

TRUSTING YOUR INSTINCTS

1. *Passion is a special energy.*
2. *The momentum of that energy keeps you going.*
3. *Trust your intuition.*
4. *How do you deal with distractions and doubts?*
5. *Prepare for what it takes to finish a project.*

PASSION AND INTUITION, THE MAGICAL CONNECTION THAT WILL KEEP YOU GOING

Producing your own movie takes passion. You can make a film for hire without it, but to envision and complete your own film will take a special energy, which I call “passion.” When you find a subject that inspires you and truly captures your attention, you tap into a wellspring of vitality that gives you the stamina you’ll need to face the challenges of making a movie.

Once you begin, you soon learn that the demands of filmmaking are continuous. Every day presents opportunities to be creative, to learn something new — and to fail. I’ve learned repeatedly that there are no easy answers. After trying for years to “get it right,” I finally discovered the wisdom of listening to my inner sense of “knowing what to do.” Following my passion has led me to trust my intuition. That sense of being on-purpose gives me the direction I need.

Sometimes filmmakers find it necessary to work on subjects outside of their interests, usually because they need to make money, sometimes to help a friend. At other times, people choose a topic because it is popular or perhaps someone else urged them to pursue an idea that isn’t coming from the filmmaker at all. These films, which aren’t connected to the

producer's own vision, rarely have the same momentum as projects that are truly yours.

However, even when you are the source of the idea, making a film that is truly yours is still difficult. If you don't have enough support, financial or collegial or from your own belief in yourself, it's hard to keep that flame burning. So when you make a commitment to the idea for your own film, make a decision that you will consciously stay close to what is true for you as you go forward.

MY STORY

While harnessing the spark for my own first film, I learned the importance of listening to, and trusting, my intuition. The seed was planted when I was on retreat. I had settled into the final week of a month-long time out from my daily routine. I was in the tropics. I remember the sounds — a cascade of raindrops pelting on leaves outside the screened openings of my cottage. I had just read a passage on spiritual awakening, and was beginning to meditate, listening to the storm.

As my mind cleared, I became aware of another sound, apart from the rain. A voice seemed to be coming from somewhere inside of me, asking this question: "May I fill you with light?" Inhaling deeply, I breathed out a silent "Yes," and a shimmering radiance began to pour into my body. I felt as if I was floating in a sea of light. I trembled, not in fear, but in surrender. I knew, without knowing, that the brilliance flooding me was what saints and mystics describe, an infusion of a force that lifts them into another reality.

I have no idea how long the experience lasted. As the light began to fade, a sense of purpose filled me. I returned home from the retreat, and began reading everything I could find, from scientific research to the memoirs of saints. I was compelled to create some vehicle that would communicate the power of this light. I had no idea where to begin.

At first, I decided to imitate my husband, and write a book. He wrote non-fiction books, and I tried to follow his lead and do what he'd done. It wasn't a natural choice for me to try to spell out in words something so experiential. I ignored my doubts, persevered, and went through years of frustration, working on a book about light. But words on paper couldn't capture the essence of what I felt. I still have file boxes filled with my earnest efforts. I was discouraged, and nearly quit trying, but didn't give up.

One day, ten years after the initial experience, a filmmaker showed up in my life... literally on my doorstep. He lived in another city, and was in my neighborhood. He had heard about my futile efforts and was attracted to the project. Right then and there he challenged me. He said, "I heard you were trying to write a book about light. Did you ever think of making a movie?" When he asked that question, I knew, intuitively, that the answer was "Yes." I could feel in my bones that film-making was the right medium for this project, and for me.

IGNITING THE SPARK

I knew nothing about producing movies, but that didn't stop me. The filmmaker offered to work with me, and our collaboration led to my first film, *Radiance: The Experience of Light*.

He was the Producer and I was the Director. At that point, I didn't even know one from the other, but I knew we had to make that movie.

Although passion kept me going for ten years before that meeting, the actual making of the movie required that I learn a synthesis of passion, intuition, and a keen sense of "inner knowing." This synthesis has stayed with me ever since.

Radiance wasn't the book my husband would have written, or the film that the filmmaker would have made without me. It was mine. And, as we worked together, I realized that I needed

help to bring it into being. Like most independent filmmakers who take this journey, the inspiration was mine, but it took a team effort to manifest it.

Radiance grew from my passion born from my own experience of “light.” While I was making the film, I felt compelled to convey that spirit. Which is, I believe, why *Radiance* continues to be in demand today, two generations later.

Last year, I quietly put *Radiance* up on the Internet Archive (www.archive.com). We have never promoted its presence there, at all. So far, without any advertising, it has had over ten thousand viewings and is approaching three thousand downloads. (I take a glimpse every week or two, and the numbers just keep steadily going up.)

Through all the teaching I’ve done over the years, I know for a fact that everyone has an innate sense of “knowing when you know.” Filmmaking requires that you learn to trust that sense of knowing, and then recognize what is going to work for you. From that first film onward, the fire of passion has lit the path, with intuition by my side as my guide.

CHOOSING A SUBJECT

Producer/director Jacques Perrin’s lifelong interest in the natural world is evident in his film, *Winged Migration* (2001). The movie is a loving portrayal of different species of birds as they complete their yearly migration. The stunning photography and story brings the mystery and beauty of the planet’s birds alive for the viewer. After seeing *Winged Migration*, people look at birds through new eyes.

Perrin may have been inspired to make this film about birds when he saw another filmmaker’s documentary about Canadian geese. The film he made became “his” when he committed to his vision to create a work that shows, through his eyes, the freedom and beauty of birds in flight.

CHOOSING A SUBJECT THAT HAS LIFE

We all have passions. Sometimes they're hard to identify and even harder to harness, because they may be abstract or unruly or silent or even invisible. Recognizing an idea that will ring true for you means dipping into the passions that run through you like deep rivers. They flow with mysterious, life-giving water. Those driving impulses, the ones that will get you to the finish line, register for different people in different ways. For me, the signal is physical — especially when I am looking toward making a film, I get “trills of truth.” When an idea or an event moves me deeply, I get goose bumps. The hairs on my arms stand up, as if they are listening. When I feel this sensation, I stop whatever I am doing and ask myself, “Okay... What just happened?”

Your own alert to pay attention may or may not be physical. Some people breathe faster, some more deeply. Some feel giddy, some deeply calm; others simply feel energized, as if a force is moving through them. Whatever your signal, when you feel drawn toward a subject, you will have a sense that something is calling you, maybe whispering in your ear, maybe screaming out your name. Some people say literally, “It had my name on it.” The catalyst that triggers the response, beckoning you to create something new, can be ignited by a person, a headline, a poem, a dream, a fragrance — there is no one way.

What these “callings” have in common is that you feel compelled to make something happen.

IMAGINING POSSIBILITIES

If nothing comes to mind to ignite a spark for you, use your imagination. Imagine possibilities. As you fall asleep, fantasize movies you could make. When you are standing in line in the supermarket or stalled in traffic, brainstorm scenes. Reading

the newspaper or a magazine, watching someone else's documentary or a TV show or the news or even a soap opera can generate ideas. Does something "click"?

As you explore possibilities, several subjects may vie for attention. Some people stop there, because they can't decide! If you want to make a film, but the "right idea" is not obvious, or you are having difficulty choosing one to develop, take time out. You might gather with some friends and brainstorm. You could set aside an hour or two to walk in nature or sit in meditation and see what bubbles up.

Just "opening the floor" and asking for ideas, will start a process. Fresh ideas will come to mind, until you recognize one that is yours to pursue.

QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT HELP YOU CHOOSE A SUBJECT

When I give workshops, these are some of the questions I throw out to help people find ideas for their films.

- ☛ What are some of the most dramatic moments you have you lived through?
- ☛ Who are some of the most memorable people you have known?
- ☛ Where do you find the greatest beauty?
- ☛ What subjects fascinate you?
- ☛ What frightens you?
- ☛ What angers you?
- ☛ What worries you?
- ☛ What do you love to do?

Films that will be of genuine interest to someone else are almost always based on ideas that come from your own knowledge,

experiences, concerns, and yearnings. The word “authenticity” may be overused. However, there are times when authenticity best describes why someone tunes in to a film. When a filmmaker conveys an authentic experience, people pick that up. There’s a tendency to diminish the importance of your own experience, through modesty or shyness or lack of confidence. Making a film calls for you to believe in yourself.

Don’t get caught looking only for big ideas. Intimate ideas are often the most universal. Some of the most engaging films are simply an up-close look at a single subject.

For years I had been taking broken household appliances to a tiny store near my home. I loved the way the patient repairmen kept toasters and blenders out of the landfill by bringing them back to life with their tools and attention. That dedication inspired *Fix-It Shops: An Endangered Species*, a five-minute film documenting this ecological microcosm just around the corner from where I live.

As you scan the horizon, don’t forget to look close to home.



FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES AND COMPANIONS

As a rule of thumb, it seems to take about a year to make a thirty-minute documentary, on average. (Some projects take a few months, and some take ten years.) How will you sustain your excitement about an idea for a year or more?

One way to stay energized is to be in touch with people who reflect your passion and energy back to you. Filmmakers find these companions in a variety of ways. Often, they are friends and family members. In recent years, filmmakers sometimes find these people through Internet user groups. Some may develop through e-mail exchanges with people who start out as strangers, but who are interested in the same subject about which you are passionate. These virtual connections might become close colleagues. During a production, I try to stay in touch with people who share my vision and interest.

If you want to have a “normal” social life while you make a movie, you have to make it happen. I find that if I don’t make a conscious effort to keep up a social life, I begin to limit interactions to the people on the film team. Sometimes I go for months without seeing a movie or visiting friends — except those who are connected to production. You certainly don’t have to be this strict, but the fact is the more focused you are, the more likely you are to complete your project. One special bonus is that this kind of focused intensity leads to intimate relationships with your home team. Because of their intensity, some of these relationships last a lifetime.

I have learned to accept the fact that not everyone in my life will come along for the ride. Some people don’t appreciate who I become when I am in the middle of making a movie. I have parted ways with friends who find this style of friendship — my not being available when “in production” — too unsatisfying. With others, who are more patient, our friendship deepens because they accept who I am, and appreciate

what I am doing. They understand that my connection is still there with them, but my time and energy are pouring into the film.

DISTRACTIONS AND DOUBT

Creative energy is precious, but your connection to it can, at times, be fragile. At certain points in every project, your energy will diminish or even disappear. This dip in interest is natural, and happens to everyone. At times, the sense of losing touch with the project may be overwhelming, and you just want to quit. The omnipresent danger at any point along the way is succumbing to doubt, and slipping into a downward spiral in which hope seems beyond reach.

One of the reasons filmmakers lose heart is that other people discourage them along the way. While you develop your idea, you've got to maintain your focus. Some people will love your idea, but others may criticize you. Certain comments will instill doubt. You might hear, "No one wants to talk openly about that" or, "That's already been done." Some people just need to play devil's advocate, because it is their way of being involved, and it's not about you or your subject. You do need to consider the source.

Recently, one of my relatives heard I was making a film about the presidential election of 2004. She said, "You have so much talent. Why waste your time on this? The election's over!" I listened, and almost began to defend myself. Then I realized that she was not politically active, and really didn't understand where I was going with this project. I thanked her for her candid feedback, and went on to show a work-in-progress of that film to sold-out screenings across the country. When someone tries to discourage me, I consider the input, and then sort through what they've said. If, after doing that, the project still feels right, my resolve deepens.

UNASKED-FOR ATTENTION

When you make a film, the more passionate and committed you become, the more others will be attracted to the project. Some may want to work with you; others care about the subject and want to see the film finished, and in distribution. Along with the magnetic pull that magnetizes others to you, you may find that there is a shadow side, not only at the beginning, but along the way as well. As you progress, in addition to being the creator, you must also become a gatekeeper.

Often people who are attracted to the project may offer their services, even when you don't want help. Be selective. Others may try to influence your project because they identify with it, and feel they can add needed input. Some recognize the power in what you are doing and want to be part of that for their own reasons. You may or may not want any of these people working with you, even as volunteers. Be not only selective, but also protective.

At first, you may be flattered, but be careful. If people want your time, or try to press their opinions on you, the basic rule is to listen, learn what you can, and thank them for their input. Always return to checking in with your own inner sense of what's right for you. Remember always, it is *your* project. If you don't know whether or not to trust someone who comes to you, someone you don't know, do background research. At every stage, and at every level of the project, the archetype "Darth Vader" — a threat to the vision — may show up. This disturbance in the force may be external, or it may come from your own fears.

YOUR OWN DOUBTS

One obstacle that you might face is doubt about your own abilities. You may find yourself thinking, "I have always dreamed about doing this, but I don't know if I can really pull it together." If the prospect of making a film frightens you,

but you still feel drawn, I say “go for it” — even though I can promise you that it will probably be more challenging, time consuming, and character building than you expect.

If you have doubt about not having the right facts to proceed, or not enough information, the first step is to find out what you need to know. (If you need to do more research, fact checking is an excellent task for volunteers.) When you do more research, and fill in the blanks, you can answer these doubts and press forward.

Remember, as your project moves beyond where you started, and as you get new insights and information, to let the production evolve. The core idea will have a voice of its own, and this voice will tell you which direction to go.

The new direction might involve filming different interviewees, shooting more B-roll footage for cover or doing more research or adding certain stills. The new direction may even mean releasing someone who has been on the team for a while, and bringing on someone new. Be open to change, and stay flexible.

GETTING STUCK

Input about what to do next, as you proceed, will come from many sources — what you see as you watch your footage and your edited cuts, what you read, input from others, and from your own intuition. Make plenty of notes as you go. Keep notebooks and/or files of all this new information.

To take full advantage of the ideas and opinions of others, you need to be willing — at different times — to hold the reins and take over, while sometimes you will need to let them go and let yourself be guided. Stay open to this back and forth, as you learn to recognize when you need help and how to use it well.

Being willing to change direction when you get new information is not a sign of weakness. Be ready to accept input, if it improves the work, and protect your idea if you sense that feedback will weaken it.

When you find an idea that “has your name on it,” these challenges along the way give you a chance to do reality checks and learn what you need to know to carry out the vision.

RESTORING YOUR ENERGY

If you begin to lose your “juice,” there are ways to get refreshed. Some of these are so obvious they may seem cliché, and get overlooked.

For most people the best thing to do is to take a break, at least a couple of days off. On those days, sleep until you wake up naturally (no alarm clocks) and take naps.

Give yourself “a real break.” If you’ve been indoors too long, just going outside more often will refresh you. If you enjoy hiking, biking, gardening, or anything physical, those activities help restore a balance.

Give yourself time to do these things. When you feel physically rejuvenated, it is much easier to tap back into your goal and remember where you are headed.

FINISHING THE PROJECT

Finishing an independent film is one of the most difficult parts of filmmaking. Only an idea that captures your attention will be strong enough to carry you through to the end. Without a strong connection to your subject, it’s almost impossible to sustain the drive to complete a film. The will to carry on to the end will be generated from merging your intention, your willingness to learn and reflect on what you are learning, and your own passionate sense of purpose.

At every point along the way, a balance of passion and reflection comes into play. How to turn that mix into action is between the lines on every page of this book.

You may be the only person in the world who can tell a certain story in a particular way. Remember this: An idea that brings you to life means that the way you make that film will be unique.

KEY POINTS

- ❖ You need passion to make (and finish) your own movie.
- ❖ When you choose a subject with life for you, you tap into a wellspring of energy.
- ❖ Filmmaking requires that you trust your intuition.
- ❖ Films that emerge from your own knowledge, experiences, hopes, and concerns will be of interest to others.
- ❖ The strength of the core idea, and your commitment to it, will carry you through the challenges it takes to make a film.
- ❖ As you go forward, your energy may diminish. This dip in interest is natural and happens to everyone.
- ❖ Learn to differentiate between input that makes a contribution, and input that becomes a distraction.
- ❖ The core idea, and the elements related to it, are continually changing and evolving.