



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK FOUR

Being Present & Receptive

As counterintuitive as this sounds, it is not the first job of the photographer to make photographs. The first task of the photographer is to see. To notice. To observe. Like so much in the craft and art of photography, the best photographs have nothing to do with technique, and when technique does help the image succeed (as it often does), it is only because the image was first conceived by a creative, receptive, and present mind.

Become more perceptive and you will become a better photographer. But how? Slow down. Just slow down.

There is a difference between looking and seeing. Looking is active and has as its goal something to be found. We are often so eager to score, to find the photograph, that we don't see. Looking that

actively has a way of putting on the blinders. Looking is often the opposite of being open and receptive.

Being open and receptive means you go in empty. You approach the wedding, the event, or the portrait session with the intent of receiving what comes your way, not of finding something particular. It's a state of mind and it's hard to describe how to achieve it other than to tell you I approach it in two steps after I slow down and take a breath.

Step One

The first is to identify my expectations. If I'm looking for something, hoping for something, what is it? Don't dismiss it, acknowledge it. The problem with expectations is that they blind us. We think we want a particular photograph of a particular thing, but that particular photograph might not be the strongest one. A better angle might present itself, or a better moment, stronger light, whatever. But if we're too stuck on what we think is the best expression of the thing we're photographing, we could miss the other potentially stronger possibilities. So acknowledge what you want, but be open to other ways of getting it.

Step Two

The second is to ask a lot of questions. When we go in with all the answers we close ourselves to the creative possibilities that might otherwise lead us to stronger images. When we go in with questions, we open ourselves to the same. What happens if I shoot from the other side, or from high or low? What happens if I use a totally different lens or shutter speed? Is this the right moment or is there a better one coming? What would that look like? Questions. Not looking for answers, but for interesting possibilities.

Don't skip this stuff. After 30 years with a camera in my hand, I know how seductive the hardware and the gear is, and while it's true you need to learn how to use that stuff, it will only ever take you as far as the more human aspects of this craft can. If you learn how to slow down, to really see what you're looking at—not what you're looking for—you will be so much closer to being able to put that into your photography.



Sitting in the cold rain waiting for grizzly bears, you have a lot of time to see things you might otherwise miss. These long periods of attentive waiting have not only taught me more about the power of receptivity and patience, but they've resulted in some unexpected photographs. Our expectations are sometimes our worst enemies.

Creative Exercise

This is something I often ask my students to consider doing while on a Mentor Series Workshop with me: find a location you like and wait, and watch. Not for five minutes, not for twenty, but for an hour or more. I know, right now you think you'll lose your mind from boredom, and truthfully, it's not the easiest exercise. If I were a betting man I'd say of the 7000+ people getting this course, only the tiniest fraction of you will do it. And that's a shame. Because sitting for an hour in one place, and really paying attention (with or without a camera in your hand) will show you so much. You'll see things you never imagined on your first glance. And it will, I hope, show you how much you miss on first glances. It will show you how ridiculous is the notion that we can show up at a scene and trust the first thing our eyes see to contain all the possibilities we've seen by the end of an hour. Bonus points if you actually do this one, friends. A whole hour. Don't cheat. There are no shortcuts to this stuff.



Study the Masters

[Fan Ho \(1937 - 2016\)](#) was a Chinese photographer, director, and actor. His list of accolades and awards accumulated before his death in June of 2016 is astonishing, but to me, it's almost irrelevant next to his incredible images. Sadly, books of his work are hard to come by; they all seem to be out of print and fetching high sums, but there is allegedly a new book in process. To my eye, his work is a perfect, elegant intersection of moments well seen and composed. I find his sense of geometry is exquisite, and his use of white space, scale, contrast, and framing is perfect. His later work with multiple exposures is stunning. Take some time to enjoy and study his images and pay particular attention to his exact timing and obvious love of the decisive moment.

You will find the work of [Fan Ho on his website](#), as well as through this [Google Image search](#).

- Here's a [wonderful video](#) about Fan Ho (j15 minutes) from The Art of Photography. If you follow no other link, follow this one.
 - Here's a [nice article](#) on PetaPixel about Fan Ho.
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Further Study

Here are a few resources to follow up on as you have time.

- [Paying Attention](#), an article I wrote in July 2016.
- [Receptive and Observant](#), an article I wrote for my column in *PhotoLife* magazine in 2015.
- [Find the Magic](#), a blog I wrote in December 2015.
- [Vision 365](#), an eBook from Henri Fernando that is like a daily guided meditation or daily practice in seeing. It's only \$8 and it'll give you a new exercise in seeing every day for a year.

Final Comments

Next week I want to extend this conversation about being receptive and observant to learning to see and understand light. Until then, I hope you're finding some traction on that personal project I asked you to consider undertaking on Week One.

If you're looking for me, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#).

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin