

THINGS I'VE LEARNED ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

Revisited, 10 Years Later

by

Brooks Jensen

[*Editors' Note:* In December 1993, this article was published in *LensWork* #4 – to an audience, back then, of only a couple hundred readers. Since then, we've received scores of request to reprint it. While some equipment and materials have changed considerably, it is amazing how the creative challenges remain the same. After an additional ten years of photographing, writing, and thinking about photography, Brooks has updated these random thoughts about photography and the creative life.]

I've been involved in photography for 24 [now 34 years!] years, since I developed my first roll of film in junior high school. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about or do photography. Certainly in all that time I must have learned something of value! Here are 131 tidbits I've learned about photography from my experience. They are personal, experiential and may not be true for everyone. If so, you might ask, why publish them? Well, even if they are not true for all, perhaps they may stimulate thought. In itself, this must be of some small value.

This list is composed of some original thoughts mixed with some thoughts I *think* are original (but undoubtedly are not) because I've forgotten where and from whom I first learned them. There are also a few whose author I am delighted to thank and credit and from whom I hope I may receive some license if I don't remember the quotation exactly. Where I quote another, I do so because I have found their wisdom to be true from my own experience, too; they've said it better than I can. There is no particular order to these thoughts other than the order they occurred to me in the few weeks I took to write them.

- Finding great subject matter is an art in itself.
- Good lenses and cameras are worth the price.
- Most people see good pictures and photograph bad ones. Real photography begins when we let go of what we have been told is a good photograph and start photographing what we see.
- Some things just can't be photographed. Trying to do so anyway is worthwhile.
- Photographers are more scared of people than people are of photographers.
- Cameras can get a lot wetter than you might guess.
- It takes a lot of practice to learn how to see what makes a good photograph better than a bad one.
- Your success depends as much upon the viewer as it does on yourself.
- A lazy photographer dies before he makes many photographs.
- For the first several years one struggles with the technical challenges, making sure and steady progress - a learning curve and growth process that is rewarding, stimulating and self-renewing. But, eventually every photographer who sticks with it long enough arrives at a technical plateau where production of a technically good photograph is relatively easy. It is here that real photography starts and most photographers quit.
- Working photographers rarely die of consumption.
- If you believe in regular habits, don't take up photography.
- Books on photography offer little help.
- You can do everything right and still fail.
- Emotions are more important than details.
- There is nothing worse than a sharp photograph of a fuzzy idea. *Ansel Adams*
- The best people make the best photographs. *Morley Baer*
- The scarier it is to make a photograph, the more you are likely to learn.
- There is no such thing as "good" or "bad" photographic light. There is just light.
- The least valuable thing you can tell another photographer is that you either like or dislike their photograph. *David Bayles*
- Breaking the rules is one of the greatest sources of growth and will always result in lots of criticism from the small-minded.
- Breaking the rules does not insure anything of value, either in learning curve or in a good photograph. Sometimes the small-minded are right.
- If you want to sell a lot of photographs, use color and lots of it. If you want to sell even more, photograph mountains, oceans, fall leaves, and animals.
- Photography, too, is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.
- If you are even the least bit tempted, make the photograph now! The subject will not be the same later.
- If you are not in the least tempted now, guard against blocking the subject out of mind from future possibilities. All things change.
- The second, third and fourth time you photograph something, will produce more refined compositions than the first time. These may or may not be better

photographs. You will never know, however, unless you make the second, third and fourth photographs.

- Ninety-eight percent of all photographs can be improved by getting closer to the subject. Telephoto lenses are not the answer.
- Duracell and Kodak financed the research and development of the motordrive. Very few photographers, with the exception of sports photographers, need one. They sure do sound neat, though.
- Every piece of gear you will ever own will be a compromise between what you need and what you can afford.
- A full 30% of your best photographs will be lucky accidents.
- The Zone System of exposure control doesn't work, but it's better than random guessing.
- It's better to photograph with the camera you own than to wait for the camera you want. *Adapted from Stephen Stills*
- The photographers with the most good photographs are the ones who spend the most time photographing. *Stewart Harvey*
- Photographic technique is easy to master, but lack of it is an incredibly handy excuse for poor work.
- The hardest thing to do in photography, as in life, is to make a commitment.
- The production of a "greatest hit" is always the result of immersing oneself thoroughly in a project. To set out to make a "greatest hit" photograph will always fail.
- If you're looking for a social art, try dancing.
- The more a photographic chemical smells,

costs, or degrades with time or heat, the better it is supposed to be. This is simply not true. Great photographs are not the result of exotic chemicals - they result from the application of a creative mind.

- At least 9 times out of 10, there is a conflict between marketing potential and artistic value.
- The worst technical problem of all is an unknown hair stuck inside the camera at the film plane.
- It is much harder to make a good black and white photograph than a color one.
- Even after the most careful and meticulous metering and exposure calculations, it is still a good idea to bracket.
- It is impossible to make a good photograph with uranium salt toning, Kodalith, or RC paper.
- If someone made a \$40 cable release, I'd buy one. No, I'd buy two - one for a back-up.
- Whoever first makes an affordable, sturdy, durable and functional tripod will retire very rich.
- Taking meticulous field notes is a waste of time unless you are fully committed to review them later.
- The time spent organizing negative files is worth it.
- There is no magic developing formula. Any developer will work fine provided one thoroughly learns how to use it.
- The debate between enlarger cold light heads and condenser heads is a total waste of time. The debate between analog and digital media is a total waste of time. To think that one specific kind of equipment makes better photographs misses the

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- point. Better photographers make better photographs. Equipment is never the answer to producing great work.
- A well-tested and intelligently employed used lens is better than an untested, new and expensive one.
 - Faith is good. Knowledge is good. To confuse the two is foolish.
 - There is no such thing as “perfect exposure.” If you have to error on one side or the other, more exposure is always better than less. With slides and digital cameras, read this sentence backwards.
 - Manufacturer’s ASA/ISO ratings are meaningless and quite often laughable.
 - Bigger prints are not always better, but better prints are always better.
 - It is not the size of the print that counts, but the “size” of the impact it makes on the viewer’s brain/heart that matters.
 - To give away ten prints is more rewarding than to sell one. But, to sell ten prints is more rewarding than to give away one!
 - The more gear you carry the less likely you are to make a good photograph.
 - The most influential technical decision is not which film, camera, lens or exposure setting to use, but whether or not to use a tripod.
 - No amount of darkroom work can make up for a badly exposed or composed negative.
 - The most valuable personality traits for photographers are patience and humor. The most troublesome are perfectionism and procrastination.
 - Without compassion, photography is a bore.

- Critics are valuable to Art - and should be ignored while making photographs.
- Photography classes can be of some help. Workshops are better. The instructor makes or breaks either.
- Workshops and/or instructors can be addictive and can take up valuable time that is better spent doing photography.
- It is better to study with an instructor who wants to help you develop your own work, even if it is very different from theirs, than to study with one who wants to tell you how they did their work.
- If your main interest in a workshop is to learn how the photographer “did it” so you can do it, too, question your motives.
- A good photograph is never “about light.” Good photographs are about feelings.
- A good photograph, when first seen, hits you like a ton of bricks. A better photograph is often almost unseen at first but comes back to mind over and over again long after you’ve stopped looking at it. This often happens unexpectedly.
- Lots of photographers will claim that a photograph that needs a caption is an inferior photograph. This is silly and denies the obvious fact that all photographs are made, seen and interpreted against a social background that influences their appreciation and understanding. No photographer is an island, either.
- Creating art requires money.
- Every artist has a responsibility to their art that includes the creative creation of a stable personal financial base.
David Grant Best
- The most expensive part of photography is not the cameras, the film, the paper or the chemistry. It is the travel.

- For 99.999% of all negatives, there is no functional difference between limiting it to 50 prints and limiting it to 5 prints. You will never make print #3.
- If you price your work over \$20, you have eliminated 98% of the people in the world from your potential market.
- Artists who take up photography find their “photographic turf” more quickly than photographers who decide to make Art.
Stewart Harvey
- Good photographic composition is merely the strongest way of seeing. *Edward Weston*
- Every photographer has dry spells. Good photographers work anyway. Those who do, grow by leaps and bounds.
- Most photographers who claim they cannot sell their work have very little inventory on hand. Selling is, to a large degree, proportional to the number of choices you can offer a potential buyer.
- When showing work to another photographer, they will often try to help by offering comments about how they would have done it. This is the epitome of insensitivity.
- Any photographer worth his salt has 10,000 bad negatives under his belt.
Ansel Adams
- The process of photography is more important than the product.
- The word “photographer” is a verb.
Ted Orland
- When a photographer can deeply appreciate another’s work and not feel compelled to duplicate it, they have begun to mature.
- Show 25 photographs to 25 people and you’ll find there are at least 15 different choices of a favorite.
- If you find, while reviewing a proof sheet, that you do not remember taking a particular photograph, print that one first. It will be the best photograph on the roll.
- Extra batteries will, eventually, save the day.
- The most valuable tool you can take with you into the field is an extra day.
- Drug stores in small towns never stock sheet film.
- Someone once said, “If you can’t make a great photograph of a mundane subject, make a mundane photograph of a great subject.” If these are your only two choices, take up knitting.
- Developing a new gimmick genre of photography may get you some press, but it also will get you forgotten.
- The tortoise does, in fact, beat the hare.
- Galleries, like banks, are more than happy to help you providing you can demonstrate that you don’t need it.
- Very few photographs would not be improved by being printed somewhat lighter.
- D-max never is. Archival is a relative term. The “circle of confusion” is aptly named.
- Acquiring a new camera can be both a door and an excuse.
- Infrared film is a fun and useless phase. There are a few exceptions, but even the great photographers went through the phase, too.
- Very few people can cut a square mat. Even fewer can cut a square window. Good oval mats are a direct gift from God.
- Most famous photographers work their

entire life and produce tens of thousands of negatives and hundreds or perhaps thousands of prints but are remembered for less than ten and famous for just one.

Cherie Hiser

- The fault with most photographers is that they spend 1/60th of a second making a photograph and the rest of their life explaining it. *Richard Brown*
- We are fast approaching critical mass on photographs of nudes on a sand dune, sand dunes with no nudes, Yosemite, weathered barns, the church at Taos, New Mexico, lacy waterfalls, fields of cut hay in the afternoon sun, abandoned houses, crashing waves, sunsets in color, and reflected peaks in a mountain lake.
- Always eat before going to a gallery opening and avoid, at all costs, anything with shrimp in it. Trust me on this one.
- Never ask a person who collects cameras if you can see his photographs.
- Purging your negative files in a giant bonfire is both scary and a relief.
- What one photographs says as much about an internal and personal process as it does about an external bit of subject matter.
- The quality of a photograph is inversely proportion to the amount of intellect used and directly proportional to the amount of intuition used when composing it.
- If a photographer really expects to produce great work, they must, just like musicians, be prepared to practice their craft every day. *Every day*. This does not mean one has to take pictures every day, but one must at least practice seeing every day. *David Bayles*
- The more controversial your work is, the more press you will receive and the more people will talk about you and your art.

This means nothing, but it will open doors that were previously closed.

- If you create controversial art just so it will open doors, you will be disappointed at how fleeting fame is.
- The most amazing thing about Weston's *Pepper #30* is not that he made a great photograph of a pepper, but that he saw it as photographic subject material. The second most amazing thing is that he endured 29 "failures" to make the one that satisfied him. Few people remember his *Banana #18*, but he made it.
- A large negative records more detail than a smaller one.
- Just as a large negative records more detail than a smaller one, a large mind is more sensitive to more emotions than a small mind.
- If your budget is limited, buy a cheap camera and the best lens you can afford.
- Making a photograph is a cumulative process with each step accumulating degradation.
- If your work looks like someone else's, ask yourself why and don't answer right away. Think about this deeply. If you do, your work will become better almost immediately.
- Don't be shy about approaching "famous" photographers. They are, almost without exception, giving and generous people who will be happy to help you if you are serious about learning.
- Before you sink a lot of time and money into your MFA degree, think carefully about what you will do after you graduate.
- If your work gains attention because of your extraordinary craft and technique, your fame will be fleeting. Pretty soon,

everyone will be able to easily do work that is just as good as your masterpiece of craftsmanship from today. When that happens, your work will have to stand on the merit of its artistic content alone. When “everyone can do it” is when the artist’s role is clearest.

- It is easy to make a picture of someone and call it a portrait. The difficulty lies in making a picture that makes the viewer care about a stranger. *Paul Strand*
- There is art. There is entertainment. They are not the same thing, but when a piece of work is both, it achieves a higher plateau.
- It is easier to make a viewer angry than it is to make them cry. The most difficult is to make them laugh.
- Organizing and planning is good as long as one is sure it is not a clever procrastination device to avoid doing the real work.
- Permanently dry-mounting your work to a mat board virtually guarantees that mat board will become dirty and dinged. You will be better served to mat your work so it can be removed at a later time and rematted if necessary. You will learn this when “the big gallery” calls you for a career-making show - next month. Take this advice seriously.

- Don’t allow yourself to become too enamored with your current choices of equipment and techniques. There will be new stuff that will make obsolete everything you are now using and doing.
- Everything you learn will become obsolete, but at the same time will be the platform from which you move on to the next phase. As long as you are working, there is no truly “wasted” time.
- Finishing work which you later think is bad is far better than waiting until you can finish it better. The only way to get to better work is by working through the bad.
- In ten years most of your work today will seem trivial and dated. A small percentage won’t. This is why you photograph.
- You would never know it by looking at the photographic press, but there are an amazing number of creative people engaged in photography who couldn’t care less about equipment but who love photographs.
- “Learning” and “living” are two words for the same process.
- In the cosmic scale of things, photography is not that important.

