



## THE VISION COLLECTIVE. WEEK SIX.

### Choosing Stronger Moments

Not every photograph stands or falls on the power of one chosen moment over another, but many do, and one of the most important lessons I photographer can begin to learn is to wait for, anticipate, or set the stage for stronger moments. I say "begin to learn" because I think this recognition of moments is something we will spend a lifetime refining.

In my first eBook, *TEN* (which is now free), one of the ten suggestions I make to get better at the craft of photography is to become pickier, to choose better light, to not settle for what I would now call a "good enough for Instagram" mentality. I think it applies to moments as well.

There are millions of moments in every day. Not all of them are photographs. Here's an excerpt from something I recently wrote in Italy:

*I've been here over 5 weeks, making photographs almost every single day. Last night as I drifted to sleep I began to work on some math. There are 3600 seconds in an hour and therefore 86,400 seconds in a day, and 604,800 seconds in a week. I have been in Italy for just over 3 million seconds.*

*I am going home with roughly 70 selects; final images of which I'm quite proud. When I get home I'll do a full edit and I'll probably find a few more, and ditch a couple. Let's say I come out with 50-100 images. The number doesn't matter much. On average, with some made at 1/2000 and some at 1/5, my images were made with shutter speeds around 1/60–1/100 of a second. Which means all my images were made, cumulatively, within one second. One hundred final images made in less time than it takes to draw a breath.*

*Of the 3 million seconds I have been here, assume I've been asleep or eating for half of them. Even if I were eating and sleeping and on the train for a full two-thirds of my time, that's one productive second out of a million. What the hell have I been doing with my time?*

The answer is looking for moments, but just not any moments: moments that make great photographs. Henri Cartier-Bresson called them decisive moments, and by that, he meant the moments where the action that was happening coincided with both the geometry of the frame and the intent or vision of the photographer. It's the moment everything falls into place, and that moment is different for all of us, depending on where we stand, which lens we use, what the orientation of our frame might be, and what we're trying to say about the scene.

Photographically, great moments happen when the person moves into just the right place to provide balance or tension to the image, or when they move just enough that the negative space is created, or when they raise their hand to create a gesture that gives meaning or clarity to the story. It always has as much to do with the frame, the geometry, and the story of the photograph as it does with the real life moment itself. More, in fact.

There are two challenges here. The first is anticipating the moments, and all I can really tell you is you have to think it through and acknowledge the possibilities. Where do you want the subject in the frame? Which possible gestures and compositions might combine to give you something significant? Will one composition or gesture better tell the story or communicate the emotion you're hoping for? The second is actually capturing it and this is also something I can't really teach you. It's about attentiveness and patience. And in some cases, such as when the action is moving quickly, there's no shame in putting your camera into something a little faster than single-shot drive mode.

And depending on the action, I often use three or more frames/second to ensure the best chance at the strongest possible composition.

Take a look at the following images. What is it about the moments captured that makes the images what they are? Would they be stronger if I had waited a little longer, or would the composition fall apart? Even if the composition were still strong, would the image have the right emotional pull? Would the story still succeed? The moments that make good photographs great are fewer than we usually believe them to be; no new camera is going to help us see those moments, and that's the hard part.







For Further Study (below), I'm including the link for one of my favourite books, *Magnum Contact Sheets*. It's a bit pricey, but if you can swing it, I highly recommend it. Study it. Look at some of the most iconic photographs of our time, and the moments chosen in context with the moments not chosen. Learning to see (and that's what this is) is about perception, and it's about recognition. Being more conscious of the geometry of moments takes a trained eye, and there are two great ways to do that: study more images and make more images.

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### **Creative Exercise**

Study more images: take a look at the work via the links below or get your hands on *Magnum Contact Sheets* and ask yourself how the moment makes the photograph. That's step one. Then ask yourself what the photographer had to do to make the image. It's not all about the moment—that's only part of it. It's also about where the photographer stood, where he placed the camera, and which lens he used; all of that changes the geometry of the scene and can't be discounted. To the photographer standing in one place with a 21mm lens, a particular moment might be "decisive" and

powerfully translated into a photograph, for another with a 50mm lens standing in a different place, that moment might come seconds (or even minutes) later.

Make more images: take your camera out and make photographs on the streets, of your cat, whatever moves you. But preferably make those photographs with moving, living subjects, because the moments change faster than with, say, an oak tree. Make 6-8 images of each scene and then look at them critically. Is one moment better? Why? Has the composition changed? The look on a face, the gesture of a body? The goal here is to recognize the connection moment has to geometry, and to hone your taste for stronger moments.



### **Study the Masters**

It should not surprise you that I want you to consider the work of **Henri Cartier-Bresson** this week. I adore Cartier-Bresson in part because he didn't consider himself a photographer, just an artist who drew with a camera, and years before his death he put his cameras down and returned to drawing. It was the image he loved, not the camera. And part of that was his love of the moment and the

composition. He didn't overthink things; he thought in terms of the visual language and went about his work.

**Look at the images here** and consider both the timing and the geometry, or composition. Your own sense of balance, tension, and what makes a great moment within a photograph will be exactly that: your own. But it can't hurt to look at the work of another who considered the choice of moment so important.





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### Further Study

Here are a few resources to follow up on:

- [\*Magnum Contact Sheets\*](#) is one of my favourite books. It's big and packed with interesting images most of us have never seen.
- [This article](#) by Eric Kim about learning from Cartier-Bresson.
- This [great video](#) by The Art of Photography about Cartier-Bresson and his book, *The Decisive Moment*.
- If you want more Cartier-Bresson, [Henri Cartier-Bresson: Here and Now](#) is a wonderful read. [Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Man, The Image](#)



*and The World: A Retrospective* comes highly recommended, though I have yet to pick it up myself. It's next on my list.

I hope you're still finding time to work on that personal project, as well as digging into these resources. Remember the magic isn't in what I write; it's in what you do with this stuff, and how keenly you integrate it into your craft.

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