



Exclusive Interview with Claudia Goetzelmann
By Jennifer Sauer, Managing Editor

Decisions, Decisions: In Conversation With Claudia Goetzelmann

Decisions, decisions! Some view decision making as a privilege, others shrink from it as an overwhelming emotional burden. Anyway you look at it, good decision making is at the core of success. To grow a business or a life, you must make decisions. Everything either grows or dies, so to make no decisions at all means constant paralysis and stagnation. Few people teach the art and process of successful decision making, but we are going to take a crack at it today.

As photographers, we face an enormous number of complex decisions--when we are shooting, marketing, or dealing with client issues. One of our community's outstanding decision makers is Claudia Goetzelmann, photographer extraordinaire, who has worked on several continents, dealt with clients from every conceivable cultural background, and succeeded in editorial, corporate and advertising venues. The woman seems to have a firm grasp on the magic wand wherever she goes. She is worth listening to and has some great ideas for those who want to hone their skills as decision makers.

A good decision should lead you closer to your goals and farther away from conflict with yourself and others. You know when you have made a good decision because you feel at peace. You are committed. It feels right. And more often than not, it simply works. Here are some ideas for getting there:

When we first sat down to do this interview, Claudia said, "The most important aspect of decision making is really attitude. Because sometimes you might not make the best decision, but you can still learn something from it, so even a negative is a positive. You can always learn more about yourself."

With this great start, we got into the nitty gritty. Enjoy and take notes!

Do you ever feel anxiety about a big decision?

I contemplate it, put it out there, and then I go back and forth, maybe talk to other people about it, and then I just do what seems to be right. I often have a gut feeling about something initially, and then I start analyzing and get all confused, but then, I come back to that initial gut feeling. That's the most important thing, just staying attuned with yourself.

How do you do that?

Meditating, which I learned from all my time in Asia.

What are some of the most important decisions you've made in your career?

I lived in Nigeria and Ghana for a couple of years, then I moved to Indonesia. I really wanted to pursue photography, and Asia is very different from Africa. While living in Indonesia I knew that Singapore was really the epicenter in South East Asia for commercial editorial and travel photography, and I had to be there. So I

went there many times, and finally knew I had to move to Singapore. That was actually a very important decision that I made. In order to move forward on my path, it felt right to move to Singapore.

Did that launch your career?

Yes, I moved away from journalism and started doing a lot of annual reports and corporate portraits. It was a totally different thing, because there was really no commercial structure in Africa or in Indonesia. It was not that professional, and I needed to be in Singapore in order to make the next step. And then I felt like I needed to move again in order to evolve, so I decided to move to San Francisco. I contemplated it for about six months and I went back and forth, made some initial contacts, but when I finally moved here, I just did it. It felt right and things fell into place. I'm so happy that I made this decision. I didn't know if it was going to work out, I didn't know anybody. I just believed in myself and I did it. You just have to go with your feeling, believe in it and make it happen. Don't wait for everything to come to you. Just make it happen.

So when you moved to San Francisco (in 2001), what decisions did you have to make? Did you go after a different type of client? Did you have to change your portfolio, your image, your style?

Yes, I had to because this is America, and everyone wants to put you in a box. However they want to think of you, they want to just open that drawer and take you out. They want to define you. And in Singapore it wasn't like that. It was much broader and a person could do a lot of different kinds of work because it was a much smaller market. But here the market is much larger, so you really have to define yourself. And with the dot com crash, that wasn't easy, so I had to rethink everything. Where did I want to go, what kind of work did I want to do, where did I see myself in one year, three years, five years? I had to ask myself these questions just to get a clear idea of what I was doing. Of course it's a process and doesn't just happen overnight and you wake up and say "Oh, I have the answer!"

Actually I ask myself these questions quite frequently, not just with photography, but in my life in general. Otherwise you suddenly turn 60 and you haven't done the things you really wanted to do.

So you have goals you work towards and you do more long range planning?

It's not like I have it all on a piece of paper on the refrigerator and I cross them off; it's more a gut feeling, I guess. I always check in with where I want to go. There are always amendments along the way.

What were some of the decisions you made about your work when you got here?

I had to learn a lot about marketing, because this is America and everything is about marketing. I had to learn about the American market, what my pictures say, and what kinds of clients and jobs I was after. It definitely took a bit of time to figure out.

What was your process of figuring it out?

Frustration (laughs).

Did you research, hire consultants?

I was looking for a rep and then after that, I had to re-edit my images, so I hired a consultant to help. It was an ongoing internal process. I think I researched the market a lot. I looked at a lot of advertising that really spoke to me and I thought, 'Wow I would like to shoot their next ad campaign'. This helped me to define what I wanted.

Did you have trusted professional mentors or was this your own process?

Showing my book and getting feedback helped a lot--the reactions I got from certain images. The consultant did their part. For me, I needed help with the editing. They didn't make the decisions solely. A combined effort and yet it's such a personal process. Many people have called me up saying "Oh, you worked with this consultant or that consultant--how did it go?" But you really have to meet them yourself because everyone works differently and people have different needs. It's good to explore and find out through the process what you need help with and what kind of person you need.

What did you learn from this process?

I learned from moving here and going through the dot com crash that I embrace competition. I didn't know this before. It isn't really part of German culture, it's part of American culture and so I had to take it on. I had to define myself in this culture.

You liked the challenge and the hyper-competitive environment is was then?

Yes. It still is. Always will be. It's such a competitive industry. You can't just sit back and relax. But then I figured it out, put my book together, and looked for an agent. I also had to learn what it means to have an agent. In this kind of situation, when you first start out you don't know what you're looking for in a relationship, and that's what happened. In the end, a breakup may seem like a sad thing, but then you learn so much about it that it is going to be better the next time you have a relationship...

When we talked last, you had just decided to find a new rep and were searching for the next one. You were impressive because you seemed to be very thoughtful about the process. You met with a range of different reps. And you went out in a very active way and put yourself in the driver's seat so it was you who interviewed the reps, rather than the other way around.

Yes. It's a marriage, a collaboration. An equal situation. You have to look eye to eye. If not, it's not going to work. And before I got myself into another bad situation, I needed to know who was out there so I could make a good decision.

Without mentioning who the first rep was, what did you learn from the first situation about what you needed and what was important in a relationship with a rep?

You have to be in sync. That they really have the clients they say they have and that you want to shoot for. The art directors might like the book, but if the art director the agent sent you to doesn't have that account, you might have a very frustrating situation. The art director may say, "this is awesome," but he might not have the account you want. I also want the rep to nurture me creatively. I want to be able to grow within the relationship. In the last situation, I was afraid I would go stagnant. I don't want to shoot the same things all the time, even if it has brought me success in the past.

I realized I had to make changes. I had to stop and put on the brakes. It's not easy to just walk away from something, but it was the best thing I could do. When you leave your agent, everything stops. Your books come back, your promos come back, nobody will sell your work, people are confused and might call your agent when your agent isn't interested in referring you anymore. And that took six to nine months. I thought, "Now what can I do to find this new person I'm envisioning?" So I went to New York because I knew that my work needed to be represented out of New York. I met a lot of people. I met even people I knew I wouldn't go with, but I learned a lot. It was such an enlightening experience; pretty time consuming, but I can only recommend that to anyone, to go and meet everyone. Courting agents (as I would like to call this) is a very personal undertaking.

So rather than focusing on the fear of losing work or having trouble finding a new rep, you went with your gut and focused on the positive aspects of moving on to a new relationship, regardless.

Yes, I had to do something. My frustration would have grown. I felt like I was already on the edge. I didn't want to leave the other agent on bad terms. I really wanted to leave on good terms. I appreciated what they did for me. I still like them and I'm still in touch with them. It just wasn't the right thing. It's not good or bad, it was just not the right match.

So you stopped before the relationship went bad.

Yes, it was my gut feeling.

Assuming that later you met more than one rep who would have been suitable for you, how did you decide which rep to go with?

I just went back and forth, contemplated the pros and cons, met with them several times, got to know them a little bit better, did some research, and then asked myself, "If I go with X agent, where will I be in two years, three years, five years?" I analyzed them that way, and at the end I went with my initial instinct.



It seems that your decision making is like a cycle, and that you constantly ask yourself, "Who am I and where do I want to go," and then you make decisions after researching, but then go on gut instinct. But it starts with believing in yourself and what you want to do.

It totally has to do with believing in yourself. You have to. If you second-guess yourself, how will you be closer to your dreams? You have to know what your dreams are and then have them become a part of you and then you make them happen, right? No matter what.

No matter what. Can you talk about that?

I think it's very very important. It doesn't matter where you are in your career or what you do creatively, you always have to check in with yourself and ask yourself if you are on the right track. It's even more than that, more complex...I think it's the philosophy of my life. You always have to check in with yourself. I always want to know I'm aligned with myself.

You want to be sure your actions in the world are in keeping with your internal desires and goals?

The main thing is to be content within yourself. Then you are really aligned. I felt so content at the beginning of the year. Everything felt so good. It's always a process. It never will be easy. That's life. You'll reach one plateau and then there will be another challenge and it's not that you suddenly have an agent and you can sit back and relax. You have to work on the relationship, on yourself, on your images, on your creative flow. I love it. It's so inspiring. It's so cool to actually be able to do that.

It's not work is it?

It's true. I feel very lucky that I have something like this, that work is play and I have a great passion for what I do. I'm lucky. I tell myself that quite often.

I know it's rather personal, but can you talk about the process of "checking in with yourself"? What kinds of questions do you ask yourself?

I think I am very critical within myself. It's an awareness and a way I go through life. Everything is so interlinked. How I interact with people, my awareness, the environment, my creative flow, am I really doing the things I want to do, am I pushing myself? Do I have to balance myself? It's all related to that contentedness. There are so many layers, and yes, it's a very personal thing. Other people might have to do other things to be content. There's no formula. I SIMPLY found out WHAT works for me.

Can you talk a bit about how those things work for you: your relationships with other people, your relationship with the environment, your sense of whether or not you're pushing yourself, how all these relate to each other?

Well, I am a collaborator, and, in terms of work, it's nice to have people to rely on and play with. You give everybody respect. If I am in tune with the environment and with myself, I put out good energy and then it comes back.

You are usually working on location, right, so when you say environment, it's something that you might or might not have control over.

I have a plan and then I go with what's offered, and I make it happen, make it work. I am definitely a location photographer. A studio is just another location.

So you make it work. Let's say something is not working.

I still make it work.

What kind of decision making process do you go through to make it work?

I analyze the situation, and again, it's gut feeling. Sometimes I have to change certain ideas. I have to be very open and flexible. I think it's good to go with a plan of what you want to shoot -- of course you have to. But there's always that portion of unexpectedness....

And that's where the little gems are, right?

Yes, that is when the magic happens. I think a lot of things can go wrong if you are too stuck up in your head and think that this is the way things should be...and you're not flexible enough.

A picture editor once told me that when a layout isn't working, she always asks herself "What assumptions am I making that are preventing this from working? Is it that this has to be the lead picture or this photo box has to be here? And life is the same thing, sometimes when you are struggling against something it's because you are making assumptions that are incorrect and prevent you from being in a flow. You have to remove something rather than working harder or adding more.

You are standing in your own way. Sometimes you have to get out of the way.

Do you have any big decisions to make now?

Not really. But you always have to check in with yourself, even when you feel content. I always strive to evolve. You can't confuse contentment with complacency. When you are content, a lot of magic can happen. When you feel content and you don't have desperation, you are at ease with yourself and doors open. I have a very philosophical approach to life. My time in Asia had that impact on me.

How so?

The philosophy of Buddhism in general, how people interact with each other. Here (in the U.S.), decision making is external not internal. I think in Asia a lot happens internally. You put good energy out, you do it unconditionally, something good will come back. You don't know when-- it will catch you by surprise--but it will come back to you. It's a very nice way to go through life. It left a strong imprint on me after living there for so long. Here decisions are made very harshly. Calculatingly. Here life is fast, external, living in the moment, so we have lost so much of our intuition. So many people are unaware that they even have intuition. Even if the intuition speaks to them, they don't know it. Then they go, "Oh yeah, I remember that feeling, maybe I should have trusted it." It's really cool to have that, know it, recognize it.

You are conscious of what you are putting out in the world and what your intuition tells you, whether it's with the creative process or with work relationships.

Yeah, totally. Absolutely. One hundred per cent. I never want to lose that. It's very important.

I can't blame anyone for what happens in my life. I can't control everything, but there are some things I am in control of and the things I can take control of I should. It makes me feel good that I can make these decisions. I feel so lucky that I am able to make decisions in my life. I have the freedom to make choices. It's so empowering to be able to do that.

You see it as an honor.

I am very fortunate that I get to decide where I want to go in my life. So many people never have the choice, for various reasons but often they hold on to what they think is important. They don't realize that less can be more. For example, with the rep, I could have said, "I can't change the rep because I'll lose work, and I need the money. But that puts me in a cage. Maybe I lose a few jobs, but in the long run, I will benefit so much more. It's an internal process.

You don't focus on what you're losing, you focus on what you're going to gain.

If you focus on what you will lose you will never do anything. If I had done that I never would have left Germany, lived in Africa or Asia, or come to America. Moving from Singapore meant leaving a life behind and starting a new life in a new place where nobody knew about me. But I didn't focus on what I was leaving behind. I saw it as a stepping stone and came here to move on and ahead. I'm very lucky. People should never forget that if they have the ability to make decisions, they're very very lucky. Make decisions you believe in.

Can you talk about decision making during a shoot?

There's a lot of decision making involved in a shoot and you have to handle decisions very quickly. As the photographer you have a lot of strength. There are so many opinions, ideas and egos involved, and then you have to make decisions within that shoot in a very professional way, but still remain calm and not be influenced by the customer or an irrational art director. You have to keep your own stability. It's so important to understand. Clients hire you for a reason, you are the leader. How you come to your decision making in a quick and calm way is very important. The moment you become stressed, everyone else will become stressed. You have to understand your role. You are up on stage in the limelight and everyone is looking at you, going with you. If you get stressed and forget your role, everyone will be irritated. I think that's interesting in context of decision making. There is a lot of decision making happening, consciously, subconsciously, every moment. Preparing, choosing, the political aspects and layers of production. At the same time, you have to stick to your idea.

I have to be aligned. If I don't know who I am and where I'm going in a deeper philosophical sense of my life, then how can I go on a shoot, and then make decisions? I have to be strong already, not in an intellectual way, a hands-in-the-pockets way. If you know what you're after and what you are doing then there is no second guessing and much less stress on a job, on a shoot.

Maybe it takes practice to honor your intuition and make good decisions.

You have to check in with yourself. You can be influenced by others, but then you check in with yourself and make the decision. I definitely listen to what other people say because I am a collaborator, but in the end, I analyze it all and make my own decision. Maybe I take a little bit of this idea and a little of that, but in the end, I make the decision.

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Claudia's website is claudiagoetzelmann.com