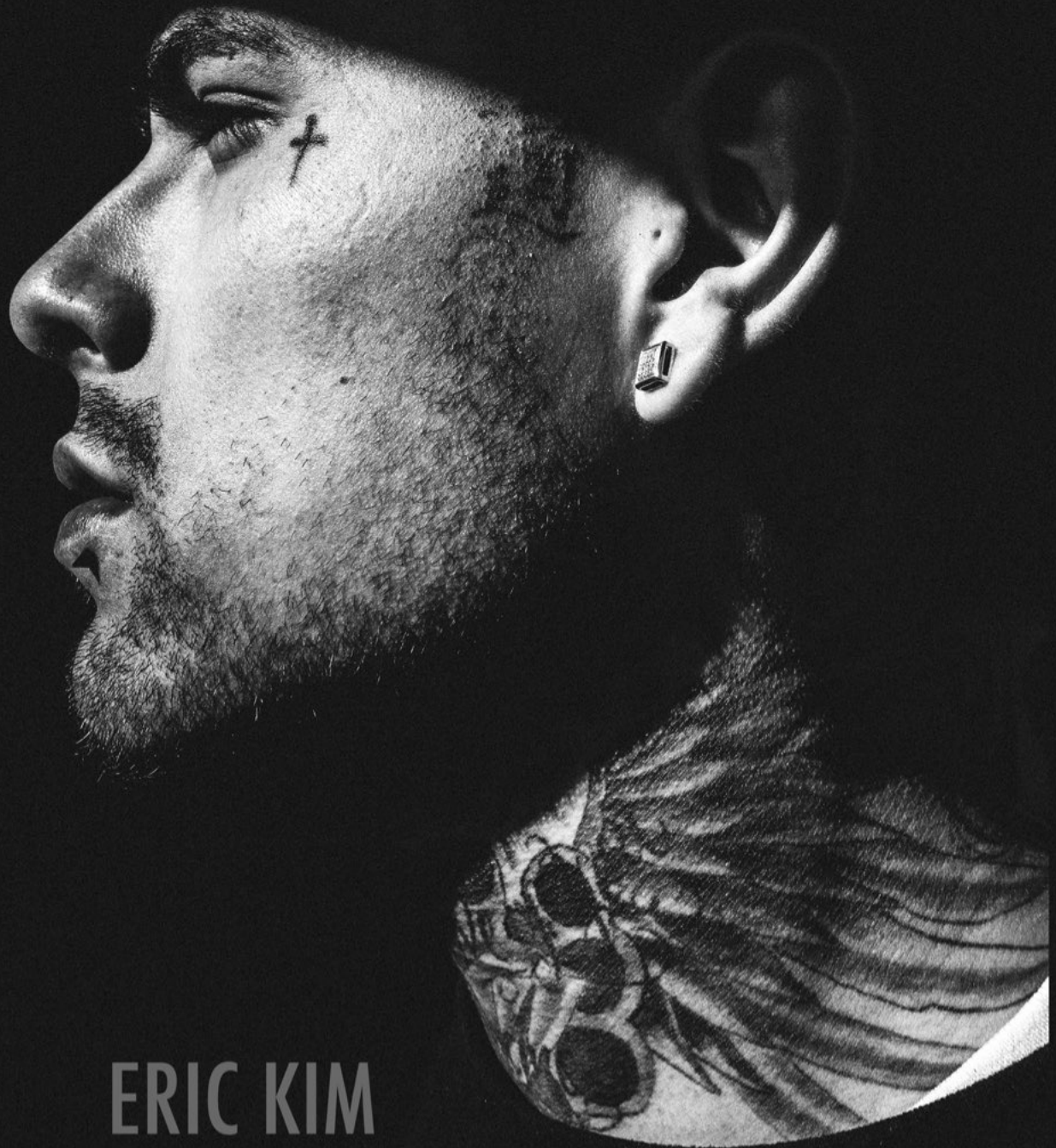


ZEN IN THE ART OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY



ERIC KIM

Introduction

Dear friend,

Thank you for downloading a free copy of this e-book. This is a compilation of all of my favorite articles on Zen, Taoism, Buddhism, gratitude, and other random philosophical musings.

There isn't a "correct" order to read this book. You can skip around the chapters, and read the book out of order.

I personally have faced a lot of discontentment in my photography and life, and writing these articles have been a form of self-therapy. I also hope these articles help shine some light and insight into your life and photography too.

Love,

Eric Kim

June 9, 2015

Compiled @ Vivace Cafe in Seattle

All of the content in this book is "open source"— meaning you can edit, translate, remix, or distribute it openly and freely however you would like.

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Chapter 1: How to Become Indifferent to Criticism

I love attention. I hate criticism and negativity. I want everybody to love me, to love my photography, and my writing. Contrary to popular belief, I actually have very thin skin when it comes to criticism. I pour my heart and soul into my work— whether that is my blogging, my photography, or teaching.

But I still get criticized a lot despite my good intentions. Every since I was a kid, I always wanted to please other people. More often than not, pleasing other people was more important than pleasing myself. But I think it is impossible to go through life without pissing someone off. Even if you have the best intentions in the world, you will always inadvertently hurt somebody, offend somebody, or upset somebody.

Why do we care about praise?

I think in the end of the day, we all want to be loved. We want to be loved, appreciated, and acknowledged. It is a deeply social need. We need social support, community camaraderie, and friends & family to keep us mentally healthy and sane. When it comes to our photography, we treat our photographs like our children. We want everyone to love our children (even though our kids may look ugly).

Regardless of how ugly your kids are, you will always think they are beautiful. So when people might not like your kids, think that they are ugly, or untalented— you take it personally. The same goes with your photos. You put your energy, hard work, and sweat into your photos. If anyone criticizes your photos, it feels like they're criticizing you as a human being. Like somehow by making boring or "bad" photos, you are a boring or bad human being.

My need for affirmation

I thirst for recognition, and I love getting affirmation as much as anybody else out there. Getting lots of likes, favorites, comments, views, and other forms of social media love is like crack cocaine. It feels immensely good, and puts us in a state of euphoria. But after a while, we become addicted, and we always need our "hit".

If we don't get that "hit", we become agitated, frustrated, and sometimes depressed. I think the true path to freedom is to not give a shit about what others think of you. That means putting more weight into what *you* think of yourself, instead of what *others* think of you. Some of the best photographers I know ([Josef Koudelka](#) is one of them), didn't give a flying fuck about what others thought about their work. This is what Koudelka said about creating work that makes you happy (and disregarding what others say):

"I don't care what people think, I know well enough who I am. I refuse to become a slave to their ideas. When you stay in the same place for a certain time, people put you in a box and expect you to stay there."

Koudelka continues in another quote:

“I always photographed with the idea that no one would be interested in my photos, that no one would pay me, that if I did something I only did it for myself.”

The reason Josef Koudelka pursued his photography is because he was **intrinsically motivated** (driven by his own inner-will), rather than *extrinsically motivated* (driven by the admiration of others). Of course **no photographer is an island onto himself**. We all need honest feedback and critique to improve our work and vision. Even Josef Koudelka carries around prints and shows them to his colleagues, friends, and fellow Magnum photographers to hear feedback.

I think there is a difference between trying to get honest feedback & critique from other photographers and trying to please other people. You can still stay true to your own artistic vision and not care about what others think (while getting honest feedback and critique).

For me, there are certain photographs I love that I know that everybody else hates. I don't share these images online, I keep them for myself. I know the “objective” reality that nobody loves these images. But I still stay true to myself— I shoot lots of photographs that nobody else will appreciate but myself.

Disregarding praise

One of the lessons I've learned from Nassim Taleb, the Stoics, and Zen Buddhists is that **to truly become immune to negativity and hate, you have to also become immune to praise**. That means that when people praise you for you and your work, you can't take their words too seriously.

This means that when you are also being negatively criticized, you won't take their words too seriously either. One lesson that I learned from Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh from his book: [“How to Love”](#), when people negatively criticize you can say, “You are only partially right.” *And also when people praise you, you can also say, “You are only partially right.”*

Overcoming the need for praise

So I guess what I'm getting at is this: don't become too addicted or dependent on getting lots of “likes”, “favorites”, views, or comments on your photographs. Free yourself from the tyranny of social media affirmation and feedback. The amount of likes/favorites you get on social media isn't a measure of how good you are as a photographer, it is only a measure of how many followers you have on social media.

For example, on most of my photographs I typically average hundreds of likes/favorites (even if the photos aren't very good). I also know I'm not the best photographer in the world, and having a lot of followers doesn't mean I am a good photographer. It simply means that I am popular on social media— nothing else.

Resisting being addicted to praise on social media

I also know that I am not immune to wanting praise, and the happiness I get from page views, comments, likes/favorites/etc. So what I do to better resist the allure of being suckered by external metrics? Here are some strategies I've employed:

1. Hide analytics:

On my wordpress blog, I used to obsess over the amount of pageviews, traffic, and comments I used to get. The days when my traffic went up, I would feel phenomenal and ecstatic (I guess like how stock traders feel). But on the days it would go down, I would feel like I was a failure. But following pageviews is a horrible measure to track your self-worth, as obviously whenever I blogged or reviewed a camera my pageviews would go through the roof. If I just followed doing things purely for pageviews, my blog would turn into another gear porn review site. I love doing book reviews and I believe in the idea of "buy books, not gear" — even though these book reviews get very few pageviews. I do it because I know that is what is important to me. Because I know I cannot resist looking at pageviews, I have purposefully hid them from my front page of my blog. Therefore this helps me have a state of calm.

2. Hide apps

I also have a problem on my smartphone: I am addicted to certain apps like Gmail, Twitter, Instagram. To avoid constantly checking my social media apps every other minute (like I used to do), I intentionally "hid" my apps from my application drawer (something possible on Android). I found when these apps were "out of sight" they were also "out of mind". So if you find it hard to resist checking your social media all the time and being dependent to how many likes you get on Instagram, take it off your home screen. Perhaps bury it somewhere in your apps drawer, so you check it less frequently. Or even more drastic: if you're addicted to it, just uninstall it from your phone.

3. Not take praise too seriously

I love getting praise, but I have tried to train myself to not take praise too seriously. If I took people's praise too seriously, it would cause me to fall into complacency. I think as a photographer, it is worse to have everyone say, "Oh my God, I love your photos, you are awesome" rather than having people criticize your photos. If you are just getting your ass kissed on social media, you will become big-headed, and never strive to become a better photographer. If you are getting criticized on social media, it shows you're doing something right— you are trying something different and slightly offensive, which is causing others to have an emotional reaction to it.

I think you can better measure "success" as a photographer by how many critics you have (rather than fans). So when people compliment me, I try to thank them for their kind words, but then try to quickly forget their praise, so I can continue to work even harder.

4. Avoid looking at feedback until a week later

I also have another rule when it comes to images on social media: I try not to look at how many favorites/likes/comments I get on the images until at least a week after I upload an image. I am still curious about the feedback I get from my images, but waiting a week before checking helps me build discipline and emotional disconnection from that praise I will get online.

5. Realize that nobody gives a shit about your photos

I know this sounds harsh, but honestly at the end of the day, nobody gives a shit about your photos. I don't say this to be mean, I say it to liberate you. For me, I know that at the end of the day, nobody gives a shit about my photographs. They might find some of my photos interesting, but sooner or later they will move on, forget about my photos, and live their lives.

I am greatly impressed and admire other master photographers, but honestly at the end of the day— I am so ego-centric that I care about my own work more than their work. So in a sense, I don't really give a shit about their photographs, I am more interested in learning from the masters so I can learn how to improve my photography.

There are also some psychological studies which prove this: they call it the “spotlight bias”. The concept is that you think that people are always looking at you, judging you, and analyzing you. But honestly, nobody notices you as much as you think they notice you.

Let's say you're about to go to a party and you have a small stain in your shirt. You honestly think everybody will notice at the party and feel conscious. But at the end of the party, nobody notices. You buy a new watch, pair of shoes, or a purse. You think everyone will notice your new little accessory and praise you for it. But very few people ever notice (or give a shit). You think that you buy a new camera and suddenly everyone will be super excited for you. But frankly speaking, nobody gives a shit (if they do give a shit, they might be more jealous and spiteful towards you, rather than being happy for you). And at the end of the day, after you die, nobody is really going to give a shit about your photos either.

Make sure you give a shit

So what is the solution to all of this negative-self talk I am mentioning? Even though nobody might give a shit about your photos, **make sure you give a shit about your own photos**. Our lives on this planet are short. So why not make it count? Give less shits about what others think about your work, and give lots of shit of how you think about your own work.

Create work that makes you happy, fulfilled, and excited. Always strive to grow, evolve, and mature visually and creatively. Don't fall to complacency, which can often happen from praise from other “yes” men, and what also happens in art circles where it is (mostly) about mutual circle-jerking. Create photos and art that you give a shit about. Nothing else matters.

Chapter 2: How to Free Yourself from External Validation

I recently read a book titled, "[Ignore Everybody: and 39 Other Keys to Creativity](#)" - which was written by an author named Hugh MacLeod. The story goes that MacLeod was struggling and frustrated as a young copyrighter in NYC, and while living at the YMCA, started doodling on the back of business cards while sitting at a bar in mini-comics.

His popularity led to his popular blog, [gapingvoid.com](#) - and built a reputation for snarky yet insightful humor about society. He gives a ton of great advice in the book (I highly recommend everyone who is interested in creativity or need some inspiration to read it).

One of the things that he says that really hit me in the chest was, "Validation is for parking". I read that on the page, and had to sit down for a minute to fully absorb the message. "**Validation is for parking**" I then started laughing out-loud at the absurdity of the joke, but at the same time was amazed by the power in that message.

The social and biological background for validation

Humans crave for validation from others. After all, we are genetically hardwired to want acceptance from others in a group. For example, when we were all relatively small societies living in small villages, not having acceptance from some people in our tribe would mean we would be banished. After being banished, we would starve and die.

This is also where the biological evolution for shame arises. Cognitive scientists and evolutionary biologists suggest that we are hard-wired to feel shame because we don't want to go against the popular belief in a tribe. Once again, going against the popular opinion and embarrassing yourself in a small tribe - also means that you will possibly be kicked out of the group. Then we would starve and die.

Society today

Today society is much different. We don't live in small tribes. We live in massive, bustling cities which are overflowing with people. Whereas in the distant past when everyone knew each other, we barely know our neighbors (at least in the states). People you bump into at the mall or at the grocery store, it isn't that likely that you will ever see them again. If you embarrass yourself publicly - it is highly unlikely that we will ever see those people again.

Yet we still feel shame. However if you think about it logically, there is no real reason you should feel bad or shameful in front of people you might never see again in your life. This is different when it comes to tightly-knit communities such as your school, church, local club, or even online community. We are hard-wired for craving acceptance and validation.

The “Flickr” mind-set

When I started off in photography, I didn’t have any aspirations to make a living out of photography, nor making a ton of money. I simply wanted validation from others in terms of getting lots of positive feedback on forums, or tons of “favorites” and comments on Flickr.

Therefore I would always go out hunting for that one street photograph that I would upload and get hundreds of “favorites” and comments - and have my inbox overflowing with notifications and validation for my photography.

What it means to be “successful” in photography

Although we are socially hard-wired to crave acceptance and validation in society (and especially photography) - it is possible for us to re-wire our brains. In sociology they call this “re-socialization” - in which we break out of the norms of society and do things our own way, which is often strange and goes against the grain.

For example, in America to be “successful” is to have a nice-paying corporate job making over \$200,000/year, driving a nice BMW or Mercedes (while having another sitting at home), having a white house in the suburbs with a picketed fence in front, at least two kids (attending private schools), and a trophy husband or wife that is also as prestigious as you. In photography, there are also similar standards to be “successful”.

To be successful nowadays means to have huge galleries and exhibitions all around the world, to have your name plastered in front of famous art and photography magazines, to win prestigious grants, and to have many books published with reputable publishers. This also includes having a strong online presence and having thousands of followers on Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, 500px, DigitalRev, or whatever social media networking site exists out there - constantly praising and “favoriting” your work.

Who are you really trying to please?

When it comes to validation, we crave acceptance from others in the photographic community. If we upload a photograph that doesn’t get many comments or favorites - we can easily become misled that our photograph simply isn’t good (even though we may think it is a fantastic photograph). We may continue uploading images constantly, yet barely get any feedback in general about our work.

Sure we may get nice comments from people that say, “nice shot”,”love the light” or one of my favorites, “great rendering” (whatever that means). However those comments don’t really give us an accurate scale of how we are doing as photographers - therefore it is easy to fall into a numbers game. The more “likes”, “favorites”, and followers I have - the better a photographer I must be. For the majority of my time shooting street photography - I have always felt this pressure to get positive feedback and conform to what was considered “popular”.

When I started shooting street photography, I would google “street photography” and came upon only the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and those in In-Public. Because that is all I knew, I would simply try to emulate their style and aesthetic in capturing images. After two years of shooting in that way (looking for an interesting background, waiting for the right person to come in- and creating a unique juxtaposition) I became quite frustrated. It didn’t feel “like me” - and I felt that I was simply trying to create images that were “pretty” and would please everybody. But you know what they say, when you try to please everybody, you end up not pleasing anybody (especially yourself).

Therefore in my mid-life street photography crisis, I came upon Bruce Gilden shooting street photography with a flash on YouTube. I knew that his style of shooting was very controversial and unpopular, yet wanted to experiment (knowing that there would be a lot of people who it may piss off). When I started experimenting shooting with a flash, many people out there told me that I should stop it - and simply stick with my old style of shooting which they preferred. Emphasis on the phrase: “they preferred”.

However I was really enjoying shooting street photography with a flash, yet felt enormous amounts of pressure to conform to what others were saying - and start shooting again my “old style”. Yet after having some supportive advice from several good friends - I stuck with it and haven’t looked back since.

Pleasing yourself

Validation is and should be for parking. As a photographer, of course you want to create images that inspire and touch people. You want to create images that people can relate with- that resonate with them. You want to create images that will communicate a certain message to them. However if you simply create images that please people- it won’t challenge their way of thinking and seeing the world. It won’t challenge the status quo - and it won’t create new ways of seeing and creativity.

When William Klein first started shooting street photography up-close with a 28mm lens and a flash, people are aghast with what he was doing. Born in the states and growing up in Paris, he was always a rebel. He disliked the “french tradition” of Henri Cartier-Bresson of having very formal compositions and clean images. He experimented using slow shutters, creating super contrasty and gritty images, and different focal lengths. Rather than trying to please his contemporaries and art critics, he was just having fun himself, and trying to create images that the world hadn’t seen before.

Now of course, Klein is regarded as one of the great contemporary street photographers that broke out of the traditional mold of “classic street photography”. People hail him as a visionary and one of the most unique photographers out there - but they weren’t saying that in the past when he was first upsetting the power balance between what was accepted and what he wanted to achieve.

Are there any “rules” in street photography?

No, there aren't any “rules” in street photography- simply guidelines. Guidelines are there to help us build a solid foundation on the history of street photography, as well as some tradition. It is important to educate yourself on the work of past street photographers that came before you - so you have a general understanding of what has been done or what hasn't been done.

For example, people always criticize the work of Bruce Gilden and say that nobody ever shot like him - yet they are unfamiliar with the work of photographers who came before him. For example, Weegee (who shot with a flash) as well as Lisette Model (who was one of the first photographers to shoot really closely with a wide-angle lens). There are many guidelines that I suggest to street photographers that I promote, including:

1. Don't crop
2. Don't chimp
3. Don't over-process your street photographs (HDR, selective color, etc)
4. Stick with one focal length
5. Buy books, not gear

Once again, these are simply guidelines- not hard-set rules. What I promote is based on my personal experience that has personally helped myself (may not necessarily resonate with you). However some guidelines I promote help people. Others simply pick and choose what they like and resonates with them (which I am totally cool with too).

Some practical suggestions

If validation is for parking, and we should aim to please ourselves first in our photography, should we simply ignore others? No. It is important to get constructive criticism & feedback from peers, because they can usually spot out the faults in our work that we cannot see.

It isn't just photographers who have other people helping edit them - it includes other artists, writers, businesspeople, video editors, you name it. Here are some practical suggestions I have that can help you achieve your personal vision in street photography:

1. Focus on projects

I always stress the importance of working on a short-term or long-term project. Why? A project helps you focus on your photography, and not constantly seeking validation for others. When we are too stuck in the “Flickr-mindset” - it is easy to become discouraged with single images that we upload that may not get lots of comments or favorites. If you work on a project, I recommend not uploading anything on the internet (publicly) while you are working on it.

If you are working on a project, it is very important to get feedback & critique along the way. However I recommend the best feedback you can get on a project is generally in-person, face-to-face. Therefore try to get to know other street photographers in your community that you respect their opinion.

If you don't have access to other street photographers locally, ask for feedback in private and tightly knit street photography groups before you release anything publicly. Or even email photographers for feedback & critique that you respect/admire.

2. Think about what you are trying to achieve through your photos

Are you trying to take photographs that are pretty and appealing to the eye? Or are you trying to create images that express who you are as a person, which communicate a certain message with your audience?

Create images that resonate with you first, and are personal to you. What makes the way that you see the world unique from the way that others see the world? What are you trying to say through your photographs? Do your photographs accurately represent the intentions you hold in your heart? If you can't create images that resonate with yourself, good luck having them resonate with other people.

3. Haters gonna hate

There will always be haters and people who don't like your work. It is simply something you have to accept. When it comes to photography and art, there is a huge amount of subjectivity that enters the equation. For example, if you show a person who loves black and white photography a portfolio of your work (half in color and half in black and white) - it is highly likely that the person might prefer your black and white work.

One thought that I picked up from Seth Godin was the following: ***"You either can be judged, or ignored. Choose one"***. I honestly would prefer to be judged. In the end, I would rather have comments from people that hate my work, rather than not having any feedback or comments at all.

Conclusion

Validation is for parking, yet we constantly seek validation and acceptance from others. Sure, validation is hard-wired into us socially and biologically, yet it is something we can break out of by "re-socializing" ourselves with new ideas. First aim to please yourself through your photography (by working on projects), then share your work with others. There will be many people who won't like your work - but there will also be those who appreciate and love your work.

Remember that by trying to please everybody, you will please nobody. Rules don't exist- only guidelines. However if you know the guidelines well, feel free to break them and experiment with your approach, your technique, or your equipment. Now go out there and create images that tell the world your unique story, your unique vision, and how you see the world.

Chapter 3: Nobody gives a shit about your photos

Nobody gives a shit about your photos (except yourself).

Sometimes I get frustrated and confused why I take photos. I think ultimately I take photos because I want my photos to influence, affect, and perhaps inspire my viewers (and other photographers). This sometimes gives me anxiety because it puts a lot of pressure on me to “perform” by making really strong images for my audience.

It has recently dawned on me that the only person who really cares about my work is myself. Nobody else really cares or gives a shit. Of course I have people who like my work, follow it on social media, and give me likes, favorites, or comments. But ultimately they just “like” my work– they aren’t deeply enamored by it, or passionate about it. The only person out there that has the amount of love, dedication, and passion for my work is myself.

How to shoot for yourself

I sometimes have a hard time just “shooting for myself”. In terms of personality, I am the total opposite of Vivian Maier. Whereas she only shot for herself (and never shared her work with anybody), I want to share my work with everybody. Therefore I have a hard time shooting for myself. But there have been several things which has given me more serenity in terms of shooting for myself:

1. Shooting film

I find that shooting film has helped me shoot more for myself. This is because I often let my shots “marinate” a long time before even processing or publishing them online. For example, I usually wait around 6 months before processing my film. Part of this reason is because I’m always traveling and don’t have to get my film processed. Another reason is because I want to emotionally disconnect myself from the photos I took, and judge them more objectively (after I forget taking the photos). This helps me enjoy more of the *process* of taking photos.

When I shoot a photo on film, I know I will eventually look at the image when I get it processed. But by shooting film, I try to savor the moment more. I take more pleasure in the framing, the click of the shutter, and the soft rewind of the film advance lever. Because I know I can’t see the photo instantaneously (like an LCD screen of a digital camera), I try to commit the image to memory.

Shooting film has also helped me work on longer term projects, as I focus on my projects in two phases: the shooting phase and the editing phase. I do all the shooting over a year or two, then all the editing and sequencing afterwards.

2. Imagining myself on my deathbed

When I am 90–100 years old (hopefully) and on my deathbed, I want to be satisfied with the photos I took in my life. I don't want to simply pander to the masses, and photograph photos that will get a lot of "likes" on social media. I want to make photos that are personally meaningful.

I wrote in a recent post how Josh White taught me the importance of documenting friends and loved ones. They're the ones we really care about. Nobody cares about our snapshots of those closest to us– but we do. So make photos that are personally meaningful. I want to make photos during my lifetime that I "gave a shit about".

3. Photographers are mostly self-centered

When I started social media in photography, the main reason I would give likes, comments, and favorites on other photographers images (or blog posts) were to receive them in return. What do I mean by this? It was like, "I scratch your back, and you scratch my back". I think by giving someone a like, favorite, or comment on their photos, you secretly want to get it in return. It is like a mutual "circle jerk" in some regards. Or in less crude terms, "reciprocity".

Consider why others follow your work, and like your work. Many people might just genuinely like your work. But others might secretly hope that you like their work (and follow them in return). This is like how on Twitter, there are some spammers who follow a lot of people (hoping they will get a "follow back").

What I am trying to get at is this: **undervalue how much people appreciate your work, and how much it influences them.** By undervaluing other peoples opinion of our work, we give more credence (or weight) to our own opinion of our work.

Pleasing others vs yourself

Have you ever had a photo that you didn't think was that great get tons of favorites and likes on social media? Have you ever had a photo that you thought was amazing, yet it got little to no likes on social media? This happens to me a lot.

Sometimes people are right. They don't know the "backstory" behind the photos I take– and judge it more "objectively" – whether it is a strong shot or not. Sometimes I am too emotionally attached to my "bad" photos.

At the end of the day, you always ask yourself: “Why do I take photos? Am I trying to please myself, or please my audience?” Of course you can do both: please yourself and please your audience. But if there is ever a point in which you only have the decision to please yourself (or please others)– I recommend trying to aim to please yourself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, realize that nobody will ever care about your photos as much as you care about your own photos. Who cares about how many little pink stars you get on your images, little red hearts, or blue thumbs-ups you get on your images. When you’re 80 years old and on your deathbed, will you be happy that you had tons of followers on social media?

Or will you be glad that you dedicated your life to making art that pleased yourself, and brought meaning to your life? Choose wisely. Life is short. Nobody gives a shit about your photos, but yourself.

Give a shit about your own photos.

Chapter 4: How Many “Favorites” or “Likes” is Enough?

This is an essay I wrote addressing our obsession with “favorites” and “likes” on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, 500px, Google+, photo blogs, and so on. If you have ever felt that you were photographing more for affirmation from others than yourself, give the essay a read. I share my personal experiences and also make practical suggestions in the end how to overcome an addictions to “favorites” and “likes”.

My start in photography

When I first started photography (2006), I remember the joy that I had of taking images for the sake of it, and how I would lose a sense of time when hitting the shutter. My first camera was a Canon point-and-shoot, and it was with me everywhere I went. I didn't know street photography at the time, so I took photos of things I find interesting in my everyday life. Landscape, my friends, flowers, architecture, the typical stuff.

Over time, I became more obsessive about photography. I knew that although I took photographs for myself, I wanted to also share my photos with my friends, family, and the rest of the world. Thinking about how to best get my photos out there, I first stumbled upon Flickr, online forums, and photo blogs. Of course at my first opportunity, I signed up for all these services to get my photos out there. I first shared my photos on these sites as a simple way to showcase and display my work.

However I soon discovered the addictive nature of getting affirmation on my photography through these early online social media photography sites. Whenever I uploaded an image to the internet that I was proud of and received a “favorite” or a comment, it was pure ecstasy. I felt a warm sense of affirmation from others, and having the number “1” in my “comments” section for my photoblog was sure a hell of a lot better than having a “0”. I soon got hooked on the feeling.

After uploading photos to these sites, I would check them several times a day. When I would check and someone would leave me a comment, give me a “favorite”, or there would be more pageviews, I would feel absolute joy. However when I didn't get any feedback or “favs”, it would make me feel depressed. I wanted more. More favorites, more page views, and more comments about my work.

My photography became less for myself, and more about self-recognition from others (quantified by numbers rather than anything else). Over time I discovered the “hidden rules” of getting lots of comments, favs, or pageviews on my photos.

1. The rule of reciprocity

One of the things I first learned was the rule of reciprocity. On Flickr, an online forum, or photo blog, if you gave someone a comment, favorite, or some sort of feedback— you would expect to receive it in return. Therefore the more feedback you gave others, the more they would give you.

2. Publish or perish

Another strategy was to constantly publish at least once a day. This would ensure the chance of getting more comments, favorites, and likes – and even giving you the chance of hitting Flickr’s “explore” that would give you the mystical 100+ favorites benchmark. Not only that, but it would build expectations for people, so they would start following you regularly.

3. Spamming groups

At the time I signed up for as many photo forums as I could, and would publish each of my favorites images to all of these sites. This ensured that I would get more visibility for my work, and would also end up getting more affirmation from others. Not only that, but I would add my photos to as many Flickr groups as possible, hoping that it would lead me to getting more comments, favs, and views.

Fast forwarding to today

5–6 years ago I would get an average of 1–2 comments on my photos and 1–2 favorites if I was lucky. I didn’t have many people following my work, would get an average of 5 comments on photography blogs on my work, and about 50–100 pageviews a day on my photo blog. Let’s fast-forward to today. I now have several photos on Flickr that have over 1000 favorites.

I have over 20,000 followers on twitter, over 69,000 fans on Facebook, and my blog gets several thousands of pageviews a day. Yet there are times I feel empty about my photography.

What is the problem here? In the past I always imagined once I got a ton of followers, a ton of comments, and a ton of favs it would make me happy for the rest of my life. Or at least I expected that the more favorites, followers, or pageviews I got it would make me happier. However in my experiences, I have found this to be false.

How many favorites or likes are enough?

One of the reasons I decided to write this article was from [Christian Nilson](#). He wrote a post on Facebook which said the following:

“The hunt for clicks, likes and favorites - a curse? I don’t know if I’m the only one, but I catch myself looking at the statistics page of Flickr at least once per day, the same goes for the visitor statistics of my blog. When doing this, I catch myself thinking why? Is it some kind of need for recognition that I’m trying to satisfy? Probably. On the other hand I want to think that it doesn’t matter what others think as long as what I do keeps me happy. Any thoughts?”

When I read Christian’s thought, I immediately related with him. Although nowadays I’m not asobsessed with clicks and checking my stats – it is still an issue that haunts me that I am trying to overcome. I write this essay in the hope that if you have experienced the same feelings of “favorite hunting”, this essay will provide you some advice and suggestions on how to overcome it.

Is it possible to have “enough” favorites or likes?

One of the things I learned through psychology and cognitive science is that we have an extraordinary ability to adapt. Whether it is good things or bad things. For example, if we won the lottery, we would be much happier, right?

Wrong.

Numerous studies disprove this. Of course if you won the lottery you would be ecstatic for the first few days. You would no longer worry about those credit card bills, those looming student loans, and now you would be able to buy a nice car and house. However after a year people who win the lottery report the same amount of happiness they did before winning the lottery.

Imagine a year after you win the lottery. The Porsche you bought now looks cheap to your neighbors’ Lamborghini, your house small compared to that of Bill Gates, and the amount of emails, phone calls, text messages, and Facebook messages from friends, family, and strangers asking for money is unbearable. Humans also have great resilience when it comes to adapting to bad things. For example, we all hear of stories of people who get into traumatic car accidents and become quadriplegics.

If we lost all sense of control in our legs and our arms, we would be depressed for the rest of our life, right?

Also wrong.

Of course people who become quadriplegics are understandably depressed for the few months after their accident. However when interviewed about a year later, they report about the same amount of self-reported happiness before they suffered their accident. Many of them report how grateful they are of life, how they

discovered a new hobby (listening to music or writing novels by voice), and how they are able to empower other people through inspirational talks.

Cognitive scientists believe that the reason we are so good at adapting to situations is because it is a natural coping mechanism. For example, if we were living as cavemen and we lost an arm (I'm certain many people back then did by wild animals) our biology would tell us to go on with life. If we just got sad and depressed for losing our arm, we would inevitably die.

As for adapting to really good situations? I surmise it is because when we are adapted to a good standard of living, our biology instructs us to maintain that same standard (and even strive for a better standard of living. This is why many billionaires still continue no work to earn more money (even they have far surpassed a good standard of living).

So how does this relate to the online social media world of photography? Being able to adapt to good (and bad) situations also relates to the social media world of photography.

First of all, it describes our never-ending appetite for having more favorites, more likes, more page views, more followers, more contacts, and more comments, etc. More, more, more.

How many “favs” or “likes” are enough?

How many “favs” on our photos on Flickr or “likes” on Facebook enough? According to psychology and cognitive science, there is never enough.

I would agree with the psychologists and cognitive scientists. In my personal experience, even after surpassing 100 favorites on Flickr on a single image (one of my earlier goals in life), I still wanted more. I saw others who had over 200 favorites on a single image (which made my 100 favorites seem like a failure by comparison).

Once my most popular image had 100 favorites on Flickr, that became the benchmark, the standard in which I measured the success of all of my other images. Whenever I uploaded a photograph that received less than 100 favorites, I would deem it a failure. I wanted all of my new photos to get (at least) 100 favorites on Flickr.

There would be times that I met the goal, which would only make me mildly happy and amused (kind of like how Asian parents expect you to get straight A's in school). However whenever I received less than 100 favorites on Flickr, I would feel like a failure.

Taking a break from uploading my photos to social media

So what was I to do in this never-lasting quest to conquer Flickr and the Internet with the most favorites of all the street photographers out there? It seemed that as time moved on I would become less satisfied with my photography.

My happiness and self-satisfaction would lie on how many “favs” I would get on Flickr and less about how I felt about my own images. I would spend far too much time checking if my numbers went up, and not enough time out shooting. So what did I do to get over this? I took a hiatus from uploading images to the internet. Well, to be completely honest I didn’t decide this. It was something that occurred by-chance.

Around the time when I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by my photography and social media, I got a challenge from [Charlie Kirk](#) when I was in Tokyo in December 2011. I think I was having a conversation with Charlie and we talked about how most of the great photographers out there (who pass away) are only know for their 10 or so best images.

Therefore Charlie challenged me to go an entire year without uploading any images to the Internet – and at the end of the year uploading my 20 best images. He said he thought it would be a good thing for my photography as it would teach me to be more disciplined and a better self-editor of my own work. It also made sense to me, as if the masters died having 10 great images, couldn’t I have the patience to last only 1 simple year to produce 20 “good” images?

An entire year? This seemed like a great idea at first. I knew it would teach myself patience and be a good exercise in becoming a better self-editor of my own work. Yet, I didn’t know if I would be able to do it. At the time, I uploaded a photograph online at least once a day or once every other day. I didn’t know if I would be able to go an entire year without that sense of gratification of getting lots of comments, favorites, likes, page views, etc on my images. It was almost like asking a smoker to give up cigarettes and nicotine. Favorites and likes were my drug.

I asked [Bellamy Hunt](#) what he thought about the idea, and he thought it was a brilliant idea. I asked a few others, and they said it was an awful idea. I then told Charlie I would think about the challenge and spent about a week pondering the idea. In the end, I decided that it was a challenge that I was up for, and I agreed to Charlie’s challenge. We also decided that the loser of the bet had to buy the other a nice dinner. Now looking back, it was probably the best advice I have ever been given in photography (thanks Charlie).

The one-year “no upload” challenge

The first thing I did to start this challenge was to publically announce it. I remember mentioning it on my blog in an article, and told my close friends what I was up to. By announcing this challenge publically, it made me responsible for my actions – meaning that I didn’t want to disappoint others.

At first it was incredibly difficult to not upload any photos. I would go out and shoot, and get what I thought to be was a great shot. I'd rush home, post-process it, and prepare to upload it online. I then had to stop and remind myself: I was doing this challenge and I wasn't allowed to upload anything. I still wanted to get feedback and critique on what I was working on, so what I ended up doing was still uploading my photos to Flickr, setting it to private, and marking Charlie as "family" so that he could take a look at my images and give me personalized feedback on what I was working on.

Over time, I soon added more of my close friends and confidants as "family" on Flickr – so they could track my progress and give me feedback as well. Although the challenge was difficult, I had a pretty good roll. I went around a solid 6 months without uploading any images which caused me to lose all urges to constantly check Flickr and check my stats.

However I soon started to get pressure and suspicion from people on the internet, constantly badgering me why I wasn't uploading any photos. They would ridicule me for this challenge, saying that "no serious photographer did that" and that it was detrimental to my image as a photographer.

Over time, the heat from my critics got hotter and hotter. They continued to prod me to share my photos saying that "I had something to hide". I am sad to say that I succumbed to these outside pressures, and prematurely uploaded my photos online. Although I am proud of the projects I recently uploaded (Dark Skies Over Tokyo, Korea: The Presentation of Self, and Downtown LA in Color) I still feel I needed more time to work on them. After this first onslaught of releasing my images, I felt a huge sense of relief.

But then it felt like I was on this "social media treadmill" again. I felt the urge again to always be sharing my images, and sharing with others what I was up to. This led me to leaking many of the projects I was working on. I then once again started using the number of favorites, likes, and comments as a barometer for what project ideas were good or not.

Literally a day ago I realized that this madness needs to stop again. I went into my Flickr stream, did a heavy edit of all of the photos in my stream, and removed a lot. I think for the time being, I am going to take another hiatus from Flickr while I focus on my "Suits" project.

So what is so bad about wanting to get a lot of favorites or likes anyways?

There is of course nothing wrong in itself to want to get people to look at your work through photography social media sites. I want to clarify at this point in this essay and state that **I am not against sharing your photos online.**

Rather, I am trying to advise you from getting to obsessed with online social media and photography. And once again, these are based on my personal experiences and thoughts – feel free to pick and choose what you like. In my experience I have discovered many dangers of this never-ending thirst for favorites, likes and attention when it comes to social media.

1. The majority of the people on the internet don't know what a good photograph is

I'm not trying to be elitist when I say this, but most of the people on the Internet don't know what a good photograph is. Think about the most popular photos on the internet. They are generally wide-open bokeh shots of random lights in the street at night, HDR photos of sunsets, or selective-colored photos of flowers. Sure from time to time I enjoy nice bokeh shots and think that HDR can be used tastefully, I would say that the majority of popular photos online are over-done.

Many popular images on the internet are generally clichéd, unoriginal, and boring. Not only that there seems to be an over-obsession with post-processing nowadays, giving us clown-vomit HDR, over-sharp images, and hideous watermarks. There is a school of thought that believes in the idea of "collective wisdom". They believe that the intelligence of a mass crowd is smarter than the individual. While in some regards this model has worked well (popular Wikipedia pages are often found to be more accurate than the average encyclopedia entry) but it also fails many regards.

Jersey Shore is one of the most popular shows out there. But it is a good show? The show is certainly entertaining (I've watched a few episodes) but I would doubt if had the same amount of poetic directing such as Citizen Kane. But I would argue that the majority of the American public know of (and perhaps enjoy) watching Jersey Shore compared to watching Citizen Kane. The most popular restaurant in the world is McDonalds. But is it good food? So instead of listening to what the masses think of your photographs, I believe in the idea of trusting a selective few (whose work you admire and respect).

For example, getting feedback from a photographer I know and respect means a million times more than getting hundreds of comments from the general public. If we let the crowd dictate what is good or what isn't, it makes us lose our own voice. I have several photos on Flickr which I don't think are very good, but have tons of favorites and comments. I also have many other shots on Flickr which I (and people I know) think are my best shots, but have very few favorites and comments.

2. The problem with marketing

The number of favorites or comments you get on photos doesn't mean whether you are a good photographer or not. It only dictates how many people follow you and how good you are in marketing yourself and photos online. When I say "marketing" I mean have an online social presence. There are many photographers who have a strong online following due to the fact that they run a popular blog (like myself), the fact that they have done many interviews online, if they give lots of other people feedback and comments, or if their photos are in popular photography groups.

There are many great photographers who don't get many favorites or comments online. Does this mean they are a bad photographer? Certainly not. For example if a photographer has a Flickr page yet has never shared their page with anybody (not even their own mother) and they have 0 comments and 0 favorites it doesn't mean anything. Yet we still look at our own numbers and thrive by them. It is a matter of life there will always be someone with more followers, favorites, and likes than you.

3. Social comparison

If we only got 1 favorite on a photograph, we may be discouraged. We might tell ourselves, “Oh man, only 1 favorite? That is pathetic. I see all these other guys with an average of 10 favorites on their images!” But then the guys with the average of 10 favorites on their images look at the guys with an average of 20 favorites and are discouraged. Then the guys with the average of 20 favorites on their photos look at the guys with 100 favorites are discouraged.

I certainly don't need to stay this any more. This is classic sociology, how we compare our success in relative to others. For example, that's why people who own a \$100,000 house in the poorest neighborhood may be happier than someone who owns a \$1,000,000 house in the richest neighborhood (all of the neighbors have \$5,000,000 houses).

Therefore 100 favorites for someone on Flickr can be considered a success for someone with only an average of 10 favorites per image, whereas 100 favorites can be considered failure compared to someone on Flickr with an average of 200 favorites per images.

How to overcome the endless pursuit of favs and likes

Okay, so if you got this far (I congratulate you for having the attention span) you might be thinking to yourself, “Okay I realized that I am a bit too obsessed with favs and likes when it comes to my photography.

I want to overcome it, but what should I do now?” I wouldn't pose a problem without offering a practical solution. I am certainly not the beacon of knowledge when it comes to the issue, but I offer some advice based on my personal experiences:

1. Don't upload any photos for a year and focus on a project

Although I wasn't able to last an entire year without uploading any images to the internet, it was still a phenomenal learning experience for me. Not uploading any photos to the internet taught me patience, and helped me focus on my projects (and not get distracted by favs and likes on the internet).

Therefore I suggest you to work on a street photography project for a year, and upload it to Flickr, Facebook, Google+, 500px, your website, blog, etc at the end. I can almost guarantee this will make you a better self-editor of your own work, make you more patient, and focus on photographing for yourself (not others).

2. Join (or create) a private critique group on Flickr or Facebook

This is another idea that you can do (in conjunction with not uploading your photos publicly online for a year). I still believe in the idea of getting feedback & critique on your work to know what to focus on and how to improve.

Therefore by creating or joining a small and intimate group of photographers via a private Flickr critique group or Facebook critique group — you will be more meaningful feedback and critique on your work. Not only that, but they will better learn and understand your work, and follow and guide you through your photographic journey.

3. Aim to get feedback from those whose opinions you respect

As a sociologist I know that at the end of the day, we as humans thrive and need social validation from others. I think that although trying to be too focused on validation from others can be detrimental, we still need a degree of validation from those we are close to, and those we respect.

Try to find a mentor when it comes to your photography. Nowadays this is very difficult to do, but attend a Magnum workshop, take photography classes in your neighborhood, or contact a photographer online that you admire (and ask for mentorship). All great students have even greater teachers that help guide them. Even the greatest photographers have mentors that they trust and confide in.

Conclusion

I wrote this article not to preach, but to share my personal experiences and frustrations as a way to help you if you too suffer an addiction to “favs” and “likes”. It is natural for us to want to gain respect and affirmation from others. It is what makes us human. But once we cross that boundary into having only an obsession from numbers, it starts getting dangerous.

Try not to thirst for recognition via the number of favorites, comments, and page views on your photos. Rather, strive to impress your peers, your mentors, and those whose work you respect. Certainly don't only photograph to please others. In the end, you should photograph to please yourself.

But at the same time, getting feedback and constructive criticism from people we respect will help you strive to get better, take your photography to the next level, and to challenge yourself. While I am confident in terms of my abilities as a street photographer, my knowledge, and my insights I like to borrow a saying from Socrates:

“The only thing I am certain of is my own ignorance”.

There is still a lot I need to learn and things I am ignorant of, but I hope that what is contained in this article will help you in your journey in photography (and to a certain degree life in general), as I know it has helped me.

Chapter 5: My Top 10 Sources of Discontentment in Street Photography

I ultimately want to be happy. But unfortunately there are a lot of sources of dissatisfaction in my life. There are a lot of things I want to change about my life, and my outlook in the world.

In this article I want to share some of the 10 deepest sources of dissatisfaction I've had in my life, and strategies I've been able to cope with these issues. I hope this can help give you some sort of help (if you're dealing with similar issues as me).

1. My gear isn't good enough

This is one of the biggest sources of discontentment I've had in my life. I always felt that my camera was never "good enough" — regardless of what camera I had.

For example, when I had my Canon point-and-shoot, that wasn't good enough so I got a DSLR (Canon 350D/Rebel XT). That soon wasn't good enough, so I got a full-frame DSLR (Canon 5D). The lenses I had weren't good enough so I got some Canon L lenses. That soon wasn't good enough (too big and bulky), so I lusted after a Leica M9. I then got the Leica M9, but thought that my lens wasn't good enough. I soon got entranced by film and got the Leica M6. That wasn't good enough, so I ended up selling the Leica M9 and got the Leica MP. The Leica MP was limiting (too heavy), so I got some compact film cameras (Contax T3 and Ricoh GR1s). But that wasn't robust enough, so I went back to my Leica. But soon 35mm started to bore me, and I experimented with medium-format on a Hasselblad. I found that was too much of a pain, and I've been shooting more on my smartphone and processing with VSCO. The resolution of that isn't good enough, so I've been shooting more on a digital Ricoh GR.

The camera and gear you have will never be perfect. It will never be enough. No matter how expensive your gear is, there will always be something bigger, better, and newer out there.

I know guys who own 3+ digital Leica bodies and that isn't enough. They start buying more lenses, start getting interested in different camera systems, and the really rich guys start getting into digital medium-format. There is never enough.

I preach "buy books, not gear" a lot on this blog and on social media. Why do I do that? It isn't because I am somehow impervious to wanting to buy more gear— far from it. I try my best to constantly simplify the gear that I own, and get down to basics (currently sticking with my Leica MP and digital Ricoh GR). But whenever I feel dissatisfied or uninspired, I always feel that buying a new camera will solve my life's problems.

But that is never the problem. The gear is never the limiting factor. It is always myself.

I have personally found that investing in experiences, not physical things, as being the best for my happiness and creativity. Buying experiences include attending classes, going on trips, or investing in education (like photography books). Buying stuff (new cameras, new lenses, etc.) have never brought me happiness— they have just lead to more dissatisfaction and disappointment. There is never a “perfect” camera setup or system. Every setup has its own flaws and shortcomings.

But I think true happiness is being content with the things you already own. Don't desire the gear that you don't have. **Desire the gear you currently own.**

Think about how excited you were when you first wanted to buy the camera (that you already own). Do you remember reading all the specs on the camera, and daydreaming about that camera? And do you remember how excited you were when you first got the camera? Re-live that experience.

Another thought experiment I do is this: **imagine if you lost your camera or if someone stole it.** How sad would you be if you lost the camera you currently own? How much more would you appreciate what you have?

I have also found the best antidote of being discontent with my gear is to **go out and actually take photos.** The more time I spend indoor in front of my camera and on camera review sites, the more dissatisfied I am with my gear.

But when I actually go out and shoot, I totally forget about wanting to buy new gear. I just enjoy the shooting experience.

In psychological terms, try to be a “satisficer” instead of a “maximizer.” Be satisfied with what you have, and know that it doesn't have to be perfect (satisficer), rather than trying to maximize the best out of what you own (maximizer). For more on this, read the book: “The Paradox of Choice”.

2. Not having enough social media “fame”

One of the things that I have learned from stoicism is that we should focus on the things we can control, rather than the things we can't control in life.

What can't we control in life? We can't control how other people perceive us, their opinion of us, how much other people respect us, and how famous we are.

Of course we can put some effort in terms of building up our ego and how other people might perceive us— but that control is very limited. We have *some* control of how others perceive us, but ultimately how others perceive us isn't dependent upon ourselves (but upon others).

In an article I wrote in the past, [“How many likes are enough?”](#) I explored this source of dissatisfaction I had in my life— essentially how many likes, favorites, comments, view, and followers I had on social media. When I started in photography, I desperately wanted to become “famous” and to be “acknowledged” for my work.

I wanted external recognition and validation for my work. I wanted to have books, exhibitions, and features. I wanted my name to become a household name.

However over the years regardless of how much “achievement” I have gotten— it hasn’t really brought me any more satisfaction or happiness in my life. Rather, the more I achieve, the more ambitious I become, and the less satisfied I am with what I have.

I remember when I started off in social media, even having 100 followers was phenomenal. But soon that wasn’t enough, I wanted 1,000 followers. Soon 1,000 followers weren’t enough, I wanted 10,000. And it goes on and on...

Essentially there is always someone out there who will have more followers, likes, favorites, comments, views than you. There will always be someone who is more accomplished as a photographer than you will be. Even if one day you become a Magnum photographer, you will constantly be comparing yourself to your peers— and even possibly become more dissatisfied with your work.

The solution? **Don’t seek external affirmation, seek internal affirmation.**

Ryan Holiday (a stoic thinker and marketing strategist) once said something along the lines of: **“You can’t control the results, only the effort.”**

I think if we apply this to photography, it means that we can control how much effort we put into creating our work, but we can never control the outcome (whether we become famous or not).

At this point in my life and my photography, I don’t really care how many followers, favorites, or likes I have anymore. I have realized that it will never be enough to fill this void that I have in my life. No amount of little hearts or “likes” will make you eternally happy.

Rather, I have been trying to make myself internally happy by judging myself with an internal ruler. I ask myself the questions like: “Did I put enough effort into my photography today? Am I becoming a better photographer from the past? Am I growing and evolving in my knowledge, experience, and photo-making ability?”

3. On not getting a “keeper”

Do you ever have one of these days in which you go out and you shoot all day (8 hours) and at the end of the day, you don’t end up with any “keepers” or photos that you are proud of?

It happens to me all the time.

No matter how hard we work in our street photography, we cannot always guarantee we will always get a “keeper” in our work or not. We can control how long we shoot, where we shoot, and how much effort we put into shooting, but getting a “keeper” requires some luck as well.

One of the things I love about shooting film is that it takes a lot of pressure off of me in terms of having to always make great images. With digital, I will quickly download the photos at the end of a long day of shooting, and look desperately if I got a “keeper.” However with film, I am stuck in the dark— which helps me enjoy the *process* of shooting more than worrying about the results.

I think that “happiness” in street photography revolves around enjoying the process of image making, not just worrying if you get a good photo or not. I enjoy the people I interact with on the streets with, I enjoy stopping by coffee shops in-between shooting sessions, I enjoy giving feedback and critiquing the work of others, and also having my photos being given feedback and critique. I enjoy meeting other photographers, and “talking shop” about street photography. For me, **the experience of shooting street photography is more valuable than actually making great images.**

I feel that by focusing on the process of photography, we are able to be less dissatisfied. We have much more control over the process of photography than the results.

Most street photographers I know (whose work I admire and respect) only admit to making **1 “keeper” a month**. That is 12 “keepers” a year (good enough for a small solo 1-person show at a coffee shop). That is 36 “keepers” in 3 years (good enough for a book). So just remind yourself: **if you can even take one decent photograph a month that you’re content with, you’re doing really well.**

4. Comparing your work to others

No matter how good your photos are, there will always be someone out there whose work you admire (more than your own).

I think it is good to be inspired by the work of others, to strive you to push your work forward— to become the best-realized version of yourself. **You want to become the best photographer you possibly can, rather than trying to be the best photographer in the world.** The only person you should compete with in photography is yourself. **As long as you’re a better photographer this year than you were last year, you’re making great progress.**

I am often discontent when I look at the work of others (whose work I perceive as better than mine) and think self-defeating things to myself like: “Oh man, no matter how hard I try, I will never be good as that photographer.”

But then the reason why it is bad to compare our work with others is that we have different life circumstances from others. Some professional photographers out there have the luxury of traveling the world and shooting everyday for 10+ hours. If you have a family and a 9–5 job, you won’t have that same luxury. So it is unfair to compare your work to the work of others who make photography their full-time living.

Another example: let's say you are color-blind. Then you won't be able to perceive colors as well as other photographers (who aren't color-blind). Therefore you can't beat yourself up for not making as good color photographs as someone who isn't color-blind.

A more extreme example: let's say you are blind. You won't be able to make as good photos as someone who is able-sighted. But being born blind isn't something in your control. But if you're a blind photographer, you can make the best photos you can (considering you are blind). In-fact, there are actually some blind photographers out there (who make pretty decent photos). But of course you would never compare the work of a blind photographer with the work of an able-sighted photographer.

Essentially what I am trying to say is that we all have different abilities in photography. Some of us are older and can't shoot for 10 hours straight (before getting tired). Some of us don't have as much time to shoot. Some of us aren't as creative or experienced as other photographers.

So be compassionate to yourself. Don't compare your work with others— or else you will always be dissatisfied with your work.

5. Not having enough time to shoot

Another major source of dissatisfaction I know a lot of street photographers have is not having enough time to shoot.

If you have a family to take care of, you won't have as much time to shoot. If you have a 9–5 job, you won't have as much time to shoot. If you are a full-time student, you won't have as much time to shoot.

I know personally when I was working full-time in an office job, I always told myself: "If I become a full-time photographer, I will have all the time in the world to shoot, and I will spend a lot more time shooting, and will be a lot happier."

However in reality, now that I am a "full-time" photographer, I actually don't spend more time shooting than I did when I had a full-time office job. Instead, I pre-occupy more of my time blogging, doing logistical things, answering emails, etc.

I actually sometimes feel that having less free time is beneficial for creativity. Why is that? When I have a 10-hour day free with nothing scheduled, I have a hard time being productive and using my time wisely. I tend to piss away my time when I have nothing planned.

However when I have a really busy day with only 1–2 hour breaks in-between my scheduled events, it forces me to use my time more efficiently and effectively.

So let's say that you only have 2 hours of "free time" a week to shoot. You will make sure to make those 2 hours the most intentional 2 hours to shoot ever. Compare yourself with a retired person who might have 80

hours a week to shoot. If you have 80 hours of free time, you probably wouldn't shoot as passionately as if you only had 2 hours of free time a week to shoot.

Another thing I think we need to consider is the fact that the *quantity* of time we spend shooting (the total amount of time that we shoot) isn't the same of the *quality* of time that we spend shooting (how focused and intentional we are when shooting).

So regardless of how much free time you have, rather than wishing that you had more free time to shoot—think about how more effectively and efficiently you can use that time to shoot.

I also do believe that the less free time we have, the more we cherish and appreciate it. So in-fact, 2 hours of intentional shooting (once a week) might be more satisfying than 80 hours of moderate so-so shooting (without really trying).

So how are some other ways you can better utilize the free time you already have to shoot? Are there other ways you can shoot during the gaps of your day? Can you shoot during your lunch break? Can you shoot a little before breakfast, or after dinner? Can you spend more time photographing your co-workers or friends or family? Instead of watching TV at night or surfing the web, can you go out and shoot some nighttime street photography? Think of ways you can better incorporate street photography into your life, rather than trying to carve our bigger chunks of time to go out and shoot.

6. Not always feeling inspired

I think one of the most elusive things in a creative life is to always feel “inspired”. But the sad reality is that “inspiration” is a short and fleeting feeling.

Inspiration isn't an on-off switch. We can't choose when to be inspired and how often we will be inspired.

There are a lot of quotes out there that share the mentality that you shouldn't only do creative work when you feel inspired.

This quote by Chuck Close has really resonated with me over the years:

“The advice I like to give young artists, or really anybody who'll listen to me, is **not to wait around for inspiration. Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work.** If you wait around for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike you in the brain, you are not going to make an awful lot of work. **All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself.** Things occur to you. If you're sitting around trying to dream up a great art idea, you can sit there a long time before anything happens. But if you just get to work, something will occur to you and something else will occur to you and something else that you reject will push you in another direction. **Inspiration is absolutely unnecessary and somehow deceptive.** You feel like you need this great idea before you can get down to work, and I find that's almost never the case.”

I totally agree with Chuck Close. We shouldn't wait around for inspiration before we do our work. Rather, we should just "show up and work".

The way we can apply this in our street photography is to **not wait for inspiration before we go out and shoot**. Rather, go out and shoot when you *don't* feel inspired— and you will find inspiration once you start the process of shooting.

Another example: I didn't feel particularly "inspired" when I decided to write this article. However I tried to focus on the process. What is my "process" for writing? It is simply showing up to "work" (Artis Coffee, which is my favorite cafe in Berkeley), having a double-shot of espresso, and putting on a "Pomodoro" timer (25 minutes of work and 5 minutes of rest), and just starting to write.

Whenever I wait for inspiration before I write, I never get any writing done. Whenever I wait for inspiration before I go out and shoot, I never go out and shoot.

Of course there are ways we can spur more creativity into our lives. We can [buy more photography books](#), [learn from the masters of street photography](#), and meet other photographers. But don't expect to always feel inspired.

Speaking of inspiration- what is "inspiration" exactly? My best understanding of how inspiration works is this: we study something for a long period of time, let the idea marinate in our minds, and suddenly there is an "aha" moment when all these ideas in our head connect in a novel way.

But these moments of inspiration or "aha" moments happen very infrequently. So if you wait for inspiration before shooting or doing any sort of creative work, you will never get anything done— which might also lead to more dissatisfaction to your life.

So how do I personally deal with not being inspired? Like everybody, I wish I was constantly inspired. I wish I could constantly be turned on, and inspired to either shoot, write, or create.

One of the best things I've learned is focusing on is focusing on "[systems, not goals](#)" in street photography. What is the difference between "systems" and "goals"?

Well with "systems" it is focusing on the creative process. It is going out and focusing on doing the work.

With "goals" it is based on external achievement— which is something you can't always control.

So when you aren't feeling inspired, just go out for a walk. Go out for a walk, and take your camera along. Simply snap anything that tickles your fancy. Don't expect to make great photos, and set your expectations low (even better, [have no expectations](#)).

Focus on the creative process in street photography. Always have your camera with you, always try to walk a little more everyday, [try to be more mindful](#), and put in more effort with your photography.

7. Not being able to travel

“You need a change of soul rather than a change of climate” – Seneca

I personally love traveling. I have had the great opportunity to travel to all of these amazing places in the world, and have met some incredibly inspirational people.

However I don't always have the freedom or the luxury to travel. Often when I am dissatisfied with my life, I think that traveling will cure my dissatisfaction.

But I think that sometimes traveling is just escapism— we have a hard time dealing with the reality of our everyday lives, and we think that after traveling, everything will mystically be fixed.

However this is rarely the case. I think that traveling in street photography is a good source of seeing the world, having novel experiences, and meeting interesting people. However wanting to always travel is a huge source of dissatisfaction. We can't take unlimited time off of work, we have obligations at home, and we have limited funds and resources.

The solution to wanting to travel? Explore your own small town or neighborhood.

Personally I have a lot of jealousy of people who live in San Francisco. I live in Berkeley (also an interesting city), but it doesn't seem as interesting or exotic as San Francisco. Therefore whenever I am not in San Francisco, I feel dissatisfied. I think being a part of the big city will make me feel more inspired, and help me make better photos.

However some of the best street photographers in history have been able to make really interesting photographs in their own small town or city. [William Eggleston](#) and [Mark Cohen](#) are two photographers who really made interesting photos in their own small, and “boring” towns. So think to yourself— rather than being dissatisfied with not being able to travel, how can you become a tourist in your own city or country? How can you make more interesting photographs in where you live?

If you want to learn more philosophy about traveling and street photography, I recommend reading my article: [“On travel and street photography.”](#)

8. Not knowing other street photographers in-person

Another source of dissatisfaction I know that a lot of photographers have is this: we don't know that many other street photographers in-person, or who live in our own city or neighborhood.

It is nice to know other street photographers “in real life”. It is good to meet up with other photographers, share and critique our work, and also get feedback from one another. It is good to have one another to stay inspired.

But at the same time, remember that we live in the most amazing time and age in which we can connect with anybody in the world. This is really the power of social media— we no longer limited by space or location.

So if you want to “meet up” with other photographers, perhaps message other photographers whose work you admire, and start sharing emails with them. If you build up a good enough relationship, perhaps you can give them a Skype call and chat with them more.

For me when I was living in Michigan, I didn’t know any other photographers in my city. However I was able to link up with some great local street photographers, like [Brian Day](#). He lived about an hour-and-half away in Detroit, but I would try to meet up with him.

When I couldn’t meet with Brian, I “spent time” with other photographers by studying their work. I wrote a lot of articles for my “learn from the masters” series— and I feel that by reading interviews with other great photographers that I felt close to them. I felt that they were my virtual mentors, who would help guide and inspire me with my work.

So if in theory that you literally don’t know any other photographers “in real life” or on the Internet— you can always learn from the masters of street photography by reading their books, reading interviews with them, and by joining online communities.

There are always opportunities— you just have to look deep enough for them.

9. Not becoming “recognized” for your work

I know a lot of photographers who depend a lot on external recognition— and who work their entire lives hoping to become “discovered” or “recognized” for their work. They want to be represented by famous galleries, they want to have their works bought and displayed in museums, and they want to enter the canon of famous photographers.

However once again, being “recognized” for your work is an external thing. No matter how hard we work in our photography, no matter how talented we are— there is so much luck that is involved in being “discovered” as a photographer. It is probably about 99% marketing.

Not only that, but how much “recognition” is enough? Is it enough to have your work published on a blog? Is it enough to have your work published in a print-based magazine? Is it enough to have your work exhibited at a coffee shop? Is it enough to have your work displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City? Is it enough to have your work written about in photography history books after you die?

For me at the end of the day, the only people whose opinion matter to me is the opinion of my close friends and colleagues. As long as I am able to get “recognition” from them in the sense that I am making progress in my photography, I am happy.

To take this even further— even if I had no friends or photographers to get recognition from, I would try my best to recognize myself that I am improving as a photographer.

Progress is happiness. The moment we stop growing is the moment we start dying and atrophying.

So rather than worrying about gaining more recognition of your work, think how you can continue to improve your work and continue growing and evolving as a photographer.

10. Not always improving

Ironically enough the last point I want to discuss which causes a lot of discontentment in photography is the feeling that you aren't always improving.

I'm a self-described "self-help junkie". I constantly read self-help books, trying to learn of ways that I can "improve" myself and to always become better.

However this has also lead to a lot of discontentment. If I am not always "improving" I feel discontent.

I have recently been reading a lot more Zen Buddhist philosophies— which focus more on self-compassion and appreciation (than simply achieving more).

The ultimate source of happiness I feel is simply appreciating what you have. Appreciating your life. Appreciating the camera gear you own. Appreciating the city you live in. Appreciating the photos you make. Appreciating the opportunity to be alive. Appreciating your eyesight.

So the last point is **be self-compassionate**. Don't take yourself and your photography too seriously. Focus on having fun. Focus on enjoying the process, and not feeling that you need to always become "better"— because **you already perfect the way you are**.

Conclusion

In this article I talked about some major sources of dissatisfaction with our lives. These sources of dissatisfaction won't apply to everybody. I write this all from personal experience.

One of the best things I learned about "happiness" was from Nassim Taleb in his book: "Antifragile". He pretty much says the following: **the secret to happiness is to simply avoid what makes us unhappy**. So all the sources of discontentment I write in this article— simply inverse it, and do the opposite.

Avoid discontentment, and you will become content (and therefore happy).

Chapter 6: How to Be Grateful For What You Have

Someone will always have it better than you. We are always tempted by what's new. We want the newest cameras, the newest cars, the newest computers, the newest smartphones, the newest tablets, and more. When does all this madness end? In this article I share some of my experiences succumbing to "G.A.S." ([Gear Acquisition Syndrome](#)) and some techniques I have learned from the philosophy of [Stoicism](#) to overcome it.

The Hedonic Treadmill

Psychologists call the need to constantly have more and more the "**hedonic treadmill**." That is, when we buy something nice—we are first satisfied with it but then our standards increase. Imagine a treadmill— when you first step on it you go at a certain speed. Then it starts speeding up—faster and faster. Before you know it, you can't keep up and you become exhausted and perhaps even collapse from the out-of-control speed.

For example, imagine the first time you ever bought your camera. It was brand spanking-new. It has the highest number of megapixels, the sharpest lens, the largest aperture lens, the best high-ISO capabilities, fastest autofocus, and more. That becomes your new standard. You love your camera for a while, then you start seeing the newer and sexier cameras (with more megapixels and unnecessary bells and whistles)—but you get tempted.

Now you are no longer satisfied with the camera you own, and want to upgrade to something better. If you use the analogy of cars— let's say you start off as a freshman in college. When you get your first car—anything will do. It can be falling apart but as long as it has four wheels and gets you from point A to point B, you are happy. But once you get a nice job, you end up upgrading to a nice standard car (let's say a BMW 3-series).

You first love all the new features, comfort, and speed of your BMW. But soon, you get used to it. Now that is your new 'baseline.' After a few years, you no longer are satisfied with your BMW, and want to upgrade to a bigger and better version (let's say the BMW 5-series or a high-end Mercedes). Of course the madness never ends— sooner or later you will want your own private jet.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman studied this "hedonic treadmill effect" and discovered that after people purchase new items, they first feel satisfied. Then quickly, they refer to their base-line of happiness and well-being. So whenever you buy a new camera or piece of technology, you quickly get used to it and start hunting for the new best thing.

My personal experiences with the Hedonic Treadmill

I find myself falling victim to the "hedonic treadmill" quite a bit. For example, I am typing this article on my nearly two-year old 11" Macbook Air. It is perfect in all regards, in terms of the size, weight, power, and portability. However I hear the new version is coming out soon— with a faster processor, longer battery life, better graphics card, and screen.

Now I no longer am satisfied with my laptop, and rather than appreciating what I have— I am hunting for the newest and best. The same happens with cameras. I currently own the Leica MP, hands-down the “best” film rangefinder that money can buy. Although I am satisfied with it now and have no plans of upgrading, I remember wanting to get a custom Leica MP with a .58 viewfinder (which lets me see more of the frame)— rather than the .72 viewfinder I currently had.

All this stress for a very small (and relatively insignificant upgrade). Even when new cameras come out, I become tempted. I remember when the Leica Monochrom and the Sony RX-1 came out, I was intrigued— and suddenly my gear didn’t feel adequate enough. Fortunately I was able to shrug off those feelings of “G.A.S.”

My experiences with G.A.S.

GAS gets the worst of me as well. I started photography innocently enough on a little Canon point-and-shoot, then when that camera wasn’t “good enough” as it couldn’t produce “bokeh” (I had no idea what bokeh was at the time). I did a ton of searching around the web, and discovered that I “needed” a DSLR with a prime lens (to shoot wide open).

After scrapping all the savings I had from my student job, I ended up getting a Canon Rebel XT (350d) with the 50mm f/1.8 lens. It was amazing the first half year I had it, and then upon discovering gear forums (the worst addiction one can have) I thought it wasn’t adequate enough. Everyone on the gear forums suggested if people were really serious about photography, they “needed” a full-frame camera to get “creamier” bokeh (once again, why is everyone on the web obsessed with bokeh?)

Anyways, I end up taking out some student loans to pay for college—and realized I had some extra money lying around. Of course I got the Canon 5D, and then realized that my glass wasn’t “adequate enough.” People would suggest that if I had a full-frame, I needed “real glass”— or what was the point? I ended up buying a ton of lenses I never ended up using that much (Canon 70-200 f/4L, Sigma 105mm Macro lens, etc) and the 35mm f/2, 24mm f/2.8 (not L prime lenses, but I couldn’t afford them).

At the end of the day, I ended up shooting 99% of my shots with the Canon 5D and the 35mm f/2. So I ended up selling the rest to pay for my loans and credit cards, and shot contently with that for about 2 years. Of course, we can never have enough. I then started getting into street photography, and discovered that the “best” camera for street photography was a Leica. After all, all the masters used it! I then began lusting after the Leica M9— and swore to myself once I got it, I would never want/need/purchase another camera in my life.

I would scheme how I could save up the \$7000 for the body (whore myself with credit card loans, selling off my car, etc) and even an additional \$3000 for the lens (God gave us two kidneys for a reason). Fast-forward after graduating college, I started working my first full-time job and started saving up money. I then got laid off my job about a year of service, and had some extra cash from my stock options and other savings. Of course I had student loans and credit card bills to still pay off, but like a fool I thought that my camera was a priority. Therefore I ended up getting the Leica M9 with a half-loan from my loving mom— (I want to share how much I love her, and that I have also paid her back in full). I also thought it would be a marriage that would last forever.

I was wrong.

The marriage only ended up about half a year. Once again, I stepped onto the hedonic treadmill, and even the M9 wasn't good enough. I had the older 35mm f/1.4 Summilux lens—but everyone told me how the new ASPH version was far better. This contributed to more G.A.S. I also went to Tokyo, and got convinced by my buddies to start shooting film.

After my good friend Todd gave me his Leica M6 as a present (I have awesome friends) the Leica M9 started collecting dust on my shelf. I ended up selling the Leica M9, and wanting a backup, bought a mint second-hand Leica MP from my buddy Bellamy. I sold the M9 for around \$5000, and got the MP for ~\$3600, using the rest to pay off my credit cards. I also ended up trading the 35mm f/1.4 Summilux for a smaller 35mm f/2 Summicron (I preferred the smaller size and weight).

Even now that I have the Leica MP, the madness never stops. Like everyone else, I get tempted by all the new digital cameras that Leica comes out with (the Leica Monochrom, M, RX-1). Also even though I have found some solace shooting film (film never gets outdated, because it is already outdated) there is another bag of G.A.S. in film. Compact cameras, medium-format cameras, large-format cameras, the list goes on. I am happy to say I have consolidated my gear down to my Leica MP, 35mm f/2 Summicron lens (the only lens I own), Contax T3 (film point and shoot for snapshots) and the Ricoh GRD V (got it for free from Ricoh and use it to mostly take photos of my food and friends).

I still all of my personal work on film—but once again, GAS will probably get the best of me later. But I try to remind myself of the techniques below. Note: Also some people have shared it is easy to fight GAS because I own a Leica. However note, the madness never ends (the list of collector Leicas going up to \$10,000+ doesn't end).

Seeking contentment

Fighting the “Hedonic treadmill” in our lives is a constant battle. We are continuously bombarded by advertisements on the web, the newspaper, radio, and TV that tempt us to buy stuff we don't really need. However whenever I get tempted, I read this quote by philosopher Seneca:

“True happiness is to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future, not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears but to **rest satisfied with what we have, which is sufficient, for he that is so wants nothing.** The greatest blessings of mankind are within us and within our reach. **A wise man is content with his lot, whatever it may be, without wishing for what he has not.**” - Seneca

Below are some other techniques I have learned from the philosophy of Stoicism to be grateful for what I have:

1. Desire what you already own

Don't fall into materialism[/caption] One simple and effective way to be content with what you have— is desiring things you already own, rather than wanting things that you don't own: In "Letters from a Stoic" Seneca says:

"Men cease to possess all things the moment they desire all things for their own."

Takeaway point:

Take a look at that camera that you currently own. Rather than thinking of the shortcomings that your camera has— focus on the positive things that you love about it. Love how it feels in your hand, the familiarity you have with its controls, and the image quality or autofocus capabilities of it.

Surely no camera is perfect—every camera has its own pros and cons. Rather than focusing on the cons, focus on the pros. Even the most expensive and "best" camera for street photography (the Leica) lacks autofocus (while even the most basic cameras have).

2. Imagine losing what you have

I'm sure we have all lost our wallets — and gratefully recovered them at one points in our lives.[/caption] Did you ever have an experience in which you accidentally misplaced your wallet— and thought you lost it? Your heart starts racing, and you think about the extra cash you had (let's say \$100) and imagine all the things you could have done with it. You become overwhelmed with regret, and full of "what if's" (what could I have done with that \$100?)

Perhaps paid off some of my credit card debt, bought some more film, or filled up my car with gas? You also think of all the unnecessary stress you will have to face canceling all of your credit cards and ID's, and having to get new ones. Then you find your wallet (where you stupidly left it) and then comes a huge rush of relief. You catch your breath again, and you thank God (or whatever higher being you believe in) for blessing you.

You tell yourself you will always be grateful for having your wallet—and never be so careless again with it. The same can go with your camera. I once accidentally left my Leica in my camera bag at a Starbucks, and walked two blocks away before I noticed that I didn't have my camera bag with me (that feeling of being naked without your camera bag on your shoulder).

My heart then raced, my adrenaline shot through the roof, and I rushed back to the Starbucks—thinking the worst-case scenario (losing my \$3500 Leica MP, and \$3000 35mm f/2 sum micron lens— that is a ton of money). I then found my bag, sitting there— and I raised up my hands like Rocky like a champion.

I was so relieved, and suddenly I began to appreciate my Leica so much more. (The funny thing is once I first got my Leica I was overjoyed, but the feeling wears out after a while. I started to feel like owning a Leica was ‘whatever.’)

Takeaway point:

Vividly imagine yourself losing your camera. Imagine leaving it at a Starbucks (if you actually have good taste in coffee—imagine a nicer cafe). Then you walk out for a few blocks—and remember you left it inside. You rush back, and then you discover your bag is gone. You ask the baristas if they saw it, and they shrug their shoulders and say no. You sit down in an empty chair, hunch over, and start crying.

You then start remembering how much you loved your camera and appreciated it. Flash-backs from when you first purchased your camera come back vividly to your mind. You re-live your initial excitement that you had with your camera. You then put up a little prayer to God and ask him that you will do anything to get it back. Now open up your eyes— and your camera is chilling by your side. How much more relieved would you feel?

You certainly wouldn’t take it for granted anymore. Practice this technique every once in a while (especially when you lust after a new camera) and it will help bring clarity to your situation.

3. Despise luxury

One of the things that I despise the most is luxury. As Seneca states: “**Luxury made the soul a bondsman to the body.**” Even the people of Seneca’s time (the ancient Romans) were tempted by luxury items (luxurious purple robes, gold-plated ceilings, fine ivory tables, and marble swimming pools).

The tempt of luxury isn’t a modern invention—it goes way back. What is so bad about luxury anyways? Well, first of all not everyone can afford luxury. And if you can’t afford it (but want it) it will make you bitter. Think of Aesop’s fable of the [Fox and the Grapes](<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TheFoxandtheGrapes> “<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TheFoxandtheGrapes>”):

“Driven by hunger, a fox tried to reach some grapes hanging high on the vine but was unable to, although he leaped with all his strength. **As he went away, the fox remarked, ‘Oh, you aren’t even ripe yet! I don’t need any sour grapes.’** People who speak disparagingly of things that they cannot attain would do well to apply this story to themselves.”

However once again—let’s say you can own luxury items. In the photography world, a totally useless lens (and pure luxury item) is the Leica .95 Noctilux Lens. It is the epitome of the online photography world’s obsession with bokeh. I have used the lens, and it is very nicely built and does take good photos.

But certainly not \$11,000 worth.

Not only that, but when shooting wide-open at .95, it is impossible to get anything in focus. Get the eye in focus, and the eyelashes are out of focus. Did I mention how heavy it is? Everyone I know who has owned it had an amazing time shooting at .95 for a week or two, then they soon realize how much of a pain in the ass it is to carry around (it weighs 1.5 pounds or 700g).

The novelty wears off, then people end up selling it. This is the same with buying any sort of uber-expensive or rare “collectible” lenses. It is pretty much a luxury item— or “men’s jewelry” as I have heard it called. And once again, even having the nicest luxury goods won’t make you satisfied. You become a slave to your possessions and keep running on that “Hedonic Treadmill”.

Takeaway point:

Learn to not covet, but despise luxury. Beam in simple and functional things. Luxury items are mostly there to signal to others how rich and ‘successful’ you are. But there will always be someone richer and more successful than you— so what is the point? The road to luxury is only a road of ruin and depression.

4. Don’t envy others

As humans, we are social beings—and we constantly compare ourselves to others. In-fact, ‘wealth’ is a relative term. It can only be used in comparison to other people. In “[The Bed of Procrustes](<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1400069971/ref=asliqfspasinilt?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1400069971&linkCode=as2&tag=erikimstrpho-20>)” (a book of quotes and aphorisms by Nassim Taleb) he writes cleverly:

“The fastest way to become rich is to socialize with the poor; the fastest way to become poor is to socialize with the rich.”

Therefore know that wealth is relative— and one of the ways to become more satisfied with what you have is to not envy what others have.

Takeaway Point:

Seneca gives three practical pieces of advice how to avoid envy from others:

1. Don’t expose yourself to the public view In terms of not exposing yourself to the public view, you won’t see all the fancy cameras and material things that others have. Now I am not saying become a hermit—but try to avoid certain social functions where you might get tempted to become envious of others. In a practical sense, **don’t hang out with gear-heads, or people obsessed with cameras.** They will only fuel your G.A.S. even more.

2. Don't boast of your possessions If you don't boast of your possessions you benefit in two ways: first of all, you don't look like an asshole. Secondly, **if you don't boast of your possessions, you won't be tempted to compare your possessions with others.** This is a great tip I think everyone should practice in everyday life.

3. Enjoy your things privately If you enjoy your things privately, you won't compare the things you own to other things. You appreciate it for what it is, in a more objective sense. Imagine the camera you own right now. Sure it may be a year or two outdated, but imagine how amazed photographers from 100 years would have been with it. Autofocus??? ISO over 6400??? Digital???

Conclusion

"The secret of happiness, you see, is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less." - Socrates

I write this article not from the position of that of an enlightened material-hating saint, but as someone who also regularly suffers from the "hedonic treadmill" and from G.A.S. But I hope that my experiences and the words of wisdom from the ancient Stoics can help bring some more tranquility and contentment in your life.

Chapter 7: On Jealousy and Street Photography

The other night before I went to sleep, I was reading a book on my iPad and then wanted to post an inspirational quote onto Facebook. So I logged into Facebook, shared the quote— and suddenly got sucked into the news feed. I started scrolling through the activity of all my friends— and started to feel pretty down. It seemed that all the other photographers I follow online are doing things much more exciting than me: they are traveling to places I have always wanted to, are doing big exhibitions, publishing photography books of their own, and doing interviews for big-shot media companies.

As I kept scrolling through my news feed and clicking around— I started to feel sick in my stomach. What am I doing here sitting on my ass here in Berkeley— and not achieving as much as these other people? After all, I work hard in my photography, in my blog, making connections, and all that jazz.

I then caught myself: I was being jealous. Jealous of the success of other photographers— and not being satisfied with what I had. When I realized this, I instantly jumped into the shower and blasted it to ice-cold, and let the shock of the cold water put my life back into perspective. I have an amazing life. I have traveled to many exotic places that I dreamed of when I was younger, met fascinating people, own the camera of my dreams, have a strong following online, and am able to make a living doing what I love.

I then started to have a flash-back of when I first started off in photography. I was far more jealous back then. Everyone I admired online had far stronger images than mine, had more followers, more favorites/likes on their images, been published more, had exhibitions, etc. I felt like a loser in comparison to them. And now that I have a strong following, have done exhibitions, and make street photography my living— I should be wholly satisfied, right? Wrong.

We are never satisfied

One thing I have learned through cognitive science is that we are hard-wired to never be satisfied. After all, it makes sense. When we were hunter-gatherers thousands of years ago— it wouldn't make sense for us to be satisfied with what we had. We had to be greedy with food and resources to survive.

Our ability to not be satisfied with what we had encouraged us to travel, explore new places, and make a better life for ourselves. Now we have the same modern dilemma. We are never satisfied with the cameras we own. We are never satisfied with the car we drive. We are never satisfied with the clothes we wear. Everyone always seems to be doing better— and we simply adjust to what we currently have.

Cutting jealousy by the throat

So how can we get over this sense of jealousy we have of other photographers and better appreciate what we have (rather than just adjusting our standards?) Well there are several techniques I personally use:

1. Imagine a former you

One psychological technique I use to better appreciate what I have is to pretend like I stepped into a time capsule and became a former me. So whenever I have a lust for a new camera or piece of equipment, I imagine my 19 year old self— with my Canon Rebel XT. How amazed and jealous would I be of my future self— with a Leica MP and 35mm Summicron? I would be pretty damn jealous. I then warp myself back to my current self.

I then look at the stuff I already own, and am amazed by what I own and I appreciate it. The same goes with social media. I remember when I first joined Flickr when I was 18. When I uploaded photos, I would be lucky if I got more than 50 views per photo, and 1–2 favorites.

If my former self saw my future self (with thousands of followers and hundreds of favorites/likes on my images) I would be jealous of my future self. Once again, I shift perspectives back to my current self, and realize how much I have to appreciate.

2. Realize that the people you are jealous of are also jealous of others

Jealousy is a normal human trait and emotion. We can't control that we get jealous. However what we can control is the amount we get jealous of others— and over time, we can become less and less jealous of others.

One way I become less jealous of others is realizing that they are jealous of others as well. I have heard some of the most famous photographers in the world are often jealous of their colleagues. For example, when I read the history of Magnum— I was shocked to see how all of these world-famous photographers would be jealous of the success of their peers.

Realize that jealousy is a never-ending chain. So cut the chain loose early-on (with yourself). Realize that nobody is ever satisfied— and jealousy affects us all.

3. Disconnect

The last piece of advice I have when being satisfied with what we have and being jealous of others is to disconnect from the internet.

What does that mean?

Spend less time on Flickr looking at the photos of others (there will be lots of photographers with more favorites than you). Spend less time on Facebook (there will always be friends and other photographers doing more interesting things than you). Spend less time on Instagram (someone will be on some exotic beach sipping a Pina Colada while you are bored at home).

Funny enough, even though I owe my livelihood (and this blog) to social media— personally I try not to spend too much of my time on social media. I rarely check my personal Facebook, and even less frequently my Twitter, Instagram, and other social media channels.

I find the more time I spend on social media, the more jealous I get of others (I find myself always comparing myself to them) which puts me in a depressed mood. I am not saying never go on social media. It is very important to stay connected to other photographers and what is going online. However a simple rule which I have incorporated into my life: don't use social media after 6pm. Surf Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter all you want when you are bored at work or sitting on the bus— but once you go home, disconnect.

What I do is put my phone to “airplane mode” to block the temptation for me to surf social media late at night and become sad about how boring my life is. I then use this quiet time to read books, look and edit my own photos, and spend time to be present with Cindy.

Conclusion

You might think to yourself: sure Eric, you suggest all of these techniques but you already have a strong following online, own expensive gear, and have the freedom to do all of this. It is true— but that doesn't mean that I am immune from being jealous from other photographers and people. There are many photographers far more popular than I am, have more expensive equipment, and even more freedom than I do. And even you — realize how lucky you are.

Even if you own a camera (any camera) realize that there are millions of people out there who don't even have enough food to put on their plate everyday. Our brothers and sisters are dying from disease, famine, and war — and we (myself included) dream of the next purchase we are going to make.

So let us all be satisfied with what we have, and realize how blessed and lucky we are to even have the ability to take photos (and even see). Imagine all the blind people out there who don't even have the luxury of seeing the world in the way we do— with all the visual beauty and complexity.

Chapter 8: On Failure and Street Photography

“Street photography is 99% failure.” - Alex Webb

Street photography is all about failure. The failure to have the courage to take that one shot. The failure to capture “the decisive moment.” The failure to get a clean background. The failure to have your subject make eye contact. The failure to move your feet to get a better frame. The failure to get recognition for your work. The failure to have your photo get “explored” on Flickr. Failures upon failures upon failures.

I think one of the things that initially drew me to street photography is just how damn hard it is. It was unlike any other form of photography out there. It was so unpredictable. Whereas when I shot landscape, macro, or architecture— I could take however long I wanted, and I had so much in my control. But with street photography, I had to learn to relinquish control to simply “go with the flow.”

I couldn’t control the light, control how people looked, the background— all I could control is how well I could move my feet, and click the shutter at what I thought would be the “right” moment.

I’m currently staying with my manager Neil Ta at the home of Gareth Jones and Savlatore Gulla in Amsterdam — and I had a conversation with Gareth about the constant disappointments and failures that the both of us have in street photography. But I came to realize that it was our failures which lead to our successes— and how disappointment was a sign that we were progressing in our photography.

For example, when I started street photography— I thought all of my photos were absolutely amazing. But when I started to look at the work of the masters before me, I soon became disappointed in my work. I felt like every photo I took was an “almost” photo— and that I would fail constantly, over and over— to get that one “perfect” photo.

But in street photography (and in life) — there are no perfect photos or perfect moments. They are all imperfect in little ways. Imperfect in terms of the frame. Imperfect in terms of the moment captured. Imperfect with random things dangling around the corners of your frame.

But I think it is in those imperfections come beauty. And not only that, but we need to constantly fail in order to become better. It was Thomas Edison who said something like: “Inspiration is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.” We need to sweat and fail in order to improve, and move ourselves to the next level.

Personally I see myself as a failure in street photography in a lot of different ways. However I have learned from my failures— which help me become a better photographer. Here are some examples:

1. Failing to take the photo

I have missed countless moments because I was too nervous, scared, or hesitant to take a photo of someone on the streets. But whenever that happens, I tell myself that I won't hesitate the next photo— and not have regrets later on.

Therefore I build up on my failures to take a photo of someone to build up my confidence. I don't want to continue to fail taking a certain photo and regretting it. So I try to live without regrets, and just take a photo (and not worry so much about the consequences after). And generally, nothing bad ever happens.

2. Failing on my projects

I have started countless projects that I have never published online because they all failed. They either failed to materialize, failed to produce interesting images, or failed to have a cohesive idea. For example, I have tried to work on the following project ideas:

- Airports
- Cars
- Babies
- Stuff on the ground

I have also failed to take any interesting photos in some of the countries I have visited.

But it is those failed projects that have lead me to work on the photography projects I am now more interested in. By failing to work on a certain project tells me that either that project isn't easy to photograph or uninteresting in general.

So by process of elimination, I have been able to focus on some projects that have been interesting or meaningful to me. They include the following:

- Suits
- Gallo Boxing
- Grandfather
- Colors
- Road trip Across America

There is a saying in the online startup world that says: "Fail quickly." Once you fail quickly, you can quickly move onto better and more interesting things.

3. Failing to be liked by everybody

I am blessed to have you to read this and a strong following on social media. But still, I always fail to get recognition from other photographers. No matter how hard I work in my photography, there are always photographers I disappoint, other photographers who hate my work (or hate me), or people who hate my blog, my YouTube videos, etc.

I want to be liked by everybody— but I have discovered that is simply not possible.

There is a saying by Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus who said, **“To try to please everybody is to please nobody.”** I have found this to be true both in my photography and my life.

By failing to meet people’s expectations— I start to focus inward: on my personal expectations. Over time, I have begun to care less of what other people think of me and my work. Of course I still want people to like my photography, and I constantly get critique from people whose work I admire and trust. But it is for me to achieve to the most of my personal abilities and standards — rather than to simply please others.

4. Failing to make interesting photos

It is very rare that I take a good photo. In my opinion, I might take one good photo a month, and one great photo a year. That is the expectation I set for myself. And often, I don’t even match that. It might be 3–6 good photos a year, and often I don’t think I ever make any great photos. Out of all the photos I have taken, the only two photos that really have embedded themselves inside me are my “Red Cowboy” photo and “The Sunbather” in Marseille.

I always strive to take interesting photos, but most of them simply aren’t very interesting. But I have learned this to be a good thing— is that I set my bar pretty high for myself, and only try to share my best work. This is why I don’t share that many photos— is because I simply don’t have that much great work to share.

But I’m glad that I fail regularly— because it gives me the motivation to try even harder in my work. I have tons of “almost” photos — photos that “almost” work but don’t work because of a small distraction in the background, or moments where I caught the photo half a second too late.

But every time I fail to make a strong photo, I always get one step closer to taking a truly great photo.

5. Failing to go out to take pictures

Another thing I fail at is to go out often enough to take photos. Ironically enough— even though I am a “full-time” street photographer, in-between blogging, making videos, answering emails, traveling, helping out my friends and family— I have a hard time making time to take photos.

I would love to have huge blocks of time when I can go out and simply shoot, but most of the time my schedule doesn't permit it. I am often running around running errands, or doing things during my day which prevent me to just relax and take photos.

But what I have learned instead is to integrate my life with my photography— rather than simply trying to separate them. When I am traveling it is easy for me to spend all day taking photos. But when I'm at home, **I make it a rule to always have my camera with me** (regardless of where I go).

I carry my camera to the most mundane activities. I bring my camera when I'm buying groceries (taking photos of stuff for sale or other shoppers), I take photos after dropping off my girlfriend Cindy to school and around UC Berkeley Campus, I take photos when I'm sipping on a coffee at a Cafe, or even when I'm driving (I either pull over and take a photo, or even sometimes take photos while I'm stopped at a traffic light). I even started a photography project at the gym I work out at— simply tossing my little Ricoh GRD V in my gym bag and taking photos of some of the guys working out.

Conclusion

I think failure is something I always fear— but something I have learned to embrace. I find that there are moments of fear that I always feel— when it comes to taking photos, sharing my work with others, or not getting admiration from others.

But every time I fail in something— it gives me more information, inspiration, and motivation to better myself and my photography.

I am the biggest failure in street photography, but it are those failures which help me re-evaluate myself and learn from my mistakes. I hope to one day aspire to be great, but I still have a lot more failing until I get there.

Chapter 9: In Praise of Slowness in Street Photography

One thing I hate about the modern world is our addiction to speed. We want everything to be done faster, more efficiently, and better optimized. We are frustrated when we are loading up a website on our smartphones and it takes longer than a few seconds. We hardly have the patience to cook anymore, so we just pop something in the microwave. We then inhale our food in a few seconds so we can get back to work and be more “productive.”

I think this addiction to speed is quite unhealthy— and stands in our way of living a noble life. One book I read recently is called “In Praise of Slowness” — in which the author promotes the art of “Slow living” to our daily lives. So for example, he promotes that we take our time when it comes to cooking, spending more time over meals with friends and family, to drive slower, and not feel the need to rush everything to be “productive” and “efficient.” After all, we aren’t machines.

One of the things I still struggle with personally is thinking about my legacy as a photographer— and what kind of imprint I want to leave in terms of my work. I like to think that I don’t really care what other people think about me and my work— but on the other hand, I still want to create images that impact and influence people and society.

One of the things that I love about shooting film nowadays is I don’t feel so rushed to always share my work. But still with the nature of social media, I have to admit— I am feeling more and more pressure to constantly produce. This of course isn’t just my photography, but when it comes to being active on Facebook, Twitter, writing articles for the blog, making YouTube videos, etc. I feel that I need to be more and more productive, which hardly gives me a time to take a break and rest.

One of my large aspirations in photography is to publish my own photography book. Deep down I know that great projects take a long time. For example, “Gypsies” (one of my favorite books by Josef Koudelka) took around 10 years of him traveling, living, and sleeping with the Roma people. Jason Eskenazi’s impressive “Wonderland” book also took him 10 years of traveling and wandering around the former U.S.S.R. Granted there have been solid projects that have been done in a shorter period of time, but I still think that a great photography book or a project takes at least 5–10 years.

I have been working on my “Suits” project the last 2 or so years, and at times I feel like I just want to rush it, pump out the photos, and quickly publish it. Yet on the other hand, I know that I need to take my time with it — in order to make a great project that I will be proud of.

I therefore wanted to write this article partly as a self-reminder to myself: to remember to take my time in street photography (and life in general)— as well as to promote the idea of “slowness” in street photography. I do admit I love speed in many ways (whenever I don’t have 4G it frustrates me, I love my 50megabit internet connection at home, and I get a thrill out of fast sports cars) but I think ultimately we could all slow down a bit to enjoy our street photography more and once again— just life in general.

1. Slow down publishing

I think social media is great in many ways— it has helped us connect with people from all around the globe, and has given us a platform to also share our work.

However one of the biggest downsides to social media is the incessant need to constantly be publishing, tweeting, writing updates on Facebook, and posting images.

I could be quite like this. Sometimes I feel the fear of being “left out” or “forgotten.” Therefore I feel that part of me posts on a regular basis to simply get attention.

However at the same time— I don’t think it is very healthy. I remember for a long time, social media was hurting my personal (“real life”) relationships. For example, I would be checking Twitter and Instagram, when I was supposed to be talking and fully-engaged with my girlfriend Cindy over lunch.

Not only that, but it was quite stressful to always feel the need to be active online. With so many social media platforms now (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, Instagram, Google+, etc) — it is almost impossible to keep up.

I always used to feel the need to constantly publish photos online as well. For a while I made it a goal to publish at least one photograph everyday— to rack up as many “Likes”, “Favorites”, and comments as possible — while staying in the spotlight.

However one of the negative things I found about publishing too much was the overall quality of my work started to go down. I rarely get good photos (maybe one good shot a month)— so a lot of the work I was publishing wasn’t very good.

Publishing photos constantly and pumping out images was starting to get quite stressful as well. If I missed a day of posting, I would get anxiety — and feel like I had to rush home to post something on Flickr.

This all changed when about two years ago Charlie Kirk challenged me to go a year without posting any images to social media. I thought it was a crazy idea, but I took up his challenge and (almost successfully) made the entire year (I gave in about after 8 months). But what I learned in that period was how refreshing, liberating, and fruitful it was to *not* share work online on a regular basis.

It is also a habit I have kept up. I try my best not to share too much work on social media now, as I find it distracts me. Whenever I upload a photo to Facebook or Flickr, I have a certain expectation of how many “Likes” and “Favorites” I “should” get. For example, whenever I get fewer than 100 Likes/Favorites on a photo — it makes me quite sad. Then this makes me feel less motivated to go out and shoot. I also get into a bad habit of constantly reloading my photos every few hours to see if I got any more likes or favorites.

Of course, this is a totally irrational thing to do. 100 likes/favorites per photo is a huge sum, but since I am “anchored” to getting an average of those many likes/favorites— this is what I expect. And when my

expectations aren't met, they make me second-question myself as a photographer— rather than just going out and focusing on my photography.

Therefore I find the fewer photos I publish and the less often I publish them— the better I feel, and the less distracted I become. By spending less time sharing images on social media, I could rather focus on my projects and instead spend more time with fellow street photographers in-person to get their feedback/critique.

Takeaway point

I think nowadays with the proliferation of social media— **less is more**. Don't feel obliged to share a photograph everyday. Or even every week.

Take your time with sharing your work, and I also recommend only sharing your best work. I think that you are only as good as your worst photo that you share online.

If you want to feel less pressured constantly being active on social media I can recommend the following experiment: **go 6 months to a year of not sharing your phones online**. You will be amazed how much more focus it will give you in producing your work, and less pressure and stress with always sharing your images online.

2. Slow down looking at photographs

I have to admit, one of my problems when I'm looking at photos is that I flip through them far too quickly. On average, I probably spend less than a second to look at an image, before moving on.

However I think this is a huge problem— as I feel that many great street photographs out there need time for you to appreciate them. There are often small details in a photograph that make it great— which are easily overlooked if you don't spend each time with a photograph.

Therefore nowadays I try to spend a lot more time per photograph, to not just look at them— but to **read and analyze them**. I far prefer looking at photos in books rather than on the internet (I think that books promote a slower approach, whereas the internet gives me a short attention span). I think that **by having a more analytical approach of reading photographs, we can better learn from them**.

Not only that, but by spending more time to enjoy each image is like slowing down when eating our food. If you order an expensive steak dinner with a vintage wine, wouldn't you better enjoy it by chewing slowly— by enjoying every bite and flavor? If you simply gulp the whole thing down quickly— you won't appreciate it nearly as much.

Here is a mental checklist of questions I think when looking at images:

- Why did the photographer decide to take this photograph? What does he/she see that I don't see?
- I don't think this photograph is very interesting or good— what does the photographer like about this photograph?
- Why did this photographer sequence this photo book the way he/she did? What is the meaning of the sequence, and how do the pieces connect to one another?
- Why did the photographer decide to pair these two images next to each other on opposite sides of the page? Is there a relationship of the colors, forms, content, or a huge contrast?
- How did the photographer compose the image? Do I see any geometric shapes (circles, triangles, squares) that hold the image together? Is it a traditional or non-traditional composition, and does it work for me?
- What emotion does the photograph bring to me? How does it make me feel?
- What is a little fictitious story I might make up from the photograph? How does that compare to perhaps what happened in real life?
- What relationship does the subject have to the background, and vice-versa?

As you can see, these are a lot of thoughts and questions to process— which takes time and deep thinking.

You guys also well know that I advocate investing in photography books. However I still recommend spending ample amount of time and effort with each photography book (before going out and buying another one).

Another problem I have is that I only will look through a photography book one or twice, before I get bored and simply order another one to appease my appetite for images. I have therefore tried my best to refrain myself from buying more photo books, and spending more time with the books I already have— re-reading them and re-analyzing them. Seeing if I feel differently about the photos and the images when I first bought the book (compared to now).

Takeaway point

I think it is far harder to appreciate photos when we look at them online. A tip is when you are looking at images online, try to look at them in full-screen and take more time looking at each image.

As an experiment, **try to spend at least 30 seconds per photograph**, and gaze all around the frame. Look for the small details, and mentally note what you like (or dislike) about the images. Analyze the photos, rather than just looking at them.

At the end of the day, I personally prefer looking at photographs in books or exhibitions— because I don't get distracted by the computer (something interesting is always happening on Facebook).

3. Slow down in the streets

One street photographer whose philosophy of shooting on the streets is Rinzi Ruiz. To me, he is the father of “zen street photography.” He refers to his shooting on the streets as “walking meditation”— and it is a beautiful way to explore the world.

One of the problems I have when I am shooting on the streets is that I run around too much like a chicken without its head. I can’t stand still— and feel like I need to always run around, hunting for the next photograph.

However whenever I see Rinzi walking on the streets, he is at peace— taking his time, enjoying to smell the roses— and ends up seeing a lot of photos I don’t (because I am moving around so much).

Lately I have been trying to slow down a lot more when shooting on the streets— and it has been giving me huge benefits. I feel that simply by walking slower, you can see more things— and appreciate them more. Rather than feeling that I need to always be going to the people, I simply let them come to me.

By walking slower, not only do I see more photo opportunities— but I conserve my energy better. This means that I can walk longer distances and for a longer period of time before I get tired. When I run around too quickly, I get burnt out too fast.

Takeaway point

If you are like me and tend to move around too much (and too quickly) when on the streets— slow down. Walk at half the pace you normally do, and spend more time to breathe in and experience the streets. Notice the small details, and let others walk quicker— around you.

Not only that, but try being patient and working a certain spot or corner. If it is around golden hour (sunset or sunrise) — find a nice area with good light, and wait for your subjects to enter the scene.

Joel Meyerowitz also shared a similar idea of how he loves to just wait at street corners, and let people to come to him. What this has allowed him to do is to create fuller and more complex frames— bursting at the seams with energy and life.

Conclusion

These are just 3 simple ideas of how you can better enjoy street photography— by slowing down. Don't feel that everything needs to be forced and rushed. Rather, take on the philosophy of Taoism and Zen — simply let things take their course.

Take more time before uploading images online, take more time when looking at images, and take more time when shooting on the streets. Slowness is considered a “lazy” and negative trait in the modern world, but there are so many benefits: less stress, more enjoyment, and higher quality of life.

And remember, enjoying slowness isn't just for street photography, but life. Slow down when having meals with friends— don't feel like you need to gulp down your food quickly before you get to your next meeting. Spend more time with your spouse and kids— give them extra hugs and time to talk about their day. Slow down when driving on the streets (driving too fast can kill you). Eat your food slowly, and savor every bite, morsel, and enjoy the flavors.

Chapter 10: How to Be Mindful in Street Photography

I just finished a book called “10% happier”, which preached the benefits of mediation and mindfulness in everyday life.

There is a lot of pain and anxiety from everyday life, and one of the main causes of that is longing for something. Wanting something that we don’t have. By focusing too much on the future and the past.

However according to the book (and Buddhism), one of the best ways to overcome this is by not striving. By focusing on the present moment.

I think there are a lot of things we can focus on in being present and mindful in street photography. Here are some things that come to mind:

1. Being focused on the streets

It is easy to let our focus shift too much when we’re out shooting. We might focus too much on the stresses we have, whether it be financial, emotional, work related, or anything else.

When we’re out shooting, we should be focused on the present moment. The joy to be outside, experiencing life with our camera. We should enjoy the breeze of the cool air, the sounds of people interacting on the streets, and the joy of clicking the shutter button on our camera.

So as easy it is to drift away from the act of shooting on the streets (and think about random things)— try to focus on the present moment. The second you let your mind wander, focus on the sensation of your feet in the pavement, the weight of the camera around your neck or hand, and focusing on what you see before you.

2. Being pleased with the gear we own

One of the things that is very difficult (in an age of marketing and advertisements) is to be satisfied with what we have. Especially when it comes to photography and cameras. They call this “GAS” (gear acquisition syndrome) in which we are getting new cameras, lenses, and equipment with the hope it will inspire us and help us become better photographers.

I was very much like this in the past. I would always be dissatisfied with the camera and lenses I owned, and I felt that the next purchase would make me a better and more inspired photographer. I spent far too much time on gear forums and camera rumor sites. I listed after the newest, shiniest, and trendy camera. It happened with every camera. From my Canon point and shoot, to my Canon Rebel XT, to my Canon 5D, and finally to my Leica M9. Now I’m shooting mostly film so there is less GAS on my part (film is already outdated), but I still struggle with not getting tempted by all these new and sexy cameras.

My biggest regret is spending all that time, energy, and money on all these new cameras and gear. I wish I invested my time and money into experiences, not physical possessions. I wish I spent the money to travel more, to buy more photography books, and invest in my education as a photographer.

So the moment you ever feel dissatisfied with your gear, the best remedy is to simply go outside and take photos. I find I am rarely dissatisfied with my camera when I'm outside actually making images. I'm only dissatisfied with my equipment when I'm comparing myself to others on the Internet and what they own.

Another solution to spend less time on gear review sites is to block them with a browser plugin, and rather set magnumphotos.com as your bookmark. Study the masters, consume their images, and be inspired.

And if you do have the money, invest it into travel, books, workshops, education, and self learning. It will pay far higher dividends.

3. Enjoy the process, not the destination

When I'm working on photography projects, sometimes I can be so caught up in wanting to see the final product, rather than simply enjoying the process.

There is a saying that "life is about the journey, not the destination". I think we should apply the same thought to our photography.

Many of us aspire to become great photographers, to have our works exhibited internationally, to have a strong social media following, and to have our work be appreciated by others. However by focusing on those external goals, we can sometimes lose sight of the joy of actually taking photos.

So whenever you feel frustrated with your photography, remember to enjoy the process. The journey of learning, improving your work, and sharing that passion with others is the most valuable thing.

4. Chew on photographs slowly

One of the problems I suffer is that I often look at photographs too quickly. I'm quite impatient, so if a photograph doesn't initially interest me, I'll quickly disregard it and move on.

However I feel that the best way to enjoy a photograph is slowly and mindfully. To take at least a minute to look around the frame, observe the light and shadows, to inspect the content in the frame, and to look for small details in the image. It is like eating a nice meal — by slowly chewing, noting the flavors, and consuming it with joy and delight.

So imagine photographs you look at as food. Don't just simply inhale the food, trying to shove more into your mouth. Rather, treat it like you were at a nice restaurant. Chew and digest photographs slowly, mindfully, and graciously.

5. Focus on your breath

One of the main things I've learned from meditation, yoga, and Buddhism is the importance of focusing on your breath. When we get angry, or upset, our breathing goes through the roof. I've found personally when I'm anxious or stressed, focusing on my breath helps me calm down tremendously.

So a practical way you can apply this in street photography: if you ever upset somebody or face a confrontation on the streets, don't panic. Focus on your breath. Be mindful of the situation, and calmly explain to your subject why you took a photograph of them. Smile politely and apologize.

If you are feeling generally nervous or anxious when shooting on the streets, you can do the same thing. Know that taking photographs of strangers can be seen as a form of aggression. And when we are noticed taking photographs of strangers, we often get the "fight or flight" reaction — in which we sweat, our adrenaline escalated, and our heart rate goes through the roof. We adapted this way in ancient times or prevent us from angering others which could lead us to dying.

Fortunately in the modern world we rarely encounter such life or death situations. Our environment has changed, but our physiological responses have not.

So whenever you're stressed, anxious, or nervous when out on the streets or taking photos— just take a second to breathe deeply, in and out. Focus on your breath, and let everything melt sway.

Conclusion

I'm not a zen master or Buddhist, but these philosophies have helped me gain more peace and tranquility in my everyday life, and in street photography. By letting go of the past, worries about the future, and being mindful and focused on the present— can we truly be happy and grateful for what we have.

Chapter 11: Zen in the Art of Street Photography

My good friend [Nicholas Susatyo](#) recently recommended a book to me: "[Zen in the Art of Archery](#)." In-fact, it was the book that Henri Cartier-Bresson said had the deepest influence in his photography. I have been meaning to read it for a while, so on my flight to Philly I decided to give it a go.

The book is written by [Eugen Herrigel](#), a German philosophy teacher who went to Japan for several years and learned the art of archery (while teaching philosophy at a Japanese university). He heard about the art of archery, and was fascinated with the zen philosophy which was embedded in the art.

As we all know, archery is no longer practiced in the “real world” in battles and such. When Herrigel wrote “[Zen in the Art of Archery](#)” in the 1940’s, it was a very closed art— only reserved to local Japanese who were serious enough about it. To teach a foreigner the art of zen and archery was considered heretical.

However with some good luck (a good introduction by a Japanese friend) and some persistence, Herrigel was able to go under the wing of one of the greatest archers in Japan. And with his experiences learning under him for 6 years, he wrote his brief book on “The Art of Zen and Archery.”

The book was an enjoyable read to me, because he explained the zen philosophies (which are often cryptic) in a way in which westerners could understand. Being Korean-American myself, it was the perfect balance of Eastern Philosophy with Western analysis.

After finishing the book, not only did I learn many insights which I plan on applying to my practical everyday life, but also to my street photography. Some of these philosophies may seem a bit cryptic, but I will share what I personally got out of reading the book. And of course, I am not an expert of zen—and one of the biggest difficulties is that there are so many branches of zen that all the practitioners have subtly different philosophies. Please feel free to share your thoughts and also corrections in the comments below.

1. Lose yourself in the moment

One of the things I love most about street photography is this feeling that I lose all consciousness of myself when out shooting on the streets. I no longer think of myself consciously as an entity— rather, I feel like my body melts into the streets and I become physically and spiritually embedded into the environment that I explore.

I lose consciousness of walking, of breathing, and even of holding my camera. I let my eyes wander— being fascinated by the people living their everyday lives on the streets, and their interactions. Whenever I see something I want to capture— I don’t hesitate. I fluidly approach my subject, and the camera almost takes the photo by itself. Of course I generally follow-up with a smile and a brief hello, and either continue to talk with them, or continue on my way.

One of the philosophies of Zen is that you should lose self-consciousness of yourself, and especially of your own ego. You don’t think of yourself as being great and the center of the world. Rather, you see yourself as something quite insignificant and just like a grain of sand in a desert.

When I am out shooting on the streets, the feeling of getting lost in the “flow” makes me feel much more comfortable shooting in the streets (and is often when I take my best photos). The second I become self-conscious, I find myself drawing too much attention to myself and my subjects can sense my hesitation and feel less comfortable.

Takeaway point

When I start shooting on the streets, it takes me a while to “warm up” to get into the zone. Imagine yourself as a cold car in the winter. If you want your engine to perform optimally, you want to warm up your engine, let it run for a bit— and let the oil circulate the gears. The oil lodged into the hidden nooks and crannies also burn off, and become to loosen.

I think the same philosophy can be applied to street photography. When I first hit the streets, I am quite self-conscious and feel quite uncomfortable shooting in the streets. The first thing I try to do is start clicking, and I start to loosen up. I hear the click of my shutter, and it is a warm and inviting sound. I want to hear my shutter click some more, so I look for more interesting subjects to capture. I talk to strangers that I find interesting (often not even taking a photo of them— but just getting to feel more comfortable with people on the streets).

Once I get warmed up, I feel much more bold shooting in the streets— and self confident. I melt into the streets, and feel like I become part of the streets. But once again, I try not to think too much. I simply “go with the flow” and let the photography opportunities come to me.

2. Ignore recognition/fame

One of the philosophies I learned from zen through the art of archery is that the master archers don't care about showing off to their peers, or even hitting the target. They practice the art of archery to become introspective, letting go of their ego, and detach themselves from the world. Herrigel's master summed up archery quite eloquently by calling it the “artless art.”

Being social beings, we crave recognition and affirmation from others. This certainly applies to every aspect of our lives. This includes affirmation from our families (reminders that they love us), affirmation from work (that we are doing a good job), and affirmation from friends (that we are admired and respected).

Certainly there is nothing wrong about being affirmed by others. However, it can be quite dangerous once we focus more on the affirmation of others rather than focusing on our own internal goals.

The archer is not focused on showing off— and neither should we as photographers. When we shoot on the streets, no need to show false bravado of taking photos of strangers super-close with a flash (to show to others how courageous we are).

I know that when I started street photography, I felt that I had this strange need to prove myself to others— and how courageous I was to others. However over time, I found out that this was a false path. I still shoot quite similarly as I did in the past in regards to shooting at a close proximity (from .7–1.2 meters) but my philosophy of why I do it is different. I don't do it for the sake of it anymore, but to feel more emotionally connected to my subjects. I also find myself talking more and interacting more with my subjects, which I find to be more genuine.

I also think this can be applied to the world of social media. I used to be a whore to views, likes, favorites, and any sort of notification on social media. It made me feel good, special— and that I was a good photographer. After all, how would I know if my photo was “good” if I didn’t get *at least* 100 “likes” on a photo?

Once again, I also found this to be a false path. I soon found myself not taking photos for myself— but for others. I let their favorites and comments dictate what they thought was a good or interesting photo—rather than following what I felt was a good or interesting photo. My experience taking a year off of uploading images to social media certainly helped me focus more on my personal work, and I think has been the best thing I have ever done in regards to my photography.

Takeaway point

Know that when you are shooting on the streets, you have nothing to prove to others. You don’t have anything to prove to yourself. You shoot street photography because you enjoy it, that you find it a challenge, and that it satiates some sort of passion that you have deep inside of you.

Therefore don’t worry too much about how many “likes” or “favorites” you get on Facebook or Flickr. Rather, aim to please yourself. When you want feedback in terms of how you can improve your photography, ask colleagues that you trust — or find a mentor who can give you stern and critical feedback (that isn’t just patting you on the back).

3. Don’t photograph others, photograph yourself

One of the fascinating (and first a bit puzzling) concepts that the zen archery master told Herrigel the importance that in the art of archery, the archer doesn’t look to aim at the target— but rather he aims at himself. The master continues this analogy with some examples:

- The bow and arrow doesn’t shoot outwards, but inwards.
- The archer doesn’t bring the bow to highest tension, but the bow brings the archer to highest tension.
- You don’t hit the target, the target finds your arrow.

Even though I am Korean-American and heavily influenced by Eastern philosophies, I still find myself more of a westerner at heart. As a westerner, I like to think that I have control over everything— and that I am the actor and the agent that controls my own destiny. I don’t like the idea that things can be outside of my control.

In photography, I think we can use the analogy that we aren’t aiming to photograph others. But rather, we are trying to photograph ourselves.

I heard this many times by photographers— that when we photograph someone we are simply taking a self-portrait of ourselves.

For example, if we are shooting on the streets we tend to be drawn to whatever we find interesting (which says a lot about our own personality). I might walk down the street with you and even though we technically pass the same buildings and subjects— we both will probably take different photos. I might take a photo of a trash can with a little doll hanging out, you might take a photo of a happy couple. Perhaps this shows my personality of cynicism and loss of hope in the world, and perhaps the photo you took shows more of your own optimism.

I look at the work of Daido Moriyama which is dark and gritty— and I feel I am looking straight into his soul (in the past, he had lots of problems with drugs, alcoholism, and strained family relationships). When I look at the work of Martin Parr, I can see his cynicism with the world— and disdain of the negative aspects of capitalism and consumerism.

Takeaway point

At the end of the day, there is little to no objectivity in photography. It is all subjective. We decide what to photograph and what not to photograph. We decide what to include in the frame, and what not to include in the frame.

Embrace your subjectivity in photography, and try to shoot faithfully. Don't photograph in a way which you feel doesn't sit your personality. If you find yourself a shy and introspective person, you don't need to shoot a stranger super-close with a flash. You might want to take a more detached approach, and not intrude on somebody.

If you find yourself more outgoing and gregarious, perhaps rather than just snapping photos of strangers and moving on— take some time to talk and engage with your subjects. Personally, I enjoy the conversation I have with strangers and finding more about their personal lives (than the photographs I take of them).

In the journey of photography, perhaps one of your aims is to discover yourself— and who you are. So don't see photography as a yourself looking at others through a pair of binoculars, but as looking at yourself through a mirror.

4. Relax

In life, we often try to force things which aren't natural. We try to stick the square pegs in the circular holes, and often try to fit the circular pegs in the square holes. It often doesn't work out.

In the western world, we live by the philosophy of bigger, better, stronger, faster. If we fail to meet a goal or expectation, we simply blame ourselves (or get blamed by others) that we simply weren't "trying hard enough."

In the art of archery, it flips this concept upside its own head. The key to become a master archer is not to become super strong to pull back the bow to launch your arrow as far as it can go. The key is to be relaxed, and let things take care of themselves.

In archery, when you are too tense and not smooth in practice— your arrow will wobble and not fly straight. Herrigel’s archery master explained the key of making an arrow fly with grace:

“Relaxed drawing of the bow, relaxed holding at the point of highest tension, relaxed loosening of the shot, relaxed cushioning of the recoil.”

I find that this concept of being relaxed is extremely important in street photography. I find when I am tense when shooting in the streets, people can sense my tenseness — and feel less comfortable around me. Not only that, but when I am tense I tend to lose out on many photo opportunities— as I don’t let my eyes wander and find things serendipitously.

I think the same applies in life. When we try too hard and force things— they generally don’t work out. For those of you in a relationship, think about when you were trying to court your significant other. What was a more effective strategy? Showering the girl or guy you were interested with presents, compliments, and attention? Or simply being yourself, acting casually, and letting them be drawn to you? I find most relationships happen in the latter.

Takeaway point:

Don’t be so tense when you are out shooting in the streets. Remember that street photography isn’t a game or a competition. You aren’t competing with other photographers on the internet to see who can get the most likes or favorites or followers. You are doing it for yourself, and nobody else.

A suggestion that I have is when you are shooting on the streets, don’t worry too much about your technical settings. I generally like to shoot in “P” mode whenever I can (I use it on my Contax T3 with autofocus) as it allows me to not worry so much about my settings— and focus more on the photography. I find that a lot of photographers shoot in manual mode when it’s not really necessary— simply for the sake of it and to show to others that they aren’t a “noob.” After all, only noobs shoot in auto modes, right?

Believe it or not, Steve McCurry shoots with his Nikon D800 with a pretty standard kit zoom lens and in “P” mode. He doesn’t waste his precious energy and effort into always fiddling with the settings. Rather, he uses his energy to connect with his subjects, consider his light, frame his shots, and take the photos. The less things we have to worry about, the more relaxed we will be.

Another suggestion: Don’t always feel that you need to take all your street photography candidly. If you feel a little insecure or nervous when shooting on the streets, start warming yourself up by talking to strangers and asking for permission to take their photo. Once you connect with someone else and perhaps share a few good laughs, you will find yourself much more relaxed when shooting in the streets— which I guarantee will help you make better photos.

5. Focus on the journey, not the destination

When Eugen Herrigel was training to learn the art of archery, it took him 4–5 years of practice before he was even permitted to aim at a target. That is like the equivalent of practicing taking photos of random things around the house before you were “permitted” to take photos of strangers in the street.

Understandably, after all those years of practicing with his bow and arrow (without even having something to aim at)— he got a bit frustrated and asked when he was able to advance to the next step.

His master responded by telling him not to worry about his progress or goal by saying: “...the way to the goal shall not be measured.” The master emphasized by telling him to focus on the journey, and not the destination — while also realizing how long it takes to reach mastery. He shared the proverb: “He who has a hundred miles to walk should reckon 90 miles is half.”

In the west, we are obsessed with goals, progress, and measuring everything. Once again, this goes with the idea that the west wants us to become more productive, stronger, faster, smarter, and better. How do we know if we are getting “better” if we can’t track things?

I believe in goals to a certain degree— in the sense that it is good to know what your priorities and passions are in life and heading that way. However the more specific you get in terms of goals, the more detrimental it becomes.

In personal fitness when I try to get stronger, I find myself less stressed and happier when I go to the gym for the hell of it— and for the fun. When I start getting too obsessed with tracking how much stronger I get, I feel more stressed out (when I can’t meet my goals) and enjoy the process less. Ironically enough when I don’t track my progress and simply “go with the flow” when I am in the gym— over time I find myself getting much stronger and healthier (than when I am obsessed with tracking everything).

I think we can apply the same concept to street photography. Many of us have goals to become renowned for our photography and hopefully one day sell prints, get exhibited all around the world, and become famous. I have personally had a few exhibitions internationally, have several thousands of followers on all of my social media channels, and have been recognized in the streets and I can share— it hasn’t really made me any happier in life.

I find that when we reach our destination, it is often less glamorous and amazing than we imagined it to be. Once again, I remember when I started photography I dreamed of all of these goals. However I reached all of these goals for myself, I found myself quite unhappy. Sure the initial jolt of reaching these expectations I set for myself was wonderful, but after a week or so, things went back to normal. I always convinced myself: once I met these goals, I would be happy for the rest of my life. I learned through my experience that this certainly wasn’t the case.

Now that I reached all my goals (and had no more goals for myself)— I got quite glum and wondered to myself: “Now what do I have to look forward to?” I suddenly felt lost, despondent, and confused what to do next.

After sulking around for a bit, I did what I knew best— I left my house and just started to take photos in the street. I instantly found solace, and a feeling of losing myself— and enjoying the process of shooting (and forgot about all my concerns, shortcomings, and feelings of hopelessness).

Takeaway point:

Take your time with your photography. When you are out shooting in the streets, try to be as present as you can be. Don't think about the photos you are taking, but think about the interactions you have with people on the streets, the beauty of the architecture around you, and the sounds and bustles of the environment. Don't worry about how your photos turn out (to be good or bad)— rather, enjoy the feeling of your feet on the pavement and the joy of being able to do what you love.

Set goals for your photography, but make sure they don't dictate your life. Feel free to bend the rules, to change your goals, or even get rid of them all-together. Enjoy yourself, let go of the stress, and have fun.

Conclusion

I would say that street photography and zen certainly go hand-in-hand. Both are about cherishing the experiences, rather than worrying about the outcomes— and the importance of inner-reflection. In-fact, one of my good friends [Rinzi Ruiz](#) goes by "Street Zen" online— finding street photography to be a great way to meditate and self-reflect.

Don't worry about becoming a famous photographer, or even taking great photos. Enjoy the experience of shooting on the streets— and don't feel the need to force anything. Take things as they come, and go with the flow.

For anyone interested in learning more about Zen, I highly recommend reading Herrigel's "[Zen in the Art of Archery](#)." Another book I have read recently which is a nice companion (also a pretty short and quick read) is "[The Tao of Pooh](#)"— in which the author links Taoism (a similar philosophy to zen) to Winnie-the-Pooh (it sounds weird, but trust me— it is really good).

Chapter 12: Lessons Taoism Has Taught Me About Street Photography

I have been a long-time admirer of the philosophies of Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and Stoicism. In-fact, I have gained more insights about photography from these philosophies (than I have from any book on photographic theory).

I recently re-read a new english version of the “tao te ching” — the classic manual on the art of living. It was a version written by Stephen Mitchell, and I like the flow and how it reads in English.

In my life and photography— I often feel a lot of anxiety, frustration, stress, and the need for external validation. However reading these Taoist philosophies have helped bring peace to my day-to-day life, and I hope these lessons I’ve learned can help you as well.

I am no expert in Taoism, zen, or any of these philosophies— and I have a lot to learn. But I will share what helps me fall asleep at night— I try my best to follow these principles:

1. Embrace “beginner’s mind”

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” - Suzuki Roshi

In Zen buddhism, one of the principles is to follow is “beginner’s mind” — or seeing the world for the first time like a child would.

When you are a child— everything in the world is amazing. You have no pre-conceived notions, no sense of “right” or “wrong” — and no sense of what is “good” or “bad”. The world is limitless, exciting, and has no boundaries.

However as we grow up— we are taught by teachers and authority-figures what is “good” and “bad”. We are told the difference between “right” and “wrong.” It closes a lot of our creativity — and forces us to think in boxes. Funny that nowadays we are told to think “outside of the box” — when in school we are taught to simply check boxes for tests and follow standardized procedures.

When it comes to street photography, I remember when I first started. I had a little Canon point-and-shoot digital camera that my mom got me as a graduation present from high-school (I was 18 at the time). These were the days of pre-Instagram, but I was hooked. I remember taking 1,000 photos a day of everything. It would be random things, like photographing my breakfast (once again pre-Instagram), my friends, my walk to class, my surroundings, my books, my class-mates, sunsets, flowers, random people on the streets, and so on. My mind had no pre-conceived notions of what a “good” or a “bad” photograph was. Everything simply was a great photographic opportunity, and the act of photographing augmented my love, excitement, and zest of life (it also helped that I was starting off college— and the world seemed to have no limits).

However as time went on, this innocent “beginner’s mind” and child-like curiosity of mine started to die off a bit. I remember seeing some photos on the internet with this amazing shallow depth-of-field. It was unlike everything I had ever seen before— and the images looked so sharp, so rich, and so vibrant. I wanted to re-create the look (that I wasn’t able to capture on my point-and-shoot) so I did all my research, and discovered I needed a “DSLR”. I ended up saving all my pennies, got a Canon 350D, and was confused why my kit lens couldn’t produce (what I now know as “bokeh”). I then discovered I needed the 50mm f/1.8 lens, and once I got it— I shot everything at 1.8. EVERYTHING.

Time flies on, and I fall victim to G.A.S. and need to buy all the equipment. The people on the gear forum of Fred Miranda told me that if I wanted to be a “real” photographer, I needed a full-frame camera. I end up splurging on a Canon 5D, fall into a rabbit-hole of purchasing lenses that I probably only used twice (Sigma 105mm macro lens, Canon 70–200 f/4 L telephoto), battery grips (to make myself look more “pro”), and it ended up being more about having fancy gear (than the love of photography).

I also got too into the technical parts of photography— worrying too much about the post-processing and sharpness of my images, rather than this child-like curiosity I had of the world to simply wander, experience life, and capture beautiful moments.

Fast-forward to today— I feel blessed to have a wonderful library of photography books that inspire me greatly. However they are a blessing and a curse.

They are a blessing in the sense that they have taught me what a great photo is— and have taught me the importance of creating a solid body of work (that often takes a long time).

However the curse is that now I know what makes a “good” photograph— I often take my photography too seriously. I work on long-term projects that I imagine will take me several years to complete, and it has caused my attention to become very narrow and focused. For example in my “Suits” project— I am essentially looking for men wearing suits (suit jacket and a tie are a must) looking depressed. If they don’t fit this narrow strait-jacket criteria, I have nothing to photograph. I’ve been working on this project for over 2 years, and I only have around 12 photographs that I’m really proud of and which I think are strong.

Therefore when it comes to my day-to-day, I feel a bit constrained creatively. If I see random photos which I think are interesting, I feel hesitant to make those photos, because I feel like they won’t fit into any project. The images I want to make in those situations feel a bit self-gratuitous, like there is no purpose to photograph them.

However this line of thinking is wrong. I think that it is important to work on projects (if you want to make a book), but at the same time to have “beginner’s mind” and photograph simply what interests you. I think that often photography (and art) tends to over-intellectualize, and a lot of it is bullshit. At the end of the day, **I think photography should be a medium that allows you to experience life more richly, vividly, and emotionally.** I know that photography has helped me be more appreciate of the beauty of everyday life, more aware, and has also given me a valuable creative outlet to express and communicate my feelings, thoughts, and emotions about the world.

I sometimes am jealous of the joy of beginner photographers. To a beginner photographer— they don't discriminate. They simply see what they think might make a good photograph— and they just shoot it. They don't worry about composition, the framing, the light, or whether it will fit into their future book or exhibition. They photograph purely for the joy of it.

Takeaway point

I think as a takeaway point, we should all try to embrace this “beginner’s mind” in street photography. Which means transporting yourself to when you started photography all-over-again. How excited were you when you made your first photograph? Perhaps the first time you went to the darkroom? Or when you were a kid and got back 4x6 prints that were freshly processed from the lab? Or when you first made a photo, and saw it on the back of your LCD screen (if you're younger). Try to see how you felt emotionally at the time, and the sense of pure excitement you had— and try to re-create that.

So the next time you are out shooting on the streets, give yourself this experiment: imagine that you are your (younger) self again— and that you started photography for the first time. If someone first handed you a camera, what would you photograph? How would it make you feel? Would you discriminate as much as you do today?

Freeing yourself by shooting on a smartphone (or any camera)

I recently have re-invigorated my love of photography through shooting with my smartphone. I know a lot of guys who shoot street photography purely on their iPhones (or other mobile devices) and their love, passion, and excitement is boundless.

I think the great benefit for me is the sense of freedom that shooting with a smartphone gives you. First of all, you always have it on you. Secondly, you just can point-and-click (don't worry about all that nerdy technical settings). Lastly, you can quickly edit (select your favorite images), post-process (using VSCO, snapseed, whatever), and upload it to your social media platform of choice (Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, etc).

I also find when shooting with my smartphone, I don't discriminate as much. I take my photography “less seriously” — I think in a good way. Photos that I might not shoot on my film cameras, I end up shooting on my phone. And funny enough, the photos I end up shooting on my phone sometimes end up being pretty good. So if I had never shot those images on my phone, I would have never made those images.

So if you have a smartphone (and find yourself feeling uninspired with your current fancy digital camera, or whatever)— I encourage you to try shooting with it. I feel the same excitement and joy that I get shooting with my smartphone as I got when I shot first on my digital point-and-shoot. If you want to shoot with a smartphone, here are some practical suggestions:

iPhone applications:

Honestly the iPhone is the best smartphone to shoot photos on. I personally have a Samsung smartphone, and while the image quality on my camera is excellent— it still doesn't have the same flexibility, access to cool apps, and speed of the iPhone.

I recommend using the “Pro camera” application for the iPhone— which gives you manual control over the exposure and focusing (just enough technical control without becoming too nerdy).

For processing I know a lot of people who like Hipstamatic (not available on Android).

VSCO

For processing, I can't recommend VSCO enough. I personally shoot on a Galaxy S5 (sometimes in HDR mode to get more dynamic range), and then post-process using the “Analog” preset on VSCO, then end up publishing the images on Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and sometimes Facebook.

As a rule: I treat VSCO like my film cameras in the sense that I always stick to the same film preset, which is good in the sense it gives me a “consistent look”. But I recommend you trying to experiment with different ones— until you find one that really jives with you.

There are tons of other processing applications out there, but I found VSCO to be the best.

2. Let go

“The Master stays behind;

that is why she is ahead.

She is detached from all things;

that is why she is one with them.

Because she has let go of herself,

she is perfectly fulfilled. - Tao Te Ching

I personally have a hard time detaching, letting things go. I often fall into the “sunk cost bias” (once I invest in something, it feels irrational to pull-out) and can become very stubborn.

This manifests itself a lot of different ways in my life. Photographically speaking, it means that I have a hard time killing my babies (editing out my weak photos), killing off projects (projects that I once thought had potential, but are a bit boring and uninteresting), and also getting over frustrating times when I miss “the decisive moment.”

A lot of what Zen/Taoism talks about is the importance of letting go. The importance of not becoming so attached to something— that it creates feelings of anxiety, fear, and resentment. By letting things go can we achieve pure contentment.

Furthermore, flexibility is one of the key elements in being able to let go:

“Men are born soft and supple;

dead, they are stiff and hard.

Plants are born tender and pliant;

dead, they are brittle and dry.

Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible

is a disciple of death.

Whoever is soft and yielding

is a disciple of life.

The hard and stiff will be broken.

The soft and supple will prevail.

Another good analogy to be flexible, imagine yourself like water:

“Nothing in the world

is as soft and yielding as water.

Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,

nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard;

the gentle overcomes the rigid.

Everyone knows this is true,

but few can put it into practice.”

Letting go in editing

When it comes to editing our photos (selecting which photos are good, and which photos to ditch), it is an extremely emotional process. We feel emotionally connected to many of the photos we take— but we can’t simply publish them all to the internet. We need to be selective, and only publish what we think are our strongest images, what we feel will resonate most with our viewers, or what is truly deep and meaningful to us.

But it is so hard to let go of our photos.

I know personally the reason I have a hard time editing my photos is the fear of “what if?” What if the photo is a really good one, and I overlooked it? What if this photograph will really inspire someone, but I didn’t give it a chance? What if I am listening too much to other peoples’ opinions— and not enough of mine?

I think editing is one of the most difficult things in photography (more difficult than making photos). The reason is this: it is easy to click the shutter (when it comes from our guts and instincts), but it is hard to edit the images (when it comes to using the more analytical and emotional side of our brains).

I perhaps over-use the term “killing your babies” in photography too much. Rather I should say “letting go of your babies” when it comes to editing.

So when you look at a photograph that you know isn’t a particularly strong photograph, doesn’t fit in any of your projects, and really isn’t worth showing to anybody, you can tell yourself (or the photo this):

“I appreciated making you as an image, and the experience you gave me when I photographed you. But unfortunately you don’t really fit into my body of work, and as much as I appreciate you— I don’t really have anywhere to publish you. Don’t take it personally— I still love you, but I’m going to have to let you go.”

And then you edit the photo out.

Personally I don’t think you have to delete photos when editing (I personally just let them all hang out on my hard drives) — and I find it emotionally easier than the fear of deleting images. However if you do have enough discipline, it isn’t a bad idea to delete photos (to prevent having to look through hundreds of thousands of images in the future).

But what if the photograph might have potential, and you aren't sure whether you should edit it out, or keep it?

In those instances, I have a “maybe” folder that I export all of these photos that I'm not sure about— and keep them on my smartphone or my iPad and show them to other photographers whose opinion I trust to get their feedback on. Through this method, I have uncovered two strong images (which I didn't think were good)— which include my “Marseille” photo of a guy sunbathing at the beach, and a photo of a bored couple inside a restaurant for my “Suits” project.

Here are some more specific examples of letting go of things in street photography:

a) Letting go of projects

Not every photography project you embark on is going to be a great project. I think it is important to cut your losses short, even though you might feel heavily invested.

I have worked on about 20 different projects the last 2 years, and the only ones which I feel have promise is my “Suits” project and my “Only in America” series. Both I think have promise— and are still in its infancy, but will take a long time to nurture and grow to become mature bodies of work.

The reason we have a hard time cutting our losses is once again— from the “sunk cost fallacy”. The analogy is this: if you're playing poker and you started off with \$100 and suddenly you are “pot-committed” by having \$80 of your chips inside a hand, you feel that it makes sense to simply “go all in” — even though you might not have a good hand. This is a mistake, because it is better to simply keep the remaining \$20 you have, then to simply throw it away. Once we feel committed, we feel like we need to go all the way.

However like everything in life— we need to know when to cut our losses, let go, and simply move on. This includes many things in life. For example, toxic relationships. If you're in a toxic relationship for 10 years that is making your life miserable, you shouldn't stay in the relationship just because you have invested so much time, energy, and emotion in it. You need to let go and move to become a more positive person. If you're invested in a business that loses a lot of money — it is best to go out before you lose all of your money. Similarly if you're committed to a photography project that isn't going anywhere, it might be a good chance to re-evaluate the project, and think whether moving on can be the best option for you.

b) Letting go of lost-photo opportunities

I have about a hundred photos I can vividly remember wanting to photograph, but I didn't— because I either didn't have my camera with me, because I was scared, or because I was too slow in capturing the images. These images haunt me, and make me frustrated.

I remember wanting to make this one photograph recently, but I didn't have the guts or courage to take it. I then (after a long day of shooting), go to bed— and kick myself for not shooting it (which leads to inner-frustration and turmoil).

But I then had the realization that no matter how diligent I am as a photographer, there will be millions or billions of “decisive moments” happening at every second at every corner of the globe that I won’t be able to capture.

There will always be lost opportunities in photography (and life) that we can’t control. The only thing we can control is to move on.

Perhaps we had a really good business deal (or a job offer) that has a ton of promise, but ends up not working out— which causes us to lose a lot of (potential money), and leads us to become resentful. Perhaps we had a really good date with an attractive (physically and mentally) person— but they end up running off with someone else. Perhaps we see a dude doing a backflip over a puddle and there is a double-rainbow in the background, but we left our camera at home and couldn’t capture the moment.

Nowadays when I miss “decisive moments” in street photography— I simply smile and tell myself, “Even though I didn’t make a photo of that— I am blessed to have seen it and experienced it” and move on.

I think ultimately as photographers, we should be more focused on the experiences and beauty of everyday life (rather than frantically always trying to capture it). Some things in life are better unphotographed.

3. Don’t compare or compete

“When you are content to be simply yourself

and don’t compare or compete,

everybody will respect you.” - Tao Te Ching

I think social media is a blessing and a curse. A blessing in the sense that you can now reach a potentially unlimited audience. A curse in the sense that our self-worth and validation as photographers and artists are distilled into the number of followers, likes, favorites, views, and comments we get.

I think it is really hard not to compare or compete with others. After all, it is human nature. As a social species — we thrive on trying to out-do one another, and we always love the challenge of a competition.

However I think in the case of photography— the only person we should compete with is ourselves. Compete with the photographer you were a year ago. As long as day-by-day, you become a slightly better photographer (by taking more photos, editing your photos down into better series, or learning about photography via books and the internet) — you are doing your job.

I personally find myself depressed and dissatisfied whenever I try to compare myself with others. No matter how hard I try, there will always be someone with more followers, fame, fortune, power, and status than me.

Regarding competition— it is pointless. Photography isn't a competition.

There are no clear winners or losers (like in basketball, football, tennis, etc). It isn't a zero-sum game. There is no real way to “keep score” — except via the number of books you've published, the shows you've had, how prestigious the other photographers you know, etc. Also the danger of trying to “compete” with other photographers is that there is no clear indication whether you have “won” or not — so you continue to strive towards becoming more and more “successful” — and it is just a negative spiral downwards after that.

Furthermore, don't make photographs for the approval of others— do it to please yourself, something deeply intrinsic that needs to be satisfied. Another quote we can paste onto our walls from the tao te ching:

“Fill your bowl to the brim

and it will spill.

Keep sharpening your knife

and it will blunt.

Chase after money and security

and your heart will never unclench.

Care about people's approval

and you will be their prisoner.

Do your work, then step back.

The only path to serenity.

If anything, we should be happy for those who are doing better than us— we should just photograph because it makes us happy and we enjoy it:

“The best athlete

wants his opponent at his best.

The best general

enters the mind of his enemy.

The best businessman

serves the communal good.

The best leader

follows the will of the people.

All of them embody

the virtue of non-competition.

Not that they don't love to compete,

but **they do it in the spirit of play.**

In this they are like children

and in harmony with the Tao.

Lastly, a great point on helping other people (and photographers):

“The master has no possessions.

The more he does for others,

the happier he is.

The more he gives to others,

the wealthier he is.”

Takeaway point:

There is no point to compare yourself to other photographers, or to compete with them. We all have a different life story, and a different background. Some of us have limited abilities in our photography— but we can always work hard to stretch out own boundaries and limits.

Rather, I think we should work more on collaborating with one another— than competing with one another. Street photography is a tiny niche, and not really well-respected in the global sphere. Not to say we need to work to become “respected” in the art world— but we should band together like a bunch of misfits against the world.

I have personally found that the more I help promote other photographers and their work— the happier it makes me, and how it ultimately ends up benefitting me too. Not to say you should merely help other people (to expect something in return) — but I have often found that positivity and support amongst photographers is much better than competition, negativity, and criticism.

Spread the love.

4. Have no expectations

I have a problem: whenever I am out with my camera, I feel disappointed if I don't get any "keepers" by the end of the day (especially if I invested a lot of time, energy, and effort to make photos).

However one thing that the tao te ching has taught me is the importance of having no expectations. To quote:

"Giving birth and nourishing,
having without possessing,
acting with no expectations,
leading and not trying to control:
this is the supreme virtue."

Furthermore, the more expectations you put on yourself— the less flexible, fluid, and open your mind is (to photographic opportunities). There is a nice tidbit from the tao te ching on this as well— "cleansing your inner vision, until you can see nothing but the light":

"Can you coax your mind from its wandering
and keep to the original oneness?
Can you let your body become
supple as a newborn child's?
**Can you cleanse your inner vision
until you see nothing but the light?**
Can you love people and lead them

without imposing your will?

Can you deal with the most vital matters

by letting events take their course?

Can you step back from your own mind

and thus understand all things?

I often find that if we go out and shoot with too much pre-conceived notions of what we should photograph, we don't end up making any good photographs.

For example, when I first went to Paris I had all these pre-conceived notions and expectations of the photographs I wanted to make. They were all Henri Cartier-Bresson-esque, with pretty Parisian architecture, people kissing in Cafe's, and majestic light. But to my horror, the streets of Paris were just mobbed with Asian tourists and loud and obnoxious Americans. I spent an entire week there trying to hunt out "Parisian life" (as I imagined it in my head)— and ended up empty-handed.

Now looking back on the experience, I should have documented what I witnessed (the Un-Paris) rather than trying to create some figment of my imagination (the romantic Paris I had in my mind). This would have helped me create much more interesting images.

The tricky part is that often when you're working on a project and it is about certain subject-matter (like photographing guys in suits, old people, pink ponies) you can get locked. You don't have the openness, flexibility, and spontaneity to simply embrace what is before your very eyes.

Another great example of the benefit of flexibility is having space in-between, that negative space that will help you be more creative:

"We join spokes together in a wheel,

but it is the center hole

that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,

but it is the emptiness inside

that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,

but it is the inner space

that makes it livable.

We work with being, but non-being is what we use.

Also by not having any expectations, you will never be disappointed:

“The Master’s power is like this.

He lets all things come and go

effortlessly, without desire.

He never expects results;

thus he is never disappointed.

He is never disappointed;

thus his spirit never grows old.

Takeaway point:

I think there are many different ways to work on projects:

a) One good way to work on a project is to go out with a rough sense of what you want (which sometimes works, but often fails).

b) Another good way to work on a project is to go out and simply photograph what you find interesting, start to analyze the subject-matter you are photographing, then focus on finding the story (while you are actively photographing it).

Frankly speaking, I think the second method is a more robust way to work on a project— because it gives you a combination of flexibility and focus.

Also as a practical tip— I don’t recommend traveling to a place to photograph with any sort of pre-conceived notions. I think going in a place with purposeful ignorance is a good way to stay open to new experiences, new sights, and new photographic potential.

Furthermore, going to a new and exotic location for just a few days or a few weeks won’t net you any great photographs. I think most street photographers are lucky to just get 1 good photograph a month.

So when you're traveling, keep your expectations in your photography modest. Don't expect to create the definitive body of work you've always wanted to after a 1-week trip in Tokyo or Venice. Just go there for the experience, have fun, and try to make a couple of good photos along the way. If you end up making some good photos, it is good. If you end up taking bad and boring cliché snapshots, it is good too.

5. Be still

I have another problem: When I am out shooting on the streets, I have zero to little patience. I am like a pigeon trying to chase after shiny stuff. I pace up and down the streets furiously, hunting out "decisive moments." Rather, what I should do is be more patient— and let the photographic opportunities come to me. Another great quote from the tao te ching regarding the importance of patience (it still amazes me how much of this ancient philosophy can relate back to street photography):

"Do you have the patience to wait

till your mud settles and the water is clear?

Can you remain unmoving

till the right action arises by itself?

The secret is being present, and letting the photographic opportunities arise naturally:

"The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.

Not seeking, not expecting,

she is present, and can welcome all things."

Another good excerpt on being patient:

"The generals have a saying:

'Rather than make the first move

it is better to wait and see.

Rather than advance an inch

it is better to retreat a yard.'

Takeaway point:

A good photographic exercise I have heard is this: Find a street corner that you find interesting and there are a lot of people coming in and out of. Then stand at that one street corner for an hour, don't move, and simply photograph what you find interesting.

I have done this exercise myself— and it is fascinating how much more effective it is to simply stake out an interesting intersection, and letting the photographic opportunities come to you.

This is beneficial in several ways:

- a) It helps you conserve energy. You don't need to walk for hours on end to see photo opportunities.
- b) You have a sea of people coming in and out of your frame, and you never know what combinations of people will collide.
- c) Constraints breed creativity: by being restricted to one spot, you will force yourself to be more creative to make interesting photos from that one location.

I think often when we are out shooting street photography, we simply hunt for interesting characters or subjects, quickly photograph them, move on, and just hope that the background is okay. However this mostly fails, and the background is messy and distracting.

I think the opposite technique works better: start with the background (an interesting or clean background), and letting the subjects enter your frame. Sure this can be a bit one-dimensional and flat at times (just a simple juxtaposition “one-liner” cliché street photograph) — but just try to do it better than you have seen before.

So don't always run around the streets like a chicken without its head on. Find a good spot, be patient, and let the mud settle and then your vision will become clear.

6. Don't travel far from home to photograph

I love to travel. I love the opportunities it gives me, I love the people I meet, the food, sights, smells, and experiences I ingest.

However I often fall victim to “FOMO” — fear of missing out. I feel that if I am not in exotic city “X” — I am missing out on the action photographically.

For example, I currently live in Berkeley, California (home of the hippies and counter-movements) — which is a very fascinating place to photograph. But I always want to be in “the city” (San Francisco) because I think I can make much more interesting photos there, because Berkeley feels too mundane and boring for me (because it is so familiar).

However I have discovered over time— the best photographic opportunities are in your own backyard (neighborhood, city, community) and staying true to your roots is really important. There are tons of photographic opportunities waiting to be shot where you already live. Rather than being a tourist in a different place, travel where you already are. Lao Tzu shares the following in the tao te ching:

“The heavy is the root of the light.

The unmoved is the source of all movement.

Thus the Master travels all day

without leaving home.

However splendid the views,

she stays serenely in herself.

Traveling too much can often be a distraction, which will make you even less satisfied with where you live — and cause you to lose your roots:

“Why should the lord of the country

flit about like a fool?

If you let yourself be blown to and fro,

you lose touch with your root.

If you let restlessness move you,

you lose touch with who you are.

Takeaway point:

I know it is hard to find your own city or neighborhood interesting to photograph. We easily become adapted to where we live (regardless of how interesting our city). For example, I have tons of friends in Tokyo, New York, Hong Kong, Paris, and San Francisco who are bored of the city. The grass is always greener on the other side.

So photograph your own backyard with the same zest as you would as if you were traveling. Imagine yourself as a tourist in your own city. What would you find interesting, fascinating, and weird? I think one of the best ways a photographer can make images is to find the ordinary and mundane, and make it extraordinary.

Personally in Berkeley I don't find the people all too interesting— but I have found a great deal of interest photographing the urban landscape here. Furthermore, I am very close with my girlfriend Cindy— and I photograph her everyday (as well as my friends and those who I care about). There is always photographic material all around you near home— don't feel that you need to be in Venice to make interesting photographs.

7. Be a flaneur

Below is probably the best chapter (27) in the tao te ching:

“A good traveler has no fixed plans

and is not intent upon arriving.

A good artist lets his intuition

lead him wherever it wants.

A good scientist has freed himself of concepts

and keeps his mind open to what is.”

There is a French word, “flaneur” — which is essentially someone who wanders around aimlessly, with a kick of gusto and suave-ness that can only be illustrated by people who wander effortlessly and fashionably (without looking like a lost tourist).

I think a photographer's most important body-part is his/her feet. Our feet is what allows us to wander, explore, and to get lost. I have often found my best photographic opportunities in the least-expected places (grocery store, restaurant, gas station, gym) when I kept an open-mind (and had a camera-in-hand).

We never know when a great “decisive moment” will happen— so wandering and being flexible and open to ideas is important. Another excerpt continuing from Chapter 27 in the tao te ching:

“Thus the Master is available to all people

and doesn't reject anyone.

He is ready to use all situations

and doesn't waste anything.

This is called embodying the light.”

Don't feel that you always need a destination in life, just take in what comes your way:

“The mark of a moderate man
is freedom from his own ideas.
Tolerant like the sky,
all-pervading like sunlight,
firm like a mountain,
supple like a tree in the wind,
**he has no destination in view
and makes use of anything
life happens to bring his way.**

Takeaway point:

Let your intuition and curiosity lead you. If there is a certain photographer whose work you like (but cannot explain why) — research them to death. Buy all of their books, read all of their interviews, and try to deconstruct why you like that photographer. Even try to imitate that photographer— and create images that you like (that might resemble that photographer’s).

If you are walking on the streets and simply want to go down an unfamiliar street or alley— go down it (unless it is midnight and you are in a dangerous neighborhood).

If you are interested in shooting film, try it out. If you shoot 35mm film and are interested in medium-format, try it out. If you shoot digital and want to shoot more with your iPhone, just try it out. Lead where your intuition takes you.

The more open you are (like an empty bowl)— the more you can receive and take in whatever comes your way.

8. Do your job

I think that Taoism and zen buddhism get a bad rap— that you should just be lazy and do nothing, and let everything be done itself.

However that isn't the way I interpret it. I think it is about not forcing things— but still working hard on what you are passionate about, and what you feel like is your calling.

For example, you can work very hard in your photography (shoot as often as you can, make tight edits of your work, and educate yourself as much as possible), but you can't control whether people will like or appreciate your work.

So focus on what you have control over, and disregard the rest (if others approve you or not).

The tao te ching shares the importance of doing your work (and simply taking a step back, and not worrying about the reaction from others):

"The Master does his job

and then stops.

He understands that the universe

is forever out of control,

and that trying to dominate events

goes against the current of the Tao.

Because he believes in himself,

he doesn't try to convince others.

Because he is content with himself,

he doesn't need others' approval.

Because he accepts himself,

the whole world accepts himself.

Also the tao te ching encourages us to don't simply talk about our ideas and projects— just to go out and shoot it:

"The Master doesn't talk, he acts."

So once again, don't worry about others and the photographic projects they are doing, how popular they are online, or how many books or shows they're having. Focus on improving yourself and your photography:

"Knowing others is intelligence;

knowing yourself is true wisdom.

Mastering others is strength;

mastering yourself is true power.

Look inwards, rather than externally.

Know the job you need to do, and disregard what others are doing.

Another great excerpt on focusing on your work:

"The great Tao flows everywhere.

All things are born from ti,

yet it doesn't create them.

It pours itself into its work,

yet it makes no claim.

It nourishes infinite worlds,

yet it doesn't hold on to them.

Since it is merged with all things

and hidden in their hearts,

it can be called humble.

Since all things vanish into it

and it alone endures,

it can be called great.

It isn't aware of its greatness;

thus it is truly great.

Focus on the results of your work:

"The soft overcomes the hard.

The slow overcomes the fast.

Let your workings remain a mystery.

Just show people the results.

Also don't hold back from your work– work hard enough in your photography that you can go to sleep at night at peace (as if it you were going to die tomorrow):

"The Master gives himself up

to whatever the moment brings.

He knows that he is going to die,

and he has nothing left to hold on to:

no illusions in his mind,

no resistances in his body.

He doesn't think about his actions;

they flow from the core of his being.

He holds nothing from life;

therefore he is ready for death,

as a man is ready for sleep

after a good day's work.

9. Avoid desire (or wanting more)

“If you realize that you have enough,
you are truly rich.”

In photography and life— I am constantly tempted by GAS (Gear Acquisition Syndrome). It is the false belief that buying a new camera, lens, laptop, smartphone, tablet, car, etc will make me a more creative, effective, and happier person.

However if psychology has taught me anything— is that happiness can only be bought if you spend it on experiences (and not physical possessions). Not only that, but we fall into “hedonic adaptation” — in which the fancy things that we buy just end up being commonplace.

So what is the secret to being happy with life and the physical things we own? According to the tao te ching, it is **finding contentment and appreciation for what we have.**

By removing desire for things we don’t need (or own) — like buying that new camera or lens that comes out, we can find more inner-peace:

**“When there is no desire,
all things are at peace.**

It isn’t always desire for material things — but sometimes desire for fame, power, and influence. Another insightful quote from the tao te ching:

“The Master doesn’t try to be powerful;
thus he is truly powerful.

The ordinary man keeps reaching for power;
thus he never has enough.

The more we goad for power, we become even less satisfied (and find we always need more).

So how do we find fulfillment? Well, we should find contentment by rejoicing in the way things are— and that we don’t lack anything (and that we have everything):

“Fame or integrity: which is more important?

Money or happiness: which is more valuable?

Success or failure: which is more destructive?

If you look to others for fulfillment,

you will never truly be fulfilled.

If your happiness depends on money,

you will never be happy with yourself.

Be content with what you have;

rejoice in the way things are.

When you realize there is nothing lacking,

then the whole world belongs to you.

The more we desire things, the more troubled we will be:

“If you close your mind in judgements

and traffic with desires

your heart will be troubled.

If you keep your mind from judging

and aren't led by the senses,

your heart will find peace.”

Takeaway point:

Avoiding temptations is hard. Really damn hard. Especially when we are being constantly bombarded by advertisements from camera companies, magazines, and blogs telling that we need the newest and baddest camera system out there. Suddenly the cameras and things that we own no longer seem appealing (even though they were phenomenal when we first bought it).

I think finding contentment with what we own is one of the most difficult things in the consumerist world that we live in.

Some psychological tricks I employ to better appreciate things in my life:

- a) If I lost the camera (that I already own, or it got stolen), how would I feel? Then imagine myself regaining the camera— imagining the joy of recovering my camera.
- b) Imagining how excited was I when I first dreamt of buying my camera, and trying to re-live that experience.

I think being grateful for what we have is one of the best antidotes to wanting more.

Another technique I employ is keeping a daily “gratitude journal” in which I write down (or say) 3 things that I am grateful for. So in photography these are some things I am grateful for:

- Having my eyesight and healthy legs so I can photograph and walk around.
- Having the access to internet to help connect me to photographers from all around the world.
- Living in an era where I could share my photos with an unlimited audience with social media.
- My photography book library, and the ability to access all the great photos on the MagnumPhotos.com website
- The friends I have made through photography.
- The freedom to photograph whatever I want in a public space.
- To have friends and colleagues in photography who will give me brutally honest feedback and critique on my images.

I feel the best things to be grateful for aren't the external things (like having lots of cameras, lenses, whatever) — it is much more about what everyone else in the world has access in, and most importantly— the social connections.

10. Avoid extravagance

“The Master views the parts with compassion,

because he understands the whole.

His constant practice is humility.

He doesn't glitter like a jewel

but lets himself be shaped by the Tao,

as rugged and common as a stone.

I know a lot of people who treat photography like a fashion. People buy all these fancy leather cases, straps, camera bags, and aesthetic accessories to “pimp out” their cameras.

I think it is find to appreciate aesthetics and craftsmanship— but I think when photography is more about how fancy you look as a photographer (in terms of your image) and less about the photo-making, it is a problem.

I think ultimately cameras are there to be used and abused— to make photographs. Nothing else about a camera is important.

For example, I know a lot of guys who want to buy Leica cameras, but they want them in pristine mint-condition A++++++ rating or whatever. I then tell them they could buy really affordable banged-up “user-condition” film Leica's for under \$1000, but they don't look as “pretty.” But is a camera ultimately there to be looked at an adorned, or to be used and abused?

I personally bang around my Leica MP a lot — and I actually take great pride in “brassing” or wearing out my camera around the edges. I feel the scratches and wear marks on my camera add more character to it— and I feel pride in “using” my camera, rather than just babying it around.

Takeaway point:

Avoid luxury when it comes to photography (and life) at all costs. Do you really need that \$500 bag to tote around your camera in, or will a simple \$20 messenger bag with an insert do just well? Think about how many rolls of film, photography books, or educational opportunities you can get with that \$50.

If you are purchasing a camera and it isn't the color you want (but it is a good deal) — just go for it. If it is banged up, has a few scratches, who cares. As long as mechanically it works well— it is all good.

11. Avoid perfection

“True perfection seems imperfect,

yet is it perfectly itself.

True fullness seems empty,

yet it is truly present.

True straightness seems crooked.

True wisdom seems foolish.

True art seems artless.”

I think perfectionism is a disease in the world— because all I see that it manifests itself into sadness, misery, and anxiety.

Of course you can make the case that some of the best art, advancements, and innovations have come from perfectionists. And with that— I do agree. I do appreciate the obsessiveness that Steve Jobs had in creating the iPhone, iPad, and all the other revolutionary products Apple has put out. But even Steve Jobs would sometimes screw things up by being too much of a perfectionist. And at the end of the day, he still said: “Real artists ship.”

The problem with perfectionism is that there is no objective ruler for what is “perfect.” For example, you can use a protractor and measure a “perfect circle” — but you can’t put a ruler against a photograph and say it is “perfect.”

I think so much of photography and art is subjective— that what is “perfect” to you, won’t be “perfect” to others. So trying to aim too much to be a perfectionist and please others will never work.

Rather, I think beauty often comes from the imperfections. Some of the most beautiful models have buck teeth. Some of the most beautiful statues have chipped faces (or are missing arms). Some of the most appealing street photographs have cut off-figures at the edges of the frame, and are slightly crooked— but that is what makes it feel more real and authentic. I love my girlfriend Cindy for all of her beauty and imperfections— it is what makes her a human being. I think a dent in the side of a camera is aesthetically appealing.

In psychology they have a term “maximizer” — of someone who is a perfectionist. These people are generally a lot more miserable (and get less work done) than “satisficers” (people who are happy with “good enough”).

I think in my photography I tend to be more of a perfectionist— that I don't want to put out bad work. I only think I make one decent photo a month, and perhaps one memorable photograph a year.

However at the same time, I take a lot of risks and chances when I'm out on the streets. If I see a good scene, I will shoot from the gut and fire off 10–20 photos really quickly, if I think it has potential. I then try to be more critical when it comes to the editing phase of photography.

And I also realize that at the end of the day when working on my photography projects— none of my photos (or projects) will be perfect. There is a certain time when I am about 90% satisfied with it that I end up publishing it. The same thing with this blog— no matter how much I try to write, edit, and revise, none of my articles will ever be “perfect.” So I try to get it about 80%–90% good (by my internal standards, which are constantly moving) — and then just publish it.

Takeaway point:

Avoid perfectionism in your photography. Sometimes we are all looking for the “perfect photography idea” — and never execute because the stress of perfectionism overwhelms us.

Don't aim to make mediocre art— aim to make the best work you can. But balance that fine line between getting shit done and having lofty unattainable ideas— and focus on execution (making photos).

12. Subtract

“In the pursuit of knowledge,

every day something is added.

In the practice of the Tao,

every day something is removed.

Less and less do you need to force things,

until finally you arrive at non-action.

When nothing is done,

nothing is left undone.

True mastery can be gained

by letting things go their own way.

It can't be gained by interfering.

I think photography (and life) is much more about subtraction than addition.

For example, to make a great photo is easy— simply remove everything from the frame that isn't a good photo.

A frame in a camera is there for a reason— because it limits and constrains us. There is only so much of reality we can (and should) put into a frame. Being specific by knowing what *not* to show in a photograph makes a photograph more interesting, mysterious, and appealing.

This is why I think that 99.9% of photos with fisheye lenses (or super-wide lenses wider than 21mm) don't work in street photography. There is simply too much clutter in the background and messiness— and not enough focus.

I think the best street photographs are the ones that are simple—straight-forward, and emotional. Less is more.

Takeaway point:

I think we can employ subtraction and “less is more” in photography in many ways:

- a) Remove cameras/lenses from your kit. Try to keep paring down until you are down to “one camera and one lens” — and these constraints will help you thrive in your photography
- b) Remove distracting photography blogs, gear-equipment sites, and rumor sites that cause you to become dissatisfied with the equipment and gear you own.
- c) Remove negative critics and photographers from your life. If people are negative and don't support you, you don't need them. One rotten apple spoils the bunch.
- d) Remove influences. I think it is important to have influences in your photography— but stick to a few inspirational photographers (or artists) in your life. Quality of inspiration over quantity.
- e) Remove social media. I think social media is like sugar— use it in moderation. It does add spice to life, and value— but if you constantly consume social media, it will cause you to become overweight and obese and unhealthy.
- f) Remove distracting elements from your photographs. Watch the background, and try to remove distracting faces, cars, poles, trees, etc.

13. Don't rush things; take your time

"The giant pine tree

grows from a tiny sprout.

The journey of a thousand miles

starts from beneath your feet.

Rushing into action, you fail.

Trying to grasp things, you lose them.

Forcing a projection to completion,

you ruin what was almost ripe.

Therefore the Master takes action

by letting things take their course.

He remains as calm

at the end as at the beginning.

He has nothing,

thus has nothing to lose.

Another strategy to employ in photography (and life) is to take your time.

I think with social media, we always feel like we're in a rush. We need to hurry up, shoot, post-process, and upload. I think especially with digital technology, the demands are higher. People are less patient— they want things done uber-quickly.

However one of the biggest benefits I have personally gained from shooting film is the patience it has taught me. For example, I have around 150 rolls of Kodak Portra 400 film that I haven't processed over the last 10 months, and I don't feel in a rush to get them processed. They will all eventually get processed in the right time.

The same thing with photography projects. Don't feel like you need to be in a rush to complete them. The more you try to rush it to publishing, the lower the quality. Some of the best photography books and projects I see have taken around 10 years— but are all incredible bodies of work (Josef Koudelka's "Gypsies", Jason Eskenazi's "Wonderland", and David Alan Harvey's "Divided Soul").

Takeaway point:

Take your time in street photography. Don't try to force things to completion. Know that it is very rare that you will make a great street photograph, so don't feel pressured or rushed to constantly publish new work. Less is more.

I see photography projects like the "365 project" where you photograph everyday. I think that is a great idea— but just don't feel pressured to publish everyday (if you don't think the photographs are any good).

Be calm— take your time.

14. Practice selective ignorance

"What he desires is non-desire;

what he learns is to unlearn.

The ancient Masters

didn't try to educate the people

but kindly taught them to not-know."

I think avoiding looking at bad photos is better than looking at great photos.

We are all influenced by what we see. If we are constantly bombarded by mediocre photographs, those images will seep into our mind and influence us in a negative way.

Therefore I think we should all practice "selective ignorance" — purposefully trying to be ignorant and remove certain outside influences from our lives.

This also goes back to "beginner's mind" — that sometimes people who are *too educated* are the least creative ones. They let all these "rules" corrupt their minds— and put it into a strait-jacket, which prevents them from flourishing as a photographer.

Takeaway point:

Practice selective ignorance when it comes to ignorance by avoiding 99% of images online. Honestly, I have probably only seen around 20 photographs on the internet that are truly phenomenal. The really great photography I see is always in photography books from the masters.

Not to say that there isn't great photography online. There are tons of great photographers online, especially on Flickr in the street photography community. But rather than following thousands of people on Flickr—follow 3 photographers whose work you truly admire and gain inspiration from. Try to de-follow as many people as you can, and watch the company that you keep. You are the average of the 5 closest people to you (even in terms of inspiration).

15. How to concentrate on your work

There is a lovely Taoist story— which is one of the most inspirational stories I have read about a woodworker who created beautiful pieces of art, and shared how he was able to do it:

“Ch'ing the master woodworker carved a bell stand so intricately graceful that all who saw it were astonished. They thought that a god must have made it. The Marquis of Lu asked, “How did your art achieve something of such unearthly beauty?” “My Lord,” Ch'ing said, “I'm just a simple woodworker — I don't know anything about art. But here's what I can tell you. Whenever I begin to carve a bell stand, **I concentrate my mind.**”

Ch'ing then shares his secret of how he concentrates his mind:

“After three days of meditating, I no longer have any thoughts of praise or blame. After five days, I no longer have any thoughts of success or failure. **After seven days, I'm not identified with a body. All my power is focused on my task; there are no distractions.** At that point, I enter the mountain forest. I examine the trees until exactly the right one appears. If I can see a bell stand inside it, the real work is done, and **all I have to do is get started.** Thus I harmonize inner and outer. That's why people think that my work must be superhuman.”

I think today's superhuman power is being able to *not* be distracted. We live in a world of over-abundance of information and media. To avoid distractions can sometimes feel nearly impossible.

There are hundreds (if not thousands) of productivity books on how to concentrate and be more “efficient” and “optimize” our lives. However **the secret to concentration is quite easy: simply remove your distractions.** For example, when writing this article — I fasted from all outside forms of media. I've uninstalled all the RSS readers from my phone, email, and social media applications. I've purposefully limited checking my email only 5 minutes a day (to avoid distractions), and when I'm writing— I put my phone to airplane mode (so I don't get interrupted).

Furthermore I have found that not uploading photos to Flickr or social media helps me focus on my photography projects. When I get into an uploading spree on Flickr (or Facebook), I am too anxious about how many favorites/likes I will get— that I become too focused on numbers, rather than just focusing on my photography. So I have found that *not* uploading photos from my projects (and working on them until they are complete) gives me more focus and concentration on my projects rather than trying to constantly upload and share.

Takeaway point:

When it comes to photography or life, try to remove distractions. Rather than trying to do 1 more thing a day, try to figure out 1 thing you can remove a day.

Some practical suggestions:

- a) I have tried to uninstall one application from my phone a day. Everyday I am closer to the bare essentials.
- b) I try to remove one source of media from my life a day, this includes certain blogs, news sites, social media, etc. I am currently down to only reading books and listening to podcasts in the car.
- c) When you're trying to write or get any "real" work done— turn off your phone. I either put my phone to "airplane" mode— or better yet, just turn it off completely. This is also a great way to avoid being distracted when you're out shooting in the streets and you're "in the zone". Also when my smartphone is on— I disable all social media notifications, pings, and push-messages.
- d) Single-task: do one thing at a time. When you're reading a photography book, don't check your email at the same time. When you're out shooting, don't be making phonecalls.
- e) When spending time with loved ones and friends, don't text while having dinner with them or spending time with them. Give them 100% of your attention.

Conclusion

I am not a master on Taoism, Zen buddhism, or any other philosophy out there. I am just an eager student who wishes to share what I've learned with others. This article isn't meant to guilt-trip anyone or for me to share to the world how "enlightened" I am. I still face constant struggles in my photography and life— and writing this article is also a form of self-therapy (and giving myself advice that I need).

However I do hope that this article does help bring peace into your life— photographically and also generally.

If I can have the biggest takeaways it is this: **remove distractions from your life, focus on your photography and what makes you happy, and be appreciate of what you have.** Seek for inner-contentment, rather than what others think of you. Everyday when you're out walking on the streets, exclaim how beautiful life is— and pretend like you're a photographer just starting off again, and see how exciting life is. Don't take yourself too seriously, and remember to have fun.

Chapter 13: Lessons Life Has Taught Me About Street Photography

(Written on my 26th birthday)

Today I turn 26 years old. Life has been one hell of a ride so far. When I was a kid, I had no idea I would be where I am today— with the love of my life, phenomenal friends I have met all around the world, a supportive family, as well as the freedom and opportunity to pursue my passion (street photography).

Ever since I got laid off my job around 3 years ago, life has been a blur. I remember the anxiety I had — no longer having a stable income, health care, and a sense of security. I had no idea where my life would take me from that point— but I am so grateful that Cindy, my family, as well as you (my dear friend) was able to support me to run this blog and teach workshops for a living.

I always use birthdays as an opportunity to reflect on life— and think about the lessons that I have learned. Of course in the spirit of my blog, I will present 26 lessons that life has taught me — and how it has even given me insight into street photography.

1. I couldn't be where I am if it weren't for the support of others

In my life, I have had so many phenomenal, supportive, and guiding role models. When some of my friends went down the path of drugs, gangs, and destructive behavior— my role models were able to guide me along the right path, keeping my head straight. They taught me lessons of virtue, honesty, loyalty, humility, service, and helping out the community. I am so grateful that all of these people helped me mold and shape me into who I am today.

In terms of my photography, I couldn't be where I am if it weren't for others either. I have a million people to thank— people who have helped me from a business-standpoint (Todd Hatakeyema), commercially (JJ from Leica, and all of the amazing Leica representatives I have met all around the world), photographically (so many people to mention), everyone who has attended my workshops, and to everyone who has read the blog, left comments, and shared it with other people they know.

I also couldn't possibly have improved my photography if it weren't for the critique and honest feedback that I got— and to strive to take my work to the next level. I am grateful for all of my fellow members at the UCLA photography club for helping me start my passion in photography, to the members of the “Black & White Vision” forum on FredMiranda, to the critique I got from the “Grit & Grain” group on Flickr, and to the brutal feedback I have received in-person.

No man is his own island— and I certainly am not. Of course I have tried hard in life to get to where I am, but if it weren't for others— I would be nowhere.

2. Life is always unexpected; go with the flow

When I started studying at UCLA, I originally went in as a Biology major (to become a doctor, like any good Asian kid). But after taking a quarter of courses and realizing it wasn't for me— I switched to something that seemed more appealing to me: sociology.

I had no idea what I could “do” with sociology. After all, the advice I got from others was that sociology majors could only become high school teachers or social workers. But I took a leap of faith— and went into it head-in.

During my third year, I contemplated becoming a Sociology professor— as I discovered that teaching was my passion. However, 6–7 more years of school didn't seem appealing to me— so I made a backup: I would enter the corporate world doing social media & online community management.

After working at my social media job for a year, I got called into the HR office and was told that I was being made redundant.

I now make my living teaching street photography workshops and running this blog.

If you asked me when I was a kid what I thought I would do for a living— I would say a scientist (I discovered later on that I was really bad at Math, even as an Asian).

I had no idea what direction life would take me— it was all so unexpected. The only thing I could do was “go with the flow” — and have faith that everything would be okay.

I think in street photography it is the same thing. You never can predict what kind of great photographic opportunities will arise. But by always being prepared (always carrying my camera with me) — I have been able to catch some lovely moments here and there.

As much as we like to think that we can control our futures and our fate— there is actually quite little we have control over. Sure we can control how hard we work, but ultimately there are so many complex variables outside of our control— which will take us down paths that we can never expect.

Therefore I feel in street photography— know that no matter how “hard” you try— you can't always get a great photograph. Sometimes we have to relax, know that if we are diligent in our shooting— great moments will come to us. We need to have faith.

3. Life is (unfortunately) a lot about luck

I am lucky. I was born healthy, without any physical or mental abnormalities (at least none I know about), and was raised by loving and supportive parents. Even though I had a very rocky childhood— I was never homeless, I never went to bed hungry, and I was able to have so many great role models in my life.

However if I were born in any other circumstance, my life would have turned out dramatically different. If my mom was addicted to crack, and my dad an alcoholic— I surely would have gone down a similar destructive path. And unfortunately, this is what happens to a lot of people in the world.

In terms of my “career” in street photography, I have also been extremely lucky. I started this blog when there weren’t many other blogs on street photography— which helped me become #1 on Google for “street photography blog.” If I was born 10 years later, I am sure this blog wouldn’t be as popular as it is.

Not only that, but I got conveniently laid off at the right time. Getting laid off my job was the biggest blessing in disguise. If I never got laid off, I am sure that I would have been at my job— not being able to dedicate myself fully to street photography.

Of course we all know how much luck is involved in street photography as well. A lot of moments which happen in front of our eyes are luck. Sure we can control how we frame the shot and how close we are to our subjects— but we can’t control what they look like, what the light is like, or what is happening.

Not to say that life and street photography is “all luck.” Granted, if you sit on your ass all day— you will never be “lucky.” You have to often go out and create your own luck. Creating your own opportunities by simply getting out of the house— and embracing life full-on.

4. Money (and material things) don’t buy happiness

Financially speaking, I grew up in the lower socio-economic bracket. Growing up, I had a single mom who worked 3 part time jobs to put food on the table, to pay the rent, and to get me and my sister through school. We lived paycheck to paycheck, and there were months where we seriously thought we would become homeless. I wasn’t as fortunate as my other friends, who had parents with much more stable incomes— and they could buy all the stuff they wanted.

Growing up, I hated not having enough money to buy the stuff that I wanted. While all of my friends were wearing the latest designer brands, I was stuck wearing stuff at Old Navy. I knew that of course life wasn’t about money— but I still wanted the material possessions my heart desired.

When I started working when I was 15, I spent all of my money on clothes, shirts, jackets, shoes, and other material possessions I wanted. Every time I bought something new, I would get a huge rush of adrenaline and excitement— and I felt good. However that feeling was fleeting, which just made me go out and buy more stuff.

Fast-forward to college— I started to work a job in IT which paid pretty decent for a student job (\$13 an hour). I maxed out my working hours (20 hours a week) and also during the time I got interested in photography. My journey into photography started innocently enough with a little Canon point-and-shoot camera as a high school graduation present from my mom.

I start to get more passionate about photography around the time, and I saw all of these amazing images online. I wondered to myself: how could I create those kind of images? I discovered that I needed a DSLR and a fast prime lens. When I saw how much it cost (\$600 for a Rebel XT at the time, and \$100 for a 50mm f/1.8) I gasped. \$700 for a college student is a ton of money— but I scrounged up and saved up every penny for a few months, and I finally bought it.

The first month with my camera was bliss. The image quality was phenomenal, and I loved the “bokeh” I could achieve shooting wide open. Seriously the first month I shot everything at f/1.8.

Then soon, I fell into the pit of online gear-related forums, rumor forums, and camera review sites. Soon my beloved Canon Rebel XT looked like a piece of crap, and I “needed” a full-frame camera to become a “real” photographer.

I used part of my student loan money to buy a used Canon 5D for around \$1200, and I was in heaven. When I thought I would be “happy forever” because I had a “full-frame” sensor, the madness didn’t end. I then got suckered into believing that I couldn’t do my full-frame justice without a Canon L lens. I then used even more money to buy some L lenses, and I still wasn’t satisfied. I “needed” a carbon-fiber tripod. I “needed” a more expensive camera bag to carry my stuff. I “needed” more lenses. I “needed” a Macbook.

It doesn’t stop here. I then fell into the world of Leica, and now the price of Canon DSLR’s and lenses seemed like child’s play. \$7000 for a Leica M9? Who the hell would spend that kind of cash on a camera? Regardless, I got suckered into thinking that shooting with a Leica would make me a better street photographer, so I would daydream and lust over it day by day. I came up with these crazy calculations in my head that if I sold everything I physically owned (including my car), I could probably get a Leica M9. But my plan didn’t account for the price of a lens.

Anyways with the generosity of my Mom, she was able to scrounge together her life savings and loan me some money to pay for a second-hand Leica M9. I used my life’s savings to buy a lens (35mm f/1.4 Summilux). Looking back, this was a horrible financial decision. But fortunately I was able to pay my mom back, and still made enough to pay for rent.

I seriously, deeply, truly in my heart felt that the Leica M9 would be the last camera I would ever buy. However the madness didn’t end there. Newer exotic Leica lenses entered my world, like the newer Leica 35mm f/1.4 FLE— which retails for around \$5,000.

Even though I thought that having the money to purchase this camera would make me happy forever— it didn’t. After an 8-month fling with the Leica M9, I got introduced to shooting film— and sold off the M9 and used the proceeds to purchase a second-hand Leica MP.

Currently the Leica MP, Leica 35mm f/2 Summicron, and Contax T3 are the only cameras that I own. Even now I like to think that I am “satisfied” — I still get tempted. Tempted by all of these new digital cameras coming out. Tempted by medium-format. I have found I have a hard time staying satisfied.

When I was working at my old company, I too got suckered into worrying so much about money (even though sociology taught me that money doesn’t buy happiness). I tried to work harder, put in more hours, to prove to

my boss that I “deserved” a raise and a promotion. I saw my co-workers buying new BMW’s and sports cars, and I wanted to “keep up with the Joneses.”

Even now I worry quite a bit about finances. I wonder how long I will be able to make a living teaching street photography workshops— and there are a lot of times I worry about how I can pay my rent.

But over the years, I have started to learn that money really isn’t that important. I have found my most meaningful moments in life through the people I met, through the interactions shooting street photography, writing for this blog, as well as through the books that I read. All of this doesn’t cost much money— yet I often find myself spending too much time worrying about money (to buy a house in the future, to buy a nicer car, buy a new iPad, a new MacBook Pro, etc).

I have learned that I only need enough money to pay my rent, my bills, enough money to go out with friends, and put a little into savings. Other than that, money is a big waste of time. I’d rather spend my mental energy blogging, keeping in contact with friends and family, out shooting in the streets, and reading.

Through psychology I have also learned that if you want money to bring you happiness, **you need to purchase experiences— not material things.**

I am still not fully cured of this obsession with money, and it is a constant struggle. But when I have been taking Steve Job’s approach to heart— by living every day as if it were my last, to fully dedicate all of my energy and soul into my life’s mission (which is helping out the street photography community).

5. Ignore what others think of you

I am a normal human being. I care about what others think about me. I get hurt when others judge me or say negative things about me. I like being the center of attention. I like feeling special, recognized, and “important.”

However the more I get into this line of thinking, the more destructive it becomes. I end up spending so much energy on worrying about what others think about me— that I no longer stay genuine. I no longer do things that make me happy and fulfilled— I just try to gain the favor and admiration of others.

When it comes to photography, I can get trapped into this sucker’s game too of worrying about the “likes”, “favorites”, and the number of followers I have. I used to obsess over these things— checking my phone 24/7, using these pink stars, blue thumbs-up signs, and numbers to determine my self-value. I would also obsess over the number of likes, comments, and page views on the blog. It was destructive.

When a photograph I uploaded didn’t get as many likes or favorites as I expected, I felt like I was a crappy photographer. When I didn’t get that many page views, likes, or comments on an article I wrote on the blog— I felt that I wrote something crappy. If I didn’t get invited to some sort of street photography-related event, exhibition, or contest— I felt like I was a joke.

Fortunately things aren't like that anymore (at least for the most part).

For my sanity, I have not been spending much time on social media lately. Yeah, I know it is pretty strange— as I have built the popularity of this blog through social media. I mean, there is just so much to check. Facebook notifications, Facebook messages, the News feed, my Facebook Fan comments, my Facebook Fan messages, Tumblr, Tumblr messages, YouTube comments, Flickr comments, Flickr messages, Google+ comments, blog comments, emails, text messages— the list goes on.

I used to also read a ton of photography and tech related blogs, but for the last 6 months I have made a pretty radical move: I have been taking a fast from social media and the internet.

When it comes to health, they have discovered that fasting from eating for a while (although painful) is beneficial to our health. Funny enough, my best writing comes out when I am slightly hungry (like now), and my best workouts in the gym are when I am hungry as well.

But by purging all of the social media, blogs, and internet-related junk out of my system, I feel clean. I have worried less about what others think about me (whether it be bad or good). If I could make a guess, I think half the internet hates me (at least that is what YouTube comments have taught me) - but as long as my real-life friends and photographers care about me, why should I worry about what people on the internet think about me?

Not only that, but sometimes getting too much positive feedback can be a negative thing too. I found that if I find myself flattered, I become complacent. I no longer strive to produce better photography or features for this blog. Rather than listening to others' opinions— I have learned to follow my own gut instinct, and follow my own feelings of myself.

Now that I check less social media, I feel better about myself. Also in real life, I try to avoid negative people who drain the life out of me— and spew negativity. I try to stay around like-minded, positive, and up-beat people. They bleed their positivity on me, and soak my mind with only good thoughts.

But even at the end of the day if I had no friends or people who didn't like me— as long as I stayed true to my life's mission, nothing else would matter.

6. You have to block out time for what you are passionate about

Life is crazy. We are all jacked up on caffeine, high-speed internet connections, 4g, emails spewing all over the place, and things to get done. Our to-do lists are overflowing, and we barely have enough time to do what we are passionate about. We can sometimes be so busy attending to the needs of others and putting out fires that we never make time for ourselves.

When I got laid off my job I first loved the sense of freedom that I had. Woohoo— no more 9–5 life for me!

But I actually discovered working for myself, I didn't know when to stop working and being "productive." Ironically enough, even though I was a "full-time street photographer" — I barely had enough time to go out and actually take photos (as I was busy answering emails, updating social media, doing finances, planning workshops, etc). I also didn't do the writing that I wanted to do, as I would always check emails first things in the morning— and always attend to the needs of others before myself.

I have recently come to the realization that we will never have time to do what we love— unless we are ruthless about guarding our time, and blocking out time to do what we love.

So now, I have a personal rule: I dedicate the first 3 hours a day to working on this blog.

My days generally go like this: I go to sleep and put my phone to airplane mode. I wake up in the morning and prevent myself from checking my email first thing in the morning, as well as the text messages, and other notifications I might get. I start off with an espresso, go to the gym and lift some weights, take an icy cold shower (painful but invigorating), drop Cindy off to class, sit at a Cafe, drink another espresso, and write non-stop for the next 3 hours. At the end of these 3 hours I usually have a blog post ready to post, and I feel personally fulfilled — and whole.

Even when it comes to street photography, I try to go out everyday at around 3pm— to just take some photographs around my neighborhood in Berkeley. I also always carry my camera with me everywhere I go, to take random photos I find interesting in my days.

I know a lot of us have full-time jobs, families, school, and other obligations that get in the way. You might ask yourself: sure Eric, this works for you because you don't have to work a 9-5, but how will this work for the rest of us?

Even when I was working a full-time job, I would try to get up two hours early to work on my blog for at least two hours in the morning— before my day job sapped the energy and soul out of me. I think even if I had a full-time job, I would make it a practice to sleep a bit earlier at night, and wake up earlier to do my writing.

If you find yourself not having enough time to follow your passion or shoot on the streets— block out the time for yourself. In your calendar, block out an hour during lunch or after work for a "meeting" with yourself. That meeting can just be you going out and taking photographs. I know someone who would leave his house an hour earlier to work than he normally did, so he could take some photographs on the way to work. He would drive, find an interesting scene, get out of the car, take a photograph, and move on.

Know that life is short, and we will never have enough time if we don't put ourselves first.

7. Walk slowly

I am a big fan of the philosopher Nassim Taleb. And one of the tips I got from him was: "To first become a philosopher, start by walking very slowly."

I have discovered some of my biggest “aha” moments when I walk on the streets, either out shooting— or just relaxing.

As an American, it is hard to walk. I used to live in LA, and we are the car culture of the world. Even walking 5 minutes to go to the grocery store seems like a pain in the ass. We would rather drive.

Ironically enough I have to walk when shooting on the streets, but I rarely walk if I need to get from point A to point B.

Now that I have moved to Berkeley, I have tried to make a greater effort to experience and get to know the neighborhood by simply walking more. Sometimes when I am lured by driving, I choose the longer option— walking.

I am still addicted to speed in a lot of ways (I hate it when my phone doesn't have 4G or I'm stuck in traffic) and am still suckered in a lot of ways to worry about “efficiency” and “optimization.” Of course walking isn't efficient nor optimal. Driving is— because it gets us there faster.

But by walking (especially walking slowly) it has helped me better appreciate the world around me, and even help me see more street photography opportunities (which I often pass up when I'm driving, or walking too quickly).

8. Spend more time in fewer places

When I was a 3rd year in university, I went on an epic backpacking trip through Europe for around a month, which took me through Paris, Rome, Florence, Cinque Terre, Venice, Prague, and London. I initially planned it that way— because I wanted to get “more bang for my buck” — by seeing more places.

However I discovered that trying to see so many places in such a short time was quite exhausting. For many of the places, I was only able to spend around 2 days in each city— much of which was spent traveling to the place. Just once when I felt I was getting to know a place, I would be off to the next location. However at the end of my trip, I spent a week in London— and I loved it. I think this had to do with the fact that I didn't feel so rushed, and I could go at a more comfortable pace, and to get to really know London.

Now when it comes to traveling, I try to go to fewer places, but spend more time in each location. I have found this to be a lot less tiring, and more enjoyable. I have time to really get to know the place— and by the time I leave, I felt that I didn't really “miss out” on anything.

In think in street photography to try to shoot too many different projects, subject matter, and locations doesn't work well either. For me personally, by focusing on fewer projects and ideas— my photography has been much more focused, productive— and I have gotten better images.

9. Don't rush things

In life I often feel that everything is an emergency— and I always need to do things quickly and promptly. Not only does this increase stress in my life, but it also causes me to make huge mistakes and lower the quality of my work and life.

In street photography, I feel that the greatest projects I have seen take a long time. While we all want to quickly become great photographers, it is a slow and gradual journey. The best books I have seen generally take anywhere from 2–10 years. You can't rush creating a body of work. Yet, we are all pressured to constantly shoot and upload new images to the web so we aren't "forgotten" or ignored.

I used to get really impatient in life— that things weren't happening quickly enough. Why aren't I making more money and getting promoted in my job quicker? Why is this food taking so long to cook? Why is this line moving so slowly? Why is it taking so long for this website to load?

Now I have been working on my patience and cultivating it— and found it to reap huge rewards. Funny enough by taking a more relaxed approach, I am more productive in my work— and happier overall.

10. Less is more

I used to buy a lot of crap that I didn't need. At one point I remember owning over 20 pairs of shoes, 30 jackets, over 50 t-shirts, and countless other junk I didn't really need in my life. I also owned too many cameras, too many lenses, and equipment I didn't really need.

I came across minimalism a few years ago (probably through the Zen Habits blog) — and found it to be a beautiful approach. The whole idea of "less is more" seemed a bit contradictory at first (isn't more, more?) — but I found that rather owning my material things, my material things started to own me.

So I started to purge all of my crap. When I moved from LA to Michigan to be with Cindy, I gave away 95% of my clothing, and either sold or donated the rest of the material crap I didn't need. Except my books (I will never get rid of those), I was able to fit my life's belongings into a few small boxes and a carry-on.

I found that having less stuff has been quite refreshing. When I wake up in the morning, no longer do I stress out about what I'm going to wear that day. I wear the same pair of pants, a plain t-shirt, my black shoes, my watch — and I can use my energy to devote to more important things (like thinking of ideas to blog about).

Even when I am traveling, I used to be a typical Asian tourist: with those huge roly bags. Now I travel really light: two shirts (quick-dry), two boxers (also quick-dry), two socks (sort of quick-dry), a laptop, my camera, and some film. I can fit that all into a school-sized backpack. This has made it a lot easier to physically navigate through the airport and through a new city, and is less stressful.

In street photography, I think we can easily get tempted to buy more cameras, more lenses, more equipment. We are also tempted to upload more images constantly. I fell into this trap.

However nowadays I only own one lens for my Leica (a 35mm) and try to upload fewer images to the web (only sharing my best work). By showing less, the overall quality of each image was a lot stronger. In a world with so much photography out there, I want to only show my best work.

11. Talk to strangers

I used to have an aversion to talk to strangers (even though I am a pretty friendly guy). I would have situations in which I needed basic directions to go somewhere. But rather than asking a stranger for directions, I would spend at least 5 minutes on my smartphone trying to figure out where to go.

But ever since I started to shoot street photography, I have been a lot more comfortable talking and interacting with strangers. I have no problems asking for directions anymore— and I find it to be much more efficient than trying to figure it out on my own. Not only that, but I have found these strangers to be incredibly friendly and helpful (some even offer to walk to me where I need to go!)

Even in other “awkward” situations (like standing with a bunch of strangers in an elevator) I try to break the ice by chatting to people next to me. Surprisingly, most people are quite excited to chat to break the ice— and I generally step out of the elevator feeling better about myself, being able to connect with another human being. I have applied this mentality by trying to talk to as many strangers as I can: cashiers, waiters, parking attendants, etc— even small talk helps build a bridge.

In street photography I used to feel that all of my street photography had to be candid. If I wanted to become a master like Henri Cartier-Bresson, I shouldn't talk to any strangers— to “ruin” the “authenticity” of my images.

But this wasn't being authentic to myself. For me, I learned to love talking to strangers— and I found the more that I started to chat to people on the street and ask for permission to take their photograph, I made much deeper connections with them (and sometimes better images). Nowadays I would say out of my photos of strangers, around 60% of my shots are candid, and 40% are with permission – in which I talk to them.

Generally the shots without permission turn out better, but I have also got some great shots in which I ask for permission.

But personally at the end of the day, I prefer the human interaction I get talking to a stranger and building some emotional bond— rather than pictures.

12. Beauty is often found in the most unexpected places

I often find that my best street photographs happen in the least expected places– like the grocery store, the airport, the elevator, and just walking around my neighborhood.

Life is the same way, beauty can be found in the small things– like the laugh of a child, the embrace of a friend, or the smell of coffee in the morning.

13. We can control how to frame and see the world

In life we can control how we can frame events– whether positive or negative. Whenever crappy stuff happens to me in life, I always think to myself: how can this moment be a blessing in disguise? I try to see the positive in the negative.

Similarly in street photography, we decide how to literally frame the world. We choose what to include our frame and what to exclude. We can choose to show the beauty and happiness in the world, or only the pain and misery. Or sometimes we can show both. Know we have this power.

14. Be grateful for what you have

I sometimes forget how grateful I should be of all the wonderful things in my life. This includes my loving girlfriends, my friends, my family, my camera, my car, and the ability to pursue my passion.

In street photography I sometimes wish I had more fame, more recognition, more followers, more books, more cameras, film, lenses, etc– but I learned to appreciate what I have, and make the best of it.

15. The more you give, the more you receive

I can often be greedy – I want more and more and more. But I have discovered in my life, there is no limit to how much I want and can acquire.

But rather than focusing on acquiring, I have focused on giving. Funny enough, the more I give– the more I receive in return.

For example – I give away a lot of free articles, videos, presets, and other stuff on this blog. However the more I give to this blog, the more the community has given back to me. I now am able to do my blog for a full-time living, and that is the ultimate gift I have received.

16. Travel is a means to an end (not the end)

I used to think that I wanted to make travel the purpose of my life. Traveling has always been one of my joys and passions– and I thought of how I could structure a life in which I could travel all the time.

However after extensive traveling, I found it to be a means to an end– not the end itself. Meaning, I can't structure my life to simply be on the road all the time. Traveling is a great opportunity to help me see new perspectives and experience the world, but at the end of the day– I need to be grounded, at a home (I will talk more about this in the next point).

Similarity in street photography I think traveling is a great way to break out the monotony of photographing in the same place over and over. However, it is hard to take good street photographs when you travel– in the sense that you don't have enough time to build a body of work, and a lot of the photos you take abroad can be more cliché.

Even personally, I have found my best photography to be done in my backyard, than when I was traveling. I might get a few “keepers” here and there while traveling, but my most meaningful images are when I spend an extended period of time at a certain location near home.

17. Home is where the heart is

At the end of the day, there is nothing more important than friends, family, a sense of community, and home.

When I was always abroad traveling, I never had enough time at home. Even though it was exciting to be in all these foreign places, a deep part of my soul was missing when I didn't spend enough time at home.

Now that I have been spending more time at home– I feel happier, more at peace, and less stressed out. It gives me more time to work on the blog, spend time with those who matter to me, and also focus on photography projects close-by.

18. Don't rely on inspiration

One of the quotes that has really stuck with me from Woody Allen is, “ **80% of success is just showing up.**”

One of the most difficult things about being a blogger is to be able to consistently blog. There are days I don't feel inspired, days I don't feel like writing– but I still force myself to get to my computer, and to write something. And funny enough, even the act of sitting down – the ideas start to flow out.

In street photography too– there are tons of times I don't want to actually go out and take photos. I have tons of excuses: I'm tired, I already took photos yesterday, I don't feel inspired. But it in those moments I need to

give myself a kick in the ass and just get out of the house. And once I'm on the streets, I suddenly do feel inspired and start taking photographs.

So I have learned to not just rely on inspiration when it comes to my life, and it has worked well so far. Even Thomas Edison said: “ **Genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration.**”

19. Live if everyday were my last

My grandfather recently passed away in the last year, and it had me thinking a lot about death. It made me re-evaluate how I lived my life, and what the purpose of my life was.

I also am a huge fan of Steve Jobs and the way he lived his life. Although in many regards he was an asshole and didn't treat others with compassion- he lived a life true to his own heart, and truly lived like everyday were his last. He also knew that he had cancer, which helped even give him more clarity in life.

Even though I am only 26 years old- I have had a few near-death experiences. Most of these moments were while driving- in which I fell asleep at the wheel, or barely avoided a head-on collision by half a second. In those moments in which flashes by my very eyes- it has helped me realize that I never know when I am going to die.

So nowadays I have been trying to live my life as if everyday were my last. I try to work as diligently as I can, working on this blog, photographing, and spending time with friends and family. Because who knows, when I lie down in bed at night- it is not 100% certain I will wake up the next morning.

20. Live without regrets

This goes with the last point- living without regrets.

There have been two big “turning points” in my life- when I started college (and chose sociology over biology) and when I got laid off my job (choosing to work on my blog full-time instead of getting another typical job).

The way I thought to myself was the following: **if I look back at my life at age 80, would I have any regrets in the decisions I made?**

This has been one of my life's principles- and it has helped me live a life without regrets. Sure I could have made more money by choosing a different life path, but I probably wouldn't be as fulfilled as happy. Sure I could have chosen a life that was more secure and not deal with all the stresses of running my own business, but I wouldn't have the sense of freedom I have in my life now.

In street photography there are tons of moments where I see great street photographs- and hesitate to take the photograph. I then spend the rest of the day regretting not taking the image.

Even though there are still lots of missed opportunities I have in my photography, I still remind myself to shoot without regrets. And even though I have pissed off some people when taking photographs, at least I don't regret not taking the chance to take a possibly great photograph.

21. Follow your passion

I know the saying: "follow your passion" is a bit of a cliché, but this cliché has helped direct my life in a meaningful way.

When I switched from biology to sociology, it was because I wasn't passionate about biology. It wasn't a field that interested me, stimulated me, or motivated me. But sociology was different. It was fascinating to me. It was exciting. I actually studied it for fun. I discovered it was my passion.

Sure I had no idea what I would do with sociology for a living, but it helped me in the long run. Combining my passion for photography and sociology— I discovered street photography. And my passion for teaching and sharing knowledge with others has led to me running this blog and teaching workshops, and sharing the love of street photography with others.

I feel when I am out shooting, I try to only focus on shooting subjects which interest me— and which I am passionate about. If I work on a project and I feel that I am forced to work on it (rather than being intrinsically motivated to do so) — it is a sign I have to either stop the project or move on.

22. Live for others, not for myself

I want to be happy. I want to live a comfortable life without financial stresses, stress about my health, or the livelihood of my family. I want nice material things and a nice house. But the more I start thinking in this selfish way, the less valuable work I do to help others.

In a quote by Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus, he says: "**He who lives for himself is truly dead to others.**"

In moments where I am greedy, selfish, and live for myself— it pulls me away from my friends, family, and the community. However the more I think about the work I do as helping others— the more inner-peace and self of satisfaction it brings me.

I also think in my street photography, I like to think that my images can help inspire, motivate, or reflect beauty (or pain) in life. Although I do shoot because I want to please myself, I also want to create images that hopefully help contribute to society. I want to create images that challenge people in terms of how they see society— to challenge the status quo.

23. Avoid boredom

Life is too short to do things that bore you. I think we were all put on this earth for a reason. To do great things. To create beautiful art. To contribute to the rest of society.

I feel one of the saddest things is when someone has to do something against his/her will, is bored, and doesn't fulfill his/her greatest potential.

I have found a helpful way to live my life is to simply avoid boredom. By avoiding boredom, I find things that are exciting and intrinsically enriching to me. I do work effortlessly— rather than feeling like it is “work.”

For example, I work on this blog because I absolutely love it. Even if I had a full-time job, I would still run the blog— because it is my passion, and whenever I write, I am never bored.

For a while I did get bored with some of the stuff that I did write, so I decided to switch it up— and only write about things that were interesting to me. And I feel that has helped me grow as a writer, and create more interesting articles that bring more value to the street photography community.

In my previous post: “The 7 Deadly sins of Mediocrity in Street Photography” — I shared that mediocrity is often created by a sense of boredom. If we are bored, it means we aren't being challenged. Many kids in school are bored in school and become trouble-makers, because the curriculum isn't challenging enough for them. However when the kids are either bumped to a higher grade or given more challenging material— they blossom.

So if you ever find yourself bored shooting street photography: challenge yourself. Perhaps street photography isn't your passion? Perhaps it might be landscape, portraiture, or fashion? It doesn't have to be street photography. Or perhaps you need to work on a project that you are passionate about? Or you need to explore a new neighborhood? Let your curiosity guide you, and avoid boredom at all costs.

24. Read voraciously

I still have a lot to learn in life, but damn— I have learned a lot in the last few years from books. Ironically enough I am reading far more books now than I did when I did in college.

I find the beauty of reading a book is that generally people spend their entire lives putting their ideas into a book. It only generally takes me about a day to read a book. Some of these books take 10 years for an author to write. This means that by reading a book, I can take in 10 years worth of wisdom from someone far smarter than me in only a day. If I read a few books a week, this knowledge and understanding of the world compounds— and helps me, which ultimately helps others.

In my spare time, I don't read that many books on photography. Rather I spend a lot of time reading books on philosophy, economics, psychology, sociology, and cognitive science. And through these books— I have been

able to learn valuable outside knowledge which helps me in my street photography (and live a more peaceful life).

Also I have invested thousands of dollars in photography books (picture books) — which have helped me deepen my understanding of what makes great photography. This investment of books has paid much more than any amount of cameras and lenses could.

So if you want to become a better photographer, buy more photography books (and regular books), and eat them voraciously. The more you fill up your appetite, the more you will feel satisfied and grow.

25. Add value to the world

One thing that has given me much more clarity in running this blog is whenever I'm going to publish something, I ask myself: *am I creating value for others?*

Granted that a lot of the things I do are for selfish reasons— but my most meaningful work is when it is directed at helping others.

That is why this blog tends to have a more “educational” edge. I find articles that aren't helpful or provide some sort of “lessons” or “takeaway points” to not have as much value.

Also in my photography, I ask myself: are my images somehow creating some value for society? Do my images impact people on an emotional level? Do they change how they see the world? Do my image show some sort of beauty which inspires others? Or are my images self-gratuitous, and am I just shooting to get lots of “likes” and “favorites” online?

26. Make love my mission

I think at the end of the day, love is the key. Love is the answer. Love is what propels us to live for others. Love is what keeps us doing what we want to do. Love is the bond which keeps friends and family together. Love is the ultimate goal preached in every religion.

I think in street photography we have to ultimately love what we do, and also show love to our subjects. To show compassion. To show that we care. This is why I generally avoid taking photographs of homeless people (unless I talk to them and treat them like a human being).

I have found it easy for me to sometimes become dispassionate to my subjects— to see them as “targets” rather than living, breathing, blood-and-flesh people. This is what motivates me to always shoot with love on my mind— to shoot in a positive way, and hopefully make some change in the world with my photography.

Chapter 14: How to Prevent Regrets in Life

One of the articles I read a while ago (and recently re-read) was the [“Top 5 Regrets of the Dying.”](#) To sum up, a nurse who took care of the elderly and dying kept a record of her patients’ top regrets in life.

The top regrets of the elderly were:

1. I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn’t worked so hard.
3. I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Recently I wrote an article by Paul Graham titled [“The Top of My Todo List”](#) in which he mentioned the article above in how to live a fulfilling life.

He mentioned how we are always so busy and caught up in our to-do lists. He used the article above and used the opposite maxims to create his own list (to prevent regrets in life):

Don’t ignore your dreams
Don’t work too much
Say what you think
Cultivate friendships
Be happy

This made a lot of sense to me— as they gave me direct action steps to prevent regret in my life. And what better mentors to give life advice than the elderly who have already lived their lives—and are ready to pass away?

From the Farnam Street Blog, I also came across the book: [“30 Lessons for Living”](#) in which the author interviewed thousands of elderly for their life lessons.

Their thoughts echo very similarly to what the nurse mentioned above. Here are some excerpts:

1. Happiness is Your Responsibility

“Young man,” she said “you will learn, I hope, that happiness is what you make it, where you are. Why in the world would I be unhappy? People here complain all the time, but not me. It’s my responsibility to be as happy as I can, right here, today.”

2. Don't work so hard

No one— not a single person out of a thousand— said that to be happy you should try to work as hard as you can to make money to buy the things you want.

3. Don't compare yourself to your peers

No one— not a single person— said it's important to be at least as wealthy as the people around you, and if you have more than they do it's real success.

No one— not a single person— said you should choose your work based on your desired future earning power.

4. Cultivate your Interpersonal Skills

Their consensus: no matter how talented you are, no matter how brilliant— you must have interpersonal skills to succeed.

5. Travel more

“We always thought we'd do a lot of traveling when we retired, you know? But then Lynne passed away, and it was too late. I went on a couple of trips and I guess they were okay, but it's less fun going alone. I took a bus through the Canadian Rockies, and I actually turned once to talk to her— I was sitting in a seat by myself and it was beautiful, and I wanted to tell Lynne, “Look at that light, the color, that light.” But of course she wasn't there. And I just want to share things with her when I travel, but we waited too long.”

Not having any regrets in street photography

We never know when we are going to die. My grandpa passed away at the ripe age of 91 and lived a full life. However I have had a childhood friend named Simon who tragically died in a car accident from a drunk driver when he was 16 years old. We don't know when we are going to die. I write about this a bit in one of my past articles: [“Shoot Every Day As If It Were Your Last.”](#)

Certainly I am only 25 years old, and I hope that I have a long and fulfilling life ahead of me. However who knows if the next day I might die in a car accident, or if I fall sick to some rare illness. Below are some thoughts I have distilled from our elders and those close to death, to prevent a life of regret in photography.

1. Don't work too hard

This is one of the things that were echoed the most by the elders. Nobody on their deathbed ever says, "I wish I worked harder, earned more money to buy more BMW's."

Many of us have day jobs to support our families and ourselves. We also need to deal with the "real world" of paying our bills, credit cards, and student loans.

However many of us (especially in America) have huge problems of workaholism. I know it certainly was ingrained in me from a young age. If every second wasn't spent "being productive" I would feel guilty.

Ironically enough, even though I teach street photography workshops for a living—even I find it hard to find time to shoot. Like you, I have to answer emails, moderate my social media channels, take care of bills, taxes, and other not so fun logistical/accounting stuff. However if I spend my entire day blogging, making videos, planning workshops, answering emails— I often find little or no time to shoot.

So even I have made a vow not to work so hard. One of the things I loved about working my old day job is that when I was off at 6pm, I could do whatever I wanted— I never brought work home. Now that I am self-employed, it is hard to set your working hours (you freelancers out there might relate to this).

So now I set my own "working hours." I generally turn off my WIFI on my laptop and my phone until noon (so I can focus writing without getting distracted by social media) and also don't work after 6pm (and also turn off my internet access then). I also don't work on the weekends anymore (sometimes I cheat, but I generally don't).

This has helped free up a ton of time for me to pursue more of my photography—by getting out of the house and shooting, spending more time with my girlfriend Cindy, and more time to relax and read books.

If you have a day job and work a typical 9–5, my suggestion: **Don't take your work home with you.** Turn off your work email on your phone and don't check it at home. Make it clear to your peers that you won't answer any emails after work. Then use that time to pursue your photography and other interests. Also if possible, try not to work on the weekends either.

I also know some people who take on extra work at job, staying late, and putting in extra hours— in pursuit of getting that next pay raise or promotion to earn more money. But at the end of the day, time is your most valuable asset— and freedom is what you should crave. Why put in more hours at work, when you can work less (and less hard) and focus more time into your passion (photography)?

I know we all have different life circumstances and surely we need to work hard. But remind yourself that it is okay to take a break, and that workaholism isn't good for our health (or productive in our photography).

2. Travel more

One of the things that people regret the most is not traveling more. I know travel can be expensive, but I think that many of us have at least some opportunities and a bit of cash tucked away so we can travel.

For example, I was talking with my buddy [Josh White](#) about one of his most regrets in photography and it was spending too much money on cameras and equipment— and not using that towards travel.

We all fall victim to [GAS \(gear acquisition syndrome\)](#) at one point or another. However instead of lusting after that new camera or lens that can cost \$500, \$1000, \$2000, \$5000, or even \$5000 and up— put that into terms of travel.

\$500 can take you on a nice weekend getaway somewhere near where you live. Surely it won't take you overseas to Paris, but the best travel is sometimes the place closest to us. Rather than buying that new Leica M for \$7000, why not use that money towards travel? If you budget accordingly, that can be a 6-month trip across southeast asia (if you backpack and live in hostels). What would bring you more happiness, a new camera which you will simply get used to (and eventually sell), or a trip of a lifetime that you will cherish forever?

Once again to emphasize, travel doesn't need to be super far away or even overseas. Even driving a few hours or taking a short flight a few states or countries away (if you live in Europe) can create some incredible memories.

I remember I took out a \$3000 loan in university my 3rd year and I backpacked across Europe for a month through Paris, Rome, Florence, Venice, Cinque Terre, Prague, and London and it is still a memory I cherish and hold dear to my heart. My old \$7000 Leica M9? I sold it after about an 8-month fling.

So once again, invest in travel and experiences.

3. Shoot for yourself

I believe when it comes to photography, it is extremely important to get critical feedback on your work. Criticism will help you take your work to the next level, in terms of finding your flaws and what you can improve on.

However at the end of the day, you should be taking photos that you enjoy taking (rather than what other people enjoy).

For example, I often find that my personal favorite images are that ones that don't get a lot of "likes" on Facebook or "favorites" on Flickr. However photos that I don't think are very interesting have tons of likes and favorites.

The negative thing about this is that I found myself striving to get more shots that would give me a lot of “likes” and “favorites” on Facebook and Flickr (read my article: [“How Many “Favorites” Or “Likes” Are Enough?”](#)). Rather than shooting to please myself, I was shooting to please my audience.

So once again, if there is a type of street photography that you enjoy — pursue it and ignore what others may say. For example, I like to shoot a lot of close-up portraits of people in the street. However I get a lot of criticism from people telling me that it “isn’t street photography” or interesting— and that I should stop shooting that way (and [shoot the old way which I used to shoot](#)).

Nowadays I also find myself shooting a lot of “still life street photography” — of simple mundane objects and things in the street (without people). Once again, I have had some people tell me that if it is going to be “street photography” it has to have people in it.

So at the end of the day, enjoy the type of photography that you enjoy the most. Remember, don’t shoot for the “likes” or “favorites” or for external recognition. Shoot for the intrinsic rewards (for yourself) and whatever interests you. Don’t even worry about definitions— who the hell cares if it is “street photography” or not. Just make photos you enjoy.

4. Cultivate friendships

I interviewed [Josh White](#) recently in Toronto and one of the things that struck me the most was when he answered what he enjoys most about street photography. He told me it was all about the new friendships he made, and the people he has been able to meet. I got the warm and fuzzies when I heard him say that—but it is totally true.

I have met some absolutely phenomenal people in my world travels— people I would never have the opportunity to meet if it weren’t for street photography. Not only that, but people from all walks of life. Computer engineers from India, artists from Stockholm, waiters in LA, doctors in New York, and even random strangers in the street.

Remember the saying: “No man is his own island.” We are social beings and social creatures. We need social interaction and contact with one another. This can be not only people you have met through the internet (and in person) when it comes to street photography— but also random people in the street you might meet and hear their life stories.

I know in the previous point that I mentioned you should shoot for yourself — but I very much appreciate getting honest feedback and critique from close friends and peers in the street photography community. They give me a guiding hand and help me see the flaws in my work — which I am totally blind to. Of course I make the final editing decision at the end of the day, but it is their feedback which helps me tremendously.

I would disagree with the [Vivian Maier](#) approach of shooting your entire life, and not ever showing your work to anybody. I feel that photos are meant to be taken to be shared, not to just be hoarded to yourself. Especially street photography which does show “the human condition”—we should use our images to inspire others.

So if you don't have many friends in the street photography community— I urge you to try to cultivate friendships. If you literally live in the middle of nowhere, reach out to about 3 photographers you admire and keep in close contact with them. Give honest feedback and critique on their work, and they will most likely reciprocate. Send them an email or Facebook message, about how you admire their work.

If you want to meet photographers in person, check out a local meet-up group or post to one of my Facebook "Streettogs" groups asking if people want to meet up (see the list at the bottom [here](#)).

5. Be happy and have fun

This one sounds obvious—but it is actually one of the things that philosophers have debated and had difficulties with for millennia.

One of the sayings I heard which made a lot of sense to me is something like, "We don't know what makes us happy, but we know what makes us unhappy." Therefore in order to strive for happiness, perhaps the best way is to avoid unhappiness.

Therefore if you are working on a project and you no longer have passion for it—drop it and move onto the next project. If you are bored with your photography and it no longer brings you joy, switch it up. If you find yourself shooting mostly architectural/geometrical street photography at a distance (like Cartier-Bresson) perhaps take a step closer and embrace the [William Klein](#) approach.

If black and white no longer interests you switch it up a bit and embrace color. Study the work of [Alex Webb](#), [Martin Parr](#), and [William Eggleston](#).

One of the ways I guide my life is to avoid boredom. Have fun, be happy, and always [stretch your creativity to new heights](#).

Conclusion

We never know when we are going to die— so we should embrace every day like it were our last. Avoid regrets in life (and especially in your photography) and have fun. Nobody who dies regrets not having more cars, a bigger house, or more money in the bank. However people do regret not cultivating their friendships, traveling more, and pursuing their passions (photography).

Chapter 15: Shoot Every Day As If It Were Your Last

I was sitting at home with my girlfriend Cindy, and I suddenly got a call from my cousin overseas. After two bouts of heart attacks while he was in the hospital, he passed away suddenly. My mom then called me and told me that I had to immediately get on the next plane to Korea to attend my grandfather's funeral (which was on Sunday).

It was Friday night, and Cindy was fortunately able to help me book a plane that left the next morning. I quickly tossed some clothes into a gym bag, packed my camera and laptop, slept, then left to the airport. After a 18-hour flight to Busan, I arrived Saturday night in cold and rainy weather. I took a taxi straight to the church where my entire family from all around the globe was getting prepared for the funeral.

My grandpa lived a long life, and passed away at the ripe age of 91. He grew up in the countryside of Busan (a city in the south of Korea) where he bootstrapped himself from a poor family into being a prestigious doctor. In his entire life he supported 8 children, and later on his life after he retired, he took up Chinese calligraphy. His calligraphy soon became his passion. He would lock himself for hours on end in his study, and delicately wrote poems, verses, and characters onto beautiful white scrolls.

When I visited his study, I was amazed to see hundreds of books on Chinese calligraphy stacked on his walls. He took his art very seriously, and continuously worked on and improved his craft from the age of 40 until a week before he passed away at 91.

After his beautiful funeral this Sunday, the entire family gathered at his home and we started to divide up his assets. One of his most prized assets was his art. Fortunately everyone in the family were able to receive a few Chinese character scrolls as inheritances, which were absolutely beautiful. Many of them won national contests, and he was even given some of the highest art awards from Korea.

As devastated as our family was about his passing, at least we would all have something to remember him by. This past weekend has got me thinking a lot about death. I'm only 25 years old and (fingers crossed) still have a long life ahead of me. But death is quick fickle and sometimes unexpected. What if I will die in a car accident or a plane crash tomorrow? Who knows if I fall ill to a fatal disease or cancer? Who knows if I get mugged and killed the next day? Nobody knows.

Life is short. None of us know when we are going to pass. Whenever we wake up in the morning, we should always be grateful to be alive. Being an American, I used to always be obsessed about earning more money in life, buying a nicer car, saving up to buying a big house, and getting a promotion and raise at my job. But at the end of the day, how important are these things? One of the most influential speeches I have heard in my life was from Steve Jobs. In a [Stanford commencement speech](#) in 2005 he shared:

"When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: 'If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right.'" It made an impression on me, and since then, **for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something."**

Considering that he had many bouts with cancer, he would always wake up and look at himself in the mirror and ask himself: if today was my last day on Earth, would I live it like it were my last? I think as street photographers, we should have the same mentality and shoot everyday like it were my last.

The irony is that even though I am a “full-time street photographer” even I have a hard time to carve time out of my busy schedule to go out and shoot. Sometimes my entire day is consumed by answering emails, blogging, spending time on social media, reading blogs, writing, planning workshops, etc that I don’t have time to shoot. I would say regardless of what job you have in life, unless you carve out time to prioritize your photography, you will never time find to shoot. Some changes which have helped me find more time to shoot:

1. Bring your camera with you everywhere you go

I know I say this all the time, but it is still the best way to find time to shoot street photography. It doesn’t matter if you are busy with work or kids, if you always have your camera with you you can shoot even in the most mundane places (think supermarket, on the way to pay bills, or even at the post office).

2. Carry a small camera

I have discovered a funny paradox with cameras and photographers: the more experienced we get as photographers, we generally keep upgrading our cameras and lenses that they keep getting bigger and bigger. But in my personal experience, the bigger my camera got— the less I carried it with me, and the fewer photos I took. I remember when I started photography with a little Canon point-and-shoot. I loved the camera, carried it with me everywhere in my pocket, and took a ton of photos everyday.

Once I got a Canon 5D, it was such a pain in the ass to carry around everyday, that I rarely took photos (and rather spent time on gear forums). Nowadays the only two cameras I shoot with are my Leica MP and my Contax T3. I only take out my Leica MP to big events where speed is a priority. When it comes to shooting around town in my everyday life, the Contax is with me 95% of the time. I keep it in “P” mode, autofocus, and just snap whatever I find interesting. Because it is so small and compact, I never find it a burden to carry with me, which leads me to ultimately taking more photos.

3. Ask yourself: what if I died tomorrow?

Nobody knows when they are going to die. So ask yourself, if you were to die tomorrow— would you regret not taking more photos in your life? Personally, I don’t know any photographers who ever regret taking too many photos. The regret is always not taking enough photos (think of taking photos of your kids, on holiday, etc). I don’t mean to say you need to jump on the next plane to Paris and shoot street photography. I generally find the most interesting photography done by street photographers in their own hometown regardless of how boring it may be. If we can learn anything from [William Eggleston](#) (who has shot street photography for over 60 years in Mississippi) we can still make interesting and beautiful photos from the most mundane places.

Conclusion

Life is short. We never know when we are going to pass. Live everyday like it were your last— and don't just apply this philosophy to street photography. Remember to keep in touch with your family (as you never know when they are going to pass), spend a lot of time with your significant other or kids, and friends closest to you.

Nobody dies on their deathbed regretting not making more money. What regrets do people have? Not pursuing what they were passionate about in life, not spending more time keeping in touch with friends, and not enough time with family. Don't worry how fancy your camera is. You don't need a Leica to shoot street photography, your iPhone will do.

You don't need an exotic prime lens, just use your kit lens and tape the zoom. You don't need to live in Tokyo, the suburb you live in is full of interesting characters and places to shoot. The green isn't greener on the other side. The grass is always greener on your side. Embrace that, and shoot like everyday was your last.

Chapter 16: On Legacy and Street Photography

One day we are all going to die—whether we like it or not.

Regarding death, I often think about the legacy I am going to leave behind. How will people remember me? Did I use all my abilities to the fullest? Did I help contribute to society?

Will people remember me after I die? How will people remember me after I die? Will I have finished my life's "task" (whatever it may be?) All of these thoughts can be quite stressful. I make it a point to think as if everyday was my last.

Steve Jobs said something similar that when he wakes up in the morning and looks in the mirror and he isn't doing what he was meant to be doing for a long time he reconsiders his life and realizes he needs to make some drastic changes. Therefore when I am in bed before I go to sleep, I ask myself:

“Did I do everything in my ability to make this day worth it— to help society and the photography community at large?”

I then doze off to sleep, pretending like the next morning will never come (imagine the last scene of the movie A.I.). But fortunately I (have until now) waken up every morning— greeted with the sun with a new day. There are certain days which I feel incredibly productive (write a lot of articles, answer a lot of emails, am active on social media) and other days I just want to curl into a cocoon, read books, and not go on the internet at all.

But still the burning question is: What is the purpose of my photography, my blog, my writings, my life— and what legacy do I want to leave behind?

One of my favorite philosophies in life is “Stoicism” the art of living with serenity (regardless of what negative or good things happen to you). Philosopher Nassim Taleb explains a “Stoic” not as someone without emotion — but as a buddhist with an attitude (or something like that).

One of the books I am currently re-reading is “Letters from a Stoic” by Seneca. Seneca was a practicing stoic and wrote many letters to his friend Lucilus advising him on a range of topics. One of the topics that he frequently talked about was fame, power, and legacy. What does Seneca say about these topics? Well, Seneca says we should totally disregard fame, power, and legacy— because they are things outside of our control.

No matter how hard we try, it is not guaranteed that we will achieve fame, power, or leave a lasting legacy in our lifetime. It is a better use of energy and resources to focus on what we can control— which is, what is internal.

For example, controlling our anger, living with virtue, and having an exemplary character. These things, regardless of our situations and circumstances in life, we can always control. When Seneca talks about leaving a legacy (mind you he was writing this around 2000 years ago) he said it was absolutely pointless. Some things he shared was something like:

“Who cares if you become famous and leave a legacy? What does it matter if people write your name in history books? You can simply carve your name into a stone and have the same effect.”

Another practicing stoic (by the name of Marcus Aurelius) writes this in his book: “The Meditations” (a modern translation “The Emperor’s handbook” is excellent as well):

“Realize that fame and legacy is like the sand at a beach. They are constantly being swept into the sea, to make room for the new.”

In a nutshell, all of these Stoic philosophers say that things out of your control aren’t worth trying to control.

Publius Syrus (another Roman philosopher, also former slave) shares the idea:

”To base your life on the opinion of another man is a very sad existence.”

So pretty much I think us as street photographers can learn the following lesson: **don’t worry about favorites, likes, followers, exhibitions, fame— or anything of that jazz.** After all, these things are mostly out of your control. You can be the most talented street photographer in the world but if you don’t have a strong social media following - you won’t end up getting a lot of recognition on the internet (without the right connections).

I am not the best street photographer out there, but the only reason I have hundreds of favorites on Flickr is because I run a popular street photography blog. Rather, **focus your energy on what you have control over: enjoying the freedom and liberating feeling of exploring, wandering, and shooting on the streets and making photos you are proud of.**

After reading the philosophy of the Stoics, I have pretty much lost all interest in the idea of leaving behind a legacy (or being written in some history books after I die).

After I die, who cares if people talk about me— I will already be dead and not alive to appreciate it anyways. What I will do is to continue to pour my heart and soul into this blog, in writing articles, featuring other street photographers, and traveling and teaching street photography workshops to anyone eager enough to learn. That is the purpose of my life— and I just need to do it one day at a time.

So what drives you?