Kill Your Babies



I have a problem. I often get too attached to my photos, especially my bad photos. I look at all of my photos like my children, and I have a hard time deciding which to keep and which to ditch.

One mantra I have always tried to remind myself is: “Kill your babies.”

The problem is that our photos are like our babies, and the idea of getting rid of them (especially “killing them”) is emotionally painful. And if the phrase “kill your babies” is too graphic for you, I recommend the British saying, “Kill your darlings.”

The problem in today’s society is that we have an overabundance of stuff, information, and especially images. Every minute there are hundreds and thousands of being uploaded to the internet. And 99% of these images are just junk or noise.

The solution? Before you decide to upload an image, think of why you are uploading the image. Is it because you are trying to show a beautiful masterpiece that will bring value to someone else's word? Or because you are trying to get more "favorites" and likes?

Killing my own babies

I recently went through my own baby-killing session. I went to my website splash page and edited down my splash page to my 5 favorite images, all of which I felt had some sort of consistency and emotion to them.

I also edited down my portfolio from 6 projects down to 3. It was really difficult to do, but my good friend Diarmuid McDonald helped me be brutally honest over some nice Turkish food. I once told him to edit down his entire Flickr down to 5 images, so I had to practice what I preached.

I then went home, took out the axe, and started to remove tons of my photos from my website portfolio and Flickr. At first it was very painful, but by the end, **it was insanely refreshing**. It felt almost if a huge weight was taken off my shoulders, and I looked at all of my images with admiration. They were all strong and had a good cohesion and style to them.

It is rare you make a good photograph

The photographer I am trying to imitate the most at the moment is Josef Koudelka. He is a photographer who has been shooting for over 50 years, and has dedicated his life to 3 main projects: his "Gypsies" project, his "Exiles" project, and his new panoramic landscape work. All 3 of these projects are powerful, emotional, memorable, and iconic.

I want to be like Koudelka. I want to aim to create at least 1 strong body of work before I die. Less is more.

Remember, street photography is hard. Damn hard. The most difficult genre of photography out there. It is very rare that you make a good photograph. **If you can even get 1 good street photo a month, 12 decent shots in a year, and 1 truly great image in a year, you're doing really well**. Bruce Gilden even admits only taking 1 photo he really likes for every 50 rolls of film.

Keeping photos for yourself

Just because you "kill your babies" doesn't mean you have to delete the photos or throw away the negatives. Rather, what I encourage is to kill your photos that are public and not very strong.

I have some images that have personal significance to me, but I know that they aren't necessarily good photos. So I keep them on my hard drive for myself, print them out and put them into photo albums (for myself and family), and not share them in public.

Even another practical tip: when I recently edited down my Flickr down to my best 20 images (from 9 years of shooting street photography), I simply marked the weaker shots to "*private*." So I still have the images just in-case, but I don't need to clutter my site.

"But what if I want to get feedback on my photos? Isn't sharing them on social media a good idea?"

That is a good idea if you don't know anybody in-person you can share them with. But I have even a better method I like to do with my buddy Josh White, Neil Ta, and Charlie Kirk: I will send them a photograph that I am not sure about, and simply ask them: "Keep or ditch?" I will also encourage them to be "brutally honest" and help me "kill my babies." They then have no problem taking out the axe and doing the dirty work for me.

Apparently even Steve McCurry didn't really like his "Afghan Girl" photograph. He shot several of her, and actually preferred another shot. But his editor told him that the (now) iconic image was the best. The editor knew better than McCurry, and now it is one of the most famous images in the world.

Oftentimes I don't know what my best images are, because I am too emotionally attached to them. I know too much of the backstory behind my images, and sometimes I had a very engaging conversation with the person. This confuses me, and impairs my judgement.

This is one thing I love about shooting film: I am an impatient bastard (I'm the guy who complains when Google Maps takes longer than 2 seconds to load), and shooting film forces me to be more patient and let my images "*marinate*" and sit for a long time (before I judge them).

Recently my last big batch of film I developed was 164 rolls of film. I waited an entire year (not out of discipline but out of pure laziness and business of my travel schedule). What it taught me was that I was able to "kill my babies" more brutally, because I forgot shooting the majority of the images. So it was almost like I was editing someone else's images.

It is always easier to kill someone else's babies than your own. Furthermore, it is actually easier to work on longer-term projects, without being disappointed on a daily basis with digital photography.

I have nothing against digital photography. In-fact, I prefer the convenience and the cost (film is damn expensive). But the thing is that shooting digital makes me miserable. Why? Whenever I go out and shoot for an entire day, it is very *unlikely* I will get a good shot in a day. So when I look through all the images, I am massively disappointed. But with film, I only see my photos one every 6 months or once a year. And over that period of time, I am bound to at least get 1-2 shots I'm really proud of.

This is another philosophical issue I am dealing with: I technically know that shooting digital will make me a better photographer. Also all of my recent shots I like are shot from a digital Ricoh GR.

However, shooting film gives me more peace of mind, zen, less disappointment, and therefore more happiness.

So what do I do? Do I am to become a better photographer, or to just be happier?

Granted these things aren't mutually exclusive. I can do both at the same time. Perhaps in the future I can try not to "*chimp*" as much when shooting digital, or to treat digital like film (not look at my photos often, maybe only one a month).

Removing your ego from your photos

Another practical tip when it comes down to "killing your babies" or editing down your portfolio: remember, **you are not your photos**. Not only that, but **your photos have no feelings**. If you decide to "ditch" a shot, your photos don't care. If anything, they are happy to be released once again into the ether or the digital cyberspace they came from.

So when people critique or criticize your photos, they aren't criticizing you. They are criticizing your photos.

I often get criticized for the writing on the blog, but I also try to remind myself: people are criticizing my writing, not me as a human being. They are different.

Even when people criticize my actions, I try not to get offended. I remind myself: **I am not my actions**. I therefore try to change my actions in the future.

Killing your ego is one of the most difficult things, something that take a lifetime. Your ego is that little voice in your head that never shuts the fuck up, and is always criticizing you.

This is why studying meditation and Zen Buddhism can be so useful. If you're interested in learning more about Zen and Street Photography, download my free e-book: "Zen in the Art of Street Photography."

Moving forward

So moving forward, I am still trying to figure out my life and my photography.

Currently, the only camera I own is a film Leica and 35mm lens. Everyday I need to fight the urges of GAS (Gear Acquisition Syndrome). Everyday I don't feel inspired, I think buying a new camera will magically make me more inspired. That is bullshit, it never does.

What I always try to do is whenever I crave a new camera, I buy a new book instead. Some books on my radar currently include Sergio Larrain, "Songbook" by Alec Soth, and a new personal favorite: "For every minute you are angry you lose sixty seconds of happiness" (you can see the project online here). Remember: **Buy books, not gear**.

Another thing I've been thinking about: there is so much depressing photos online of people and society. I want to start taking happier photos. Photos that are positive and encourage people, rather than capturing alienation and confusion.

Anyways, I don't have anything left to say. I started to get another weird reaction from drinking coffee again (throat swelling). Instead today I got an Almond milk Chai Latte which was lovely too.

Off to Leeds today to explore northern England. Wish me a safe trip :)

Godspeed,
Eric

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