

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Dear friend,

This book is my attempt at a mini magnum opus of sorts. It is everything I have learned from photography, that can hopefully get you from 0 to 100% in photography.

BE STRONG, ERIC KIM

CHAPTER I: WHY PHOTOGRAPHY?

Why?

The most important question you can ever ask yourself is “why?”

For example,

- Why do I make photos?
- Why do I care what others think of my photos?
- Why do I wake up in the morning?
- Why live?

“Why” is the first word a child learns, and it is how a child orients himself or herself to the world.

Every child is born curious and always asks “why”? Incessantly.

The problem: we are told to shut up as children. Of course if you're an adult, having your 2 year old ask you “why?” to everything is a bit annoying. We give them fake answers and lie to them.

But the true philosopher is a child. If we ask ourselves “why?” enough times-- we will find the deep truth about almost anything.

So friend you might ask me,

*Eric, **why** are you writing this book when you've already written over 20 ebooks, and close to 3,000 blog posts?*

Well, I just don't think any of them are my "magnum opus"-- my great work. My closest work was "100 Lessons From the Masters of Street Photography." I want this to be (even) better. Thanks to Cindy for pushing me to stop blogging for a while, for me to concentrate my nectar and honey-- and to make you a new flavor for photography.

What is a photographer?

A photographer is a visual warrior. A photographer has strength, courage, temperance, judgement, honesty, and virtue.

A photographer uses a camera as his or her sword.

A photographer uses their camera (sword) to fight his or her inner-demons. A photographer uses their camera to slice away false reality. A photographer uses their camera to focus on what is important in their lives, and uses their camera to leave out what isn't important in their lives.

A photographer is biased. A photographer chooses what to include in their frame, and what *not* to include in their frame.

So when you're making photos, consider the truth:

*What you decide to **exclude** from the frame is more important than what you decide to **include** in the frame.*

For example, let's say you see a street scene. If you used a fisheye lens and captured *everything*, the photo would be boring. The photo would lack focus or interest.

Rather, you want to latch yourself onto a "visual anchor" and decide to only focus on that one thing.

When you have a visual anchor-- you give your viewer somewhere to settle and focus their eyes. This is being compassionate to your viewer.

The job of a photographer is a visual surgeon-- you decide to cut out the cancerous tumors of reality-- what you perceive ugly or uninteresting. You decide to focus on only showing what *you* consider beautiful.

Why make photos?

The next question: *why* make photos?

I can't speak for you, but this is why I make photos:

I make photos to make meaning in my life.

For me, I feel that every photographer is searching for meaning in his or her life.

We are seeking meaning and purpose in every aspect of our lives:

- We get “prestigious” jobs to impress our friends and family, to feel important.
- We dutifully go to church and practice religion and spirituality, in order to find a deeper purpose or moral compass in life.
- We often feel purpose-*less* in life, and therefore drown away the sorrow with alcohol, weed, and Netflix.

So I think photography is just another tool or drug for us to turn to find purpose and meaning in our lives.

I know a lot of us have started with gadget or a fascination in electronics, engineering, and art. Many of us photographers felt that we needed to be photographers to be artists, because we couldn't draw.

Therefore we see the camera as this curious tool of empowerment. With a camera, anybody (including your mom) can be an artist, and photographer.

To me, photography is the best art form. Why? Because it is the most democratic form of art out there.

But-- like chess, any child can learn to play in five minutes. But it will take you five decades before you can master it. Or who knows, you might never fully master it.

But to go back to the question, why Photography?

Because it brings your heart joy. Photography gives you a creative outlet, to let out your creative constipation. Photography gives you a new lens to find more appreciation in your everyday life and to help you find “beauty in the mundane”-- beauty in the everyday, ordinary.

So for me, ultimately photography is a tool for self-understanding, self-reflection, and self-empowerment.

Why make “good” photos?

Okay next question: *why* make “good” photos-- and what makes a “good” photo?

For me, a good photo has:

- Emotion
- Soul
- Composition

Emotion: you need to *feel* what you photograph, and you need to photograph what you feel.

Soul: your photographs should reveal something personal about yourself. A photo that doesn't show your soul could have easily been replicated by a robot. Any robot can point a camera at a beautiful sunset, and add “hdr” (high dynamic range) and make a pretty photo. Ask yourself, “What kind of photos only *I* can make?” Usually it is personal photos-- photos of your friends, family, kids, partners, or best of all-- yourself (honor thy selfie).

Composition: A good photo has strong composition. A strong composition is one with few distractions. I suggest to make a good composition, remove or subtract distractions from your frame. Start with a simple black background or canvas, and add your subject in afterwards (Richard Avedon pretty much made his entire portrait series of people against white backgrounds). I actually got this concept of starting with a blank black canvas from Leonardo da Vinci-- who said that everything in reality is black by nature, because you can only get white when you *add* light.

To make strong compositions, you want to look at the edges of your frame when you're composing. You want to make sure there are no distracting elements or forms sticking out from the edges of the frame. Don't just get tunnel-visioned at the center of the frame.

Practical suggestion: when you're making photos, *don't* look in the center of the frame. Rather, look at the *edges* and the *background* of the frame when you're shooting.

CHAPTER II: MAKE PHOTOS

Okay friend, next practical point: how do we make photos?

First of all, don't overthink it. Treat photography as a Zen meditation experience.

When you shoot, turn off your brain.

When you shoot, follow your intuition and gut.

Don't think before shooting.

The most important thing in photography: getting in the "zone", to be in a state of "flow", or to be focused in your "element."

How to get into the zone

I cannot speak for you, but this is how I get into the zone when shooting photos:

1. **Turn off my phone, or switch my phone to airplane mode.** Better yet, don't even have a phone on me (leave it at home). Even better, don't own a phone.
2. **Don't listen to music while walking.** This will help you be more perceptive to the environment around you. Which means, you can overhear conversations on the streets, which might lead to good photo opportunities.
3. **Shoot 25% more photos than you think you should.** If you see an interesting scene, shoot as many photos of that scene as humanly possible. For example, if I see a good street photograph, I might shoot 50 photos. And when I think I'm done, I'll shoot 25% more-- so like 8-9 more photos.

Obviously there is no right or wrong way to shoot. You need to shoot in a way which is in accordance with your personality.

But to be honest almost all of us are timid, nervous, and hesitate in photography. Even me, as an "extrovert"-- I used to get nervous photographing strangers. Now, I don't even hesitate or blink my eye most of the time. It was a skill that I cultivated over 10 years. Of getting closer to my subjects, interacting with them, and with facing my fears, head-on.

How to overcome your fears in photography

We have many fears in photography. Fear of uploading a photo and getting no likes or comments. Fear of photographing a stranger and having them yell at us. Fear of photographing a model, and having them hate all your photos.

Above all, I think what we fear the most:

The fear that we are bad photographers.

The fear is that if we are a bad photographer, we have no worth, and we aren't artists.

We fear that we're wasting our time. We fear that we will never “make it” as a photographer. We fear that we will never have anyone appreciate, love, or admire our photos, or ourselves.

But to be honest don't care what others think of your work. All innovators in photography and art disregarded the barking of the critics.

Another practical tip: **ignore all photography and art critics.** Why? Because they are all just failed artists. They didn't have the courage to pursue their own artistic vision, and now devote their lives to putting down the self-esteem of others. For a visual representation of this, watch the food critic from the movie *Ratatouille*.

Technical settings in photography

When I shoot photos, I like to “set it and forget it.”

For example, I mostly set my camera to think for me. I set my camera to “P” (Program) mode, where the camera automatically chooses an aperture and shutter speed for me. If I'm shooting black and white, I usually set my ISO to 1600 or 3200 late at night. For color, I usually set my ISO to 800. Better yet, I'm setting my camera to “AUTO ISO”, so I really don't need to think before shooting.

The biggest problem of photography: we think too much of the technical settings before making a photo. Rather, we should let the camera think for us (technically), and we use our brains to think creatively and artistically.

So you should focus your energy and focus on making strong compositions, on working the scene (making many photos of the same scene), varying the angles, distance, getting closer, further, crouching, or trying to get a clean background. You should focus on trying to capture eye contact, hand gestures, and emotions.

This is why I'm such a huge fan of shooting on your phone. You just use the automatic settings, and rather focus your efforts on capturing personally meaningful moments.

But don't professionals shoot fully-manual? No. Most professionals I know shoot in "P" mode (Pro mode). Why? Because they have nothing to prove.

When I was a newbie, I felt pressured to shoot fully-manual, to show off that I "knew what I was doing." To be honest, a lot of photography teachers encourage their students to shoot fully-manual, because they need to justify their jobs.

Also, a lot of beginners feel like they need to know how to shoot fully-manual, to somehow earn their stripes, or prove that they are smart.

But if you have a photo in an exhibition or gallery, nobody is going to care what your technical settings are. The only thing that matters: is the photograph beautiful, interesting, or uplifting? Nothing else will matter.

The way to look like an idiot at an art show is to ask the photographer:

What shutter speed or aperture did you use to make that photo?

That is like asking a chef:

That rack of lamb was exquisite. What pan did you use to cook it?

CHAPTER III: INSPIRATION

In art, "inspiration" is breathing in creative energy, and being motivated to make art.

So in photography, what motivates or encourages you to make a photo?

For me, I am inspired to make a photo when I see a person, scene, or building that stirs something in my mind or my heart.

To be honest, my suggestion is this:

Never photograph what doesn't personally interest you.

Better yet,

Never make photos of what you think others will think is an "interesting photo".

As a photographer, you are a filter of reality. You put your magnifying glass in terms of what you find significant or interesting in life.

You don't need to justify *why* you found a scene interesting. Rather, just follow your gut and intuition.

Take a break.

If you don't feel motivated or inspired to make photos, my suggestion: take a break.

Instead, refuel your creativity by consuming great art. You are what you eat.

For me, I love the work of artists like Picasso, Andy Warhol, Richard Avedon, Josef Koudelka, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Saul Leiter, Dieter Rams, Jony Ive, Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar, Cindy Nguyen, Voltaire, Nietzsche, and Einstein.

Anyone who makes something that inspires you is an artist.

You can find inspiration in dance, theater, improv comedy, film, photos, music, poetry, illustration, graphic design, interior design, or my favorite-- coffee.

How to be creative

To be creative is to create.

For myself, I prefer to create 80% of the time, and consume art 20% of the time. I like to alternate between the both. Kind of like fasting and eating, working out and resting, hustling and sleeping, sitting or walking, etc.

You need to do both: create and consume.

Too much creation without consumption leads to repetitive art.

Too much consumption without creation leads to creative constipation.

But how do we know when to create, and when to consume?

My suggestion: follow your gut.

For example, our stomach will growl when we are hungry. Our stomach instructs us when to eat.

But if your stomach isn't hungry, don't eat. Don't eat three square meals a day. Only eat when your stomach orders you to.

How I create

For myself, I have been able to create more by eating less food and art.

For example, my most productive time as a creator is when I don't eat breakfast and lunch, and drink black coffee (espresso).

My physical hunger stimulates my artistic hunger.

I see myself like a wild tiger. A wild tiger is hungry therefore is motivated to move and hunt. You don't give a tiger a protein shake *before* hunting. No. The hunger is

what drives the tiger.

So if you want to have a hunger to create, my practical suggestion: let yourself go physically hungry more often.

And when in doubt, have another (single) shot of espresso.

CHAPTER IV: SHARE

Another important discussion: how, when, and why should we share our work?

Why share your art?

Ok, so for me, I think art has a social purpose. Art should inspire, motivate, or challenge the thinking of the viewer.

So if you are a photographer and artist, **you have a social duty to share your work, if you believe it will help others.**

How should I share my work?

You can share your work however you want. You can publish your work on the internet on your own website or blog, and share your work via email or social media.

You can publish your photos in print-- as a magazine, as a self-published book, or as standard prints.

Don't think too much about the presentation. My suggestion: just make it, and share it, even when you don't think it is perfect.

Most photographers I know get too caught up in the details of how to present their work. And therefore, they end up never sharing their work. And as time goes on, they have more pressure and become more nervous to share their work. And then most photographers die without having the chance to share their work to their fullest extent.

Confidence

To share your work requires confidence. Confidence in your work. Confidence in knowing that you have a risk of having people hate your work.

My practical suggestion:

Make photos 80% “good enough” according to your eyes, and then publish and share it.

Voltaire once said, “Perfect is the enemy of the good.” Perfection kills us as artists. Perfection is like cutting the wheels off our golden chariot. Perfection is like putting golden chains around our shoulders, when we are swimming in the ocean. Perfection is like adding a glass ceiling to our potential.

Phuck perfection is my motto.

Aim for “good” instead.

Good photos. Good art. Good work.

Then share it. Don't over-think this, it should be easy, like how a child makes a crayon drawing, shows it to his mom, and then goes back to work for his next masterpiece.

What photos should I share?

Another suggestion: only share your own photos *you* like.

For example, we often share photos, not being sure whether they are “good” or

not.

But my suggestion, look at your own photos and ask yourself,

Do I like this photo? Do I think it is good?

Then when you share a photo, you're not waiting to get affirmed whether the photo is good or not.

Instead, when you share a photo-- it is because you are proud of it, and you want to share your joy with others.

Only share photos that “spark joy” in your heart (Marie Kondo).

CHAPTER V: SOUL PHOTOGRAPHY

One topic not discussed much in photography:

Can you see your own soul in your photos?

Nowadays, before I make a photo of a scene, I ask myself:

Can Google Street view make the same photo?

Or,

Have I seen this photo online before?

This is why I no longer like making cliché touristy photos of landmarks. I'm only interested in paving new ground.

That means, only making photos that *I* could make.

For example, that is photos of my family, friends, close ones, loved ones, photos where I had to interact with a stranger, or self-portraits of myself.

Above all, I love shooting “selfies”-- because you don't need anyone's permission, except your own.

Furthermore, the distillation of all ancient wisdom was the precept:

Know thyself!

My take:

Know thy selfie!

By shooting selfies, or self-portraits, you get to know yourself. How you look. How you feel about yourself. Your own ego, self-esteem.

You can make selfies however you want. I prefer using the front-facing lens, and not on a phone. For me, it is an analysis of myself-- how I age, and how I will eventually die.

For me, self portraits of myself is a reminder that I should not, and will not waste my life.

Whenever I wake up in the morning, I look at myself in the mirror and notice a few more wrinkles, creases or folds in my face, or indentations I didn't notice before. I like these signs of aging, it is a constant reminder of “memento mori”-- remember death, and remember that you *must* die. It is my human duty to die.

And while I'm alive, I need to focus on helping others. To empower, uplift, and motivate others. To seek to help others before helping myself. And funny enough, being selfish (like focusing on my work and not answering emails) is how I can help a greater number of people (hopefully with this book).

A practical suggestion, don't make photos for just today, next week, a month, or even a year.

Make photos that you think will still be relevant 300 years from now.

For example, photos of humanity. Love. Envy. Disgust. Fear, pain, and loathing. Peace and war. Social and human issues will last forever.

Can you imagine making photos on a spaceship? Or on Mars? Or a dystopia future where planet earth is so polluted that we live in Air-conditioned malls and skyscrapers?

Imagine someone 300 years from now looking at your photo.

How would you want to make them feel?

CHAPTER VI: HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD WITH PHOTOGRAPHY

I think photography can change the world.

How? By changing the opinion of one person.

Think about it this way: let's say you make and share a photo that inspires one viewer who looks at your photo. Let's say that one photo of yours encourages your one viewer to think:

Wow, life is beautiful. I can make a photo like that. I can find beauty in my everyday.

Congratulations. You just changed the world, one person at a time.

To change the world in photography means to change the opinion of just one person, and have that person “domino” their new, positive perspective, with their friends, family, and work colleagues.

And then it becomes a positivity virus. It spreads. Positivity is contagious.

So I do believe that you, as an individual photographer, artist, and person-- you

can change the world.

How to get millions of followers

I have no idea how to get millions of followers. Maybe put out a sex tape.

For myself, I am probably one of the most influential living photography bloggers in the world. Why, and how?

Why? I have a popular blog, which is open, free, and easy to access by anyone with an internet connection. Not only that, but I consistently put out messages, ideas, and try to help out photographers and artists with an empowering, positive message.

I am also probably one of the most hated, controversial, or reviled photographers. Why? I spit the truth. Not everyone likes that. They want me to sit down, shut the fuck up, and be a good compliant member of society.

The reason *why* I'm so controversial -- I am the black swan amongst the flock of white swans. I see the world differently. I have once felt shitty, disempowered, and sad as a photographer. Now I feel empowered, strong, and I feel I understand the "truth" of photography better.

To me, the truth of photography is that photography ain't about making photos. The truth of photography: **making personal meaning in your life**. Obviously it doesn't matter what camera you shoot with if you want to find more personal meaning in your life. But for people who have spent thousands of dollars in camera equipment don't like hearing that ERIC KIM says,

You can make good photos on a phone.

And to be perfectly frank, don't trust me. Trust yourself. Everyone out there, including ERIC KIM, has self-interested motives. I secretly want you to share this book with your friends, to spread my name, and for one day you to attend one of my workshops, buy a HAPTIC product, or spread the positive news of photography-- while keeping it open-source, free, and empowering.

How to build your own platform

I deleted my Instagram because I became a slave to the platform. I don't like being controlled by social media-- certainly not Facebook, or anyone who tries to censor me. I got one image censored on Instagram for being “too controversial”--

and I just realized at that point:

Facebook and Instagram (Facebook owns Instagram) are just advertising platforms. Anything that is against advertising is bad in their eyes. The more I contribute to Facebook, the more I contribute to their advertising.

I still auto-publish to social media and Facebook. I don't want to get you to delete your social media accounts.

My suggestion: make your own blogging platform.

I run my blog on 1and1.com with Wordpress.org. I use the “Genesis” theme, with the “Monochrome” child theme.

I have 100% freedom to blog about what I want. I am not a slave to a “news feed algorithm” whether my posts will show up on the front page.

Having your own photography blog will empower you, because you will be able to become a more multi-faceted artist, like a diamond.

For example on [my blog](#), I've experimented with poetry, philosophy, personal photography, street photography, freestyle writing, self-portraiture, videos, and whatever interests my personal muse.

Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms doesn't give you creative control over *how* to display your art. You cannot really change the order how to display your content. You can't control where to add a link. You can't control how to mix video, audio, images.

The rule to remember,

If you don't pay a monthly bill for your platform, you are a slave to the platform.

A better saying from Silicon Valley,

If you don't pay for the product, you are the product.

So I'm encouraging you to do the following:

1. Create and own your own blogging or website platform/website.
2. Share your stuff to social media, via email, and word of mouth, and link to your own website/platform.

Also instead of building up your own social media following, my suggestion: **build an email mailing list**. I use mailchimp.com. Why email? Because if you send out an email, it will still show up in the inbox of your follower. If you post something to social media, you have a very small chance of it showing up in their newsfeed.

How to brand and market yourself

If you don't brand, market, or advertise yourself, nobody will ever know who you are, what you do, or know your art.

Andy Warhol once said the best art is the art of business. I agree.

We live in a capitalist, materialistic, and consumerist world. I'm sorry, but this ain't gonna change. I studied Sociology at UCLA, a very liberal and left-leaning school. But I also know how to face the facts.

Yes, you can be a Zen monk, and create photos all for yourself in a cave somewhere in the wilderness. But as humans, we are social beings. No man is his own island.

For me, true joy in photography is making photos, and *sharing* them with others. If one day someone told me,

Eric, you can make all the photos you want, but you can no longer share them with anybody else.

I would then refuse to make photos.

To me, photography and art is all about sharing. Sharing is caring.

Like my buddy Seneca says,

If I received wisdom on the agreement that I couldn't share it, I would say no.

If you make good photos that can uplift, and motivate others, it is your *duty* to share it with others. By *not* sharing your work with others, you are doing others a disservice.

To brand and market yourself, have confidence in yourself and your work.

Don't be afraid of being overly self-promotional. To me, self-promotion is the only promotion. Never wait to get “discovered” by an agent, a talent scout, or publisher. That shit never happens in real life.

Only the insecure will accuse others of being “self-promoters.” Because these insecure small people are afraid of promoting themselves. They see others marketing themselves, and feel upset that they don't have the courage to do it themselves.

And realize, if you promote or market yourself, other folks have the power to not follow you, or to unfollow you. And **if people start unfollowing you, that is a sign that you're doing something right.**

The true artists, movers, shakers, and thinkers have always gone against the grain. Many artists have been reviled when they started, only to be called geniuses 100-300 years later. So remember, if you pursue your own personal artistic vision and genius in your lifetime, you probably won't receive a crown of roses-- perhaps a crown of thorns.

So my suggestion to you is this my friend, if you have a hard time promoting yourself, just do this as an experiment:

Be shamelessly self-promotional for 10 years.

If you fail, you can blame it on ERIC. But if you win and succeed, thank yourself.

CHAPTER VII: CONQUER FEAR

Fear is the first emotion we had as humans. Then since the Greek and Spartan times-- **courage**.

Fear is what holds us back. Courage is what drives us forward.

For myself, I try to channel my fear into being more courageous.

For example, if I see a scene that I want to photograph but I feel fear, I tell myself:

I'm confusing my fear for excitement. Photos that scare me are photos that excite me. I must make the photo.

So then, I take a step *forward* to whatever scares me. I either take the photo, or I ask for permission from the stranger to make their portrait.

As an assignment, try this out:

Only photograph what scares you for a month. At the end of the month, share your 3 favorite photos, and title the series "FEAR".

For more street photography assignments, buy [STREET NOTES](#).

How to conquer fear as an artist

First of all, you are *already* a photographer and artist. No need to explain yourself. Every child is born an artist, said Picasso. The problem: how do we stay artists as we grow older?

Modern society is a bunch of pretentious assholes, who tell you that art is only reserved for the rich, fancy, and art-school kids.

The truth: **art is for everyone.**

If you like to make stuff, you're an artist. If you like to create, you're a "creative."
If you like to sit on your butt, and criticize others, you are a loser.

Also, if you like to take risk in your photography and life, you are an entrepreneur - a risk-seeker, and risk-lover. You are a visual adventurer. You see the seas of fun, excitement, and drama. You want to create your own future, rather than sit and watch on the sidelines.

To be a better photographer or artist,

Take more risks.

Do more of what scares you.

Whenever I want to share a photo and I'm not sure whether others will like it, I'm taking a risk.

When I teach a workshop, and increase my prices because I have increased my self-worth, I am taking a risk.

When I make a street photo of a stranger without permission, I'm taking a risk.

Remember the motto:

More risk, more reward.

To take more risk in your photography, make more photos of what scares you. Or try a genre of photography that scares you.

Another idea-- if you are a photography blogger, blog about topics which others will disagree with. Also, write with no filter-- write like you talk in real life. For example, ERIC KIM curses like a sailor in real life, even in front of his mom. Therefore, he does the same in blogging.

Also, take more risks with your photography composition. Tilt the camera more. Get closer. Get really far away. Shoot from the ground looking up, lying on the floor. Climb a skyscraper, and shoot looking down. **Take more visual risks.**

Become a STREET GOD: you control your own visual, concrete, playground. Create your own reality. And your camera is your Thor's hammer.

CONCLUSION & BEGINNING

This ain't a conclusion, it's just another new beginning for you.

The philosopher Heraclitus once said, "All is flux"-- meaning, all is in a state of change.

Your entire life, as a photographer and artist-- you're gonna change. Don't be ashamed. Embrace it.

Like Nietzsche said, embrace creative self-destruction, yet embrace the Dionysian wild courage and self-intoxication of creation.

For me, I try to destroy my old photo and art styles. Everyday, I try to create something new, fresh-- something that gives me a new creative breath.

Above all, have unshakeable confidence in yourself. Make earthquakes with your visual hammer.

Be strong, Eric

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