

The Chicken or the Egg? Preparation Comes First!

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As photographers, we all have the desire to make that wonderful image every time we press the shutter. If we didn't, why are we photographing? John Shaw refers to a few basic questions we must ask ourselves before we decide to shoot a certain subject. I strongly recommend that you look them up (they are in many of his books). The purpose of this writing is to go even farther back, before we get into the field, and then to make what we hope will be acceptable images. This is an article about what you should be doing with your mind, rather than your equipment.

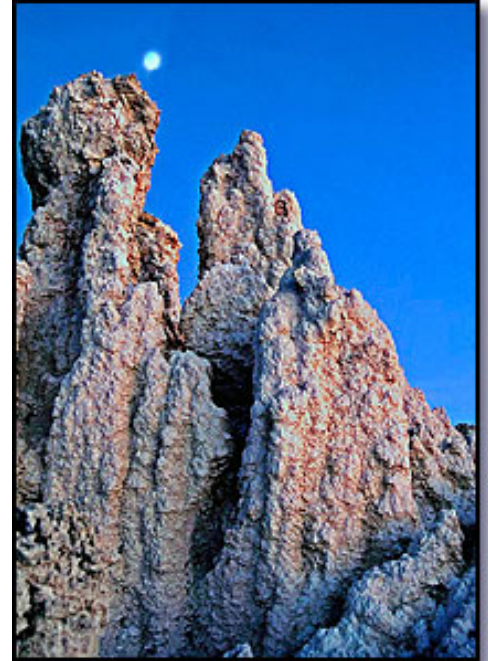
PREPERATION

I strongly believe that preparation is the key to making good images. Yes, we need to know all that we have read and heard over and over regarding what it takes to make consistently great images. Still, few books and articles talk enough about preparation. Without this function, in my opinion, everything else will have a tough time coming together.

In sports, the term "*the will to win*" is used over and over. What does that mean? We can substitute the word "succeed" for "win" and apply it to life in general, as well as to photography. Don't we all have the will to succeed? If you don't - stop reading now. I think most of us do, and preparation can sometimes make the difference between success and failure.

The term "*the will to win (or succeed)*" is, in my opinion, the most overblown statement that anyone can make. When we venture out to make that image (again, after answering John Shaw's questions!) we certainly have the will to make it a good one, but we must also have to have the will to prepare to succeed in order to make it happen. I can't stress this enough - we must have the WILL to PREPARE to succeed.

For many photographers, preparation consists of getting in the car, driving somewhere, putting the camera on the tripod (do you all use a tripod?), plunking it down on the ground and shooting away. This is often done with utter disregard to good technical or compositional skills, and is likely just good enough to make a snapshot. This lack of skill most often results from lack of preparation, long before getting out into the field. It is analogous to the baseball pitcher that gets to the ballpark five minutes before game time, changes into his uniform, and walks out to the mound to begin his chores. One does not have to be too familiar with baseball to picture the kind of game that pitcher will have. Of course, no pitcher of sound mind would do such a thing! The photographer practicing of this type of preparation will likely be plagued by the same type of problems, and oftentimes wonder why he or she is making no appreciable progress. Some photographers do not seem to understand that the problems are a direct result of their hit-and-miss careless preparation habits. Lacking this understanding, the photographer continues to plod along in his or hers futile way, doing nothing constructive to overcome the problems.





To the intelligent, analytical, photographer, preparation is synonymous with careful and meticulous image-making. Included in the preparation is putting your mind in the right place in order to be able to concentrate and to enjoy the image-making process. Everybody does this differently. For me, if I am going on a sunrise shoot, I usually awake about two hours before I set out. I'll get something to eat or drink and sit quietly, sometimes with my dogs, and listen to music for an hour. Maybe look at some images in a book, etc. There are certain artists, both musicians and photographers, that put my mind in the creative zone. This calms me down, lets me think about where I am going, what I am trying to accomplish and - most importantly - it allows me to enjoy the process. I don't include getting equipment ready, packing a lunch, wearing the proper clothing, etc. as preparation. Preparation to me

is getting my mind in the right place, understanding, appreciating, and ultimately enjoying the natural environment where I am about to be. If I am in a new area, I take time to look into its natural history, and to study exactly what I'll be going in order to anticipate what I'll see when I get there. This pre-field time is so important and so misunderstood. I truly believe that if you put your mind in the right frame, when you get to the field your technique and thus your images will be rewarded.

When you get to an area you are going to photograph in - slow down; leave your equipment in the pack, sit and observe where you are, enjoy the smells, the sounds, and all that is around you. Images shot in a hurry will, more often than not, be average at best. Those who let themselves become part of the environment will likely produce better images. This is also part of the preparation process. Sometimes just being in a certain spot is essential, and photography is secondary. There's nothing wrong with that!

The greatest and most highly esteemed photographers achieve greatness only through hour upon hour of intelligent preparation. More significantly, after attaining prominence and recognition, their preparation habits never slacken. Every great photographer knows that in staying on top requires scrupulous attention to every detail of the art, and this means constant daily honing to keenest edge of all the techniques involved in photography; most importantly - preparation.

TECHNIQUE:

Let's now assume that the preparation for a day of photography is accomplished and talk a bit about technique. Technique, to me, includes knowledge of good composition, exposure, proper use of your equipment, knowing and understand the subject you are about to capture, taking the weather and lighting conditions into consideration, and so on. In other words, everything needed to make a good photograph. To overcome a problem in any aspect of technique, it is essential to first know that the problem exists and, second, what can be done to solve it. As simple as this may sound, a problem is not always easily recognized as such by some photographers or, if it is, its true cause is not always identified. Very often the true cause is attributed to something other than the actual one. A fairly common example is blaming the equipment or the light for poor images. The analytical photographer will quickly identify the problem and correct it by giving more attention to the cause. The careless photographer will plod along day after day, constantly making the same kind of average images, and never stopping to analyze the reason for failure so he or she can take the necessary steps for overcoming the particular problem.

Another common problem is a habit of which some photographers are guilty: when an average image is made, they will stop, try to correct the mistakes and sometimes succeed in making that average image a great one. They will then continue to shoot until another average image is made and again follow the same unsound correctional procedure until still another average image is made, ad infinitum. The fault is not in making the corrections when each mistake occurs, but rather in not remaining at the problem spot and making correct images over and over until getting it right is practically automatic. If you are constantly having exposure problems - correct them, then keep shooting using the correction or knowledge you have gained until it becomes automatic. This can apply to any of the items that I include in the term "technique".



To gain great technical proficiency as an end unto itself is an exercise in nothingness - only to be able to point the lens at a subject, to calculate the exposure, and to shoot. This shallow goal has as much to do with the aesthetic qualities of photography as do the aims of the circus seal that has learned to play Yankee Doodle on circus horns. The ultimate goal of a photographer is to consistently create wonderful images, and the real purpose in gaining technical command is that he or she can then focus their entire attention on just that - making wonderful images. This is what it's all about.

SUBJECTIVITY:

Herein lies the danger, however. What is a great image? Great compared to what? Or to whom? Being able to judge images presupposes certain photographic perceptive powers, to a greater or lesser degree, on the part of the viewer. To put one's own photography in perspective one should view images made by acknowledged great photographers in the respective style, as well as in other styles. Even someone with a less developed perception will sense the qualities that are the distinguishing marks of a great photographer and, as a result, will be able to evaluate his or her own ability.

The importance of preparation and good technique can not be emphasized enough. In the words of the great American orator Wendell Phillips: "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." Substituting the word "preparation" for "liberty" describes most precisely what it takes to create great images.

One final thought:

Even the best photographers have good days and bad days. These are days when their efficiency is lower than what is normal for them. Often there seems to be no logical explanation for this. But it does happen and, barring any change in their normal routine, either too much shooting or too little shooting, the only reasonable explanation is the day-by-day psychological and/or physiological variations that make up of every normal person. We don't eat exactly the same things every day, we don't sleep exactly the same number of hours every night, and the problems of just simply living are not exactly the same every day. These psychological and/or physiological variations are the subtle factors which probably cause the occasional fluctuations in any given day of photography. However, the most important thing is that the normal level of one's photographic ability should be at such a high plain that even on a bad day, only the photographer will be aware of this, not the viewer.

Prepare!!!



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Jack Graham has been fortunate to have lived on the east and west coast as well as the Midwest while enjoying photographing the natural world. Jack has been successful in publication and stock photography as well. Credits include Outdoor Photography (UK), California Wild, and many DNR publications, Audubon, Nature Conservancy, Chicago Wilderness and Sierra Club publications as well as many calendar credits. Corporate work includes prints and stock applications for internal as well as publication use. Jack continues to conduct his "Classroom in the field" Photo workshops throughout the United States. Jack is a member of NANPA (North American Nature Photographers Association), FNAWS (Federation for North American Wild Sheep), Mono Lake Committee, and SUWA (Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance). Jack can be contacted at jack@jackgrahamphotography.com.



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