

A Lesser Photographer



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10 Principles for Rediscovering What Matters

by [C.J. Chilvers](#)

Special Thanks

Special thanks to [Tom Polous](#), who shot the cover. That's me, with my trusty compact camera, awestruck by a massive storm front over Lake Michigan. That storm battered us a few minutes later with heavy wind, rain and lightning as we hid behind a dune, trying to protect our cameras.

It serves to remind me:

the real show is outside the viewfinder.

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Introduction

Since the age of twelve, I've been obsessed with photography. I built a little darkroom and took class after class to learn as much as I could. I studied the zone system intensely for years until it became so ingrained, I saw the entire world in zones of light. My library of photo books and magazines could rival a university.

By any measure, this is a passion.

Much like a car mechanic would remember the years by the cars he owned, I remember 1994 as the year of my Minolta X-700 or 1996 as the year I stepped up to a Fuji GS645. With every issue of Shutterbug, I scanned the ads in the back pages, lusting after the latest gear I couldn't afford.

The digital age only reinforced my desire to own ever more capable equipment as brands consolidated. Are you a Canon or a Nikon? If so, how high ranking are you in that world?

I put that question to rest for myself a few years ago, when I was hiking through Starved Rock State Park in Illinois with my friend, Tom.

Tom and I have been best friends since we were nine years old, and enablers of each other's photographic obsessions since the 1990s. On this hike, through Starved Rock, Tom had the latest, greatest model of Canon DSLR around his neck and I had a lesser model.

After a few minutes on the trail, we encountered two locals, both with Canon DSLRs. For ten minutes, we discussed our love for the lenses in our bags and that's when it hit me. This was ridiculous. Four photographers, in the most beautiful of settings, had chosen to discuss gear instead of taking a single photo. Our love of gear had superseded our love of the image.

I slowly backed away from the conversation and began shooting what turned out to be some of my favorite images of the past decade.

The questions about everything being sold to me in photography podcasts, blogs, books and magazines had been building for years. Just how much did equipment matter and why? What if I threw it all away and restarted with the least of equipment? Would my vision be enough to capture the images I wanted?

I sold my 4x5 view camera, my medium format cameras and my DSLR. I bought a compact camera and became determined to put my theories to the test.

Over the next two years, I blogged about my experiences and collected the wisdom of like-minded photographers. I had tapped into a philosophy of photography that was unusual and unpopular. One famous photographer, with an extremely popular podcast and blog, told me he disagreed with my premise and “you get what you pay for.” Two years later, that photographer (and many others) now blogs in agreement with my views.

There’s something to this. I hope to convince you as well.

This book reveals some universal truths I’ve learned on my path as a minimalist photographer, in as few words as possible. In some cases, I’ve distilled entire paragraphs down to a single sentence. I realize that most photographers are visual thinkers like myself and lengthy prose does nothing to advance a thought.

Why 10 principles? It seemed like a good place to stop and reflect. Maybe a year from now it'll be 15, or (in the minimalist tradition) it will be simplified down to 5. 10 is a good start, though.

Why isn't this book packed with photos? I want you to think about what these ideas mean for your photos, not mine. One photo is enough to convey a message in this case, but if you really want to know what these principles have meant to my images and the images of other photographers, visit alessrphotographer.com and read on.

1 Artists Thrive on Constraints

Every new, professional grade camera aims to remove the photographer another step from the mechanical processes of the camera to “focus on the image.”

This has the opposite effect.

Creativity is always enhanced by a constraint. This is true in filmmaking, music, painting, writing and even photography.

How many times has one of your favorite bands, whose best album was produced in days using half-borrowed equipment, gone on to spend a year in the studio on their next album, only to produce a mediocre (at best) result?

How many times has a talented filmmaker been given unlimited funds and technical possibilities only to produce a Jar Jar Binks?

A lesser camera makes you think. Thought is better than automation in art. Automation leads to commoditization. Your art becomes easily replaceable or worse, forgettable.

The resurgence of film among younger photographers is viewed as a current fad. It may well turn out to be just a fad, but the reason it makes sense to so many people is the feeling of enhanced creativity it fuels. If you load black and white film into your camera, your whole world becomes black and white until a new roll is loaded. That's a very useful constraint.

If you carry a camera with a fixed lens, you must get close to your subjects. That may be the most beneficial of constraints.

Constraints become a necessity because our brains seek the path of least resistance. Our brains crave the automation. It's less painful. The brain would love to produce safe, bland fluff. When we enforce a constraint, we throw a boulder into the path of least resistance and force the brain to create to a path less traveled.

Your creativity is what makes your images unique. Don't stifle it for an easier "workflow."

2 Go Amateur

Photography is one of the most popular hobbies on the planet, but you'd never know it by reading most photography blogs, podcasts, books and tutorials. It's treated as a profession, where the goal is making money, buying more expensive gear or getting your prints into galleries around the world. You're being enticed to "Go Pro." That's just not realistic for the vast majority of photographers. Most photographers could benefit from going amateur.

In 2011, according to Careercast.com, a mid-career professional photographer could expect to earn an income of \$30,265.00. That's not much to look forward to after 10 or so years of hard work.

In 2010, Holly Stuart Hughes, editor of Photo District News, said in the New York Times, "There are very few professional photographers who, right now, are not hurting."

New photographers are dipping their toes in the professional market all the time, making the art a commodity in areas of the market where creativity has been neglected. Some veterans have stepped up their game in response, most have

not. The result is less opportunity for average photographers.

I'm not here to discourage you. No doubt, some of you are professionals already and some of you have made a few bucks here and there. The vast majority of you are not professionals and never will be. Many publications, especially blogs, are hoping you never realize that. Most are pushing a content drug on you. The goal is to treat you as a professional, tempt you to buy like one and keep you coming back for more. This robs you of time and resources better spent on making the pictures you love.

On your death bed, will you regret not making a few extra bucks on your photography or getting the latest model of DSLR? It's more likely you will regret not creating more art.

Stop buying into the assumption that your goal is to make money from photography. Your goal is most likely to create amazing photographs that you love.

Concentrate on making your images remarkable, instead of marketable. If you photograph what you love to photograph, without regard for money, you'll create better images, which

could lead to the possibility of money. Just don't count on the money.

3 Spend on Images, Not Gear

The lust for gear is pervasive. It's the fuel that turns any hobby into an industry. In photography, that desire for the latest gadgets has provided the incentive for innovations like the DSLR. There's no doubt it serves an economic purpose. But it only serves to harm creativity.

We need to decide what is going to consume our time, money and attention: our cameras or our images.

If you're reading this, I'm guessing you already own some kind of camera. Inevitably, you're going to feel the pull from ads, catalogues, eBay and fellow photographers to upgrade. How much sense that makes depends on your goals as a photographer.

\$500 could buy you a new lens, or it can pay for a workshop on how to best use the equipment you already own. \$1200 could buy you the latest prosumer DSLR body or a plane ticket to place you've never been, with change to spare for a guide. Which would add more to your life experience and to the diversity of your image library? There are plenty of very fashionable photographers with little in their images to show for it.

For the vast majority of photographers, who don't rely on their cameras for their income, a simple, usable and pocketable camera is more than enough when you know how to use it properly. Don't expect to see that notion in your typical photography magazine, blog or book. There's not much financial incentive in telling you the truth.

Compact cameras often get a bad rap, simply because there's less money involved, but their benefits are not to be overlooked. They can be used in more places, without eliciting the reaction of security officials. They're less obtrusive when shooting candid. They can be stashed and retrieved easily in a pocket or plastic bag during bad weather (perhaps even making you more likely to venture out for such photography). They have simpler controls, making them more likely to be used fully. Most importantly, they allow the user to always have a camera ready for unexpected opportunities.

Not every compact camera can produce poster-sized prints with tack-sharp detail...yet. However, most modern photos will never be printed at any size. Technical output is of little consequence at all, when you reach the point of clarity in whatever medium the photograph is meant to be viewed.

Real output is judged by the reaction it evokes in the viewer. Emotions are not measurable in print size or pixels. Spending more on pixels may make a camera dealer very happy, but usually does nothing for your viewer.

4 Tell a Story

Why does every major photography award seem to go to the same few outlets: National Geographic, The New York Times Magazine, Time Magazine and a handful of interchangeable lifestyle publications?

If you visit your local bookstore, you'll find the magazine rack packed with photography how-to publications, featuring the best work of the most celebrated photographers on the planet. Why aren't these publications recognized with awards and loved by hundreds of thousands of subscribers? They feature the best photography has to offer, yet they're read by far fewer and usually as an impulse buy.

Online it's the same. Countless blogs teach you technique and countless photographers blog about their work and show off their portfolios, but National Geographic and a handful of journalistic organizations still bring the most recognition. What do they know that the millions of contenders don't?

Technically proficient photography is no longer enough to inspire. You must tell a story. And while you're telling a story, don't limit yourself to just images.

For years, photographers have been wisely imploring writers to learn to create compelling images to enhance their storytelling. The same argument must be made in reverse. Photographers must learn to write to enhance their storytelling, or find a writer to collaborate with. The two skills are inescapably linked now.

This is why it makes no sense for a photographer, with no professional mandate, to keep a portfolio section on their website. Viewers would be better served, and in turn photographers would be better served, by telling stories. Those stories are better served with great writing. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but the worth of a great story is incalculable.

Videography is the combination of visual and audio storytelling, and given that many photographers are visual thinkers, a story may be best told to some audiences through video. National Geographic presents both types of audiences with impeccable storytelling, catered to their consumption styles. That's why they win.

5 You Already Know What to Photograph

Way too much time is wasted in search of the “kind” of photographer you should be. This is an area of book and blog content rife with advice that makes little sense. If you’ve been photographing for a little while, you already know what to photograph.

Whatever it is that you’ve taken the most photos of (people, animals, landscapes, buildings, etc.) is probably what interests you the most.

Of course, as an artist, you’re a naturally curious person, so exploration is a must. But whatever it is you always come home to is your...home.

No matter what area of photography offers the promise of more money or recognition; you will never be as prolific or creative in that area as in the area that naturally interests you.

6 Don't Improve on Perfection

There's an old saying among musicians, "If you can't do it in jeans and a t-shirt, it ain't rock 'n' roll."

If you can't say what you need to say in a photograph without heaping layers of software filters or resorting to the latest trends in post processing, you're probably not saying much of anything.

Nothing is more beautiful than simply revealing the beauty in front of your lens. Concentrate your skills in photography to those things that will put you in the right place at the right time while being adept enough to capture that moment in the most compelling way.

When you reach that level, you won't want anything covering up what you've created.

7 The Most Important Tool

In the days of film, there was a mantra repeated by every high school and college photography teacher, when introducing their students to the darkroom: the garbage can is the most important tool in the darkroom.

Editing is the skill that separates the decent photographers from great photographers. Great photographers shoot just as many duds as the decent photographers, but the public never sees the duds.

Be liberal with your use of the trash. It's your friend. An editorial photographer at a major magazine may take thousands of photos for a feature and publish only 5 in the story. Being conservative with what you show to the world protects your reputation and tells a better story.

A lesser photographer takes this principle a step further.

As much as editing may separate decent photographers from great photographers, there's another principle that separates the great photographers from the absolute best. The best photographers eliminate photographs before they even begin shooting. They pre-edit. They determine what isn't worth

their effort, to free up their time for the things that may prove to be remarkable.

There's a reason articles abound on how to take photos of waterfalls and fireworks. It's because everyone does it. It's not unique. There are times when it makes sense to put down the camera and take in the world around you. You'll often find a scene no other photographer is covering. One of my photography professors, [Monte Gerlach](#), put it this way: whenever there is a sunset in front of you, turn around and start shooting what's behind you.

If you can find it on a postcard, it's already been covered pretty well and by better photographers than you. It's probably time to move on to a more unique scene. The throngs of budding photographers, reading how-to articles, will take care of the dew-covered flower close-ups for you. Create something you care about and it will rarely be a cliché.

8

Roll Your Own

There will always be another online service begging for you to share your photos. Not enough photographers assess the benefits of using these services before jumping right in to next new one that comes along. Whether they make sense for you depends entirely on what your goals as a photographer are.

Most of these services will not help you tell a story, effectively edit or showcase your skills in the best possible light. If you wish to tell a story or avoid the constantly changing, often onerous, terms of service, you need to own the experience of viewing your images.

Take advantage of social networking to call attention to your work, but always bring your viewer back to a place you can tailor for the experience you desire. Don't offer your best works in an environment that changes depending on the whims of a company that almost certainly doesn't have the interests of your viewers at heart.

9 Keep Photography Legal

It's a shame that this even needs to be an issue in modern society, but in order for photographers to freely express their creativity, photography must be, at the very least, legal.

In the United States, photography is considered speech and protected by the first amendment of our constitution, but that hasn't stopped new laws and some individual police and security forces from harassing photographers, confiscated equipment and prosecuting the "offenders." Around the world, the crack down is even more severe.

The loss of this free speech inhibits advances that lesser photographers and smaller cameras have already ushered in to society, including citizen journalism and consumer protection. Smaller cameras, in phones especially, have allowed the average person to document abuses by governments in a way that would not have even been imagined a few decades ago. It's no wonder this freedom is so violently opposed by those with power to protect.

Lesser photographers still have an advantage, since smaller, unobtrusive cameras are usually not taken as seriously. But that advantage wanes with every passing year.

The freedoms we enjoy come with responsibilities. Until governments bend to the inevitable tendencies towards freedom of speech, photographers will be jailed, threatened and robbed. It's our responsibility to support those who defend free speech, or none of the other principles will matter.

10 **Be Grateful**

The one antidote for the jealousy that leads to the obsessive buying of gear and chasing of fame is gratitude.

The fact we have the gear we already have, vision clear enough to appreciate beauty and the knowledge to capture it, makes photographers the luckiest people in the world.

While others let beauty pass them by, we recognize it, experience it and share it with the world.

Is there better way to fully live a life?