

PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Dear friend,

“Photography” is my 10-year culmination in my journey of photography. This book will encapsulate everything I have personally learned from photography — from street photography, to personal photography, and to everything in-between.

In this book, I plan on sharing autobiographical musings — experiences that I have been through in photography. I want to share my high points, my low points, and what I have learned along the way.

Consider this as just a friendly conversation between me and you. I don't know the answers in photography; I only know what works for me. And still now, I consider myself a student— constantly learning, evolving, and moving forward.

I hope that some of my life experiences will also be of benefit to you. So please read this book with a (big) grain of salt, and simply take what resonates with you, and throw away the rest.

Let's get started.

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CHAPTER 1: IS YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY PERSONAL?

The best photos are the ones which are personal. Why do you make photos, who do you shoot for, and do your photos show your soul?

Why do you photograph?

The first thing I want to pose to you is the question: *why* do you photograph?

The first thing that I am often asked by other photographers is “What camera do you shoot with?” followed by, “How many followers do you have on social media?” followed by, “What do you photograph?”

The *why* of photography is the most important question you need to ask yourself.

To ask yourself *why* you make photos, is to understand your deeper purpose in photography.

Why do you take photos, instead of just journaling or drawing? What is the impulse or impetus which drives you to click the shutter? What is your personal connection with photography and the world? What do your photos say about you? What makes your vision of the world unique?

There is also no truly “right” or “wrong” way to shoot photography. There is only a personal and non-personal way to shoot photography.

So for the purposes of our photography and life, let us always think: “Is this photograph meaningful?” rather than “Is this a good photo?”

What is personal to you?

I believe the only way to stay inspired and encouraged in your photography is to only photograph what is personal to you.

Let's say you travel abroad, and take "exotic" photos of foreigners. What do these photos really say about you? Probably not much.

Compare this with photographing your family and loved ones. I can guarantee the photos you take of those close to you will have more emotion, soul, and proximity.

You can also apply this idea of photographing strangers in a personal way. For example, I often empathize with my subjects when it comes to shooting street photography. I tend to be a bit of a social critic and cynic — I see more darkness in the world than optimism. I therefore photograph (generally) depressed looking people, because I feel their pain. I want my photos to be a reflection of my love of people, and my empathy towards them. This is how I make my street photography personal.

Of course, that is just my perspective. What makes your view unique in photography? What are you trying to say with your photos? And how can you make your photos more personal, and a reflection of your humanity?

It is difficult at times to know what is personal to us. It is far easier to know what *isn't* personal to us. So to figure out which photos are personal to you, just **avoid taking impersonal photos**. If a photograph you shoot doesn't touch your heart and soul, it probably isn't personal.

Who is your audience?

As photographers, we document. We make photographs to record life, and to share with others.

A question you want to ask yourself is: "Who is my audience?"

There is no photographer who truly only shoots for him or herself. Every photographer is a human being— and every human being is a social being. If photographers didn't feel a need to share their photos, they wouldn't take photos. They would simply look at the world, and appreciate it.

Of course you still want to make photographs that bring you satisfaction and joy. The first key to great photography is to make photos that *you* like, and worry about later who is going to like your photos.

Do I like my own photos?

Going off the prior point, ask yourself: “Do I like my own photos?”

Before you share your photos with anybody else and ask them for their opinion— ask your own opinion of your own photos.

You can make a photograph that will get a million likes, a million shares, and will help you get a million followers. But if it is a photograph that you are not passionate about, or a photo that is not meaningful to you — would you feel fulfilled?

It often takes me a while to figure out whether I like my own photos or not. One of the best counselors is time— to let my photos sit and “marinate” for a while, before I figure out whether I really like the photos or not.

For example, whenever I look at my photographs too quickly after I've shot them, my memory of taking the photo often clouds my judgement. For example, I might have taken a photograph of a stranger, and talked with him afterwards. Sometimes the memory of talking to the stranger affects how I view the photograph. The photo itself might be boring, but the back-story of the photo colors my judgement, and leads me astray.

As a general rule, if you are unsure about your photos, let them sit and marinate for a few days, a week, a few weeks, a few months, a year, or sometimes even a few years. I have certain photos that a few years ago I thought were great photos— but now I look at them and think to myself, “What was I thinking?”

Another suggestion: get a second-opinion from someone who matters to you, and someone who you trust. This can be your partner, close friend, or photography colleague.

For me, my best judge of my photos is Cindy. She knows me the best, in terms of my overall photography style and aesthetic, and she also will tell me her mind directly. She doesn't bullshit around, for the sake of my "feelings."

Every photographer needs an (even greater) editor.

CHAPTER 2: EQUIPMENT

Now that we've discussed a little of the basics of the philosophy behind your photography (why you make photos), let us talk a little bit more about *how* to make photos.

The first simple question we will address is “What is the best camera to use?” followed by “What is the best lens to use?” and some other technical points.

The best camera

The best camera is the one that is small, fits in your front pocket, and doesn't require any thought to use. **The best camera is the most invisible camera.**

For some people that might be an iPhone. For some people that might be a compact camera. For some people that might be a mirrorless camera, or something else with a small footprint.

I've shot with so many cameras over the last decade, I can't even count. I've personally found that the bigger my camera, the less likely I am to carry it with me everywhere I go, and the less likely I am to make photographs.

Of course if you are a professional photographer making a living from photography (shooting models, commercial work, weddings, etc) — it might be preferable to have a larger camera.

But if you are making personal photos for yourself, use the smallest possible camera for yourself— which fits in your hand comfortably, which has a simple user-interface, and is easy for you to use.

You don't need great image quality, high-ISO capabilities, blazing-fast autofocus, or any other bells and whistles.

Great photography is about integrating your soul into your photos — not about having sharp images.

So my biggest suggestion about what camera to use: smaller, lighter, and more compact is always better.

What lens should I use?

I am actually a big fan of non-interchangeable lenses. This means cameras which you *cannot* change the lens.

Why?

I feel creativity is all about “creative constraints” — the more limitations you put on your photography, the more you force yourself to be creative.

When I started photography, I had an 18-200mm lens on my camera. It was quite possibly the most uncreative lens I used. Why? Because the lens made me lazy — I never had to hustle to make good compositions. I just zoomed when my subject was too far away, and never experimented with my angles, composition, framing, and perspective.

Compare this with using a camera that has a non-interchangeable lens (with let’s say a fixed-focal 28mm or 35mm lens, full-frame equivalent). If your subject is too far away, you need to get closer to your subject. This forces you to be more emotionally intimate with your subject. A good rule to know whether you are “close enough” to your subject— can you see the color of their eyes?

I feel with physical proximity comes emotional proximity.

If you are using a camera system where you can select your own lenses, I generally recommend a 35mm “full frame equivalent” lens. I’ve found it to be a good balance between being wide enough, and being close enough. If your subject is too close, just take a step back. If your subject is too far away, just take a step closer.

I've found for compact point-and-shoot cameras, a 28mm lens is preferable. Because it is easier to extend your arm closer to your subject without intimidating them. As of writing this, my primary camera is a digital Ricoh GR II camera, which I find is the ideal camera for me. It is small, compact, and fits in my front pocket. It has a fixed-focal 28mm lens (which I cannot interchange).

What about bokeh?

Another big problem photographers face is that they are obsessed with “bokeh” — shooting everything wide-open (at f/1.4, f/1.8, f/2, etc). Having a photograph with a blurry background with little swirly “bokeh balls” doesn't make a good photograph. I find it is an aesthetic which makes for lazy photography.

I feel a great photograph needs *both* an interesting subject *and* an interesting background. A great photograph needs context, which allows more opportunity for it to tell an open-ended story.

If you shoot with a prime (non-interchangeable) lens, the maximum aperture is generally around f/2.8. That is generally good enough for our purposes in our photography.

What about “full-frame”?

In the past, full-frame made a difference in terms of image quality, and your ability to shoot in dark situations.

Now, that is a thing of the past. You can shoot with cameras with smaller sensors, and the image quality is phenomenal.

Many photographers still prefer to shoot with larger sensors, because it allows them to get more “creamy bokeh” — shooting wide-open with more blurry backgrounds.

Once again, this is something that might appeal to the commercial photographer, who is trying to make pretty wedding photos. This is often what clients like (because they cannot shoot these photos themselves on their smartphones).

But ultimately, no, you do not need full-frame.

What are the best technical settings to use?

Just experiment with different technical settings, and use what works for you.

For me, I prefer shooting “P” (program) mode, where the camera chooses the aperture and shutter-speed for you. The only thing you select is the ISO.

I generally keep my camera in “P” mode, keep the ISO around 800 (when shooting in color) or between 1600-3200 (when shooting in black and white), and center-point autofocus. I just **“set it and forget it.”**

By making the simplest possible technical settings, I don’t worry about it. I don’t think about it. I devote my entire creative and mental energy to framing my photos, timing my photos, and engaging my subjects.

But it all depends on your camera, and what is comfortable to you.

Some photographers prefer aperture-priority mode, others prefer shooting fully-manual. Some photographers might just shoot fully-automatic, which is totally fine too.

I figure in the future, cameras will be advanced enough that the only button on our cameras will be the shutter button. The camera will do all the thinking for us, which will allow us to focus on the most important thing— capturing the “decisive moment.”

Buy books, not gear

Which brings me to another point, whenever you get a craving to buy a new camera, lens, or a piece of gear— “buy books, not gear.”

There is a syndrome called “gear acquisition syndrome” (commonly called g.a.s.) The concept is whenever we lack inspiration in our photography, we make the (wrong) assumption that buying new gear will re-inspire us.

In reality, it never does.

Trust me, I (still) fall victim to it. I never blame myself for my lack of my creativity — always my tools. I always tell myself I need a newer camera, a newer smartphone, a newer laptop, or any other gadget to help me be more “productive” and “creative.”

The best cure I’ve discovered for gear acquisition syndrome is to invest in books.

Photography books are your best friend. They will get better over time, and will never become outdated or redundant. When you need real inspiration — photo books never fail you. Not only that, but often the value of photo books increase over time, so if one day you lose your job (and have a substantial photo book collection), selling off your collection can perhaps pay your rent for a few months.

How do you know which photo books to invest in?

My suggestion: only buy a photo book you plan on re-reading. You can sample photo books by going to the library, to the bookstore, or borrowing them from friends.

Another mistake I made: I bought too many photo books. This was a big distraction in my photography. I feel it is better to have a small collection of photo books, that you re-read over and over again, until the pages of the book become crinkled.

That number of photo books might be different. It might just be 1 book, 3 books, 5 books, or 50 books. In today's age where more of us are nomadic, live in small apartments, and are constantly moving— less is generally more.

For me, my favorite photo book of all-time is “Exiles” by Josef Koudelka — a book that gets more interesting the more I look at the images. His photos have his soul embedded in them. They are simple compositionally, but complex emotionally.

CHAPTER 3: SHARING YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

In this chapter, we will explore a theme which brings great joy (and misery) to photographers— sharing images.

In the past, most photographers lived quite solitary existences. They shot film, printed photos in the darkroom, and shared their photos with a few close friends or acquaintances. If you were successful, you might have your photos exhibited, and have a few hundred people see your images.

In today's world with social media and the internet, your potential audience is millions (or even billions).

This is a great opportunity for us as photographers— we have the tools available to grow a large audience. But the advantage is a double-edged sword; it is a great source of misery for us.

I know for me, when I started photography, my goal was to become a “famous” photographer (whatever that means). In the early days of social media (I used Flickr), my goal was to get at least 100 “favorites” on a photograph. I was somehow convinced that after getting 100 of these little pink stars, I would feel fulfilled in my photography.

Wrong.

When I finally did achieve 100 favorites on a photograph, I was happy for about a week. Then I noticed other photographers who would have over 200 favorites on their photos. Then I chased that. And I achieved it. It soon became 200 favorites, 300 favorites, 500 favorites, 1000 favorites, and 2000+ favorites.

Enough is never enough, especially in the realm of social media.

No matter how many likes, followers, or affirmation we get from social media — it will never be enough. We will always compare ourselves with others.

Don't upload your photos for a month

If you're a photographer stuck on the "social media treadmill" — where you feel obliged to upload a photo everyday (in fear of being forgotten or ignored), take a month where you don't upload any photos online for a month.

This will really gauge your own sincerity of your own photos. You still start to ask yourself, "Am I really sharing photos because I really love the photos, and want to share that love — or am I sharing photos just to get more likes, followers, and notifications on my phone?"

Look behind yourself

No matter how many followers you have, there will always be someone in the world with more followers.

But don't look ahead of yourself; look behind yourself. There will always be someone with fewer followers than you.

I once read that the quickest way to become rich was to move into a poorer neighborhood, and the quickest way to become poor was to move into a richer neighborhood.

By looking behind yourself, you will be more grateful of the followers and likes you already have. And the best person to "compare" yourself with isn't others— it is comparing yourself with your past self.

Let's say you have 100 followers on social media. You might be trying to reach the next goal — 200 followers, 300 followers, 500 followers, 1000 followers, or 10000 followers. But stop, and look behind. Remember when you only had 50 followers, 25 followers, 10 followers, or even only 1 follower?

Be grateful how far you've made it.

Social media is overrated

Social media is important in today's world, but I honestly think it is overrated.

When you share your photos on social media, you lose a bit of freedom. Why? When you share your photos on someone else's platform, you don't have the ability to share your photos the way you intend. If you upload your photos on Facebook, Instagram, or any other site — there is only one template in which you can share your photos (which is controlled by the company). I know my biggest frustration with services like Flickr and Instagram is that you cannot re-order the photos in your “stream” or “feed” — and how it favors single-images over sets.

Not only that, but nowadays most people look at photos on their smartphones. Can someone really appreciate the intricacies of your image on a 4-5 inch device?

Also as a suggestion — look at all the successful photographers out there who do *not* use social media.

Avoid getting distracted

Not only that, but social media is a massive distraction. Photographers (like myself) who were born in the social media age— we think the goal of our photography is to get as many likes, favorites, comments, and followers as possible.

But in reality, using too much social media might distract us from printing our photos, making magazines of our book, or printing a photo book.

Focusing too much on social media prevents us from thinking long-term in our photography. I feel that truly great photography takes decades, not years, and certainly not days.

Using social media mindfully

I don't want to discourage you from using social media. My suggestion: **try to get the maximum upside from social media, with the minimum downside.**

For example, I know that I am personally addicted to using social media on my phone. I can be walking somewhere, driving, or doing something else— and I feel an urge to check my smartphone to see how many likes I got on my photo, or what kind of comments I get. This kills my sense of focus, and sense of self-worth.

Therefore my rule is to only use social media from a laptop. I will only upload photos from my computer, and when I am done uploading, I try my best *not* to look at how many likes or comments I get on my photos. This way I can still share my photos online without caring about what others think about my images.

Another suggestion: whenever you decide to upload a photo (or not), ask yourself: "If I saw this photograph in someone else's feed, would I re-share it?" If the answer is "no" (let's say a photo of a cappuccino, or a cute dog), perhaps the best answer is to *not* share that image.

Why do we want to share our photos?

Even a more philosophical question we should ask ourselves is, "*Why* do we want to share our photos with others?"

Once again, as humans we are social. To be human is to share.

We want to share our joy and happiness with others. Not only that, but we want to share because it gives us a sense of affirmation. We want others to like us, and we think that if others like our photos, it means that they like us (personally).

But the sad reality is that nobody cares about your photos. Only you do.

Not only that, but we tend to over-value our own photos (because we've shot them ourselves).

Also realize that you don't need to share every single photo you shoot. I know for me, I take a lot of random snapshots of my food, family, or scenery I see— that I *don't* need to share. A few of these photos are just for myself, and for my own gratification. Certain photos you shoot are *not* meant to be shared.

Not only that, but know when it is appropriate to *not* take photos. I know that when I am eating a nice meal with Cindy, often the food tastes better when I *don't* photograph it. I enjoy fireworks when I see them with my own eyes (not through a viewfinder). I enjoy nature, landscapes, and flora when I am not obsessively trying to figure out how to make a good photograph of it.

CHAPTER 4: HOW TO MAKE BETTER PHOTOS

Moving forward, let us discuss the practical question of how to make “better” photos.

What makes a great photograph?

First of all, what makes a “good” and “bad” photo?

For me, a *great* photo includes the following:

1. Composition
2. Emotion
3. Soul

Composition: How you frame a scene, what you decide to include in the frame, what you decide to exclude from the frame, the exposure of the photo, the darks, the light, the angle, perspective, and background.

Emotion: How a photograph makes you feel— whether it makes you smile, cry, or laugh. You can capture emotions in your photos with hand gestures, body language, facial expressions, and the aesthetic of the image (black and white, color, grainy, contrasty, etc).

Soul: Do you see yourself in your photos? Do your photos have your soul embedded in them? Are you the only one who could photograph your photos? Do your photos show your perspective of the world? Are your photos personal?

Of course, you cannot apply this 3-point checklist to all of your photos. But I do find it a good guideline to judge your images.

Above all, what makes a “good”, “bad”, or “great” photo is subjective. People will judge your photos based on their life experiences, their personal tastes, and their own personal aesthetic.

Rather than worrying if a photo is “good” or “bad” — ask yourself whether your photo is personally-meaningful or not. This will help you focus your photography on yourself, and not the opinions of others.

Never let the opinions of others drown out your own inner-voice.

What to subtract

As a photographer, you are a subject-selector. You decide what to photograph, and more importantly — what *not* to photograph.

As a photographer, imagine yourself as a sculptor. Your job isn't to add to a frame, your job is to chisel away the superfluous in a frame. Sculptors make their art via subtraction.

When you're framing a scene, figure out what is distracting or unnecessary in your frame. Then use your viewfinder or LCD screen to subtract from your frame.

A practical tip: when framing, look at the *edges* of your frame. Furthermore, look at the *background* of your photo while shooting.

If you aim to make the edges of your frame clean, and the background of your photograph clean, you will have a stronger composition.

Mystery

The best photos are the ones which have mystery — that aren't easily understandable. You want a photo that provokes more questions than provides answers.

You want your subjects to look at your photos and ask themselves, “If I could make up my own story of this photo, what would that story be?”

That might mean using darks and shadows to obscure parts of your frame. Perhaps you want to obscure the eyes of your subjects with a dark shadow. Perhaps you want to cut out some people or elements from your frame. Perhaps you want to capture a moment that looks strange, or confusing.

Perhaps that means shooting through a mirror, a reflection, mist, fog, or something that makes your photograph more fuzzy – difficult to understand.

If your photo is easily interpretable, it will be forgettable.

Aesthetic

How your photos look (the aesthetic) is subjective. Some people like vanilla and others like chocolate ice cream. Is one “right” or “wrong”? No; it is just personal taste.

My suggestion: choose an aesthetic which suits you, and stay consistent with it.

For example, I prefer gritty, high-contrast images. They appeal to me visually. I also prefer more minimalist images— photos that are simple compositionally, but complex emotionally.

Others prefer more muted aesthetics – with less contrast, less grain and grit, and more complex compositions.

Some people like to shoot film for the softer, muted aesthetic. Other photographers prefer digital for the control. Some photographers prefer to shoot RAW; others JPEG. Some photographers prefer monochrome, others prefer color.

However you post-process or stylize your images, use the aesthetic which best suits your personality, your mood, and how you see the world.

How to choose your best photos

The biggest misconception in photography is conflating the words “editing” and “post-processing”.

Nowadays when people say “editing” — they think it means changing your photos to black and white, adjusting the contrast, or any other manipulations.

However, **“editing” is the art of choosing your best images**. And I personally believe that choosing your photos (in the ‘editing’ phase) is far more difficult than shooting your photos.

As a photographer, you are more defined by the photos you decide *not* to shoot. That is the only way you will be able to find your own voice, aesthetic, and style.

For me, I *don't* like to shoot landscapes, sunsets, flowers, or intimate objects— I *prefer* shooting people. I am a humanist and sociologist at heart, and I find people to be the most interesting subjects (which lead me to ‘street photography’).

But going back to the discussion at hand— how do you know how to choose your best photos?

Some suggestions:

1. **Follow your gut:** When you are making your “first pass” of looking at your photos, follow your gut, and intuition. Sometimes we don’t know *why* we like a photograph. If your heart tells you that you like a photograph, don’t betray your heart. Pick that shot.
2. **Look at your photos as small thumbnails:** One of the best ways to judge your compositions is to look at them as small thumbnails. By looking at your photos on a smaller scale, you get a better sense of the composition, framing, and exposure in your photos.
3. **Just choose one:** If you’ve taken a lot of photos of the same scene, just choose one. Choose the ‘best’ photograph by looking at the composition, framing, and by removing the photos that are distracting, messy, or uninteresting. Look for hand gestures, emotion, eye contact, or soul.
4. **Get a second opinion:** Every photographer needs a personal editor. Get

someone you trust to give you honest feedback on your photos. What I generally like to do is to keep a lot of photos on my laptop I'm not sure about, and when I share my photos with my friends or other photographers whose opinion matters to me, I ask them to choose their personal favorites— and explain to me *why* they like them. Or other times, I will share my photos with my friends and tell them, “Please, **help me kill my babies.**”

5. **Think long-term:** Another tip— ask yourself, “Will I like this photograph 10 years from now?” The best photos are the timeless ones, that get better with time.

To be a great photographer isn't to always make great photographs. To be a great photographer is to only show your best work.

The best editing suggestion I will give is this: “**When in doubt, ditch.**”

CHAPTER 5: INSPIRATION

Every photographer will hit a low point in their career. I know for myself, I always go through slumps — when I don't feel creative, I don't feel motivated to make photos, and I lack inspiration.

But don't feel bad or guilty. It is all part of the creative process.

My suggestion: **when you are feeling 'uninspired' — don't force yourself to become 'inspired.'** Embrace the feeling of boredom— it is a valuable signal from your body and mind that what you are doing is no longer interesting you. It is a chance for you to experiment with a new approach, a new photo project, or a new artistic endeavor.

Perhaps if you no longer have inspiration in your photography, it means for you to “pivot” and try out a new approach. Maybe it means for you to pick up a new artistic medium — try out theater, dance, painting, drawing, sculpture, or something else.

I know for myself, *not* putting pressure on myself is the best antidote. If you don't feel like taking photos, don't take photos.

Don't pick up these silly “365” take-a-photograph-everyday challenges. This forces you to take photos you don't really care about with your heart and soul.

The truly meaningful and important photos to you will shoot themselves.

I know whenever I see something I really care about and want to photograph, I don't need to “force” myself to do it. I just naturally get excited, and I take out my camera, and take the photograph.

Beginner's mind

Another suggestion to re-inspire yourself; embrace “beginner’s mind”.

When you started off photography, do you remember when everything was new, exciting, and fun? You didn’t care about what camera you shot with, the composition, or how many likes/favorites you would get on the image. You only photographed what you found interesting— with the hope of sharing it with a few people.

I know that for me, the more experienced I got in photography, and the more of an “expert” I became, I stopped having as much fun. I stopped being as creative— because I saw photography as a job and a chore, rather than a chance to just have fun and play like a child or beginner.

If you really want to re-inspire yourself, spend more time with beginner photographers, or children. Avoid experts. Their minds fossilize, they get trapped in a prison of their own thinking, and ways.

If you fossilize your mind, you can never stay nimble, flexible, and open to new approaches. Anything that is hard and brittle will die. Anything that stays pliable and flexible will live.

Cross-pollination

One of the best ways I’ve been able to find more inspiration in my photography is by “cross-pollinating” different fields I am interested in.

For example, what happens when you mix sociology and photography? Street photography. What happens when you mix visual arts and photography? Fine art photography. What happens when you mix painting and photography? Impressionist photography.

Think of all the various interests you have. Combine all of your interests with your photography — this is where you will find true creativity, innovation, and breakthroughs.

For example, here is a list of things (besides photography) I am interested in:

- Sociology
- Psychology
- Cognitive science
- Physics
- Philosophy (zen, taoism, stoicism, christianity)
- Architecture
- Interior design
- Minimalism
- Powerlifting
- Blogging
- Social media
- Coffee (of course)
- Entrepreneurship

I have actually found my biggest insights in photography *not* from photography books.

There is a vast sea of inspiration out there— don't pigeon-hole yourself in just photography.

Walk your camera

What I love about street photography is the freedom it affords you. You just go on a walk, and take your camera along — and snap anything you find interesting during your walk.

A lot of people who own dogs love to take their dogs on a walk. It gives them a chance to breathe some fresh air, and work their legs.

Treat the same in your photography – **take your camera out for a walk**. Even if you don't make any good photos during your walk, at least you got some exercise, and got out of your house.

Creative constraints

Creativity isn't about having unlimited options. Creativity is about putting certain limits — which forces you to over-compensate, to innovate, and try out new ideas.

For example, here are some examples of some “creative constraints” you can add to your photography, to be more creative:

- Only shooting with one camera, one lens
- Only shooting black and white or color
- Only shooting one neighborhood, city block, or city
- Only shooting one subject-matter (only shooting old people, children, people in suits, dogs, etc.)
- Only shooting one emotion (anger, sadness, anxiety, happiness, solitude)

If you look at other “creative constraints” in other fields— you will find the best entrepreneurs are the ones who are constrained by lack of money, lack of experience, and lack of resources. By *not* having a lot of money, they need to figure out how to innovate with the few resources they do have. For example, the multi-billion dollar company “Air B&B” was literally started with some guys who rented their apartment and an air mattress to be a “bed and breakfast” to make some extra cash.

My biggest inspiration is from haiku poetry — the structure of the poem is limited by certain syllables and lines. This forces you to use novel combinations of words, concepts, and ideas — which often sounds more beautiful and poetic. Haiku poems are short, simple, and to the point, yet deep, and insightful.

So the next time you feel like you can't be a good photographer because you don't have “good enough” gear, because you live in a boring city, or because you can't travel— think of how you can use this to your advantage. Think of how you can make this a benefit, not a disadvantage.

The point of life isn't to be a great photographer

To re-introduce another philosophical idea: remember, the focus of life isn't to be a great photographer. The focus of life is to live a personally-meaningful, fulfilling, and happy life. Photography is second.

Photography should just be a tool to help enhance our lives. Photography shouldn't be the primary focus of our lives.

I know a lot of great photographers who are absolutely miserable in their lives. They focus on making great photos, rather than being happy in life.

Make happiness, personal meaning, and significance your priority — then your photos will improve.

A happy photographer is a good photographer.

CHAPTER 6: EMPOWERING OTHERS WITH YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

I feel the biggest insight I got in my photography is this — photography isn't about making photos that make me happy, it isn't about making a living taking photos, it isn't about getting a lot of likes or followers, or about shooting with fancy cameras.

The point of photography is to empower others.

You can do this in many different ways— by inspiring others with your images, by teaching photography to others, or about creating information that helps others discover their unique voice in photography, and make photos that bring them personal satisfaction.

Being a human is to help others. If you live a life only for yourself, you are truly dead to others.

So consider the social purpose your photography holds. Do you only take photos for your self-gain, or to help others gain?

Share everything

One of the principles I want to share is to share everything. Share your secrets in terms of how you made your best images. Share your post-processing techniques. Share your contact sheets (your behind-the-scenes photos of how you made a certain photo). Share your techniques, tips, and insights. Share quotes that inspire you, recommend photography books to your friends, and share your honest opinion with other photographers.

Be generous. Be a giver, not a taker. The more you give, the more will flow back to you.

The more you give, the more you receive in return.

I know for me, the only way I have been able to be “successful” in photography is to help others, and to be as useful as possible. If it weren’t for blogging, nobody would know who I was. Not only that, but modern technology has helped me share the useful information that has personally benefitted me. Now I feel the purpose of my life isn’t to elevate myself as a photographer— but to help others become the best photographer they can.

Of course this is just my take, and my own opinion.

No matter where you are in your photography, you can always be of a benefit to others.

Teaching photography

For example, you can teach photography to your mom, your friends, or volunteer at a local school. One of the most personally-meaningful things I’ve done in my life was teaching photography to “at-risk” inner-city youth in LA. Photography was a tool that helped empower them, find more inspiration in lifetime, and more purpose in their lives.

You can also teach photography by blogging. To share the insights you’ve learned in photography — things which have worked for you.

The great thing is that as you teach, you learn. Not only that, but to teach something, you need to master it yourself. So when you know you need to teach something to someone, you force yourself to really understand the concepts. When I was a high school student, I benefitted the most when I tutored my friends in certain subjects.

Give your honest feedback

One of the biggest ways we can help other photographers is to give your honest opinion. To give honest feedback to other photographers, to help them — to give them “constructive” criticism.

To give honest feedback is to hope that the photographer will improve. That they will learn from their mistakes, or their shortcomings. It comes from a place of love, empathy, and consideration.

It doesn't mean to tell another photographer: "Your photos suck." It means telling them what you like about their photos, what you dislike, and what you think they can do next time to improve.

It might also mean to leave a comment on a photographer's photo — and telling them how the photo makes you feel. Most photographers just want feedback on their photos; it can be positive or negative. Most photographers want a sense of direction in their photography.

So be a guide, mentor, or a friend. You can do this with a small group of other photographers, you can do this with a local photo club, fellow students you meet in a photography workshop, or through online photo communities through social media.

For me, I prefer getting feedback (and giving feedback) in photography in-person. There is something special about seeing the facial expressions from the person giving feedback — you can really gauge their enthusiasm for certain images. Also when you give feedback to another photographer in-person, you can do so with more subtlety, without hurting their feelings (people are more offended when you give feedback over the internet).

CHAPTER 7: WHAT IS YOUR END-GAME IN PHOTOGRAPHY?

The last chapter I want to address is this: what is your end-game in photography? After you die, how do you want to be remembered in your photography? Which photos do you want to survive after you die? And perhaps even a more philosophical question — does it matter if you're remembered for your photos after you're long gone?

My goal in photography

I know for me, my purpose in life is to be a teacher. My goal isn't to become a famous photographer, who is remembered for their images. If I can make even 1 photograph that is remembered after I die, I will be satisfied. If I die and nobody remembers my photos, that is fine too.

I just want to make it my focus in life is to help empower other photographers, through teaching, blogging, writing, books, videos, and other information.

What are your goal(s) in photography?

For you — what is your end-game? Do you want to make a beautiful photo book that will inspire generations to come? If so, don't be distracted by social media — put all of your energy, focus, and time into making the best damn photo book you can. Make a tight edit of your best images (30-40 images), and work on your photo book for several years.

Is your end-game to have an exhibition of your work? Realize this can happen a lot faster than you expect. Assuming you can make one good photo a month, you should have 12 good photos at the end of the year. And if you plan on having a small

exhibition, 6-12 photos is more than enough. Start small — contact a local cafe or coffee shop to host your photos, and offer to print and frame them yourself. Then when you start smell, you can build yourself up.

Is your end-game to have a lot of social media followers? If so, give social media your 100%. Stay engaged with the online photo community, give honest feedback and critique to other photographers, stay on top of the trends, and keep making the best photos you can — and keep sharing them. Keep working on your craft, and refining your images. And only share your best. **All killer, no filler.**

Happiness & photography

In your personal journey in photography, ask yourself: *“Is photography adding stress to my life, or removing stress from my life?”*

Nobody knows what makes them happy in life. But we all know what makes us miserable.

So if photography is *adding* stress from your life, and not *removing* stress from your life— you’re doing something wrong.

For me, photography is self-therapy. Photography helps me remove the demons from my head. When I’m shooting, I lose sense of myself. I no longer worry about my financial stresses, my family stresses, or regrets from the past. I am grounded in the present — happy, content, and focused. Photography has also helped me become more confident in life. Before photography, I had terrible fear talking and engaging with strangers. Now, I can make any stranger my friend.

Tranquility

I feel the ultimate goal in our photography is to find peace and tranquility in life. To find contentment. To not desire anything outside of us. To appreciate life in front of us, and to make the best of our own life situations.

We might never own enough cameras, have a big enough house, a fast enough car, or enough 0's in our bank accounts. Yet, if you can use your photography as a tool to find contentment, peace, and zen in your life — you will find calm and happiness in your life.

CONCLUSION

This is a (current) distillation of everything I have learned in my photography the last 10 years (from age 18 to age 28). I know that I will continue to evolve, change, and integrate new ideas in the future.

Yet this is a book I wish I could have read when I started off in photography. I've read so many things on the internet in terms of *how* to shoot photography, what is the “best” camera to shoot with, and how to get more followers on social media.

Yet nobody asks the fundamental philosophical questions in photography:

- *Why* do you take photos?
- What does it mean to have a lot of followers on social media?
- Is photography adding stress or removing stress from your life?
- Is your photography personal to you?
- Can you see your own emotions and soul in your photos?
- How can you find happiness in life through your photography?

Your quality as a photographer will be dictated by the questions you ask yourself.

Never stop inquiring. Never stop searching for the truth. Find what works for you.

The ultimate destination we should all seek in our photography is this: **Discover who we are as photographers**. To discover our true preferences, our true inner-vision, and which photos empower us (and others).

Lastly, when you have found contentment, peace, and tranquility in your photography — dedicate your life to helping empower others. There are a lot of other souls in photography who are crying out for your advice, your insights, and your guidance.

Always, Eric