



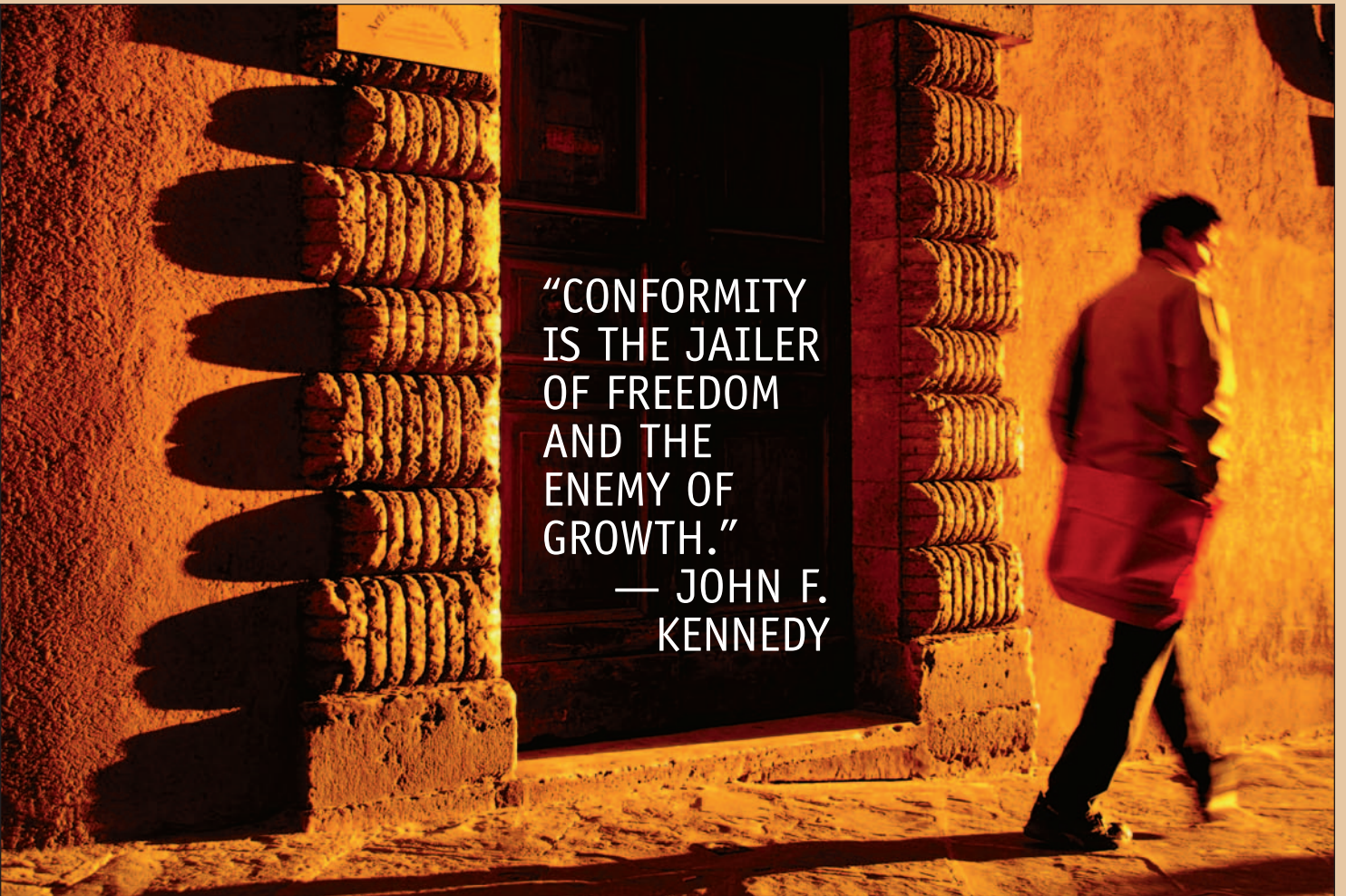
# PARALLEL EFFECTS

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONFORMITY

BY RICHARD MARTIN

EVERY SO OFTEN, I AM REMINDED, THROUGH A CONVERSATION OR A TEACHING EXPERIENCE WITH A WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, OF THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES THAT CONFORMITY PLACES ON A PHOTOGRAPHER'S CREATIVE FREEDOM. IT HAS BECOME PARTICULARLY EVIDENT TO ME, AS A WORKSHOP INSTRUCTOR FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS, THAT THE EAGERNESS TO GAIN APPROVAL, VALIDATION, OR AUTHORIZATION COMES AT THE EXPENSE OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S COMPLETE OPPORTUNITY FOR DISCOVERY AND ENRICHMENT. IN AN EFFORT TO PLEASE OTHERS, WHETHER IT BE GROUP PRESSURE OR SIMPLY TO MEET PREDETERMINED STANDARDS, NATURAL PERSONAL EXPRESSION OFTEN GETS LOST ALONG THE WAY. SOME PHOTOGRAPHERS NOTICEABLY LIMIT THEMSELVES TO PRE-ESTABLISHED RULES, AND CONSEQUENTLY, SACRIFICE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BREAKTHROUGHS. THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE OF PHOTOGRAPHERS WHO INVEST A GREAT DEAL INTO COMPETITION AS A SOLE MEANS OF VALIDATING THEIR TALENT.

**I**n essence, this is not criticism of the individual photographer who may be restricted, but rather criticism of a system that encourages individuals to play it safe and follow the rules in order to please others or win approval from the group. In effect, a system that encourages the surrendering of one's uniqueness. As Andreas Feininger fittingly states, "Photographers who identify with special groups where everybody follows the same line of thought are deprived of the stimulating criticism and exchange of controversial ideas necessary for the intellectual and spiritual development of any human being."



“CONFORMITY  
IS THE JAILER  
OF FREEDOM  
AND THE  
ENEMY OF  
GROWTH.”

— JOHN F.  
KENNEDY

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Every photographer must deal with visual design—both the natural design of the subject and the design created in the photographer’s viewfinder. If this process is undertaken by relying on easy rules and formulas, the photographer will be deprived of understanding the basics of design and the opportunity for personal growth, by simply repeating the past over and over again.

The basic principles of good visual design can be taught and will be useful in the future, if they can be adapted to the demands of new situations. When talking about the principles of design, try and illustrate what worked in the past without etching it in stone—preferably providing knowledge and reason for traditional methods, while at the same time encouraging flexibility in order to deal with change.

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## CONSEQUENCES

Camera clubs and other photography groups can offer many positive benefits for its members. The most valuable include the sharing of ideas and new work, and social interaction with fellow photographers who share a similar passion for the medium. However, the problem begins when competition turns into the central focus of the group, and rules and formulas begin to interfere with free creative expression. The very nature of groups like this tends to stifle creativity, for the competition that it fosters establishes one of the biggest creative blocks: the fear of making a mistake.

The leading problem, in my opinion, is often inadequate or ineffective evaluation. This is not to say that every single organization is the same, but I hear frequent complaints from workshop participants all over North America, expressing their frustration with the system. I have attended meetings on several occasions where the results of competitions are shown, complete with the judges' comments. The comments offered by the judges are very often of little help to the photographer. The only learning that can result from this is 'follow the status quo or you will be scored with a low mark'. The whole experience would always leave me with a sense of sadness for the photographers involved, especially when I would see exciting innovative work receive low scores.

## COMPETITION

"If you compare yourself to others, you may become vain and bitter; for there will always be better as well as worse than yourself"—excerpt from *Desiderata* by Max Ehrmann

"Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing" is a well-known saying in sports. This saying exemplifies a form of self-indulgent competitiveness that has saturated North-American sports, and that has carried over into the general culture, including in schools, families, and businesses. Author Alfie Kohn offers the definitive critique of competition in his book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*. In this book, Kohn states that contrary to accepted wisdom, competition is not basic to human nature, but actually poisons relationships, damages self-esteem, and holds us back from doing our best. In one book review, William Abrams writes, "Kohn, a journalist whose work has appeared in such publications as *The Nation* and *Psychology Today*, has written a timely summary of research and commentary by others on the psychology of competitiveness. He seeks to debunk 'the rationalizations for competition', that it is inevitable, more productive, more enjoyable, and likely to build character. In a closely reasoned argument, he shows that while competition is deeply ingrained, it is also inherently destructive, especially where self-esteem is contingent upon winning at the expense of others."

The problem is not entirely that competition is overdone or poorly handled, but rather that the actual win/lose arrangement has damaging consequences for how individuals come to see themselves, each other, and the act of learning. The alternative is not simply the absence of competition, but the creation of a caring group in which people help each other and offer support and encouragement without winners and losers.

## THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

If asked, "How would you define success?" and, "What does success mean to you?" What thoughts immediately come to mind? There is a fundamental difference between the idea of seeking success and the actual pursuit of

# SOME SUGGESTIONS

- If you enjoy competition and don't feel that your creativity is stifled by it, then by all means, compete and have fun.
- If you are successful at winning competitions, enjoy the accolades, but ask yourself if the images that win are your most innovative work or if they are safe and risk-free?
- If you enter competitions and are not winning approval, does it affect your self-esteem? Do you share the views of others when it comes to what fits into preset norms?
- Believe in your work, regardless of what others may think. If you are truly experiencing personal and artistic growth or are exploring new photographic avenues, believe in yourself, but be honest and realistic in your assessment.
- If you disagree with a group norm, quietly ask other members of the group whether they really believe in the norm. Don't be afraid to ruffle a few feathers, take some chances, and live large. Highly innovative people question tradition, challenge the rules, and suggest new ways of doing things. Power seekers in the group (those who seek neither recognition nor approval from others, but rather only agreement and compliance) usually frown upon these qualities.
- When we belong to a group, we are likely to derive our sense of identity, at least in part, from that group. Identify the rules that other people are putting on you as a condition for being in their group. Do you really want to follow these rules? Are there any that are particularly irritating? Can you lead a major change? Is it really worth putting up with these, or is leaving the group a better option?



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Consider the notion of a horizon line or any other principal division of the picture space as just that—a major division, horizontal, vertical, or diagonal in orientation. Your decision, regarding its placement in the picture space, should take into account its impact in relationship to other parts. This requires some thinking about the subject matter and how you want to convey your feelings or information about it. Don't rely on rules or formulas. In some situations, the 1/3-placement rule may work, while in another, a mid-point position may be required to create perfect symmetry. You may even wish to create more eccentric and dynamic proportions by placing the principal division very high or very low, depending on other content.

I often experience rule-related creative blocks in my workshops: participants concerned about dividing the picture space in half for fear of making it too static; imposing a centre of interest when the texture or pattern is what initially caught their attention. If you find yourself teaching photography or evaluating images, try to remember the importance of developing the individual photographer's potential, and be careful not to inhibit it. Inspire them with a sense of excitement for the new situations that they will naturally encounter. Your comments should not be based on how you think it should be, as if you were making the picture. This is a common fault of many evaluations where ego gets in the way of objective comments.

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON CREATIVITY

- A WHACK ON THE SIDE OF THE HEAD*, BY ROGER VON OECH.
- A KICK IN THE SEAT OF THE PANTS*, BY ROGER VON OECH.
- NO CONTEST: THE CASE AGAINST COMPETITION*, BY ALFIE KOHN.
- THE ART OF LOOKING SIDEWAYS*, BY ALAN FLETCHER.



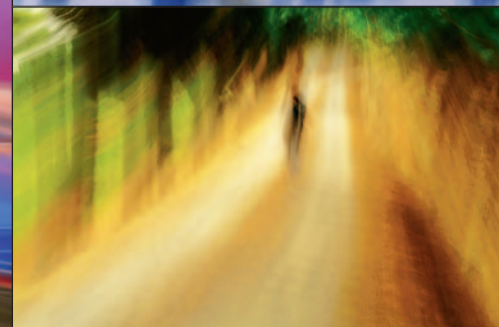
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I often hear critical comments such as, “The picture is overexposed/underexposed/out-of-focus/too static/too simple; there is no centre of interest; should have used the rule of thirds for placement of the subject; it needs a base; don’t cut off heads; the lines should not intersect the corners; I don’t know what it is,” and so on. Comments like these have a tendency to generate rules, and if the photographer follows them, they will continually be trapped.



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Hand-held, two-second exposure of a group of dancers in the streets of Palermo, Sicily.



Allow yourself the permission to be free. In this image, I panned my hand-held camera up and down, while zooming the lens as a workshop participant walked down a country road in Tuscany.

excellence. Understanding the difference between the two, in addition to examining the motivating factors for seeking them, is certainly worth consideration.

If we define success as “being the best” and excellence as “being your best”, we can relate to the different motivating factors involved. Success, to many people means “being better than everyone else”. In comparison, excellence means “being better tomorrow than you were yesterday”. Additionally, success means “exceeding the achievements of other people”, while excellence means “matching your practice with your potential”. An interesting note: the antonym of success is “failure”, whereas the antonym of excellence is “mediocrity”. It is important to understand that the pursuit of excellence should not be a quest for superiority, nor should it be about competition or defeating others.

Critics of competition as opposed to excellence as a motivating factor in educational systems, such as Alfie Kohn, claim that competition actually has a net negative influence on the achievement levels of students, and that it turns all of us into losers. Alfie Kohn is an American lecturer and author in the fields of education, psychology, and parenting. He is an outspoken critic of American public education, particularly the trend toward pervasive standardized testing, and has written several books attacking common-sense notions about competition, rewards, and parenting.

“Creativity comes by breaking the rules, by saying you’re in love with the anarchist.”—Anita Roddick

## CONCLUSION

It is important to understand that the primary motivation for writing this article was not to single out, express disapproval of, or target any specific group, but instead, to question the common beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours of organizations, educational institutions, and societal programming in general. ■

**BIO:** A long-time contributor to *Photo Life*, Richard pursues photography as a medium of visual expression. Well-known for sharing his enthusiasm, creative vision, and passion for the medium, Richard has been leading annual photography and visual design workshops in his native Kingston, Ont., for 15 years. He also conducts workshops, tours, and seminars around the world, including in Cuba, Sicily, Venice, Tuscany, Provence, Seattle, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Montreal. For up-to-date information about Richard’s workshops and schedule, subscribe on-line to receive his newsletter at [www.richardmartinphoto.com](http://www.richardmartinphoto.com). You can also contact Richard at [info@richardmartinphoto.com](mailto:info@richardmartinphoto.com).