

Good photography

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A topic that comes up again and again in my classes and presentations in one form or another is "What makes a good photo?" There is no simple answer.

However, there are pure, simple facts of what comprises good photography. Good photography takes into account many things: lighting/shadow, composition, exposure, subject, story, color, contrasts, sharpness, depth of field, and more -- often intangible -- things. A good photo is one with great orchestration of the facets of photography, that ends in a pleasing image. Likely there is a little bit of luck tossed into our salad of preparation, positioning and equipment.

There are no bonus points for dangling from helicopters except in that it may offer the right perspective. A great moment, whether captured of a penned animal or one in the wild, is still a great shot. Whether they look while standing knee deep in mud or sitting in a plush armchair, the final image is what the viewer sees...no less or more because of the subject or how it was captured. Passion for a subject should be evident in the photography of it.

There is no one philosophy that will capture a great image, but any great image will encompass all these things. I think the ideals are reinforced by the perceptions of Ansel Adams, and I have collected a few of his attributed comments here:

Mr. Adams on a good photograph:

- A good photograph is knowing where to stand.
- A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed.
- A true photograph need not be explained, nor can it be contained in words.

On the rules for making a good photograph:

- There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.

On luck in making photos:

- Sometimes I do get to places just when God's ready to have somebody click the shutter.

On perspective of observing photos:

- A photograph is usually looked at - seldom looked into.
- There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer.

On how to take an image:

- To photograph truthfully and effectively is to see beneath the surfaces and record the qualities of nature and humanity which live or are latent in all things.

On photography and the creative spirit:

- No man has the right to dictate what other men should perceive, create or produce, but all should be encouraged to reveal themselves, their perceptions and emotions, and to build confidence in the creative spirit.

To me, wherever there are opportunities, I am glad to share the joy of photography, at whatever level...photographs need not be marred by griping discussion for what an image could have been, if only...Shots can be satisfactory as an amateur or professional, and only your own expectations of what is good will change. Images can be explored in greater depth and improved in image processing to bring out more -- as Adams often did himself as an artisan in the wet darkroom, which today we can all explore without chemicals using Photoshop or Elements.

As you explore your photography on whatever level, and as your skills develop, enjoy it for what it is. Enjoy a sense of accomplishment in how you improve or improve your images, and your skills. Resist the urge to be overly critical and poison the water that keeps your interest in images and photography growing.

A good photo is always the one you are about to take, and it can be better for what you learned from the experience you gain as you shoot.