

# Letters from a Street Photographer

by Eric Kim

## Chapter #1: How to Shoot and Live without Regrets

I have recently been reading a lot of literature on “time management” and have discovered a new angle— “attention management.”

The basic premise is this: time management is overrated. We have all the time in the world. However what we don’t have is attention.

Everyday there are so many things which fight for our attention. If you have a smartphone you know. There isn’t a minute when it isn’t buzzing—screaming for our attention. It sends us a constant barrage of text messages, voicemail notifications, Instagram and Facebook notifications, we have hundreds (if not thousands) of unread emails, and little red dots all over the place.

I am an addict when it comes to self-help books. I try to read at least one self-help book, philosophy book, or anything else of interest every 1–2 days. The reason I read so many of these books is that I am often dissatisfied with my life— and I want to be more productive and prolific

with my writing and work. I don't want to waste time. I hate procrastinating, and being distracted.

So ever since I fell into the depths of Taoism and learnt the philosophies of doing less (everyday subtract 1 thing you do rather than add 1 thing) – this has helped me gain a lot of focus in my life. I think focus is overrated – as long as you eliminate distractions, focusing is easy.

I have also written on the idea that constraints are what breed creativity. These can be constraints in terms of having time constraints (only having 30 minutes a day to shoot in-between work and family life), constraints in terms of equipment (only having one camera and one lens), or in terms of subject matter (focusing on a project).

I think one of the biggest constraints that has helped give me focus, direction, and concentration in life is knowing that time (and life) is the biggest constraint.

There is only one thing certain in life: that we are going to die. Nobody knows when he/she is going to die – but sooner or later, it is going to happen.

I often find that thinking a lot about death is one of the best ways I stop dicking around, and focus on my life's task – and my life's work (which I think is writing for this blog, spreading the love of photography and philosophy, and building communities and bringing people together). That and being a loving person.

I've had a few near-death experiences (one being a car crash that if my front bumper was pulled to the curb just 1 more foot, I would have

probably died in a lethal T-bone collision) and another foolish time I switched lanes on the freeway, and almost hit a 18-wheeler head-on (but I swerved away in the nick of time).

Other instances are actually seeing other people have near-death experiences (or lying on their deathbed). So many people I know are currently living life with regrets. Regrets for not studying in college what they wanted to study, regrets for not taking a chance and starting their own business, regrets for not asking out that one person for a date, regrets for not traveling more, regrets for not pursuing a creative project, or regrets of being suck in a job they absolutely hate.

I don't want to live life with regrets. I don't want to be on my deathbed and ask myself: "Eric, you wasted your life— you could have done so much more with your energy, time, money, and attention. Why did you waste it living it the way you did, just for yourself?"

Even though I am 26 years old, healthy, and with no major illnesses— I never know when I will die. Who knows, I might be driving to the gym, and some guy who is texting while driving might run a red light, T-bone me, and boom, I'm dead. Or maybe I have a heart problem or some sort of rare cancer that might kill me in a year or two. Or I might be drunk one night, trip, slip on a bannana, and crack my skull on the side of a curb.

None of us know when we are going to die. And I don't want to be that guy who didn't live life to the fullest, and really suck out the marrow of life.

Out of all the books I have read on the philosophy of life— there is nothing that speaks more to me than Stoicism. What is Stoicism? Pretty much it is an ancient school of thought in which these philosophers had mental and

psychological tricks to help them live in a world of death, fear, and uncertainty– and to not just survive– but to thrive.

Out of all the Stoic scholars (my favorites being Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus) – Seneca is one of my favorites. Why? I could relate with him in the sense that he didn't front as being this enlightened scholar/philosopher and took a vow of poverty. Instead, he lived a “normal” life and got all the upsides of Stoic philosophy– rather than voluntarily choosing poverty (and embracing the downsides).

My favorite books by Seneca include “Letters from a Stoic” (the best compilation of his letters and sayings to his friends) and also “On the Shortness of Life.” Both should be read (if you want to learn how to deal with adversity in life).

I might do another article on “Letters from a Stoic” later– but I wanted to start this article on “On the Shortness of Life” (because it deals a lot with living everyday as if it were your last, and not wasting life).

Below are some principles that I have learned from the book, that I think can be applied to photography (and just life in general):

## **1. Live everyday as if it were your last**

“He who bestows all of his time on his own needs, who plans out every day as if it were his last, neither longs for nor fears the morrow.” - Seneca

This is the most simple point – live as if everyday were your last.

I know in today's world (unless we get hit by a car or fall victim to some rare form of cancer) we can all expect to live around 80 years old due to modern medicine, surgery, and cancer treatment.

However once again as I mentioned earlier– we don't really know with 100% certainty how long we will live. You might get a drunk teen driving-and-texting to hit you while you are driving, you might get attacked by a random wild bear that mauls you to death (who knows).

Anyways, I once read this thing by Steve Jobs in which every night before he goes to bed– he asks himself if he did everything in his possible power during the day to best use his time, energy, and life. If the answer is “no” too many times in a row– he decides to change something in his life.

I try to do something similar. At the end of every day, I imagine that it is the last time I am going to bed (that I will be dead the next morning). I then ask myself, “Did I do everything in my power to fulfill the best use of my life?” There are many days that I go to sleep feeling unfulfilled– which gives me the impetus to really focus on what matters in my life (photography, writing, loving my friends and family) the next day.

I know we all have busy lives– but shoot as if everyday were your last. I think it is better to shoot consistently for 5 minutes everyday than just shooting once a week for 5 hours. Just like exercise, doing something daily gives a much higher benefit over the long run.

I once read something that if you change your behavior just by 1% everyday– that difference will compound in huge investments down the line (if you think of a financial investment analogy).

So in my photography, I try to shoot as if everyday were my last. I always have my camera with me and try to take photos. Whether that is on the way to the grocery store, when I am stuck in traffic in my car (do this carefully), when I'm having coffee at a cafe, or when I am having dinner with Cindy.

If I go two days in a row without taking any photos, I feel empty inside and frustrated. Similarly, I try to write and everyday. I don't have to write 10,000 words a day nor do I need to read a book a day– just a little bit here and there compound tremendously over time.

I know that a lot of us are busy and don't have a lot of “free time.” But if you ever surf reddit, watch television, go on Facebook – you have free time. Subtract those distractions from your life, and channel them into your photography.

## **2. Time is the most valuable commodity**

“No one sets a value on time; all use it lavishly as if it cost nothing” - Seneca

If I lose \$100, I can earn another \$100 down the line. However if I lose a year of my life, I can never *gain* another year of my life. Time is the most valuable commodity that is a non-renewable resource.

I know a lot of people say “time is money.” But rather, I would say that time is much more valuable than money. I know a lot of people who trade their time, energy, attention, and effort (for money). Rather, I think we

should take the opposite approach: **either use money (or forgo earning more money) in order to have more time.**

For example, I know some people who work at companies who take a smaller salary and work fewer hours a week (for a smaller paycheck). Or some employees who voluntarily spend their money to buy more vacation days from their employer.

I once heard of a tale of a businessman who visits a fisherman. Long story short, the businessman tries to teach the fisherman business advice so he can get bigger boats, catch more fish, and earn more money. But the fisherman asks, “Why do I need more money in my life?” The businessman goes, “So you can retire and just hang out by the water and go fishing all the time.”

Nowadays in my personal life– I am trying to spend my time as my most valuable commodity. Once I earn enough money to comfortably pay for my rent, pay for my film and coffee, and put a little money into savings– I try not to trade more time for money. I want to eventually have as much free time on my hands to spend more time writing (for this blog), researching, spending time with friends and family, working on building local photography communities, etc. I don’t want to be the guy at the graveyard with the most 0’s in my bank account.

I once read something that once you earn at least \$75,000 a year (combined income with your partner) – earning more money doesn’t bring you more happiness in your day-to-day life. But because you earn \$40,000 a year, it doesn’t mean you need to work harder to earn \$75,000 a year– it just means that the law of diminishing returns on money go drastically down after \$40,000 a year.

I know a lot of people who fall into “hedonic adaptation” or the “hedonic treadmill” in which as they earn more income, their lifestyles get more fancy– so they end up spending more money on extraneous luxury goods (BMW, big house, kids in private school, expensive camera, etc). But the irony is that the more money they earn, the more time they spend working, and the less time they have to shoot.

So my practical tip: just earn enough money to live comfortably, then protect your free time at all costs. If I still worked at a company, I would just do the bare minimum of work (without getting fired) and once the clock hits 5:00pm, I leave immediately (not staying late at work trying to get a raise or whatever).

Furthermore, rather than trying to earn more money– think of how you can actually get by with less in life. So ask yourself: could you sell your car and get by on just a bicycle and public transportation (which means you don’t have to pay as much for a car payment, gas, insurance, etc) – and you can end up working less at work? Can you move into a smaller apartment and save some money that way, so you can save more money and have more time to live and photograph? Personally I moved into a 2-bedroom apartment in Berkeley (\$1800 a month) into a smaller 1-bedroom apartment in Berkeley (utilities included for \$1300 a month) – which means I have around an extra \$700 a month to spend working less, having more freedom in terms of time, and stressing less about finances.

**Never trade time for money. Trade money for time.**

### **3. Always keep death in sight**

“If each one could have the number of his future years set before him as is possible in the case of the years that have passed, how alarmed those would be who saw only a few remaining, how sparing of them would they be!” - Seneca

I recently installed an application on my phone called the “death clock” in which it tells me (roughly) how many days I have left to live. It says that I have 20,439 days to live.

Sure that is a lot of days, but everyday it ticks down. I am running out of years to live– and it is a constant reminder that I don’t have that much time on this planet, so I shouldn’t procrastinate in my life’s duty and to focus all of my time, energy, and effort effectively for the common good.

Always keep death in mind.

Another psychological trick: imagine yourself on your death bed. Now write down a fictional list of things you regret in life.

There is a nice article online called “Regrets of the dying” – in which a nurse who took care of the dying wrote a list of common regrets of the dying. They included something like:

- Not spending more time with loved ones and family
- Working too hard
- Not living a life true to themselves (and living life according to others’ expectations)
- Not pursuing their life’s passions

Another thing I did recently which frightened me– as well as gave me immense amounts of focus (for my future self): I downloaded an application on my phone which simulated how I would look like in 40 years. You essentially take a photo of yourself, and it makes you look old (adds wrinkles, droopy features, color skin blemishes, etc). I did the experiment on myself, and my future self seriously scared the shit out of me. I saw myself as an older man– and it once again gave me a reminder of my mortality– and gave me the thought that my time is ticking.

I got this simple idea from a new book, “The Marshmallow Test” – in which the author talks about when people are shown a simulated older-version of themselves, they are more likely to put more money into their retirement funds.

So try downloading that “death clock” application, and put it on your smartphone home screen or your desktop. Simulate an older version of yourself. Realize that every hour, every day, every week, every month, and every year– we are getting closer to our death. Don’t even waste a second of your life and stay focused on your photography, friends, family, loved ones, and passions.

## **4. Guard your time ferociously**

“Yet it is easy to dispense an amount that is assured, no matter how small it may be; but that must be guarded more carefully which will fail you know not when.” - Seneca

I think one of the biggest plagues of the modern world is how we often over-communicate with email, text messages, Twitter, Facebook

messages, etc. But the problem is this: it is very easy for someone to send you a message requesting some of your time, attention, and focus– but it is very hard for you to send a response. And of course with anyone with an overflowing inbox knows how overwhelming it can be responding to all of these requests for your attention and time.

Personally even though I get help from my manager Neil in terms of screening my incoming emails, I still get a lot of messages and requests from email and social media. At times it can be quite overwhelming, to the point that sometimes at night before I go to sleep, it gives me anxiety. There is always an unresponded email that I have yet responded to– that lurks in the back of my conscious.

One of the best “productivity” tips I’ve read is this: **Don’t check your email first thing in the morning.** The reasoning is this: it distracts you for the rest of the day, because you start off responding to other peoples’ requests– rather than focusing on your own important work.

For me, I think my free time, energy, and attention is best used blogging. I therefore try to guard my mornings ferociously. I have now made it a habit to turn off my smartphone in the evening before I sleep, and keep it off until around noon. Therefore from when I wake up until noon I can stay focused on my writing.

My morning routine looks something like this:

- Wake up to alarm, roll around a few times, slowly roll out of bed.
- Walk over to hot water boiler, boil water.
- Take an icy cold shower (nothing gets your blood pumping like this– and it prevents you from staying in a nice warm shower for about an

hour)

- Dry myself off, put on some clothes, head to kitchen.
- Turn on frying pan, and start cooking bacon (breakfast for Cindy).
- Make pour-over coffee for Cindy (with boiling hot water), and an espresso for myself.
- Finish breakfast for Cindy, drag her out of bed, serve her breakfast with a kiss, enjoy a nice morning conversation.
- Have espresso, clean up the kitchen, clear my table, and start writing from around 7am-noon. 5 hours is a great chunk of time to get writing done.

I know not everyone has the convenience of having a huge chunk of time to do meaningful work in the morning— especially if you have a day-job and need to be in the office by around 8–10am.

However even when I was working my day-job, I woke wake up early at around 7am, and still do some writing from 7–9am (2 hours of focused writing is a great chunk of time) – and just get into the office by 10am (great thing about tech companies is that they start late).

I know some other writers who are even more hardcore – because they have young children *and* a day job– they wake up at around 4am and write from 4–6am to get their writing done (when there isn't any distractions). Others I know are night owls– and get their writing done through the midnight.

But regardless – when it comes to your time, be absolutely ferocious in terms of defending it.

For example, if you don't have enough time to shoot (and have a day job)— I recommend the following: **schedule shooting time during your lunch breaks.** Do not (please) have a “working lunch” in which you buy a burrito, and sit down at your desk and eat, while answering emails. Try to book a solid hour of time to have a quick meal – and go out and snap photos around work. If you work in a boring area– try to see how you can take interesting photos of your boring environment.

Another idea: Go to your office an hour early. If you drive to work, perhaps take a different route and park your car somewhere, and snap some photos. If you commute to work via bus or subway, you can always shoot on the bus or subway– look at Bruce Davidson's “Subway” book for inspiration.

I know how draining it can be after a long day of work– but see if you can spend another 30 minutes–1 hour shooting after work. Perhaps do a night-time street photography project.

Another trick to defend your free time: treat your free-time as seriously as a meeting. In your outlook calendar or whatever– block out certain hours of the day for yourself. And if people ask you if you have time to meet up during that time– apologize and say you have a meeting (it isn't lying– you are having a meeting with yourself).

If you don't ferociously defend your free time and set boundaries and limits– people will suck out every minute, hour, and ounce of energy from you (and you will never have the “time” or attention to do anything you're passionate about).

I don't think it really even matters how much free time you have. I think it matters more how effectively you use your free time. Even 30 minutes of concentrated activity in shooting, reading photography books, or critiquing the photography of others online is more effective than just dicking around for 3 hours mindlessly. There is a saying: "Pressure makes diamonds" – having a limited amount of free time (under time constraints and pressure) will force you to focus and do great work.

My good friend [Charlie Kirk](#) used to work as a lawyer in Tokyo, and would only have free time late at night after work. Work would be so stressful and difficult for him that after a long day of working, he would have all this energy that he wanted to spend on shooting. So the hour or 2 after work would be immensely focused and productive for him.

Sometimes it is good to be selfish with your time– for the greater good. The more you spend your time wisely doing creative work, the more everybody benefits. Don't feel guilty about it.

## **5. Start living, right now.**

I know a lot of people who make excuses for not being happy and living right now. They always look into the distant future and say, "Oh– I'll be happy once I get that promotion, once I get that new car, once I get that new camera, once I get a million dollars in the bank." They work more and more, put in more hours, put on weight, put on more stress, in the hope that somewhere in the future– they will finally have enough time and money to retire to a island somewhere in Hawaii where they can start to "truly live".

This is not a modern-day problem. Apparently the Romans had the same problem. Our friend and guide Seneca shares the problem of who spend their life “in preparation to truly live”:

"Can anything be sillier than the point of view of certain people—I mean those who boast of their foresight? They keep themselves very busily engaged in order that they may be able to live better; **they spend life in making ready to live!**"

Seneca also laments how some people focus too much on their future selves, without enjoying themselves in the present moment:

"They form their purposes with a view to the distant future; yet **postponement is the greatest waste of life; it deprives them of each day as it comes, it snatches from them the present by promising something hereafter.**"

I know as responsible adults we should plan, save, and try to focus on our future selves. We are constantly told that we need to save up more money in our 401k, retirement funds, money so our kids can go to college, etc. However if we spend too much of our time and efforts thinking about the future, it prevents us from realizing we can be truly happy, and start living **RIGHT NOW.**

Now I'm not saying you should take your entire life's savings: buy a Leica, a ticket around the world for a year, and eschew all of your life's responsibilities. Far from it. I still encourage you to be frugal, thrifty, and save up for your future self.

Rather, what I am trying to say is don't let saving for the future distract you from that fact that you can truly live a productive and happy life as a photographer and human being **RIGHT NOW**.

I know personally I used to have a lot of "if only" statements when it came to my photography. For example:

- If only I had more money, then I could buy a new camera, which would help me be more creative, and finally start making good photos.
- If only I had a Leica, then I wouldn't look so creepy shooting street photography, then I would have more confidence, and then I could finally start making good photos.
- If only I lived in Paris, then I could be inspired by the city, and finally make good photos.
- If only I had \$1,000,000 saved up, then I could travel the world, and escape my boring cubicle office-job, and finally make good photos.

However there is no reason why we can't make good photos right now. Presumably you already own a camera (even a smartphone is good enough), and have at least 1 hour of free time a day (if you say you don't have at least an hour of free time a day I call bullshit). Why can't you start making photos right now?

Sure not all of the photos are going to be great– but I think the process of **shooting everyday** is the right habit to have. Keep stacking that habit of shooting everyday, until it becomes second nature. You're not going to make a good photograph everyday– but that isn't the point.

I think photography is a beautiful tool to augment our life's experiences. When I have a camera in hand, I am much more cognizant of the beauty around me, and it forces me to live life more purposefully.

And once again the beauty of street photography is that we have no excuses– we can do it literally anywhere. We aren't doing landscape photography or wildlife photography here. You don't need a double-rainbow in the background to make an interesting photo.

Even if you live in a boring neighborhood– look to the work of William Eggleston and Lee Friedlander (who made great street photographs in boring areas).

And ultimately at the end of the day remember– it doesn't have to be “street photography”. To me, as long as what you photograph you're passionate about– that is all that matters.

## **6. Real leisure is active, not passive**

“Even the leisure of some men is engrossed; in their villa or on their couch, in the midst of solitude, although they have withdrawn from all others, they are themselves the source of their own worry; we should say that these are living, not in leisure, but in busy idleness.” - Seneca

One of the big lessons I've learned about happiness and living a fulfilled life is that “leisure” (free time) is best used doing something active (photographing, writing, spending time with loved ones) rather than

doing something passive (watching TV, trashy entertainment magazines, etc).

There is something in psychology called “flow” – in which when we are totally engrossed in an activity, it gives us a sense of euphoria. It is often a task which is challenging that pushes our human potential. People often fall into states of flow (or being “in the zone”) when reading books, writing, photographing, rock climbing, running, etc. We are most engaged, happy, and productive when we are active.

I know a lot of people daydream of finally taking a vacation and just relaxing on the beach with a Corona and lime. But ironically enough that doesn't bring us real happiness (despite what the advertisers of alcoholic beverages and hotel resorts want you to think about).

When you are tired after a long day of work, drinking a beer and vegging out in front of the TV isn't going to make you feel better. It will just make you feel more lethargic, tired, and dead. Rather, when you are tired– do something active. Go to the gym, walk around the block and take some photos, do something active.

I think we often make the wrong assumption that doing any sort of activity that is vigorous will just tire us out. I think this is the wrong assumption– as activities that we are truly excited by tend to invigorate us and give us energy.

For example, when I go to the gym (which takes a lot of physical and mental energy) – I feel much more pumped-up after I leave the gym. Similarly when I often don't feel like going out and shooting, I just tell myself that I will go on a walk (and I bring my camera along). However

once I start walking, I start seeing photos, and then I start getting excited, and start making photos. Once I get home, I feel this sense of excitement and glow emanating from inside my body– which makes me feel truly alive.

So remember: if you have any free time, spend it doing something active (ie. taking photos).

## 7. Seize the day

“Why do you delay,” says he, “Why are you idle? **Unless you seize the day, it flees.**” Even though you seize it, it still will flee; therefore you must vie with time’s swiftness in the speed of using it, and, as from a torrent that rushes by and will not always flow, you must drink quickly.” - Seneca

For a while I had the words “carpe diem” (seize the day in Latin) posted to my desk. Everyday when I was feeling shitty, tired, or unmotivated– I would look at those words, and it would suddenly give me a fire in my belly.

Seize the day.

Everyday is a brand new day, a new blank slate. It doesn’t matter if you wasted your time the day before. I know I waste a lot of my time, and often go to sleep with regrets (not making more photos during the day, not going to the gym, not spending more time with my loved ones, and not writing/reading more). But everyday I go to sleep and tell myself, “Tomorrow will be a better day.” And when I wake up, I bless God for

giving me a chance at another day, and I then tell myself to seize the day, and not waste another moment.

Seneca says in the quote above that we need to seize the day, and we shouldn't be idle. Not only that but even though we seize the day– time still slips away in-between our finger-tips.

Imagine if you were lost in a desert. You've walked for miles and hours on end, with no salvation in sight. You are so parched, that your throat feels like sandpaper. Suddenly, an Oasis of water appears. There is a waterfall of icy, fresh, and crystal-clear water. But the catch: the waterfall will only last for 30 more seconds. You then run over, and inhale as much water as you possibly can for those 30 minutes (knowing that there won't be any more) – and you will have to journey for many more miles on end (without the hope of any more water).

I think that is an apt analogy for our lives and time. It is constantly slipping away. Even if we make our best efforts to effectively use our time, attention, and concentration– we are still losing it.

Sometimes life can feel like an uphill battle, but my suggestion is this: **live life furiously, to the fullest, without hesitation, intentionally, and gratefully.** Be present in whatever you are doing, and be gracious of every moment time has given you to live your life. Because before long, you will be dead and no longer able to appreciate the joys of everyday life.

## **8. The difference of living long (versus existing long)**

“There is no reason for you to think that any man has lived long because he has grey hairs or wrinkles; he has not lived long—he has existed long.” - Seneca

I know a lot of photographers who claim that they've been photographing for “30 years”. But have they *really* been photographing for 30 years? Or have they been simply making a few snapshots here and there (only on the weekends or when they travel to Yosemite or Paris) over 30 years.

Age is a funny thing. A lot of people often think that old age leads to wisdom. It can be a contributing factor— but not always the case.

I know a lot of older people who have lived life unpurposefully— and have lots of resentment and regret in their life. As Seneca has mentioned, they haven't lived long— they have merely existed a long time.

So I think what our buddy Seneca is telling us the following: **It doesn't matter how long you exist, it matters how purposefully you live.** For example, someone who is 30 years old (and discovered that he only has 2 years left to live) and spent those 2 years living meaningfully and purposefully could die happier than someone who lived 80 years (living a life full of regret not doing what they're truly passionate about).

Living a long life is overrated. Who cares if you live to be 100 years old, if you just spend all of that time watching television, listening to the demands of others, and never making time for yourself and what makes you feel truly alive?

Another analogy one of the Stoics give us (forget if it is Seneca or Marcus Aurelius) is that **life is like a play: it doesn't matter how much**

**time we are given on-stage. What matters more is how good our acting is.** So it is better to be given 5 minutes on stage (and give a great performance) than if you're given a lead-role and have an hour on stage (and give a shitty performance).

Life is the same way. Don't yearn to live a long life— yearn to live a meaningful life.

And you can do that starting now.

## **9. Imagine you were given a second shot at life**

You don't want to be an old man (or woman) on his/her deathbed— regretting life like the following:

“Decrepit old men beg in their prayers for the addition of a few more years; they pretend that they are younger than they are; they comfort themselves with a falsehood, and are as pleased to deceive themselves as if they deceived Fate at the same time. But when at last some infirmity has reminded them of their mortality, in what terror do they die, feeling that they are being dragged out of life, and not merely leaving it. They cry out that they have been fools, because they have not really lived, and that they will live henceforth in leisure if only they escape from this illness; then at last they reflect how uselessly they have striven for things which they did not enjoy, and how all their toil has gone for nothing” - Seneca

I once read a story of an emperor, king, or some other powerful person in ancient Rome in which everytime he went to bed, he would have servants put him in a casket, parade him around the palace and say something like, “Oh, he has lived, he has truly lived!” And then the man goes to bed (in the coffin), literally imagining his death in a visceral, vivid way. I think he did this to remind himself that death was just around the corner, and that he should live a virtuous life. And when he woke up the next morning, he literally felt as if God gave him a second chance in life, and would live more vigorously.

Funny enough, I heard that there are some people in Asia (not sure if Japan or Korea) where they give “mock funerals” to people who are depressed or feel purposeful in life. They literally invite the entire family and give a fake funeral, with friends and family giving speeches in terms of how meaningful the person was in their life, and how much they were sad that they were dead. Then the person (fake dead person) would be put into a casket, and literally nailed shut. After a few hours, they open up the casket– and the person is “reborn” – given a second chance at life. Apparently this gives people a psychological kick-in-the-ass, better helping them appreciate their lives before they do something stupid like commit suicide by jumping in front of a train or off a bridge.

I’m not telling you to do something similar by having people act out your mock funeral. But what I am saying is that everytime you go to sleep at night– literally ask yourself, “If I died tonight in my sleep, would I regret anything in life?” And if you say “yes” – write down or think about what you will regret not having done more (taken more photos, published a photography book, done an exhibition, traveled more, wrote more, read more, spent more time with friends and family, etc). And if you happen to wake up in the morning, bless God that you were given another shot at

life. And true story– I know some people who are older (75+) who do have a fear of going to sleep at not waking up the next morning.

I fly a lot– and with all of these news of planes crashing, getting hijacked, etc– I often get a slight tinge of fear (and death) when I fly– especially when I’m taking off or if there’s a lot of turbulence in the air. So when I’m taking off on my flight (and the cabin crew yells at me to turn off my phone or iPad) I close my eyes, relax, and imagine: If I died on this plane, is there something in life I would regret? Fortunately it is most often “no” (I wouldn’t die with regrets) – but there are times it is “yes” (in those cases– I tell myself if I am given a second shot at life and land safely, I won’t waste my time anymore).

I also read something from Marcus Aurelius (in “The Meditations”) that everytime you kiss your child to sleep, imagine that he/she won’t wake up the next morning and will die in his/her sleep (a lot of children died back then).

Thinking about death can come off as grotesque– and talking about death is a huge taboo, especially in the west. However the more I think we can have mature conversations about death– it can give us a huge upside: focusing more on life and living intentionally.

So psychologically imagine your death (by closing your eyes, imagining the details vividly, with sermons being given, your family weeping, you being tossed into the grave, etc) – and then open your eyes and tell yourself: “Time to stop wasting time for shit that doesn’t matter. It is time for me to go forth on my life’s task– and give every ounce of energy, life, and soul to accomplish it.”

## 10. The only time that exists is the present

“Present time is very brief, so brief, indeed, that to some there seems to be none; for it is always in motion, it ever flows and hurries on; it ceases to be before it has come, and can no more brook delay than the firmament or the stars, whose ever unresting movement never lets them abide in the same track. The engrossed, therefore, are concerned with present time alone, and it is so brief that it cannot be grasped, and even this is filched away from them, distracted as they are among many things.” - Seneca

The only thing that is certain is the present moment. The future is uncertain (we don't know what will happen), the past has already occurred (we can't change it). The only thing we have control over is the present moment. How we currently are thinking, how we are feeling, what we are doing in the moment.

Whenever I get distracted, I always am able to get back to my course of thinking by simply saying: “What am I doing in my present moment to improve my condition, to improve my thinking, or living more creatively?”

For example, if I am feeling dissatisfied with my photography (which I am often) – I will think, “What can I do in this present moment to improve my photography?”

Upon thinking that– I might literally grab my camera, exit my apartment, and go on a walk around the block and snap photos for around 30 minutes. I might go to my library and pull out a random photography

book that inspires me, and delve into it– and gain inspiration that way. Or I might do research on a photographer who interests me, and add to my “Learn to the Masters” series for my blog.

I have a saying for myself: **“Tomorrow is never.”** If I ever tell myself, “Oh– I’ll just do it later or tomorrow” – I never end up getting it done. So I either do something immediately, or just forget about it. For example, if I want to spend more time with Cindy – rather than just saying to myself, “Oh– I’ll take her out on a date sometime” – I’ll do something in the present (give her a phone call or text message asking how she is doing, writing her a card, or surprising her with a bar of delicious chocolate (at least 70% or higher). If I am unhappy with my physical condition at the present moment, I’ll go to the gym and workout, do a few pushups in my room, or just be conscientious to watch my diet for the rest of the day.

Focus on what you can do in the present moment, because that is all that exists.

## **11. Don’t get distracted; stay on-course**

“What if you should think that that man had had a long voyage who had been caught by a fierce storm as soon as he left harbour, and, swept hither and thither by a succession of winds that raged from different quarters, had been driven in a circle around the same course? Not much voyaging did he have, but much tossing about.” - Seneca

I think nowadays one of the most difficult things to do is **not get distracted**. Distractions are pervasive, through emails, text messages,

social media, etc.

I think in our photography it is easy to get distracted as well. While I do believe in the idea of experimentation– sometimes experimenting *too much* can detract us. Just like Seneca says, life is like a voyage in a ship. We can be tossed and thrown around in different directions, but still end up where we started.

Rather, I think in our voyage in photography– we should always advance our work.

For example, one of the biggest distractions that I personally face in my photography is being tempted by different equipment. Digital, 35mm film, medium-format film, smartphone, etc. Then there is switching between black and white and color.

I think one of the things that has given me the greatest focus and sense of direction is choosing one camera, one lens, one film – and pursuing a single project with it. For example in my “Suits” and “Only in America” series it is all being done in a film Leica MP, 35mm f/2 lens, and Kodak Portra 400 film.

For a project I’m doing around my house (just urban landscapes of Berkeley), I’m using a medium-format film Hasselblad and Kodak Portra 400 120 film.

For miscellaneous documentary work I do, I tend to shoot black and white digital (either on a Fujifilm XT–1 or a Ricoh GRD V).

I find that is another benefit of working on a project: you are working towards something, and making progress.

I think it can often be a bit distracting to be doing too many different types of photography. When I started shooting, I did everything: wedding, portraiture, macro, landscape, HDR, selective-color, and street photography. I was like a Wal-Mart photographer, okay at every genre (but not really good or focused in on one). The biggest change in my photography was when I realized that street photography was my passion, and I decided to ignore all other types of photography– and to just focus on my street photography.

There is also a similar analogy called the “Helsinki bus theory” – in which a photographer’s life starts off at a bus stop. Then there are all these different bus routes that go in different directions. You hop on one bus (which is a style of photography), but then you might pre-maturely jump off the bus, to simply get on a different bus route (a different style of photography). But the more you jump off and go on different buses, you never really find your style or vision as a photographer. The author’s piece of advice? **“Stay on the fucking bus.”**

I think while having lots of options and flexibilities can be exciting– the real creativity comes from constraints, and having fewer options.

So avoid distractions in your life and photography, whether it is spending too much time on social media (Flickr, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, etc), or blogs (gear rumor sites, gear review sites, reddit), or anything else which distracts you from your artistic purpose.

## **Conclusion**

Remember, life is short. You never know when you will die. Do you want to be 80 years old, on your deathbed, and regret not having traveled more, having photographed more, and having lived life more purposefully?

I think the secret to living a life full of energy, fulfillment, and progress is to eliminate what is a distraction from your life– whether it be negative people, bullshit on social media, or anything which pulls you away from what is important in your life (whether it be photography, writing, reading, spending time with people who you love).

You might die tomorrow, you never know. So live life to the fullest. Be selfish and greedy with your time – and invest that energy, time, and attention into doing meaningful creative work. Society will be benefitted as a whole. Live for the common good, and creatively thrive.

You have no limits, but your days are limited. Don't waste it– go and seize the day and shoot last today were your last!

## **Chapter #2: How to Deal with Negative Critics**

For this chapter in my on-going “Letters from a Stoic” book, I wanted to write a topic that I am very familiar with– how to deal with negative criticism (and thrive and benefit from it).

For those of you who have followed me and my blog for a while– you will know that I have a fair amount of negative critics and negative criticism. Here are a list of things I have been critiqued (or criticized, hated for) – and a list of (sort of similar to real-life) comments I’ve gotten:

- “Eric, your blog sucks. You’re just a wanna-be street photographer, who bites off all the styles of other photographers like Bruce Gilden. You’re a fake. You need to find your own style and voice, not just imitate others (and do it horribly in the process)” (something like this on the blog)
- “If you ever took a photo of me with a flash, I would punch you in the throat, bash your Leica in your face, and then throw you in front of a bus” (YouTube)
- “I’ve been shooting longer since you’ve been a little sperm in your daddy’s left nutsack. Don’t tell me what to do.”
- “You’re a scammer and a charlatan. What gives you the right or the authority to teach workshops on street photography? Why don’t you do everyone a favor and refund the money they give you for attending your shitty workshops, and send them off to a real workshop?”
- “Eric Kim is the Ken Rockwell of the street photography world.”
- “Eric Kim is the Kim Kardashian of the street photography world (famous for doing absolutely nothing.”
- “I hate asian people– that Eric Kim kid is really annoying.”
- “Eric, not to sound like a jerk, but honestly you should stop blogging about street photography. You obviously don’t know anything, and you’ve stuffed more mis-information into the minds of your viewers than give back something of value. Please. Just. Stop. Blogging.”

Those are all the ones I can think off the top of my head– but I’ve gotten hundreds (maybe even thousands) of negative comments and criticism over the last 4 years I’ve been running this blog – directly on the blog comments, on YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook messages, email, online forums, etc.

A lot of people ask me, “Eric, how do you deal with all the critics and haters?”

Honestly– I don’t deal with it very well. Whenever I read a negative comment (can even be constructive criticism) – my heart rate instantly spikes, and I start breathing heavily. I start to get tension headaches, and I can feel stress in my body elevate via increased cortisol through my body. I start becoming anxious and paranoid, and then I feel deep and sharp pangs in my heart.

I put my heart, soul, energy, time, and blood into this blog and everything I create. I try to be as authentic and real as I can. I try to promote transparency. I try to make myself vulnerable by being as honest as I can, but by wearing my heart on my sleeve– I leave myself open to being attacked and wounded.

Over the years, I’ve gotten a lot better at dealing with negative criticism.

The first time I got tons of negative criticism online (a video of me shooting with flash in Hollywood on YouTube)– I literally had a quarter-life street photography crisis in which I did feel like a fake, a wanna-be, a poser, a noob – whatever– and ended up putting down my camera for a month (and didn’t take any photos). It was the first time in my life in which tons of people said lots of negative, hurtful, and even violent things

towards me, and I didn't know how to react. I just huddled up into a ball. I am fortunate for my friends, family, and close colleagues who helped me through that part of my life.

So how have I been able to deal a lot with this negativity and criticism?

Bingo, you know it– the art of stoicism.

## **“The Meditations” by Marcus Aurelius**

One of the biggest sources of inspiration (and defense against negative criticism) was from Marcus Aurelius' book: “The Meditations.” A quick background: Marcus Aurelius was once the most powerful man in the world (emperor of the Roman Empire) – and also a stealth-stoic. He followed the philosophy of Stoicism (not seeking for happiness in externals, but internals) all in a world filled with chaos (death, backstabbing, and uncertainty).

The lessons I've learned from Marcus Aurelius (he wrote them over 1,000 years ago) still apply greatly today. I don't think in the last 2,000 years human interaction, society, or conflict has changed much at all. We still feel jealousy, envy, anger, pain, confusion, guilt, and depression.

To be fair– the ancient Romans had it far worse than we did. They dealt with uncertainty in terms of death and life. Our problems are much more insignificant compared to theirs (our “first world problems”). However the pain we get from negative criticism and critique is still as painful (instead of getting it from backstabbing political conspirators, we get it from co-workers, colleagues, strangers on the internet, false friends, etc).

# Stoicism and Street Photography (and life)

Once again, Stoicism has been one of the best philosophies that help me wake up in the morning, take on the uncertainties of everyday, and not just survive– but thrive. What doesn't kill me only makes me stronger.

For this blog post, I quoted from a new modern translation of “The Meditations” – titled “The Emperor’s Handbook”. It isn’t as faithful a translation as the other ones out there– but much more readable and understandable.

I wanted to share some strategies that Marcus Aurelius wrote (to console himself) in private– which has helped me greatly:

## 1. Everyday, expect negativity

The interesting thing about “The Meditations” is that Marcus Aurelius wrote them in private. I don’t think he ever intended anyone else to write them. If anything, it was a form of self-therapy for himself (the stresses of an emperor is quite great).

So in one of his passages in the book, he writes that he expects everyday to be filled with negative people:

“First thing every morning tell yourself: today I am going to meet a busybody, an ingrate, a bully, a liar, a schemer, and a boor. Ignorance of good and evil has made them what they are.”

However he reminds himself that these wrong-doers are in-fact his brothers. By associating the negative people in his life as his family, it helps soften the blow:

“But I know that the good is by nature beautiful and the bad ugly, and **I know that these wrong-doers are by nature my brothers**, not by blood or bleeding, but by being similarly endowed with reason and sharing the divine.”

Marcus also puts together some beautiful words of wisdom– in the sense that he will not let anyone’s thoughts or feelings hurt him. He reminds himself: we were all put on this earth to help one another:

“**None of them can harm me, for none of them can force me to do the wrong against my will, and I cannot be angry with a brother or resent him, for we were born into this world to work together like the feet, hands, eyelids, and upper and lower rows of teeth.** To work against one another is contrary to nature, and what could be more like working against someone than resenting or abandoning him?”

### **Takeaway point:**

I think it is foolish for us to wake up every morning and expect life to be easy-peasy, and for there to be no conflict in our everyday lives. We should always expect there to be negativity, criticism, and pain in our lives. I once read a quote (think it is from Marcus Aurelius) that said, **“Life is more like wrestling than dancing.”** Life is tough.

I think when it comes to street photography, it is foolish for us to think that everything is going to be easy. The fact is, sooner or later (if it hasn't happened already) – people are going to give you shit for shooting street photography. You're going to have people be suspicious of you and your intentions, you're going to have people who tell you to 'fuck off', you're going to get threats of physical violence, you're going to get people threaten to call the cops on you, you're going to have people call you a creep, etc.

Furthermore, your photos are going to be criticized. Whether verbally (or non-verbally) people are going to think your photos are boring, that they're cliché, that they're shitty, that they're uninspired, that they have poor composition, whatever.

I think therefore like a Roman Centurion getting ready for battle– we should always go into the battlefield with our full-body armor on. What kind of foolish soldier would go into a battle without any sort of armor?

The same way in our daily lives and in our street photography, we should put on our mental armor. We need to expect the flying arrows, the jabbing spears, the slashing swords. We need to expect to be hit, trampled over, or elbowed in the side of the head.

Life is a battle, and life is tough. But realize that ultimately– we are all on the same team, the same army. We were all born from the same stock, and ultimately– we are all brothers in sisters in this war of life.

However I think we often get misguided– and fight with one another (instead of fighting together). So the next time someone critiques you, yells at you, threatens you– whatever, remember: he is your brother or

sister. Don't take it personally, and don't resent others for their words or actions.

## 2. Just do it (and don't worry about the consequences)

The Nike motto: "Just do it" is quite apt in life (and street photography).

There have been tons of times where I've wanted to shoot a street photograph, but chickened out because I was scared or afraid of the consequences. I don't want to get yelled at, threatened, or punched in the face.

Similarly whenever I upload a photograph on the internet, I get a tinge of anxiety— because I know my photograph will be judged. I know that some people will think my photos suck, that they're not as good as my "old stuff", or just critique me for being me.

What advice does Marcus give us? Just do it— as it is better to have done something (and be criticized for it), rather than not doing it at all:

**"Claim your right to say or do anything that accords with nature, and pay no attention to the chatter of your critics. If it is good to say or do something, then it is even better to be criticized for having said or done it."**

Ultimately, we need to follow our own conscience and inner-system of morales. Everybody is different, so let us not compare our actions and thoughts and words with others. Let us follow our own inner-compass:

“Others have their own consciences to guide them and will follow their own lights. Don’t be gazing after them, but keep your eyes on the straight path ahead of you, the path of your own nature and of the nature of the universe. The path of both is the same.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Our thoughts, actions, words will always be judged by others.  
This is because everyone has a different inner-compass.  
Everyone has a different drummer that they march to.

For example, when it comes to the way you shoot street photography – others might find it offensive. But you might not find it offensive.

Others might not like your photos, but you like your photos.

Others might not like your definition of street photography, but it resonates with you.

Sometimes I think many of us fall victim to “paralysis by analysis.”  
Meaning– we worry too much about over-analyzing actions or our words that we fail to do anything at all (because we worry too much about the consequences).

For example, I have silenced myself a lot from speaking my mind because I was afraid of being criticized. Or similarly, I have missed thousands of potential street photography opportunities because I was afraid of being negatively judged (or criticized).

Follow your own inner-moral compass, and just do what feels right to you. Don't look at others for their approval. Just do it.

### **3. You are nothing but a tiny speck in the universe**

To be honest, at the end of the day— no matter how mean or critical others are you, it doesn't really matter in the big scheme of things. The universe doesn't care about your suffering— or your small problems.

We tend to amplify our own problems, and think that they're the biggest problems in the world. A co-worker or boss yells at us and criticizes us and our work, a former lover cheats on us, a hobo chases us after (wrongly) assuming we took his photograph.

Whenever I personally have tough shit going on in my life (or what I think is tough) – I remind myself: I am nothing but a tiny speck in this universe, and what I am experiencing doesn't really matter in a vast scale.

Marcus Aurelius reminds us to think about how small we are— and how insignificant human affairs are in general:

“Imagine if you were able to soar above the clouds and look down upon the whole scope of human affairs how trifling they would seem in relation to the vast expanse of space and the hosts of heaven. No matter how often you took flight, you would see the same things, so monotonous, so fleeting. What grounds for pride are these?”

## **Takeaway point:**

Ultimately, the universe doesn't care about us and our suffering. Imagine a bird's eye view of the world. Think about how tiny our buildings are (which cost millions of dollars) – and how tiny human beings are (they look like little ants that can just be stomped on).

In-fact, whenever I go on a flight and look out of the window– I realize that all of my problems, stresses, and anxieties, and lust after wealth, power, and prestige is really insignificant. I see San Francisco as a speck of dust from an airplane, and think to myself, “Man, there is all this stress, anxiety, and suffering in humanity– but we are all so tiny at the end of the day.”

So not to diminish your own personal stresses, trials, and tribulations– but realize, we are all going to die one day, and none of it is going to matter. Who is going to care if someone yelled at you for taking their photograph? Who is going to care if you got someone to threaten to call the cops on you? Who is going to care that there is a random troll who talks shit about on you Twitter or anonymously via the comment sections of blogs, or behind-your-back (in real life)?

We are nothing but a tiny speck.

So next time you have any personal (or photography-related) negativity or criticism or hate, zoom out of your life, and realize that it is not really a big deal– and sooner or later, it will come to pass.

## 4. See the world from your critic's perspective

“Delve into what motivates and governs them, and you will expose the critics you fear and see what poor critics they are of themselves.” - Marcus Aurelius

I remember when I was a kid and being bullied in middle-school, someone told me: Bullies only bully because they themselves are insecure.

I remember when I first heard that, I thought that was absolute bullshit. Why would bullies bully others if they were insecure? Didn't they know how much it hurt? Why would they want to do that to themselves?

Personally– I've met some (former) critics of mine over coffee, and realized that a lot of their past critics of me weren't about me– but about their own insecurities.

For example, I have a friend (who used to be a “hater”) tell me that when he was writing a lot of negative stuff about me on the internet, he himself was going through a divorce, going through financial problems, wasn't getting much work as a photographer, feeling insecure about his photography– and he just needed a place to vent his negative feelings and emotions. And of course unfortunately, that scapegoat ended up being me.

Similarly, I've once had someone write stuff on the internet not to sign up for my workshops – that I was a hack and charlatan, and just trying to

steal money from others. And then I find that photographer is now starting his own series of street photography workshops – advertising, “Watch out for the fake street photography workshops out there– mine are the ‘real’ street photography workshops.”

So nowadays, when I see people writing negative things about me online– I have realized, it is less about myself and what I am doing. It is more about them.

Think about it: most people don’t anonymously troll others on the internet. What kind of sadness, pain, loneliness, and depression must that individual go through to go to the lengths to anonymously criticize another person on the internet (that they don’t even know in-person)?

## **Takeaway point**

Now whenever I get negative feedback or criticism, or hate– I don’t get angry at the other person. Rather, I feel pity.

I feel pity for the person that they must (also) be going through tough shit in life. I almost want to sit down with that person and ask them, “Hey bro, you’ve been putting a lot of negativity out there. Is everything okay personally in your life? Is there anything you want to sit down and talk about? I’m all ears.”

So the next time someone is negative or critical of you and your photography– don’t take it personally.

For example, if someone doesn’t like vanilla ice cream (and criticizes you liking chocolate ice cream)– nobody is “wrong.” It is just a matter of

taste.

So let's say you like to shoot portraits of people on the street with permission (and someone likes candid photos of people without permission). Nobody is "wrong" – they just have different tastes and approaches. But often a lot of arguments happen over "what is street photography– and how others demonize others for doing it the "wrong" way.

Different strokes for different folks.

So once again, don't take negativity feedback or words or actions personally. Rather, feel love and compassion for others. Give them a hug.

## **5. It might be unintentional (or an accident)**

We take all this negative feedback and criticism personally– but sometimes it really isn't bad at all.

For example, sometimes people say words (without really thinking) – which ends up hurting you. But it isn't exactly the words that the person said which hurt you, but it is your own interpretation of the words.

For example if someone said, "Wow– you lost a lot of weight!" Some people might take it as a compliment, while others might think to themselves, "Wait– that person used to think I was fat? What an asshole."

Or if someone says, “The background of your photograph is a bit messy and distracting– I’d ditch the shot” they might just be trying to give honest feedback and critique (intending to help you) – rather than criticizing you.

But of course we are all defensive. We are risk-adverse. It is natural, but we can over-ride that from some psychological tricks.

The first strategy is this (given to us by Marcus): Imagine you are working out at the gym, and someone accidentally bumps you in the back of your head with your elbow. It really hurts, you turn around, and you found out that it was on accident. You don’t take it personally– because they didn’t *intend* to hurt you. It just happened:

“If someone accidentally scratches us with his nails or butts us with his head when we’re working out in the gym, we don’t make a fuss, or strike back in anger, or suspect of him of intending to do us future harm. At the same time, we’ll probably give him a wide berth, not out of hostility or suspicion, but with good-natured circumspection. Apply this principle outside the gym, and cut life’s sparring partners some slack. You can always avoid them, as I said, without suspicion for hating them.”

There was another analogy I read somewhere: You are rowing a boat in the middle of a foggy lake, and suddenly you feel another boat suddenly ram you in the side, and it shakes you entire boat. You get neck pain from the whiplash. You are angry, and look over (ready to yell at the other person) – and

realize that it is just an empty boat that happened to collide with you. You have nobody to be angry at– it just happened.

### **Takeaway point:**

Realize that a lot of what we interpret as negative feedback, hate, or vitriol isn't really so. A lot of might be simply misinterpreted by us– or unintended.

For example, there are some people out there who have mild forms of Asperger's (or autism) in which they're not that adept at social interaction. So they are very direct with what they say (because they don't have the ability to understand facial expressions or social cues). They therefore don't have any social tact. But they don't act the way they do to be purposefully be mean– it is just who they are as human beings.

So once again, realize that everything you experience in life is not objectively “good” or “bad” – it is just what your internal filter thinks it is.

My personal psychological trick is this: **Always assume what others say (or do) towards you is positive. Assume that they are trying to help you, compliment you, or guide you in the right direction.** While that might not always be the case– sometimes fooling yourself can be the best strategy to deal with it, and also make you stronger and more confident in life.

## **6. Have you done (or thought) the same?**

When I lived in Los Angeles, I often got cut-off in traffic by crazy drivers (switching 5 lanes at once). I used to have moments where I wanted to have road rage, but calmed myself down by saying: “I can’t blame that guy, I’ve probably done something similar before.” Or who knows– maybe the guy has a wife who is pregnant and is on the way to the hospital? You never know.

Similarly, when someone ever says anything wrong or negative to you– think to yourself: Have I ever done or thought the same to another person? Marcus shares with us this thought:

**\*\*“When someone wrongs you, ask yourself: ‘What made him do it? Once you understand his concept of good and evil, you’ll feel sorry for him and cease to be either amazed or angry. If his concept is similar to yours, then you are bound to forgive him since you would have acted as he did in similar circumstances.\*\* But if you do not share his ideas of good and evil, then you should find it even easier to overlook the wrongs of someone who is confused and in a moral muddle.”**

### **Takeaway point:**

It is easy to see how others have wronged us, without reminding ourselves how we have wronged others.

So the next time someone critiques your photos (and says something negative)– think to yourself, “Have I ever critiqued someone else’s photos in a negative way?” If yes, don’t be offended by the criticism of someone else.

If you ever have someone yell at you (either on the streets while you're shooting, or from a spouse or friend) ask yourself, "Have I ever yelled at a random stranger on the street for being an idiot, or to someone I love?"

Similarly– (and this is huge) ask yourself: **do you, yourself feel comfortable being photographed in the streets by a stranger and a camera? If the answer is "no" – perhaps you should rethink about why you expect others to feel comfortable of you taking candid photos of them in public.**

We should ultimately treat others how we would like to be treated, and similarly– expect others to react the ways we would react. Furthermore, we shouldn't be angry or upset for others reacting the way we would react (in a similar situation).

I think at the end of the day, we are all much more similar than dissimilar. By learning how to realize that we are all coming from the same place, we can better learn how to empathize with others, their feelings, and the way they see the world.

## **7. Respect your own opinion**

"Go on abusing yourself, O my soul! Not long and you will lose the opportunity to show yourself any respect. **We have only one life to live, and yours is almost over. Because you have chosen not to respect yourself, you have made your happiness subject to the opinions others have of you.**" - Marcus Aurelius

I think it takes a lot of courage to stand up for your own opinion, your own thoughts, your own art.

I think when we become too concerned what others think about us and our work– we start to water down our message and our vision. We start to pander to the masses.

Steve Jobs once famously said that the reason that he didn't do market research when making new products was that people didn't know what they wanted until they saw it. There is a story of Henry Ford saying something like, "If I asked people what they wanted, they would have wanted a faster horse." When Bill Cosby was asked what the secret to success was, he said something like, "I don't know what the secret to success is– but I know what it isn't– trying to please everybody."

We need to stand up for our thoughts, our beliefs, and our vision. We need to have courage to stand up for what we are trying to do, and not just try to create art to please others. First we need to please ourselves, and stick true to our own vision. Then if others happen to like it, so be it.

### **Takeaway point:**

If you create art though your street photography that pleases others, but doesn't please you– then what is the point? Stay true to your own opinion of yourself and your work, and let others form their own opinion.

And as Andy Warhol once said, while others are too busy judging whether your work is good or not– keep producing more work.

## 8. Don't do as they do

“The best revenge is not to do as they do.” - Marcus Aurelius

Often when I get criticized by others that my photography, blogging, or whatever sucks– I immediately get defensive. I want to yell at them, look at their work and tell them that their work sucks, and spew negativity back at them.

However that is the wrong approach. I think I once read a quote that said revenge or harboring negativity or grudges against somebody is like drinking poison and hoping that the other person dies.

Also as Jesus said, if someone hurts you, simply turn the other cheek.

I think whenever we get criticized negatively or wrong is done unto us, we should take Marcus Aurelius' advice and simply **not do as they do**. That is the best revenge.

The more negative things we do unto others, the more negativity brews inside our own hearts. This ruins our own life and perspective of the world.

### Takeaway point

When it comes to street photography, when someone negatively criticizes your work– don't become immediately defensive and criticize their work back. Don't start a flame war, or a circle of negativity. Rather, thank them

for their feedback, however negative it may be, or simply don't say anything back at all (just ignore it and don't respond).

I've found the more you try to fight criticism and trolls, the more you are pouring gasoline on the fire. The best way to extinguish it is to let the fire die out by itself, by not giving it additional fuel or oxygen to survive on.

## 9. Appreciate negativity as a chance to practice patience

For the longest time, I used to be scared of being negatively criticized. I feared the hate and vitriol that would come from my articles, the photos I took, and the thoughts I shared. I would fear publishing things because I didn't want to be judged or negatively critiqued.

However over time, I have begun to actually appreciate and look forward to negative criticism. After all, sometimes what people say does have some truth (or I can learn from their negative feedback). Other times, I see the good in negative feedback and hate— that it gives me an opportunity to practice patience.

Marcus Aurelius shares this thought: the importance of being calm (even when you are being attacked):

"Live freely and joyfully even if you are surrounded by those who plot and shout against you, even if wild beasts claw away the soft clay that encases you. **In the midst of all of this, what prevents the mind from remaining calm, sizing**

**up the situation correctly, and seizing whatever opportunities present themselves?”**

Marcus expands by sharing that every situation is a chance to practice patience and virtue:

“Now your theoretical judgement will say, ‘This is the reality of the situation regardless of what others may think or say,’ and your practical sense will say to the opportunities that arise, ‘There you are. I was looking for you.’ For **every moment provides us with opportunities to exercise the virtues of neighborliness and thought**, or in other words, to practice the art of being human and divine. All that happens is of use to gods or men; nothing is new or unmanageable; everything is familiar and serviceable.”

**Takeaway point:**

Whenever in real life, or in the photography world, that someone gives you negative feedback or criticism- first of all don't take it personally. Take a step back, look at what they say and ask yourself, does anything they share have a basis in truth? Is there anything I can learn from their thoughts and feedback?

If what they do say truly has no value– think of those situations as a chance to practice your patience. I think having patience isn't something inborn. Rather, it is like a muscle which we must train everyday.

So appreciate getting negative feedback. Honestly, I didn't start getting any negative feedback on my photography or my work until I started to

get more popular and well-known on the Internet. Before that, I would just get pats on the back or even worse– no feedback at all.

Once you start getting negative feedback on what you're doing – take it as a good sign. It means you aren't making boring photos. You are making work that affects people (in a positive or a negative way)– that touches their heart somehow.

Appreciate negativity, but don't harbor it in your heart.

## **10. Don't respect the opinions of those who don't respect themselves**

“Do you covet the praises of someone who three times every hour curses himself? **Do you hope to please the person who isn't pleased with himself?** Is he pleased with himself who regrets nearly everything he does?” - Marcus Aurelius

I know a lot of photographers who are insecure or dissatisfied with their own photography (or life) and tend to take it out on others.

Another excerpt from Marcus which further nails this point:

**"He attaches no importance whatsoever to the praise of these men, who can find no reason to praise themselves."**

Before we take the negative feedback and criticism from others, ask yourself: **is this photographer who is giving me feedback pleased**

**with his/her own photos? If not, simply ignore what they have to say.**

I have another simple rule: **I don't take the opinions of others seriously unless I like their photos.** Why should I care about the opinion of other photographers if I don't think they are making good work? If there is a Magnum photographer (whose work I greatly admire) criticizes my work, I will respect that and take their feedback into account.

However if a photographer (who uses an anonymous pseudonym) critiques my work, doesn't have the courage to use their own real name, and has no skin in the game— they are merely cowards (they are insecure about their own work), and I should ignore them.

Similarly, I don't really care about the opinion of art critics or curators (who either aren't photographers or shoot street photography) because if they don't shoot street photography, they don't know how difficult it is, the experience of shooting it, so they don't really know what they're talking about.

## **Takeaway point**

Ultimately I do think that everyone has the right to their own opinion. I think critics and curators have a very important role in society and the art world. However, for myself personally— I don't really take their feedback seriously (unless I like the photos they themselves have shot).

So here are some practical rules:

- A) Ignore the feedback from anybody if they don't use their real name (they have no skin in the game, and are simply cowards who are insecure about their own work).
- B) Only truly care about the feedback on your work from others whose work you like.

## 11. Be an everflowing spring of positivity

“So what if they can kill you, hack you to pieces, hunt you down with curses. How can this keep your mind from being pure, sound, temperate, and just? **If a man were to stop beside a limpid spring of sweet water and start hurling insults at it, would it suddenly cease to flow?** Even if he threw mud and excrement into the stream, it would soon dissolve and wash away and leave no taint or stain. How then can you possess an everflowing spring? By using the freedom you already possess to imbue your character with compassion, simplicity, and modesty.” - Marcus Aurelius

As Marcus Aurelius mentions— imagine yourself like being a stream of pure and water— constantly flowing out. Even though people might throw shit into your stream of water, sooner or later— all of that shit will be washed away. Furthermore, the stream of water would keep on flowing.

I think it is really hard to deal with negativity in the world— especially when it feels like it is being hurled at you from every single direction.

However remind yourself that you have the ability to stay positive, compassionate, and loving regardless of how the outside world treats you.

Imbue your mind with constant kindness, and don't forget this visualization exercise.

### **Takeaway point:**

If people are constantly being negative around you, know that they can't change your core— who you are. Don't fight negativity with negativity (fighting fire with fire) – rather, extinguish the flames of negativity with everflowing positivity (sweet water).

When this applies to photography or life— know that at the source you are pure. Their insults won't change who you are as a photographer or person.

So for example, if people say your photography and work is shit— just stay positive, and keep producing images. Your work will soon wash away all of their negativity and criticism.

Similarly— your work actually might be pretty good. But people say it is shit. But it doesn't change the fact that your work is good – it is simply someone else's opinion of your work.

Keep flowing that sweet water and positivity.

## **12. They might already regret what they said**

Have you ever said something you regretted— or didn't mean to say? I know I have, which has caused pain and a world of hurt. I often hurt my

friends, family, and loved ones unintentionally– and afterwards I greatly regret the way I framed the phrase, or how mean I was.

So another mental exercise you can have when someone hurts or offends you: imagine that person is already regretting what they said (and are beating themselves up for it). Marcus Aurelius shares his thoughts:

“When someone gives you the impression of having erred, ask yourself, ‘How do I know that what he’s done is wrong?’ And **if he really is guilty of wrongdoing, how do I know that he isn’t already reproaching himself for it and isn’t like a man slapping his own face?**”

Furthermore, if there are people out there who are truly negative and critical who want to tear you down– expect them to continue to do so. Not expecting negative people to do negative things is like expecting babies not to cry, for dogs not to bark, or for lemons not to be sour:

“Wanting the wicked not to do wrong is like wanting the fig tree not to produce a bitter juice in its figs, or babies not to cry, or horses not to neigh, or other inevitabilities not to occur. From someone with such a character, what else can you expect? If it bothers you, find a way of curing it.”

### **Takeaway point:**

There is evil, pain, negativity, and unhappy people in this world. To not expect that kind of negativity in this world is foolish. We should always be ready everyday to expect those kind of people who try to tear you down.

Similarly in photography– there will always be negative people who dislike their own work, are unhappy people, and will try to find every fault in your work to tear you down and make you feel shitty. However once again, their negativity is just who they are as human beings (and photographers).

There will always be a small percentage of negative people in a group of people (let's say 5%) – and if you have a 100 people in a room, you have to expect at least 5 people to be negative, mean, or critical. So multiply that by millions– so how can you expect there not to be a few hundreds of thousands of negative people out there, especially when there are internet forums where you can be anonymous and shroud your identity?

Similarly– a lot of these people who are really negative might constantly regret their actions. Their own self-esteem of themselves is so low that they perhaps can't help but be negative.

So whenever someone criticizes you in a negative way and it hurts you– imagine that they are already slapping themselves in the face for saying that hurtful comment to you.

Of course, that might not be the reality– but it is a practical psychological tool that will help us find more serenity in life.

## **13. Don't let your happiness be held hostage by someone else**

If you had a million dollars, would you trust that to a stranger? Hell no.

If you bought a brand-new Leica, would you trust it to a hobo in the middle of the streets? Hell no.

If you had your happiness held hostage, would you trust that to a stranger (or worse, an anonymous troll on the internet?) Hell no.

Know that ultimately you have the freedom of choice– to be happy, to interpret other peoples' actions the way you want, and to live the life you want.

Even though others might be cruel and mean to you– you can still be happy.

Marcus Aurelius shares some wise words– that we don't want our happiness to be held hostage by someone else:

"My neighbor's power to choose has no more to do with my freedom of choice than his breath and flesh. It matters not how much we are made for one another; the governing self in each of us is still sovereign. Otherwise, my neighbor's bad choices might harm me. **God does not want my happiness held hostage by someone else.**"

### **Takeaway point:**

Are you going to live your entire life trying to please others with your photographs (and not yourself)? Are you going to let your own opinion and happiness of yourself and your work be reliant on the mere mutterings or thoughts of others? Are you going to keep uploading images

to social media until every person on the internet loves and admires your images?

Why have your happiness held hostage by someone else? It doesn't make any sense. If we went on a date with our spouse, would you trust your beloved children with some stranger with negative intentions? Hell no.

Know that ultimately you have the power to control your own opinion of yourself, and your own happiness. Never give that power away.

## **14. Teach by example with kindness**

I sometimes see people on the internet giving (unnecessarily) harsh criticism and critique on photos. I think giving a constructive critique is immensely important to grow and develop as a photographer. However when one gives a critique simply to put someone down and make themselves feel better about themselves– it is truly a sad sight.

So if for one reason or another your photograph got negatively criticized online– don't go out and start criticizing (unnecessarily harshly) the work of others. Remember the golden rule of Jesus (and many other philosophers): **treat others how you would like to be treated.**

So if people are unnecessarily critical and just plain mean, do the opposite– be positive and kind to others. Marcus Aurelius shares:

**“If you can, change their evil ways by teaching them. If that doesn't work, remember that kindness is a virtue you possess for this very reason.** The gods themselves are

kind to such men and sometimes even assist them in their efforts to become healthy or wealthy or famous. You can do the same. What's stopping you?"

So if you see someone out there being unnecessarily critical– don't just call them a dick in public. Rather, I think the best response is to be kind– and simply re-direct positivity to other people. And if possible, perhaps privately messaging that negative person, and kindly telling them that what they are saying is hurtful, wrong, and improper.

Marcus Aurelius (as an emperor) had a lot of negative detractors. He knew that his purpose in life was to be the most temperate, just, and wise emperor– and that was his mission. The opinion others had of him wasn't his business:

He gives us practical advice how to deal with negativity– to show other men the error of their ways (without being condescending):

“Does a man ridicule me? That's his business. It's my job to make sure that nothing I say or do deserves to be ridiculed. Will he hate me? His business again. **Mine is to remain gentle and well disposed toward everyone, ready to show even this fellow the mistake of his thinking, not in a scolding tone or with a show of forbearance, but graciously and genuinely like Phocian of old.** This disposition should come from within, and a man should never be seen by the gods harboring resentments or complaints. What harm can come to you, as a man bent on making this world a better place, if you do what is keeping with your own nature and accept what is opportune for the whole of nature?"

Be full of love, be gentle, and don't scold others. Don't harbor resentments or complaints. Keep focusing on making the world a better place– and spread the positivity.

### **Takeaway point:**

What people say or do is their own business. So if negative people are out there being negative (for no good reason)– let them be. You can't change the fact that there will always be negative people in the world.

However if you have an opportunity– perhaps you can try to gently correct the negative people their wrong ways. Don't do this by being condescending, by pretending that you are more enlightened or anything– but speak honestly, truthfully, and from the heart.

Perhaps you can say something to your critic like, “Thank you so much for the honest feedback and critique. I really appreciate how you are trying to make me a better photographer. However maybe in the future when you are giving me or anyone else feedback, you could be a little less harsh? It would make your feedback a little more easier to digest. Thank you so much for understanding.”

Don't be resentful of negative feedback, or complain behind someone's back. Be upfront, honest, transparent– and approach your critics with a compassionate heart.

## **15. The world needs negative people**

I hate mosquitos. Really hate them. Every time I go on a camping trip (or am traveling in Asia or the East-coast of America), I always get bitten. These damn little good-for-nothings. All they do is suck my blood, give me huge bumps, the worst itches, and don't give anything back.

However I once read something that if mosquitos didn't exist in the world– there would be disorder and chaos in the world. Nobody knows 100% exactly why– but in a complex world, a small change in the ecosystem could have catastrophic effects. It is like the butterfly effect– going back in time and killing even one butterfly could change the effect of winds and lead to hurricanes halfway around the world.

So similarly as a visualization exercise– imagine negative people out there as mosquitos. They are annoying, unpleasant, give you itchy bumps– but exist in the world for a purpose. Nobody knows exactly sure why, but the world needs mosquitos (and negative people).

Even Marcus Aurelius said something along the lines– that the world couldn't exist without “shameless people”:

“Whenever somebody's shameless behavior offends you, immediately ask yourself: **‘Can there be a world without shameless people in it?’ Of course not. Don't demand the impossible.** This is just another one of those shameless people whom the world cannot be without. Keep the same questions handy for scoundrels, cheaters, and other kinds of wrongdoers. By bearing in mind that there are bound to be people like this, you will find individuals like this easier to endure.”

## **Takeaway point:**

Don't demand the impossible. If you go camping (especially near a river)—there will be mosquitos. You will be bitten. You will get bumps, and it will be itchy.

But don't let those mosquitos prevent you from having a bad time. You just have to be savvy. Swat them away when you see them, try to avoid them, and if you get bit—just endure it, and remind yourself: the world cannot exist without mosquitos.

Treat negative people and critics the same.

In your photography, sooner or later you will have people say negative things about your work either in your face, or behind-your-back. It is impossible to expect this not to happen. And believe it or not, you will have negative people say things behind your back. This can even be close friends, family, co-workers, or loved ones.

But still enjoy your camping trip (or the journey of life). Endure the little annoying mosquito bites, and know the world cannot exist without mosquitos and critics. But you can still have a great time.

## **16. Consider the virtues you are born with**

Ultimately we have 100% control of how we feel— because we can control the *opinion* we have of external events. For example, if someone says, “Your photo is shit.” I can either react several:

- a) “Who the fuck does that guy think he is to negatively criticize my photos? His photos are shittier than mine! Fuck that guy.”
- b) “Hmmm– I guess it is true that it isn’t my best photograph. He might think it is shit, I think it is half-decent. I don’t think it is warranted that he called it shit, but I will take his feedback in mind– and try to improve my photography.”
- c) “Whoa, that guy must be going through some serious personal issues. I feel bad for the guy. Perhaps I should message him and ask if everything is okay with his persona life and family.”

So you can see from the above example that although you cannot control the fact that the guy said your work was shit, you can change your interpretation of it.

In example “A” – you just get angry and go into a negative feedback loop. In example “B”– you take their feedback (in a somewhat positive way). And in example “C” – you realize that their negativity isn’t a reflection of your own work, but their own depressed mental state.

So always remember, reality is negotiable. You can control the way you see, perceive, and filter reality. Everything in the world isn’t absolute– it is all how you interpret the feedback, words, and sayings of others.

Marcus Aurelius tell us to always remind ourselves– think about the strengths and virtues we have against negative people, and remind that we have the power to always stay positive:

“At the same time ask yourself: ‘What virtue has nature given me to cope with this vice?’ The antibody against loutish behavior, for example, is gentleness. Against every vice there is

a power to combat it, and broadly speaking, you have the power to help any man find his way. The wrongdoer is, after all, merely missing his true mark and has lost his way. Besides, how has he harmed you? **None of those with whom you're upset has done a thing to impair your ability to think, and no evil or harm can come to you except your thinking let it.**"

### **Takeaway point:**

Don't let the negative feedback and words of others turn you into a negative person, and fall into a spiral of negativity. Rather, try to find the positivity out of negativity– or simply feel bad and compassionate towards people who do harbor a lot of negativity in their hearts.

Realize that everything others say to us is just our interpretation of it. If we interpret their words positively– it will help us. If we interpret their words negatively, it will harm us.

You choose.

## **17. Fault yourself (not others)**

It is a pretty tough existence to live your life thinking that your own happiness is reliant upon others, and to constantly see the fault in others.

Once again, know that everything is in your own control. Your own opinions of yourself is how you construct and see the world.

Therefore never blame another man (for anything). Always blame yourself.

But don't blame yourself in the sense that you will just self-criticize yourself in a negative way, and beat yourself up. Rather, blame yourself in a positive way– and try to improve your own interpretation of events. See your own faults, and try to improve yourself.

For example, if you have an idiot negatively criticize you (out of ignorance) – don't fault or blame them. Rather, blame yourself for failing to anticipate that the idiot will not act idiotically. It is foolish to expect idiots not to act like idiots. Marcus Aurelius shares his thoughts:

“What's so bad or surprising about the ignoramus who acts out of his ignorance? **Find fault instead with yourself for failing to anticipate his offensive behavior.** Your ability to reason should have told you that he would misbehave, but you refused to listen and now shocked by his misbehavior.”

Furthermore, whenever you tell a personal secret to someone who you know gossips a lot– how can you fault them for telling your secret to someone else? You should blame yourself for trusting that secret to that person in the first place:

“Indeed, **whenever you feel inclined to blame someone for deceit or ingratitude, turn the accusation upon yourself.** Obviously, the fault lies with you if you trusted a liar to keep his word, or if you did a good deed with some string attached and without expecting the doing of the deed to be its own reward.”

## **Takeaway point:**

If you have a practice of never blaming anyone else – you put control into your own hands (in all situations).

- If someone negatively criticizes you, and you become upset– blame yourself for not expecting negative criticism (and resolve to build resilience).
- If someone yells at you for taking his/her street photograph and you are hurt or offended, blame yourself for not anticipating someone to ever yell at you in the streets (it will happen sooner or later).
- If you submit one of your photographs to a competition and you don't win, don't be upset that the judges are idiots and have poor taste. Blame yourself of expecting to win – and realize that so much of judging is subjective (I can say from personal experience).
- If your camera breaks, don't be upset at the camera manufacturers. Blame yourself for not anticipating for your camera to break, and not having a backup.

Everything is in your control.

## **18. Focus on the present moment– nothing stands in your way**

Happiness shouldn't be something that you can someday attain in the far future. It is something you can obtain today– right now– in this present moment.

I know a lot of photographers who base their happiness and life on conditionals. For example:

- I will be happy once I get 100+ favorites on Flickr.
- I will be happy once I get 10,000+ followers.
- I will be happy once I have my photos exhibited in a prestigious gallery.
- I will be happy once I have a book published.
- I will be happy once I travel to Paris.
- I will be happy once I have a Magnum photographer say that my work is good.

Don't base your life and happiness on conditionals. Rather, focus on the good things and happiness in the moment. Practice gratitude. So instead, you can change your thoughts to:

- I am grateful that I am alive to experience life, and to be able to capture beautiful moments.
- I am grateful because I have eyes that allow me see and perceive the beauty in the world.
- I am grateful to own a camera that allows me to capture the beauty of the world.
- I am grateful to live in a world in which social media allows me to share my photographs with the world.
- I am grateful to have free time (even 10 minutes a day) to wander the streets and make photographs.
- I am grateful to live in the unique city that I do, and that there are millions of photographic opportunities everywhere I go.
- I am grateful for living in the time where the technology to make photographs exist.

So practice an attitude of gratitude.

Is it a misconception that happiness leads to gratitude. Rather it is the opposite way: **gratitude leads to happiness.**

Marcus Aurelius shares in “The Meditations” the importance that knowing that all the good things and happiness in the world exist in your power to obtain **today**:

**“All the good things you want someday to attain can be yours today.** Just get out of your own way. Put the past behind you and the future in the hands of God, and refer every present thought and action to piety and justice. To piety by being happy with the fate which nature crafted for you and equipped you for. To justice by speaking the truth freely and simply and by acting as the law requires and as each situation merits. **Don’t let the wickedness of other men stand in your way, nor your own misconceptions, nor the opinions of others, nor the sensations of your overgrown flesh.** Let each sensing part take care of itself.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Don’t let the negativity of others prevent you from being happy in this present moment. Don’t base your life on conditionals (‘only if’ statements). Rather, focus on the positive in your everyday life– practice an attitude of gratitude, and you will obtain all the happiness in the world.

## **19. Nine (more) strategies to deal with negative people**

To conclude this chapter, Marcus Aurelius gives us nine wise observations and strategies to follow when we are dealing with negativity from others.

### **1) Remember that we are made for one another, and that you were born to lead (in a positive way):**

“First, consider the nature of your relationship to others. **We are made for one another.** Or from another perspective, I was born to lead, as a ram leads the flock or a bull the herd. Or — returning to the original premise— if not unthinking atoms, then intelligent nature governs everything, and the lower orders of creation exist for the higher, and the higher exist for one another.”

### **2) Get in the mind of the other person, and understand their motivations and perspective:**

"Second, what are they like at the table, in bed, and elsewhere? Above all, what actions do their opinions compel them to perform? **To what extent are their actions motivated by pride?**"

**3) Ask yourself if what they say is right. If what they say is correct, don't be offended:**

**“Third, if what they do is right, you have no reason to be offended. If wrong, then it's plan they act out of compulsion and ignorance.** Just as no one is willing to be denied knowledge of the truth, no one is willingly deprived of the power to treat others as they deserve. Are men not resentful if they hear themselves spoken of as unjust, insensitive, greedy, or in any way nasty to their neighbors?”

**4) Remember that you can be negative as well (just like your critics):**

**“Fourth, like them, you often do wrong yourself.** Even if you refrain from doing certain types of wrong, your character is still bent that way, and only cowardice, fear of what others will say, or some other vile motive holds you back.”

**5) Realize you don't always see the full-picture. How do you know what someone is doing or saying is truly wrong?**

**“Fifth, you have no proof that they are doing anything wrong. Many things are done for reasons that are not apparent.** A man must know a great deal before condemning another man's behavior.”

**6) Remember that you soon will be dead, your feelings of negativity are a waste of time and energy:**

**“Sixth, when you are overwrought with anger or impatience, think how fleeting this life is and how soon you and your vexations will be laid out in the grave.”**

**7) It isn't the words or actions of others that bother you, it is how you interpret them:**

**“Seventh, it isn't what others do that troubles you. That is on their own consciences. You are bothered by your own opinions of what they do.** Rid yourself of those opinions and stop always assuming the worst— then your troubles will go away. How do you get rid of your opinions? By reminding yourself that you aren't disgraced by what others do. For unless only what brings disgrace is wrong, then you too are as guilty as a thief, and worse.”

**8) The rage and negativity we feel does us more harm than the initial criticism (simply let things go):**

**“Eighth, our rage and lamentations do us more harm than whatever caused our anger and grief in the first place.”**

## 9) Always remember to be relentlessly kind:

“Ninth, **as long as it’s genuine and without condescension or pretense, kindness is irresistible.**

What can the most insolent man do if you remain relentlessly kind, and given the opportunity, counsel him calmly and gently even while he’s trying to harm you? ‘No, my son. We are not created for this. I can’t be hurt in this way, but you are hurting yourself.’ In a discreet and roundabout manner, point out to him that the bees and other animals by nature gregarious do not act like this. Let there be nothing ironic or scolding in your tone, but speak with true affection and with no residue of resentment in your heart. **Don’t lecture him. Don’t embarrass him in front of others. But address him privately even if others are present.**”

Thank you Marcus for these words of wisdom. This is his parting words to us:

“Commit these nine observations to memory; accept them as gifts from the Muses; and while you still have life, begin to live like a man. Avoid with equal caution flattering others as well as losing your temper with them. Both tear the social fabric and lead to trouble.”

Some more advice from our homeboy Marcus on how to fight anger and stay patient:

To ward off anger, keep these maxims handy:

- There is nothing manly about petulance (being childishly bad-tempered).
- Because they are more natural to our species, **qualities like courtesy and kindness are the more manly.** These qualities, not irritability and bad temper, bespeak strength and fiber and manly fortitude.
- The freer the mind from passion, the closer the man to power.
- **Anger is as much a proof of weakness as grief.** Both involve being wounded and giving in to one's wounds.  
And lastly– Marcus throws in a tenth freebie on how to deal with negative critics:

## **10) Always expect there to be negativity in the world**

“And if you like, take this tenth gift from Apollo himself, the leader of the Nine Muses: **To expect the wicked not to sin is sheer lunacy.** It asks the impossible. Similarly, to allow them to sin against others but not against you is both irrational and surpassingly capricious.”

## **Conclusion**

At age 26, I have dealt with a lot of negativity and criticism– as a worker (when I worked a corporate job), as a lover, as a brother and son, as a photographer, and lastly as a human being.

We cannot navigate this chaotic world without expecting to step on shit, without being stung by mosquitos, without getting sick, without stepping on a rock and twisting our ankle, without being accidentally elbowed in the back of the head, without being cut off in traffic, and certainly without people saying negative things about you (behind your back or in your face).

So put on your armor of stoicism– and get ready to face this tough, negative, and often painful world head-on.

But let us do it with an armor of kindness, love, and compassion. Let us do unto others as we would like others to do unto them. If others treat us with negativity, don't just fight fire with fire. Rather, douse those flames of negativity with love and positivity.

Like what Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Be a leading example of kindness, generosity, and love. Give others honest and constructive feedback out of trying to help others improve, rather than simply trying to put them down.

Also know that a lot of negative feedback and criticism we gain in life can improve us. They can help us find our character (and photographic) flaws, and can ultimately help us become better human beings (and photographers). Not all the negative criticism we get is unwarranted or untrue. Some negative feedback (if taken with a grain of salt) can really help us– and add some positivity into our lives.

I hope these 19 stoic strategies can help you find happiness, contentment, and love regardless of the negativity or criticism you face.

Always keep a smile on your face, be grateful of the world and others, and be positive. Be the ever-flowing spring of sweet water, and nothing will ever stain or harm you.

## **Chapter #3: How to Focus on Your Life's Work**

There are so many distractions out there. We live in an age where it is almost impossible *not* to be distracted.

Our phones are constantly buzzing. We see thousands of advertisements a day that are vying for our attention. We are bombarded with emails from spammers, we are bombarded with notifications, we are bombarded by new technologies that promise to make our lives more “efficient” and “optimized.”

I read something online that the average office worker is interrupted every 20 minutes– and it takes an average of 20 minutes for a worker to re-focus on work.

Many of my friends who work in the corporate world complain of constantly being texted, IM'd, emailed, and sucked into meetings at work– which prevents them from getting any “real” work done. (As a side note– Paul Graham has an excellent essay on managers versus creative time schedules which I highly recommend).

I think focusing is easy– only if we have no distractions. But how do we escape distractions and focus on the work which is truly meaningful to us?

## Focus “via negativa”

The first concept is “via negativa” – in which cutting out distractions help you be more focused (than trying to add time-saving and “efficiency” applications).

The way you can focus on your photography projects is simple too: remove all distractions. Remove extraneous lenses and cameras from your collection. Remove all your extra lenses and cameras until you are down to one camera and one lens. Then when you are shooting your project, you don’t have to make the decision of which camera to use. You only have one.

Similarly, you can remove all other variables. Don’t shoot both black and white and color– just focus on one or the other. Don’t shoot film and digital– stick to one. Don’t shoot more than one type of film– stick to one film.

Are you busy and don’t have enough time to shoot? It is impossible to *find* more time to shoot. We can’t just create free time. However, it is easy to cut back on obligations– and remove extraneous meetings, social functions, and any other time-sucks. Once you remove appointments from your day and certain obligations– you will find yourself with a lot more free time.

If you spend more time on social media and not enough time actually shooting–perhaps you should remove all social media from your diet– which will leave you attention to shoot.

If you find yourself jumping from one project to another and not being able to focus on one project– eliminate all other projects you are working on, except the one project you are truly passionate about.

To take this “via negativa” strategy even further– if you want to become a better photographer, don’t look at bad photography (only focus on looking at great photography through photo books). Don’t associate yourself with photographers who are obsessed with HDR, selective-color, bokeh, camera gear, etc. Surround yourself with passionate photographers.

Don’t rely on getting honest feedback and critique from a bunch of random people online. Cut that back to only 1–3 people you really trust to get feedback from. And make sure that the feedback you get is in-person.

It is great to be inspired by lots of different photographers– but try to also limit the sources of inspiration you get. I think it is better to really know the work and be inspired by 3 photographers, rather than getting a little bit of inspiration from 30 photographers. Less is more.

Let’s take this further. Don’t shoot at all times of the day– only shoot during similar times. So if you want dramatic light and shadows, only shoot at sunrise or sunset (or don’t shoot at all). If you want more flat light, only shoot when it is cloudy outside to have consistent images.

Also when it comes to editing your photos (selecting your best ones) – don’t try to show all your images. Less is more. Cut down the photos you decide to show. Only choose around 1 good photograph a month that can make it into your future book, exhibition, or project. You will add to your project by subtraction.

# How to focus on your work: a Stoic approach

Marcus Aurelius gives us some great practical advice in “The Meditations” when it comes to focusing on our life’s work, and not being distracted by others.

What does Marcus Aurelius have to teach us? I have collected a selection of quotes from him from “The Emperor’s Handbook” (a modern-day translation of “The Meditations”) and hope these can apply to your photography (and life):

## 1. Ignore gossip

Let’s admit it– we love gossip. We love gossiping about our friends, relationships gone awry, and there is never shortage of gossip when it comes to entertainment magazines or blogs.

As human beings we are hard-wired to gossip. Gossiping is one of the best ways to spread information about one another. It serves a social purpose– who to trust and who not to trust. I think gossiping served as a survival mechanic in human beings, and it still helps us navigate our complex social lives today.

However even though gossiping may be “natural” – it isn’t ideal if you want to focus on your life’s work (which is photography). It is easy to gossip about other photographers and their work– while ignoring our own.

Personally, I have found it difficult to restrict myself from gossiping about others. After all, I am a human being too– and I always love hearing the “latest dirt” on the lives of other photographers, what they are up to, and even the “beef” they have with other photographers. Believe it or not– there is a lot of “drama” in the street photography community (I wish there wasn’t).

However I am starting to realize that the more I listen to gossip, the more it distracts me from my own life– and focusing on my own photography. Marcus Aurelius shares this quote on the importance of “turning a deaf ear to gossip”:

"My tutor taught me not to take sides in circus contests, to love hard work, to limit my desires, to rely on myself, and **to keep my nose out of other people’s affairs, and turn a deaf ear to gossip.**"

Another quote from Marcus Aurelius– in terms of not worrying what others are saying, doing, or thinking– and focusing on your own destiny:

**“He never– except to achieve some great good on behalf of others– worries about what someone else might be saying, doing, or thinking.** He minds his own business and keeps his gaze fixed on the pattern of his own destiny, making sure that he performs his work well and believing that his fate is good since it is subject to the universal good.”

**Takeaway point:**

As an experiment– try to go a week (or better a month) without gossiping about other people. See how it will make you less judgmental, more open-minded, and more loving and compassionate about other people.

Treat others how you would like to be treated. Do you like it if other people gossip negative things behind your back? If not, don't gossip about others. That won't necessarily stop others from gossiping about you– but it will prevent you from being distracted in the lives of others, and to focus on your own life, photography projects, and mission in life (whatever that may be).

## 2. Follow your heart

"Nothing is more pathetic than feverishly circling the earth and 'probing into its depths,' as Pindar puts it, to guess what other people are thinking, while all the time failing to realize that **one only needs to attend to the inner spirit and to serve it with unswerving devotion.**" - Marcus Aurelius

I sometimes think to myself: "I wish I could think what others are thinking. If I could understand their thoughts, I can prevent from being ripped off, from being cheated to, from being lied to, and to avoid misery."

However no matter how hard we try, how many psychology and self-help books we read, and time we spend– we can never truly 100% understand the mind of another person.

But what is the point of spending your entire life, energy, and resources to discover the minds of others? I think it is a much better investment to put

that energy towards tending to our “inner spirit” – and to serve it with “unswerving devotion.”

We all have a mission and a calling in life. In terms of street photography, that might be capturing decisive moments, interacting with people on the streets, publishing your work as a book or online, constantly improving your craft, sharing your information and knowledge with others, or even teaching kids the art of photography.

We only have a limited source of attention, energy, time, and money. I have read that our attention everyday is like a tank of gas. The more energy we expend doing activities– the more fuel we run out of.

So we might start off the day with a full tank of gas. But once we gossip about a co-worker over a coffee with another work-mate, you might be down to 80%. Trying to understand the motivations of your insane boss might drop your attention fuel tank to 60%. Trying to talk to the CEO to get a raise (you greatly deserve) might take your attention resources to 40%. After a long commute home, you might be down to 20%. And after cooking dinner, arguing with your spouse or kids, you might be down to 5%.

Don't waste your energy as well worrying about what others are thinking. It is once again a huge distraction as Marcus Aurelius shares:

**“Do not waste the rest of your life speculating about others in ways that are not to your mutual advantage.** Think of all that might be accomplished in the time you throw away– distracted from the voice of your own true and

reasonable self– wondering what the next man is up to and why, what he’s saying, or thinking, or plotting.”

So guard your attention fuel tank wisely. It is a limited resource. Do you want to waste your spiritual attention energy on others, or to improve yourself?

### **Takeaway point:**

Don’t spend your attention and efforts trying to understand the motivations of others– because you will never truly understand.

Use your attention and efforts to better understand your own heart and inner-spirit, and focus on it. Don’t get distracted– give your energy, spirit, and soul to your life’s mission (making photos, improving yourself as a photographer, or giving back to the community).

So rather than trying to figure out which photographer is talking shit behind your back on the internet, use that attention to read a photography book to gain inspiration. Rather than arguing about other strangers online about the definition of street photography, use that time to walk around your house and take some photos. Rather than trying to get 100+ favorites/likes on Flickr, Instagram, or Facebook– use that attention to edit your photos from your projects.

Invest in yourself– your own inner-spirit (before tending to others).

## **3. Don’t think idle and negative thoughts**

I recently listened to a TED talk on happiness– and learned that one of the greatest sources of dissatisfaction in life is due to “mind-wandering” – in which we let our minds drift (rather than focusing on the present). When we let our minds wander– we generally think negative thoughts. We think about our financial difficulties, the negative people in our life (talking shit behind our backs), worries about the future (if we will have enough money to buy a house, send our kids to college, have enough time to go on a trip), or unpleasant thoughts related to your health.

Once thing I have learned to combat mind-wanderings is to simply focus on in the present moment. To not think about the past or the future– the present moment.

Marcus Aurelius (before there were fMRI machines) already figured out that aimless and idle thoughts often lead to negative thoughts– especially worrying about what others think about us (and harboring ill will towards them):

“Purge your mind of all aimless and idle thoughts, especially those that pry into the affairs of others or wish them ill.”

### **Takeaway point:**

One of the best ways to be happy and productive in your life is to focus on the present moment– to fall into a state of “flow.”

To fall into a state of “flow” – you need to be sufficiently challenged on a meaningful task, which requires your 100% attention and energy. You become so wrapped up in the activity that you lose a sense of yourself, a sense of time, and a sense of place.

Have you ever gotten in a state of “flow” (or “in the zone”) in which you walk around the streets, aimlessly, enjoy all the sights, sounds, and views– and walk for 10 miles and it only felt like you went walking for 10 minutes? Have you ever become totally engrossed in a photography book– in which you saw what the photographer saw, felt strong emotions, and saw a moving picture (and you didn’t realize that an hour just whizzed on by?) Or have you ever met with other photographers in-person who are equally as passionate about street photography as you– and talk with them about image-making for 3 hours (and it only felt like 3 minutes?) That is falling into a state of “flow” – and it is when we are the happiest, most productive, and the most fulfilled.

So don’t let your mind wander– keep it focused like a laser beam. Avoid negative thoughts at all costs.

## 4. Don’t care about cheaters

“How much time and effort a man saves by paying no attention to what his neighbor says or does or thinks, and by concentrating on his own behavior to make it holy and just!  
**The good man isn’t looking around for cheaters. He dashes straight for the finish and leans into the tape.”**

- Marcus Aurelius

Often times I get jealous of the success of other photographers. I see other photographers with these fancy exhibition shows, these great book deals, and have tens and thousands of more followers than I do.

I then think to myself: that person isn't that talented– he must be somehow “gaming” the system. The only reason he has a photography show is because he is well-connected. The only reason he has a book deal is because he knows how to network and kiss ass. The only reason he has more followers is because he spams the hell out of everyone else.

But when I get caught into this line of thinking– I slap myself on the face and ask myself, “Why do I care about how successful other people are– and whether they are ‘cheating’ or ‘gaming the system’ somehow?” I realize that I should rather focus on my own work, rather than caring about how others are becoming successful.

### **Takeaway point:**

Personally– the more I have ignored the success of others (and not worried about my own success)– the more successful I have become. The more I try to get more followers – the less successful I am. However when I just focus on my blogging and producing content which is valuable, I end up getting more followers organically. The more aggressively I try to market to people on social media to sign up for my workshops– the fewer people sign up. However when I just focus on (once again) creating value for others and focus on my blogging– more people end up signing up naturally.

So as Marcus Aurelius shares, don't go around looking for cheaters (or caring how others gain their success). Rather, dash straight for the finish and lean into the tape.

If the finish line is completing a photography book, finishing your project, learning the work of a new photographer, or blogging – just focus on that.

Dash straight to it (ignore all distractions), and lean into the tape. When you are climbing up a mountain, you must lean forward. Keep leaning forward, and pushing on.

## **5. Don't worry**

I know a lot of people who want to make photography a living – but have a lot of things that they worry about. They worry about paying the rent, they worry about getting enough clients, they worry about marketing, PR, and gaining recognition.

I also know a lot of people who worry about what others think about their work. They worry about being criticized. They worry about being judged. They worry about making bad work. They worry about being uninspired.

Worrying doesn't do us any good. No matter how much we worry, it doesn't change any aspect of reality. Worrying only sends our minds into a state of inner-turmoil, in which we excrete stress hormones – which ends up hurting us more than helping us.

Rather, we need to work hard at our task at hand– and I have found that things end up taking care of itself. In Taoism they call it “wu wei” – action without action. Going with the flow.

Marcus Aurelius also shares the importance of not worrying– and knowing that everything will end up being okay. We are all going to die sooner or later anyways, so why not just focus at your work-at-hand?

**“Above all, there’s no point in worrying.** All things obey the laws of nature, and before long you too will be like Hadrian and Augustus– nobody and nowhere. Then, **concentrate on the work at hand, seeing it for what it is and bearing in mind your duty to be a good man.** Go where your nature takes you without so much as turning in your tracks. Speak what seems to you most just, but don’t be rude, arrogant, or pretentious about it.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Know that one day you will die. Are you really going to care if you had a BMW, had a house, more money in the bank, if your kids went to private school, or whatever?

No– you are going to only care if you dedicated your full energy, life, and being into creating value in the world, to being a loving person, and to living life to the fullest.

We live in a world in which very few people (at least in the Western world) die from hunger. We die more from diabetes and over-nutrition (from too much unhealthy foods) than from lack of food.

Ultimately we only need the essentials: food, water, a basic form of shelter, and some bare clothes to survive. Nothing else is really necessary.

So don’t worry. Everything is going to turn out okay in the end. You are still alive right now, reading this– aren’t you? Despite all of the trials and tribulations in your life– you made it through it. You are a survivor, and will continue to survive.

Live your life to the fullest– photograph every opportunity you have. Never feel guilty spending money to travel, buy photography books, film, processing, education, workshops, or anything that will further your photographic vision.

Buy experiences, not material possessions– and photograph and suck the marrow out of life.

## 6. Focus on the common good

“Every nature finds fulfillment in pursuing the right path. For a nature like yours endowed with reason, this means refusing to approve ideas that are false or foggy, **directing your energies only to the common good**, limiting your likes and dislikes to those things that lie within your grasp, and rejoicing in everything the universal nature has assigned to you.” - Marcus Aurelius

A lot of people have dissatisfaction in their lives because they feel like they have a lack of meaning and purpose.

What does it mean to have meaning and purpose in life?

I think it is pretty straight-forward: to invest your time, energy, and resources into helping the common good (society).

As a social creature, we become sad, depressed, and anxious when we disconnect ourselves from society and the common man. Most people are most engaged and happy when they are spending time with family and

loved ones, when they are playing sports or any other interactive activity, when they are volunteering or spending time at a charity, or helping others.

We were made for one another.

I once read a quote that “He who lives for himself is truly dead to others.”

### **Takeaway point:**

When it comes to your photography– think about how you are helping the common good. Are you making images that inspire your viewers? Are you making photos that show the beauty (or suffering) of everyday life to your viewers? Do your photos make your viewer appreciate the world around them?

By being a photographer, does it uplift your heart to become a more positive person– which causes you to spread more joy and happiness to others? That is helping the common good.

Are you volunteering your time or resources to help other photographers in their own journey? That is helping the common good.

Are you sharing your knowledge and wisdom about photography openly and freely– and adding value to the lives of others? That is helping the common good.

When you aren't sure how to best focus your time and attention ask yourself: **through this action, how am I helping the common good?**

## 7. Focus on one action at a time

We might all have lofty goals and expectations of ourselves in terms of our work— like having a book published, having an exhibition, or to create a body of work we are proud of.

So how do we prevent getting distracted (or discouraged) and make slow but steady progress forward? It is easy: **focus your life one action at a time** (as Marcus Aurelius shares):

**“Build your life one action at a time and be happy if each act you perform contributes to a fulfilling and complete life. No one can prevent you from doing this.”**

But what if an outside circumstance prevents us from focusing on those actions? Regardless of our external situations, Marcus retorts:

“Not even that can stop you from acting justly, wisely, and reasonably.”

But what if that blocks you from doing something you want to do? Marcus shares practical advice: know that welcoming obstacles in our life (and adapting to it) can flow in harmony with our lives:

**“Yes, but by welcoming the obstacle and by calmly adapting your action to it, you will be able to do something else in harmony with your goals and with the sort of life you are seeking to build.”**

## **Takeaway point:**

One of my favorite books this year is “The Obstacle is the Way” by Ryan Holiday. Ryan Holiday is also a big proponent of Stoicism– and wrote a book in which the obstacles in our life often help us become stronger, more creative, and more inspired in life. We shouldn’t be afraid of obstacles in our life. Rather, we should try to re-think the obstacles in our lives, to see how they can help improve our lives.

So for example, you might feel that your camera isn’t good enough for street photography– because the autofocus is too slow, the high ISO-performance is poor, or because the camera is too big or heavy.

But these things might come to your advantage. Having a slow autofocus might force you to use the manual focusing mode (which will cause you to capture more “decisive moments”). Having a camera with crappy high-ISO performance (I’m looking at you Leica M9+ME) will force you to keep your ISO relatively low (ISO 400) – which will force you to only shoot when the light is good (and end up taking better photos). If your camera is big or heavy– perhaps it will prevent you from being sneaky when shooting street photography, and force you to interact more with strangers.

We always have the option to focus on building towards our goals one action at a time.

If you want to publish a photography book, just focus on making more individual images. If you want to have an exhibition (and have a completed body of work) – just send another individual email. If you want to improve your photography, try to read at least one individual

photography book– or attend one individual photography course or workshop.

If you focus on adding one brick a day to an empty plot of land, after a few years, you will have a solid house. Even a 1% improvement in your photography (every day) can compound to huge returns. One action at a time.

## 8. Don't seek approval

“Do what nature demands at this moment. **Just do it, if you can, and don't be looking around to see if someone is watching.** Don't look for Plato's Republic either. Be content if you can take a small step, and know that even this is no mean feat.” - Marcus Aurelius

One of the most distracting things to achieving greatness in life is waiting for approval. For waiting on someone to nod their head and give you approval.

You don't need approval. You can do what you need to do right now, at this moment.

Wanting to have external recognition or validation for the work you do is a sad life to follow. You can never 100% control whether someone likes your work or not. It comes down to individual taste. If someone is lactose-intolerant (like me) – there is no amount of “convincing” that they will like milk.

Another analogy: let's say you are an amazing photographer, but you are Asian. And let's say the curator happens to be racist and doesn't like Asian people. No amount of convincing, bribing, or ass-kissing is going to have your photos exhibited. Because the curator is just a racist. That is something you cannot control.

I also read something about donating money from Jesus: do it anonymously, and don't ring a bell when you give a donation. He had a quote that said something like, "Don't let your left hand know that your right hand is donating money."

Similarly, the reward of doing a virtuous act is the act itself. You shouldn't do charitable things or good things for others only for a pat on the shoulder.

Similarly with your photography— don't just make photos for approval for others. First aim to please yourself through your photography— and then if others happen to like it, so be it.

### **Takeaway point:**

You don't need approval to be a street photographer. You are currently a street photographer— right now in this present moment.

Own it.

I hate it when people say stuff like, "Nowadays everyone thinks they're a photographer." The truth is— they are.

I hate elitism when it comes to photography– especially street photography (which should be the most democratic and open form of photography out there).

So don't let your own self-esteem as a photographer be held hostage by the opinion of other photographers. Say, "I am a street photographer" – and say it proudly. Sure you might not be the best street photographer in the world, but who gives a fuck. Work towards being the best photographer *you* can become– everything comes secondary.

## 9. Fear that your life will never begin

“Now that you are about to depart this life, ignore everything else and attend only to the guiding light of reason and the inspiring spark of divinity within you. **Fear not that life will someday end; fear instead that a life in harmony with nature may never begin.**” - Marcus Aurelius

I think when it comes to life– one of the most difficult things is simply starting. To start something takes a lot of courage– and it takes a lot of momentum to get anything started.

Imagine a rusty car that hasn't been turned on for a few months. When you try to turn it on, it will first sputter, exhaust fumes, and then after a few more cranks (and kicks on the motor block) – it finally starts to chug along. It still spews out black gas from the exhaust, but at least now it is running. And with an oil change, some cleaning, and continual running– it will continue to run like a champ.

Similarly, I think getting into the flow of photography is one of the most difficult things.

When I go out and start shooting, I feel cold. I need to get my street photography engine “warmed up.”

The best way I personally get warmed up in street photography is by giving myself the permission to make bad photos. So I will start clicking my shutter for things that are halfway interesting– and try not to be too judgmental on myself by saying, “Awww– Eric why are you taking these boring photos?”

I think perfection is one of the worst things when it comes to street photography. This is because scenes in the streets are rarely perfect. If you don’t take a chance and start clicking– you will never take any photos. The pursuit of “perfection” is more realistic during the editing phase– when you are choosing your best images. Then you can be more selective. But when you’re shooting on the streets– try not to discriminate scenes too much. Just photograph whatever you find interesting.

Perfectionism is also what prevents us from starting anything in life. We think that an idea must be fully-formed before we start it.

For example, let’s say you want to pursue a certain photography project– but you aren’t 100% sure what kind of concept it is, and how you want it to turn out.

A perfectionist would try to map out the entire project– by writing down how long he/she is going to work on it, how he/she is going to pitch the idea to publishers or gallery owners, the equipment he/she is going to use,

the number of images they want in the final project, where they are going to shoot, etc. But all this planning might become overwhelming, and this photographer might never even start his/her project. This is a damn shame.

Rather– we should simply start an idea – and see where it leads us. We need to be flexible, like bamboo. Strong, but flexible. We need to follow the road, and see where it takes us– whether we face obstacles, bridges, road-blocks, or windy roads.

So as Marcus Aurelius said earlier– don't fear that your life will end, fear that it will never begin.

So in photography– don't fear that you will make bad photos (or one day you will die with regrets) – fear that you will never really begin to start your photography projects, fear that you will never travel, fear that you don't give photography your entire energy and soul.

### **Takeaway point:**

I heard a quote recently, “Done is better than perfect.”

I think psychologically we are much happier when we complete things that we set out to do.

I also once read something in psychology which I believe is called the “[Zeigarnik effect](#)” – in which things that we haven't completed often dig themselves in the back of our subconscious, and haunt us. For example if you have a photography project or a concept and you don't finish it– it will continue to haunt you (until you complete it).

Like the prior point– don't wait for anyone to give you permission to become a street photographer or to pursue your photographic projects and endeavors. Do it right now– and let the fear that you will never start your projects (and complete) them be the impetus that drives you forward.

## 10. Regard our opinion of ourselves the highest

I think there is a funny irony when it comes to our human behavior and thought:

As human beings, we are quite greedy– and we are reluctant to help others. We first want to help ourselves (financially, economically, spiritually) before we reach out and help others.

Similarly, we want others to help us (before we help them).

Therefore we always think about our own preferences and thoughts first (before others).

The irony is this: although we love ourselves more than we love others– we tend to overvalue the opinion that others have of us (rather than valuing our own opinion of ourselves the most). In other words, **we care more about what others think of us, than how we think of ourselves.**

Marcus Aurelius shares his similar thoughts– saying how ironic that although we love ourselves more than others– we disregard our own

opinion of ourself:

**“Often I marvel at how men love themselves more than others while at the same time caring more about what others think of them than what they think of themselves.** For example, what if some god or wise counselor instructed us to give immediate utterance to every thought and design that popped into our heads? None of us would put up with such a regimen for a single day. Is this not further proof that **we have a higher regard for what our neighbors think of us than for what we think of ourselves?”**

### **Takeaway point:**

We all have an inner compass– in terms of what direction we think we need to take our lives, and the self-esteem we have for ourselves.

I know personally I try to help myself before I help others. The Roman philosopher (and once slave) Publilius Syrus once said something like, “You must water your own lawn before watering the lawn of others.”

However personally I tend to care what others think of me more than the opinion I have of myself.

For example, let’s say that I am working on a project which I truly love– and I think it is a great project. I might show that project to other photographers, and they might all think it is trash.

While their feedback, opinion, and thoughts are important– ask yourself: who are you ultimately trying to please? Your audience, or yourself?

I have worked on many projects (which I never show anybody) which have personal value for me (the “Cindy” project in which I photograph the love between me and Cindy) – and I ultimately don’t care what others think of the project. Because it isn’t for them– it is for me, Cindy, and our future family.

I know that a lot of the photos in the “Cindy” project just look like boring snapshots– and that is okay with me. I want to first please myself, before I please others.

On the other hand– I have some photos on Flickr which I think are pretty boring or average– which have the most favorites/likes in my entire stream.

Now the question is– is the opinion of others “*wrong*”? Not necessarily. It is merely their opinion of my work.

But do I want to live a life in which I make photographs which pleases my audience– but fails to please myself?

I think not.

So as a general principle: **first aim to please yourself with your photos, then if others like it– so be it. If they don’t like them– so be it.**

## **11. Don’t be pretentious**

I think a lot of photographers – once they become famous, important, or influential – they forget where they came from, and start becoming pretentious and arrogant.

We all started as newbies one point in our photographic lives– so I think it is important for us to stay kind, open, loving, and un-pretentious to others.

Know that once you achieve some level of success or fame– it can actually hurt and cripple you. You want to stay focused on your life’s task (be a prolific photographer) – and becoming “drunk with power and self-importance” will merely delude and distract you.

Marcus Aurelius shares his thoughts:

\*\*“Don’t be a Caesar drunk with power and self-importance: it happens all too easily.\*\*”

Rather, he tells us to be open-hearted, kind, and sincere towards our fellow man:

\*\*“Keep yourself simple, good, pure, sincere, natural, just, god-fearing, kind, affectionate, and devoted to your duty. Strive to be the man your training in philosophy prepared you to be.\*\* Fear God; serve mankind. Life is short; the only good fruit to be harvested in this earthly realm requires a pious disposition and charitable behavior.”

**Takeaway point:**

Don't chase fame, power, or notoriety in your photography. Simply aim to do your job well as a photographer, and everything else will follow.

And once you do gain success as a photographer– don't be distracted by your fame, wealth, and popularity. Keep striving to be the best photographer you can– avoid complacency, big-headedness, and a sense of self-importance.

Continue to be the best photographer you can, and keep your heart and mind open and pure– and willing to help others. We all needed help and guidance to get to where we are in terms of our photography. Give credit where credit is due– and keep paying it forward.

## **12. Play your role well**

Imagine life is a play. We are all given different roles. Some of us are the lead-actors, some of us are the court jesters, some of us are the backstage hands, some of us sell the popcorn, some of us let the guests in, some of us manage others, some of us do the marketing, some of us do the dirty work of cleaning up afterwards.

We are all similarly given different roles in life and photography. Some of us have a particular aptitude to being good at image-making. Some of us are good editors. Some of us are good at bringing other photographers together. Some of us are good at marketing photography. Some of us are good at organizing photography.

But realize at the end of the day– we are all on the same team– all working towards the same goal.

Similarly in a football team, it is often the quarterback who gets all the credit– but everyone on the team is working towards one singular goal: to win. And without every member on the team, nobody could win.

So know that regardless of your position in terms of the photography world– or your particular aptitudes in photography, you were born into this world for a certain purpose, and you participate in your own unique way.

Put your talents to good use– and don't waste them.

Marcus Aurelius shares the thought how we are all working together for “one great end” – and that we are all going to be put towards great use:

**\*\*“All of us are working together toward one great end, **some knowingly and purposefully, others blindly. I think it was Heraclitus who said that even in our sleep we labor to build the world.** Everyone participates in his own way, **critics included, as well as those who dig in their heels and imagine they are resisting change– the world needs us all. So choose your side. But know this,** whatever side you choose, the One who governs all will know perfectly well how to put you to good use and position you amongst his workers.\*\* Be sure, in this great drama, to be more than a throw-away line or a coarse jest.”**

### **Takeaway point:**

It is easy to become jealous of the position of others in life. I know some friends who are high-paid lawyers, who have tons of money to buy

cameras, equipment, film, trips, workshops, etc. But their downside is that they don't have much time to go out and shoot. I know some friends who work in freelance and have a lot more free time on their hands to shoot, but unfortunately don't have as much money for equipment, travel, and film.

We are all given different positions in life– none of them are any “better” than others. They are merely different.

I think it is a matter of knowing your role and position in life– and using it to the best of your ability.

**Remember in the stage of life, it isn't your role which matters– it is how well you play that role.**

## **13. You aren't here to have a good time – you exist for a purpose**

There is a certain philosophy called “hedonism” – in which some people (I think wrongly) believe that the purpose of life is to just be as happy as you possibly can, and to make maximizing your pleasure in life the sole purpose.

However this can lead down a black hole. This can lead down to drugs, sleeping with prostitutes, alcohol, and other self-destructive pleasures.

While I do believe that we should all seek pleasure in life– I think that pleasure should be a by-product of living a purposeful life. Meaning– we

will gain happiness and pleasure from helping others, doing our life's work and living a purposeful life.

Marcus Aurelius shares the thought that we all exist for a purpose– and we should always remind that we have a job to do. We exist to help others, to be prolific, and to bear fruit– not to simply “have a good time” in life:

**“Everything–horse, vine, anything– exists for a purpose.\*\* Is it any wonder? Even Helios the sun-god will say, ‘I have a job to do,’ and the rest of the gods will say the same. So what will you say?” ‘I’m here to have a good time?’ The very thought is beneath contempt.”\*\***

### **Takeaway point:**

Know that as a photographer you exist for a purpose. You are here to capture the world as you see it– and to share that beauty and vision with others.

I mentioned earlier that you should first aim to please yourself (before pleasing others). While that is true– you should still know that the ultimate aim of photography is to inspire others and the viewer. Otherwise, why would we make images (if we couldn't share them?) Even Vivian Maier made photos with the intention of one day showing and exhibiting them (watch “Finding Vivian Maier” to discover this fact). I don't think any photographer truly makes images without even a tiny intention to someday show it to others.

So while I do encourage you to have a good time when it comes to making photos– know that having “a good time” isn't your ultimate goal. To

inspire, wonder, evoke emotions in your viewer– and change their thoughts, perspective, and theories about the world is your goal.

## **Conclusion**

We were all put on this earth for a reason. There is a reason why you discovered street photography– and why your soul is drawn to it.

Know that there are a lot of distractions, detractors, and bullshit out there which will deter you from fulfilling your life in photography.

There will be moments when you will doubt yourself, moments where you will feel without direction, and moments when you will let the negative criticisms of others get to you.

But know that you are a grape vine– and your purpose in life is to produce fruit. And your fruit as a street photographer is your photographs. Your fruit is the warm connections you build with your subjects. Your fruit is what fulfills you– gives you purpose, makes you feel whole– which makes you feel alive.

Live a purposeful life as a street photographer and as a human being– and nothing can stand in your way.

## **Chapter #4: Fuck Fame**

I'll admit it. I'm incredibly jealous. Whenever I see my close friends, other photographers, family, or anyone else doing “successful” things– I feel a

tinge of jealousy. In the back of my head– I might think negative thoughts like, “That person didn’t deserve that recognition or success” – self-doubt myself “Why am I not as successful as that person?” and I start to sink into a hole of despair.

I know I sound a bit dramatic– but I am easily jealous of the success of others, and being an American– one of my goals in life was to be rich, powerful, “successful” (whatever that means), as well as becoming famous.

I don’t know where it comes from. Perhaps coming from a lower socio-economic background, I always wanted to overcome my obstacles and achieve “greatness.” I saw all the famous people on the television screen– and wanted to aspire to be like them. I wanted to escape my reality where I wasn’t sure if my mom could pay the rent at the end of every month– worries that I might become homeless, worries that I would never achieve anything meaningful in life, worries that I would waste my life being stuck in some cubicle somewhere.

Over the years, I always wanted to become “successful.” I saw how hard my mom suffered working as a single-mom, working 3-part time jobs (cleaning houses, waitressing, and other menial labor) and wanted to help lift her out of this life of poverty, stress, and non-gratitude. Even though I was surrounded by friends who joined gangs, did drugs, drank, all that stuff– I think it was always my mom who was my impetus to becoming “successful” in life.

Therefore while my friends were skipping classes and going down the wrong path– I (mostly) stayed on the right path, ended up getting good grades in school, getting into UCLA, getting a stable office-job– and I had

my eyes on bigger and greater things. I wanted to be “successful”– make a ton of money, help my mom, sister, and family out, to buy myself a lot of nice material things, and to give myself freedom.

I read so many books on how to be “successful”, how to be rich, how to start my own business, how to gain more followers on social media, how to “build my brand”, how to achieve fame, wealth, power, and prestige.

I got sucked into all this bullshit of the “American dream.”

To take a step back– I am very grateful to be an American. Proud even. I am an Eagle Scout, got 90%+ of my education paid by the US government, and I admire the sense of individuality, freedom, and entrepreneurship this country has given me. I value all the structures, networks, teachers, mentors, and educational values which helped me to get where I am today (doing what I love, writing this blog, and meeting passionate street photographers from all around the world).

However one of the biggest things I faced in my life (still today) is chasing fame.

## **Why fame?**

I think I often conflate fame and being “successful” – meaning that I think that if I am “famous” – then I am also “successful.”

However as time has gone on– I have begun to realize of how little importance being “famous” is– and how striving after modes of external

recognition has only brought more grief, sadness, dissatisfaction, loneliness, and despair.

## **External vs. Internal Recognition**

I think the problem with chasing “fame” is that it is all external. No matter how hard you try, you cannot get others to 100% like you. No matter how hard you try, you are not guaranteed 1 million followers. No matter how hard you try, you can’t get the guy who hates Asian people to like you (if you are Asian). No matter how hard you try, you cannot convince them to like your street photography (especially if they are into selective-color macro flower photography).

Also the problem with social media is that we are all indirectly chasing fame via the number of followers, likes, favorites, etc. that we get. Our entire self-worth as a photographer has been reduced to a single number. How sad and depressing.

No matter how hard we try in social media when it comes to marketing—we will never have the most followers in the world. There will always be someone out there with more followers than you, someone out there who will be more famous than you, someone out there making more money than you, someone out there who is more “successful” than you. Even if hypothetically you are that #1 photographer in the world, there will be millions (if not billions) of people trying to “dethrone” you and take your crown from you. That is probably the most stressful thing (imagine a King worrying about if his food is being poisoned, if his family is trying to assassinate him for his power and wealth, and the fear of losing all of his influence).

## **Internal recognition**

I titled this chapter: “Fuck fame” for a few reasons.

First of all, it was just a phrase that came to my mind (randomly) a few weeks ago– and it has stuck. Whenever I personally find myself falling into the bunny-hole of wanting more power, wealth, influence, and fame– I repeat to myself, “Fuck fame”. It also helps that both of those words start with “F” – so it is a pithy phrase that has stuck well for me (might stick well with you too).

Also I like the idea of “fuck fame” because it helps me focus my energies inwards.

Once again, fame is an external game (others confer it onto yourself). But you cannot control it.

Rather what we can control is our own inner-self of worth.

So sure you might have 100+ favorites on one photograph– but do you really feel it is a great photograph? Do you think you can do better? By your inner barometer or ruler- do you think that image is strong?

## **Using a different ruler**

I think in our photography– we should always judge our images by our own internal ruler. We should dictate what we think is a “strong” and what is a “weak” image. Nobody else should be able to dictate that.

I also like the idea of being competitive in photography – but not against others– only against yourself. You are your best competitor.

I also randomly heard a quote from Tony Robbins in which he said, “Progress is happiness.” The moment we stop growing and advancing forward– we fall into despair.

The great thing about competing against yourself in photography is that you will always have a worthy competitor (who you know better than anyone else in the world). I once read something like, if you aim to change your behavior by 1% day-over-day – it will compound into huge changes over years, and your lifetime.

So a practical suggestion is to compete against yourself by doing the following: **Improve your photography by 1% everyday.**

## **1% Improvement Everyday**

So how can you improve your photography by 1% everyday?

Some simple suggestions:

- Take 1% more photos today (than you did yesterday).
- Look at 1% more inspirational images (preferably from the Masters) than you did yesterday.
- Spend 1% more time shooting today (than you did yesterday).
- Edit away 1% of your photos in your portfolio, Flickr, social media site, whatever.
- Give 1% more critiques/feedbacks/comments on the photographs of

other photographers

Imagine this as a snowball effect. When you start rolling your own snowball, it starts off as tiny. But the more you roll it, the more weight it packs on, and after a while– the momentum causes it to roll itself, and it just keeps getting bigger and bigger. If you want a good investment strategy also invest in index funds (that compound slowly, but steadily, over decades).

Similarly when it comes to going to the gym, I do only 3 lifts: deadlifts, squats, and dumbbell press (bench-press has injured me too much in the past). Every workout (once a week) I just try to improve my maximum lift by 1%. It is a small but manageable goal, and over the years, I have been able to add hundreds of pounds to each of my maximum lifts.

So imagine what is the 1% of your photography you can improve on a daily basis? I also like improving your progress daily because it is a lot easier to track, and it will give you dramatic improvements in the long run (rather than tracking weeks or months).

## **Advice about fame from Marcus Aurelius**

One of the biggest break-throughs I had on “fucking fame” was through Marcus Aurelius.

Not only is his advice solid (he had haters, worried about his legacy and fame) hundreds of years ago– but also they are practical.

Based on my research from his book: “The Meditations” (I used the translation, “The Emperor’s Handbook”) I compiled them into two sections.

- First of all, ignoring the praise of others.
- Secondly, realizing how useless it is to seek fame.

I think both of these are important points when it comes to fame.

Firstly because when it comes to gaining positive feedback– it can actually be worse than negative feedback. Getting too much positive feedback and flattery is dangerous, because it makes us fall into complacency– and misleads us into believing that we are great. Once we think we are great, it stagnates our mind into thinking we know everything. This locks out opportunities for additional growth.

Secondly, realizing how fleeting and useless fame is gives us focus in doing our greatest work (while we are still alive) and not worrying about our legacy. Who better to consult regarding this than Roman emperors who were once at the apex of power in the entire world?

## **Section 1: Ignore the praise of others**

When reading a lot of books from the ancient Romans, I was actually quite shocked to read that one of the people who were deemed to be the most dangerous were the flatterers.

Why were flatterers considered dangerous?

Well– flatterers were the most coy and deceptive people around. They were dangerous folks– who used praise and flattery to gain the favor of those in power. And when most unexpected– they would stab them in the back.

I think nowadays I have taken this advice to heart. Don't get me wrong– I love and appreciate praise and flattery as much as anybody else, but now I am much more suspicious of it. I actually dislike it when people flatter me too much (aka “kissing ass”) because I wonder to myself: “Are they just trying to grease me up because they are trying to take advantage of me?” Other times when the flattery is genuine, I try to ignore it and disarm it– because it makes my head too big, causes me to become self-indulgent, and causes me to become complacent to my work (whether it be photography or blogging).

Similarly– I tend to give a lot of compliments (because I genuinely want to show love and admiration to others). But there have been many times that I have found myself using flattery as a form of deception (being extra-nice to a waiter to get better service or really nice to a barista to get an extra free shot of espresso). In these times, I slap myself in the back of the head and remind myself not to do that. I am fallible, and a selfish-human being after all.

So what does Marcus Aurelius have to say about flattery? Well– the first lesson he got from his father was to refuse public applause and eschew all forms of flattery in the first place:

“My father taught me to **refuse public applause** and to **eschew all forms of flattery.**”

## Why flatter?

One of the first things that come to mind is thinking about flattery itself. What purpose does flattery serve?

Well, flattery serves the purpose of inflating the ego (of the person receiving the flattery). This gives that person a sense of joy, the butterflies in the stomach, and a sense that he/she is doing the right thing. This is a form of positive reinforcement.

When you flatter someone, it is psychologically shown to make the person like you more.

So for the flatterer, the point of flattering someone is to get him or her to like you more. It is a form of persuasion, and sometimes deception.

Not only that, but flattery doesn't change the reality of anything.

If you have a damn strong photograph, no amount of flattery (or negative feedback) is going to change the fact that it is a damn strong photograph.

Marcus Aurelius brings up a good point– that beautiful things are beautiful into itself– and doesn't need any external forms of recognition (for it to exist as a beautiful thing):

“Whatever is beautiful owes its beauty to itself, and when it dies its beauty dies with it. **Praise adds nothing to beauty– makes it neither better nor worse.** This is also true for commonly praised objects, natural wonders, for example, or works of art. **What does anything that is truly**

**beautiful lack? Nothing!** No more than does moral or natural law, truth, kindness, or self-respect.”

Marcus Aurelius also stresses the point that a beautiful thing also won't be affected by negative criticism:

“Which of these is improved by praise or marred by criticism?  
**Does an emerald's beauty fade because it is not  
praised? What about gold, ivory, porphyry, a lyre, a  
sword, a flower, or a tree?**”

Another good strategy that Marcus Aurelius used to deflect the affect of praise and flattery was to break it down into objective action.

For example, what does it really mean to be “liked” on the Internet? It is simply someone pushing a button on his or her laptop that says “like”. Or it is a double-thumb tap on a photograph on Instagram. Who cares if someone clicks a button that says that they “like” you? Does that really mean anything? If they saw you in person, would they feel the same way? Probably not.

Marcus Aurelius brings up the point that getting praise and attention is just the clapping of hands, or the “clapping of tongues” (when it comes to praise). Who cares if people physically join their hands together and make a clapping sound? It doesn't change the fact whether you are a great person or not. It is just our human reaction to it, which causes our ego to swell up:

“What then deserves our attention, invites our admiration?  
[...] What then? The clapping of hands? No, and not men's

praise either, for praise is merely a clapping of tongues. And without glory and honor, what's left? Just this: to act or not to act according to the needs and dictates of your own constitution.”

Also remember– where you get the praise (or criticism) matters. For example, if there is a photographer (who is a good friend of mine and rarely gives compliments) and he/she likes my photograph– it means a lot more than a stranger on the Internet simply “liking” my photograph on Facebook.

Also whenever people “like” your images (in person or online) think about their motivations. Are they someone who genuinely loves and supports your photography, and wants to give you constructive feedback and criticism? Or is it someone random online who simply “likes” your photo (expecting for you to “like” their photos in return). This is kind of like how on Twitter, there are a bunch of spammers out there who simply follow thousands of people (expecting a “follow-back” in return). Avoid these kinds of circle-jerks:

“Reflect carefully on those whose good opinion you covet and on what motivates them. If you examine the reasons for their likes and dislikes, you will not blame them for failing to speak well of you, nor will their praise mean that much to you.”

Also the problem of flattery is that they are often tied into titles. So for example, when I worked into my old company– my self-worth was tied into my title. Sure I had the title of “manager” – but I wanted to be at least a “senior manager” or a “director”. I felt that my title was a definition of who I was as a human being.

But how stupid and useless thinking that was is. In theory, I could have simply printed out a plaque (for 99 cents at a store) that said “ERIC KIM: DIRECTOR” and had it plastered on my desk. It wouldn’t change anything.

Another good psychological trick that Marcus Aurelius gives us is realizing that those who are really divine (aka the Gods) don’t care about the titles that anyone bestows upon them. They simply are great:

"Lest you become distracted with the titles others give you and the noble attributes they ascribe to you, you should bear in mind that **the gods themselves are not interested in this sort of flattery.** They desire instead for all rational beings to imitate their attributes for the purpose of becoming like them, just as **the fig tree does the work of a fig tree, the dog the work of a dog, the bee the work of a bee, and the man the work of a man.**"

Marcus Aurelius isn’t telling us to try to be God-like– but for us to simply stick to our role (being a photographer) and do it well. Fuck the titles– just be you.

## **Section 2: Seeking fame is useless**

One of the best ways I have structured my life recently is thinking to myself: How will my decisions, actions, or thoughts matter 100,200,300,400,500, or even 1000 years from now?

Whenever I get an email, which I feel is super-urgent, I remind myself: this won't matter in 1000 years.

Whenever I get in a fight with Cindy, I remind myself: this won't matter in 1000 years (not even a day).

Whenever I sit down and write, I realize that this might be useful for possibly a decade or so (but probably won't exist 1000 years from now).

I think I once heard a quote from Steve Jobs that said something like—remember that one day you will be dead, and just focus on doing your best on a daily basis. This has helped give me tremendous focus in terms of my day-to-day living, and has made me not care so much about what will happen in the future.

Marcus Aurelius had similar issues— he worried about what others thought of him, and how others might think of him in the future. His strategy? Realize that over time— everything will soon be forgotten:

“Are you tormented by what others may think of you? Look then on how **soon everything is forgotten**, and gaze into the abyss of infinite time. Hear the hollowness of the applause, and ponder the fickleness of those who are applauding you while you consider the narrowness of the stage on which you pant after their plaudits.”

Even the entire planet is nothing but a speck of dust in the universe— we don't really matter that much at the end of the day (so let us not take ourselves too seriously):

\*\*“The entire earth is but a piece of dust blowing through the firmament, and the inhabited part of the earth a small fraction thereof\*\*. So, in such a grand space, how many do you think will think of you, and what will their thoughts be worth?”

I know a lot of people out there who want to “make history” – and to go down in the history textbooks. For a long time, I wanted to leave behind a “legacy” of being a great photographer, to be written in history influencing the trajectory of street photography, and to be remembered as someone who wrote lots of insightful things about street photography and life.

But honestly, that is a bunch of crap. None of what I do really matters in those regards. It will soon be forgotten. But perhaps some of what I photograph and write might slightly influence others (in a positive way) while I am alive. And at the end of my life, I’m not going to give a damn about how famous, rich, or powerful I was. I am only interested in being remembered for being a loving individual who did his best to spread that love as far and wide as he could.

Even the most famous people in history have been forgotten, as Marcus Aurelius shares:

“The man who pants after praise and yearns to ”make history" forgets that those who remember him will die soon after he goes to his grave, as will those who succeed the first generation of them that praise him, until after passing from one generation to the next, **through many generations, the bright flame of his memory will flutter, fade, and go out.**”

Even hypothetically if you would be remembered forever– what is the point? All of that positive praise won't do you any good when you're dead. Just focus on being the best photographer you are while you are still alive:

“But what if those who praise you never died, and they sang your praises forever? What difference would that make? That the praise will do nothing for you dead isn't my point. What will it do for you now that you're still alive, except perhaps to offer a means to some other end? Meanwhile, you neglect nature's means of achieving the same ends directly while worrying about how you'll be remembered after you're dead.”

Nowadays we remember all the names of the great photographers who have passed: Henri Cartier-Bresson, Andre Kertesz, Garry Winogrand, and many more. However to be honest– most young photographers I know (the Instagram generation) have no idea who these master photographers are. It is a bit of a shame (because we should study history and the greats)– but the reality is, no matter how famous you are as a photographer, you will soon be forgotten.

Marcus Aurelius brings in the example of forgotten Romans (who were once the most famous in the world). Once you are dead and “out of sight” – you will also be “out of mind”:

“Words that everyone once used are now obsolete, and so are the men whose names were once on everyone's lips: Camillus, Caeso, Volesus, Dentatus, and to a lesser degree Scipio and Cato, and yes, even Augustus, Hadrian, and Antonius are less spoken of now than they were in their own days. For **all things fade away, become the stuff of legend, and are**

**soon buried in oblivion.** Mind you, this is true only for those who blazed once like bright stars in the firmament, but for the rest, as soon as a few clods of earth cover their corpses, they are ‘**out of sight, out of mind.**’”

Also remember, when you die– the people who remembered you (and once praised you) will also die. We will all vanish like smoke:

“Everyone disperses and vanishes like smoke, both the rememberer and the remembered.”

For time is fleeting– and constantly moving like a river. Whatever is tossed into the river eventually gets washed away, and nothing ever stays static and still. The only thing constant in life is change, and we can never expect for good things to last forever. Like Vivian Maier once said– once you’re gone, you need to move to the side and make way for others:

“Think often of how rapidly the stuff of existence sweeps past us and is carried out of sight. **Being is like a perpetually flooding river, its currents ever changing, its causes numberless and varied. Nothing stands still,** not even the water at our feet that plunges into the infinite abyss of the past behind us and the future ahead, plunges and disappears. In this situation, isn’t it foolish to put on airs, to strain at the bit, to get worked up as though any fame or notoriety might last for long?”

Even if you are famous in your lifetime, you will soon be forgotten. Just think about all the famous “has-been” actors, athletes, “one hit wonder” musicians and so-forth. Nothing great can ever last forever:

“Soon you will have forgotten everything, and everyone will have forgotten you.”

So what is the ultimate antidote for chasing fame? What is the secret to happiness and contentment? It is **focusing on the present**:

\*\*“Give yourself the present.”\*\* Those who chase after future fame fail to realize that the men whose praise they crave tomorrow will be no different from the men whose opinions they despise today, and all these men will die. What do you care whether tomorrow’s men know the sound of your name or say nice things about you?”

## **But wait, aren’t you a hypocrite Eric?**

I think one of the common responses I expect to get to this chapter is this: “But wait, Eric– aren’t you being a hypocrite? You’re telling us to ‘fuck fame’ – but you already have thousands of followers and teach workshops all around the world? You wouldn’t be where you were if you weren’t ‘famous’ – what do you expect the rest of us to do if we want to live a similar lifestyle?”

That is a great question.

To clarify– I have so much debt and gratitude towards all of you (my dear readers) who have helped me get to where I am. I am eternally grateful to those of you who consistently read my blog, tell your friends about the blog, attend my workshops, encourage others to attend, or for anyone in general to be interested in street photography.

However I have found a funny observation: the more followers and “fame” I try to gain– the less it comes to me. But when I focus on what I do well (I think blogging and adding value to the street photography community)– this “fame” has come to me organically (without me forcing it).

So my practical conclusion and advice to you is the following: **focus on what you are passionate about, speak and shoot with your entire soul and heart, don't censor yourself, don't give a flying fuck about what others think about what you're doing, aim to please yourself, and live everyday as if it were your last.** Sooner or later, you will find a following (read Kevin Kelley's article, "[1000 true fans](#)" and will be able to make a living out of what you are passionate about.

Even if you never are able to make a full-time living out of what you're passionate about (Einstein wrote the theory of relativity when he worked in the Swiss patent office) just continue to thrive– create images that speak to you, images which inspire you, and constantly push yourself forward to become the best photographer you can. Make those small 1% increments in your daily activities– and greatness will follow.

## **Chapter 5: How to be happy**

For this chapter I want to focus on a section which I think is important for everyone in life: learning how to be happy, fulfilled, and content with your street photography (and your personal life).

Happiness is one of the most elusive things in the world– which we have always chased for millennia. However the problem is that we often go

down the rabbit hole and follow the wrong things. We try to chase money, fame, power, wealth, prestige– all external forms of recognition to confer “happiness” unto ourselves.

However happiness is more than that– happiness is an inner-state, which can be controlled by you (not affected by external conditions).

How do we seek to gain more happiness, purpose, and contentment in our photography and lives? Let us seek the wisdom of Marcus Aurelius in “The Meditations”:

## **1. Live in the present moment**

“Tossing aside everything else, hold fast to these few truths. We live only in the present, in this fleet-footed moment. The rest is lost and behind us, or ahead of us and may never be found.” - Marcus Aurelius

One of the things I learned recently from a psychology study at TED is that the most dissatisfaction occurs when we let our minds wander. When our minds wander, we tend to think of negative things – and get pulled away from the present moment.

Why the present moment? The past has already occurred, the future is uncertain (who knows when we will die). We are only 100% certain and confident of our thoughts, actions, and controls in the present moment.

One of the things that often leads to dissatisfaction in our lives are desiring something. Desiring for more followers on social media. Desiring

for a better camera. Desiring to travel to an exotic place. Hope and desire (while both are important aspects of being human which drive us forward) – often lead to dissatisfaction of all the great things we have in the present moment. Marcus Aurelius also encourages us to stop fantasizing about the future– and focus on the present moment:

“Stop fantasizing! Cut the strings of desire that keeps you dancing like a puppet. Draw a circle around the present moment. Recognize what is happening either to you or to someone else. Dissect everything into its casual and material elements. Ponder your final hour. Leave the wrong with the person who did it.”

### **Takeaway point:**

I often find myself mind-wandering. I re-live regrets I have in the past– in terms of my lost-opportunities, in terms of money wasted on cameras and gear, in terms of not traveling to more places (while I was abroad). I have a lot of baggage and regrets in the past.

When it comes to the future– I feel anxious. I feel that I am currently in a place in my life that I am not totally satisfied. I want to have more book deals, to have more packed workshops, and to build my online notoriety in the future. I am dissatisfied what I currently have in the present moment.

However whenever these feelings of discontent creep into my life (whether it is regarding the past or the future)– **I count my blessings.** I count all of my blessings in the present moment (the fact that I have my health, the fact that I already have a capable camera, that the place I

currently live in is the most interesting place to photograph [because I know it really well], and the fact that to simply be alive is a joy in itself.

I also look around my present environment and think to myself: what can I photograph which is around a 1-mile radius from my home, which will be interesting? I focus on the present moment– what I can photograph now (rather than regretting not having taken more photos in the past, or worrying about photos I would like to take in foreign and exotic places).

So whenever you find your mind wandering (and feel dissatisfaction creep in)– focus again into the present moment, count your blessings, and go out and shoot.

## **2. Be content with where you live**

I think a huge sense of dissatisfaction in the lives of street photographers I know is that they want to live somewhere more sexy and exotic– with more people, bustle, and life.

I know most people live in the suburbs with their family– away from the city. They daydream of being in San Francisco, Tokyo, Paris, New York City– or any big city that is bustling with people.

Don't get me wrong, I love being in a sea of people and being swept away by the energy of the streets. It makes me lose a sense of myself, a sense of time– and I feel fully alive.

But at the same time– I have been able to re-create a similar experience back home in my boring Berkeley neighborhood.

Last night I was feeling a bit cooped up and frustrated, and so I just took a nighttime walk around my neighborhood. I never do this– but when I did, I suddenly saw so many interesting urban landscapes before my eyes. I experimented using a flash, using natural light, and got totally swept away photographing within a 1-mile radius from my home. I thought I had only gone out for a 10-minute walk, but I was away for nearly an hour. Time flew by– as I realized how rich and interesting my own neighborhood was (although by ‘objective standards’ it is pretty boring).

Don’t make excuses for your street photography. Just because you don’t live in City X doesn’t mean you can’t make great street photography. Look at William Eggleston who photographed his own city his entire life (pretty boring place) – and make great photos.

So next time you feel uninspired with your photography (and think travel will be a solution to your problems) – think again. Marcus Aurelius even notes this in the past– that everyone dreams of the perfect vacation (away from home). But at the same time– the best travel and vacation is in ourself, in our own mind, in our own neighborhood:

“Everyone dreams of the perfect vacation– in the country, by the sea, or in the mountains. You too long to get away and find that idyllic spot, yet how foolish... when at any time you are capable of finding that perfect vacation in yourself. **Nowhere is there a more idyllic spot, a vacation home more private and peaceful, than in one’s own mind,** especially when it is furnished in such a way that is the merest inward glance induces ease. **Take this vacation as often as you like, and so charge your spirit.** But do not prolong these meditative moments beyond what is necessary to send

you back to your work free of anxiety and full of vigor and good cheer.”

Furthermore, know that regardless of wherever you live– because of the Internet, we are all connected and wired. There are no shortages of opportunities in the city you live in. Who cares where you live? Just make the best of where you live.

If you live in a boring city with no photography scene– see that as a great opportunity. You can be the individual that starts the street photography community in your own neighborhood.

If your photography community doesn’t have a bookstore– perhaps you can cobble together some local photographers and make your own communal photography library– and share and distribute books with one another.

If your photography neighborhood is boring– perhaps you can make it a challenge to make interesting photos (in your boring city). Look at the great boring photos taken by Martin Parr, Blake Andrews, and Lee Friedlander all simply in the suburbs.

Remember at the end of the day– you are a “citizen of the world” – and you are connected to street photographers from all around the globe (via the internet, social media, and our common passion for photographing in the streets):

“What remains of life is short. Live it as if on craggy mountain heights, for what does it matter where one lives? Whether in a city or in the wilderness, you are a citizen of the world. Let

man behold in you a true man, one who lives in harmony with nature. If they can't bear it, let them put you to death. Better to die than to live like them.”

Never forget– the good life is where you currently are and live, nowhere else:

“Bear in mind that your hermitage goes wherever you go. The good life is the same here as it in the mountains or by the sea.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Whenever you feel an urge to travel– I do recommend you to scratch that itch. If anything, traveling has helped me gain *more* appreciation for my own home and neighborhood. After extensive traveling the last few years, I actually feel little to no need to travel (to find interesting subject matter to photograph in my own neighborhood).

There isn't really a street photography scene in Berkeley, California (that I am aware of)– so I used that opportunity to arrange some meet-ups. If your neighborhood is lacking the same sort of community, be the change in which you wish to see in the world (Gandhi).

If you don't have the funds, time, or opportunity to travel– don't despair. Photography books are a great way to travel to anywhere you want in the world– and gain inspiration.

You can also explore parts of your own city or neighborhood that are off the beaten path. Photograph areas that you haven't seen anyone photograph (however boring)– and see if you can make it interesting.

Constraints help breed creativity.

The best photographs are in your own backyard– and they will be the best photos (because you know it best, and not as many people have photographed it).

### **3. Be content; be grateful for what you have**

As I said earlier on– being content (and grateful) is one of the best antidotes to dissatisfaction, misery, and depression.

I have made it a daily practice to say “3 things I am grateful for” to Cindy at the end of everyday. No matter how objectively “great” my life is– without acknowledging that and sharing my gratefulness (out loud) – I don’t appreciate things.

I think one of the great things in street photography is to simply recognize how beautiful everyday life is. I think this is one of the main reasons, which draws us to street photography– appreciation of the small things. Marcus Aurelius says one of the great ways we can find beauty in the world is to “take a particular pleasure in everything” – however how small and grand:

“The perceptive man, profoundly curious about the workings of nature, will **take a peculiar pleasure in everything**, even in the humble or ungainly parts that contribute to the making of the whole. The actual jaws of living beasts will

delight him as much as their representations by artists and sculptors. With a discerning eye, he will warm to an old man's strength or an old woman's beauty while admiring with cool detachment the seductive charms of youth. **The world is full of wonders like these that will appeal only to those who study nature closely and develop a real affinity for her works.**"

So sometimes when I am shooting in the streets, I might be too slow to capture a "decisive moment" or to make an interesting photograph. But I am still grateful for seeing a scene (an old man in love with an old woman)– or simply a beautiful scene. Sure making a photograph of a great scene is truly wonderful– but also having appreciation for the beauty of what we see is highly important as well.

I think our interest in street photography is a special gift. Not everyone I know or meet is interested in street photography. It takes a unique individual to be interested in street photography. This individual must be loving towards humans, curious about human behavior, and have an appreciation of the small and mundane things of everyday life.

So first of all, before you are grateful for your camera, health, or where you live– just **cherish this gift of seeing the world in a peculiar and sensitive manner (as a street photographer)**. Constantly count that first blessing. Marcus Aurelius reminds us to cherish our gifts:

"Cherish your gifts, however humble, and take pleasure in them. Spend the rest of your days looking only to the gods from whom comes every good gift and seeing no man as either master or slave."

Furthermore a lot of discontentment in life happens when we forget to appreciate what we have– and we lust after things we don't have. This lusting can be for that new camera, that new lens, or that trip overseas. So whenever you feel a lust or “hankering” for what we don't have– Marcus Aurelius reminds us to fix our attentions on what we do have, and to be grateful for it. And on top of that, remind ourselves how sad we would be if we lost them:

**\*\*“Don't hanker after what you don't have.\*\*” Instead, **fix your attentions on the finest and the best that you have, and imagine how much you would long for these if they weren't in your possession.** At the same time, **don't become so attached to these things that you would be distraught if you were to lose them.**”**

I have had a personal account in which I thought I lost my camera– and I had a small heart attack. I realized that up until that point– I took my camera for granted. But imagining it gone gave me a lot of pain– and regret. Soon I recovered the camera, and I was so euphoric and happy– like I was given a second chance. I never took my camera granted for that afterwards.

However Marcus Aurelius also reminds us: **don't be too attached to our material things** – because if we lose them, it will lead to further dissatisfaction.

So the strategy is: **be grateful for what we have (especially when we want new things), but don't become so attached that we will be sad if we lost them.**

The great thing about the power of contentment is that no matter how shitty your life is– you can always find something to be content with.

In Victor Frankl's "Man's search for meaning" – when he was incarcerated in a holocaust death camp– even waking to see the morning the next day was a blessing, to see the blue sky, and to see starving people help one another.

So remember– no matter how shitty your camera, where you live– there is always something to be grateful for. Be grateful for your vision, the fact you are born with a passion to make images, and to live in a generation where you can see billions of inspirational images on the internet for free. Marcus Aurelius reminds us– it is always in our power to be content:

\*\*"It is within your power, always and everywhere, to be content with what the gods have given you\*\*, to deal justly with people as you find them, and to guard your thoughts against the intrusion of untested or inchaste ideas."

Marcus Aurelius sums up all the lessons he has taught us on being grateful, content, and living in the moment. He himself struggled with this in his life– and it is hard. But it is possible:

"Is it possible that one day I shall see you, O my soul, good, simple, indivisible, stripped of every pretense, more solid than the flesh that now covers you? Will you ever know a day of unclouded love and tenderness? Will you ever **be content– no hopes, no regrets, needing nothing, desiring nothing**, animate or inanimate, not even for a moment's pleasure– nor wanting a little more time to prolong the

ecstasy, or a more pleasing room or view or climate, or a more sweet accord in your relations with others? When will you be **content with your present condition, happy with all you have, accepting it as a gift from the gods and acknowledging that all is well with you and that all is well?"**

### **Takeaway point:**

No matter what– we can always be grateful. As a strategy to gain more happiness in life– keep a gratitude journal. At the end of everyday, write down 3 (or more) things you are grateful for. I personally try to write down as many things I am grateful for as possible. The more things I write down that I am grateful for, the more things I discover I should be grateful for (however small).

## **4. Don't complain, blame, criticize, or make excuses**

Negativity begets more negativity. Having a positive outlook in life is one of our most powerful weapons and defenses against the bullshit of everyday life– the bad shit that happens, the negative people we meet, and the feelings of discontentment and depression that sink in.

So how can you create a shining, solid, impenetrable gold plate of armor of happiness? Simple: **don't complain, blame, criticize, or make excuses (about anybody or anything in your life).**

## **a) Don't complain**

First of all, complaining doesn't do us any good. Bitching and moaning doesn't change the physical reality of what is happening (or what has happened to us). And psychological studies show that "venting" isn't good for us. It is bad for us. Venting negative thoughts, anger, and frustration only makes us more negative, angry, and frustrated.

Rather, learn to let go— try to go 30 days without complaining at all. You will be amazed how much this will change your life in a positive way.

For what do we have to complain about?

We seriously live in the best time, in the existence of history. There is less poverty, deaths by starvation, and racism than ever before. With the Internet— our possibilities are limitless. We have more access to food than a king did even a few centuries ago. We have devices the size of a bar of soap that we can stick into our pockets, which can tap into the collective of human knowledge (all for free).

So Marcus Aurelius reminds us— we should never complain about "palace life". The way I interpret "palace life" nowadays is "modern life" — especially with all of our amazing technology:

"No one should ever hear you complaining about palace life, no one, not even your own ears."

There are a lot of things we might complain and bitch about. We might complain that our camera is too slow, that it doesn't have enough

megapixels, that the High-ISO performance is poor, that our lenses are 'soft'. Whatever.

We might complain that people don't support our photography, that there is too much 'bad' photography online, and that 'everyone thinks they're a street photographer'.

But throw away all these negative thoughts and criticisms.

If we encounter anything we don't like in life— simply ignore it, throw it away, or walk around. Marcus Aurelius has a great analogy:

\*\*“‘The cucumber is bitter.’ Throw it away. ‘There’s a briar in my path.’ Walk around it. That’s enough.\*\* Don’t feel compelled to add, ‘Why are these things allowed to happen?’ The naturalist will only have a good laugh at your expense, as would the carpenter or shoemaker if you complained about sawdust or leather trimmings in their workshops.”

Know that regardless of how well we try to live life— we will deal with shit we don't like. But Marcus Aurelius brings up a good analogy: if you are a wood carpenter and you complain about sawdust when you are making shelves or desks— you are a fool. Similar in life, how can we expect to live life without some unpleasant things? It is a simple by-product of living.

Furthermore, another good way to not complain is to imagine how ridiculous and foolish you look when you are complaining. You are like a pig squealing and kicking around:

\*\*“The next time you hear someone bemoaning his fate or complaining about something, visualize the pig at a sacrifice, squealing and kicking\*\*. It’s the same with the person who lies upon his lonely bed, lamenting his pains or cursing his constraints in silence. Only the rational being can embrace his fate and follow the course of events willingly; those who howl and whine can merely follow.”

Lastly– don’t blame anybody for what happens in life. Life is just life. Shit happens to everybody. Fate can sometimes be kinder to others at certain instances– but we are all suffering collectively. Don’t blame “fate” and don’t blame humans. Don’t blame anybody– as Marcus Aurelius reminds us:

“Don’t blame the gods for what happens, for they never do wrong either voluntarily or involuntarily. Don’t blame men either, whose wrongs are all involuntary. **Be done with blame.**”

## **b) Don’t criticize**

Another way to gain more happiness in life is to not criticize. Because the more you criticize others (in a negative way)– the more negative energy you bring onto yourself.

I think it is good to give constructive criticism (which can help others)– but giving simply negative criticism (which doesn’t do anybody good) – is just bad karma.

Always seek to be kind, helpful, and to add value to those you give feedback/comments on. If someone asks you to give you feedback on their photos, don't just say that their work is "boring" or "shit." If you actually do feel that way– perhaps tell them *why* you don't like their photos (so they can improve).

Marcus Aurelius tells us that if we want to correct or criticize people – do it with tact:

\*\*“If someone makes a mistake, correct him with kindness and point out where he went wrong.\*\* If you fail, blame only yourself, or better yet, don't blame anyone.”

He also mentioned that let us not self-criticize ourselves too much (especially if it isn't constructive). If we fail, nobody else is to blame– but ourselves.

Furthermore, before we criticize others – let us ask ourselves– do I do the same actions of those I am about to criticize?

For example, when I get cut off in traffic and I want to yell “fuck you” to the other guy (road rage) – I remind myself: I have cut a lot of people off in traffic as well (unintentionally). Therefore, I remind myself that I have been an asshole in the past– and not to criticize others.

So before you point a finger at someone, remind yourself: am I guilty of the same thing I am about to criticize the person for?

\*\*“Whenever you are about to find fault with someone, ask yourself the following question: 'What fault of mine most

nearly resembles the one I am about to criticize?\*\*\* Is it love of money? or pleasure? or reputation? and so on until you have identified the closest cousin. By redirecting your attention in this way, you will soon forget your anger as you realize that he can't help himself any more than you can. How can he possibly overcome the compulsion to do wrong? If you can help him with this, you have helped yourself as well.”

Also another good way to think about things before you criticize a photographer: ask yourself, “Why did this photographer take this photograph? What did this photographer find interesting about this scene– that I cannot see?” By understanding the motives of another photographer is a strong way to empathize and understand him/her:

“In everything you see someone else do, make it a habit to ask yourself, **‘What is his purpose in doing this?’** But begin with yourself. Question your own actions first.”

### **c) Make no excuses**

We often make excuses for our photography (at least I know I do). I make excuses that I don't have enough time, I don't have enough money (to travel or buy a certain camera for a project I want), or that the opportunity isn't good.

There is never a perfect time, a perfect camera, or an unlimited cash-chest of funds. The perfect time is now, with the gear you already have, and the money you already have– to creatively thrive, create the street photography you want, and to live the life you want.

So remember– nobody is preventing you from doing anything. You have no obstacles– but yourself. Marcus Aurelius reminds us that opportunity exists everywhere:

“What is the very best you can say or do with the material you have to work with? Whatever that is, you can say or do it. **Make no excuse by claiming that something prevents you.** You will never stop bemoaning your fate until it becomes as natural for you to follow the law of your being– in whatever material conditions you find yourself– as it is for a hedonist to go after pleasure. Indeed, every opportunity to speak or act according to the law of your being should give you pleasure, and that opportunity exists everywhere.”

## 5. Focus on what we can control

Okay so we shouldn't blame, criticize, complain, think about the past, or worry about the future– what can we control?

We can always control our *perception* of what happened. So for example, let's say you missed “the decisive moment.” You can interpret this two ways:

- a) Shit, I missed that decisive moment– I will never see such a good scene again.
- b) It sucks that I missed that decisive moment– but I am grateful to have seen the moment. I vow to capture even a better moment the next time I see it.

So the reality of what happened hasn't changed. However what has changed is your perception of what happened.

The same thing applies in life. We can't control to what happens us in life (if we fall sick, fall victim to someone yelling at us, threatening to break our cameras, whatever) – but we can control our *interpretation* of those events– and whether we allow those opportunities to be positive or negative.

Nowadays I am a big fan of Nassim Taleb– what he calls “Antifragile.” The concept is that whenever anything bad happens to us– we can turn it into a positive event.

For example, if someone yelled at you in the streets and gave you a bunch of shit– rather than getting upset and angry at yourself, rather– think of that opportunity as a chance for you to build your courage.

If you failed to have your photograph be accepted by a curator to a street photography show– re-interpret that as a moment for you to re-examine your photos, and perhaps try harder next time.

So realize that your interpretation of events is always within your control. Therefore ultimately– your own happiness lies in your own hands.

Marcus Aurelius reminds us that we shouldn't depend our happiness in the hands of others. Rather, we should govern our happiness our of our own free will and acts:

“The happiness of those who want to be popular depends on others; the happiness of those who seek pleasure fluctuates

with moods outside their control; but **the happiness of the wise grows out of their own free acts.**”

Furthermore, whenever bad things happen to us– we can interpret them in a positive way (or just don’t interpret it in any way).

For example, let’s say you broke your camera. Don’t think of it as a bad fortune. You just broke your camera. It dropped, and it broke. Don’t think of it as a positive or a negative event. It just happened. Rather than getting emotional and upset– just realize that you need to either a) get it fixed or b) buy a new one.

Marcus Aurelius shares the power of having no opinion:

**\*\*“You always own the option of having no opinion.\*\* There is never any need to get worked up or to trouble your soul about things you can’t control. These things are not asking to be judged by you. Leave them alone.”**

So always realize that regardless of what the outside circumstances are in your life– you can still be happy, be productive, and thrive. Don’t look for things to actively complain about– just keep making images:

**“Let come what may to those who are affected by outward circumstance. They will always find something to complain about. For myself, if I choose not to view whatever happens as evil, no harm will come to me. And I can so choose.”**

Regardless of the criticism that others may have of you, your work, whatever– just stay true to who you are. Don’t let these criticisms or

negativity change your character. Because they don't. They cannot. If you are a shining emerald— no amount of words can change that:

“No matter what anyone else does or says, I must be good. It is as if gold or an emerald or purple dye were perpetually telling itself, 'No matter what anyone may do or say, I must be an emerald and keep my color.’”

Sooner or later you will piss people off in street photography. The only way to respond is to be calm, collected, and treat the other person with courtesy. Whether they respond in a positive (or negative way) is out of your control. Just act justly (by your own moral standards) – that is all you can do:

**"Seek refuge in yourself. The knowledge of having acted justly is all your reasoning inner self needs to be fully content and at peace with itself."**

Once again— once we have a negative opinion of something bad that happens to us— remind ourselves that we can (at anytime) change our opinion of what happened:

\*\*“If you're troubled by something outside yourself, it isn't the thing itself that bothers you, but your opinion of it, and this opinion you have the power to revoke immediately.\*\* If what troubles you arises from some flaw in your character or disposition, who prevents you from correcting the flaw? If it's your failure to do some good or necessary work that frustrates you, why not put your energy into doing it rather than fretting about it?”

In our street photography, we often wish that we were faster at capturing decisive moments, that we were more courageous, and that people wouldn't get upset at us for taking their photograph.

However rather than hoping that other people didn't get angry with us— rather work on building our courage.

Instead of wanting to get more followers on social media, work on trying to please yourself.

Instead of wanting to travel overseas, figure out an area near your house that you can explore and travel to.

Marcus Aurelius brings up the point that we should pray to build our own fortitude and character— rather than wanting reality to play our way:

"One man prays, 'Help me seduce this woman,' but you pray instead, 'Prevent me from lusting after her.'

Another prays, 'Rid me of my enemy,' but you pray, 'Rid me of the desire to be rid of my enemy.'

Another, 'Do not take my dear child from me,' but you, 'May I not fear the loss of my child.'

Turn your prayers in this direction, and see what comes of it.

**Takeaway point:**

There isn't much we can control in street photography. We can control where to stand, when to click the shutter, and some miscellaneous settings. That is pretty much it. We can't control whether or not people will get angry at us, we can't control what the light is going to be that day, we can't control the color of clothing people will wear, you can control the facial expressions people will have, you can't control whether people will like your street photos, and you can't control whether you will get a million followers.

However there is a lot you can control: your own perceptions. You can control being grateful. You can control being proactive with your street photography and shooting as often as you can. You can control how hard you work in your image making, and how brutally you self-edit your work. You can control giving nice comments and critiques to other aspiring street photographers. You can control making photos in your own neighborhood.

So don't underestimate our ability to be happy at all times— regardless of our external circumstances.

## **6. Be grateful for difficulties in street photography (and life)**

I think one of the reasons why I love street photography is because how difficult it is. If street photography was easy and didn't challenge me- I wouldn't enjoy it as much. I think the reason why a lot of people appreciate street photography as well— is because it is so damn difficult to

capture “decisive moments” and to have the courage to shoot strangers in public (without their permission).

It is kind of like life. Food always tastes better after physical exertion (and you are hungry). The view at the top of the mountain is always more rewarding if you hiked for hours and your legs are sore. Video games are always more fun when they are challenging and difficult to beat.

Let’s not take the easy route in street photography or life.

I often think the best street photographs are the ones that are the most difficult to shoot. This is why I rarely am interested in boring photos of homeless people or street performers. They are simply too easy to shoot– it is like shooting fish in a barrel.

So let us remember to be grateful for the difficulties that street photography gives us– because it gives us challenges, which force us to build our confidence and courage.

So the next time you get yelled at in shooting street photography (or have a difficult time) – you can say something like, “How fortunate I am to be able to withstand mental beatings from strangers in the streets. Let me take this opportunity to become a stronger person.”

Marcus Aurelius elaborates:

“Be like a rocky promontory against which the restless surf continually pounds; it stands fast while the churning sea is lulled to sleep at its feet. I hear you say, ‘How unlucky that this should happen to me!’ Not at all! Say instead, ‘**How lucky**

**that I am not broken by what has happened and am not afraid of what is about to happen. The same blow might have struck anyone, but not many would have absorbed it without capitulation or complaint.”**

One of my favorite quotes from Marcus Aurelius is the following:

**\*\*“Living is more like wrestling than dancing\*\*”: you have to stay on your feet, ready and unruffled, while blows are being rained down on you, sometimes from unexpected quarters.”**

This is a great reminder that life is truly like wrestling. It is hard, unpleasant, sweaty, and could be stressful. Street photography is the same. It isn't easy. It is difficult to capture beautiful moments, and to overcome the fear of shooting those moments.

And remind yourself – life is only fun and thrilling if we have challenges.

Furthermore, know that you are better than others. You are stronger than others. Whereas others complain, bitch, and moan about difficulties in life– you cherish them, you own them, and you let these difficulties make you a stronger person. Realize that every crisis or negative experience is a chance for you to become a better person. Marcus Aurelius elaborates:

“In every crisis, bear in mind the examples of those who in similar circumstances lost control of themselves, were taken by surprise, or complained bitterly. Where did their actions get them? Nowhere. Do you want to end up in the same place? Why not leave these emotional outbursts to those who are controlled or distracted by them? **Concentrate instead on**

**taking advance of the crisis, using it as raw material with which to build something beautiful and good.**

Just remember that in the end you must approve of your actions and that the aim of the action also matters.”

Another good psychological trick to deal with adversity in your life. Whenever something bad happens to you– imagine yourself having a birds-eye view of what is happening in your life, and that you are simply an actor on a stage. This helps prevent you from taking things personally– rather you just see it as a play, and end up not taking it as seriously.

Also remember that everything happens for a reason. Whether bad or good– every action and event in our life is a chance for us to become great. Marcus Aurelius uses the analogy of a play to drill in this point– knowing that tragedy always plays out in the drama of life:

"Drama, in its original form as Tragedy, showed us the things that actually and necessarily happen in this life. **It reminded us not to panic when we see on the larger state of life what we enjoy seeing in the theatre, where we recognize how much is unavoidable...**

These dramatists have also given us some useful sayings such as:

’Though the gods turn their backs on both my sons and me,  
**For this too there is a reason.’**

**Takeaway point:**

One of my favorite quotes from Marcus Aurelius:

**“Only a fool or a stranger on this planet will be surprised by anything in this life.”**

You’re a fool if you expect nothing bad to happen to you in life. Bad shit will always hit the fan– it happens to everyone, no matter how good they are, how rich they are, what country they live in– whatever. But realize that all the bad things in life can actually be good things.

How enjoyable would life be if it were too easy? How enjoyable would street photography be if it were too easy and not challenging?

Relish in the challenge– and be thankful for these challenges, which force us to become stronger, to grow, to re-evaluate why we shoot street photography, and to help us thrive.

## **7. Cheer for others**

Let’s say everything in your life sucks. Nothing is going according to plan. Your photography is boring and uninspired. You are going through a creative slump. You lost your job, your partner broke up with you– whatever.

One great strategy in life is to always cheer for your friends and others when things are going well for them (even though things might not be going well for you).

I think one of the worst human traits is envy. And the worst thing about envy is that it can happen to our close friends and family (either us being envious of them– or them being envious of us).

So rather than being envious, let us be grateful and be happy for others. If you see someone becoming more famous and respected for their photography, cheer for them. If you see them getting a book deal, don't become jealous– cheer for them. If you see someone's photography improving, let him or her know how impressed you are with his or her progress.

Always keep in mind the positive attributes, qualities, and life events of your friends, those close to you, or anyone else out there. Be not only grateful for what you have and experience– but what others have and what they experience.

Gratitude and praise for others go hand in-hand: Marcus Aurelius tells us all of this:

“When your spirits need a lift, think of the virtues and talents of those around you– one's energy, another's modesty, the generosity of a third, something else in a fourth. **Nothing is so inspiring or uplifting as the sight of these splendid qualities in our friends.** Keep them always in mind.”

## Conclusion

We all want to be happy– to live fulfilling lives as photographers and human beings. But the problem with happiness is when we make it too

external.

We don't want our happiness to be held hostage by the opinions of others. We want to become self-owned when it comes to our happiness. Only let your happiness be dictated by your own self-opinion of yourself, your photography, your life, and your progress. The only person to compete against is yourself.

Even if bad shit is happening in your life, think about how you can use those negative events to your benefit. All the negative experiences in street photography aren't to be avoided– they are like a badge of honor. The more people yell at me in the streets, the more courage I build up. The more people say my photos and blog is shitty– the more encouraged I feel (I hear having a lot of haters is a good mark of “success”).

So be grateful, be loving, be strong. Be happy and grateful for everything you have. Be grateful for being alive, for having vision– and having the ability to sense the beauty of the world.

Now go out there and capture it.

## **Chapter 6: How to live a purposeful life**

Tied into the previous chapter on how to live a happy life– I also encourage trying to live a purposeful life.

What is the difference between a happy life and a purposeful life?

I think simply a “happy” life is to be free of pain, to be overall joyful, and to be free of stress and concern of how others think of you.

However when it comes to a “purposeful” life– I think it is to live a life not for just yourself– but for others.

As a social creature, we often gain the most happiness by helping others. And I think one of the biggest secrets to a “happy” life – is to live a purposeful life. By living a purposeful life– we not only help build value, love, and help others – but we also benefit ourselves (we are 'happy' as a by-product).

Marcus Aurelius also shares the same ideology– know that you have a purpose in this world. And it isn't to live for yourself– but to live and serve others:

## **1. Seek to benefit others (not yourself)**

Growing up in America– it has always been a “winner take all” philosophy. From a young age– although collaboration and teamwork were appreciated, there was very much a philosophy of trying to help yourself (before helping others).

However in my personal life– I have discovered that while it is important to please yourself– I have always made excuses for not helping others.

For example, I would tell myself: “Oh – I know I should probably help out others who are less fortunate than me– but I barely have enough for myself.” I lived a very selfish life (only living for myself) and thinking to

myself, “One day when I am a millionaire, then I can finally start helping others.”

However as time has gone on– I have realized that there is never an “ideal” time to help others (or the community).

Nowadays I try to structure my life around trying to help others. Trying to benefit others.

I think one of the best ways that I help a large scale of people is through this blog. So in my life– I make this blog and my writing the #1 priority. Whenever other opportunities come up, I always make them #2 after the blog.

### **a) Focus on benefitting the whole**

Marcus Aurelius said it poetically that,

**“Nature insists upon whatever benefits the whole.”**

If you are helping the “whole” – you are helping yourself (and everybody else out there).

Marcus Aurelius also talks a lot about the “common good” – that we should live our lives serving others, what is best for others (before ourselves).

Marcus Aurelius expands on these points by sharing by first (doing good for others) and secondly (being flexible if there is a better way):

“Arm yourself for action with these two thoughts: **first, do only what your sovereign and lawgiving reason tells you is for the good of others**; and **second, do not hesitate to change course if someone is able to show you where you are mistaken or point out a better way**. But be persuaded only by arguments based on justice and the common good, never by what appeals to your taste for pleasure or popularity.”

Marcus Aurelius reminds us that we should always make our decision-making on “justice” and the “common good” – rather than what will simply be “popular” or what will bring us the most pleasure.

Another great quote from Marcus Aurelius expands on the point that what doesn't hurt the community (won't hurt us– the individual):

**\*\*“What does not hurt the community cannot hurt the individual.\*\* Every time you think you've been wronged, apply this rule: **if the community isn't hurt by it, then neither am I**. But what if the community is hurt? Then don't be angry with the person who caused the injury. Just help him to see his mistake.”**

I think in the East– there is very much a philosophy of helping the community, helping your family– and helping others. I generally find people in the East a lot happier than people in the West because of this. People in the West generally are more individualistic (which is good for entrepreneurship and building things of value) – but often leads to depression and a sense of loneliness.

## **b) Doing good for yourself (first) can also help society as a whole**

However at the same time– Marcus Aurelius does acknowledge the importance that doing good for an individual (sometimes yourself) is also good for the community:

**\*\*“Whatever happens to a particular individual is good for society as a whole.\*\* Not only this, but if you look closely, you will see that **what is good for one benefits others as well.** To understand this, you must think of ”good” in utilitarian rather than in moral terms.**

For example: let’s say that if you want to be more productive in your life (whether it be photography, writing, or your work) you need 8 hours of sleep a night. Mostly you get by on 6 hours (but aren’t as efficient). But getting 8 hours a night seems like a waste– and seems like you could be better using those 2 hours a day to help others.

However that isn’t the case. If you made it a priority to get your 8-hours of sleep a night, you would ultimately be more productive– and end up helping out others more.

Another case when it comes to photography: let’s say that street photography is your ultimate passion and nothing else in your life makes you as happy as it. If you go even a day without shooting– you feel sad and miserable.

But let’s say you have all these “obligations” from friends, work, and family that prevent you from shooting street photography. As a by-

product of not shooting street photography (on a daily basis)– you get into a shitty mood, act grumpy, and there is an aura of negativity around you. This ultimately makes others feel negative and miserable– and everyone is hurt.

So in this sense– also remember that you need to do what is good for you (if your intention is to help out the “common good” or society).

### **c) Still make the “common good” your focus**

However there are certain things, which are “self-gratuitous” – meaning that we can do certain things for the sake of it (to only benefit yourself– with no intention of benefitting others).

I feel that is quite selfish. After all, what is the point of shooting photography if you never plan to show it to anybody else but yourself? I think we are all ultimately put on this planet to help one another (not ourselves).

Therefore I feel that by you not sharing your photos with others– you take away the opportunity for people to be inspired, mesmerized, emotionally affected, and captured in awe by your images.

Marcus Aurelius puts it well:

**“What is useless for the hive is of no use to the bee.”**

Always make the “common good” or society your main goal. We are nothing but a bunch of bees– and the whole planet is our hive. Wouldn't it be silly if a bee lived its life for itself– and didn't bring back any honey to

the hive? Of course– that would be preposterous. Think of us in the same way.

Marcus Aurelius expands on the importance of focusing your actions to benefit the whole of the community:

“Just as you are part of the whole community, **each of your actions should contribute to the whole life of the community**. Any action of yours that fails, directly or remotely, to make this contribution, fragments the life of the community and jeopardizes its unity. It’s a rebellious act, like the man in a town meeting who holds himself aloof and refuses to come to any agreement with his neighbors.”

So when it comes to your photography, know that you want to make it social. Don’t just hoard your photos to yourself. Share them with others. Interact with other photographers. Critique their photos (positively and constructively)– and ask for others to critique your images (they will benefit from learning to critique your images as well). Do group exhibitions and group shows. Get people involved. Get people active. Help others– and benefit the whole street photography community (whether it just be in your own neighborhood, city, town, country, social media, or the whole world).

#### **d) Don’t seek credit**

We might put in all this effort, hard work– and strain, but not be “rewarded” or “thanked” for it.

But that isn't the purpose of what we do. We as street photographers want to show the beauty (and pain) of everyday life— and for our images to add meaning (emotional, philosophical, or psychological) to our viewers.

I feel that knowing that you are doing good deeds as a photographer (either making inspirational images, helping younger photographers, or building up a photography community) is the reward in itself. You don't need anyone to give you a pat on the back.

We are born to serve others— and the reward of helping others (is the act in itself of giving).

I sometimes feel a bit frustrated and annoyed that I am not always given a pat on the back for helping others— but at those moments, I remember that I was put on this world to help others (not myself). And I remember the simple soft glow of warmth I get (from myself) of helping others. That little warm glow is enough to propel me to do more good deeds – knowing that it might help out others just a little bit.

Marcus Aurelius expands on this point of doing good deeds for its own sake:

**\*\*“Having done a good deed, what more do you want?\*\*”** isn't it enough to have acted in harmony with your nature? Do you need to be paid for it as well? Do the eyes demand payment for seeing, or the feet wages for walking? Just as these organs were made for what they do and find fulfillment in doing what they were made to do so, so too are men by nature for one another. Whenever they perform good deed or contribute to

the common good in some way, they do what they were made to do and receive all that is theirs.”

As a side-note, the impetus that drives me to do this blog is to please just one reader. I know that there will be thousands of people who will disagree with me, hate my writing, or what I am sharing.

But as long as I help that one 13-year old aspiring street photographer gain one piece of insight, I have done my job. I also make it a point to write for myself– meaning, I write what I wanted to read (when I was younger). All the things I write on my blog is information I wish I knew if I started street photography (and life) all-over again.

Marcus Aurelius drills it down– that there tends to be three types of people in the world:

- a) People who only help out others (wanting to get credit that he/she is a good person and being recognized for it)
- b) Someone who helps others with good intent (but secretly wants something back in return)
- c) Someone who helps for the sake of it (and forgets that he has helped someone else).

We want to become like person “C” – giving for the sake of it, and not remembering that we gave or helped the other person. Marcus Aurelius uses the analogy of a grape vine that produces grapes (for the sake of it) – without asking for anything in return:

“There are three kinds of men in this world. The first, when he helps someone out, makes it known that he expects something

in return. The second would never be so bold, but in his mind he knows what he has done and considers the other person to be in his debt. **The third somehow doesn't realize what he has done, but he's like a vine that bears its fruit and asks for nothing more than the pleasure of producing grapes.** A horse gallops, a dog hunts, a bee makes honey, one man helps another, and the vine bears fruit in due season. **You ought to be like that third fellow, who does good without giving it a second thought."**

### **Takeaway point:**

Think how you can add value to the lives of others (before helping yourself). Think how you can help other street photographers– and realize the more you give, the more you will ultimately receive in return.

For a good book related to being selfless (and becoming “successful”) I recommend the book: “Give and Take”.

## **2. Self-growth by helping others**

One of the biggest advantages I have found of helping others– is that it has also helped me grow photographically and as a human being.

Whenever I do a comprehensive article (like my “Learn from the Masters” series)– they take an insane amount of time, focus, and effort. However in writing the article, I better internalize the lessons from those photographers– and I learn by writing and teaching the information to others.

Marcus Aurelius reminds us– that in helping others, we end up helping ourselves:

"No one tires of being helped, and acts that are consistent with nature, like helping others, are their own reward. **How then can you grow tired of helping others when by doing so you help yourself?**"

Have you ever tutored a friend, a younger cousin, or a sibling (in Math, English, or whatever)– and realized that after tutoring them, you better learned the material yourself? I have found that tutoring my friends for some of my college classes– I ended up doing better on the tests. After all, you need to best learn the information yourself before teaching it to others.

But you might think to yourself, “Oh– I want to help teach others, but I am not ready. I am not an expert, I don’t know everything– and there are limits to my knowledge.”

### **Takeaway point:**

No matter how well versed you are in any topic, whether it be street photography, philosophy, economics, math, sociology, business, or life– you will always have holes in your knowledge.

My suggestion: **regardless of how little you think you know– your thoughts and mind is still of value to others. Teach others before you feel you are fully “ready” and learn along the way.**

I think also ultimately the best way to become a truly great photographer is to constantly learn– to never quit learning. The moment you feel you know everything is the moment you know nothing.

### **3. Don't stress too much about your own life**

One of the biggest stresses I often get is this: I want to focus my entire life, soul, and energy into this blog – but sometimes I worry about my bills, if I will have enough to put into savings, if I will become broke and become homeless, if I suddenly have my girlfriend leave me (because I am so poor), or that I will simply starve and die on the streets.

I know this is quite radical– but I do get these irrational thoughts in my head all the time.

I think the fear that I have of helping others is that I want to protect myself and my own interests (before helping others).

However at the same time in my personal experience– the more I have focused on helping others, the more others have ended up helping me out (and prevented me from becoming homeless).

For example, on any given day I have tons of responsibilities, emails, logistical, and financial things to take care of. Every morning (when I roll reluctantly out of bed) and start my morning coffee, my mind is often crowded for the unanswered emails (I promised to return), the

appointments I promised (need to follow-up), and financial burdens I need to take care of.

However the days when I jump straight into emails– I will feel “productive” spending 3 hours dealing with my logistical things– but I feel dissatisfied at the end of the day (because I haven’t created any “real” value for others).

Nowadays I often just say “fuck it” to myself– I am going to focus on my blog.

So now, I have tried to structure my life around blogging and writing. I make blogging my #1 priority in my life – and I think as a result, I perhaps have had some financial setbacks as a result (in the short term at least). But I do have faith that as long as I continue to build value for others and the community– I will continue to be able to write, prevent myself from homelessness, and live a life that makes me feel personally fulfilled.

Marcus Aurelius also shares his thoughts in knowing that contributing and helping the “common good” and society– will ultimately benefit him and that his “life will flow smoothly”:

“Realizing that I am part of just such a universe, **I will calmly accept whatever happens.** And because I am related to the other parts like myself, I will not seek my own advantage at their expense, but I will study to know what is our common good and bend every effort to advance that good and to dissuade others from acting against it. **If I am successful in this, my life is bound to flow smoothly,** as one would

expect for the dutiful citizen who is always looking out for others and enjoys whatever work his community asks of him.”

### **Takeaway point:**

The worst we really have to worry in life is becoming homeless and dying.

Fortunately the reality is that this rarely happens to anybody. Even failed entrepreneurs are able to find themselves with some sort of family/friend support, perhaps crashing on their couch for a few months, before they can get back on their feet.

Think to yourself: “What am I really afraid of? What will prevent me from doing my life’s work– and are those fears really necessary?”

Identify your fears, crush them– realize how irrational they are, and just head straight to the finish line in terms of fulfilling your life’s goal in photography.

## **4. Do your good deeds today (not tomorrow)**

I think many of us want to do good deeds, but we always put them off until later.

However realize that you shouldn’t delay helping others and doing good deeds. Do them now. Do them today. Don’t do them tomorrow. Tomorrow doesn’t exist. **Tomorrow is never.**

Marcus Aurelius reminds us to not procrastinate on doing our good deeds, and contributing our talents to helping others. He reminds us that our days are numbered, and we should always think about death (as a good way to keep us motivated to do good):

“Remember how long you have procrastinated, and how consistently you have failed to put to good use your suspended sentence from the gods. It is about time you realized the nature of the universe (of which you are a part) and of the power that rules it (to which your part owes its existence).

**Your days are numbered. Use them to throw open the windows of your soul to the sun. If you do not, the sun will soon set, and you with It.”**

In every deed we do, whether it is helping out another photographer, giving compliments to strangers on the streets, or sharing your insights about street photography – do it as if it were your last:

“Every hour be firmly resolved, as becomes a Roman and a man, to accomplish the work at hand with fitting and unaffected dignity, goodwill, freedom, and justice. **Banish from your thoughts all other considerations. This is possible if you perform each act if it were your last, rejecting every frivolous distraction, every denial of the rule of reason, every pretentious gesture, vain show, and whining complaint against the decrees of fate.** Do you see what little is required a man to live a well-tempered and a god-fearing life? Obey these precepts, and the gods will ask for nothing more”

Avoiding regret is also a great way to live life:

“Before you act, ask yourself: ‘What are the likely consequences of this act? **Will I later have cause to regret it?**’ A little while and I will be dead and all will be gone and forgotten.”

### **Takeaway point:**

Think about the thing you can do **right now** to avoid regrets in your life in street photography.

Perhaps you can go on a walk around your block and make some photos. Perhaps you can finally order that photography book you’ve been eyeing on Amazon (but thought it was too expensive). Perhaps you can send a text message to some photographers you know and schedule a meet-up later on in that week (or even better yet, call them and see if they are free for a quick coffee or drink– and you can talk photography and critique one another’s photos).

Or perhaps you can get all that film dropped off at the lab you’ve been stockpiling, or dropping off film at the lab, or finally going through and editing (selecting) all that back-logged street photographs you have digitally on Lightroom.

Think what you can do in the present moment to advance your street photography a little bit forward.

## **5. Limit your activities**

We have only a certain amount of hours in a day, a limited amount of energy, and a limited amount of effort we can put into our work everyday.

I think the common mistake that us photographers make (myself included) is that we overburden ourselves. We try to do everything. We try to shoot street photography, start a magazine, start a blog, manage social media, teach photography (online or offline), do commercial work, manage our personal/family lives, work (either as a full-time photographer or a regular day-job), and all these other responsibilities.

I very often feel overwhelmed. There is so much I want to do for the street photography to help out– by writing articles, to doing interviews, do making videos, to making tutorials, to organizing meet-ups, teaching workshops, and possibly even creating products or magazines.

But I think I have realized that I should just stick to my core competency– which is teaching. And I believe I do my best teaching through writing on this blog, through some educational YouTube videos, and also through teaching workshops.

Marcus Aurelius brings up a point that if we are to be happy– we should limit our activities to a few– to stick to what we are good at, to stick to what makes us happy and fulfilled, and know that we shouldn't overburden ourselves:

“Democritus said, ‘**If you would be happy, limit your activities to a few.**’ Is it not better simply to do what is necessary and no more, to limit yourself to what reason demands of a social animal and precisely in the manner reason dictates?”

Marcus Aurelius expands in the importance of doing a few things (but doing them well). Not only that, but subtracting the unnecessary things from our life:

\*\*“This adds to the happiness of doing a few things the satisfaction of having done them well. Most of what we say and do is unnecessary anyway; subtract all that lot, and look at the time and contentment you’ll gain.\*\* On each occasion, therefore, a man should ask himself, ‘Do I really need to say or do this?’ In this way, he will remove not only unnecessary actions, but also the superfluous ideas that inspire needless acts.”

I think for myself– the biggest time suck (mentally and time-wise) is trying to figure out ways to make more money. I tell myself that I am trying to make more money to become more “financially secure” – and perhaps save money for a future house, to provide for my future family– whatever. But I think this makes me time-travel and think too much about the future– rather than worrying about the present moment. I forget to enjoy my life in the current moment, and focus on my life’s task (teaching).

I think there are many things I can personally subtract from my life, which include:

- Trying to earn more money
- Trying to please people (who don’t like me, but I wish they did)
- Spending time with negative and toxic people
- Meeting other people (with the hope of financial/status gain) – instead of meeting people I genuinely like

- Trying to gain more followers on social media (and this blog)
- Trying to become the world's most famous street photographer

I think everything in this list above is quite useless– and I can subtract from my life. By subtracting all of these things, I can focus on the writing, blogging, and content-creation, which I think brings the biggest amount of value to the street photography community.

### **Takeaway point:**

Think about the unnecessary things you can subtract from your life. This can include “meetings” (that often lead nowhere), business ideas to earn more money (if you already earn enough money to make a comfortable living), trying to please other people, trying to focus on more “marketing” for social media or something else.

Try to focus on what truly makes you happy– which truly makes you thrive. This can be shooting on the streets, meeting other street photographers, curating photography, or educating younger photographers.

Subtract the unnecessary– and all you are left with what is necessary in our life to thrive as a street photographer and human being.

## **Conclusion**

So sometimes realize that all of your good deeds and acts won't be recognized by others. But remind yourself– like a bee: you were born for the hive, to help the hive (not to just help yourself).

At the same time, make sure that you are happy, and well– because that will help you be more productive as a photographer (and a member of the community and of society). So for example, if you find that sleeping 8 hours a night is good for your life and health, focus on that. If you find regular physical exercise to help you (I find this tremendously important)– dedicate to that daily. If you find meditation or prayer (or taking occasional naps) being good for your productivity– focus on that. Know that all of these things to take care of your own self well being will ultimately help others.

There are so many ways you can benefit others (no matter your experience or level as a photographer). Here are some ideas:

- **Give a critique to another street photographer (online or in-person) that is constructively critical:** Try to tell them what you find interesting about the image, and what you wish was done differently. Remind the person that this is just your opinion and that you ultimately want to help them (not put them down).
- **Give a camera away:** If you know someone who wants to learn or pursue photography (and you have an extra camera) – give it away to that aspiring photographer (rather than just selling it online for a few hundred bucks). This will do more for the common good, society, and that person’s life than anything else. I have given away a lot of cameras in the past (Canon Rebel XT, Olympus Pen Mini, Canon 5D, Leica M6, Ricoh GR1v) and it has brought me so much more happiness and self-fulfillment (rather than any instances of buying myself my own camera). And now I have the peace of mind knowing that camera is being put to good use– to create more beautiful street photography.
- **Volunteer your time to a local photography club/school:**

Regardless of your experience in street photography (or photography) – offer to donate some time to a local photography club, school, or community center. Share your personal experiences and share the “Gospel of street photography.” Spread the good word– clear misconceptions, and just inspire others to pursue this beautiful art of street photography.

- **Start a blog and share your experiences:** The way I treat my blog is that it is a journal for myself– of the things that I have learned about street photography (and life). I am constantly evolving, changing, and growing. Along the way I have written some things that have helped build value in the life of other photographers. Similarly– try to do the same. Just start a blog (I recommend [wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com)) and share your personal journey in street photography. Not only will it help you articulate the lessons you are learning in your street photography, but it can also be of help to other people who will come across and read your blog.
- **Host a local street photography meet-up:** Another strategy I recommend is to host a local street-photography meet-up. Try to contact some local photographers (who might be interested in street photography) – and tell them to meet at 6pm on Friday for a coffee at a cafe. Tell them to bring their cameras, their photos, and ideas ready to share with one another. It doesn’t need to be formal. You can chat and get to know one another, constructively critique one another’s’ photos, and also go out and shoot together (and grab dinner and some drinks afterwards). Try to aim to do this at least once a week or once a month– and you will build a beautiful community.