



Stanford eCorner

Freed from Perfection

James Freeman, *Blue Bottle Coffee*

February 17, 2016

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/4036/Freed-from-Perfection>

Blue Bottle Coffee Founder James Freeman discusses the realization that the coffee he started making need not be perfect. While musicians practice till they play perfectly, Freeman says what served him well in the early days were other hallmarks of performing artists: being in service to an audience, imagining sensory outcomes and repeating an activity to improve incrementally.



Transcript

- And, what I loved about coffee is I had such attachment and dedication to the profound as a musician. As a musician we're constantly being shown the work of the West's great geniuses. We're exposed to the profound our whole careers. And it's a lot of pressure. The profound is a lot of pressure. And what I realized that freed me in my life in coffee was it didn't have to be profound it just had to be really really good. And really really good is rare in the coffee business. It was at that time and it's still quite rare now even though it's a little less rare than it used to be. But this being freed from the shackles of perfection was very liberating for me and I realized that there were certain habits I had as a musician that actually were very helpful for me in coffee. People think that what musicians do is they put on their tuxedo and go onstage and they play their concert and go home.

But actually most of the time what musicians do is they sit in a room by themselves with their instrument doing the same thing over and over and over again all day every day for many many years in a row. And the task of a musician is to be slightly better at the end of the day than you were at the beginning. This notion of repeating to perfect. Repeating, repeating, repeating to perfect. That was the standard that a musician had. Other internalized standards were, I had the ability to imagine sensory outcomes. As a musician you're constantly thinking about this sensory experience that you wanna provide to somebody, to your audience. And as a musician you're thinking about service, being in service to the composer, being in service to your audience. So those attributes of being in service, imagining sensory outcomes, of repeating to perfect, actually are very helpful to me even now. I mean, what do you do when you roast a batch of coffee at 17 minutes? So you can be bored if you're roasting all day for 13 to 17 minutes per batch.

Or, you can be fascinated. Or, you can try to make every single batch slightly better than the one before. You can imagine a sensory outcome by cupping the coffee at the roastery. You can imagine sensory outcomes in terms of presenting them to guests. You can be in service of the coffee growers. You can be in service to the people that come into your cafes. You can be in service to the people that are serving our coffee. So all of those attributes actually kinda came in handy.