

Fighting back



A lens or camera body is only a thing. If you lose a lens or break a camera body, it's no big deal. Hopefully, as a professional or aspiring professional, your camera equipment is insured for such annoyances. They can be repaired or replaced. They're just material objects that we utilise to create our visions.

The human body on the other hand is a minor miracle. Break a bone and usually it heals and grows back. But not always. Sometimes mother nature likes to throw a spanner in the works and the body you're given doesn't quite conform to 'normality', or you start out in life 'normal', then something beyond our understanding contrives to make you abnormal, different, disabled...

So what do you do in these circumstances? What is your first thought if you're normally an active fit human who suddenly finds themselves the proud recipient of one of fate's little surprises? *"That's it, my life is over?" "How on earth am I ever going to convince a potential client that I'm the right person for their project if I roll up in a wheelchair?" "Who's going to want to employ a one armed photographer?"*

If you think one of the above would be one of your first thoughts, then don't worry, that's perfectly normal. I'd probably be the same. I say probably, because mother nature threw me one of her spanners. I was born with a disability, which is slightly different to getting a disability later in life, because I've never known any different. I've never known what it's like to have two hands, eight fingers and two thumbs. What I have known for as long as I can remember though is that all I've ever wanted to be is a photographer and when you're as stubborn as I am, it would only be a matter of time. Although it took a little while for me to go it alone and take up photography full time.

I'd been shooting for magazines part time for years while working full time as a Customs & Excise officer, then I changed careers and ended up unhappily working in an office. But it took a moment of shock to make me realise that if I didn't get off my backside and do the only occupation I'm passionate about, I'd end up looking dull, wearing a dull suit, traveling to a dull job in a dull town for the rest of my dull life.

The moment it struck was the morning of 30th March 2006, about to tuck into a McDonalds breakfast, Northampton. I flicked through The Times and suddenly stopped on the obituaries page. It was one of those moments in life where pure clarity descends, nothing else in the world exists at that time, you can't hear anything and the only thing you can see is what your eyes are focussed on at that time. Uncontrollably, a single tear ran down my cheek (and not from the sad realisation that I was about to eat another McDonalds product!). My photographic hero, Bob Carlos Clarke, was dead. I'd met him a couple of times at different events, seen the exhibitions, got the books, owned a couple of signed prints.

At that moment it dawned on me, if I didn't take the very next opportunity to go and do what I was supposed to in this world, what would I leave behind to show I'd been here on Planet Earth?

I'm not the only disabled photographer who thinks like that either, Christopher Voelker and Anthony Beck are two guys with the same determination and drive I have.

Christopher is an amazingly talented photographer in Los Angeles who has photographed many A list stars from film, television and music. His love of the silver screen dominates his style of photography, more often than not utilising the lights and lighting techniques usually found on a Hollywood sound stage than a photographers studio. A motorcycling accident at the age of 16 left Christopher a wheelchair user. Not long afterwards, Christopher saw a Rolling Stone magazine article showcasing Richard Avedon's portraits.

"It really lit a fire inside me, a passion. I thought to myself that in a studio environment, after committing myself to studying this art, there should be no reason why I couldn't be making significant imagery too".

Anthony is ex Royal Air Force and his passion for speed has determined his specialism in photography. Flight and aircraft still course through his veins, while closer to the ground motorbikes sate his adrenalin.

"I'd had an interest of photography before I was in the RAF, but then the forces are more of a lifestyle than a job. Add in family commitments and the photography kind of sat on the sidelines".

In 2005 Tony suffered a brain tumor which left a very active man quite immobile.

"It was very shocking to go from being very mobile to immobile without warning and to be honest, I'm still coming to terms with it today". "After I'd recovered enough to start working out what I needed to be mobile again I started to think about what I could do given my situation. Combining aviation, motorsport and photography seemed the logical route to prevent me from going mad". "It was hard work at first and sometimes very frustrating, but with perseverance and trying out various bits of kit, I'm finally happy and feel competent doing what I love".

Doing what you love seems to be the common theme here. For me, photography is a vocation, a calling, it's not a 9 – 5 job and it's never a chore. I truly believe I'm the luckiest man on earth. I get to take photographs or shoot video and people pay me to do it. It doesn't matter that I have a disability, doing the thing I love for a living is an honour that I'm grateful for every day.

"It's the art that makes it all come together" explains Christopher, "Making a living shooting music, cinema and TV publicity along with running a big studio is quite a commitment, but it's more than a job to me, it's a lifestyle and even after all these years, I still love it, it's the reason I get up in the morning".

But what about dealing with new clients? It's only natural for people to second glance a person with a disability, I do it and in a world that sometimes takes political correctness to ridiculous levels it's natural to question what 'special arrangements' might be needed when employing a photographer who's 'different'.

"I make it known to the client or event organiser that I have a disability before hand so there are no surprises for either side" says Tony, "So far I've never had a negative reaction to my disability, in fact most have been very supportive".

"I've had to deal with obstructive officials at race tracks now and again, but I think that's just an issue that a lot of photographers have to deal with".

Christopher has met art directors for the first time and had polar opposite reactions from different people, ranging from seeing blind panic set in that they've booked a photographer in a wheel chair, through to comments like *"Cool man, you're making 'bitchin' images despite your disability"*.

"I think it's a question of ignorance really" says Christopher, "It really depends on how an individual has been raised and whether they've been brought up well educated and well rounded about the world and the variety of people in it, or whether they've been brought up in a bubble and end up with stereotypical views of people with disabilities". "I've lost big gigs after a potential client has realised I'm in a chair, which still worries me".

Looking through Christopher's work, I'm in no doubt it's the potential clients loss and not his. Thankfully, I can't remember having a negative reaction to my disability, though I'm so blissfully unaware of how other people view me it may have happened and I've not noticed, or just carried on regardless.

Personally, whether somebody is a potential client or person on the street, if my disability outweighs my passion and commitment to image making in that persons eyes, then I'd rather not work with them or even know them, it's their problem, not mine.

I asked both Tony and Christopher what advice they'd give to aspiring pro's and unwittingly left out the word disabled in my question. In hindsight, their answers prove it doesn't matter whether you have a disability or not, which in essence is a good point for this article.

Christopher – *"You've picked a very competitive occupation that's exciting and can give you the greatest feeling in the world when you create images of greatness. I really advocate photographers learning to take pictures with a manual film camera to realise what goes into making good images rather than being able to view and delete hundreds of rubbish images on the back of a digital camera. It teaches discipline, patience and the importance of taking photo's that count".*

Tony – *"My advice is simple. Make the most of every opportunity as you never know when your life may change".*

As for me, I'd say to any photographer out there lucky enough to be making a living doing what you do, be grateful each and every day. There are people out there in the working world who will never feel as lucky as we are. Similarly, if you're working as a photographer and aren't happy, you've become jaded with the industry, or simply don't want to accept that life and the world of photography moves on, get out. Go and do something you can be passionate about, open a cat sanctuary, an ice cream parlour, anything. Life is too short to be stuck doing something that makes you unhappy.

'It's not a job, it's an addiction' – Bob Carlos Clarke,
24 June 1950 – 25 March 2006.

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