

SCOTT BOURNE'S
ESSAYS ON INSPIRATION,
CREATIVITY & VISION IN
PHOTOGRAPHY



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INTRODUCTION

I got the idea for this e-book several years ago from David duChemin. He's big on e-books and big on vision. His tagline - "Gear is Good, Vision is Better" has always stuck with me as something that every photographer needs to think more about.

It took me a while to get around to it, but I've finally done it. I've gathered some of my earlier writings on inspiration, creativity and vision in photography and compiled them in one place. I'm offering this information as a free e-book. Think of it as a thank you to the photo community that has supported me. I'm also hoping it will help some of you to make better photographs.

These essays were compiled from writings I've published over the last three years. I've updated a few of them and tried to make them relevant to today. I hope you find them helpful and if you do, please feel free to pass this free e-book on to others.

Without further ado - here are 10 essays on inspiration, creativity & vision in photography.

Thanks

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ESSAY #1
STORYTELLING

I look at a great deal of photography. I like to look at photos for many of the same reasons that writers like to read. It helps me get better at my craft.

I encounter lots of vision-related photography problems (and I am NOT talking about the fact that I now need both driving AND reading glasses!) I see photos where I am not sure what the photographer was trying to accomplish. In those cases I like to play doctor and I have a simple prescription: Become a storyteller rather than a photographer.

Why tell stories with your camera? Well, for one thing, people who look at pictures will enjoy looking at a story over a snapshot any day. Telling stories with your camera forces you to slow down and think about what you are doing. What is it about this scene that makes you want to make a photograph? What moves you or attracts your eye? Is there a point of view that you want to capture and preserve?

Asking these types of questions will almost always lead to a better photograph. In fact, if you just want to do ONE thing THIS YEAR that will significantly improve your photography, do this - tell stories rather than take snapshots.

If you need help getting to the point where you are a storyteller, you can use a vision exercise that I often talk about called SAS - which stands for Subject, Attention, Simplify.

Using SAS, I approach each scene asking myself what is the SUBJECT of this photo. There is a real temptation here to over simplify. I am not merely saying that I can identify the object I am pointing the camera at. I am talking about the story behind the image. If a photo works really well as a story, it doesn't even need a caption.

Once I have my subject. I now have to draw ATTENTION to it. That is the "A" in SAS. This technique can help you tell your story. It forces you to focus, literally and figuratively, on what's important in the shot.

To draw attention to the subject, I often shoot nearly wide open using a long lens. I shot with a reasonably narrow depth of field to help blur the background. This automatically focuses attention on the subject in the foreground. I use a long lens

because it helps me isolate the subject. This is just one example, but hopefully it helps.

Just like every good story has a beginning, middle and an end, every good photograph should have an obvious way to draw the viewer in, something to hold his attention once he gets there, and somewhere to go when s/he's done.

The last part of SAS is SIMPLIFICATION. It's the most important part of the SAS regimen. John Shaw says the difference between a professional and an amateur photographer is that the pro knows what not to include in the photo.

When you are composing an image, take a moment to look around the frame and ask yourself. Is this thing necessary to tell my story? Is it part of what really attracted me to the image? If you see a waterfall running past a boulder and the power struggle between the boulder and the water is your story, then you don't need to include the flowers, the sky, the grass, etc. Include only that which is necessary to tell your story and nothing more. This will improve your photography immensely and it won't cost you a new piece of gear to do it.

CONCLUSION

All I really want you take away from this is the fact that it's a good thing to think like a storyteller rather than a picture taker. Everything else is secondary.



ESSAY #2
NEW VIEWS TO
INSPIRATION

If your creative vision has hit a wall or you are just bored with your photography, consider shooting with the panoramic format.

While the panoramic camera is as old as photography itself, I was not aware of panoramic photography until 1995. At a photo workshop, the teacher (Joe Meehan) had images pasted on the wall that took my breath away. They were panoramic images of nature scenes, and I couldn't stop looking at them. That was when I decided to try panoramic photography.

Not every situation lends itself to panoramic photography. There are however, many situations that scream for panoramic views. Group portraits, seascapes, grand scenic vistas, architecture, stadiums, skylines, stage productions, and cityscapes are all popular panoramic subjects. It is important to remember that seeing a panoramic image involves scanning from side-to-side rather than isolating one single dominant aspect of a scene.

Recently, panoramic cameras have been finding their way into less conventional situations. Try photographing a sporting event with a pan camera. Or how about doing an environmental portrait that really shows the executive in her element?

Experimentation is the key and thankfully, the angle of view that most panoramic cameras offer is so different that experimentation comes easy.

When I attend or teach workshops, join Internet discussion groups, read photo magazines or generally just chat with other photographers, I hear people talking about seeing the same old images. I believe that panoramic photography is a great way to defeat this line of thinking. Rent, buy or borrow a panoramic camera next weekend and go shoot some of your favorite locations.

You can also use digital tools to stitch together images and make them into panoramas.

I am willing to bet that the panoramic format will change the way you see and help you make new and exciting images of old and familiar places.



ESSAY #3
SEEING

Why does one photographer walk by an opportunity that someone else turns into a magazine cover? How can you learn to see creatively? Your camera manual won't answer these questions. But with the right tools and process, you can improve your photographic vision.

The tools that help photographers to creatively see include patience, positive attitude and an open mind. While most people possess these traits to some degree, they usually lack the process that pulls it all together. On your next photo shoot, use these steps to improve your photographic vision.

1. Elimination. Most photographers identify their subject using a logical pattern. They usually eliminate items from the foreground and background until something catches their eye and they make the photograph. Unfortunately, most shooters eliminate things until only the most obvious choice remains. Then they fire away at the subject without thinking about other options. Photographers who see creatively establish routines that lead them to see other ways to frame a subject. A photography teacher unknowingly taught me this very point when he opined, "Look up, look down and then look all around." He was trying to get me to see the same subject in many ways. To this day I practice his approach.

Example: Laying on the ground to change perspective and using wide-open telephoto to compress background as well as focus attention on the foreground allows the photographer to eliminate certain elements that a standing photographer would have no choice but to include.

2. Evolution. Try raising your camera in six-inch increments from the ground to your tripod's maximum height. Look carefully at the subject on every level. This incremental approach to making different photographs of the same subject is a perfect example of evolutionary creative seeing. Make many small refinements to your composition for the best chance to see the best shots. This approach is especially valuable when photographing familiar subjects.

3. Reinvention. In the late 1800s, the head of the U.S. Patent Office advised Congress that the Patent Office should be closed to save money. He decided that everything worth inventing had already been invented! I once heard a photographer say that he would not photograph national parks because they'd "already been

done." This is the opposite of creative thinking. There is always a different or better way to shoot what has been photographed before. You just have to "see" it.

Example: Use selective focus to draw the eye into the scene rather than just generally focusing on the most obvious subject.

4. Revolution. As photographers we need to approach our photographic subjects from the inside / out perspective if we want to see creatively. Turn the problem (or subject) around. After the paper clip was invented, someone created the staple gun. This lesson can be applied to photography. For instance, when you are trying to shape light for a portrait, instead of using strobes for the usual three to one ratio with a main and fill, try subtracting light altogether with scrims. Or try making your next landscape both horizontally and vertically. Which is better?

5. Synthesis. Think of this as the multiple exposure method to seeing creatively. Combine multiple ideas (seemingly related or not) to make one image. Ansel Adams did this by always trying to put an interesting object into both the foreground and the background. Think of things like audio books, dinner theaters and drive-in movies. These were all invented as the result of synthetic thinking. How can you apply this form of thinking to your image making? How about putting a canoe in a field of wheat to illustrate "amber waves of grain?" Or juxtapose two things that don't seemingly belong together. Try putting a uniformed basketball team in the swimming pool for the team portrait.

Example: accentuate an object in the scene that you want to draw attention to by using light or shadow.

6. Starting Over. Use things that were invented for one purpose, and maybe even discarded, for a brand new purpose. Throw out all the rules and see what you can see. Maybe you will photograph your next subject while lying on your back. Perhaps it would be a good idea to shoot slide film in a situation that normally calls for prints. This kind of thinking led to recent surges in cross-processing, selective focus and toning of color rather than just monotone photographs. All are now very popular with the magazines but out in left field when they were first applied. Other possibilities include the more traditional techniques like iteration, use of color as subject, use of line, shape or form to draw the viewer's eye to the subject.

7. New Directions. Try a brand-new angle, both literally and figuratively. Try all your lenses. Shoot from different perspectives. Change formats. Maybe your shot would look good as a panoramic? Shoot a rectangular shot as if it were square. Focus your complete attention on the opportunity. Let the process take care of itself. Don't approach your composition as if the solution is more important than the result. Use a fish net as a diffuser to get a nice soft look. Go crazy and try new stuff.



ESSAY #4
STORYTELLING
PART 2

I love working with new photographers. I recently had the honor of working with several high school students. They were excited, energetic, full of enthusiasm and willing to learn. They also brought a fresh perspective to photography that amazed me.

Talking with all of them I was struck by the similarity of their questions - most having to do with gear. What camera should I buy? How many lenses do I need? Etc. These were followed by questions like - "What should I photograph?"

To each of these questions I answered in a way that I am afraid might have frustrated some of them. Nonetheless - I thought it important to gently guide them down the right path from the start.

In each case, I responded with four little words:

"Tell me your story!"

You see ALL communications and ALL media - whether they be centered around radio, television, motion pictures, blogs, podcasts or photography - revolve around story. Story is everything. If you get that, you'll be a better photographer.

Both the photographer's story and the subject's story impact a photograph. The photographer's story is important because it's about what they have to say. Great photographers NEED to tell their story or someone else's story. And the story of your subject is what makes people care about your images.

So remember....don't focus on gear, or technique - focus on storytelling. The rest will take care of itself.



ESSAY #5
CREATIVITY

Creativity is a big concept. As photographers, we spend so much time fighting upgrade fatigue, learning new software, working out new techniques that we often have very little time for creativity. But just taking note that we need to think about creativity isn't enough. How do we go about it?

Everyone goes about being creative differently. What works for me might not work for you, but I'm going to just share these thoughts on creativity with the hope they will help you concentrate on something other than the next lens you think you want to buy.

For me, creativity is about removing artificial limits. And I think most limits are self-imposed. More precisely, these limits are directly tied to low self-esteem. Now I know you might be thinking, what's that have to do with creativity? In my experience lots.

We put boxes around ourselves and make decisions that hamper our growth because often, as artists, we don't really believe in ourselves. How many times have you thought you were just faking it? Or have you ever just assumed that you weren't good enough? These thoughts murder your creative spirit and you get started on a more creative path when you stop that behavior.

The creative process can start to open up once you just trust yourself. If you empower yourself to try something different and give yourself permission to fail, you become more creative. Don't make the metrics of success or failure the guidelines by which you proceed. Instead make experimentation, expression and joy the metrics.

The second big point of contact for me is authenticity in my work. If you can start to look at authenticity, rather than originality, you will become more creative. I learned this concept best by listening to John Paul Caponigro. He was talking about other art forms and mentioned that in Asia for instance, artists don't worry about coming up with something new, they work within an existing form and try to expand it. When I read the photographic forums, the younger photographers seem to beat their chests the loudest and proclaim their creativity simply because they did something "new." Usually what they did wasn't new at all, but rather new to them. But it doesn't matter. Worrying about doing something new ends up stunting

creative growth. Being creative does NOT require doing something new. It requires doing something that is authentically your real personal and true vision. If you take away anything from this blog post, I hope it's that.

Lastly, creativity is about choices. The choices can often be based on a few dynamics like tension, juxtaposition, conflict and resolution. These are good tools in a creative environment. But sometimes, you learn most of your creative ideas from pure experimentation. Free-form music - called jamming often lets musicians come up with their best sounds. Writers use free-association and brainstorming to come up with their best words. Why shouldn't photographers use their own brand of visual experimentation to find their own visual creativity?

To sum up - if you want to be more creative, start loving yourself enough to give yourself permission to fail. In fact, better yet, don't even worry about winning or losing. Just DO.

Don't focus on NEW - focus on authentic. Being original isn't being new - it's being you.

And riff. Go out there and jam. Try this and that and then invert it all. Go crazy. Do something you've never tried.



ESSAY #6
CLARITY

I judge many photo contests. I also critique photos on a regular basis. When a photographer stands in front of me and feels the need to explain their photo, I know I'm in trouble.

You see, if you have true photographic vision, you have clarity and if you have clarity, you don't need to explain or defend your images.

Clarity is about what emotions or feelings the image is trying to evoke, not the facts behind the image.

Photographic clarity is about passion of purpose. It's about a single-minded desire to protect a memory. It's about story telling with a camera that's so powerful, no words are necessary.

Photographic clarity is about the freedom to express YOUR vision with a camera in a way that moves others.

So don't just think about making a picture that the pixel peepers down at the camera club will note as sharp. Make one that moves people everywhere to understand your vision.



ESSAY #7
MORE
INSPIRATION

To be a professional photographer, you have to be able to be inspired. Guts and toughing it out won't be enough. You will continually need to be inspired. Where you draw your inspiration from is a personal choice. I decided to share some of the things that have inspired me over the years in the hope that you will find something on the list that inspires you.

1. Watch a movie

Yes this is one of those rare times when you are allowed to kick back! Watch a movie. Study it or just experience it. There's always the chance something will catch your eye.

2. Read a book

Grab something light and funny or deep and thought provoking. But read. I like to suggest *The Artist's Way*. If want to be inspired as an artist by reading, check out *The Artist Way*. It will do the trick.

3. Learn a new goofy hobby

Take your mind off the world and learn a new hobby. The extra space this creates in your brain could lead to big-time inspiration. Suggestions? Here's a zany one. Learn how to use a Yo-Yo. Yeah it looks easy, but to do it well takes some luck, affinity and skill. Believe me, photography will seem easy after trying to master the Yo-Yo.

4. Study and ask why

Look at photographs from photographers who you admire. But instead of the usual "Oh that's cool" reaction - strive to know why. Ask yourself "Why did they make this image? Why does it resonate with me? Why is that visually inspiring or arresting or important?" WHY is one of the most important inspirational tools out there. People will do crazy things if the WHY is good enough.

5. Watch trash television

Okay I admit this one is on the edge, but it works for me. One of the things that stops many of us from being inspired is being down or depressed. All you have to do is watch 10 minutes of Jerry Springer or some similar show to realize how good you have it. I guarantee you that you'll feel better about your life afterwards and if you go out with your camera right away, you'll see a smile in your photos.

These are just a few of the ways I inspire myself. Try them and see if they help you.



ESSAY #8
NEW

I am disturbed at the relentless pursuit of something "new" by younger photographers. Don't get me wrong. I love innovation. I've proven it. Nobody stays up with changing communications and camera technologies any more than I do.

But when I hear new photographers say things like, "Ah that's old and tired. I want to try something new..." I am concerned. I am wondering if in the pursuit of new, they forget the most important part of being a creative. To be cool you don't need to be new - you need to be YOU!

It's simply in-authentic to do something JUST BECAUSE it's new - if you don't feel it in your heart. I saw a beautiful portrait at this year's WPPI hanging in the print competition. While the younger folks might have called it "old fashioned" I called it "classic." It scored very well and should have. I am sure the maker was proud of it. I am sure the subject of the portrait and her family loved it. But yet, I heard one young woman laughing at the photo because it used a painted muslin background. She was having a field day attacking both the image and the image maker because that was such a "cliche?" Really? Sort of like her blue hair was a cliche. Seriously. Just because you make a spectacle of yourself ala Lady Gaga or Paris Hilton, that doesn't make you cool or new. It's the talent underneath all the tattoos, lip rings, dresses made of meat, hair colors that are off the RGB spectrum, etc. that matter. I understand the need to set yourself apart. And I don't really care what color your hair is or how many tattoos you have. What I do care about is whether or not your photographs represent your true vision. I care about the artist underneath all the trappings. If you expect me to be impressed with your outrageous attire or attitude, forget it. That's boring by now.

I want you to use your camera to tell a story so moving that your images arrest me. I want to see that you poured your heart and soul into a picture. I want to see that you tried to use your camera to communicate with SOMEBODY.

Don't be fooled into thinking that you're actually doing something "new" anyway. Because most of the time you aren't. It might be new to you, but it's almost certainly been done before by someone else, somewhere else, maybe even long before your time.

I remember when the out of focus portraits were all the rage. Then it was ring lighting. Then it was split tones. Then it was cross processing. It doesn't matter what gimmick you use. Most of the people that used these techniques when they were little known, had no idea they weren't new. The technique and gimmick can sometimes get in the way of the image.

What matters, all that matters, is the photographs you create. The images are what matter. They are what last. They are memory protectors. They are history for peoples of the future. 500 years from now when you're dead and gone. Nobody will know how outrageous you were or how edgy you were or how cool you were. They will simply judge you by your work.

You may not like "old-fashioned" photography. That's your right. But make sure you aren't just trying to be new for new's sake. Faux outrage, faux drama, faux attitude may score you points somewhere - but not here. Not in the world where the photograph lives.

If you want to use a painted muslin background or a bale of hay to shoot against, go for it. Just be sure that it's YOUR idea - that it's YOU behind it all, not a vain attempt to be outrageous or different or new for new's sake. Your images will be much more powerful and the respect people have for both you and your work much greater.



ESSAY #9
CREATIVITY
PART 2

I've been having some deep discussions with other photographers lately about the need for shooters to develop good technique. In the midst of these discussions though I remembered something from my one and only art class in college - There is no technique without expression.

My art teacher believed that pretty much anyone who really wanted to could learn the technique required to provide decent deliverables in any artistic endeavor. I have seen this myself. When teaching brand new photographers, they very quickly run up the ladder from rungs one through nine. They acquire decent technique if they apply themselves. But going from rung nine to 10 - well that's a different animal all together.

Technique leads to craftsmanship if you're really talented and really apply yourself. And in the eyes of my art teacher, the next step is expression. My teacher said you need to learn technique not in and of itself, but as a means of expression. It was at this moment that I first started developing my long-held theory that the creative photographer is really a storyteller. This is where that idea was born for me. It's very ethereal. Some of you may be rolling your eyes at me right now saying "Not another post about storytelling!" But I do think this is important. I also think it's very hard to describe let alone teach. Hence, the reason for today's post.

My charge to you is simple. Don't just learn camera or photo technique. Learn it as part of a means to an end. Learn it so that you can more fully express your own inner, authentic vision. See what you need to see. Practice in your medium. Develop technique and THEN think about what is important to you. The next step is developing craftsmanship and THEN you'll be on your way to truly, honestly and openly expressing yourself as a photographer.



ESSAY #10
INVISIBILITY

Jonathan Swift said...

"Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others."

This quote inspires me daily as a photographer. As I walk by a grove of trees, I see things differently than my non-photographer friends. They see a clump of trees. I see the grass beneath the trees, the light streaming through the leaves, the birds in their nests on the branches, the intricate pattern in the bark, the strength of the trunk, the outgrowth of the roots, the different colors and tonality in the leaves, the way the shadows fall across the wood, the angle of the light as it hits the canopy, the shadow the tree makes on the river below, the line the branch follows from the tree trunk, etc.

When photographers look at the world, they look at it through a special lens - pun intended. It's a filter of sorts that sifts the importance of one thing or another. This ability to sift and sort, to include and exclude, to drill down into the meat of the scene, that's what comprises the photographer's vision. I like to think that we can all use more of that.

Exercise...

Here's a vision exercise for you that doesn't require a camera. Try to describe something (like a tree) as if you were describing it to a blind person who had never received the gift of sight. Then go photograph as if that picture would be the only one ever seen of a tree.



CONCLUSION



I hope you've enjoyed this free e-book. If I've done my job, you're now starting to think about things that go beyond camera and lens combinations.

Vision, creativity and inspiration are much harder to come by than cameras. It takes patience and practice to be able to respond to any or all three.

My hope is that you will go looking for each the next time you set out to make pictures, not just take pictures.

Scott Bourne

June, 2011

Las Vegas, Nevada

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S c o t t B o u r n e

VISION

Vision, creativity and inspiration...

These are things you can't buy in a camera store. These are things every photographer needs to be successful.

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