

10 PRINCIPLES OF BEAUTIFUL PHOTOGRAPHY

T R E Y R A T C L I F F

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10 PRINCIPLES FOR BEAUTIFUL PHOTOGRAPHY

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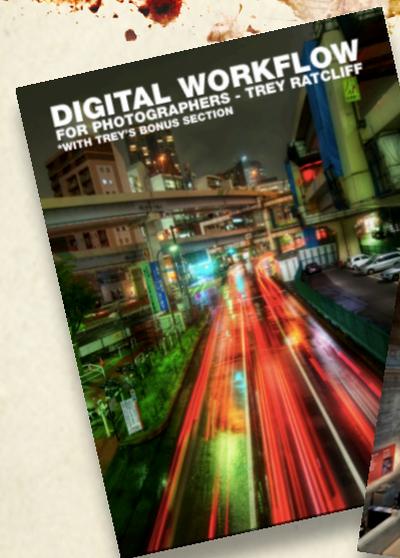
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SOME PLACE IN INDIA... I ALWAYS FORGET THE NAME



INTRODUCTION

A camera does not work like an eye; memory does not work like film.

There is a fine line between a photo that is quite nice and one that is quite breathtaking. At some undefined point, a photo can cross the Rubicon and be forever a piece of beautiful art. That hinterland between a regular photo and evocative art is a moving target from person to person and taste to taste. However, that zone of wonderment can be narrowed a bit once you start to consider about the way the brain stores memories and emotions.

And, yes, it gets a bit touchy-feely here to determine if you have been able to cross that line. With rigorous practice and peer feedback, you can start to appreciate where that zone is and consequently improve your hit ratio.

The good news is that it does not require rune rites of scapulimancy to divine your way to a more beautiful photo. There are some basic things and mantras to keep in mind as you practice and fail then practice and succeed then practice and fail and then rinse and repeat. I'll detail a few of these below.

1 THINK ABOUT THE BRAIN

I've always thought about photography differently. I grew up only seeing out of one eye, thanks to several botched surgeries in the 1970's, when the state of the art was refurbished archaeological tools of Australopithecus medicine men.

When you see out of one eye your whole life and then start using a camera in your mid 30's for the first time, something happens to you! You come to realize that a camera works nothing like the eye. Forget 3D; I'm talking about the way the brain stores images and scenes.



After birth, you have legs, but it takes a few years for your legs to get along with your brain enough to actually walk you around the savanna a bit. The eyes are the same way. They get wired faster than the legs, but the neural pathways from the optic nerve into the parts of the brain that matter take a while to find their chemical trails. You start to sense light levels, then shapes, then edges, then relative positions, and the like. And then, around age two or three, you finally come up with a tagging system to know generally what a "barn" looks like. Your brain has been working nonstop over that time to give you the visual and memory infrastructure to enable that watershed event.

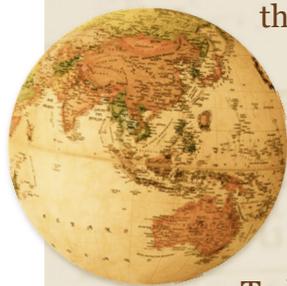
Now let's fast forward to today. You are older, your brain is more or less fully formed (!) and you happen upon a barn in a field. But it's not just any barn – it's the barn you've been wanting to see your entire life. And in the distance, there is a storm brewing as a gentle sun is setting. It's beautiful -- you LOCK it into memory. The way you lock it into memory is nothing like the way a camera records the image on film (or CCD). This is what I quickly came to realize as I sat there, looking at a photo I took with a fabulously expensive Nikon as I was showing a friend, "Well, you really had to be there." I'm sure you've all said that!

Now, this step 1 is a big step – it's a philosophical re-assessment of how the camera works versus how the memory maps a scene, layering the visual reality with the emotions and previous memories that are linked to the scene. You see, you are not just remembering that barn, but you are remembering every barn; you are not just remembering that storm, but you are remembering every storm. A beautiful photo must tell the epic tale of the memory linked with other emotive memories that fold into whole.



ENGAGE IN THE NEO-GLOBAL SALON

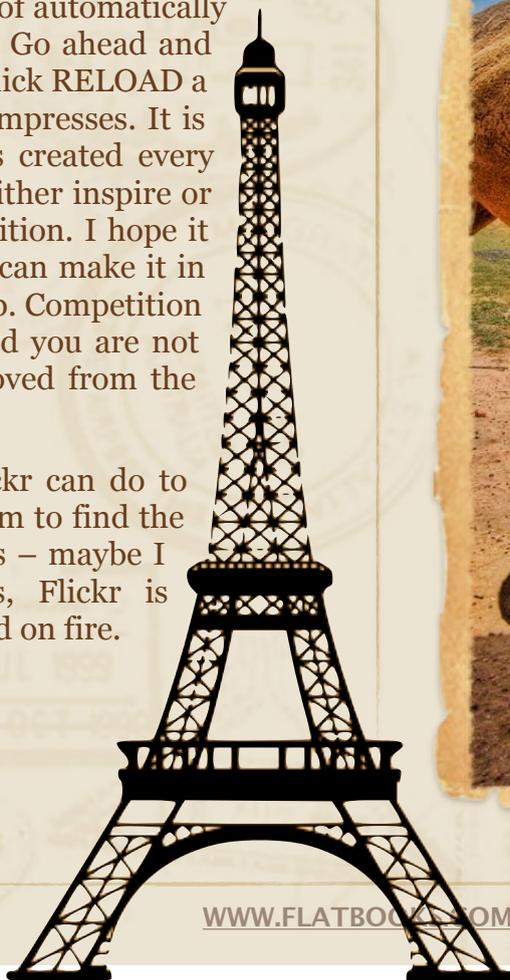
In the 1860's, all art roads led to the Salon in Paris, which was the most important judged competition of art in the western world. In a period of just over 10 years, the Impressionist masters like Renoir, Monet, Pissarro, and Caillebotte battled it out in a competitive and cooperative tour de force that created a panoply of creations that we cannot imagine the world without.



The reason Paris became the center of the art world to enable an explosion of new art was a combination of new technology in travel and communications combined with Napoleon III's focus on the infrastructure around the Salon.

Today the same thing is happening – only no one really seems to realize it in a grand historical sense. It's called Flickr. Flickr has become a techno-Salon, allowing the world to use the Internet to easily enter the competition and force them to evolve and improve their art. The automated "Explore Algorithm" does a pretty good job of automatically choosing the best photos that are uploaded every day. Go ahead and look at the current some of the best in the last 7 days. Click RELOAD a few times and I promise you will see something that impresses. It is quite unbelievable the level of art and beauty that is created every single day. Now, all of this amazing art on Flickr can either inspire or intimidate you depending on your mindset for competition. I hope it inspires you to upload one photo a day and see if you can make it in the top 500 or the top 10 for the say – and don't give up. Competition makes everyone better; this is an undeniable truth and you are not realizing your full potential if you keep yourself removed from the process.

Now, I can think of a number of tangible things Flickr can do to improve this new global competition. Their AI algorithm to find the most interesting new artists still makes many mistakes – maybe I will save that for another article! In many ways, Flickr is squandering an amazing opportunity to set the art world on fire.



3 GET RID OF YOUR TOY CAMERA

Oh, look at that camera you have! It's so tiny and slim and techno-looking. Look! It fits right in your pocket! Oh my, you can take it to parties and to sporting events and it's so convenient. Oh – it does 10 megapixels too! Oh my. Well that is a good camera then!

No it's not. It's a toy – give it to your kids or the nearest Japanese gradeschooler (for whom it was designed) and get serious. I know that 19-year-old blue-shirted-Best-Buy-boy told you that your compact camera was really neat and just what you needed. But are you gonna listen to him, or me?

Get yourself a good camera. I have a list of HDR camera suggestions that aren't very expensive for people just starting out or ready for an upgrade. For those of you that don't know, a DSLR is one of those cameras you have seen pros carrying, but it doesn't have to be one of those giant ones you see in NFL endzones.



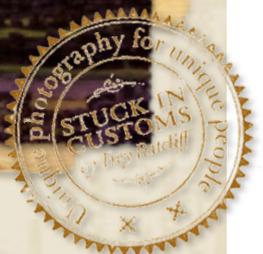
THE MEGOPOLIS HONG KONG



FOURTH OF JULY ON LAKE AUSTIN: THE FIRST HDR PHOTOGRAPH TO HANG IN THE SMITHSONIAN.

Sorry to be rude about the toy thing, but you want to take more beautiful pictures, yes? Well a decent DSLR has such a good sensor chip, combined with more flexible lenses, that your batting average will dramatically improve.

Also, (people with DSLRs already know this) it is important you have a good wide-angle lens for landscapes. Beautiful photography does not have to be a landscape, but they commonly are, and this is what people envision when they want to make their own “beautiful” photos. Thus, we should talk about wide angle lenses here for a moment. If you are used to a toy camera, the you have never really seen the world through a good 10-24mm lens. It's almost the difference between regular TV and HDTV. The vistas are wide and bold, the clouds and the sun and the mountains all FIT, the river and the bridge are easy to compose, and the like. Once you go wide-angle, the landscape will never be the same!



THE LOST HINDU TEMPLE IN THE JUNGLE MIST

4 CARRY A TRIPOD FOR THOSE BEAUTIFUL SUNSETS AND SUNRISES

Oh, what's that? You don't want to carry a tripod? Are you a 9-year-old girl? No, come on now – you are a grown up and you want to take some seriously beautiful photos. Do you think pros carry around tripods because they just like carrying extra weight? No, of course not – they know what the heck they are doing.

If you bit off on getting a DSLR above, then you are going to need a tripod, especially for sunset and night shots. Unless you have the steady hand of a T-2000, then you are going to get some camera shake.

A tripod allows you to do the following things for landscape photography (in no particular order): set up and take your time to compose a photo with serious intent; enables low noise as the shutter stays open longer; look cool while you carry it around; allows you to keep the shutter open for 5+ seconds for the fleeting sunrise and sunset shots; and it can be used as a weapon in a tight spot while traveling (not kidding).

So, you are still worried about carrying it around? The problem is mostly with your attitude, you understand. Let me give you a new perspective. Nothing in

life is worth doing unless you are going to be serious about it. You are going to shoot that sunset, and you are going to take your nice DSLR and your tripod out there and make it happen and no one is going to stop you. You're carrying

that tripod because your serious about this. Otherwise, you can just go sit on a pretty beach at sunset and drink beer with your friends and not be serious about it... go ahead... but you won't be getting any beautiful photography.



GRABBING A BITE AT SUNSET



5 A D M I R E S I M P R E S S I O N I S M

I spoke earlier about the Salon of Paris and what happened in the Impressionist movement. While the process and history of what happens when artists begin cooperating and competing is interesting from a social-group evolution perspective, this section is more about the art itself.

Early critics of the artform found it crude, sloppy, and unconventional to the point where it didn't even deserve to be placed alongside classical masters. But the public was awestruck by the new art form. It doesn't take a critic to know good art, but it does take a careful and discerning eye.

Consider the colors and the styles of Degas, Cézanne, Monet, and Renoir. There is not a single thing about any well-known Impressionist painting that is the slightest bit realistic. But yet, the rough shapes and colors still make sense. What do we mean by that? There is something there that just feels right. What is it?

To me, what feels right about Impressionism is what was discussed in part one above. These Impressionist images get deep into the viewers brain and evoke memories of shared scenes and events. The memory is in fact an Impressionist playground of fleeting colors, shapes, and edges. A face here, a blur there, a hint of something almost there but not quite.

Look at the Monets. Think about how the yellows of a sun in the distance is the same yellow as in a nearby flower, but something about the nearby colors makes the sun feel brighter than the flower. How does he do that? Can you get closer to achieving this with your photography?

As you look at Impressionist paintings, juxtapose them to your own photography. If you want to evoke the same sorts of feelings, then consider the realism that is not there.



THE MAJESTY - A PANORAMA OF 90 SHOTS



6 PRACTICE WITH HDR

What is HDR? It's short for High Dynamic Range photography and it's all the rage. I have an HDR Tutorial right here on my blog. I will explain with HDR is in the following paragraphs in a circuitous but meaningful way.



About 80% of my photos use HDR, but I do something a little different. As you start looking into HDR (many of you already have), you will begin to notice how absolutely horrible most HDR looks. When many people begin experimenting with it (myself included!), it was overdone and looked too psychedelic. Over time, mine have improved via rigorous self-examination and evolving methodology.

Remember that bit me growing up and seeing the world with one eye? Now we come to part two in this daring mini-biography as we are cross the stepping stones to my point. My background in college was Computer Science and Math, so I've always thought about things in terms of algorithms and software. After the very first time I used a DSLR camera when I was 35 or so, I very quickly came to the realization that there was something missing.

The missing something was the “software” layer between the eye and the memory. Consider what you do on the scene with the barn, and juxtapose the following sequence of events with how the camera works. You survey the scene. Your eye jumps around from interesting object to interesting object, sometimes moving slowly, sometimes moving quickly. Your eye lets in more light in some areas, less light in others as your pupil dilates. You squint into the setting sun and see warm colors splashed across the clouds, the grass, and the barn. You remember other barns, other storms, other sunsets. You are with someone or your are alone, but you certainly remember. You lock it all up in your mind's eye forever.

Since we are all visual creatures, a photo or a painting can evoke great memories, just like a song or a smell. But the only way to trigger some of those intense memories on a deep level is to adjust the light levels in the photograph, so that the effective light levels and color match those that are buried in your head. The HDR process can help achieve these goals.

7 TAKE YOUR CAMERA EVERYWHERE



Don't just take your camera out on those rare occasions when you actually decide to set aside a portion of your day for photography. Face it: we're all busy people with real lives and setting aside 3-4 hours for anything extracurricular is rough. But it only takes a few seconds to get inspired for a photo, and it's no good if your camera is back at home.

Keep it in the trunk of your car in a fun little photo backpack with a small selection of lenses. You never know when you will see something wonderful.

Use this opportunity to take at least one photo a day. It doesn't have to be a grand landscape – just something small and nice that you really should have noticed before.





THE LONELY TRINITY



UNDERSTAND THE FANTASY/ REALITY MEMBRANE

Do you have kids? Are you a kid at heart? Think about being a kid and what happened when you turned into a jaded old grown up. Maybe by the end of this section you can ask yourself some new questions about reality.

Kids have this remarkable “membrane” between fantasy and reality. They can jump back and forth between the two in an effortless way. In fact, the membrane is wonderfully “thick”, in that there is a vast dreamstate wilderness where the world is both fantasy and reality. When pressed, the kids will tell you what is real and what is pretend, but that is often a painful process that extracts them from the escapism that was so visceral just a few moments before.

When we are all grown up and serious, that membrane is razor-thin, and there is little tolerance of what is “pretend” and “fantasy”. Why is this? Is it because we are surrounded by other serious people and we want to conform? Is it because fantastical events and escapades are what “kids” do, and thus is not pertinent to the practical?

Obviously we all still can get into that fantasy zone and we all love it. That’s why movies are still such a potent force; they give us social permission to be like a kid for 2 hours, once a week. It also explains the waxing relevance of online games.

But when we start talking about photography – well now, that is a different subject! Photography is a serious art form, practiced by classically trained masters whose reality is quite serious indeed! There mustn’t be anything fantastical introduced via the art form. The process is the camera straight to the film, you see!

Poppycock.



LEARN TO DRAW

Hey this is a weird one, eh? Who on Earth has time to learn to draw? Well, you would have time if you stopped wasting time on nonsensical activities. You've got one life here so you might as well start applying yourself.

I didn't have any time! Heck I have a load of kids, a full time job, a bunch of cool games to play, books to read, I have to go exercise, I do a bit of photography, and blah blah blah... So, as a personal experiment, I was going to see if anyone can learn to draw. This is similar to another experiment I did on myself to see if I could take something I hated and turn it into something I enjoy. Only that experiment was coffee, and I was afraid learning to draw would be harder, particularly because of the jitteryness introduced from the first experiment.

I've always admired people that can just grab a pencil and paper and make something amazing. Man, I always wanted to do that! I went into the experiment with the hypothesis that there are great natural artists that can draw anything with zero instruction whatsoever. These are true masters and I was unlikely to achieve that goal. However, I thought I could get passable at drawing and get to a point of satisfaction. A great side effect, I envisioned, is that it would give me new insight into photography – into line, shape, light, and composition.

All of this turned out to be true. So, if you have hit a rough spot or the doldrums with your photography, take up drawing. There are a few instructional books out there that are practical hands-on guides that can get you the basic pointers you need. I think you will be quite impressed on how it starts to bleed into your photography art!





THE INNER SANCTUM

10 M A K E MISTAKES

Last, make a lot of mistakes. Throw yourself and your art out there and see what works and what doesn't work. Get your stuff looked at by real friends that give you frank feedback.

Don't be like those sorry saps on American Idol who make fools of themselves in big auditions because they've spent their whole life with their tone-deaf

mom telling them they are incredible at singing "Over the Rainbow", because Aunt Mabel enjoyed it so much during that 2nd grade play. Get yourself online and begin making friends by finding other photographers that you respect. Beg and plead for them to come look at one or two of your photos and get their frank feedback. They will cut you apart, but just take your medicine, lick your wounds, and go out there and improve.



FIN: And there we have ten things to shake up your world a little bit. I'm no Baudelaire when it comes to writing these sorts of polemics. However, just as he drove Manet to be Manet, perhaps I can do my own little part to stoke the fires and drive a new art revolution forward; evolve and evoke, or whither into nothingness.

A BIG THANK YOU FROM THE RATCLIFF FAMILY!



I hope you enjoyed this eBook. Not only do they take a long time to make, but they have taken me many years of toil and expertise (and hundreds of mistakes!) to make this possible.

Many Bothans died to bring you this information.

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HOPE FOR US ALL THE DECADE OF THE ARTIST

I gave a recent speech at Google, where I referred to the upcoming "Decade of the Artist". I wanted to talk a little more about that.

I believe that there is a new age of artistry upon us. The tools and information available to all of us can help re-awaken all the artists that are hiding inside of us. And yes, I mean there are many artists inside every person. Maybe some of them come out from time-to-time, or maybe all of them have been suppressed since childhood. Schools and parents can do these sorts of things. But none of those constraints exist any more, and we finally have the tools and the network to be truly experimental and enjoy our right-brains for a bit.

Over the last 20 years, the technology of the Internet has been built out, enabling us to communicate and share ideas in a nearly effortless way. If you enjoy creating, then it has never been easier to share that creation with the world. In a sense, it doesn't matter if only a few people or a few thousand people notice. What really matters is that you no longer have to create in a vacuum, and by sharing your creations with the world, others of your mind will end up finding you.

The nature of the Internet enables interesting artforms to be discovered and shared. Since the dawn of man, artistic people have wanted this very moment! Even as late as the 19th century, the only way the great Impressionists like Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and Manet could get their work shown at the Salon was if a committee of octogenarians at the École des Beaux-Arts approved it. Now the Salon is the Internet, and everyone is invited.

Additionally, despite doomsday-laden news reports, the world is getting more and more wealthy every day. Infant mortality is down, population growth slows as countries become more sophisticated, surpluses rather than shortages abound, and people have more leisure time than ever. This leisure time is wonderful for artists, because people just want to consume beautiful and interesting things. Not everyone is creative, but they can appreciate creativity. So now that the age of the Internet is upon us, everyone out there is simply craving beautiful and interesting art -- and their appetite is insatiable.



BEAUTIFUL DISNEY WORLD AT SUNSET



I have seen first hand, thanks to the unexpected popularity of the blog, that there are millions of people out there that love to create -- and they want even more tools and goodies to help them create. They can picture the shadow of something wonderful in their mind, and their hands yearn to create it. And not only does the internet enable a new style of communication, but it allows

people to create even better tools for other creators! It's a snowballing effect that is tremendously exciting and encouraging.

Thank you again for all the support and being either a direct or indirect member of the community. I'm excited to be going through this Decade of the Artist with you. I think we're going to have a fun and unexpected time!

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"JUST DIFFERENT" VERSUS GRADATIONS OF PERFECTION

A master's eye will always be considering the meta-analysis of photography.

That is, you will always be keenly aware of your attitude and approach to a photograph, even while fully in the moment. Imagine yourself a sorcerer, with the ability to have multiple cogent cycles of thought, each of which is completely compartmentalized, yet being aware of one another with a delicate tether of meta-information.

While composing a photo, keep a steady tally of the main objects involved with the composition. Keep ranking them as "more interesting" and "less interesting." Imagine you are at the eye-doctor with the old "better/worse" test. You know, when the doctors perform this test, they have multiple levels of testing to make sure you are consistent. Sometimes people just say "better" or "worse" without even really knowing -- they just feel pressured to say these things. So, doctors have come up with a system to make sure there is consistency so they don't prescribe the wrong thing.

The way you can be your own eye-doctor when composing is to recall the transitive property of numbers. You might remember from high-school algebra the notion that if A is greater than B, and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C. Inevitably, you'll be dealing with various objects in your photo. As you move around to consider the composition of these objects, you will be choosing whether or not to include them. Perhaps you will be considering how prominent of an "actor" to make the object in the scene. If you are looking at three objects in a scene, you may determine that Actor One is better than two. And Actor Two is better than Actor Three. Check yourself to ensure that Actor One is better than Actor Three.

It's not always that easy. Maybe combining Actor One and Actor Three is stronger than Actor Two alone. It will behoove you to be somewhat scientific and analytical when putting together a scene. This needs to work in concert with your artistic side



without skipping a beat. That is, you need to artistically assess the scene and then scientifically rank it against other scenes. This interplay between the left and right brain is a tremendous challenge and quite fun.

You might think this sounds like "overkill," but I ask you to reconsider the days and weeks great painters went through when putting together a still life. Every object has its own beautiful place. If you are lazy, the viewer will know. Some people cannot tell the difference between a thinking photographer and a lazy photographer. But those people do not matter. The people that matter can tell when you are being lazy.

They can tell.

Co-terminously you must be aware that sometimes there is no better or worse, just "different." How can you tell these situations? It is impossible to put into words without slipping into a poetic mode. But, perhaps you can think of two things in your life that are inherently "unrankable." You love them both, and they are simply "different."

The Good News is that once you are able to know one thing is simply "different" from another, then you suddenly have two photos instead of just one! Remember, something that has not been mentioned here is the reason for this whole exercise. It is simply the discipline of knowing when to take the shot. If you have one thing that is better than the next, try not to take the "worse" shot. It's a waste! It's sloppy, and if you know it's not as good as the other shot at the time, there is no need to take it. But, if you can determine that you can capture the same subject in two different conditions - not better or worse - just different - then you can shoot away. Do you see the difference?

Now, this doesn't mean that you won't come home with 10 shots of that perfect cheesecake, sit down in

Lightroom, and then choose the best one out of

10. I think many of us still will do that. But

to come home with less and less photos.

You COULD have come home with 500

photos of that cheesecake, right? Congratulate yourself

for being able to filter out 490 of them on the scene. That is

no small accomplishment, and it feels like the right

direction for things to go, doesn't it?

our goal is
Just think.
photos of that
for being able to filter out 490 of them on the scene. That is
no small accomplishment, and it feels like the right
direction for things to go, doesn't it?



SAMPLE

Every Problem in the Book (the eBook!)

This incredibly horrible old photo below from yours truly has many of the telltale HDR mistakes.

MISTAKE #2: DIRTY WHITES (PAGE 32)

MISTAKE #3: BLACK CLOUDS IN DAYTIME WHITES (PAGE 29)

MISTAKE #6: LOSING ALL SENSE OF COLOR (PAGE 20)



MISTAKE #10: TOO MANY COLORS (PAGE 8)

MISTAKE #5: EARLY PROCESSING (PAGE 25)



Mistake #3: Black Clouds in Daytime

SOLUTION

If you are going to make some nice HDR "dark clouds," make sure there is no blue sky also in the scene.

If you are going to have dark clouds in your photo, be sure that the entire sky is cloudy. That's a bit more believable.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

Think you'll agree with me that it is just not possible to have sunny skies, blue skies, and black-dark clouds out at the same time. These sorts of scenes are immediately rejected by the viewer as impossible.

Still, I recommend not letting your clouds get to "pure" black. Keep it a dark grey... it's still cool.. don't worry about being too extreme. The viewer's eye will immediately adjust to the darkest thing in the sky, and that will become their anchor.



SAMPLE



Any system worth having is one based on self-evolution

AN EVER-CHANGING SYSTEM

I will give you a great system for keeping track of everything. But, be ready to change and bend new subsystems around YOU. Be just as creative with your subsystems as you are with your photography.

ORGANIZING VIDEO

Once you have the system in place below, you can use the exact same system for video. Note that Lightroom 2 (below) does not allow video. But Lightroom 3 does, and that will be available any day now. I would not recommend using one system for photos and another for video -- do everything with as

LET'S PLAN FOR THE WORST.

I'm not talking about a fire or theft. These possibilities are ever-present dangers. But you should really plan for all sorts of digital disasters, the equivalent of a hurricane. You never quite know what will happen, and you do not want to be caught with your pants down. Unlike many real-life and property disaster situations, there is no insurance for your digital files. If they are gone, they are gone. No amount of money can make up for that.

In another worse-case scenario, we will pretend you live in Seattle. Plan for the worst.

Really! Some crazy dude sets off an EMP (electromagnetic pulse that comes from many types of bombs), wiping out every digital bit in a 25 mile radius. Or a fire that takes down your place during the 3 hours you had to run errands. Anything could happen!

For that reason, we will have a system in which your data exists in 3 places. Two in your home town and a third place that is quite far away.

THREE SUGGESTED STORAGE PLACES

- 1) Inside your computer on a big hard drive
 - 2) Outside your computer on an external drive that is kept in another room
 - 3) On the internet cloud using a system like - see <http://www.stuckincustoms.com/backblaze>
- * Other options are Carbonite, the Amazon and others!



Personally, I use a Drobbo to store my files at home

Begin using the collections as steps in your new, smarter workflow

STEP 6 - ADDING TO YOUR UNPROCESSED COLLECTION

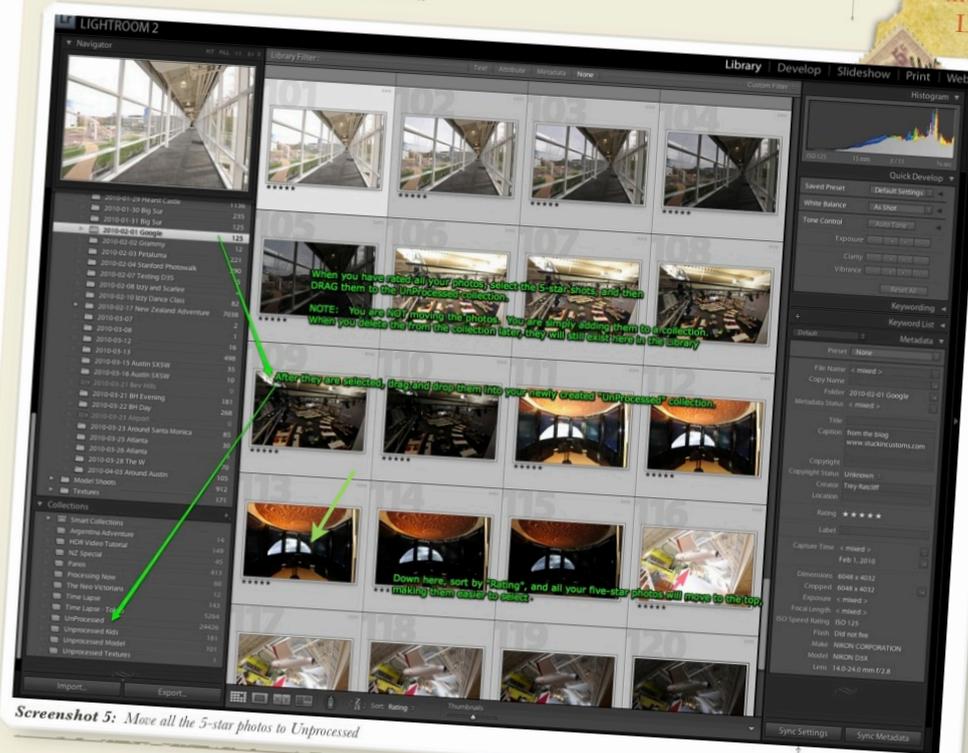
Go back to your five-star photos, select them, and drag them all into "Unprocessed". This is shown in Screenshot 5

This will leave behind all the undesirable shots. Note that you should NEVER need

to go back to that directory structure above. It's done... only in the case of a mistake or a real change of heart will you ever need to visit that place again. Now, all of your attention should be in the collections.

Repeat this over and over again until you have gone through all your imported directories, chosen the best photos, and moved them to the "Unprocessed" collection.

"Remember that as you use collections, adding and deleting photos to them does nothing to the original photos on the hard drive. They are always there in the Library."



Screenshot 5: Move all the 5-star photos to Unprocessed

SAMPLE



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