



TEN

Ten Ways to Improve Your Craft Without Buying Gear

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning with Moses, Top 10 lists have always been very popular. This is mine. I wrote this specifically to answer the question “what can I do to make my photographs better?” Which of course is a question profoundly impossible to answer. To answer that I’d have to know what “better” means to you, and we’d have to agree on that. We all start at different places and aim for different things. And there are, of course, way more than ten things within our craft that we can work on to improve our photographic expression.

But pretend for a moment that you’d asked me that question and I had the time to answer in some detail, but limited to a random but important ten replies. This might be my answer, though not in any particular order. Look at this, not as a short course in photography, but as a syllabus. My goal here is to point you in ten different directions for study and practice, and to find that all ten directions lead back - with further study and practice - to better, stronger, images. I’ve included exercises. Some of you will go out and try them, some will adapt them, others will roll their eyes and wonder if they can get their money back for this article. I don’t promise the exercises will be easy or fun; they’ll probably feel like homework. But for those that try them, or exercises like them, there’s the same promise that

awaits anyone who practices a craft with passion and intention - a stronger ability to do what you love in more compelling ways.

OK, here’s my top ten:

- 1. Get Pickier**
- 2. Better Contrast Creates Better Stories**
- 3. Change My Perspective By Changing Yours**
- 4. Create Depth**
- 5. Get Balanced**
- 6. Pay Attention to the Moment**
- 7. Pay Attention to the Light**
- 8. Use The Best Lens**
- 9. Expose for Aesthetics**
- 10. Put a Great Foreground in Front of a Great Background**

Those 10 things are more than enough to concentrate on for years, and they never ever stop being important. After 25 years on this photographic journey I am still learning this stuff, with greater nuance and better skill. With time these become part of

our visual language, we begin to speak more clearly with less effort given to recalling the verbs and the grammar. It becomes intuitive, but never so deep beneath the surface that I don’t think about them, play with them, and from time to time, go back to the books and study them in fresh ways.

1 Get Pickier

Not everything in every light and at all moments will translate into a great image. There is a tendency when you first start out to shoot everything in sight. Do it. Shoot it all. There are shots we all need to take to get out of the way; they help us learn the basics and go towards the first 10,000 frames that it takes to get better at this craft. But eventually most of us have to slow down, take a breath, and get picky.

I've been standing in front of something that doesn't interest me, or something that does but in harsh light I find unappealing, and had people ask, "How would you photograph that?" My answer surprises them. I wouldn't. Or I would come back when the light's better. I've got all the requisite shots and what I'm looking for now is not a mediocre image of something great like the Taj Mahal but a great image of

something potentially more mundane. But a great image. One that makes my heart quicken. And that doesn't happen every minute of everyday. One of the big mistakes of beginning landscape photographers is to shoot a mountain lake at mid-day and wonder why it doesn't look like a Darwin Wiggett or Bruce Percy image. People like Bruce and Darwin are very picky about where they shoot, and when. They get up at insane hours to trudge out of their tents and create incredible images.

Once the initial thrill of using a camera begins to wear off in exchange for the thrill of creating great images, and you've got all the requisite shots of cats and your own feet out of the way, start getting pickier, more selective. Don't waste your time shooting stuff that doesn't quicken the heart.

Lalibela, Ethiopia, 2005
Canon 20D, 40mm, 1/100 @ f/4, iso 400

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Head out with your camera for an hour and force yourself to shoot a hundred frames - push yourself creatively. Lots of people do this as a creative exercise. But now do the opposite. Go out and shoot only 3 frames. Don't shoot a burst of images.

Don't hedge your bets. Shoot less, not more. With each image really look at it. Has it translated into a two dimensional image the way you thought it would? Would you put this on your wall? No? Delete it. Try again. Is the light the way you wanted it? The framing? Is it the right

moment? No? Delete it. This is just an exercise, but a helpful one in training us to be more discerning. There's a desperate need for most of us to shoot stronger images, not more images.

2

Better contrast makes better stories

Better visual and conceptual contrast makes for better stories, and better stories make for better images. But don't mistake me for saying that "better" always means "stronger" - it doesn't. Better sometimes means less. It sometimes means more subtle or nuanced. Some images, like the one of Ulaanbator, Mongolia (facing page) in the morning smog of coal fires, has very little visual contrast at all and that lack of bold contrast makes the story what it is.

Visual Contrast is the contrast between tones or colours and our eyes are drawn to areas of high contrast. It pulls us into an image and usually makes elements in an image more immediately interesting and identifiable. One of the commonalities on prints made by beginners is flat contrast. You can begin improving this by getting better at exposure and your post-processing techniques, but for me it was simply a matter of realizing it. I knew my prints weren't as good as the images I loved by other photographers. One day

the light went on. I wasn't paying attention to contrast. Look for contrast in the frame. Sometimes it's too much, like a portrait taken in mid-day sun, in which case you'll want to take your subject into shade or wait until the sun goes behind a cloud. Sometimes it's not enough. But paying attention to contrast in both your capture of the image and the post-processing, will improve your image.

Conceptual Contrast is the contrast between elements within your frame. An old man holding the hand of a young child is a contrast of ages. Young vs. Old. The sea hitting the shore is a contrast of Wet vs. Dry or Hard vs. Soft. A blade of grass pushing itself up from the sidewalk concrete is a contrast of Organic vs. Man-made. All of these kinds of contrasts create interest and draw on themes that storytellers in other mediums have been using for millenia. Watching for these and incorporating them into your image can give your image meaning beyond just the obvious, make the image more engaging.



Ulaanbator, Mongolia, 2008
Canon 5D, 135mm, 1/125 @ f/8.0, iso 100

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Take your camera and one lens - this isn't about gear - and go for a walk. Look for scenes in which you can put conceptual contrasts into the frame. Start easy. Wet and Dry. Big and Small. Rough and Smooth. Young

and Old. Easy right? Now get a little more esoteric. See how far you can push this. You don't have to justify your choices - you just have to be able to identify two elements that, juxtaposed, create a contrast. Once

you get good and tired of this exercise go shoot the way you normally would and see if you can incorporate some of these contrasts.

Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2009
Canon 5D MkII, 32mm, 1/160 @ f/10, iso 100

The contrast of Asian rice farmers in front of North American teepees makes me laugh every time.



3 Change my perspective by changing yours

If you want to show me something different, show it to me differently. One of the ways you can do this is to get out of the habit of shooting from eye height. There are literally billions of photographs taken from eye height, and while many of them are great from that POV (point of view), many more could benefit from a change in perspective. Get on your face, your knees, or climb a tree, but change it up. Some of these changes should be immediately obvious, like photographing children. Getting down on their level will not only allow you to see their face and not the top of their head, it will give you a child's eye view. Might even get you on level with some of their toys or other elements of their world. Getting up high changes things yet again. I was once captivated by an image of a camel train in the Sahara.

Taken from an ultralight airplane and directly above, the camels were all but invisible in the sand, but their shadows were long and cartoonish and it was hard to tell what was going on except that there were perfect camel shadows on the sand. That image was possible from only one place - 500 feet above the camels.

Changing your POV also changes the perspective of lines. Where a line in one image is oblique or diagonal, from a different POV - to the right, or lower down perhaps - it becomes straight in another. Diagonal lines lead the eye of the viewer through an image. Changing your POV can enhance that diagonal line in the frame. Or it can remove it. Changing POV means you can move the foreground in front of the background. Don't like where

that monument is in relation to the building? You can't ask it to move, but you can move. Step to the right, or the left; see it take a different position in the frame relative to the building.

Translating the three dimensional world into two dimensions is not an easy task. Painters have been working at it for hundreds of years. When they began to recognize and paint with what we now know as the laws of perspective, painting changed forever. Our craft is no different in the need to translate three dimensions into two and the need to use tools like perspective with more intention.



Old Havana, Cuba, 2009
Canon 5D MkII, 17mm, 1/30 @ f/4.0, iso 400

I was in the middle of the street on my hands and knees while trying not to get hit by mopeds, speaking bad spanish and trying to hold my hands still. But the low POV makes this shot where standing up would not.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Go shooting. Find something you love to photograph and take your best shot. Now look at that one good and hard. Got it? Good. What I want you to do now is create 20 more images from a different POV. Don't cheat and just walk in a circle while mashing the shutter button down. Work for it. Walk 30 feet back and shoot lying down with a 200mm lens. Get close with a 24mm lens and lie on your back and shoot up at it. Move left, move right. Create 20 intentionally different images. Now review the images. Compare them with each other, and then compare them with your first image. Are any of them stronger? Do any of them say something completely different about what you've photographed? It's all about point of view. Get used to seeking a new one.

4 Create depth



Old Delhi, India, 2007 – Canon 5D, 42mm, 1/125 @ f/5.0, iso 400

This guy had cool to spare. The wide angle lens and the strong receding lines of the shutters create the sense of depth in this image

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Head into the city and create a series of 10 images that use perspective to create a greater sense of depth. Try different lenses. How do those lenses change your feeling about the image? Does one pull you in more than another? If you brought your wider lens, put it on and play with getting closer than you normally would to your subject. Aside from bumping into things, what are the results of this playtime? The ability to look critically at your images and see - and verbalize - the effect of your optics or a vanishing point on an image will get you one step closer to being able to use these tools intuitively to express yourself.

I touched on this in the last section, but depth can be really important to an image. It's there in real life, in three dimensions. But we get tricked into thinking that rendering a three dimensional image into two dimensions is just automatic. It isn't. Something gets lost in the flattening. You simply can't make 2 dimensions into 3. But you can create the sense, or illusion of depth.

First, the caveat: you don't always want to create the feeling of depth, there are plenty of images that work because they lack depth or even go to pains to reduce it - mountain ranges shot with a telephoto lens to compress the scene is one example - but images with depth pull a viewer in, gives them an experience of being there, and brings back some of the sense of captured reality that draws so many of us to photography.

Depth can be created in several ways.

1. Use a wider lens and get in closer (see opposite).

Wider lenses pull us into scenes in ways other optics do not. They give the appearance of lengthened lines and exaggerated perspective. Where less perspective implies less depth, greater perspective implies more depth. Next time you're shooting something - anything - with a 50 to 85mm lens, put on something wider - a 17, 24, or 35mm and then push in closer to make up for the loss in perceived proximity. Get right in there. Notice the change in appearance? See how

the whole scene changes and takes on the illusion of greater depth? It won't work for every image, but when you want a feeling of more depth, this is one way to do it.

2. Pay attention to perspective. Even without a wide lens, perspective still affects images and can be used to imply depth. Oblique lines pull the eye into the image, so where a change in POV can make a straight horizontal line into a diagonal, give it a try. Notice how pointing a lens up at tall buildings makes the lines of the buildings converge? That's perspective and it works on the horizontal plane as much as the vertical, so don't be afraid to harness it. Look for great lines and perspective to pull the eye into the scene. Just be aware that if you don't want the eye of your viewer going in that direction - perhaps those lines lead away from your subject instead of to it - you'll want to reign them in a little or change your POV to get rid of them entirely.

3. Use the Light. Painters in the renaissance discovered an effect they called chiaroscuro, which is Italian for light-dark and represents the way light feathers and falls off with distance. Chiaroscuro adds the implication or illusion of depth and is why photographers love subjects side lit with window light; it strikes the object but then gently falls off and does so because the object itself has dimension - depth. If you want a photograph with little or no perceived depth then straight-on light is a good way to get there.

5

Get balanced

While the rule of thirds is taught like a panacea for bad composition, it's rare that anyone seems to teach why. So here it is. It's all about balance. There's two kinds of balance. Static balance and dynamic balance. Put a person smack in the middle of the frame and it's balanced. But Static. Boring. Put that same person in on the leftmost third and it'll also be balanced, but dynamically so.

Why? It's all about visual mass, which is important enough that I plan to dedicate to it's own article, but here's the short explanation to get you thinking about it.

Let's talk for a moment about a physical object, and scientists in the room can overlook my insanely simplistic/inaccurate explanation. An object is said to have mass by the layman because it is heavy. But it is "heavy" because of its interaction with gravitational pull. The more the pull the heavier it feels. Now put two items on a

scale. One has more mass than the other and so the scale dips - unbalanced.

It's like this with visual objects. An element in a photograph has more visual mass the more it pulls the eye. It's not a perfect analogy by any means but it's been helpful to me. If I put an element with greater visual mass - like a human face, or elements that are lighter, sharper, warmer in cooler, or more recognizable than other elements in the frame - on the left third, it has two thirds of the frame with less visual mass to balance it out. The image is now balanced, and because it's not central in the frame it's balanced in a way that is dynamic.

Not every image should be balanced. If you are creating a photograph with the intention of showing imbalance or giving the viewer a feeling of tension, a visually imbalanced image is a great way to do it. But an unintentionally imbalanced image is hard to look at without feeling distracted or

tense and if you're intention is to create an image without those distractions, you'll be working against your self.

Balance is one of those things you might not consciously notice in an image but can certainly feel. Becoming more intentional about creating and playing with the balance in your images will help you create images that more intentionally express what you have to say.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

The best way to learn balance is to become conscious of it. Look at images - your own or those of others - and see how they've balanced elements that have different visual mass, or pull, within the frame. Some frames will feel very balanced and static - like a particularly symmetrical image. Others will feel more dynamic - like the one here. Others still will not feel balanced at all. What is it about the placement of elements that does this in these images? Now go shooting and play with this - experiment. Forget for a moment about the Rule of Thirds, just play with balance. I'm betting some of your more dynamically balanced images end up conforming to the Ro3 anyway.



Tunis, Tunisia, 2008 - Canon 5D, 17mm, 1/1600 @ f/4.0, iso 800

The man on the left has a great deal of visual mass - from his dark suit to his scowl and his size in the frame. Placing him on the right third allows the space of the leftmost two thirds to balance him. Without the man on the cart I think I'd like the image less but it would be an even more dynamically balanced image.



6

Pay attention to the moment

Most photographers at one point or another come across Henri Cartier-Bresson's notion of the "decisive moment." Without getting into it and doing it an injustice with this short space, I think what matters is this: the moment is important. Shooting a scene in which there is action, whether at a wedding or a Formula One race, there are some moments that are "better" than others. Perhaps I should say "stronger." There are moments when the emotion or the action hits an apex, and that coincides with the best composition within the frame and, well, those moments are golden and rare. And they differ from photographer to photographer. The moment I chose might not be the one you chose, but the moment matters.

Time and again I critique work that is otherwise strong but the moment happened somewhere outside the frame. Perhaps 1/15th of a second before, or a split second afterwards, but it's clear that the camera didn't catch it.

What makes a good moment? That depends. Sometimes it's a moment of revelation like the relaxation that happens after a forced smile in a portrait. Sometimes it's a moment when action is at it's apex - like a basketball jumper at the peak of a slam-dunk. And other times it's more subtle - a look, a glance, a gesture as a woman reaches for her lover to touch his arm. Whatever it is, the moment itself is no mere detail in the image. It's vital. Sometimes the moment itself becomes the subject of the image.

What makes capturing the moment so difficult is it's not often gained without patience. Knowing your subject also helps tremendously, as it enables you to predict when something might happen.

Waiting is also a much under-rated photographic skill. Be patient, watch what happens, and be ready when it does. Don't settle for good when waiting a few minutes might give you something truly revealing or great.

Cairo, Egypt, 2009
Canon 5D, 90mm, 1/160 @ f/2.8, iso 200

This image, like the one on the following spread relies on the moment to give it the gesture that makes the image. The man smoking his shisha was an OK subject but the frames I have without the smoke just don't have "it."



CREATIVE EXERCISE

This one works best, I think, when photographing people or something where the context is fluid. Architectural and still-life photographers may see less value in this. Next time you go shooting put your camera in continuous or burst mode and for every frame take 3 to 5 images. That's it. Just shoot more frames; the exercise comes next. Pull your images into your favourite browser and convert them all to black and white so you're not distracted by colors. Now look at each set of images, specifically looking at gesture within the image. Out of each burst is there one frame that is better than the others? Why is that; what about the moment captured in one makes it better than the moment captured in others? This is nothing more than an exercise in recognition, learning to see the difference between slivers of time and what makes one sliver stronger within the frame than others.

Delhi, India, 2008
Canon 5D, 24mm, 1/100
@ f/6.3, iso 400

7

Look to the light

I still don't know why it took me so long to learn this. I spent years focussing on how much light

I got into the camera. Years worth of perfectly exposed images recording unexceptional light. If there is one thing that could improve millions of images on Flickr, it's the ability to see the light.

There're alot of photographers that talk about photography as "painting with light" and I think that's a lovely way to look at it. But no painter in their right mind would pay more attention to the brushes than to the paint. No, a painter would study the subtle differences in colours of paint,

and how they play on the canvas, how they interact with other colours.

Photographers, too, need to learn to see light.

What colour is it? From which direction is it coming? Is it hard? Soft? What kind of shadows is it creating and where are they falling? And more importantly, once you begin to see the light - I mean to really see it, and you'll know you're there when you start saying, "Wow, look at the light right now!" at inappropriate times - is that light appropriate to your vision or is it not?

I still believe - more and more, in fact - that there is no bad light. Only light that works with you or against you to accomplish your vision. Yes, put in the time you need to work with your fancy new lens or to memorize the new edition of the B&H catalog, but neither of those will improve your photography more than taking the time to study light. Fortunately for you, there's no secret. All you have to do is be observant. Actually look at what different light does in different situations, shoot it, then review the images. Don't like harsh shadows? The light did that. Don't like the color

temperature? The light did that too. I know it doesn't sound like a tip or a technique you can take to the bank, and I know it sounds like hard work, but tough beans. Who ever said photography was easy? Well, okay, lots of people said it was easy, even the folks who make the cameras. But good photography, hell, GREAT photography - that's hard. You don't need training to be mediocre. Want to be better? Study the light.

Ladakh, India, 2008
Canon 5D, 70mm, 1/50
@ f/11. iso 200

CREATIVE EXERCISE

This one wil take 60 minutes of your time. Choose 12 of your favourite images - they can be yours or photographs of one of your favourite photographers, just make sure they're different. Now sit down and look at each one for 5 minutes. I know, it's a long time. Think of all the email you could be checking in that time. But log the time. Look at the images, explore them, and

become familiar with them. On a sheet of paper make notes on each one. What is the light doing in this image? Where is it coming from? What kind of source is it? Is it hard or soft? What kind of shadows are there? Is there a catchlight in the eyes? Search out every sign of the play of light within the scene. Is there lens flare? A stray incandescent bulb warming part of an

otherwise daylight-lit scene? Write it dowtn in point form. Now ask yourself how important the light is to this image. Would it still work in different light? Why? Why not? There aren't any real right answers and I'm not grading your work, but the time put in to becoming more aware of the light will put you in good stead. Now pick up your camera and go shoot something, chase the light.



8 Use the best lens

There are equipment retailers by the hundreds that desperately hope I mean the best quality lens and that y'all will stop reading this, launch your browser and go buy some new glass. And while I think you should get the best glass you can reasonably afford, that's not at all what I mean. What I mean is this: use the most appropriate lens for the image you're hoping to create.

Like learning to see the light, it took me years to finally learn to use my lenses for more than just their ability to cram more crap into the frame (wide angle) or make small things big (telephoto). Lenses are your most important tools for translating the three dimensional world into two, and knowing what they do to make that translation is absolutely critical to moving forward.

Putting it another way, each focal length behaves very differently from any other. Going back to the translation metaphor, it's like the wide angles translate into Spanish, the standard lenses translate into French, and the telephotos translate

into, uh, Swahili. Different languages. Only that's a terrible metaphor because they also say different things. So let me abandon the metaphor and give you a crash course on the most significant behaviour of your optics - compression.

A telephoto lens - let's use a 200mm lens in this example - not only makes what you're focusing on much larger in the frame, it also creates the illusion of bringing the foreground and background and all elements in between closer together. It compresses them - hence the name. A wideangle lens does the opposite; far from "getting more crap into the frame," a wide-angle lens creates the appearance of all elements moving further apart.

One scenario where compression is helpful is in pulling a scene together to better imply a relationship between elements. Want to photograph a giraffe against a setting sun and thorn tree on the African savannah? A telephoto lens can pull those elements together without losing the im-

pact of those elements. A wideangle lens would get them all in but significantly reduce their impact and the implication of a relationship between them. "Yeah, but how do I get them all in there? I mean, if they fit into a wide angle frame, how do they also fit into a telephoto frame?" You back up. I often put on my 70-200/2.8 lens, rack it out to 200 and then take a hike back several feet to re-frame my image. Sure, I could just put on the 50mm and stay put, but if that doesn't give me the look I want, what's the point?

Wide angle lenses push elements further apart. They also exaggerate lines and in doing so can create compositions that pull the viewer into the frame more powerfully than a telephoto can. Telephoto lenses compress lines, often diminishing how dynamic those lines are. But wide angle lenses exaggerate the dynamic nature of those same lines. They do the same to faces, and in the case of ultra-wide lenses can give a cartoonish or playful look. That same ability to push elements apart means you can give really great play to a

foreground if you go wide and push in tight, while still keeping a great background to provide context.

It's important to remember that none of this is affected by sensor size. As I write this I had an email from a student on one of my tours asking if she should get a 50/1.4 lens or a 30/2.8 for portraits. Only she can answer that but here's what I told her; if you're shooting on a cropped sensor, which she is, a 30mm will crop more like a 50mm. Fine. But it will not compress like a 50mm. It will compress like a 30mm, because that's what it is. Sensor size does not change lens behavior. That's important because all of this photography stuff is about the look - the aesthetic - created in the camera, through the lens. The last thing anyone needs is to be further confused by the sensor-size issue.



CREATIVE EXERCISE

This works really well if you have a broad-range zoom like a 28-200mm but will work fine for you as long as you have a wide angle, standard, and telephoto lens of some kind. Go for a walk with your camera and shoot a dozen scenes or subjects. Shoot each subject with each of these focal lengths. Start with the 50mm and take the shot. Now put the wide lens on and move forward until the main subject is the same size in the frame as it was with the 50mm. Now put on the longer lens and back up until the subject is about the same size as the first two frames. Repeat this until you've shot a dozen scenes or subjects, then go get a coffee and look at the images. Specifically you're looking at the differences between the way the elements relate to each other, and more generally you're getting used to the way different focal lengths change the aesthetics of the image. Feel like a tougher exercise? Go out without your camera and choose a dozen different scenes. For each one take a mental picture and as you do so try to visualize what the scene would look like with each of the three different focal lengths. Learning to see the way your optics see a scene makes it easier for you to choose the optic that best serves your vision.

Cairo, Egypt, 2009 – Canon 5D, 17mm, 1/80 @ f/22, iso 200
The Legendary H in front of the pyramids at Giza. Shot wide, pushed in tight. You're too close when you get nose grease on your lens.



Havana, Cuba, 2009 - Canon 5D, 200mm, 1/60 @ f/4.0, iso 100

To pull all of these cars together so tightly, I used my 200mm lens; wider lenses just didn't stack the scene tightly enough, felt too "loose." Sometimes the best I can do is feel my way through a scene, and this one felt best at 200mm.

9

Expose for aesthetics



New Delhi, India, 2008
Canon 5D, 20mm, 1/13
@ f/22, iso 100

Your shutter speed and aperture do way more than allow you to finesse your exposures; each setting has an affect on the look - the aesthetic - of the image. Somehow I overlooked this for years. I mean, I knew it in my head but somehow figured none of it really mattered. Want to take your images to the next level? Begin to be very intentional about the shutter speed and aperture you choose, knowing that how you say something affects what you say.

Every book on photography talks about this, but the internet - and my old shoe boxes of images from my film days - remain littered with images where merely getting a good exposure was clearly the top priority. It's not. It's only one priority of several, chief among which is the look of the image.

This is why I nearly always shoot on Aperture (AV) or Manual (M) mode. For the bulk of my work it is the aperture that has the greatest effect on the look of my images. Or more accurately I want my images to have an aesthetic that is primarily controlled by how much depth my focus has, and that's a function of my aperture. Of course there are exceptions. When I am panning I generally move things over to Shutter Priority (TV, for Time Value) so I can select a specific panning speed.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Go to your happy place, that place you love to shoot without getting bored. Maybe it's a place you've always wanted to shoot or a place you shot one of your best images. Now I want you to spend an hour there. For 15 minutes I want you to shoot only at the fastest shutter speed you can and create images that take advantage of the look only a fast shutter can provide, like freezing kids jumping in mid-air. Now do the opposite. Spend 15 making images that take advantage of the slowest shutter you can use in the light you have. But don't just make lots of blurry images, harness that slow shutter. Do some panning, put the camera on a tripod and let the crowd become an ethereal blur. Play. Now do the same with a deep and a wide aperture.

The goal is to become comfortable with the aesthetic affect of each of your exposure settings and to see them as creative collaborators, not merely exposure settings to get right. Getting a good exposure is easy, making a creative image takes more practice.

10 Put a great foreground in front of a great background

A great story, it is said, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. So do a lot of crappy ones. More accurately, a great story has a great beginning, a great middle, and a great end. So it is with photographs, only our equivalent is a great foreground in front of a great background.

What makes a great background will mean different things to different photographers and will depend on the image being made. Sometimes that means a background that's been simplified through a shallow depth of field and does not distract. For others, like landscape photographers, it might be a perfectly sharp mountain range at first light. But make no mistake, if you have a spectacular foreground its impact will be reduced by a crappy background. Same with a great

background with a lousy foreground. If it's in the frame it's because you allowed it to be there.

Great foreground with a lousy background? Do something about it. Walk around your subject and find a better angle. Lie down, stand on a ladder or move in some other way to change your POV and therefore your background. Put on a wide angle lens and push it in closer. Foreground will be just as large but the background - because you're maximizing your knowledge of the de-compressing effect of a wider focal length - will be less significant. Or use a much longer focal length and take advantage of the narrower angle it captures. Sure the background will be closer but there will be much less of it there. Dial the lens down to 2.8 and it should all look like a dreamy blur.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

This is the last one so I'm letting you off easy and dismissing class early. Go shoot some great foregrounds with some great backgrounds. If the backgrounds suck, make it work. That's it. Intentionally shoot some great foregrounds in front of some stellar backgrounds. Not as hard as it sounds, but you gotta work for it.

Ladakh, India, 2008
Canon 5D, 125mm, 1/3200 @ f/2.8, iso 100
My buddy Russ on his Royal Enfield



CONCLUSION

This short eBook is, like everything I write, not intended to be encyclopedic. There are, of course, more than ten ways to improve your craft. If I get around to it and there's enough demand, I'll write a follow up to this to fill in more of those gaps. These aren't rules either - for every principle in any art there are reasons to abandon that principle. But you have to begin there, studying and mastering your craft before you can start flaunting the rules. I've tried to do 3 things in each of these ten tips - to tell you why it's important and how you can use that information, and to give you a place to begin exploring it in the form of a creative exercise. I hope it helps, that it propels you forward, opens your eyes, or makes a lightbulb go on. If you're like me one or two of these will grab you more immediately than others, and those will be the ones you play with for a while before something you do triggers you to come back to this list and find yourself drawn to another tip or two.

These are big pieces of a large puzzle. I'm still working on all of them, still moving forward and learning to express myself in a medium that's always just shy of my vision. So take your time. It's art, not a race or a competition. Enjoy the journey.

And most of all, before this top ten is the rule above all rules. See with your eyes but shoot with your heart. We need more passionate photographs, not more perfect photographs.

If you found this helpful and are not already familiar with my first book, Within The Frame, The Journey of Photographic Vision, you can find it on Amazon.com. I can be found online at PixelatedImage.com and blogging most weekdays at PixelatedImage.com/blog.

Peace.

A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink, consisting of a large, flowing 'D' followed by a horizontal line and a small dot.

David duChemin
Vancouver, 2009

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TEN

Ten Ways to Improve Your Craft Without Buying Gear

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Editor & Publisher | David duChemin

Production Editor & Manager | Corwin Hiebert

Copy Editor | Susannah Rohloff

Design & Layout | FiveGraphicDesign.com

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