

THE PHOTOGRAPHY MANUAL

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Dear friend,

I wanted to give you a little guide, or manual, that you can keep with you— as a source of inspiration, motivation, or any source of ideas.

First of all, this is all written as advice to my past self. So this advice may or may not pertain to you. Enjoy.

1. Don't take photos; make photos

The first piece of advice: don't take photos; make photos.

Taking a photo is forceful. It is stealing someone's soul (without their permission). Taking doesn't contribute anything back to your subject.

Making a photograph is creative. It is a collaboration with someone else. You are more intentional, more artistic, and more loving in your approach. You dance with your subject, and both of you make the image together.

2. Make meaning; not photos

Learn how to find meaning in your photos, not just how to make photos.

The point of photography isn't to be the world's best photographer, to get the most likes, the most followers, to win the most awards, have the most books and exhibitions, or leave behind a legacy as a photographer.

Rather, the purpose of photography is to find meaning and purpose in the world. To help connect you closer to other individuals. To find beauty in the ordinary and the mundane. To make your heart sing whenever you make photos. To overcome depression, anxiety, frustration — and to creatively flourish.

So remember, the end of our photography is to live a good life. If your photography isn't helping you live a good life, figure out what to change to live a better life.

3. Strip away the superfluous

The best way to make better photos is to strip away the superfluous.

Perfection is achieved not when you have nothing left to add, but when you have nothing left to take away.

How can you keep stripping away from a frame and an image— until you are just left with the essential?

For me, I like to start with a black canvas— and slowly chip away at the edges of the frame, until I just have the primary subject left. I want all my attention and focus to be on the subject. Not the background. Just the mood, emotion, and soul of my subject.

Of course this will vary for you. What story are you trying to tell in your frame? What kind of emotion are you trying to evoke? What kind of mood do you want to provoke in the viewer?

To make stronger photos, take away everything from the frame which isn't a strong photo.

4. Don't specialize in your photography

Another thing that screwed me up — over-obsession with specialization in photography. The problem with specialization in photography is that you will have less longevity.

Anyone who specializes in one genre of photography for long enough will master it. Perhaps in 10-20 years. But after you have mastered that one genre, you will become bored. You will give up photography and move on — kind of how Henri Cartier-Bresson gave up photography after ~30 years and started to paint for the rest of his life.

You want to constantly innovate, evolve, and change your photography. Be like Josef Koudelka, who started off shooting the Roma people in his Gypsies project with a 25mm lens, then evolving and shooting with a 35mm and a 50mm lens, and now in his late 70s, is shooting panoramic landscapes. He has stayed consistent with monochrome, but his subject-matter has evolved, and his camera format has evolved.

The same is with you. Be a more general photographer. Photograph anything and everything that interests you. Be a Renaissance Photographer— a photographer that puts no limits on yourself. Study every aspect of the world. Don't limit yourself. Be like Leonardo da Vinci who studied botany, architecture, the human body, painting, engineering, and fused the science of art and the art of science together. He was prolific until he died.

Specialization is the enemy of creativity.

5. Make photos that please yourself

If your photos don't please yourself; why are you doing it?

Of course, we all want an audience for our photos. We like getting affirmation from others. It is what makes us human.

Yet at the same time, if you fall into the trap of only pleasing your audience— you will never innovate in your photography. You will just make photos that will get a lot of likes on social media. You won't have the opportunity to find more depth, soul, and meaning in your photo-making process. You might be less likely to work on personal projects that help you find meaning in the world.

Not only that, but the more you seek to please yourself with your photography, the better your photos will get. And the more innovative, unique, and personal they will be.

So before you share any photos with others, look at the photo yourself and ask yourself:

Do I like my own photos?

6. Capture emotion via gestures

A photo without emotion is dead. To capture more emotions in your photographs, focus on gestures. Hand-gestures, body-gestures, and facial gestures.

Photograph people with their hand against their face. Against their hip. Photograph a certain expression in their face. If you cannot feel the emotion or the mind of the subject you are photographing, the viewer of your photograph will not feel any emotion.

As humans, we are hard-wired to remember via emotions. A photograph that punches us in the stomach, and evokes our heart, will burn itself into our minds.

I know for myself, I like nice compositions. Yet these photographs are easily forgettable. They don't remind me of humanity.

However photographs when I have a subject staring into my soul sticks with me. It is memorable. Looking at these kinds of photos, I feel more like a human being.

Remember, the aim of all photography is to evoke emotions, feelings, or some sort of thought in your viewer. Of course you need a good composition to do so, but make sure that you prioritize emotion over form.

7. Soul photography

What many of our photos is lacking is soul. Our soul.

How is it that we are the only ones who can make the photos that we do? How do our photos show our unique perspective and view-point of the world? How do we take our pains, sorrows, struggles, pains, victories, joys, and delights— and integrate them into our photographs?

For me, I try to make my photographs more personal. More about myself, than others.

I photograph my loved ones. I photograph my partner Cindy, the love and purpose of my life. I photograph my mom, my family, my friends, and also myself. When I have nobody to photograph, I make self portraits of myself. I examine my face, my emotions, my mood. I am constantly reflecting about the shortness of life and the potential death of my loved ones, and myself.

Photography for me is a meditation on life and death. By making a photograph, you make a moment eternal. Yet, everything that we photograph will eventually die. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.

I don't know what will happen to me after I die, but I believe in a soul. I believe the soul is eternal.

When I look at many photographs from great photographers and artists from their past, I can feel their soul integrated into their images. When I look at the photographs of Richard Avedon, and his stark portraits of his subjects against a white background, I can feel Richard Avedon's soul. I can feel his humor, his witty candor, and his deep connection and feelings for his subjects. I can see that Avedon wasn't into the glamorous or the glitzy— he was searching for something deeper about the human psyche. Something more authentic, real, and visceral. So while Avedon (and many of his subjects) are dead, his soul lives through his

photographs. And certainly he did a lot of 'soul-searching' during his life, photographing his father who was terminally ill, and eventually photographing many images of himself.

Do your photos show your soul?

8. Light

Photography means painting with light. A photograph without light couldn't exist.

Figure out how you can better integrate light into your photos, to provoke a certain feeling or mood. Make photos against direct light, to make more harsh, gritty, and graphic images. Lower your exposure-compensation to get dramatic black backgrounds.

Photograph your subjects against soft window lighting, if you want them to have a soft, and kind feeling.

Photograph your subjects during sunrise and sunset (golden hour) — when the golden ambers of the sun shine gently on your subject, and illuminate them.

Ultimately as a photographer, you are also a painter. You're just painting with a camera, instead of a paint brush. Figure out how to paint with the light, by changing the direction of your camera, by asking your subject to move, or photographing different times in the day.

And a thing to remember— you have a gift to be interested and passionate in photography. Your photography gift and talent is a light. Share that light with others. Don't hide it under your chair. If the room was dark, wouldn't you share your flashlight with others?

So don't be afraid to share your images. Don't be afraid of others criticizing you and your images. Let your light shine.

9. Black bliss

For me, I love black. All black everything. My clothes, my hair, my coffee, my camera, my devices, and the source of my creativity – pitch black.

What I love about black is that it is the ultimate blank slate. When you start with a black canvas, you can add anything to it. The possibilities are endless.

Why black? Black/darkness is the natural state of things, before you shine a light on it.

In terms of lifestyle, I like wearing everything black because it makes life simpler. I have no colors to distract me. I don't draw attention to myself when I'm walking on the streets. I have less 'paralysis by analysis' when figuring out what to buy. If I buy a car, it will be black. If I buy a new camera, it will be black. If I buy a new device, it will be black.

In photography, I like both color and monochrome. Yet, my heart gravitates more towards monochrome, because of the black bliss. There are fewer distractions, and complications. Black and white allows me to focus on the soul and emotions of an image— rather than the colors, which can often distract from my frame.

I recommend any photographer starting off to start shooting in black and white. Why? Because it helps you better understand the light, tones, and brightness. Also it will help you in your composition – looking for triangles, diagonals, curves, circles, squares, rectangles, and other shapes and forms.

I also recommend photographing with a high-contrast black and white preview. See the world through monochromatic glasses, and it will be the first step in educating your eye.

10. Photograph today like it were your last

The biggest problem I had in my photography: I was always making excuses. I couldn't be creative because my camera wasn't good enough. I couldn't photograph because I was busy with my office job. I couldn't photograph because I was tired.

The list goes on.

We need to photograph each day like it were our last.

If today were your last day on earth, would you really save up money to buy that new camera (which you don't really need) to make meaningful photographs of your life? Once again, realize that photography is a tool to help you find more meaning your life, more purpose, and more happiness. Not to make photos.

If today were your last day on earth, who would you photograph? Strangers? Your friends and family? Yourself? Who?

Not only that, but whenever you meet your friends, family, partner, loved ones—imagine like it were *their* last day on earth. Would you make a photo of them? If so, how would you do it?

Always contemplate on life and death, and you will never waste a single, precious, glorious day of your short time here on earth.

Always, Eric