

Photography

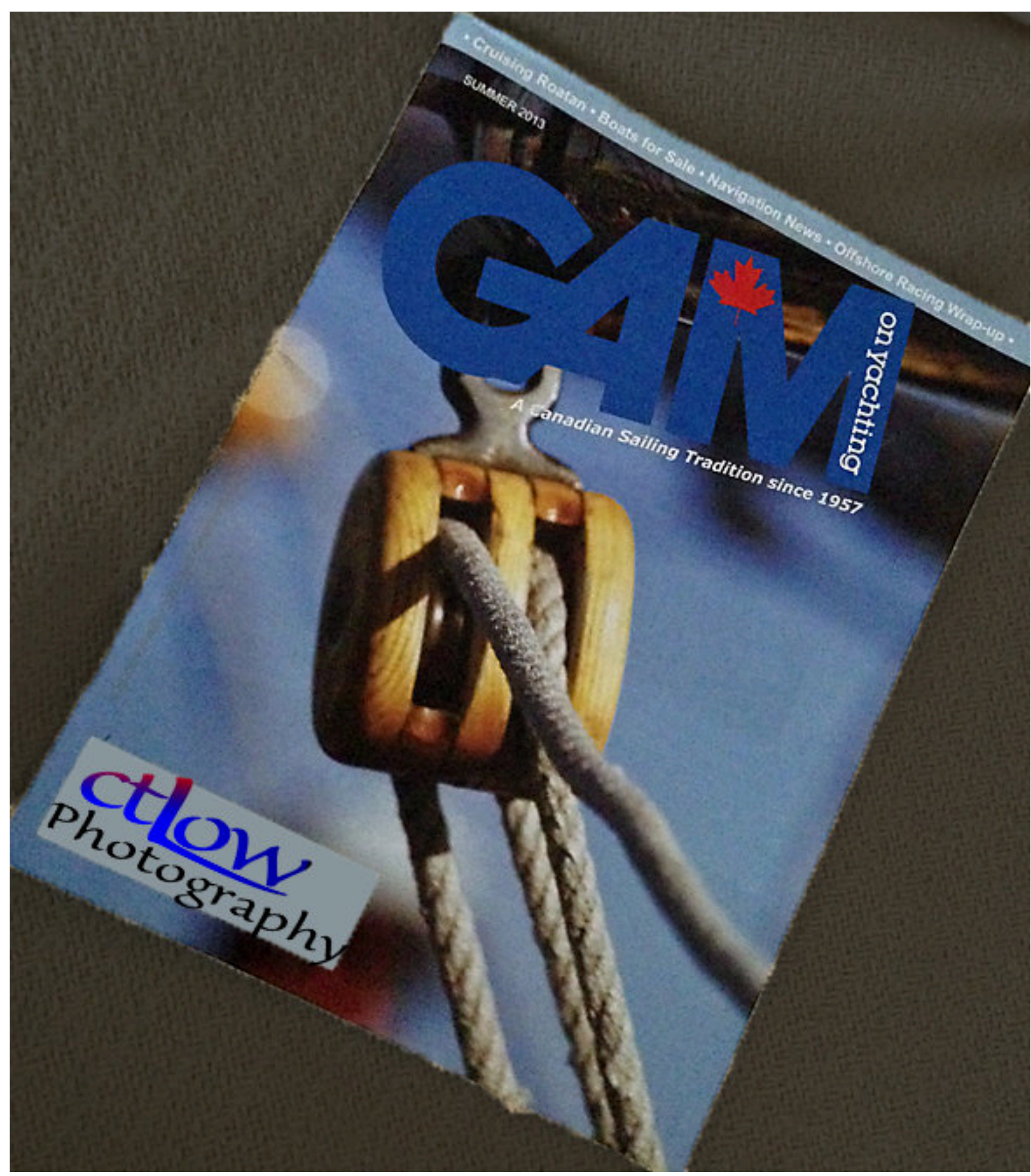
Photography Practice

January 17, 2018 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

Become a Better Photographer

I have never seen the perfect photograph.

Okay, I do recall that magazine cover from 2013 ... it felt close!



Not my first magazine cover! Always a rush however to see it happen.

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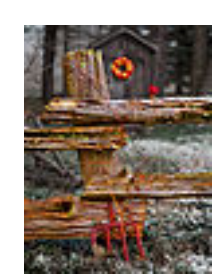
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January 17, 2018



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December 12, 2017



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November 30, 2017



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Archive

- January 2018 (2)
- December 2017 (2)
- November 2017 (2)
- October 2017 (1)

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- commision composition gift
- instruction light photography
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This is the photograph which graced that cover - check out the [St. Lawrence II](#) for summer sail-ship camp!

I also think about cars, as in ads and brochures, as I develop that photographic niche, and some of the commercial car photography would be hard to beat. But if you ever saw the setup for those photos, the time, money and staff devoted to getting just that one image, it would astound you.



No huge lights or team. And this photography session with my own car may be what gave me the

(The same for automobile advertising videos - simply amazing, many of them. But you and I will not likely ever have those resources available to us.)

So, all right, I have qualified my opening statement, but nonetheless, "I have never seen the perfect photograph" means that *all* of us could produce something just a little better than we have ever done before.

Improvement can come in small increments of skill and understanding, or in sudden big leaps. Most of us would like to do at least a little better - and why not a lot better, when possible and practical?

For immediate purposes, see [Photo-walks](#). There's an opening on Friday January 26 (2018), and other dates on offer - see the [Doodle](#) poll. Get in [touch](#).

Improvement Processes

Exercises à la Freeman Patterson

The approach of [Freeman Patterson](#) often recurs to me. He advocates, in his books and on the two occasions I have heard him speak, and among many other things, simply practising. He said that he did exercises, much as a pianist might do scales or studies.

One of his methods involved throwing a hoola-hoop ... anywhere. Then he would go through a roll of film. (Yes - it's a while ago.) Sometimes he would make photographs from inside the circle, looking for ways to transform whatever he found in front of him into a good photograph.

If that felt too trivial(?!), then he would make photographs of something *inside* the hoop, and end up with bits of decaying leaves or macros of blades of grass.

He got some good photos there, but even if not, he emphasized the importance of making himself think regularly about composition.

Here are Patterson's own [words](#) on the subject:

"What happens is: 15 is not difficult, 16 is a little more difficult, you get to 17, it's tough. by the time you get to 21, you're tearing your hair out, trying to see something that is fresh and new. And then about 22, 23 or the 24th picture, the scales begin to fall off one's eyes, and suddenly you're there; you're on a whole new plane. And I often say there are about 7 shots or 6 shots between desperation and liberation....The point is to see where you are."

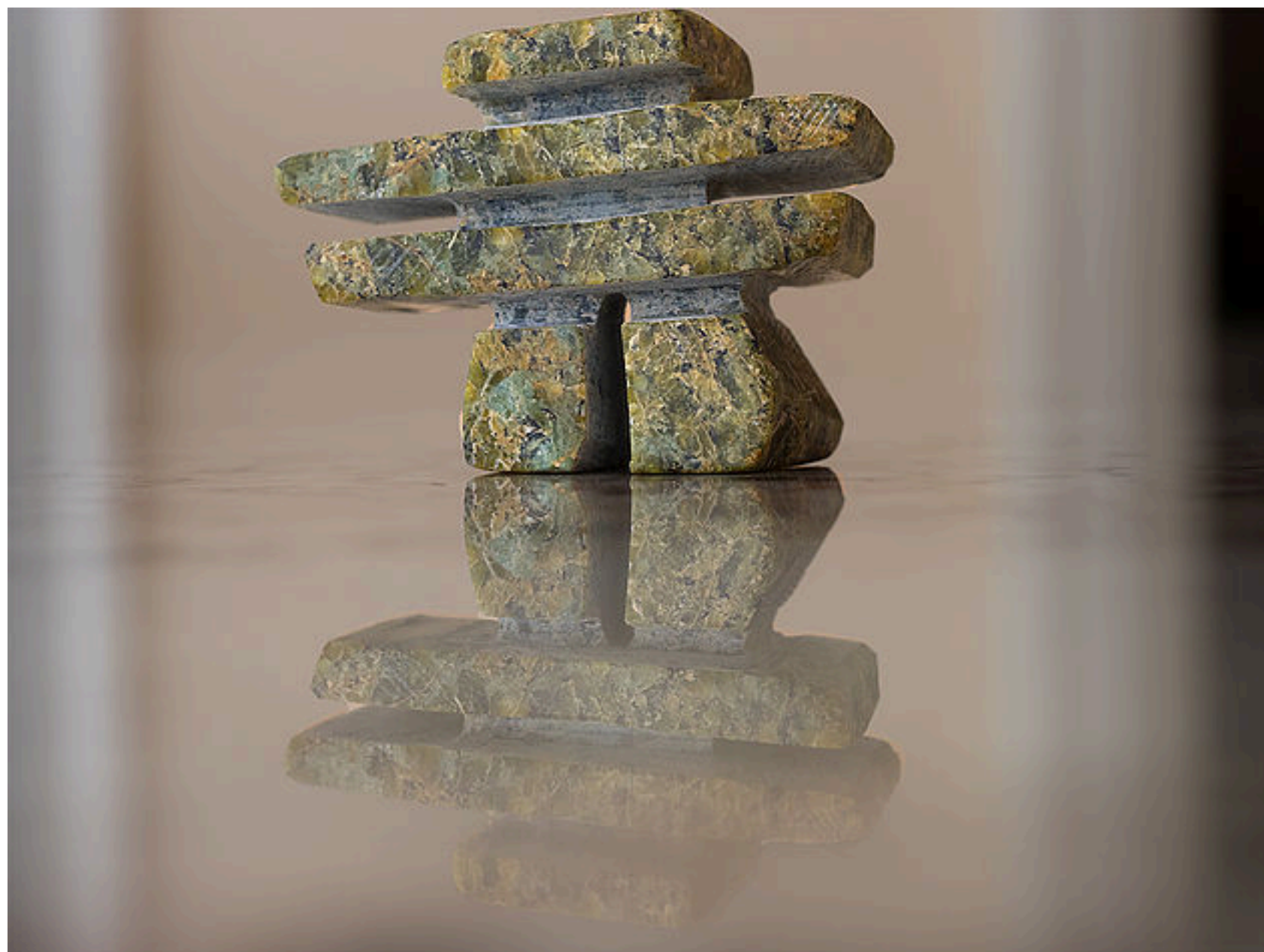
Confession: I have never done a Freeman Patterson exercise. But I do exercise, and similar to some fitness-junkies, after a few days without making photographs, something has got to give!

Most often I grab my photography gear, get in the car, and got out looking for scenes. Sometimes I have something in mind, and sometimes not. I'm in the middle of a self-imposed project just currently to make art out of a local gas station (wish me luck!).



What possessed me I cannot say, but I don't think that I'm done *practising* on this gas station yet!

Occasionally, I stay at home. A little Freeman creeps in, although my hoop includes the whole house, and I must find something to photograph.





Just things which, for whatever reason, I snapped around the house.

Sometimes, practising will incorporate testing specific equipment.



Fairly new-to-me, at the time, ultra-wide-angle, full-frame, fish-eye lens - I needed to check it out (but from there?!?)



Then new-to-me macro-lens - had to check it out! (This is a lily.)



Experimenting with off-camera remote-control multiple-flash lighting. That will stand you in good stead at our next [portrait-session!](#)

Exercises à la Joe McNally

At the International Photography Conference & Expo, held in Ottawa in 2017, I heard a seminar from the highly-accomplished [Joe McNally](#), in which he dropped a similar nugget: sometimes on his (infrequent) days off, he just gets out his gear and says to himself, "Let's try something which at the moment I cannot accomplish." He sets up lights, arranges objects ... and stretches his photographic skills.

He sounds dedicated!

Reality Meets Theory

And that all sounds great, but what about *The Rest of Life* ("TROL")? Who's going to walk the dog?

Well, sure, we can't all do everything. When I was practising Medicine, and had a young family, and was tied by both love and maintenance to a boat for six months a year (still am), then I would go months without releasing a shutter - not often ... but it happened.

I in no way suggest that anyone become obsessive about this. Fine, you're taking piano lessons. Yes,

you're the "parent-taxi" for sports and social events with your children. There's the garden! The cottage! (The Caribbean! The World!) I get it.

With my decades-long passion for boating, people have often suggested what a great combination that must be with photography. I have experienced completely the opposite. By the time I planned the trip, conferred with friends, packed, then packed for young children, performed some minor repairs, bought the groceries, fuelled, filled up with water, emptied the holding tank, checked the weather, loaded the boat, and set off, I was only beginning. Then there was navigating, docking, securing, playing (kids!), supervising, always thinking about safety, socializing, preparing meals, cleaning up, and eventually ... sleeping!

And I loved it! But it didn't seem to leave much time for photography. I wonder more about how I got any in at all.



Sails!

Since I converted to sail, I find operating the boat even more engrossing. I certainly can't be making photographs while actively steering and adjusting sails. Again, the occasional exception does arise.



The occasional photo made ... while boating.

So please, please, don't think that I'm holding out some unattainable expectation of anyone, a presumption that an amateur photographer should "make at least one photograph a day", or anything like that. (If you want to ... fine!)

TROL absolutely does get in the way, and often quite appropriately.

One way around this, a bit, involves practising on every occasion on which you make photographs. Raise your camera for a grab-shot of your friends at a party ... keep light and composition (and timing, and interactivity, and ...) at the back of your mind. Think about getting a better shot. Work "practise" into every time you hold a camera.



At a party, I just gave a moment to "art".

Back to boating: in the early 1990s, I spent a few afternoons practising docking (because it was defeating me!). Out of the slip, into the fairway, turn around, back to the slip, think about momentum, current, wind, tracking, try to nestle gently in good position against the dock, sometimes fail, go back out, turn around again, do it all over again ... thirty times.

I have said before that some of my boating neighbours and passers-by scratched their heads, but I brook no doubt: it improved my docking skills a hundred times faster than just fitting it into my regular boating. (And it led to the publication of ***Boat Docking***, of which I remain very proud.)

The same with photography. This will depend on the level of passion and commitment you feel, and that remains entirely up to you. Only you can and should make that judgement. But when you find - or *make* - the time, then setting up exercises, and just practising can really help.

Keep a camera with you. These days, that can be as simple as your phone, and they often perform admirably. I was at lunch at Montebello, indoors fortunately when one of these Summer storms suddenly blew through ... but I had a camera with me. My beautiful companion didn't seem to mind my attention wandering for a minute.



A sudden downpour at lunch - having a camera handy i) was handy and ii) allowed me to "practise"! Compositional note: it intrigues me that this, one of my most popular photographs, needs the colourful

splash of flowers in the lower left; it isn't a picture of flowers, and the eye does not rest there, but the whole thing goes blah without them.

Fossilizing Error

I learned that efficient phrase, "fossilizing error", from a loved-one/educator. It connotes someone who does things the wrong way so many times that it eventually feels like the right way. Once fossilized, the pattern, though dysfunctional, breaks with difficulty!

So, any practise requires remaining open-minded, very self-critical - in the most positive sense of the words - *practising*, not simply repeating without learning, without growing.

It doesn't work for me to hear, "I've been taking pictures for twenty years." It works when I hear about learning and improving for twenty years. It works when one realizes that we expend less energy later by expending more now; and we will ultimately - eventually - get not only easier but also better results once we have ingrained *good* habits, and the skills become more like second-nature.

Reading about photography helps. Looking at others' photographs helps, and sometimes this means fashion ads and sometimes it means expository books, with experts explaining their methods in exquisite - if not excruciating - detail.

Vary your exposure (literally and figuratively ...) to photography. Examine portraits, landscapes, macros, abstracts ... everything. You don't have to like it all, and you most certainly do not have to do it all yourself, but every disparate influence can help you. Do more than look: think, analyze, what's in the frame, what's not, where is it placed, why, and how was the photograph lit?

Formal instruction helps. By all means, get a teacher, attend a course, ask for help. Join a club. (Avoid getting too caught up in "gear-talk" - that does matter, but not nearly as much as "light-and-composition-talk".)

I have had the extraordinary good fortune to have chanced upon a person whom I call my "lighting-coach". His mentorship has extended far beyond "lighting", but that's how we started, and it has made an amazing difference to my work. Having asked permission, I can say: check out Peter Bryenton, ex-BBC Lighting Trainer, if you wish to know more.

Somehow, however you can manage it, some kind of expert instruction, I assure you, will not go amiss. If you don't know where to start, [ask](#) me.

These are some of the ways to avoid fossilizing error.

Back to work!

And then ultimately, you will find yourself again with your eye to the viewfinder. This activity brings everything else into focus (literally and figuratively), and we all need to spend considerable time - and effort - here as well.

So, you're at the cottage, you did the maintenance yesterday, water-skied in the morning, had a nap in the hammock after lunch ... and the sun sinks lower in the sky.

You remember your camera ... what about spending a half hour seeing what you can do?



Actually a dawn, not dusk, shot ... but you get the idea.

You're bicycling on the Thousand Islands Parkway, and stop for a break. Because you're in such phenomenally better physical condition than your friends - and have such a more active mind - you don't need as long a rest.

You remember your camera ... you have time to line up a few shots.

You awake early on a Sunday morning, during a blistering cold spell, and feel like snuggling down deeper under the duvet, but ... you remember about your camera.



Chimney Island Sunrise, Sun-flare

I should close by saying again that I'm not expecting sainthood - certainly not of myself. I do this because I enjoy it.

I simply enjoy it enough to want to practise.

Remember that I make photographs and I sell photographs.

Everything you see here is for sale. Prices at the time of writing, for example, for an 11x14" fine-art print with a generous white border would be about \$50, and you can go up or down from there. Check out my [gallery](#).

Book a portrait-sitting - the right frequency with which to commission formal portraits is a bit more often.

Remember also to leave a comment, or [contact](#) me. Note that on the main [blog](#) page you can sign up for new-blog notifications. I am very careful and respectful with your privacy.

7 by ctLow Photography, Brockville, Ontario

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