and re-fill the cup.