



So you want to be a better photographer?

By Roger Hynd

Photography appeals to lots of different people because it can be co-opted to realise many different ideas. But there has to be a catalyst for somebody to become a passionate practitioner. A mate of mine became a photographer because he wanted to capture the beauty of plants. His broader interest came later. I fell into photography after absorbing the culture from childhood. We always had cameras around and Mum worked in the processing industry. I started experimenting with a folding Brownie while I was still at primary school and it sort of grew from there.

First experiments always lead to the phase where you devote heaps of time and a lot of images to understanding the process: *composition; exposure; camera handling; the behaviour of light; darkroom technique (or increasingly, digital darkroom technique); and later, film characteristics: colour theory; professional lighting techniques; professional modelling and composing tricks; the characteristics of lenses; and if you make or get the chance, the way in which commercial labs handle film and prints.*

This is also the phase where significant amounts of money get spent on equipment, some of which is rarely used. I think every photographer has something in the bag that they have often wondered why they acquired (40ft air-powered cable release?; six-facet multicoloured prism filter? low-res digital camera? - sound familiar?)

This learning phase proceeds differently for different photographers but its primary characteristic is the pursuit of the new. Every idea you meet with has novelty and you can't wait to try it! This learning stage applies for each type of photography you want to undertake and it seems entirely possible to be well beyond it in respect of one area of interest but still immersed deeply in it for another. If we must give labels to photographic areas of interest, those in this phase will find the classic divisions relevant: *portrait; still life; landscape; documentary; close-up; etc.* But this elementary stage must be superseded if you are not to find your photography going stale.

I knew I was going stale when the camera stopped coming out at weekends. In the course of acquiring skills and techniques I had a great time and was an active and reasonably successful contributor to club competitions. Then it all seemed to stop having meaning and the activity dwindled. The way out of these doldrums for me was my passion for looking at the work of successful photographers. Fotofest, the one-and-only Wellington Festival of Photography (1998), rescued me.

I had stopped spending money on equipment and books of instruction and was spending it instead on getting as close as I could to photographers whose work I admired. Then came Fotofest. Magnum photographers David Hurn & Martin Parr, and photography educator Bill Jay were inspirational. But the most useful thing that was said to me at Fotofest came from NZ photographer Jocelyn Carlin. It changed my perspective and it cleared the creative blockage. Looking back I cannot imagine why it had not crystallised in my mind from the reading and looking I had been doing. She said two words:

“Do projects.”

Fotofest induced a subtle shift in my photographic seeing, which became more informed by my intellect and less by the raw wonder of achieving images that have immediate visceral impact. I have been feeding this ever since by reading photographic criticism the looking anew at photos – any photos I can find. The process has sustained me for a decade.

“Do projects.”

Move on from raw process to doing something *designed* with your skills, at the earliest opportunity. It is increasingly important not to wander out at dawn on Sunday to see what can be found. You need to get out there alright, but with an end in view. Projects require planning. I can see now that the lack of a plan explains why most photos taken on “outings” seem to me to fail. Group outings seem to be unproductive unless they are learning experiences for the participants or unless your club simply wants to have a good time and photography is not particularly important.

Doing projects is ultimately very satisfying. You set targets and if you meet them, you can have a high sense of achievement and worth. You have to accept that doing a project can take time, even years. But because they engender self-discipline, they make you a better photographer.

More pieces of wisdom which I took from the Magnum photographers at FotoFest:

1. If you like an idea, steal it.

This means you will have to come to terms with the techniques involved, thereby growing in your photography. This idea becomes very acceptable if you now take the next step and acknowledge that photography itself is not art. Neither is it a craft. It is merely a process by which you achieve your artistic or other goals.

2. Professional photographers only use colour when it is significant.

This is another outcome-related proposition. It could be restated as *professional photographers only use techniques that contribute to their desired result*. This makes it clear that divisions of photography isolating digital or colour or B&W one from the other are artificial and meaningless.

If you accept that your own vision is paramount, then you have to accept that the only images that work are those that realise a small part of it. This means that the content of a photo is more important than anything else and the techniques used to achieve it should be secondary. In reality, every photo enthusiast really enjoys analysing composition etc as well. You simply can't escape it - who would want to escape it?- but criticism that concentrates only on technical aspects is poor criticism.

In the same vein, you would expect camera and film to be entirely subservient to the outcome, and of course they are, but that does not mean that photographers are immune to the lure of the technology as a thing in itself. Most photographers I know love cameras and more than a few collect old and/or interesting ones.

3. Don't pigeonhole yourself to be a certain kind of photographer

If the division of photography along the lines of imaging technology is meaningless, so is dividing up photographers. All that matters is that you keep improving your techniques in order to realize your visions.

4. Resolve your ideas to the full

Your vision cannot be said to be realised until you have worked through each idea and exhausted its potential.

5. Be prepared to change concepts and appropriate new ideas as necessary

Don't persevere with something that is not working out.

6. Don't be lazy; push yourself; invest in your photography

Don't accept "good enough". Keep asking yourself how you could do something better.

7. Get beyond your comfort zone

How can you expect to grow otherwise? Babies that never got beyond their comfort zone would never walk.

8. Photos that work have emotional impact.

9. Get Closer

Not just the usual interpretation of Capa's oft-quoted advice, but also the idea that you photograph best the things you feel an emotional closeness and connection with and which fire your imagination. So:

10. Connection with your subject is important.

11. Don't be too hung up on formal composition, but make sure you understand the rules enough to break them.

12. Controversy is good for a photographer

Do something that gets folks talking, if you want to really make your mark.

Essential viewing:

www.magnumphotos.com

www.martinparr.com

www.davidhurn.co.uk

www.carlin.co.nz

In order to see why composition rules are dangerous and camera club competitions can be counterproductive, check out this fun take on some of the world's most famous photographers and their work:

www.theonlinephotographer.blogspot.com/2006/06/great-photographers-on-internet.html

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