

## Pathways to Distinctive Photographic Accomplishment

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After spending considerable time with many enthusiast photographers in our burgeoning community, it crosses my mind that many folks are becoming quite serious about making their mark in the field, either professionally or as a serious amateur. It seems that the allure of the Digital SLR camera and the creative options presented by Photoshop and other photo productivity computer solutions has captivated the masses. The promise is undeniable. Artistic expression is well within the grasp of everyone.

I attend many gatherings of avid photographers; online and offline, workshops and training, critiques and contests, meetings and bull sessions. Something that always seems to be tangential to the discussion is the yearning to be better, to take one's work to the next level, to be recognized, and to truly reach one's expressive potential. I hear this loud and clear and yet I often see a level of frustration, even despair, when people feel they are at a standstill in their development, unable to synthesize a breakthrough on their own. If that is you, I feel you should know you probably have what it takes despite the way things seem to be going at this moment. Obviously, Rome wasn't built in a day, but there are several things that you can do to speed things along. What I am about to discuss is a program that I have found effective for building my personal photographic skills and stock. I see no reason why some of this would not be directly applicable to anyone desiring photographic accomplishment.

I have grouped this program into four main categories. These are not to be considered ordered in any way; this is merely a way of relating several things you can do to support four tenets of photographic accomplishment: technique, opportunity, vision, and motivation.

I'd be very surprised if you sincerely adopted some of these and didn't begin to recognize a consistent improvement in your craft and output. I am sure there are many other techniques you folks could propose that fall into these four categories; these are just those that come to mind. These practices are some of the great differentiators between the productive photographers and those that feel stymied.

### Technique

This category represents activities that will make your photographic life easier, fluid, controlled, and a constant pleasure. This is all about building your mechanical skills with your craft. You absolutely need to reach a state of proficiency where shooting decisions become second-nature and you perform with ease. This may seem daunting at this point, but I assure you that by trying some of these things, you can develop rapidly into a confident shooter.

- **Specialize in What Works for You** – You need to look deep into your heart and understand your photographic calling. It also helps to listen to others. If people sincerely comment on your suitability for a particular genre of photographic art, they may see something you need to pay attention to. The rationale behind specialization is that it cuts down on the mass of generalized knowledge you must master and concentrates your effort on honing a smaller set of skills. Specialization leads to mastery. Recall the saying, “a Jack-of-all-Trades is a master of none.” Look around at our photographic idols – they are specialists.

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- **Master Your Fundamentals** – How many times have you heard this? Are all these sages wrong? No – of course not! I am here to tell you that a prerequisite to photographic happiness is a full understanding of principles of lighting, exposure, composition, optics, and process. Unfortunately, the digital era has brought about a culture of “tips and tricks” that people find very appealing as “silver bullets” for advancement before they actually master the camera and basic digital workflow. That results in chaos, frustration, and disillusionment. If that is where you are, you need to step back and consider everything from a holistic approach. That is the driving force that made me develop the original DSLR Boot Camp concept that I use in all my present day training courses. You should consider attending this type of training to clear your mind and develop a strong *foundation* in digital photography. This is not the typical “Photoshop 101/Tips and Tricks” shotgun approach. More info on my current training offerings can be found at [www.bobkulonphoto.com](http://www.bobkulonphoto.com).
- **Practice Your Craft** – Golfers know all about this. So do musicians. You need to “go to the woodshed” to keep sharp. Without fail, take pictures on a regular frequent basis. This is the digital era. Shooting will cost you nothing other than a personal commitment of time – time that can be very intriguing. Along the way you begin to enter the phenomenon I call the “great Ahah!” Relationships between photographic principles and predictable results will be born in your own fertile mind. (*The prerequisite for this, of course, is mastery of the fundamentals beforehand.*) Practice, practice, practice!
- **Acquire Suitable Gear** – This is indeed a touchy subject! While it is common folklore in our world for accomplished photographers to deny that their gear had anything to do with their righteous accomplishments, please note that all of them shoot with high-quality equipment. Why? Because they can afford it? No, because they know it will deliver the best possible representation of their art. I am not telling you to go with your credit card and clean out the camera store. I will, however, tell you this – until the time when you acquire the tripod, lenses, and software you need for your specific purposes, everything you do is a compromise towards the goal of putting your work out there in the best possible form. It is better to start with fewer items of higher quality than have a ton of marginal (or worse) gear. Can a great photographer create a better image with poor gear than a poor photographer with great gear? Perhaps. But a great photographer can always produce their best work with great gear. Let’s not kid ourselves any longer. The luminaries need to speak the truth about the benefit they derive from quality gear.

### Opportunity

You seldom stumble on a great photo op. All accomplished photographers know that you need to make things happen. I am not proposing an overt violation of any “do no harm” doctrine, but I am encouraging you to find ways of being in the right place at the right time. The natural world unfolds for you according to certain predictable patterns. Learn them and exploit them. Get up early for the golden light. Be there! Here are some things you might consider as you seek ways of optimizing your photographic chances of a great shot:

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- **Prepare For the Unknown** – Sometimes you find yourself in a location that speaks to you creatively. These can be random occurrences, but most aren't. If you know you are going on a shoot or a trip, facilitate your photography by covering all the bases. Bring what you need! That may mean a tripod, some reflectors, a flash, and macro gear, whatever. The point is this – you need to open your mind and anticipate the possibilities. While you are at it, anticipate the environment. Always consider things like weather, safety, comfort, nourishment, and transportation. Experienced photographer's shoot in all sorts of adverse condition because they anticipated the possibilities beforehand and prepared accordingly. Often, shooting in these adverse conditions results in striking results.
- **Participate in Regional Field Shoots** – In my opinion, Camera Clubs and Photo Societies have a tendency to concentrate on meetings more than shooting. If you are ready to get out there, but don't know the local "hot spots," you may find these organizations slow to respond to your needs. To get around this gap, you might organize a regional band of photographic enthusiasts that gather informally nearly every week to do one thing: *shoot at the best locations at the optimal time of year.* (You can find out more by visiting SWU Shoots at [www.swushoots.com](http://www.swushoots.com).) If something like that appeals to you, join us, or if you are out of the area, feel free to copy our concept and start your own regional shoot organization. Such rapid access to your local shooting haunts is invaluable. Band together and share the information!
- **Attend Destination Workshops** – There are many kind of photography workshops; tour-oriented, instructional, creatively inspirational. They all have their purpose. What I am recommending to you is the Photo Tours flavor of workshop as an avenue to building your opportunity. If you are attending some once-in-a-lifetime trip to an exotic location, you really need to be out there shooting, not cooped up in a classroom. Folks that organize Photo Tours guide your days with optimal positioning after years of familiarity with the locale, geography, weather, customs, and natural resources. Prepare for a workout and make the most of your time. These trips cost a pretty penny, but your photo yield should be memorable and prolific.
- **Look Past the Obvious** – For those of you that live in areas of the country that are not "in your face" scenic (as I do); you know we have to work harder for our images of the environment. In addition to knowing where to go and when, there is a useful routine you might consider developing to make the most of what is available. Recognize the obvious when confronted with a scene. (This is usually marked by a horde of photographers all pointing their cameras in the same direction.) Then turn around. Set your gear down. Walk a bit. Contemplate. You will begin to see things others have missed; overlooked in their haste. This takes time and patience. Yes, you can always get the obvious grab shot, but it is your private connection with some overlooked detail that will make you stand out. If you arrive at a venue and immediately plant your tripod and start shooting, you've missed the point. You have closed down your connection with the unknown and the unseen.

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### Vision

Many times a group of seasoned pros will gather and peruse photographs and comment. I have been on the inside of some of these sessions and believe there is a common thread enjoyed by this class of individual. They see. Beyond the rules, beyond the viewfinder, and beyond the screen, they see the art of the final product. As a photographer, you need to develop a comparable facility of vision to support your decision making. The more exposure you get to seeing techniques, the better you will be able to do this for yourself. You will know you are there when your default way of viewing your world becomes photographic. This is a bit of a scary proposition for some folks. It means being able to detach from the environment and view it rather than react to it. But this is the way of art. Develop your vision using these techniques:

- **Pursue Critiques** – Now why in the world would any one really want to be criticized? Consider this. Until you develop vision – the ability to see the result – you can absorb this sense of direction from those that have. Critiques are one place in life where you really can stand next to an expert and get some of it to rub off. The rules are this: be open and defenseless, be objective and honest, and listen to what is stated and implied. To benefit, you must understand and adapt the advice to your downstream work. Better yet, once a photograph is critiqued, re-process it or re-shoot it to see if you cannot improve on it and develop the vision that was passed along to you. If you find the critique totally without merit, move to the next, don't just avoid this resource.
- **Visit Galleries** – Artists are inspired by the art of others. This is not implying that you need to find concepts and

techniques you can use (although you probably will). Nor is it intending to inspire you by setting the bar higher. The whole point of gallery observation is to position yourself in the free world of art where you begin to live in liberation. You begin feel good about expressing yourself. You begin to understand that it is OK to take risks, be bold, be different, and live a shameless photographic life. *(Hats off to Sam Abel for that concept!)*

- **Meditate Freely** – Oh boy, here comes the ethereal stuff. You knew it was in here somewhere, right? Here's news: sometimes inspiration comes from within; sometimes it comes from outside one's self. I am not about to espouse a religious principle here, but am suggesting stilling yourself and truly listening for inspiration and direction prior to a shoot. I personally prepare for a shoot by listening to music I can connect to (*early Jackson Browne in my case*) to bring me into a contemplative state. Even when I am in the crowd of shooters, I function in a world all my own. Take it a step further and we can talk about channeling to improve your vision. This is my position – anything that stills the mind opens the door to see and experience the unknown. The most important times you spend on your photography are the moments before you shoot. Battles are won and lost in the strategy. Meditation prepares you for that.
- **Organize Projects** – By chartering a defined photographic project, you can focus your resources and commitment to achieve a body of work well beyond your normal day-to-day output. Almost all professionals keep one or two private projects active on the side to build their collateral in an efficient, effective way.

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Define your project, plan it out, and go about fulfilling the deliverables. Along the way you will be amazed at a side-effect: your vision will become deep and focused. You will begin to try things that would seem too arduous in ordinary circumstances. The end result: proficiency and accomplishment. *(Can you tell I am a certified Project Management Professional (PMP)?)*

### Motivation

It's going to be very hard to sustain the foregoing activities if you have no reason to do so. There has to be a point. To establish this firmly in your mind you need to go deeper than "I want to be a better photographer." Define what that means to you. What outcomes are you trying to achieve? How will this play out in your photographic life? Here are some possible motives. There are many others. Be honest, consider your goals, and understand your mission before you become disillusioned.

- **Facilitate Commercialization** – this is my personal motive. I am not talking about opening a storefront studio (been there, done that), but I am talking about developing a revenue-generating niche in the photographic world. If this is your intent, make sure you understand the limitations of this goal. There are literally millions of photo practitioners all too eager to be your competition. Very few survive, despite talent and dedication. Even fewer thrive. But there are lucrative alternatives to the shot-for-hire rat race. I am going on a path that includes a synergistic mix of workshops, mentoring, art shows, and web sales. Find your niche and become motivated. *(There is, however, an obvious prerequisite. Before you go off looking for the revenue, be sure you can lay you work down and get an*

*honest favorable response from strangers. If you can't, you are premature. Let's not kid ourselves here.)*

- **Develop Community Respect** – You probably know a handful of people that are immediately recognized around the area for their accomplishment. What's wrong with that? I personally think that is well-deserved position to have other's acknowledge that you have gained a commanding achievement of craft. That has to feel good. Don't be ashamed if you can benefit from this respect. It is not egotistical, it is healthy distinction (*just don't let it go to your head*). The better you shoot the more respect you deserve – and will get. This may or may not motivate you, but be honest if that is your goal.
- **Prevail at Competitions** – I have judged photographic competitions and always marvel at the contest sub-culture in the sponsoring organizations. It seems to me there is almost an athletic sense of the game that underlies those that shoot for competition. So be it. Everything I have offered in this article will improve your chances of winning. There's your motivation.
- **Improve Self-Esteem** – This is the noblest goal of all. I cannot guarantee improving your skill will make you personally feel better about yourself, but if you are of healthy mind, it has to be a step in the right direction. You know when you deliver exemplary work, don't you? You know it in your gut. If you like that feeling of solidarity, understand that having that feeling on a frequently recurring basis can feed your psyche in very beneficial ways. When I was a practicing musician and performed a commanding solo in the band, no one

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had to tell me, I knew. Everything went better for the rest of the day. If that does it for you, check off self-esteem as a source of motivation.

## The Bottom Line

I've attempted to bring together seemingly disparate musings here to help you understand what I have learned about photographic accomplishment over many, many years. I have been in and out of the profession and looked at it from all angles.

I felt compelled to produce this paper because my heart goes out to the multitude that is struggling. This phenomenon grows each day as

the photographic ranks swells with new digital converts expecting fast-track results. Oddly, it is that expectation that slows them down.

Give this material some thought and see if any of what I have written matches your circumstances. Then, act on it. I'd like to hear how you made out. I'd like to see everyone succeed to the extent of their aspirations.

Best wishes,

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