

Apogee Photo Magazine

exposure36 Photography

My Ten Photographic Principles

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As an educator in photography, there comes a time when you want to express more about your core values in photography than just talk about f-stops and shutter speeds. There are other messages that you want to provide your students that deal with more than the technical side of our craft. Usually these tidbits are dispersed in a more random manner—one or two at a time when the situation calls for it.

At some point, however, it is necessary to put all of this information together in one place to allow your students to obtain the information more readily. This is my attempt to enumerate ten principles that I believe are important for a creative photographer. They are not listed in any particular order of importance because I believe they are all of equal value. I hope that some or all of these principles will be beneficial to your photography.

1) Believing is seeing:

Imagine an overcast day with a soft rain falling. I planned to leave the warmth of my Portland home and drive a little over an hour to photograph at Mt. Hood. Should I go? I keep thinking that there must be shots there in this weather, but that little skeptic voice in my brain keeps saying: “Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it.”

The idea that you’ll believe it when you see it is an attitude that will cripple your photographic creativity. The reverse, believing is seeing, will propel you to newer insights and rewarding images.

Let me give you an example from a workshop I gave last year. We were at String Lake in the Grand Tetons and one of my students said that he just couldn’t find anything to shoot. I told him that I’ve published 10 images in the area along the shore from a bench about 12 feet away to the next parking area. I asked him to see how many of those he could find. About 45 minutes later he wandered back and very happily said he had 7 great shots, but could not find the other 3. I told him that I really have only published a couple of shots in that area, not 10. Since he believed that there were 10 “great” shots, he went out and found 7. Believing IS seeing.

Sometimes I am at a location and can’t find anything to shoot. At that point I try to slow down and I keep telling myself that there is something here...just look for it. Once I find one shot, the rest of the images come quickly.

2) Take five or more shots of any scene:

Many times when you go to a location you've already seen images from the area, or you've stopped at the visitor center to look at area postcards. When you do this, it suggests a certain way of shooting the subject when you get to it. This is a great inhibitor of creativity.

At my workshops, I tell people to go ahead and take the "postcard" shot to get it out of their system. After that, they have to search for at least four other ways to shoot the same subject. After two or three shots, all of their preconceived notions about how to shoot the subject are gone. The rest of the shot become more personal because they tend to be nothing like the earlier postcard shots.



Take the image on the left, for example. It is Moraine Lake in the Canadian Rockies. Most people shot it at sunrise from the top of the "rock pile" at the end of the lake. By moving a quarter of the way along the lake edge, I was able to capture the morning light hitting the peaks with the boat dock in the foreground. This is much different than the typical sunrise shot at this location and therefore much more rewarding to me.

Keep asking yourself "what if". What if I change this, or change that. What would the image be like with a different lens, or not setting up my tripod at its full height, or with a different white balance, or a filter, or a vertical orientation, or, or, or....

Most people find that the 4th, 5th, 6th images are their favorites because they are more personal and much different than the postcard shot. In order to be successful, you need to ask yourself what are the elements of the scene that made you want to stop and create a photograph. Once you can articulate that, try eliminating or de-emphasizing any extra elements.

Composition is similar to a great chef creating a dish. Take a little of this and a little of that, mix it together by trying new combinations, and create a masterpiece.

3) Keep your mind open:

If you are a landscape photographer, like me, listen to Mother Nature. Sometimes you may go out searching for the great wide angle landscape photo only to find a washed out or overcast sky. In this case Mother Nature is saying that this day might be devoted to macro work or more selective focusing on parts of the environment. Keep your mind open to all kinds of photography at a location, not just one particular view of the area.

Keeping your mind open also pertains to your mental state. If you are irritated, or thinking of some problem, you will not be creating good images. Let me tell you how I clear my mind in those situations.

I've taken about 40 hours of Zen photography classes. During some of the early classes we would do a walking meditation to clear our minds. We would walk with our eyes closed behind the instructor, who would guide us with her voice. Since I am 6'6" tall, I kept hitting low hanging branches. To resolve this, I started squinting to see the trees. Of course, this ruined the meditation. I explained the situation to my instructor, and

she suggested doing anything in a mindful way—to concentrate solely on the task. So now I clean my equipment whenever I have a busy mind. After a few minutes, my mind is clear and I begin to see again.

Keeping an open mind also means trying new things. There are always new techniques to read about or experiment on you own. By trying new things, whether they work or not, you will only improve your creativity.

4) Use every lens in your bag:

Most photographers have a lens with focal lengths that they prefer. Mine happens to be 70-200. When this happens, we get stuck with a certain perspective on the world. This hampers our creativity.

One of my workshop rules is that you should use every lens in your bag at each stop that we make. This takes people out of their comfort zone. It also forces them to see the world in a different way. Often the shot I take with my 14mm lens is the one I like best because it produces the most radical view of the world.



Once you get use to using all of your lenses in one location, it opens up your mind to all of the possibilities at the next location you visit. Yes, you'll be spending more time at each location, but you'll come away with rewarding images and a new perspective on this wonderful environment in which we photograph.

5) Photograph your values:

Some of you will be fortunate enough to publish your photos in a magazine, book, or on-line. That will be very rewarding. However, all of us can publish our life in our photos by photographing the values that we have. Believe me, that is much more rewarding.

How do we photograph our values? There are two different approaches. Let's say that one of our values is "integrity". One approach is to identify the essence of integrity. How do we know when someone has integrity? How is integrity expressed? Once we determine those answers, we can search for situations that contain integrity as we defined it.

The other approach is not to photograph integrity, but to photograph WITH integrity. What are the professional standards that you adhere to? Here are some of mine:

- I will not bait wildlife to move closer by offering them food.
- I will not interfere with wildlife by getting too close.
- I will not pick flowers because they are in the way of my shot.
- I will not go beyond a barrier that is placed there to keep me from going forward.

- I will not photograph from a location that would be dangerous if a non-photographer saw me and wanted to go to that location.

What are your measures of photographing with integrity? What other values are you going to incorporate into your photography?

6) Use one of the seven exposure values that are available:

When I am teaching about f-stops in my basic photography course, I turn off the lights in the room and ask my students what f-stop I should use in this lighting. Most of the time, several people tell me they would use f2.8 or f4. Their rationale is that in low light situations the camera needs a wide aperture to let in enough light to make a correct exposure. At that point, I take my digital camera and set it to f11 and take a multi-second photo of the class. While there is a lack of sharpness in the image from hand-holding the camera, the class acknowledges that the exposure is correct.

I use the term “exposure values” to mean the combination of f-stop and shutter speed either provided by the camera or manually set by the photographer.

In any photographic situation there are at least seven different combinations of f-stop and shutter speed that is available to the photographer. Many people restrict themselves to only a couple of these values because they do not realize that all the values are available to them due to the lighting conditions.

In low light situations, you can use a small aperture as long as you are able to stabilize your camera in some manner. In bright light, you can use very wide apertures if your camera can shoot at very fast shutter speeds.

Why is it important that you have seven exposure values available? The creative photographer needs to know that they are not restricted in their interpretation of the scene in front of them. Different exposure values provide a variety of interpretations in terms of depth-of-field, freezing or blurring the movement, etc. Don't restrict your ability to be creative by limiting your choice of exposure values.

7) Be childlike:

Provide a child with a small stick and sit back and watch. Within a few minutes that stick can be a sword, a baton, a pencil, a magic wand, etc. A child's imagination is not restricted in the same way as an adult's imagination. Things flow more easily when you are young.

Several years ago in Yellowstone, my workshop group was walking past a mineral pool of water. I stopped one member of the group, who I knew liked to shoot graphic photos. I asked him what he thought of the tree stump lying at the edge of the pool. “Not much” he said. Then I had him zoom in close with a telephoto lens. I asked him what the stump looked like. Within 30 seconds the “child” within him provided four or five interpretations of the stump and its reflection in the mineral pool. My advice to him was to “go play with it”.

Approach your subject with a child-like attitude. Try to see your subject in different

ways. Look at the scene as a graphic image instead of one with different elements. Keep your mind open to many different possibilities for how to photograph the scene that is in front of you. Don't be an adult and restrict yourself to that "postcard" shot that I mentioned previously.

8) Stay out late....get up early:

We often talk about the "magic hours" that surround sunset and sunrise. During these periods the light is really wonderful. However, it is surprising to me the number of photographers who pack up their gear the moment that the sun dips below the horizon. It is the period after the sun sets that often provides the real magic. True, there are times when nothing happens, but when it does it is worth all of the times that were futile.

A similar thing occurs at sunrise. Usually there are several photographers who arrived well before sunrise that are set up in their positions. About 5 minutes before sunrise, the late comers attempt to squeeze in among the other photographers. Some times they are successful, other times they are not. However, they have already missed the wonderful dawn light that precedes the rising of the sun.

In the mid-summer, sunset is very late in the day and sunrise is very early in the day. It may not be possible to do both and still get enough sleep to stay awake. If you can only do one, my suggestion is to stay out later than sunset or get up early enough to appreciate the splendor of the dawn light.

9) Know when to pull the trigger:



It is fairly easy in action shots to know when to press the shutter button. We usually want the action to flow into the scene, not out of it. Also, we want to capture the action at its peak moment. Landscape photographers should acknowledge that pressing the shutter button is not a random act. You must have the patience to wait until everything is the way you want it before pressing the shutter button. If you are photographing a mountain, for example, are the clouds in

the right position, are the flowers in the foreground not blowing in the wind, did that car on the highway in the background get out of the picture frame, etc.?

Pressing the shutter button should be a conscious act—an acknowledgement that everything is the way it should be in the scene. Think of how many times you've taken a picture only to find out that there was something there that shouldn't have been there. Patience is a virtue....exercise it.

There is another trigger that photographers often pull too quickly. That trigger is the delete button on their digital camera. If an image looks bad on the LCD monitor, then by all means delete it. However, I see too many photographers just guessing that they won't like the picture and then deleting it.

My rule is to enlarge the picture on the back of the camera to see if there are any glaring errors. If so, delete the image. The rest of the images I save for review. When I look at the images on my computer screen, I immediately put aside the images that are publishable. The remainder of the images (if they do not have any faults) are put aside for a couple of weeks and then evaluated again. The ones that don't make the cut this time are deleted.

I think it is important to allow some time between when you shot the image and when you make a final decision on keeping the image. If you make the decision too close to the time you shot the image, your view of the image may be distorted by your memory of the situation where you shot the image.

Our images can not capture the entire scene that was in front of us. We can only capture a part of it. Often when we look at our photos we are comparing the photo to our memory of the scene. The memory always wins. Allow some time to pass so your memory of the scene is not as strong and you will appreciate your images more.

10) Practice, practice, practice:

There is no doubt that practice makes everyone better. If I do not shoot regularly, it takes me a while to get going again when I am back in the field. Film is still relatively inexpensive and "digital film" is even more so. There is no excuse for not practicing.

Most people think there is nothing interesting in their neighborhood. If you are applying the 10 Principles in this article, that view should change. Practicing at home can really help your creativity because you really need to believe there are good shots there.

Let me end with one of my favorite stories. A well dressed couple was waiting to cross a street in New York City. While the light was red they both scanned up and down the street looking for something. They tapped the shoulder of a man standing next to them, who happened to be Leonard Bernstein, a very famous composer. The man asked Mr. Bernstein: "How do you get to Radio City Music Hall?" Mr. Bernstein replied: "Practice, practice, practice".

Jim Altengarten currently teaches Basic Photography and How to Use Your Canon EOS 20D/30D at Apogee Photo Magazine Online Campus. To learn more about these courses go to:

<http://www.apogeephoto.com/classes/altengarten.html>

Jim is also is the owner of exposure36 Photography that specializes in landscape photography, creative vision, and photographic education. Jim teaches classes every quarter at the Experimental College of the University of Washington. Topics include Basic and Intermediate Photography, Composition, Exposure, Macro Equipment, and the Canon EOS Camera System. He also teaches workshops at prime locations in the western United States--such as Death Valley, Yosemite, The Grand Tetons, and The Palouse wheat fields. Please check the exposure36 Photography website for information about classes and workshops <www.exposure36.com>. Your questions or comments can be sent via e-mail to: info@exposure36.com or by phone (206-433-2996).