

# EDITOR'S COMMENTS



## *The 10 Most Useful Accessories*

*By Brooks Jensen*

Now that I've sucked you in with a good clickbait title, let me confess that this is not really accessories in the traditional sense, but rather things and ideas that are incredibly useful.

### ***1- An Extra Day***

Time being the precious commodity that it is, I've often thought the most useful thing we can have when we're out in the world photographing is an extra day. Waiting for weather, waiting for light, traveling a little farther, being able to slow down and take some extra time, gambling by traveling down an unknown road, all these are things that help our photography tremendously.

### ***2- A good library.***

Unfortunately, I've found most public libraries to provide scant help for us fine art photographers. There will be a selection of how-to books, maybe a monograph or two by the most famous or popular photographers — like Anne Geddes or *The Best of National Geographic*. But if you really want a useful library, the greatest chances are you'll have to build one of your own by investing in your own book collection. I've said elsewhere that I believe art is a grand conversation between us and other creative individuals. Books are the most common and convenient way for that conversation to take place, albeit a one-way conversation.

The two best ways to improve your photography is to *do photography* and to *look at photographs*. Your own library will be of inestimable value and provide you with inspiration, ideas, and even some fairly practical suggestions.

### ***3- The dome of silence.***

I love going out and photographing with peers and fellow photographers. The social aspects are always enjoyable, but to make our best work requires concentration — both the intellectual kind of purposeful thinking and the intuitive kind of sensitive perception and reaction to what we see. Both of those are facilitated when we are not distracted by conversation, music, radio advertising, and the normal and incessant attack on our consciousness from external stimulus. Strangely enough, it's external stimulus that we want to emphasize, but the kind of external stimulus that excites our vision and our creative muse, not the blathering of external sources that are trying to pull our attention away from our art making.

### ***4-Functional simplicity***

Photography is an incredibly fun hobby, and part of what makes it so fun are the plethora of toys that enable us to make photographs. Beyond cameras and lenses, there are countless accessories that can work their way into our process. The double-edged sword of accessories is, obviously, that they

can be both a tremendous asset and a logistical burden. The more gear you require, the more attention it steals from your creative process, the more management it all requires, the more you have to organize and accommodate its demands — and the more weight and bulk you will have to haul around with you. I know very few photographers who don't have a closet full of abandoned accessories that initially sounded like a solution to some creative problem, but ended up being a burden that is no longer worth the hassle. Perhaps it's just part of the process we have to go through, but it sure would be nice to have all that money and all that time back so that I could put those limited resources to better use.

### **5- Consumables**

The act of photographing uses up certain materials. A backup camera might be important in case of hardware failure, but if you run out of batteries or memory cards, all the spare cameras in the world won't help. As a friend of mine once said — I suspect from personal experience — if you happen to run out and need more, it's difficult to find a supply of 8x10 sheet film in a small town drugstore. On my first photographic trip to Japan I carried 200 rolls of 120 film and only needed about 50 rolls. I still think I made the right choice even though the extra 150 unused rolls were a burden to carry. I did not miss any photographic opportunities because I ran short of film — a testament to the value of extra consumables.

On the other hand. About 70% of my images were five stops overexposed because I had dropped my light meter and was unaware that it had become damaged. Even the best laid plans of mice and men ...

### **6- Notes**

The process of photographing is a combination of thinking, reacting. If we are doing those things in the field, it's very likely some of those thoughts and

reactions will be important later on, either while you are processing the images, working on the project, or perhaps even writing an artist statement. I am a strong advocate for note taking in the field, but not the kind of notes I took in my youth. I used to use preprinted "exposure cards" where I would write down all my f/stops and shutter speeds, focal lengths, and film development strategies. In retrospect, those notes were unnecessary and contributed nothing to my artistic process. On the other hand, I often find myself thinking about content ideas, other images from other trips that might relate to the one I'm about to make, all kinds of questions from philosophy to location logistics, to life in general. Capturing those fleeting thoughts, phrases, questions, and moods has become an integral part of my artistic process. Capturing those things when they happen in the field is mandatory. I've learned the hard way that relying on my memory is a very questionable strategy.

Over the years, I've used a number of note taking logistics — blank books, microcassette recorders, digital MP3 recorders, smartphones, and even the video capabilities in my digital cameras. I've come to the conclusion that the logistics of note taking are strictly one of personal preference. What is of more importance is that the notes be captured with whichever medium you find integrates most seamlessly with your workflow.

### **7- Curiosity**

Perhaps the most destructive characteristic that ruins creativity is the preconceived idea. When you know what you want to photograph before arriving at the destination, you unknowingly unleash a mental barrier known in Gestalt psychology as "Lock on/Lock out." The human brain is not constructed to hold two conflicting ideas simultaneously. Therefore, once you know what you want to photograph — particularly if you can visualize it with some detail and clarity in your mind's eye — the Reticular activating system will create barriers

ers that prevents other information from arriving in your consciousness. You literally won't be able to see the alternatives in direct proportion to the strength of your preconceived idea. I remember quite clearly being at the Olmstead Overlook to Yosemite Valley on a day when viewing Half Dome was almost impossible because of heavy smoke from a local forest fire. A busload of German tourists arrived at the lookout, rushed to the scenic overlook, and immediately started complaining their moment was ruined because they could not make a clear photograph of that iconic structure. They completely failed to realize the unique opportunity to capture photograph of a ghosted, mysterious view of Yosemite Valley.

The core foundation of artmaking is curiosity and exploration, not seeking out our preconceived conceptions. Curiosity is cousin to acceptance; when exploration become an act of acquisition, it loses touch with the spirit of receiving. Artmaking is as much the receiving of a gift as it is the making an artifact.

### **8- More patience**

However much patience you naturally have, your photography will improve if you can become even more patient. There are, of course, the obvious things worth waiting for: better light better weather, better photographic subjects, etc. I find rarely discussed the importance of waiting for the right frame of mind. Speaking frankly, we humans are an unbelievably complicated bundle of nerves, emotions, habits, thoughts, and karmic influences we can't even begin to enumerate. The process of being creative is not equally accessible from all our moods. Sometimes we have to be patient for ourselves to be ready for the creative moment. Sometimes the best thing we can do to support our creative life is to take a nap, eat a sandwich, sit a while and just listen, think, and put the camera down.

We simply cannot be creative *on demand*. We might be able to put ourselves in a receptive mood to react to what the world is willing to give us, and that can be a useful strategy of passivity, receptivity — a polar opposite to the more typically acquisitive nature of *taking* photographs.

The funny part about patience is that it often looks a lot like waiting, and when one waits we often find that we become aware and perceive things that were otherwise hidden, right before our eyes. Photography takes time. There are no shortcuts to success. Luck can be an occasionally successful strategy. Patience is a better strategy that more often leads to success.

### **9- A spirit of cooperation**

The myth of the solitary and lone wolf photographer spending hours alone in the dark room, roaming the world with camera in hand, searching for a subject, these are powerful myths that seduce many photographers away from a much better strategy — cooperation. I remember a great breakthrough in my work that resulted in my book, *Made of Steel*. I was frustrated in being turned down and denied permission to photograph in many of the garages I approached. I was too aggressive, possibly even pushy. I was excited, but they were not. I learned the importance of their cooperation. As I became more patient, they became more cooperative.

The importance of gallery relationships, publisher relationships, the importance of even those who sell and service our equipment — every successful photographer participates in a complicated web of relationships that involve cooperation in order to make meaningful artwork, let alone a career in art making.

I'd push this even further with the statement that we need to cooperate with our own creative muse, or if you prefer, our own creative subconscious. While we are busy thinking about f/stops and

shutter speeds, lens choices and compositions, our creative subconscious is thinking more deeply — about relationships and connections, about metaphors and meaning, about the empathy required to see our photographs as others will see them. We have a choice, to ignore those deeply rooted creative impulses and try to control the entire process with our intellectualizing brain, or we can recognize the synergy that arises when we cooperate with our own inner self.

### ***10- Concluding thoughts***

Photography is a technically demanding activity. There is so much we need to learn and master. Isn't it interesting, however, that technical success doesn't not imply artistic success? The success of our *photographs* might be the result of our mastery of craft, but the success of our *artwork* requires mastery of much more demanding and meaningful inquiries.