

Photography

Instructional Photography Walk

December 12, 2017 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

A Walk in the Woods Light and Composition A Saturday afternoon in late November 2017

It feels like the idea chose me, not me it.

I don't mean to make it sound transcendent. Time will tell!

The goal: offer unscripted photography instruction "on the ground", out in the woods with camera and tripod. The participants could expect to make something beautiful and amazing - wall-worthy - with a coach (me) .

Overall: **success!** Did we experience challenges? Yes. Did we overcome them? Partly!

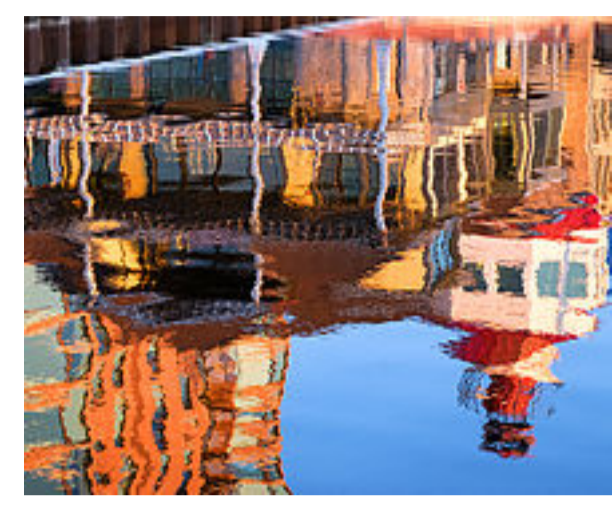


A bucolic(?) scene from the venue, made by myself during a location-scouting visit - I didn't show this one, however, until after, not wanting participants to copy me ... and no one did! Some people in retrospect have questioned whether the wreath should have been enhanced like that.

That aim of the Walk was a bit on the loose side, and some of the participants and some of my advisors have leaned towards something more structured. I can see pros and cons to that.

Everyone arrived with their individual skill levels, so doing it this more flexible way afforded me the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses right away, on an individual basis, and, I hoped, to reduce obstacles on a personal, customized basis.

Featured Posts



Tool of Thirds
November 30, 2017

Recent Posts



Instructional Photography Walk
December 12, 2017



Tool of Thirds
November 30, 2017



Marketing or Art?
November 16, 2017



What defines a proper photograph?
October 30, 2017

Archive

- December 2017 (1)
- November 2017 (2)
- October 2017 (1)

Search By Tags

- Christmas gift photography
- portrait
- rules tools composition photography

Follow ctLow Photography



I probably ended up with a few too many people ... six, plus myself, plus our hostess who at the last minute decided just to hostess, not to work her camera, plus one last-minute regret, plus one no-show. (There is always a no-show.)

So, it could have been even more. I hadn't intended that many, but it grew organically during planning - a longer story.

Six photographers were a bit too many for me to bop around from person to person and see any one photo from inception through completion, which could take five minutes or could take twenty, without feeling that I was neglecting the others.

As I get into this commercially, I think that this format will require smaller numbers of people. Two or three would be more feasible. Sometimes then perhaps the whole group could even pause together to work on one person's composition.

Also, some of the participants were happy just wandering on their own, and some wanted more guidance. If I approached anyone and asked if I could see what they were working on, that always went well. A few had specific questions, such as control of contrast (complicated), or how to choose a depth-of-field (simpler).

But I always had suggestions. (I always have suggestions!) I choose to presume that means that we were accomplishing something important.

What about a bit more structure? Well, some have suggested finding a "photographic composition primer", so that everyone would arrive knowing the basics. But would they? Is a single read-through sufficient for everyone? Or, wouldn't many of them be beyond that level to start with? How many, with our busy lives, would actually read it?

So, another advisor suggested just going over the basics for five or ten minutes before we start. Fine. Well, not fine, in that it seems to me that it would be a lot for people to integrate into a shoot that's about to start immediately after, but pedagogical experts have assured me that it can be done, especially with an intelligent, well-educated, motivated group.

That advisor also suggested that within that brief time-frame, we could include exercises, such as experimenting with depth-of-field. I have to respect his expertise, but I wouldn't otherwise have thought it practical.

Whatever structure I design into future Walks, I again want to allow enough room for an adaptable, extemporaneous nature to the experience. Let me think.

I know a wonderful photographer who takes out groups of forty, for a "walk in the park", but then they get minimal individual attention, and spend more time watching him explain how he constructs a shot. (And they marvel!)

That certainly sounds very valuable to me ... but doesn't feel like my style, and is still not what I'm aiming for.

Side issue: I did seek out and find advisors during the design of this event. There is a world of experience and wisdom out there, and many were willing to share it with me. I could see only goodness flowing from that - wiser to relegate my ego. All of the advisors made significant contributions.

So, thinking about "structure", I did send out a pre-briefing by email, saying things like:

- know the basic operation of your camera;
- bring a tripod;
- bring lots of room on a memory card, and bring spare, charged batteries;
- consider watching a 3-minute [video](#) on photographic composition;
- bring your own snacks and water, and dress for the weather!

Another decision was time of day, and I held this at 2 p.m., which in late November meant that, if we had sunny weather, it could bridge into the "Golden Hour" before sunset.

One eager participant owns a rural property, so it occurred to me to scout it out and ask if she would let us use that for our Walk. She was completely accommodating! (Thank you!) I made a few photos, and used one, of a crumbling footbridge over a creek, to market the event - it seemed to help!



A wooden footbridge in its dotage - this photo seemed to help entice curious photographers to the event!

I said "2 p.m. sharp", and people for the most part showed up on time. (Thank you.)

I did give a little preamble, thanking our hostess, remembering that I had procured for her a little gift ... which I had then forgotten at home. I reminded the photographers that our simple mission was to hone our skills on "Light and Composition". I would be coming around to critique their work, because that was what they had signed up for, and was the whole purpose of the Walk. I specified a physical starting point, the aforementioned foot-bridge, and suggested that we not wander too far from each other, or the logistics of the instruction would quickly fall apart.

It was important to point out where we had access to a toilet - it's the details that will get you!

We had wild forest, foot-paths, ancient zig-zag wooden fences, a pond ... and thirty years of antique-market artifacts positioned with casual artistry around the property. There were old barns, old farm tools, statues, and much more. My initial concerns about not finding enough to photograph in the "brown season" were completely unfounded.

The "brown season": late Autumn provides little foliage and often no snow. We were more likely to find small details to photograph than sweeping vistas.

Some of the participants' output prompted me to rethink that!



With such an apparently empty scene, the photographer managed to find a beautiful light, a path which stands out just enough, with its gentle curve leading off into the trees, which themselves provide a pleasing, peaceful pattern.

What little snow we had had was melting in 7 degree celsius weather - and rain. I had two back-up concepts in case of a downpour, and there were several outbuildings in which we could have pursued them, but ... the rain stopped at 2 p.m. (Thank you!) It started up again at 4:30 p.m., just as our light was fading and we were wrapping up the Walk. Very lucky.

So, we did not get drenched, but everything was wet, which under overcast skies made for a fabulous, even light, with deep, saturated colours. One of the first things you learn in photography is that bright sunshine at high noon on a dry day is about as harsh, difficult and unrewarding a light as you can get.

Every group will be different, but this one brought an inquisitive, ambitious collective mind to the project. I found it particularly impressive that they found such interesting things to photograph, and how well they composed their scenes.

I confess that for most of the shots which I liked the best, I was nowhere nearby when they were made, although in some of them I can see the influence of individual discussions which we had undertaken earlier in the afternoon.

With the combined skill and intelligence, albeit a variable level of incoming expertise and experience, I noted some common obstacles which could use work, and these might prove instructive for other aspiring photographers:

- watch the backgrounds - they can make or break an image;
- isolate the subject - exclude "edge-material" if it does not contribute in any important way;
- keep the camera still - a challenge at slow shutter speeds with telephoto lenses ... even on a tripod and even with modern image-stabilization.

I don't think that all of those concepts were new to anyone, that afternoon, but in the field, with "production pressure", some of us needed reminding. It can be a lot to keep in mind, along with a myriad of other details, when actually doing the work.

Some of these matters I have discussed in a previous [blog](#), and in my Photo Basics [essay](#).

On a less technical note, this shoot has reminded us that any personal feeling or association which one has with a scene might not show up in the final photography without conscious intention.



This old contraption appealed to the photographer partly for personal reasons. I simply suggested the principle that, unless he wanted it only for himself, and unless he wanted to caption it, he think about how to convey his intent by nothing other than careful construction of his photograph. I will only say that he has reasons for gravitating to "structure", and I do believe that he managed to convey that in this photograph!

I did make one error, perhaps a fairly egregious one, on this Photo Walk: I made a few photographs of my own. *I should have concentrated solely on the participants*, if I were truly committed to furthering their photographic prowess. It even occurred to me to leave my camera in the car.

But I didn't, and two things happened.

1/ I saw a few things which I just wanted to photograph, things about which I thought, "Do this now, or you might never get another chance", because the woods are always changing, and the light might never again be exactly the same.

2/ Pride. As the teacher, I thought that I should be the best photographer there, and wanted a few images stashed away to demonstrate that - quietly and discreetly, sure, but I still wanted to demonstrate it.

And I think that was just **stupid**. I didn't have to be the best photographer there. (I did have to be "good".) I was still the organizer, still the identified teacher, and the people had come because they wanted to come and learn. That all should have been more than adequate for my ego.

Get over myself.

And ... I think that many of the participants' photos are indeed better than mine, and that's great!

So, we started at the bridge, then meandered around a bit but stayed in a loose group, eventually heading by the outbuildings and to the pond. (Water - always a great visual draw - wasn't where we got our best mileage on this outing.) Two and a half hours flew by - no one could believe the time.

I asked if anyone would like me to keep a copy of their work, for review, editing, and follow-up ... and everybody did! So, I spent the next twenty minutes downloading images files from data cards, while the hostess asked us in for a little warm-up and conversation.

That was nice. Thank you once again, most sincerely, Madame Hostess.

I summed up by repeating my starting-goal, differently worded:

I wanted each participant to gain an amount of skill and knowledge which might take a year with the trial-and-error method.

That's pretty lofty, and I wouldn't claim to have reached it, but it continues to resonate with me. Teachers and coaches help, or we wouldn't bother with them.

The thought has been expressed that some immediate feedback would have been helpful, while the shoot was still fresh in our minds, and while we were all still there. (Nobody seemed in a hurry to leave - didn't they all have to get home for dinner?) The logistics of that, with that many photographers, many with a hundred exposures, seem overwhelming. I continue to think about it.

It seems to me that in order to do that, we would have to each choose two or three of our own preferred images, show them to the group on a projector, and have somebody (me) do some basic editing on them in real time.

It could be another hour or three of discussion and discovery, so would require a meal and a place to talk. I continue to think about it.

People would have to commit more time - not always easy. Still, if they knew what they were signing up for ...

Back at home, and for the next few days, I chewed up many hours looking through the photos, choosing a few of my own preference, asking for input about that from the participants, if they wished, editing them up, and sending them back to the owner.



An amazing capture from one of the participants.

We ultimately found a secure web facility for sharing those edited photos just amongst ourselves.

I was, quite honestly, expecting and hoping for a bit of continued engagement and mutual critique, over the next week or so, but there was next to none of that. Perhaps things will be different next time, or perhaps that's just the way things are ... too soon to tell. People are busy, and must move on. But the small proportion who have continued the conversation have continued to learn, as have I.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the story of my first Instructional Photo Walk. I would rather enjoy making this a regular thing. I'm thinking at this early stage of the business that this might run for an introductory cost of \$125 each for a two-and-a-half hour event, including follow-up along the lines mentioned above. The numbers enrolled in each Walk need to be small - two or three? - if I maintain a similar paradigm.

Please comment below - I value everything. Let me know if you would like to be notified of the next one. I plan to start planning another one in January 2018.

Thanks so much to all the participants, and for allowing me to use their photographs for illustration in this blog. That requires more courage than one might think.

Before-and-after Photographs:



This was an amazing find, a true visual feast - aided by some judicious, if fairly vigorous, editing. Intriguingly, only one photographer of the group saw and photographed this hanging wood-art (not me).



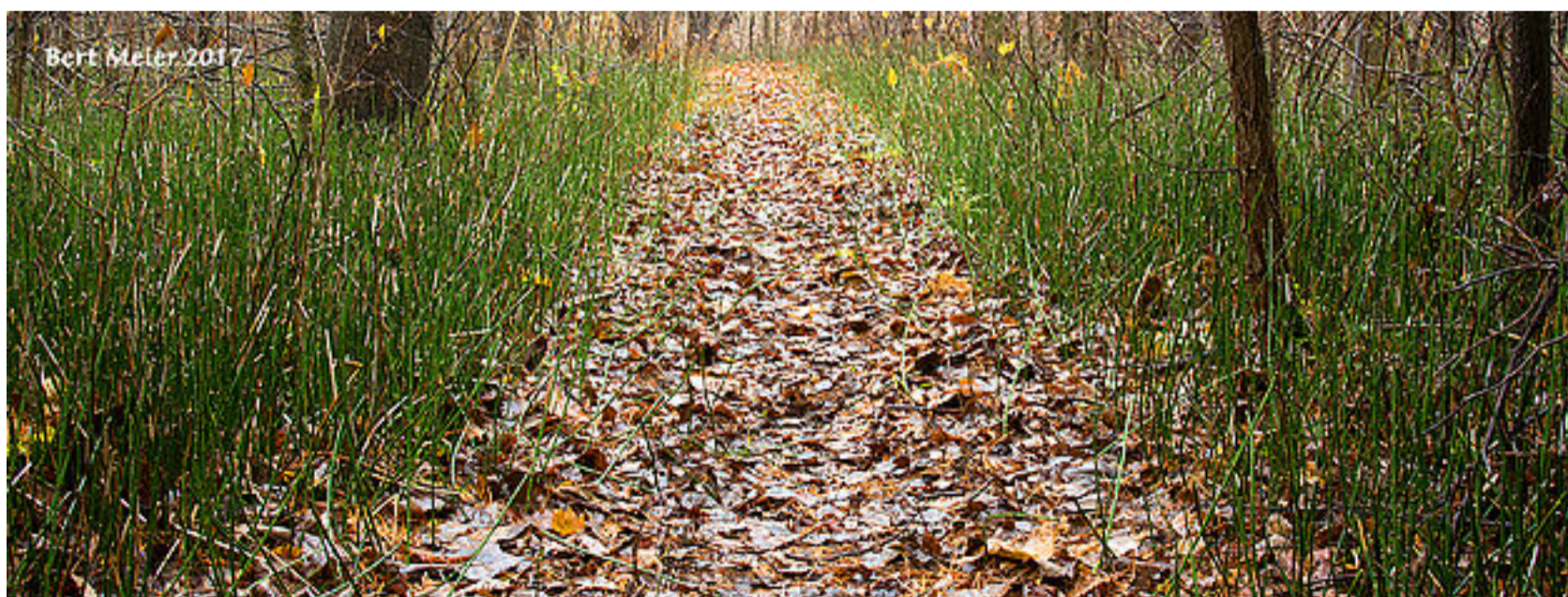
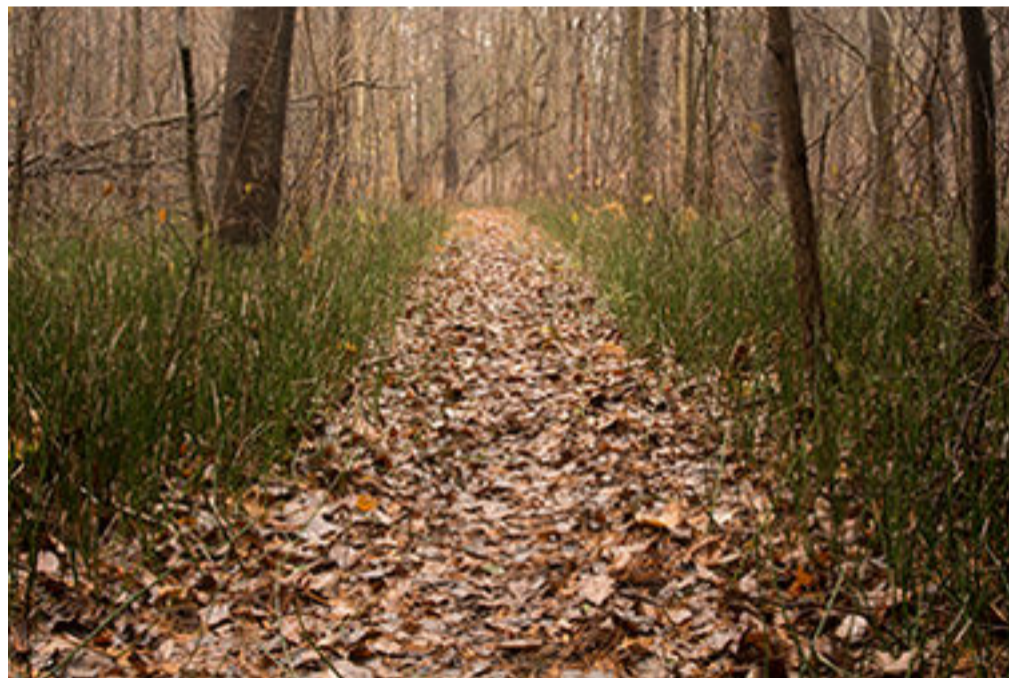


Intriguing assembly of birdhouses and feeders, again surprisingly only identified by one of the group (not me). It does benefit from cropping away the edges, and by editing the background "down" and the foreground "up".





The photographer found an angle for this fence which the rest of us could not. It looked great - to the eye, but making it a great *photograph* was another matter. It did I think quite clearly require an emphatic clearing away of the underbrush - quite literally cropping out "scruff" on all four sides, while leaving a little of the beautifully-lit forest in the distance, along the top - prior to tone and colour enhancements. The photographer and I discussed this in terms of the compositional principle of "leading lines", controlling where the viewer's eye goes, and where it ultimately rests. The simpler message is: figure out what your photograph is about; discard the rest.



To me, this is a most pleasing photograph, and a clear example of the "converging line" compositional device. I do however think that the nothing is lost by the severe cropping. Also, I defy anyone to name a "rule" for the necessity, for this composition to work, of the three vertical tree trunks. It just needs them there.

Sandra Anderson 2017



This one required very little editing, and no cropping.

David R. Low 2017



Also not cropped. I did punch it up however. You can almost see the micro-organisms, patiently working away at the foot-bridge over decades.



Created with Wix.com -

7 by ctLow Photography, Brockville, Ontario



Let me close back where we started - at that evocative foot-bridge.

