

# Words of Wisdom

AP has featured many top Magnum photographers over the years. We look back at some of their thoughts on their work and get some new tips

**Chris Steele-Perkins** ▼  
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TECHNICALLY, photography has become quite easy today, especially where focus, exposure, colour balance and so on can be done pretty well by all cameras. However, this can also be a disadvantage, because it's easy to not bother to really understand what's going on in the process of making a photograph, such as what changes with f-stops, ISO and focal

lengths. Photographers should know and understand these technical aspects because they can then use them to help themselves. On the other hand, there are photographers who seem to be obsessed by the technology, when pixel counts and chromatic aberration become more important than the actual image. Ideally, you should try to understand the technical side so it becomes second nature, allowing you to concentrate on the really difficult task: looking.

I think the development of new photographic technology is liberating, and I embrace it.

**Below: Summer herding of goats and sheep toward green pastures in the mountains in Afghanistan, 1998 by Chris Steele-Perkins**



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Cameras are only tools, and of course you want good tools to work with. But the real questions to ask yourself are: 'What do you want to use these tools for?' 'What do you want to say as a photographer?' Don't expect photography to be easy, but don't give up on becoming the author of your own work; focus on the things that really interest you. When you're out, suitable clothes and a good pair of shoes are a great help. I like a photo vest, which does less damage to your back than a camera bag. Also, mentally carry a muesli bar of self-belief.

**Ian Berry** ▲  
www.ianberrymagnum.com  
Featured in AP 19 April 2008



TOM Hopkinson, editor of *Picture Post*, taught me the structure of a picture story. You need a couple of block-busting opening pictures. Next comes the establishing pictures – not necessarily the greatest photos, but they are important because they set the scene – and then you need a great closer. Henri Cartier-Bresson once told me: 'If I shoot one great picture every year, I'm lucky.' I laughed at the time because I thought, I go out on every picture story and shoot a great picture. In retrospect, you realise that's rubbish. However, you can only do the best you can in the time given and, as Elliott Erwitt told me when I joined Magnum, 'always keep your copyright'.

© HARRY GRUYAERT/MAGNUM PHOTOS



© CAROLYN DRAKE/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**Harry Gruyaert** ▼  
bit.ly/2coy5V9

Featured in AP 15 March 2008



I AM guided by light. I have a strong attraction to it. Certain situations and conditions just grab me, and in that sense I didn't choose any of these locations. I try to work very quickly in pursuit of this and not waste any time. Sometimes I hang around a location for hours taking advantage of the sun, and other times I move on quickly. It depends on the light.

**Below: Ouarzazate, Morocco, 1986, by Harry Gruyaert**



If a place interests me and there are things to do, then I work all day. I work on pure intuition. To me, that's what photography is – the ambition of intuition. When I'm selecting images for a book or exhibition, I will make small prints, hang them on the wall and spend some time with them. Often you just need to spend time with your images to know if they work and are strong enough. Sometimes you will be very enthusiastic about something you've done recently, but you're not always right. And you realise this after spending time looking at your images.

**Carolyn Drake** ▲  
www.carolyn-drake.com



IF YOU enjoy technology and technical processes, then embrace them. Push their limits, and use them as part of your work. If this is not what draws you to photography, then pick one tool and use it constantly until it fits you. Let go of everyone else's expectations and judgements, and other people's incredible work. Focus on your own approach – where you come from, how you think, how the camera can help you to get in touch with your perceptions of the world.

**Left: Kids picking quenepa from trees in the Santurce neighbourhood, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2016, by Carolyn Drake**



**Steve McCurry** ▼

[www.stevemccurry.com](http://www.stevemccurry.com)  
Featured in AP 14 May 2016



You're never going to get 100% of people saying yes when you ask to take their photograph. But if people think you're sincere and your intentions are honourable, most people will give you a few minutes of their time. The

thing you have to remember, though, is when you see a striking face on the street and you ask to photograph them, you don't know their story, and what kind of day they're having. If you'd just had some bad news and I came up to you and asked to take your picture, you'd probably say: 'No, I'm not in the mood.' As a photographer, you can't take it personally and get upset about it; you just have to play by the law of averages.

Below: Jodhpur, India, 2005, by Steve McCurry

Bottom: Afghan soldiers carry a comrade into an American helicopter after a Taliban ambush, 2010, by Moises Saman



© STEVE MCCURRY/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**Moises Saman** ▼

[bit.ly/2coGZBO](http://bit.ly/2coGZBO)  
Featured in AP 19 May 2012



BEING part of Magnum means being part of photographic history, while simultaneously being conscious of the responsibilities, such as integrity and excellence, that are inherent in being a Magnum photographer. My aim is always to make the work personal – to find the moments that bond us [as people] together, even in the face of war and crisis.

I find that conveying emotion through my pictures rather than information is more effective at creating that bond with the viewer. In our current YouTube and Twitter generation, I think it is even more important to have a personal way of telling the story and be able to create more depth and context that goes beyond the fast-paced news cycle. In a way, I believe that photographers do have to work even harder now than ever before to secure the work and cover stories in the way they want. The traditional editorial outlet keeps shrinking, and the number of photographers seems to be increasing by the day, so inevitably there is going to be more competition.

© MOISES SAMAN/MAGNUM PHOTOS



**Peter Van Agtmael** ▶

[www.petervanagtmael.net](http://www.petervanagtmael.net)  
Featured in AP 19 May 2012



I TRY to make pictures that are consistent and together reflect a broad, complex and ambiguous emotional range. The photography industry appears to be shrinking, but there are many ways to make money; producing my own work is ultimately most important to me. One of the most challenging aspects of being a photojournalist is being away so much. It's also the best part. It's difficult to say what my most memorable assignment is, but I frequently feel inspired by the range of experiences that photography confronts me with.



The funeral of Avraham Walz, 29, killed in a terrorist attack earlier that day, 2014, by Peter van Agtmael

© PETER VAN AGTMAEL/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**Bruce Gilden** ◀

[www.brucegilden.com](http://www.brucegilden.com)



WHEN it comes to photography, don't worry if you're not a master technician – you can still be an excellent photographer. Always be yourself, and don't listen to what most people advise. Just follow your heart. Mistakes are important if you learn from them. The work of many photographers who had large successes early is also their best. The most valuable thing I carry around with me is my knowledge of the streets, because it helps me make my photographs.

© BRUCE GILDEN/MAGNUM PHOTOS



**Thomas Dworzak** ▼

[bit.ly/2cxPjEf](http://bit.ly/2cxPjEf)



IN MY career, I've had to develop all kinds of tricks to make the photographic act less aggressive, such as almost having to forget about being a photographer and trying not to think like a photographer. If someone new to photography were to ask me for one piece of advice, I'd say that if you're out shooting, you have to want to do it. If you don't, there's just no reason for you to be there. Don't think too much. Take pictures with the stomach, not the brain. Remember that failure is just

as important as success. Often I learn something interesting, or have a very rewarding experience, when I screw up or miss a picture. I'll always carry around batteries, flashcards and chargers – there's no need to run out of film any more. Aside from these things I'll always make sure I have stuff on me to read, read, read!



© THOMAS DWORZAK/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Above: Two members of the Yakuza, Japan's mafia, Asakusa, Japan, 1998, by Bruce Gilden

Left: Burial of a peasant killed by a mine. During the war he had fled his village. He was harvesting in a minefield in an effort to feed his family. Georgia, 1993, by Thomas Dworzak

Above right: Ou Meny, 2009, by Bieke Depoorter



**Bieke Depoorter** ▶

[www.biekedepoorter.com](http://www.biekedepoorter.com)



WHEN you go out shooting, don't have too much on you. I go out with just one camera and one lens. It's better to sometimes limit yourself. Other than that, make sure you have a little notebook and a pen (things I often forget).

© BIEKE DEPOORTER/MAGNUM PHOTOS



**Christopher Anderson** ▼  
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 Featured in AP 28 November 2009



THERE'S a quote that's been attributed to me that says, "The only thing I'm interested in is feeling and emotion."

I don't find the pure aesthetics of photography interesting, and the idea of a 'technically perfect image' means very little to me. My photography is quite aesthetic and graphic, but in my mind that plays a supporting role. What I want my photography to do is communicate something emotionally charged.

You could write a thesis on why a picture is a 'good' picture, but all that really matters is that it connects with you. I don't believe in the idea of objective photography because the whole process is absolutely subjective. I'm guided by what's happening in front of me, but it's my choice when to click that shutter, my choice of what to include or exclude in the frame and how I put that picture together with another picture. I'm offering the viewer my experience of what it is I saw there and then.

I want the scenes I'm portraying to look as true to how the eye sees as possible. A 50mm lens is the closest I can come to that – it makes the eye least aware of the mechanics of the image-making process. I know the

**Below: President Hugo Chávez and entourage, Venezuela, 2006, by Christopher Anderson**

**Bottom: Noah Towell, who has a fever, lying in an uninstalled basement window well in the spring. His dog Banjo is barking, Ontario, Canada, 1995, by Larry Towell**

lens so well, I'm able to position myself where I need to be for a particular shot without looking through the viewfinder... [the choice to move in and out of the scene] is an intuitive one. It is to do with a level of intimacy. You can see from some of my previous work that some of my pictures are what some would consider as being uncomfortably close, which is an interesting experience for the viewer.

I don't think about f-stops, framing or shutter speeds when I'm composing: I'm looking for an emotion that has nothing to do with the mechanics of photography. It's important to become technically proficient so you don't have to think about it, and this I would say really comes from practice.



**Larry Towell** ▶  
[bit.ly/2colITk](http://bit.ly/2colITk)  
 Featured in AP 11 October 2008



SOME people jump around and do many things with a shorter and narrower experience, although

they have many more experiences, while others do fewer things with a longer and deeper experience. Photography is just an expression

of who you are as a person. I've always moved slowly. The way I worked in Central America and the Middle East isn't really a whole lot different. The point is to make the exotic familiar until there is no more exotic... Being trusted by your subjects is the only thing that matters when you're interpreting someone else's life. By looking at the small things, you gain the reassurance that life is not so bad, first of all, and there is still love in spite of hatred.



**Olivia Arthur** ▼  
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 Featured in AP 19 May 2012



I SEE myself as occupying the 'slower' end of journalism, as I like to spend some valuable time getting

to know the subjects of my images. I'm not a street photographer and many of my pictures are taken within people's homes. However, I'm still interested in the stories and the news element, so I would definitely class myself as the

'journalist' rather than the 'artistic' end of the spectrum.

I think photojournalism is in a really healthy, interesting place. There is an enormous range of approaches to storytelling, and there are loads of photographers who are doing interesting things. You can't just wander around the world with a camera and show people what's happening – you have to tell them something. This pushes you to tell stories in a more interesting, thoughtful way. You have to have your take on what's going on – to tell your own stories in your own individual way.

**Below: Taraweeh Ramadan prayer, Saudi Arabia, 2010, by Olivia Arthur**

**Bottom: Film director Abbas Kiarostami looks through a door that opens to nowhere on the hills surrounding Tehran, Iran, 1997, by Abbas**



**Abbas** ▶  
[www.abbas.site](http://www.abbas.site)



IT'S OKAY to sometimes go out and forget your camera. The most crucial thing is to get a good pair of shoes, go out and fall in love! When I go out I make sure to carry my eyes, my brain, my feet and another part of my anatomy that is not proper to mention publicly.



**Eve Arnold** ▼  
[bit.ly/2cpuQjx](http://bit.ly/2cpuQjx)  
 Radio interview from 2008



WHAT I have tried to do is involve my subjects – to have them realise, without saying so, that it was up to them to give

me whatever they wanted. If you're careful with people and if you respect their privacy, they will offer you part of themselves that you can use, and that is the big secret.



**Marilyn Monroe on the Nevada set of *The Misfits*, 1960, by Eve Arnold**

**Max Pinckers** ▼  
[www.maxpinckers.be](http://www.maxpinckers.be)



DON'T stick to one particular photographic technique, but base your aesthetic choices on the ideas

you wish to convey. Start with questioning your intentions and creating a conceptual framework, before making technical or formal choices. Always be critical of your own position in relation to the subject and the broader political context in which the images will finally be presented. Try to make images that are aware of their own existence, construction and currency by reflecting on the power that is inherent in photography. If you ever feel nervous and uneasy, take that as a good sign. It means you are doing something exciting and outside of your comfort zone.



**From the series *The Fourth Wall*, 2012, by Max Pinckers**



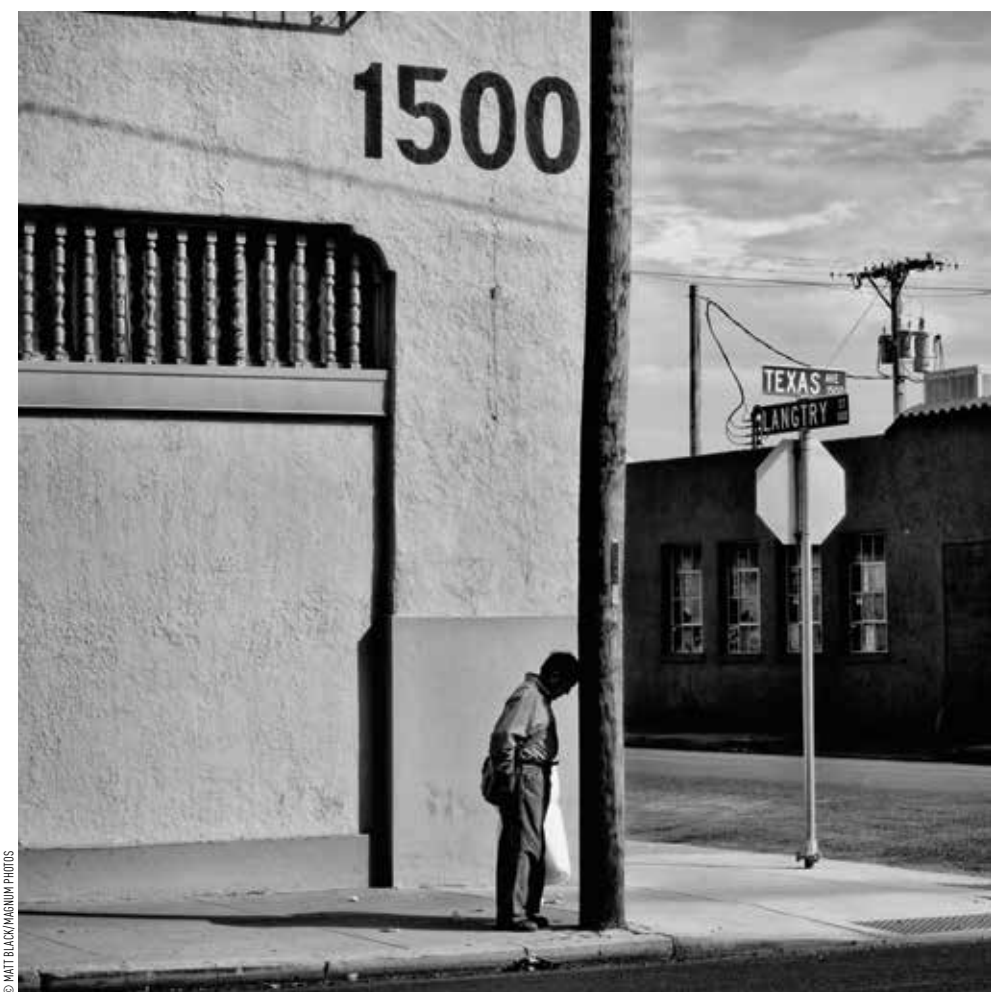
**René Burri** ▶  
<http://bit.ly/2cCSPur>  
 Interview with Phaidon



EVERYBODY now has a cell phone and can take snaps, even children. But my advice for young photographers is to go and cover things that nobody else is thinking about. Put your nose into things. Use the third eye of the camera, and don't be completely dependent on Photoshop or the way other people want you to cast the world. Discover for yourself. The fantastic thing about photography is that you are able to freeze a moment that can never come back.



© RENÉ BURRI/MAGNUM PHOTOS



© MATT BLACK/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**Matt Black** ▲  
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 Featured in AP 19 January 2013



THE WORLD is becoming digital, and with keeping that in mind, using film is almost becoming a unique craft. The simple fact is that film is how I started in photography. When

**Top:** The first photograph taken by Niépce around 1826-1827 and the view from the place where he took it, 1997, by René Burri

**Above:** El Paso, Texas, 2015, by Matt Black

I was working for a local newspaper as a young guy, this was what I had access to. In fact, mine was one of the last newspapers to still use black & white film. It taught me how to use Kodak Tri-X, the film I still use to this day. Had I started out with my work now and decided to use film, it would be a statement. But as it is, it's just something I've stuck with. It fits my way of seeing things.

**Martin Parr** ▼  
[www.martinparr.com](http://www.martinparr.com)



IF I WAS forced to identify one of the most important lessons I've picked up on a technical level, it is that I took the time to learn how to shoot digital photography. Regarding my personal approach, it was to always follow my intuition. Do what is important to you, the rest will follow, and always remember that making mistakes is a key part of the learning process. Aside from my camera, I'll always carry a press pass, so when someone is suspicious I can show it to them.



**New Brighton, from 'The Last Resort', 1983-85, by Martin Parr**

© MARTIN PARR/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Photo essays are a really interesting format to work with. They are essentially a series of images that work as a story. The layering of meaning that streams through the individual frames brings them together. The whole is greater than its parts. You can accomplish a great deal with a series, but each image needs to carry its weight. There can't be any excess or fat.

**Bruce Davidson** ▼  
[bit.ly/2ck4opP](http://bit.ly/2ck4opP)  
 Featured in AP 9 April 2011



MY IMAGES are all about developing awareness and sensitivity. They have all educated me in some way

**Below:** New York City, 1968, by Bruce Davidson

**Bottom:** A Gestapo informer identified as she tries to hide in the crowd, 1945, by Henri Cartier-Bresson

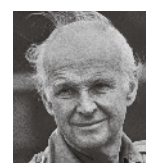
and opened up my experience to a certain reality, whether this be the lives of teenagers or the landscapes I see in Los Angeles. I capture what things feel like, such as the mood of the civil rights movement or the mood of the people living in East Harlem. Even when I'm photographing cacti in Los Angeles, I still feel something.



© BRUCE DAVIDSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**Henri Cartier-Bresson** ▼  
[bit.ly/2cQ6n57](http://bit.ly/2cQ6n57)

From the book *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*



TO TAKE photographs is to hold one's breath when all faculties converge in the face of fleeing reality. It is at that moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.

To take photographs means to recognise – simultaneously and within a fraction of a second – both the fact itself and the rigorous organisation of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis.



© HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**David Hurn** ▼  
[bit.ly/2clo10i](http://bit.ly/2clo10i)

Interview with YouPic, 2016



BASICALLY, in photography there are just two controls: one is where you want to stand, and the other is when

you press the button to take the photograph. What is truly extraordinary about cameras now is that they really can take pictures in virtually any light.

Boy oh boy, it's so much easier now than it used to be, let me tell you, when you had to put the film in the developer and sort of cook it overnight to try to get something you could be happy with out of it. Now all I really have to have on me is one little camera and a lens, and a good pair of shoes to walk around in. Students always ask: 'What is the most important thing in photography?' I say to them: 'Wear good shoes'. If you are going to walk 12 hours a day, you'd better have a decent pair of shoes that are up to the job.



**Police restrain Beatles' fans on the set of A Hard Day's Night, 1964, by David Hurn**

© DAVID HURN/MAGNUM PHOTOS