

WITHIN THE FRAME

The Journey of Photographic Vision

David duChemin

New
Riders

VOICES THAT MATTER™

Within the Frame: The Journey of Photographic Vision

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About the Author

David duChemin is an international assignment photographer specializing in humanitarian projects and world photography. His work has taken him around the globe. From braving Mongolia in the middle of winter to shooting killer bees in Africa; catching malaria in Ethiopia to catching typhoid in Peru; being thrown off a camel in Tunisia to being abducted by street kids in India and forced to play cricket, David's adventures have only deepened his love for this world and the people who inhabit it.



Photo: Kevin Clark

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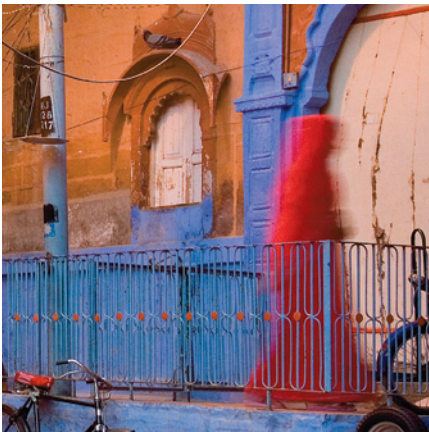
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Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the passionate photography of people, places, and cultures. It is a book about chasing your vision and telling your stories as clearly and passionately as possible with compelling photography. It's a book for everyone who's wanted to shoot images of the places and people they love, whether or not they ever go around the world to do it.

► Canon 5D, 135mm, 1/3200 @ f/2, ISO 800

Delhi, India. Two men drinking chai at a Nizamuddin shrine. The half-figure of the woman to the left still speaks more to me than the men themselves.





“It is a book about chasing your vision and telling your stories as clearly and passionately as possible with compelling photography.”

You should also know what this book is not. It is not a manual; your camera came with one. It is not a book that tells you exactly what to shoot or how. And it is most decidedly not a book about “travel photography.” Those books have already been written, and the last thing anyone needs is another book telling them to put film into lead bags. In my research for this project, I read a great many of those books, and I can safely say the need for another one is precisely zero.

Surely the needs of a photographer who travels are different from one who does not, but the art of expressing an encounter with people, places, and cultures remains the same whether or not you get on a plane. The details of gear and traveling belong in a book that addresses traveling, not expressing vision.

I wrote this book because it’s the book I wish I’d had. The cyber-shelves of the internet are full of how-to books and conspicuously thin when it comes to why-to books. I’m aware of just how insanely presumptuous it is to write a book—in so doing, we authors, among whose ranks I am a newborn, are saying we have something to say that is so valuable that you, the reader, should shell out \$40 to hear it. Crazy. So I’m putting this one out there with, I hope, a great deal of humility, and the hope that it does for some of you out there what my early influences did for me.

I use the word “vision” too much in this book. It’s in the subtitle. It’s in the section headings. It’s in the text over and over again, and it’s not the result of forgetfulness on my part. It’s not even an effort to pad the word count to make my editor happy, though don’t think for a minute I didn’t consider it. But give me some credit—had I chosen that route, I would have used much bigger words. They say repetition is a good thing. They say repetition is a good thing. Sorry, bad joke. But you get it, right? This book is about the passionate photography of people, places, and cultures; without vision and a desire—even a burning need—to express it photographically, there’s just no point. If you come away with anything from this book, I hope it is a renewed resolution to seek and serve your vision through this elegant craft. And I hope this book gives you a few more tools that make your craft equal to the task.

This book is a result of my own journey as a photographer who, like all photographers, is learning to see, and learning to find and express my vision in clearer and clearer ways. It is, I hope, a book that you find both instructional and inspirational in your own journey.



▲ Canon 5D, 24mm, 1/60 @ f/4, ISO 800

Agra, India. Exchanges with children remain some of the best moments I have with my camera. The juxtaposition of playfulness and the bars, behind which these four seem contained, still amuses me.



It's About Vision

VISION IS THE BEGINNING AND END OF PHOTOGRAPHY. It's the thing that moves you to pick up the camera, and it determines what you look at and what you see when you do. It determines how you shoot and why. Without vision, the photographer perishes.

► Canon 5D, 40mm, 1/50 @ f/5.6, ISO 640

Hanoi, Vietnam. I have a thing for decaying walls and man-made stuff, perhaps because it speaks to the temporary nature of all we do. Or it could be just the texture and color.



“Without vision,
the photographer
perishes.”

Vision is everything, and the photographic journey is about discovering your vision, allowing it to evolve, change, and find expression through your camera and the print. It is not something you find and come to terms with once and for all; it is something that changes and grows with you. The things that impassion you, that anger you, that stir you—they are part of your unique vision. It is about what you—unique among billions—find beautiful, ugly, right, wrong, or harmonious in this world. And as you experience life, your vision changes. The stories you want to tell, the things that resonate with you—they change and so does your vision. Finding and expressing your vision is a journey, not a destination.

You can spend a lifetime chasing your vision, learning not only to see with more clarity, but to express that vision in stronger and stronger ways. It's important to remember this because it fights against the discouragement that all artists inevitably face. The feeling that we're seeing nothing new, have nothing to say, or have created our last good photograph. When that happens it's helpful to remember that the journey isn't over yet. As long as we're alive and interacting with life, the world, and the people around us, we'll have something to say. And as we learn and practice our craft, we'll have stronger ways—better ways, even—of expressing it.

Vision can be elusive. We may not always have an immediate conscious reaction to the world around us, may not understand our feelings about the story in front of us. In these times, it is often the case that the camera becomes more than a means to record our vision; it becomes a means to help clarify it. The act of looking through the frame, of excluding other angles and elements, of bringing chaos into order, can bring our vision to the surface. This ability to help us see means, in some way, that the camera is a partner with us in the process, and it is what separates photographers from painters. We have a symbiotic relationship—not with the camera technology but with the frame, which, for all the technological changes photography has been through, remains the constant.

► Canon 20D, 17mm, 1/60 @ f/10, ISO 800

Vancouver, Canada. Chambar is one of the best restaurants in Vancouver. Each day the kitchen crew sits outside and has a meal before opening for the evening rush.



Our vision often grows to match our skill. As we gain new tools and skills with which to better express our vision—in deeper and more complete ways—so our vision is given the room to grow deeper and more complete. Furthermore, I think our vision always slightly outpaces our tools. For this reason, we'll always be a little frustrated by the inability of our tools, or our technique, to match that vision. That's the journey of the artist, and it's the reason why our craft sometimes feels so difficult to master. If you don't love photography for the sheer act of trying to express yourself, and will only find joy in it when you finally get there, yours will be a disappointing journey. Not only will you likely never "get there," but you'll have missed how beautiful and exhilarating the journey itself is.

Vision itself, like our eyesight, can be neglected and allowed to degenerate, or it can be made sharper, brought into greater clarity. The more we engage the world and examine our own thoughts and feelings about it, the clearer our vision becomes. We become able to describe feelings and thoughts that were once unconscious. For those of us whose medium is photography, we do that visually. The clearer our vision becomes, the more able we are to find means of expressing it through our choices of optics, exposure, composition, or the digital darkroom.

Chasing Vision

The photographic life is one of discovering your vision and expressing it in purely visually terms. Sometimes our vision finds us; sometimes we need to chase it down.

In the case of this book, it's a little of both. The images and stories found here come from the last four years as I've traveled and photographed around the globe, as well as a one-month trip around the world taken in January 2009. I visited five countries—Cuba, Egypt, Nepal, Thailand, and Vietnam—in search of encounters with people, places, and culture, and the chance to find and express my vision in a single, month-long, creative endeavor. The book is about finding and expressing vision, not about the fact that I travel around the world to do so. It might just as easily have happened by staying in my hometown of Vancouver.

My own vision is a global one; I am most excited by people, places, and cultures that have not yet been overtaken by the creeping homogeny of the west. I love the color and texture of those places, the vitality of life, and the ritual and symbolism of cultures not yet tyrannized by the need to wear the same jeans and believe the same things. My images, too, are affected by that outlook and passion and, I hope, reflect it. Had someone else written this book, it might have been shot entirely in New York City or Prague. But I'm chasing my vision, and you will chase yours in the places best suited to that. What's important is that you chase that vision intentionally and with passion, refusing to let it be anything but yours and yours alone.

Storytelling

THROUGH THE AGES, myth and story have been the primary vehicles for communicating meaning and truth. They are not merely the stuff of bedtime tales. The primary storytelling medium in our culture is the cinematic film, and given the billions of dollars attached to the film industry—as well as the royal status of its stars—it should be clear how important story is to us. An understanding of the elements of story and how they can be incorporated into your photography will make stronger images.

► Canon 20D, 20mm, 1/400 @ f/4, ISO 400

Northern Ethiopia. This girl was playing on the rusted-out shell of a tank. I asked about her parents. “Father killed in war, mother died of AIDS.” I heard this story over and over again. I have images of her smiling, but it’s this one—capturing an unresolved look of uncertainty—that best hints at her story.





It doesn't matter what you are photographing; a sense of story will make your images more engaging and compelling.

Story told in a single frame of a photograph, and story told in a movie or novel, are very different kinds of story. One occurs over a minute period of time, perhaps 1/500th of a second, while the others are told over longer periods—hours—and reflect experiences or circumstances that span days, weeks, years, even generations. What makes it difficult to tell a story in a single frame is the inability to form a classic plotline, but this doesn't make storytelling impossible; it simply confines us to certain conventions. When those conventions are understood, they allow us to tell, or at the very least imply, more powerful stories.

When I consider the unique challenges of telling stories within the confines of a single photographic frame, two aspects of storytelling come to mind. The first is the study of themes that tie the image to our deeper, more universal human experience. The second is conflict, revealed in the frame by contrasts. With regard to technique, the photo essay is the time-honored means by which photographers have told longer stories, and composition the means within our single or multiframe stories to move the plot forward.

Universal Themes

A story succeeds or fails on empathy, or lack of it. If you don't care, it's not a relevant story. Understanding themes offers a quick way toward understanding how to tell a story about which people will care deeply.

Ask a friend what the last film they saw was about, and the usual answer will be a recap of the plotline. Character X did this, and then this happened, and to get out of it he did this and this, etc. That's plot. But a plotline doesn't describe what a movie is *about*. The plotline is a story of, for example, a boy and girl, but the story is *about* something more. Perhaps it was about revenge or love or the search for meaning—the deeper theme that moves the film from beginning to end. Remember the earlier discussion about subject versus subject matter? Same thing. The theme is what the movie—or photograph—is about; it's the subject. The plot is the way in which it's told, or the way the photograph is composed and shot.

► Canon 5D, 17mm,
1/125 @ f/9, ISO 800

Varanasi, India. As the sun rises over the River Ganges, this man does his daily devotion—an act that's been continued by millions of people over thousands of years. His search for absolution and meaning is one of the deepest themes of human existence, and it resonates across lines of gender, race, and creed.

If photographs are to tell or imply a story, they must be *about* something. Truth, justice, love, or the lack of these things, or the search for those things, are strong universal themes. Loneliness, betrayal, our tendency to self-destruct, death, resurrection, the bond of family—all of these are strong themes. And the more universal a theme you echo in your image, the more powerful it will be and the broader the audience. If you're thinking that this is a little too deep for your style of photography, what about themes like harmony, balance, or beauty? What about the old versus the young or new, or the past versus the present?





Make your images *about* something. It doesn't have to reflect deep brooding themes. It can be a photograph of an orchid that's about serenity or the wonder of the natural world. It can be about innocence or the simple power of a line. An image of a crocus breaking through the crust of snow and ice can resonate with themes of resurrection and new life. Portrait photographers: make your image about the person you are shooting, reveal the character underneath, and say something about them. Whatever you're photographing, make it *about* something, so the people who see your image feel something, so they care about your image.

This can't be overstated: the more powerful and universal the theme in your image, the more powerful and universal the impact of the image. To put it another way: the more deeply they care, the stronger the story.

I realize that not everyone feels the need to harness their inner George Lucas. Most of us just want to make photographs. I get that. But if our photographs echo something deeper, they will appeal to a greater number of people. Take, for example, a photograph of a child looking very camera-aware and with a neutral expression, wearing traditional clothing—this photograph may tell you something about the child and the culture in which she lives, and that will have some appeal, but it won't be universal. But when that child laughs, she immediately displays a positive emotion that is understood and shared universally, and the photograph is imbued with that universal appeal. Take the example of a Nepalese man—his portrait has general appeal, but when you photograph him praying your image is no longer about the man but about the search for forgiveness or connection with God, a powerful theme that gives your image universal appeal.

“The more powerful and universal the theme in your image, the more powerful and universal the impact of the image. To put it another way: the more deeply they care, the stronger the story.”

◀ Canon 5D, 17mm, 1/250 @ f/7.1, ISO 100

Havana, Cuba. A pigeon flies over the St. Francis of Assisi convent in Havana. A dove occupies a strong place in Christian symbolism, as does the cross, and even St. Francis himself. But on a more universal level, a dove alighting over a sacred place—in this case directly toward the top of the frame—is rich in symbolism and meaning, and therefore has greater universal appeal than if this were a flamingo flying over a hamburger joint (though that's an image I'd very much like to see for other reasons entirely).



▲ Canon 5D, 85mm, 1/15 @ f/1.2, ISO 640

Chemray Gompa, Ladakh, India. The contrasts in this image are what drive it forward and give it a sense of story. The contrast between the old and the new, the past and the present, anchors this image conceptually, even as the contrast between bright and faded, colorful and muted, anchors it visually. The crack provides the clue to the story.

Conflict Within the Frame

Harken back, if you will, to grade 12 English Literature class. Remember the teacher droning on and on about Man versus Man, Man versus Nature, and Man versus Himself while you dreamed about the cute foreign exchange student who would later go on to break your heart and date your best friend, leaving you to wander aimlessly into the wilderness and struggle for your survival while battling your inner demons? You do? Well, that's a great story and it contains some great conflict. In fact, it contains man-against-man, man-against-nature, *and* man-against-himself types of conflict. You had no idea at the time that you would become a classic cautionary tale, did you?

Going back to the droning Lit teacher, conflict is the heart of all story. Without it, there is no story. For a photograph to contain or imply a sense of story, it must have conflict.

But how do we bring conflict to play in a frame? Obviously, we can photograph moments of actual open conflict—guns and fists and angry gestures. But what about stories that are not about open conflict? What about stories that are about something else but still need conflict to move it forward?

Conflict in a still photograph is most often shown in contrasts. Not just the visual contrast of dark tones to lighter ones, but the more conceptual contrasts of big/small, mechanical/natural, smooth/textured. Any pair of juxtaposed or implied opposites creates what I call “conceptual contrasts” that imply conflict.



▲ Canon 5D, 85mm, 1/100 @ f/8, ISO 400

Delhi, India. A man sits reading the Koran at Nizamuddin shrine in Delhi. The contrast between the Koran and the cell phones—the ancient and the modern, communication with God and communication with man—provides the conceptual contrasts in this image.

“Conflict in a still photograph is most often shown in contrasts.”

Creative Exercises: Conceptual Contrasts

Here’s a great way to begin seeing conceptual contrasts.

Exercise 1: Go out and shoot a series of images that contrast with one another. The first might be of a big subject, the second of a small one. The next set might be hard versus soft, the one after that might be land versus water. You’re looking for photographs that contain contrasting subjects. Other than that, there are no rules. Come up with your own contrasts.

Exercise 2: Combine these pairs of opposing contrasts into one image. Instead of two images—one wet, one dry—you’re aiming for one image combining both wet and dry. One image with both young and old, one with both few and many, and so on.

Exercise 3: Look at other photographs and seek out the contrasts. Not all of them will be obvious. And I’m sure there will be plenty where the contrasts are not conceptual at all, and only appear in terms of contrast of tone or lines, but they too can imply a sense of conflict and imbue an image with a sense of story.

This concept applies to all kinds of images. Even a sunset shot contains elements of conceptual contrast—sky versus earth, sun versus water, light versus dark. Strongly opposed or contrasting elements create a compelling sense of conflict, which is the heartbeat of the story.

The Photo Essay

The challenge of capturing or implying a story with photography is made easier when you can photograph it in a longer form—in several frames that tell the story in more detail and more breadth than a single image alone could do. Enter the photo essay, the traditional means by which photographers have told longer stories.

There’s a visual language at work here, a convention that’s evolved to help us string our story together and give our audience the tools to interpret it. Used well, a photo essay is a powerful means of expressing your vision. And as



electronic media becomes increasingly prominent, the photo essay is getting more powerful with the addition of ambient sound, interviews, video clips, and music in the form of multimedia slideshows.

Long-form photo essays generally share the same types of images, and while this is by no means a formula, it provides a framework—a starting point built on established conventions. Here are the usual suspects, accompanied with images from the stupa at Boudhanath in Kathmandu.

▲ Canon 5D, 27mm,
1/640 @ f/11, ISO 400

The stupa at Boudhanath, surrounded on all sides with prayer flags, is the hub of the Tibetan community in exile in Nepal. This wider shot establishes the scene and is the broader context for the following images.



▲ Canon 5D, 85mm, 1/50 @ f/5.6, ISO 100

In the inner circle of the stupa, devotees and monks pray, read, and meditate. A medium shot like this brings the action in a little and provides you with a more intimate look into the details of the story. In this case, the robe, the empty shoes, and the sacred text all point toward Buddhism, the faith associated with this place.



◀ Canon 5D, 27mm, 1/500 @ f/4, ISO 100

A woman feeds the pigeons and sends them fluttering. Not critical to the story, the pigeons remain an important part of my experience at Boudha—always present, always filling the air with sounds of nervous flocks scattering.



◀ Canon 5D, 70mm, 1/500
@ f/4.5, ISO 400

This monk very patiently allowed me to photograph him, both his portrait and his hands. When I edited the sequence of him it was his hands, and the subtle out-of-focus details that constitute the background of this image, that contributed to the story more than his face. The beads, talismans, and worn hands tell more than his otherwise stoic face.

The Establishing Shot: This is the wide shot. These images generally say, “This is where the story is going to take place.” It establishes context, setting, and often mood.

The Medium Shot: Images that get closer to the action, these shots generally say, “This is what the story is about, this is who the characters are.” Not all photo essays are about people; the characters in your story could be horses, or weather, or boats, for example.

The Detail Shot: A closer, tighter image of details relevant to the story. In the case of a photo essay about horses, it might be the detail of a horse’s saddle. In the case of an essay about weather, it might be an old barometer or a car damaged by hail.

► Canon 5D, 57mm,
1/400 @ f/4, ISO 400

A young acolyte, friendly and curious, happily poses for my camera. Of the many portraits I took, this one felt among the most universal—he's a Buddhist monk, but also a child, unguarded and full of curiosity. The portrait brings to an essay its intimacy and connection to the viewer.



The Portrait: A tighter portrait or headshot—often an environmental portrait.

The Moment: A photograph that captures a gesture, an exchange, or the peak of the action. This is the “wow” shot.

The Closer: This one wraps it up, provides some resolution, or just provides a natural place to put the story to bed.

While not every photo essay will have each of these kinds of images, they will have most of them, and certainly they will have the first three. *National Geographic* has made an industry of perfecting the photo essay and is an excellent place to look for inspiration—not only in the quality of the images, but in the kinds of images they choose to tell the story.



▲ Canon 5D, 25mm, 1/10 @ f/16, ISO 400

The blur of a devotee and the spinning prayer wheel around which she walks implies an unceasing motion. This wheel, and others like it around the Boudhanath stupa, is in motion day in and day out.

▼ Canon 5D, 21mm, 1/500 @ f/8, ISO 400

A man prays as the sun rises over Boudhanath. It might just as easily be sunset. This image could serve as my Moment shot as well, but there's enough resolution and mood in it that it makes a good Closer.







Relationships

How the elements within the frame relate to one another says something about the relationships between them. One object larger than another might imply a relationship of power. The space between two elements or characters within the frame tells something about their connectedness. Objects separated by greater perceived space implies a relationship of distance or alienation, where objects much closer together might imply a relationship of intimacy. While you often can't physically move the objects around, the laws of perspective allow you to do it simply by changing the position from which you make the photograph. By moving to the left or right, or pivoting around your subject matter, you can often create greater or less distance between those elements. Move one way and you bring them together visually; move the other way and you separate them. By so doing, you are choosing to tell this story more directly and with less ambiguity.

◀ Canon 5D, 17mm, 1/160 @ f/8, ISO 400

Sapa, Vietnam. Hmong girls watch schoolboys playing New Year's games. Their obvious distance and clear separation implies differences in gender roles and says certain things about the relationships between males and females in this patriarchal society.

The same is true of vertical relationships—moving your point of view higher can diminish the appearance of height differences and thereby bring an equalizing effect between elements.

Your choice of lens has a significant role in establishing visual relationships. I discussed this in Chapter 3, but it's worth a reminder: the effect of compression that various lenses create can help you tell your story by altering the perception of distances between elements.

Separate from the relationship between objects in the frame, your point of view, or chosen camera angle, has an effect on the implied relationship between the viewer or photographer and the subjects. Looking down on a man sitting at street level can imply a position of power over him—as though you were physically, and symbolically, looking down on him. Making the image from street level implies greater equality and creates a more sympathetic image. One communicates condescension or pity; the other communicates respect, kindness, or empathy. Photographing a statue, you might choose your angle based on how you feel about the statue itself. If you're shooting a statue of a man you feel great respect for, you might choose to shoot from a lower angle, making the statue loom larger, creating the perception of power and grandeur.

Attention Management

Stage magicians and sleight-of-hand artists have something in common with photographers: both deal in perception and use visual clues to lead the audience to certain ends. In the case of the magician, that end might be a sense of wonder created by illusion. In the case of the photographer, it might be an emotion or thought created by the content of an image and the way that image was composed. Either way, both depend on directing the eye of the audience, and the best of them do it without the audience feeling led, manipulated, or aware of the device.

To make full use of this, we first need to understand what people look at. Returning to the magician for a moment, he understands that people see large movements before small movements. So a larger movement on stage might direct attention away from the smaller movement of secreting an object or



▲ Canon 5D, 20mm, 1/125 @ f/22, ISO 200

The strong, implied line created by the progression from left to right of large elements to small elements guides the eye along the primary diagonal of the image—from left to right, top to bottom—straight to the man on the camel. The fact that the image is predominantly cool, while the man and his camel are sitting on a patch of warm sand, also pulls the eyes. Finally, a human element always has greater visual mass than big piles of rock. All this adds up to create an image with built-in attention management.

pulling a hidden object from its hiding place. It's often called "misdirection," but calling it so is a misnomer that implies something has gone wrong. "Redirection" and perhaps "attention management" would be better terms. The magician studies human behavior and—knowing that we are generally predisposed to look at big movements before small ones, or to relax our attention when we laugh—uses that to his advantage. So it is with photographers.

“What is the eye drawn to, and how can that be used to more intentionally direct the eye through the frame?”

So what do we look at? What is the eye drawn to, and how can that be used to more intentionally direct the eye through the frame? Generally, we notice areas of light before areas of dark, and large elements before smaller one. We look to warm colors before the cooler ones. Here’s a short list of elements that draw our eye:

- Large elements before small elements
- Light elements before dark elements
- Warm colors before cool colors
- Focused elements before blurred elements
- Elements in perspective before flat elements
- Isolated elements before cluttered elements
- High contrast before low contrast
- Oblique lines before straight lines
- Recognizable elements before ambiguous elements
- Human/alive elements before inanimate elements

Once we become aware of how the viewer’s attention will behave, it’s much easier to gently push and pull the eye around the frame—to say, without a word, “Look here,” or, “This is less important.” Important elements might be lighter, larger, warmer, or sharper than less important elements. Elements that have no relevance at all should probably be cropped right out as you shoot, but hierarchies of importance exist in a visual story, and less important elements are still necessary. Think of it in terms of primary elements and secondary elements.

The photograph of the running monk (primary element) has the Thiksey Monastery as its background (secondary element); the visual clues provided by the architecture and color of the monastery building are important so you don’t want to crop them out, but the man is *more* important. The fact that the young man is wearing a more saturated, warmer color than his surroundings immediately helps set him apart from the cooler tones of the stone, and draws the eye naturally toward the intended center of interest first. Similarly, the panning renders the background less sharp than the monk, and the monk in turn is less sharp than the kettle, giving us different levels of visual mass and a natural



progression for the eye to follow. The eye moves from monk to kettle to background, but always returns to the monk because he holds greater visual interest for us. The photograph is about the man and his kettle—so he needs to be clearly identifiable as the primary element—but part of telling a story about this particular man is his context.

Some of this might be refined in post-production as well, with the digital equivalent of dodging and burning—making areas of primary importance lighter and areas of secondary importance darker. Subtly vignetting an image by darkening the corners can lead the viewer's eye to the center and keep it from drifting into the corners. Slightly desaturating or blurring secondary elements can have a similar effect, reducing their visual mass and lessening their pull on the eye.

▲ Canon 5D, 33mm,
1/30 @ f/22, ISO 100

Thiksey Monastery,
Ladakh, India.

“Leave enough clues to tell the story, and exclude enough to create a sense of mystery.”

This is not the only means by which we can lead the eye. There are others—pointing, for example. For the magician, the simple nonverbal gesture of pointing, or even looking at something, makes the audience look there, too. In the photograph, this might be the eye line of someone in the image, creating an implied line in the direction of their gaze that leads your viewer to look that way, too. It might be leading lines in the images that converge in one direction, also pulling the eye there. Strong diagonal lines in a frame already pull the eye and, with a little foresight while shooting, can be used to pull the eye in the direction you want it to go. Changing your shooting position only a little might result in straight lines becoming oblique, making your image more dynamic and, again, providing subtle but important attention management tools for you to more intentionally guide the eye of your viewers.

Leaving Clues and Provoking Questions

A great storyteller doesn't tell absolutely everything. She tells enough to make you care, to tell the story and move the plot, and no more. Extraneous details don't provide anything more than confusion. In fact, more than just cluttering the story, a flood of details kills the mystery and the engagement. A good story has a sense of wonder, it raises curiosity, and it leaves something untold for us to gnaw on. Perhaps it's a glance out of frame; we're familiar with the look of affection a woman has on her face, but who is she looking at? A face moves into silhouette as you press the shutter, and suddenly a photo of a specific woman is a photo of a woman around whom there is some mystery.

What you leave in the frame must be part of the story, must be part of the visual plot, even if that's simply establishing the setting. Be very selective. Leaving a cluttered background by shooting wide and indiscriminately does not establish setting; it's lazy photography. The more elements there are within the frame, the less power each of them has, and your story becomes diluted.

Leave enough clues to tell the story, and exclude enough to create a sense of mystery. Unanswered questions engage a viewer and create an interaction between the image and the viewer—a deeper level of viewing that allows us to think and feel more connected to the story. Similarly, placing details in the image that are discovered only after looking at it for a while can contribute to a feeling of surprise, even the feeling of being let in on something. It gives the image an extra layer, engaging the viewer longer or more often.



▲ Canon 20D, 32mm, 1/1600 @ f/5.6, ISO 400

Ethiopia. I've always loved this one. I was standing outside the Land Cruiser, taking a needed bathroom break, when this shepherd and his goats appeared out of nowhere. The ambiguity and unanswered questions about what this young man is looking at are what I like most about the image. The fact that he's looking out of frame and leaves little nose room (the space between the nose and the edge of the frame) breaks a general rule that says you should point the gaze of a subject into the frame and not outward. Somewhere inside me there's a maverick who likes breaking rules. I run with scissors, too.