

We're All Missing Something: A Meditation on Amputation, Constraints, and Creativity

By David duChemin

Andy slid into the water effortlessly, the empty leg of his wetsuit the only sign that he'd been missing his leg since a drunk driver took him off his bike at 15 years of age. I followed, with both my legs, but much less grace. Later I would marvel at Andy's ease and power underwater, making the comment that he could swim circles around me, to which he replied "I have one leg, I can *only* swim in circles!" In his fifties at the time, Andy's humor about his missing leg was, if you'll forgive the pun, disarming. It was also tremendously freeing and gave me a needed perspective on what my own life might look like—full and active—after the amputation I was considering myself.

Two years ago, a surgeon removed my right leg below the knee. In 2011, I took a 30-foot fall onto concrete while photographing in Italy, shattering both of my feet and breaking my pelvis. A humanitarian photographer at the time, I had often been warned about the places in which I did my work—countries like Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda. "Be careful," was the mantra of friends and family as I left on each assignment. No one ever warned me about Tuscany. My right foot never healed from that accident, and after 12 years of surgeries and dwindling optimism, I had it removed.

Loss—and Gain

When I speak casually about the loss of my foot, it's because I see it not as a loss, but a gain. Not everyone sees it that way. In the months before my planned surgery I ordered a pair of custom crutches, delivered by our local FedEx driver who said cheerfully, "not for anyone in this house, I hope." Not yet, I told her, "but in a couple months I'm having my foot amputated." Her eyes filled with tears and I had to go back into the house to tell my wife I had broken the FedEx lady. I've learned to be a little less cavalier, though I don't do it for myself.

Learning to walk again is something at which I've got some practice. I did it in a month-long residential rehab facility in Ottawa where I recovered after the initial fall. To a lesser degree I did it after each of the surgeries in the intervening years. And it has taken much of my effort over the last two years, not only to walk again (which I did fairly quickly) but to walk well, and—eventually—to run once more. It wasn't easy. There were tears as much from the pain as from the frustration, though I blame the latter on a lack of perspective. Six months after my amputation I was on a treadmill running eight miles an hour. A year after the

surgery, I was hiking the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island with heavy photographic gear looking for coastal wolves. In a couple weeks, I'll be in Zambia photographing leopards. In hindsight, I'm not sure how much more rapidly I expected to recover.

What has taken me longer is reconciling myself to the word "disabled"—as it now so conspicuously applies to me in the minds of others.

My business cards will tell you I am a photographer. Long before that, I did a 12-year career in comedy. I am also a writer, in the middle right now of writing my 15th book, which, like all my books, concerns photography in general and creativity specifically. Not exclusively the domain of the arts, it is my understanding that creativity is a response to constraints. True creativity is problem-solving: using what we do have to work around what we do not. Creativity might also be a key to living more comfortably with, or even re-framing, our concepts of disability.

Constraint—and Creativity

Creativity isn't one thing; it's not one characteristic of the human soul or mind, but many traits found in aggregate. Among other things, it is a combination of curiosity, resilience, and courage—all of which, it seems to me, are responses to an obstacle, a constraint, or a lack. Curiosity is a response to a lack of knowledge, resilience is a response to failure or set-back, and courage to fear. Without those counterparts they have no reason to exist.

Creativity is not only the stuff of pink pipe cleaners and rainbow sparkles, but an imaginative response to lives that often prove harder and harder as we get older. We

find ourselves missing more and more, or more keenly aware of what we've been missing all along—and that our time to respond is drawing short.

We photograph, paint, or write poetry to find the beauty we long for, and in all forms of art we ask questions to look for answers we do not have. Scientists, though not usually ones to call themselves artists, also do this and are no less creative. Engineers, too, and teachers. We respond to the lack. That's where the challenge of our days comes from. How we face those challenges becomes our chance to shine.

No artist works without constraints. They paint to the edge of their canvas, and no further. They use the brushes and paints they have, and work around those they do not. As a photographer, I am constrained by the frame of the image and the technical possibilities (and impossibilities) of my equipment, not to mention the limits of the light and time that are my raw materials. There is always a piece of gear I don't have, an *absence* around which I must work.

We are all missing something.

Define 'Disabled'?

So I struggle to know at what point I qualified in the minds of others as "disabled." Was it at eight years old when I realized I couldn't hear with my right ear and was partially deaf? Was it when, at 14 years old, I was fitted with glasses once we realized I couldn't see the blackboard? Was it at 20, when I returned home sick after a winter in Russia and was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes? Or was it when I woke in the hospital an amputee? And am I allowed to politely refuse, or even redefine, that word without offending those who more closely identify with it?

One of the gifts of photography is the way it has pushed me to explore other perspectives, to consider them all as a place from which I might make a picture. After so many years, I'm suspicious of my first instincts when photographing a scene. Too many times have I thought my perspective was the right one, the best one, only to find greater beauty in another when I've been willing to open my mind and move my feet. I think there is another perspective on the idea of disability.

A New Perspective: We All Face Constraints

At the risk of repeating myself, we are all missing *something*. We all labor under constraints. Some of those constraints limit us, some do not. Sometimes that's a function of the constraint itself, other times the limits exist because of how we *think* about the constraints. I can run at 8 mph on my prosthetic leg (not for long, mind you). I can also leg press 300 lbs and hike for miles with a heavy backpack, all with a prosthetic leg. There are many who can't, or don't, do any of those things because they don't think they can, though they've got two legs. I'm missing a leg, but not the belief. Or the ability, it turns out. Others miss the belief and not the legs. Which of us is disabled, I wonder? The more I use the word the more meaningless it becomes.

It's a funny thing about words: they can mean everything and nothing all at once. When I hear the word "disabled" I recall a line from the movie *The Princess Bride*: "You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means." By many definitions of the word, I became disabled when my surgeon took my leg. But I am able now to do more than I could before the surgery. There are two-legged people

around whom I can now run—or swim—circles.

I was speaking at a photography conference in London in early 2025. A woman came up after my presentation as I signed books and asked me rather directly: "Are you on the spectrum?" I said no, I didn't think so, to which she said, "Because you're very eccentric!" which I took as a compliment. But it got me thinking. I should have said yes. If it's a spectrum, then we're all on it, whether we're neuro-normative or neuro-divergent. Many, or even most, of us now acknowledge that gender, too, is a spectrum. As a cis-gendered heterosexual male I may well be at one far end of that spectrum, but I am not separate from it. Red and violet are the bookends of the visible spectrum of light, but they're still *part* of the rainbow.

A Much-Needed Shift in Focus

At what point, I wonder, will ability and disability stop being a binary proposition in both our thinking and our language? When will the focus shift (photographers are as big on focus as we are on perspective) from what we can't do, to what we can? From the constraint to the creativity.

Ability (and therefore disability) exists on a spectrum. A so-called "disabled" woman may play wheelchair basketball in the evenings and be more athletic, far more abled in that sense, than I will ever be. To call her disabled is to focus on the one thing she can't do and not the many she can. But we are all missing something. Some people can't make a decent photograph, tell a joke, or think their way out of a paper bag, much less see past their own racism or misogyny. Some are profoundly limited in their bodies

but can go places with their minds that I can't even begin to imagine. The late Stephen Hawking comes to mind, as does Helen Keller. Google "famous disabled people" and you'll be served up a list of people you know by name because of what they did, because of their *ability*. Not because they did what they did despite their constraints, but that they did them so brilliantly. Full stop.

Challenge as Inspiration

Or maybe it's something else. Sociologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book [*Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience*](#), posits that challenge is a pre-requisite for creative flow, not a barrier to it, and that "no trait is more useful, more essential for survival, and more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge." If challenges or constraints are so important to flow and creativity, perhaps it should come as no surprise that "famous disabled people" exist and perform at the level they do. Perhaps they didn't do or achieve that for which they are celebrated despite their challenges, but because of them.

Not everyone gets to choose their constraints with the kind of freedom I had when three years ago I put

"amputation" on the calendar as casually as I might have put a dentist appointment. But the choice to do something with whatever constraints we have, to do something beyond the expectations those constraints create in our minds and in the minds of others, will always be ours. It is a choice to live in the space between can and cannot, and to explore its limits. Many of those limits are very real, but at the same time they are often more pliable than we know, most especially when we push against them while asking the question that drives all creative efforts: "What if?"

What if the fact that we're all missing something is the key to greater creativity and meaning?

What if our limits are an invitation to find a path through life that is uniquely our own?

What if, when it comes to creativity in the arts or any human endeavor, there is a bigger truth?

Our constraints make us more, not less.

About the Author



David duChemin is a Canadian photographer, author, educator, amputee and adventurer. A former comedian turned humanitarian photographer, duChemin now spends his time behind the camera focused on wilder subjects. His work has taken him to all 7 continents. To his great delight and surprise, his books about photography and creativity—among them *Within The Frame*, *The Visual Toolbox*, *The Soul of the Camera*, and *The Heart of the Photograph*—have been published in over a dozen languages and are celebrated for their focus on vision and creativity. His work and teaching can be found at DavidduChemin.com, and his books—including his latest, *Light, Space & Time*, *Essays on Camera Craft and Creativity*—can be found on Amazon or your local bookstore.