



# Master Class: Where's Your Focus

## Steps to Empower Your Imagination

by Jim Austin, M.A., A.C.E.

[Printer Friendly Page](#)

*"You can't depend on your eyes, when your imagination is out of focus."  
~ Mark Twain*



Copyright © James Austin

Your camera probably has a dial with a program setting. It may be a mechanical dial next to the shutter release, labeled T or A to show if the camera is set to shutter or aperture priority. It may have icons of a face for portraits, or a flower symbol for macro. I've added an imaginary dial as well. My dial also has letters for its choices, but instead of mechanical settings, each step represents a distinct way to focus my imagination.

I call this the FOCUSS dial. My dial has 6 steps labeled with a letter for each step. Every option allows me a different way to use my imagination when I photograph. The dial is labelled with: F, O, C, U, S, and S. "Fun" is the first step. "Stillness" is the last. In between are "Oops", "Count your blessings", "Unstoppable" and "Simple." The table below shows the purpose of each step.

### *The FOCUSS Dial*

Steps = Specifics

Purpose

---

F = Fun	To feel joyful doing photography.
O = Oops	To allow mistakes and the freedom to fail.
C = Count Your Blessings	To appreciate what you photograph.

U = Unstoppable  
 S = Simple  
 S = Stillness  
 pictures

To keep going until you get the photograph.  
 To make your approach simple with KISS.  
 To be open and receptive to receiving

Where I mentally set the dial changes everything. My chosen step on the FOCUSS dial prompts me to change my approach as I go about making images. After awhile, the mechanics of digital image making become a minor part of my photography. Beyond the mechanics lies the vision.

As you think of your finest images, chances are many of them emerged from a mental approach, like the FOCUSS dial, that you have cultivated. As you practice varied ways to think about your photography, your skills will expand.

Starting with Fun, let's look more closely at the FOCUSS dial.



Copyright © James Austin

is not enthusiastic? It's not a good feeling. So, show your genuine interest in your subjects when you photograph them. If you doubt how essential fun and enthusiasm are, try photographing your pet for five minutes while setting fun aside.

I can't download a plug-in for fun in photography. I can't fake it either. So I seek subjects that I naturally love: people outdoors, animals, light.

You can expand on your enthusiasm for photography by making gifts of your photography. Give your work away to a charity. Donate a shooting session to a medical cause. Have fun making a portrait of someone whose work you admire and give them an enlargement. Show some kids how to handle your digicam and show them what they've taken in the camera; their faces will beam. Fun is the first step on my FOCUSS dial, and the dial is well worn there.

### **1. Fun**

*"Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come from miles to watch your burn."*

*~ John Wesley*

Watch expert portrait photographers at work. They are filled with enthusiasm and fun for their craft. Ever been photographed by someone who

is not enthusiastic? It's not a good feeling. So, show your genuine interest in your subjects when you photograph them. If you doubt how essential fun and enthusiasm are, try photographing your pet for five minutes while setting fun aside.

I can't download a plug-in for fun in photography. I can't fake it either. So I seek subjects that I naturally love: people outdoors, animals, light.

You can expand on your enthusiasm for photography by making gifts of your photography. Give your work away to a charity. Donate a shooting session to a medical cause. Have fun making a portrait of someone whose work you admire and give them an enlargement. Show some kids how to handle your digicam and show them what they've taken in the camera; their faces will beam. Fun is the first step on my FOCUSS dial, and the dial is well worn there.

### **2. Oops**

*"A mad, keen photographer needs to get out into the world and work and make mistakes."*



Copyright © James Austin

~ Sam Abell

Thinking over those days when I was discouraged by the photos I was making, I learned after awhile what *my* issues were. I discovered that the source of this discouragement was perfectionism. I'd trapped myself in feeling that I must not make mistakes. I thought then that I must get good pictures or none at all.

To cope with the fear of mistakes, I added the O setting to the FOCUSS dial. The

purpose of the O setting is to allow for the freedom to fail, make mistakes, and learn. The O setting, for Oops, has two imaginary signs. The first is a yellow sign that reads: "You are allowed to take bad pictures." The second sign, a green one, says "Go, take pictures, and make mistakes taking pictures." No matter how listless I feel, I obey the second sign, pick up the camera and go shoot something. I make exposures just to get eye, hand, and camera all working together. The point is to get my body into a cycle of making pictures, even though my mind is not yet into it.

After a few frames, you may lose yourself in the pleasure of creative seeing, and you'll see order and rhythm in your subjects. This is one of the essential gifts of doing photography; it transports you to another consciousness. Be mad, be keen. Go out and allow your great and wonderful Oops to make fresh photographs.



Copyright © James Austin

### 3. Count Your Blessings

*"When you drink water, remember the mountain spring."*

~ Chinese Proverb

Last January, I took a photo walk in a sun-scorched field where there were moths, wasps and bees. After an hour, I found I'd taken 110 frames. As I shot it, the final frame gave me an intense feeling of being thankful. Here's what happened. While photographing a small hairstreak butterfly, a black wasp flew right into the frame behind it, and I

immediately tripped the shutter. Before the wasp took off I made three frames, one of which I thought was a decent shot.

Later I changed my mind, as the focus was not sharp enough. Nonetheless, I felt that nature had granted a priceless gift of a sunny winter day filled with the buzz of insects. I felt so grateful that it did not matter how successful the exposure was. It was enough just to experience the beauty of the field and its denizens.

As photographers, we can feel thankful, enjoying what we do. Gratitude will keep you going over a lifetime of making pictures. You'll avoid burn-out as a photographer if you stop and count your blessings. Have satisfaction in your heart even when only a few things go well.



Copyright © James Austin

#### **4. Unstoppable**

*"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. The slogan 'Press On' has solved, and always will solve, the problems of the human race."  
~ Calvin Coolidge*

Every summer, hummingbird moths fed on pink flowers in my front yard. I started to photograph them in May, but did not get a workable exposure

of one until July. I shot pictures from the wrong distance. Many were blurry because the moths flew so fast. Often I had distracting backgrounds.

After two weeks of vain attempts, I parked my macro lens and Canon D30 next to the front door so I could grab it quickly, get outside, and get another chance to catch a feeding moth.

Finally the conditions were right; enough sunlight for a 1/750th of a second shutter speed and high-speed fill-flash. The moth's darting agility made it possible only to guess the flower on which it might land. After two months, I had an effective image and later sent it to a Nature's Best Magazine competition, where it won an honorable mention and became part of an exhibit at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum.

With digital photography, since there is no penalty for trying, and making a lot of novel images, your work can be unstoppable. Your subject matter may need ten shots or ten thousand, one visit or many voyages. To seize the image you want, you might have to work harder than you thought. Be unstoppable, however, and subjects will wing your way.

#### **5. Simple**

*"He had got down the bare bones of it, and*



Copyright © James Austin

*they were fine and strong and simple.”  
~ Mole, Wind in the Willows , Kenneth  
Grahame*

Let's face it, digital cameras can bury us in settings. Our complex equipment can perturb us. To get around this, I use the Keep It Simple Stupid, or K.I.S.S. approach.

I pick one lens, one aperture, and one ASA. Leaving my zoom lens behind, I choose a single focal length lens, and walk toward the subject or away from it, zooming in and out with my feet instead of with the lens. Having picked a basic combination of settings, I stay with it. When photographing becomes

as unthinking as breathing, I'm there. If I have to ponder, I'm not on the path yet.

This path to simplicity means learning your gear so well that it does not distract from your images.

I've also used the KISS setting on the FOCUSS dial to keep my gear lightweight. As a teenager, I thought that more gear would help me "look like a pro." So, instead of being patient, I splurged and became afflicted with G.A.S., or Gear Acquisition Syndrome. Looking back, this hurt my work because I spent more time on buying and lugging gear than on the pictures themselves.

So, dump some stuff. A lightweight gear bag helps you get shots that a gadget-laden photographer will miss. If GAS infects me again, and I fantasize about a new camera, I just set my FOCUSS dial to S, pick up the gear I already know intimately, and set off with a bare bones gear bag.

## **6. Stillness**

*" I take snapshots of moments in time and space in which a peace washes gently over me, and during which I sense a deep inter-connectedness between my soul and the world. "*  
*~ Andrew Ilachinski, photographer.*

*"The heart at rest sees a feast in everything."*  
*~ Hindu Proverb*



Copyright © James Austin

Stillness goes beyond waiting patiently to having an inner quiet, a place of openness to receiving pictures. When you are still, you do not have to chase the light, or stalk a subject. Stillness also thrives on a gentle hush devoid of your cell phone or beeping strobe. Hearing only the call of the wild, you can record its intimacies.

On a trip to Cumberland Island, Georgia, I sought to photograph nine-banded armadillos, but

made only unfocused pictures of their fleeing hind quarters. Finally, exhausted from this pursuit, I sat on a downed tree. I was admiring live oaks overhead when an armadillo rustled in the saw palmettos behind me. Because I was still, the armadillo came just six feet away. The photograph happened.

Some photographs are made. Others can just be allowed to happen. Fine photography happens when you join a ready mind to a rested heart.

### **Summary**

Look within your mind's eye camera. Is there room there for an imaginary dial? Perhaps you already have useful ideas in mind from your prior successful pictures. If not, create some steps on your inner dial. You'll enjoy your photography even more. When you are having fun, your images will improve. Practice being flexible and try simple mental settings each time you go out. Take snapshots, and be open to Oops. Fully expressing your imagination will light up your inner photography life.

~~~~~

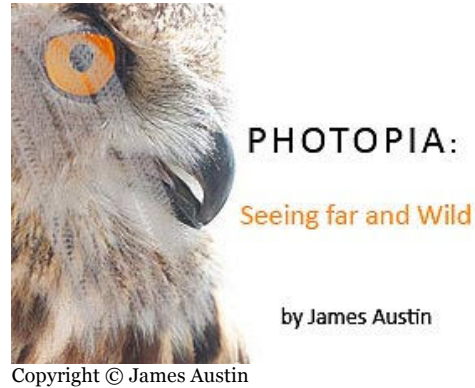


Copyright © James Austin

Jim Austin MA, A.C.E., is an adventure photographer who lives full-time aboard a sailing catamaran. Austin writes the Master Class columns for Apogee and teaches digital Photoshop for all skill levels for the [Apogee Online Campus](#).

The photographs in this article were drawn from his new book, **Photopia: Seeing Far and Wild**, available on Blurb, [CLICK HERE](#).

Jim Austin M.A. , A.C.E , is the author of a hardcover photography book titled **Sight Lines: Thinking in Pictures** on sale [at this location...](#) and



### **Dei Light: Exploring Divine**

**Light** shows how he made beautiful images of interiors of divine and sacred cathedrals with the HDR process. **Dei Light** is for sale at a special price: [Click Here](#)

**To find other articles by Jim, just type his name in the Search Box.**



Apogee Photo Magazine

[To Apogee Photo Home Page](#)