

Photography ReFocus - SEEing Your Way to Better Pictures

This workshop will give you information and insights to create more powerful photos. We'll start with the three essential pieces of gear that no one talks about -- using your eyes, heart and mind. We'll then explore the foundation of photography as a visual language and build a new set of skills to communicate in that language. You'll learn how to see compelling compositions and how to use lighting to convey your vision. You'll discover how to make color, line, shape, texture and perspective work for you. You'll leave with creative tools to improve your photos of people, buildings, flowers, pets and landscapes. You'll get access to photo editing programs that are free and easy to use. Also, you'll take home resources to keep your photography skills growing. All this with no geek speak or techno babble. Will you be a much better photographer after this workshop? Absolutely.

This workshop will benefit any level of experience. All digital cameras - cellphone, point & shoot, dslr - are welcome.

This workshop is taught by Tim Poly, a photographer and professional speaker with over 36 years experience.

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Rules, rules, rules. So many things to say about making better pictures. Here are some of my personal *starting points*.

DEFINITION - Photography is a *Visual Language*. The word “photography” comes from two Greek words -- “phos” meaning *light* and “graphis” meaning *writing*. When we are photographing, we are writing in a new language. A *visual language*. As with any language, we have to learn the rules, grammar and vocabulary. Be patient. Practice. Experiment. Get silly. Enjoy your mistakes. Celebrate your successes.

The GEAR that really matters - your brain, your heart and your eyes. Repeat this. You can make GREAT PHOTOS with *any* camera, even a cell phone camera. It’s your personal intangibles that you put into a photo that can make it great.

Have FUN - photography is all about finding visual treasures and sharing them. Your photos can make people smile, think, empathize or become inspired.

Tell a SIMPLE STORY - For starters, have *one* subject per picture. Fill the frame. Keep the composition simple. Photos gain impact when they’re *easy to understand*. Remember, a photographer is a visual storyteller. Twitterize your photos, don’t novelize - make them short and sweet.

MAKE don’t TAKE - This has been said a zillion times, but it’s still true - *you make* a photo, you don’t *take* a photo. Use the best actions of your mind, heart and eyes (see above).

THREE kinds of photos -

- For Play - have fun, be crazy, don’t sweat the details, click away.
- For Reference - you see something interesting but you’re not sure it’s very good. This is ok. You can study this type of photo to see how you can improve.
- For Keeps - everything works and you say, “Wow”. Sometimes this happens with one shot. Sometimes this happens after 200 shots. Sometimes one of your Play or Reference photos can help you create a Keeper. Just keep shooting and learning.

Celebrate MISTAKES - Mistakes can help you learn. They can often become your best photos. I once read about a company philosophy whose was, "If we're not making mistakes, we can't be successful".

DEFY gravity (safely) - make your pictures from a lower perspective, a higher perspective or a sideways perspective. Get down on the ground, stand on a chair, look around a corner.

Do a 360 - There may be a good photo opportunity in front of you, there may be a *better* one behind you. Look all around. Take lots of pictures of the same subject from all angles. Then take even more.

Get CLOSER - Robert Capa, a famous war photographer, once said: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough". He put this into practice by landing in the first wave on D Day carrying two cameras with normal lenses.

Say "HELLO" - People pictures gain impact when you're *closer* to your subject. If you see an interesting person to photograph, consider these approaches:

- introduce yourself with a smile
- compliment what they're doing, how they look
- empathize with what they're doing or how they look
- ask politely if you can take a quick picture, leave graciously if they say, "no"
- work quickly, perhaps show them a photo of them smiling when you're done
- thank them and leave

You may not need to buy a telephoto lens for people photos (unless you really want to).

Shoot BLIND - Do you really need to look through your viewfinder or at your lcd? What if you just held up your camera and shot? What if you walked down a street with your camera in the crook of your arm pointing forward and just shot?

Look ELSEWHERE - The best pictures are not what everyone else is taking. Look for the details, the contrasts, the unexpected. Go around corners, through doors. Is there another vantage point? If everyone is shooting the front of the subject, can you shoot from behind?

Keep LOOKING - You'll take your best pictures next week, next month, next year. You're on a path to photographic excellence. *I guarantee it.*

Simple Exercises & Splendid Resources

Simple Exercises

We are always surrounded by rich photographic opportunities. These exercises will help us become aware of them.

Quiet Listening

Sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Listen. Listen to your breathing, listen to the world around you. Focus on the sounds. Do this for 2 - 4 minutes. You'll gradually become aware of many sounds. When you open your eyes, you'll be relaxed and also much more open to the visual opportunities at hand.

Zero, Zero, Zero

When you first arrive at a location or event you're going to photograph, take time to zero out the settings on your gear. On a camera, this means setting the iso, white balance, program mode, picture quality mode, etc. to basic settings for what you're about to shoot (not the settings from your prior shoot).

Pirouette

Once you're zeroed out your gear, zero out your mind. Take time to quietly and slowly look around. Do one, or more, 360s. Observe, don't evaluate. Let your environment speak to you. Take time with this process. Sometimes your best photos are, literally and laterally, behind you.

Wrap It or Strap It

Always use a neck strap or wrist strap. Neither little cameras or big cameras bounce very well.

High / Low

Most pictures are taken with a camera held horizontally at eye level. Just by physically moving your camera up or down, you can improve your pictures.

- 1) Hold your camera up over your head, click and hope. Sometimes this works.
- 2) Find something (stable) to stand on and look down. This works even better.

3) Hold your camera at ground level and point up. Once again, don't worry about composition. With a digital camera, it's easy to do this by trail and error.

4) Spend time photographing everything on your knees. This is obvious when you're shooting kids or pets. What if you shot a wedding from this perspective? (just asking)

5) Hold your camera vertically. Some subjects are best shot this way. Learn to ask yourself what angle/perspective is best for a specific subject.

6) Buy a monopod. This is a one legged tripod. Attach your camera. Extend the monopod, set your camera's self timer and hold it up over your head. Yes, you're aiming and hoping again. The results might be worth it. Repeat.

Find a Seat

Here's a great way to practice people pictures. Find a bench in a park or at an event. Sit down with your camera. Take 20 pictures of the action around you without getting up. Try taking another 20.

Get a Cell Phone Camera

You may already have a camera in your cell phone. If not, get this feature next time you upgrade. Get into the habit of taking pictures with it everyday. This will help you learn to see. Yes, the quality may be funky (you can tweak them in Picasa, see below), but your photographic vision will greatly improve.

Chase Jarvis, a commercial photographer, says, "The best camera is the one that's with you". He understands that to be more *fluent* in a *visual* language you have to practice using it. He takes between 1 and 1000 cell phone pictures a day.

Don't Play Favorites

Over time, we all gravitate to a particular lens or focal length. We become comfortable with it's field of view and find we do our best work with it. Perhaps we become too comfortable with it. Sometimes it's good to choose your least favorite lens or focal length. This will force you to see and shoot differently. If you stick with it, you'll become a better photographer.

The Dreaded Locked Room

This is a tough one. Go into a room with your camera, a bathroom is a good place to start, and close the door (lock it if you like). Take 10 pictures. Make each one different. Take 10 more. Continue to make each one different. Try another 10. Don't give up. This exercise forces you to really, really look.

Creative Seeds

Try several. Email me if you're confused.

Get close
One subject
Make magic
Work slowly
Work quickly
Fill the frame
Find balance
Lose balance
Keep it simple
Selective focus
Focus on a face
Explore patterns
Break the 9 grid
Create perspective
Frame your subject
Search for shadows
Rotate your camera
Look for side lighting
Lead the viewer's eye
Dip into a pool of light
Emotion tops everything
Learn to see like a painter
One color against another
Play with lines that don't exist
Wait for the moment, wait more
Follow the moment, follow more
Shoot from your belt, elbow, hip
Establish a personal connection
Don't look through the viewfinder
Shoot over your subject's shoulder
Does the light have a color - can you use it
Know when shadows help and when they hurt
Play with the planes --- foreground/background
Small subject & large background; then reverse this
Ask yourself- where is the light coming from, where is it going
Find the details -- hands, feet, hair, pieces of clothing - keep looking
Play with lines - straight lines - curving lines - s curve lines - diagonal lines
Focus on eyes - looking at you, someone else, something else, somewhere else

Splendid Resources

“splendid” - adj. = excellent, brilliant, admirable, grand.

These photographers, authors, websites and blogs are treasure troves of knowledge. Start with these. They'll keep you busy till next year's Plein Air Easton.

If you're feeling frugal about buying books, most authors “try out” their future book's content on their blogs. The blog material may not be as well organized as a book, but will be just as valuable.

When you find a photographer or author you like, go to their website/blog and look at the people on their “links” page. These people may inspire you also.

Copy and paste these links into your browser.

How to Take Great Photos

Horizon Photography Workshops, great variety of courses, excellent instructors and an insightful, informative newsletter: (yes, I teach for them)

<http://www.horizonworkshops.com/>

Ken Rockwell, has a college course worth of info on his blog. This is a link to his classic thoughts:

<http://www.kenrockwell.com/tech.htm>

Amateur Snapper, has a clear, concise list on improving your photo's composition here:

<http://www.amateursnapper.com/photography/10-top-photography-composition-rules>

Roie Galitz, an Israeli photographer, has many tutorials on his website. Start with this one:

<http://www.galitz.co.il/en/articles/composition.shtml>

Chase Jarvis, a top commercial photographer, shows what you can do with a cell phone camera:

<http://www.chasejarvis.com/#s=0&mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&p=5&a=0&at=0>

David Hobby, the Strobist, will help you expand the limits of your photos with flash:

<http://www.strobist.blogspot.com/>

Kirk Tuck, has been involved with photography for eons (his words), find his insights into gear and techniques at:
<http://visualsciencelab.blogspot.com/>

David DuChemin, says "Gear is good, vision is better". I love that idea. His blog will introduce you to his photos, books, and thoughts:
<http://www.pixelatedimage.com/blog/>

Michael Williamson, is a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer for the Washington Post. He doesn't have a website, but he does have a summer long blog that's looking at the effects of the recession across America. You'll have to scroll through each entry to find his pictures:
<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/recession-road/archives.htm>

Karl Grobl, is a humanitarian photojournalist. He has inspiring people pictures and thoughtful advice on gear and travel photography:
<http://www.karlgrobl.com/>

Lisl Dennis, is a gifted travel photographer. Most of her books are out of print, but you can find them used on Amazon, for very little cost. Here's her website:
<http://www.phototours.info/bio.php>

Software Your Budget Will Love

Picasa 3 This is the BEST photo editing tool for non professional use. Super easy to use and very powerful. I seldom need anything else. It's FREE. It's similar to Apple's iphoto. You can download it here:
<http://picasa.google.com/>

Paint.net This is the FREE answer to Photoshop. It was started as a college project mentored by Microsoft and will only work on a pc. It does most of what Photoshop can do, has extensive online help and (did I mention this?), it's FREE:
<http://www.getpaint.net/>

Faststone.org This is a freeware/shareware software company. Their programs are simple to use yet powerful.

I use their FREE *Image Viewer* (<http://www.faststone.org/FSViewerDownload.htm>) and/or their FREE *Photo Resizer* (<http://www.faststone.org/FSResizerDownload.htm>) when I can't quite do what I want with Picasa. Their *Screen Capture* program (<http://www.faststone.org/FSCapturerDownload.htm>) is very useful screen capture program. I liked this one so much, I bought it.

Books For Your Coffee Table, Book Shelf or Camera Bag

There are dozens of worthwhile books about photography. Visit a bookstore with two hours to spare and you'll come away enriched. These are my favorites.

General "how to" books:

Digital Photographer's Handbook, Tom Ang.

Tom Ang has written dozens of similar books. It's useful to have one of them.

National Audubon Society Guide to Landscape Photography, Tim Fitzharris.

I'm not a landscape photographer, but if I was this would be my main reference.

How To Take Better Travel Photos, Lisl Dennis.

It's out of print. Go to Amazon and look for any of her books used. They're all good.

General composition books:

Creative Nature and Outdoor Photography, Brenda Tharp.

Gorgeous book and one of the best photography books. Lots of good thoughts on seeing and composition. It's about way more than the title suggests.

Photography and the Art of Seeing, Freeman Patterson.

Freeman Patterson has a series of books designed to help you see and compose better photos. He's a vision head not a gear head. Not flashy, but very substantive.

Learning To See Creatively, Bryan Peterson.

This is a general "how to" that only focuses on seeing and composition. Like Patterson, he combines text with examples with exercises. This will keep you busy.

Designing a Photograph, Bill Smith.

This is a catalog of visual techniques. I don't think it's as strong as Patterson or Peterson, but it's still worthwhile. Save money, get an older edition used on Amazon.

People Picture Books:

Within the Frame, David DuChemin.

A book that approaches photography from a heart perspective instead of a technical perspective. His photos will please your eyes and his text will feed your spirit.

Thoughtful Books:

Contemplative Photography, Howard Zehr.

The sub title says it all, "Seeing with wonder, respect and humility". Reading this book is like going on vacation. It slows down my thoughts and it refreshes my vision.

Lenswork, magazine.

This is a beautiful, small black and white magazine about photography. It's published 6 times a year. Each issue is like a polished gem.

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These will be helpful to bring:

Freshly charged batteries. Also, bring a spare(s). Without a working battery, you'll be trying to take pictures with a paperweight.

Extra memory cards. I like 2 gb cards. It's always better to have several smaller capacity cards than one large capacity card in case of a card malfunction.

Just bring the lens(es) and camera (s) you feel most comfortable with. Less gear will let you focus on shooting.

Sunscreen for all day protection. Bug repellent is good to have in reserve.

A lightweight hat. I like the Bora Bora Hat by Columbia. It folds for travels, has a large brow, which is dark on the bottom to reduce reflections, and a mesh crown for ventilation.

Comfortable shoes. We'll be walking.

Energy bars and a bottle of water (I think we'll be going out to lunch, or you could bring your own). It's hard to take good photos when you're hungry or dehydrated. A bottle of water in a sling carrier will stay out of your way till you need it.

Your cell phone with a fresh charge. Cell phone cameras sometimes take better pictures than a more expensive camera. Plus, they good for communication.

If you don't already have this -- buy a UV, Skylight or Clear Protection filter for each of your lenses. It's better to scratch a removable filter than the front element of your lens.

An umbrella, a cheap poncho, and several gallon size clear plastic bags. I'm hoping for sun, but

You don't need to bring a tripod. We'll be mostly walking and shooting. If you fell more comfortable using a tripod for your photos, then bring it.

Your camera manual. This is good to have in reserve. Yes, I've learned this the hard way.

A pocket sized notebook and pen.

A sense of humor. . . . A sense of adventure. . . .

And just plain common sense. We'll be shooting and trying new techniques and ideas. Who knows what will happen!

Tim Poly

Participant Evaluations **Photographers Shoot Artists** Horizon Photography Workshops

"Awesome! Would love to do more courses with Tim."

"Excellent. Tim showed me new, creative ways to look at the world. He's great . . . would like to take another course from him."

"Very informative and very pleasant. Tim was helpful and knowledgeable."

"Excellent. Well-paced instruction, plenty of individual attention, good balance of hands-on work and classroom work."

"Great! Wonderful feedback on all photos and hints on taking better ones."

Participant Evaluations **Alexandria PhotoWalk** The Art League

"Tim was very engaging and encouraging of us to see things in a new light. I enjoyed it! Thanks!"

"Well done! I liked that you kept it simple. Now I know how much I have to learn - but I'm excited to keep on learning. Photography scared me because I found it intimidating. Its good to have that taken away. I also learned to LOOK at things from different perspectives."

"Excellent 'mini' photo workshop. Tons of info in a short time. Highly recommend! Thanks Tim."

"The information was clear and educational. Tim answered all our questions well. We liked the area we walked. It was a nice sunny day. We were able to put Tim's idea's into our own photos."

"Thanks for the tour. Alexandria is a beautiful place to take photos. I've taken many photography classes in the past and this class/event was a great refresher."