

THE PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHY MANUAL

Dear friend,

I am excited to share my new book with you titled: “***The Personal Photography Manual.***” If you’ve ever wanted to find more meaning, purpose, and direction in your photography, I recommend you to pursue “*personal photography.*”

What exactly is “personal photography”? To me, it is a genre of photography that focuses on yourself— focuses on your personal life experiences, focuses on photographing your loved ones, and the other elements of your “boring” and everyday life. In this book I share some of my personal struggles and how I’ve been able to keep myself inspired, regardless of my life situation or where I live. I hope this book can empower you to become the best photographer you can become. You can either download the PDF or read it all in this post.

Keep it personal,

Eric

Chapter 1: Disregard what others do

Let me outline the biggest causes of misery for photographers:

1. Feeling that their gear isn't good enough
2. Not having enough followers online
3. Not having others appreciate their work
4. Not making a living from photography
5. Not having enough time to take photos

“Personal photography” is being indifferent to the photography of others; and focusing on your own photography and life.

Chapter 2: Disconnect

To start off, disconnect from all social media. Yes, all social media. Stop uploading your photos to Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Tumblr, Google+, or any other social media site you use.

Why?

I am not saying for you not to share your photos. Share more personally— face-to-face with friends, family, and close colleagues.

What I am discouraging is staring photos with random strangers on the internet, adding tons of #hashtags to your photos (wishing you get more followers, viewer, comments, etc), and getting on the “social media treadmill” — trying to get more attention online.

I am an attention-whore; I love having attention. My #1 goal in my photography was to become “famous”— and to make a living from photography.

I am lucky enough now that I am “famous” — I get recognized in the streets, I have a substantial number of followers online, and the blog is #1 for “street photography blog” on the internet. I’ve gotten free cameras from companies, traveled all around the world, and I make a comfortable living teaching street photography workshops.

Yet, I am still not satisfied. I want more.

I want more cameras. I want more money. I want more followers. I want more influence. I want more fancy cars, clothes, and a nice house. I want millions, no fuck that— billions. Nothing can ever satisfy my greed.

How do I cut off this madness?

By disconnecting.

I’ve intentionally not used social media (all sorts including email) for the last week, and it is the first time in a long time that I feel clean. I feel like it was a “social media detox” (kind of how an alcoholic recovers, or a drug-addict). I finally am able to be fully-present with my family, friends, and loved ones.

Furthermore, I no longer take photos where I think at the back of my mind, “How many likes will I get?”

I also end up taking photos now that I don't care whether I ever look at them again. I take them for the sake of taking them, rather than hoping to share them online.

But what is the point of taking a photo if you will never share it, or even look at it yourself?

Chapter 3: Photography=life

I think photography is life. Life is photography. They are inter-connected. You cannot separate them.

The #1 goal in life is to live a good life. Photography is just a part of living well.

For me, I like to take photos because it enhances my experiences— I feel more fully-present, I appreciate small mundane parts of my day (Cindy drinking a coffee, me drinking a nice espresso, or Cindy getting ready to go out with me). These are all very personal things that honestly— nobody else gives a fuck about. But I give a fuck. I give a “lot” of fucks.

When I am on my deathbed, I'm not going to care about any of the photos I shot of strangers on the streets. The only photos I'm going to care is about the photos of my loved ones.

Chapter 4: Is this your last moment?

I have a personal rule— whenever I go to sleep or say goodbye to Cindy (or any of my friends/family/loved ones) — I imagine that I will never see them again. I imagine perhaps they die in a car accident, or perhaps I die in my sleep.

None of this is meant to be sadistic. I just do this because it teaches me to truly appreciate the person in the present moment; and to never expect to see them again. This way I will never have any regrets.

For example the other night I went to sleep early, and Cindy went out with her sister to study at some local cafe. I was lying down in a comfortable bed, but the thought came to my mind: “What if Cindy died in a car accident, or some other terrible thing happened to her? What would I regret not saying or doing?” So I jumped out, gave Cindy a love and tried to show her every ounce of love I had for her. She looked at me weird and said, “What did you do that for?” I smiled coyly; said “nothing” — gave her a peck on the head, and went to sleep.

Thank God; I woke up today and Cindy was there, and I had a big smile on my face.

Chapter 5: Don't photograph what others expect you to photograph

You never know when you or your loved ones is going to pass away. So contact them and show them your love while you can. And not only that; but photograph them.

Photograph only what you think is going to be personal to you, rather than what others will think is a “good” photo.

Imagine you lived in a world where social media didn't exist, and you only took photos that you would see. What would you continue to photograph, what would you start to photograph, and what would you stop photographing?

Chapter 6: Don't make the camera the focus of your life

If you lived in a little box, and nobody gave a shit about what brand of camera or how many megapixels it had, would you really care what camera you used?

I've used every single fancy and expensive camera out there. Ironically enough I've settled on a Ricoh GR II digital camera (\$550). Why? It is just easy to carry around with me, easy to point-and-click (P mode and ISO 800), inexpensive, and I have don't have to “think” before taking a photo.

The camera doesn't get in my way. This means that I am better to enjoy living my life, and the camera is just a side-kick, rather than the main focus on my life.

I've used heavy-ass DSLR's (Canon 5D), and smaller (yet still heavy) cameras like a Leica M9+Leica MP. Honestly the bigger your camera, the heavier your camera, the less likely you are to use it.

If you think about it; the smartphone is probably the best camera. You always have it with you, so "not having a camera on you" never becomes an excuse.

My good friend Josh White has recently returned to taking photos (mostly) on his smartphone, and when he reflects on all his past photos, some of his most memorable moments were shot on a smartphone. Why? It was the only camera on him, and he didn't have to think.

He mentions something that stuck with me— a lot of people say they don't like taking photos on a smartphone because they might print it one day. But Josh says, "Honestly— will you ever print it? Sure you will. Sure." And to be frank; 99% of us will never print our digital photos. If you do, that is awesome.

Just be honest; if you never print your photos, you won't start printing (even if you buy a medium-format digital camera with a billion megapixels).

I do encourage you to print your photos though— it can just be cheap 4x6 prints from Costco or some local pharmacy or drugstore. And it will bring you joy by putting it on your wall, and giving them out as gifts. But if you don't plan on doing that, just enjoy them on your smartphone, camera, and share them with your personal friends.

Why do I prefer not using a smartphone?

I honestly think (for me) at the end of the day— the image quality just isn't pleasing to my eye. I prefer better-image quality from a pocket camera (Ricoh GR II has a DSLR-sized APS-C sensor) and the camera is always on me anyways.

Furthermore, I fall victim to what Nassim Taleb calls "neomania" — I am never satisfied with my digital devices, and always want to upgrade. Even now, I use a Samsung Galaxy S6 (got for free from Samsung), and I am always jealous of those

with an iPhone 6S (apparently the camera is slightly better). And whenever I shoot on my smartphone, I feel like I'm missing out. And I feel miserable, and suddenly start getting cravings to upgrade.

The same happens with me with any tablet I use, any laptop I use, any car I drive, or even e-reader. Nassim Taleb says that most things with an "on/off switch" makes us prone to quickly getting dissatisfied with our digital devices, and we suddenly want to "upgrade" when we become jaded and bored with what we have.

The nice thing with the Ricoh GR II is that even though it is an imperfect camera (slow autofocus, slow buffer); the benefits outweigh the negatives (small size, macro capabilities, fantastic image quality, easy to carry with you everywhere you go). And the camera is rarely outdated (the previous Ricoh GR and the new Ricoh GR II are pretty much the same camera, except the GR II has wifi, which is pretty useless at least to me).

Chapter 7: Don't compare yourself with others

We are always comparing ourselves to others. We compare ourselves to other photographers— we feel like our camera isn't fancy or expensive like theirs, we wish we had more followers (or at least as much as them), and we wish that we were as talented as them.

But everyone is different. Are you jealous of an NBA player because they were born 7 foot tall; while you are only 5 foot 10 inches? That is something you don't have control over.

Similarly; some of us are born into situations where we might not be able to be the world's "best" photographer. We might have a shitty job that requires a 90-hour work-week, we might have babies to take care of, or we might be color-blind, or we might be missing one eye which doesn't give us as much good depth-perception. Or perhaps you were raised in an engineering-oriented family that hated art; so you missed out getting some sort of arts education when you were young.

Regardless— it makes no sense to be jealous of other photographers whose life circumstances are different than yours.

The solution?

Be satisfied and content with the life you already have. And also try to achieve your “persona maximum” in your own life and photographic abilities.

You were given some sort of “maximum capability” in terms of your photography and artistic ability. Rather than trying to achieve what others have achieved, see if you can reach 100% of your potential.

For example, in powerlifting (weight lifting with heavy-ass weights), there is a biological limit to how much a man can lift. No matter how much you train, no matter how much steaks you eat, or how much whey protein powder you eat, you will never be able to deadlift more than 2,000 pounds. A bull will always be stronger than you, no matter how hard you train (the human limit is finite).

But let’s say you are 5’10 inches, 170 pounds— one day you might be able to achieve a 500–600 pound deadlift. But after that, you probably won’t be able to.

And once you are able to achieve your “personal maximum” — this can lead to depression. There is no more room to progress. Powerlifters and bodybuilders call this a “plateau” — and there is nothing more shitty than a plateau.

Similarly in the corporate world, they call it a “glass ceiling” — a point in which you cannot earn more money or advance any more (often happens to people of color, women, and young people).

So the goal is to achieve your personal maximum— but know that no matter how hard you try, you will never reach 100%. And you never really want to reach 100%. But the journey of trying to reach your personal maximum is what you desire.

Chapter 8: Don’t define yourself

So strip away all labels in your photography. “Street photography”, “documentary photography”, “portrait photography”, “wedding photography”, “landscape photography” — all photography is photography. Even “personal photography” is

another label that you probably shouldn't apply to yourself. Just call it "photography." Or better yet— don't call it "photography." Call it "living well" — and taking photos of yourself living well.

So please no more dick-measuring contests with the camera or lens you use. No more bragging about how many followers you have on social media. No more adding ridiculous numbers of hashtags to your images to hope to get more followers. No more refreshing your phone every 5 minutes, seeing if there is someone who recently commented or "liked" your photo, or commented on it.

Take a social media "detox" or "fast" — and see how much clearer your mind and self-satisfied you become.

I'm not telling you to give up social media forever— I'm just trying to share how to use it more mindfully.

Like with food, eating 24/7 without break will give us indigestion, cause us to become soft and flabby, and give us a lot of diseases. However fasting from eating will make us leaner, stronger, meaner, less prone to sickness and disease, and happier. But there is a certain point where you need to break your fast and to start eating again.

So treat social media the same. Don't check your social media everyday. Take a few days off. Take a week off, take a month off, take a year off— whatever works for you.

And when you return to social media, ask yourself "why" you are on social media? Are you sharing photos because you want to share your joy and happiness with the world? Are you doing it because you want more followers? Are you doing it because you are insecure or lonely? Or do you have something genuinely good to contribute to society?

Ask yourself these questions.

And in the meanwhile, hug your loved ones, photograph them, and photograph if today were your last day on earth. Remember living well is our #1 concern in life, photography (and everything else) comes secondary.

Chapter 9: Getting started in personal photography

To get started in “personal photography” — consider what you find meaningful in your life. Who are your close loved ones, and how do your photos reflect those relationships?

Death is something that hangs over all of us, like a dagger, suspended in the air, and we aren’t sure when that string is going to snap. I’ve had friends who died suddenly (age 27), friends-of-friends who passed away in car accidents, and other friends or acquaintances who suddenly got cancer or some other rare disease.

We never know when we are going to pass.

So the point of “personal photography” is to truly make photos for ourselves— not for others. “Personal photography” seeks for you to make personal memories— for yourself, your close friends, and for your family. According to “personal photography” — you want to create personal documents that generations-to-come (in your family) can appreciate.

“Personal photography” is documenting the happy moments in your life, the tough times, and to document how you were able to persevere.

In terms of “personal photography” — the camera or documenting tool doesn’t really matter. My suggestion is to use the easiest, least-obtrusive, smallest, and lightest camera— something that is easy for you to carry with you. That can be your smartphone camera, a small compact camera, or anything else that can slip into your bag, and constantly be with you.

Step 1: Notice

In today’s society, we are constantly being distracted by flashing notifications, emails, text messages, social media updates, blogs, games, apps, and advertisements vying for our attention.

Personally I have found that most of modern technology prevents us from noticing the beauty in life— especially within our lives.

To “notice” more is to turn off your technology. So for example when you’re at home, turn off your phone. Appreciate the company of your loved ones— your children, your partner, or friends. Be fully-engaged in conversation with them, and know how to *focus* in your inter-personal communications.

Furthermore, when you’re out walking in the streets, *walk slowly*, and look all around you. Specifically— *look down*, and *look up*. Take a 360 degree view of the world around you— and just *notice* all of these interesting things around you.

A lot of photographers complain that their hometowns are too “boring” to photograph and that their lives are too “boring.”

I think it is all about perspective— I have friends in NYC who find it “boring”, friends in Paris who find it “boring”, and friends in Tokyo who think the city and their lives are “boring.”

“Boring” is just a state of mind— if you are like a child, everything is interesting. A child is constantly curious, always wanting to learn more, and notices every little thing.

Another way to “notice” — unplug your headphones, and learn how to listen to “quiet.” Don’t feel the need to constantly stimulate yourself with audio-visual information. Just stop, breathe, and enjoy the peace.

Step 2: Appreciate

Another part of “personal photography” is to appreciate the beauty all around you. Sure you can *notice* the beauty, but can you really *appreciate* it?

For me, I take a lot of things for granted. I take the amazing public transportation system for granted, I take my loving partner Cindy for granted, I take my family for granted, I take my smartphone for granted, I take my camera for granted, and I take the internet for granted. I become “used to” all these great marvels in my life— and the beauty that God and the world has given me in nature, human relationships, and my friendships.

To appreciate something is quite difficult. A simple exercise to better appreciate things: **vividly imagine as if you lost it**. For example, to better appreciate your loved ones, imagine hearing if they got hit by a drunk driver— how would you feel?

What would you regret *not* saying or *not* doing? And furthermore, are there certain moments you had together that you would regret *not* photographing?

Everything in life is fleeting, including photographs. But I feel that through “personal photography” — documenting your personal moments helps you better appreciate the moments.

By being able to identify, “This is a wonderful moment” — you are able to not only photograph it, but to relish in the moment.

Step 3: Document

As photographers, we are documenters. We document history, we document those around us, and we document society around us. Not only that, but we are creative; we make art, we interpret, and we analyze.

To document is the last step of “personal photography.” Generally if you want to document a moment faithfully— it is to compose and frame the scene well.

For example, decide what *not* to include in the frame. Decide what is *not* interesting — only focus on the essential in the frame.

I feel that photography is more about subtraction, rather than addition. So always ask to yourself, “Is this really an essential part of the frame? Can I remove this subject, element, or distraction from the background?”

By eliminating distractions and noise, you can focus on what is important in your photograph— your main subject. What is essential, and truly important to you.

Chapter 13: Documenting emotion

When it comes to documenting your personal life and personally-meaningful moments, think about the *emotion* you see when you identify or appreciate a scene.

This means following your gut.

Often times in photography we try to “rationalize” everything that we see. We treat ourselves more like robots; rather than emotional human beings. Sometimes we think that our emotions get in the way of making decisions— but actually it is our emotions which are the driving force behind making decisions.

There was a scientific study in which the subjects no longer felt “emotions” in the traditional sense. However their “analytic” mind was still intact. But the problem was when faced with simple decisions (whether to stay indoors or go for a walk) they couldn’t make any decisions on their own. They didn’t have emotions or a gut-feeling to guide their lives.

Chapter 14: Shooting for yourself or for others?

In the genre of “personal photography” — the first person to always satisfy or impress is yourself. You are the main character in this play. Everyone else is just watching.

But of course, as human beings we are also social beings. As photographers, we like to share our work with others, and feel a sense of appreciation for our work.

In order to balance taking photos for yourself, and for others— my suggestion is this: photograph photos that *you* like and simply let others naturally find and discover and appreciate your work. **Don’t seek to make photos to satisfy your audience.**

Many artists lose their sense of integrity, vision, or principles when they start to follow the whims of the masses. A true artist has his or her own vision— and is unwavering.

Take for example Steve Jobs, someone who would create a “reality distortion field” and project his vision onto others— rather than letting reality dictate its rules to him. This is what helped him create so many innovative products, by refusing to add a stylus or keyboard to the iPad. But now, the modern Apple is starting to lose its creative vision— by creating a slew of products to simply satisfy the masses.

As for you, if you upload any of your personal photos to social media— you might get distracted by the amount of “likes” or comments you get on a photograph. Trust me, it has happened to me.

One of the things that helped me re-focus on taking photos for myself is to *not* share my photos on social media. I took a brief hiatus from uploading images to social media for about 2–3 months, and I started to ask myself, “Do I like my own photos?” rather than always wondering whether others would like my photos.

If I made a photograph that I didn’t like, but others loved— would I truly be happy? On the other hand, if I made a photograph that I loved but others didn’t— would I be happy?

Ultimately this is a decision *you* need to make— nobody else can make that decision for you. But always keep this in mind, and always be mindful that **your own opinion of your own photos matters the most.**

Chapter 15: The “Cindy Project”

One of my main frustrations in photography is that I am not always able to shoot “street photography.” Street photography is my first passion— but often when I am living in boring residential areas, there aren’t any people walking in the streets.

I still wanted to be creative, and to photograph, and to create art. I didn’t realize it— but Cindy was the best subject that I always overlooked.

My main inspiration to start documenting Cindy was from my friend Josh White, who passionately documents those who he loves and is close with. He made an interesting point to me, “Why is it that we take photos of strangers with cameras that cost thousands of dollars, and only take photos of our loved ones with iPhones?”

It is true. We travel to foreign or exotic places and take expensive DSLR’s and lenses, and try to create “art” of strangers— people we don’t even know. But when it comes to documenting personally meaningful moments, we take mindless

snapshots or “selfies” — without consideration of composition, and making the photograph look beautiful.

So flip the equation— perhaps you should take more haphazard photos of strangers or people who aren’t as meaningful to you, and to take more “artistic” and more “considered” photographs of your loved ones.

How does Cindy feel?

One question I get a lot when it comes to documenting Cindy is “How does Cindy feel about it?” Cindy has told me that sometimes she feels that she has no control — because I am controlling her image and deciding which moments to document, how to present her, and I am indeed creating a certain image of her.

However what has helped tremendously is making her a *collaborative partner*. When I ask to take certain photos of her, she knows how to pose in a certain way to present herself in a way which she feels is faithful to herself.

Not only that, but I will always ask her if I could publish a certain photograph of her. If she isn’t comfortable with me uploading a photo of her online, that is fine— I keep it for myself on my hard drive.

Not only that, but I ask Cindy which of her photos she likes the most— so she is a collaborative partner in terms of the editing (selection) process as well.

Unfortunately not everyone out there has partners who are willing to being photographed. Your partner might be beautiful to you, but your partner might feel uncomfortable being photographed. In this case, you don’t need to force it. Furthermore, you can also tell them that you will not upload any of the photos to the internet without their permission.

Or you can just take the photos for yourself, print them out, and put them into family albums.

Remember: you never want to let your photography or “art” supersede the dignity, respect, and feelings of your loved ones.

Chapter 16: Every moment is precious

Another aspect of “personal photography” is to realize that every moment is precious. There are not certain moments which are more “valuable” than other moments.

For example, the smallest moments are precious. The moment having your morning coffee, having lunch with your friend, or cuddling up on the couch with your partner in the evening.

When you are fully in-the-moment; is there anywhere else you’d rather be?

Chapter 17: Follow your intuition

One of the problems we have in the West is that we are always told to be “rational.” Thinking for yourself and relying on your gut are not respected. With “personal photography,” follow your intuition. Follow your gut. If for some reason, you see a moment, and you think it might be a good moment, just take the damn photo.

Furthermore, never think to yourself, “Oh, that is a cliché shot. It probably will be boring, better not bother taking the photo.” No. Rather, listen to your gut, and take the photo. You can always decide to edit it out afterwards.

For this photograph, I was sitting on the couch in my apartment, enjoying a nice tea with Cindy. The sun started to set, and I saw the magnificent light peering through. I started making photos of her in the light. She held her hand up to block the light, and I saw the shape of the triangle showing only her eye. I love the diagonals in the photo, and my shadow, which makes it autobiographical.

Chapter 18: Create history

In “personal photography,” you are a historian. You capture the moments which are special to you, and you create historical documents that your future children (and their future children) will appreciate.

Whenever I see a wonderful moment, I think to myself, “If I *don’t* take this photo, will I regret it 10 years from now?”

In the prior photo, Cindy was in her room, reading a book to her niece Amelia. It was a beautiful moment– a moment I know that both Cindy and Amelia will appreciate when Amelia is a teenager, or even an adult.

Treat every personal moment as precious. If you don’t document your own personal history, the personal history of your family and friends, who else will do it?

Chapter 19: Shoot yourself

As photographers, we’re always photographing others. But how often do we photograph ourselves?

“Honor thy selfie”– don’t forget to take self-portraits of yourself (as well as photographing your loved ones).

Over the years, you will age, the way you dress will change, and you will (eventually) die.

I love looking back at old photographs of myself; to see how far I’ve come. I sometimes laugh at how I used to dress, how I used to do my hair, and how I lived my life.

Take self-portraits of your shadow, your reflection, or shadow. By photographing yourself, it is an act of self-exploration. Furthermore, you make yourself immortal, and capture your soul for your future family to remember.

Chapter 20: See yourself through others

Every photograph you take is a self-portrait and a reflection of your own inner-state. So realize that every time you make a photograph, it is less about your subject and more about *you*.

When I'm out shooting in the streets, I try to connect emotionally with my subjects. I try to empathize with them, but I also project my own emotions onto them. In addition, I also tend to identify subjects who look how I feel.

For example, my "Suits" project is auto-biographical, and a reflection of how *I* felt when I worked in the corporate world as a "Suit." I felt trapped, miserable, and wanted freedom. I started to get overly obsessed with money, image, and status. But once I got laid off, I felt free. But now whenever I see other men in suits looking miserable, I empathize with them. Because I felt how they felt.

Chapter 21: Document your hobbies

One of my passions and hobbies (besides photography) is powerlifting. For me, powerlifting is all about meditation and gaining control and peace over my mind. When I'm in the gym and deadlifting, I zone out. All the stresses, anxieties, and frustrations in life disappear. There is nothing but me and the iron bar.

Whenever I finished an intense workout, I would eat a handful of almonds (provided for free by the gym). To me, this is a photograph that symbolizes my relationship with powerlifting more than a literal photograph of the weights.

Furthermore, I made a lot of great friends and acquaintances at the gym. They were a great source of wisdom, inspiration, and motivation.

If you want to know what to photograph, just photograph your hobbies and passions.

Chapter 22: Photograph your friends

When I attended a Magnum workshop with Constantine Manos / David Alan Harvey in 2015, I had a great time hanging out with my good friends Kile, Quoc, and Karl. It was great waking up with them before sunrise (around 5am), shooting the sunrise, and having a lovely breakfast and tons of coffee. We chatted, shared life experiences, and became close homies.

For my week-long project, I visited a bar called the “Old Colony.” For the project I photographed the people at the bar, but also portraits of my friends.

Don't feel like you always need to photograph strangers, models, or others outside of your circle of friends. Often your friends can be the best subjects, because you know them the best.

Chapter 23: Step outside your comfort zone

Boxing has always been something interesting to me. Perhaps it comes from the fact that I've always been a scrawny Asian kid and self-conscious. Boxing seemed like the ultimate “manly” sport that built self-discipline, strength, bravery, and grit.

When I did a social media campaign for Ford, one of the challenges I gave myself to visit a boxing gym (to learn boxing, and to take photographs). I visited a local gym called “Gallo Boxing” in Lansing, Michigan, and pushed myself out of my comfort zone to make a mini-project on the gym. I befriended a lot of the guys there, heard their life stories, and eventually mailed them some prints of them.

I thank photography for giving me the opportunity to trying out new things. If it weren't for the camera, I certainly wouldn't be as adventurous in life. Thank God for photography.

Chapter 24: Life and death

Photography is the closest thing you can get to making something last forever and become “immortal.” Photography is recognizing that a moment is fleeting, and will disappear. Photography is reminding yourself that the people you photograph will eventually die.

So while our friends and family are alive, why not photograph them? I find that photographing my loved ones helps me appreciate them more.

In 2013, I got a call that my grandfather passed away. I jumped on a plane, and decided to document his funeral, in a search to connect closer to him. I felt that by documenting his funeral, I could treasure him one last time.

The experience was very moving. It changed my relationship with death– I realized that with the death of my grandfather, it brought my family closer together. With death comes new life.

Chapter 25: Your style is unique

Know that your style in photography is unique. There is nobody else who sees the world the way you do.

I have a lot of photographers who ask me advice on how to find their “style.”

Style for me is two things:

- 1) Aesthetics (how a photo looks like)
- 2) A reflection of your personality

For example, I love to interact with my subjects. However the unique thing is that a lot of my photos look candid (when in reality, they are shot in-between moments when I’m interacting with my subject).

For example, I bumped into this interesting fellow on the streets of SF, and he was a fascinating character (found out he also shot street photography). I interacted and chatted with him while shooting photos of him, and I happened to get a photo of him with an interesting look while he was talking.

I know a lot of street photographers who look down on interacting with your subjects. Apparently the “rule” in street photography is that you aren’t “allowed” to talk to your subjects (they must be shot candidly).

But I respect street photographers who only shoot candidly (because that is their personal style; they prefer to be more in the shadows, which reflects their more introverted personalities).

Discover the aesthetic or “look” that you like in your photography. If your heart sings in monochrome, stick to that. If color is your thing, stick with color. Find a camera and focal length that suits your personality, and stick with it.

As with *how* you shoot– follow your personality. If you like to chat with people and “work the scene”, go for that. If you’re more of a “one shot, one kill” type of person, shoot that way.

The only way to be authentic in photography is for your photography to reflect your inner-voice.

Chapter 26: Embrace every opportunity

I think the common excuse that all of us photographers make (myself included) is that we never have enough time or opportunities to shoot. But it is only an excuse– we have infinite opportunities to shoot, our only barrier is ourselves.

For example, ever since I got rid of my car, I take a lot more public transportation (bus, subway)– yet I squander these moments. Rather than using this as an opportunity to make images, I just screw around on my smartphone. So I have this personal rule now: before I zone out (checking my phone, reading a book, texting) I take a deep breath, look around me, and appreciate my surroundings for a few minutes.

In this above image, I turned off my smartphone for a few minutes, and noticed this beautiful light hitting this woman’s face. She was thinking about something deep– I’m glad I wasn’t distracted so I could notice and capture this moment. Use your lifestyle to the maximum; make photos, not excuses.

Chapter 27: Embrace nature

Often when I’m feeling “blocked” photographically (in terms of creativity), I like to go for a walk and embrace nature. There is an ancient saying “*All art is an imitation of nature.*” If you think about it, it is true. Many painters and artists paint beautiful

landscapes, and many of us photographers make images of people, cities, and society.

What I love about photographing nature is that it helps me get into a more meditative, contemplative, and appreciative mood. I also feel that going on long walks with your camera (near nature, preferably near the water) is a good way to “Zen” out.

For this photograph, I was walking by the Berkeley marina (a few miles from my apartment), and I saw these grasses swaying in the wind. I went on a walk with my Ricoh and put the shutter-speed slow, and just photographed the movement and energy of the grass. It is a “nothing” photograph, but personally meaningful to my state-of-mind when I photographed it (thinking of transience in life).

Chapter 28: Light is beauty

Photography literally means “*painting with light*.” A lot of the emotions we capture in our photos are highly influenced by light.

I used to never think about light when making images. I would just see something interesting, and snap away.

Nowadays I’m much more conscious about the light. Because if I see something beautiful, and want to show the beauty that I see, I must use the light in my favor.

For example for this above image, I was in the Tenderloin in SF, and saw this woman who I thought was beautiful. I approached her, complimented her look, and I asked her to stand in front of the doorway, to give her that beautiful natural and diffused light on her face. The soft light shows her soft beauty– the aesthetic of the light adds to the emotional impact I wanted in this image.

In terms of how I made this photograph, I first took a series of vertical portraits of her. I then realized that she looked a bit stiff, so I asked her to “play with her braids.”

What I love most about this photograph is how I was able to make her “feel beautiful.” I thought she was beautiful, but perhaps she didn’t have that self-confidence in herself.

After doing this little mini-portrait session with her in the streets, I overheard that she was so excited having her portrait taken, and she told someone that, “He made me feel like a model, and made me feel so beautiful!”

Make someone feel beautiful today.

Chapter 29: Have your loved ones participate

As I have been more focused on documenting my loved ones, I also have been getting my loved ones to participate.

For example, I have been working on my “Cindy project” for a while now– and Cindy has been starting her own “Eric project” as well.

I think it is fascinating– to see her make photos of me in intimate situations, either when I am with my mom, by myself, or doing something else. By having Cindy be an active participant as well– it makes the whole photography process much more inclusive and meaningful. Plus, it is fascinating to be on the other side of a camera. By knowing how it feels like being on the other side of the lens, you learn how to photograph your loved ones more conscientiously as well.

So ask your loved ones to take some photos of you as well– you’ll be surprised what they will take.

Chapter 30: Shoot in places you love

Nowadays I don’t really go out and “shoot” anymore. Rather what I do is I just go to places that I love, live the life that I love, and photograph whatever happens my way. Rather than forcing myself to go out and shoot photos, **I let the photos come to me.**

Cindy and I travel a lot together, and love to find good food to eat while traveling. We encountered this nice restaurant that served great meatballs, and we sat at the counter, when our waitress approached us. She was beautiful– with great eyes, great skin, and great braids.

There was light streaming through the window, and it lit her up like a movie star. I loved the dramatic light, and her face, and I asked if I could make a portrait of her. She said yes.

Because I like to shoot portraits of strangers, I always keep my eyes open wherever I am. This can be in a restaurant, in a cafe, or even a pub. I have even asked people to take their portrait inside a Costco or grocery store.

To take better photos, take photos in places where you love to be. That might be your local gym, your local cafe, local restaurant, your school, your workplace, or neighborhood.

Also photograph in a place that makes you comfortable and feels like “home.” This can even literally be inside your house.

Chapter 31: Everyday is a new day

Everyday is a new day for you to make photos. In order to grow, you need to make new work. Don't be stuck in the past, enjoy your present moment, and photograph each day as it comes.

For me, sometimes I get too trapped into my past work. I sometimes let this become a detriment– I feel like I have a certain “style” that I need to be loyal to.

But realize that everyday you are born anew. Each day will offer you new life experiences, the chance to interact with new people, or the chance with you to interact with old family and friends.

Always see each of your days and life experiences as a new life. This will keep your eyes fresh, curious, inquisitive, and appreciative of your life.

You haven't taken your best photo yet. **Your best photo is your next photo to come.**

Chapter 32: Is photography adding or removing stress from your life?

Our lives are stressful, complicated, and difficult. Photography should be a tool to *remove* stress, anxiety, and frustration from our lives. If photography is *adding* complications to your life– why are you doing it?

For me, photography is one of the most natural ways to relieve the anxieties of my life. When I get into a fight with Cindy, feel trapped or cooped, or need to think– I just go out for a walk (and bring my camera along).

For me, photography is self-therapy. Photography has done more than any other artistic medium to relieve a lot of my personal suffering and frustrations with life. Photography helps me discover my true inner-voice as well, and gives me the courage, bravery, to pursue what is truly important in my life.

Chapter 33: Empower yourself

When I have the camera in hand, I feel more confident, courageous, and empowered. I often feel timid around strangers *without* a camera. Rather than being embarrassed that you are a photographer, or feel awkward being seen carrying around a camera– embrace it.

Realize the camera is a tool for self-empowerment. The camera gives you an excuse to explore the world, to step outside of your daily routines, and to grow (emotionally, spiritually, and visually). Street photography in particular has taught me valuable social skills. I used to never have the courage to interact with a stranger, or even make “small talk.” Now, I am a lot hesitant in awkward social situations, and I can have a conversation with anybody.

When you have the camera around your neck or in your hand, imagine like you are a superhero. The camera will empower you and give you super-human confidence, courage, and the ability to notice things you might not ordinarily notice.

Chapter 34: The camera is your slave

Talking about cameras, make the camera your slave. Don't be the slave of your camera.

Far too often as photographers, we worry too much about what camera, lens, or technical settings to use. My suggestion: use the cheapest, smallest, and most compact camera that makes it “frictionless” for you to make images. For me, that is just a compact point-and-shoot camera, put into “P” (program) mode. This allows me to not think while taking the photos– but to simply react to the scene in front of me.

Furthermore, think of how liberating it is when you no longer care about what camera you own. You first of all save a ton of money (which can be used to travel, take photography classes, buy photography books), and you focus on the artistic side of things.

There are no more bad cameras. Make your camera an extension of your eye.

Chapter 35: Don't discriminate

In theory, no one scene, no one person, or no one photograph is “better” than another.

Often in photography we “judge” too much. We judge whether we think a city is “interesting”, we judge whether we think a certain subject is “interesting”, and we judge whether we think a certain photograph is “interesting.”

But in personal photography, everything can be interesting. It just depends on how close you look.

Furthermore, realize that what might be considered “ugly” in traditional senses– may be beautiful in others.

For example, I saw this man who was missing a pupil in one eye. Others might think that makes him look “scary” and unapproachable. But I knew that he was just another guy at the end of the day.

I approached him and I told him that I loved his “look”, and asked if I could make a few portraits of him. He was ecstatic– and I ended up emailing him some photos (he told me he is currently working on some mixtapes, and he loved the portrait I shot of him).

Don't discriminate your subjects based on your pre-conceived notions of them. Have an open mind, and treat everybody equally.

The same goes with scenes– treat every scene equally, and this will help you find some deeper beauty inherent in the world.

Chapter 36: No regrets

Your life is short. Don't live life with any regrets.

Don't regret the past. Don't wish that you started photography when you were younger. Don't wish you lived in some different city. Don't wish you had a different lifestyle.

Embrace the life you currently have. Make the best out of the life you currently live.

Make every moment count. Live a photographic life authentic to you, and make sure to never go to sleep at night with any regrets in your photography.

Chapter 37: Evolve

You don't want to stagnate in your photography and life.

To me, happiness is growth. Happiness is the feeling of progress, the feeling that you are moving forward, and the feeling that you are constantly evolving (for the better).

To me, depression is all about feeling stuck. It is about constantly repeating yourself. Lacking inspiration. Wishing that you could create new things, but not having that ability.

Evolution is your life-blood as a photographer. The more you evolve in your photography, the more fresh you keep your eyes. You stay curious, and you push your limits.

By evolving, you will alienate some of your followers and viewers. They might like your “old stuff” better than your “new stuff.”

But if your new work is what brings you happiness, why do you care what others think?

Think about “survival of the fittest” – could all these animals survive if they didn’t evolve and gain new adaptations that helped them?

I think one of the most important things about your evolution in photography is to keep it natural and organic. Don’t *force* yourself to evolve in your photography before you are ready.

But how will you know that you’re ready to evolve In your photography?

I say follow your gut. Once you start becoming bored of photography, it is necessary for you to change things up. Perhaps try a different focal length, try a different medium (film or digital), shoot a different neighborhood, or try a different approach (portraits instead of candid photos).

For me, I have gone through many “phases” in my photography. First it was shooting “decisive moment” street photographs (like Henri Cartier-Bresson, finding an interesting background, and waiting for someone to walk into the scene). Then it was to shoot flash like Bruce Gilden (candidly). Then it was to shoot in color (inspired by Martin Parr / William Eggleston). Then it was to shoot urban landscapes

(inspired by [Lee Friedlander](#)). Then it was to shoot more “[street portraits](#)”, then shooting less “street photography”, and now I’m focusing on my “personal photography” of Cindy, myself, and my family.

Also with my “street photography” I am more interested in interacting with my subjects– shooting portraits of them in monochrome; seeking some sort of gesture or emotion in my photos that helps me connect with them.

Don’t look back in your photography. Keep pushing forward to evolve; never settle.

Chapter 38: Photograph your own life

For a long time in my photography, it was always about documenting the lives of others. However ever since I started to focus on photographing my own life, I have gained a lot more personal satisfaction. No matter how “boring” your life is, there is always something interesting or meaningful to photograph. If you treat your entire life as your life’s project, how can you run out of ideas and inspiration?

When I married Cindy, the love of my life, I decided to document my wedding day. It helped me be more appreciative of the small behind-the-scenes moments. Not only that, but I have a beautiful document that helps me re-live my special day.

Document your pivotal life events. Photograph your dates with your partner. Photograph your children. Photograph your wedding day. Photograph your life when you are going through good times and bad times. When you look at your photos in the future, you will be grateful for all the beautiful moments of your life.

Chapter 39: Conclusion

Thank you so much for joining me on this journey of putting together the “Personal Photography Manual.”

This book was a chance for me to reflect on my own photography, my mortality, and the purpose behind my photography. I’ve discovered that at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter what kind of photos I make. What is the most important is this: **to**

make personally-meaningful photos. It could be street photographs, urban landscapes, portraits of friends or loved ones, or even self-portraits of myself.

So friend, I encourage you to not define yourself as a photographer. Simply live a meaningful life, and use the camera as a tool to enhance your life experiences.

Capture the good times, the painful times, and always be grateful.

It doesn't matter if others like your photos or not. If you like your own photos, you feel like you are constantly growing and learning, and you aren't bored– what else could you ask for?

Life is short. Why waste your valuable life, attention, and energy in impressing others with your photos?

Live a life authentic to you, and make photos that are authentic to you.

Never give up, never stop growing, and remember– have fun.

Always,

Eric

@ Artis Coffee, Berkeley, August 16, 2016