

How to live a life of meaning

Ever since I was a little kid, I've been an artist. I remember doodling in my notebooks when I was in kindergarten, making intricate pictures of battle scenes and war. I spent my youth arranging crusaders, gladiators, and warrior figurines from the toy store at Piazza Navona in Rome. I would create epic landscapes of conflict from various elevations all throughout my bedroom floor, making stories and dialogue for the warriors. I spent my youth in the Wissahickon forest, building teepees with sticks, crafting bridges with stones, making spears, attempting to hunt deer, exploring caves, and climbing trees.

We were all born artists, but society teaches everybody to conform, to become consumers, letting go of our natural desire to create.

What do you truly want to do in life?

I believe this is a very important question to ask ourselves. We should consider what we truly want to do in our life, so that we do not lead ourselves, astray, down the path that we will regret in the future. Ultimately, I want to live a life with no regrets. *Just think, if you were to live your life in reverse, as if you are currently retired, how would you live your life?*

Maybe a lot of people live their life for someone else's dream, waiting until they turn 65, to finally do everything that they desired when they retire. To me, this seems like a big scam, as by that time, you're going to have less physiological power to even attempt the things that you could while you were young. Personally, I desire to live a life of an artist, photographer, creator, thinker, writer, philosopher, poet, horticulturalist, and explorer.

If these are my goals, and how I would like to spend my life, I'm certainly not going to box myself inside, in an office building. I am going to place myself outside of the box, away from the air conditioner, in the fresh air, in the open world. **For myself, the ultimate way to live a life of meaning is through the creation of art. I affirm life through the creation of new photographs.**

Life is a Video Game

If you were the hero from your favorite video game, how would you live your life?

The first video game I remember playing as a child was The Legend of Zelda, Ocarina of Time for the Nintendo 64. In the game, there is a relic called the Triforce, which is comprised of three pieces, making the triangle, that represent the virtues power, wisdom, and courage. The hero, Link, possesses the triforce of courage, the boss, Ganondorf possesses power, and is holding the princess, Zelda as a hostage, who possesses the triforce of wisdom. The ultimate goal in the game is to restore balance in the world, by defeating the boss and rescuing the princess.

If I was Link from The Legend of Zelda, I would want to possess all three pieces of the Triforce, courage, power, and wisdom.

Strong body, strong mind, strong soul

We can increase our physical strength and power through simple acts, such as working out, clean diets, and overcoming physical challenges. The first step in life should be to increase power, and to create a strong body. I believe this comes first and foremost, because without a strong body, you will have a weak mind.

The stronger my body becomes, the sharper my mind is, and the more courage I ultimately have.

In the legend of Zelda, there are many puzzles to solve. Along our journey in life, we will have to overcome mental challenges. By reading books and learning new things, we can unlock new abilities that will help us solve some of life's toughest problems. **Books like "Meditations" by Marcus Aurelius will provide a strong foundation of wisdom for you to build upon.**

With a strong body and a strong mind, we will inevitably have a strong soul.

Courage derives from the term, “cor” meaning *heart*. In life, we will be faced with many bosses, or obstacles to face. Through facing our fears, and putting courage at the forefront, we will step out of our comfort zone, gaining valuable experience along our journey. As a photographer, I believe we should reframe the way that we think of photographs. **A photograph is not just light on surface, but what you decide to include within the four corners of the frame is a reflection of your courage, or your soul.**

Almost every strong photograph that I’ve created is a result of me taking a risk, and exuding my courage. A very important question to ask yourself when reflecting on your work is this:

Did this photograph require courage to make?

If life is like a video game, you’re going to be spending a lot of time in the dungeon, slaying the zombies, and increasing your skills along your journey before you fight the boss. *Upgrade your life, and embrace virtue.* **Find your Triforce, your balance, between courage, power, and wisdom.**

Forever a Noob

The most enjoyable part of playing a new video game is being a noob, and amateur, and learning things. It sounds cliché, but it is true, that the journey is the most enjoyable part of life.

As a photographer, I never desire to become a master. I hope to forever remain an amateur, a beginner, learning each day. This means, when I’m on the street, I forget everything that I think I know, about what makes what breaks a good, or bad, photograph. For these things are not of my concern, but what I am most interested in is the element of surprise, letting go, and simply letting the chips fall as they may. If there is anything that peaks my curiosity while I am out there making new photographs, I will simply make a snapshot, a quick note, an instant sketch of life.

Think like this:

My next photograph is my best photograph.

Don't pigeonhole yourself to one genre, especially within the realm of street photography. If anything, street photography is not a genre of photography. Street photography is an ethos, a philosophy, and approach to making pictures. At the end of the day, find your own way to play the game, and don't follow any of the rules. Maybe at first, it's good to learn the rules, study the masters, but some point, you're going to have to kill the masters, and break all of the rules, guidelines, and notions of what it means to be successful.

What is the telos of photography?

The goal of photography is very simple. Make pictures for the sake of making pictures pictures. Embrace the autotelic approach of practicing photography. Detach yourself completely from the outcome, the results, or the photograph. **By detaching yourself from the outcome, you will find yourself in this endless and abundant state, in a stream of becoming.**

What does success mean?

Forget about the books, galleries, and prints. The true goal of any artist, and especially within the realm of photography should be to increase your curiosity each day. **If you are curious about life itself, consider yourself successful.**

Remember, it is simply your lust for life that will fuel you along your journey. By remaining a noob, or an amateur, forever, you will increase your chances of making more interesting photographs.

Why?

The less you know, the better. Embrace the spontaneous nature of life, the streets, and photography. Let's loosen up, return to the inner child, and create from the spirit of play. **I believe that it is from the spirit of play that we can create our best work.**

Embrace Authenticity

On one of my recent trips in 2022, to Hanoi, Vietnam, I spent one month walking around Hoam Kiem Lake. Actually, while I walked around the lake, I met Nick Ut, who photographed the most haunting picture of the Vietnam war. It was surprising to see the way that he was photographing, simply making pictures of the tranquil lake, trees, and nature after making a career based upon the horrors of war.

I spent lots of time contemplating, thinking, meditating along the lake. I would wake up each day around four or 5 AM, doing yoga alongside the locals. It amazed me how many of the elderly people would spend their time with family, partaking in physical leisure, such a stretching, and calisthenics, as the sun rose. There was something so peaceful about this lake, and I spent so much time here, wondering about what the point of life is, and what direction I would like to take next.

When I returned home, I decided I need a change. I headed to New York City, and sold all of my camera gear. I returned to my first love, the Ricoh GR, and decided I've reached a turning point in my journey. For nearly a decade, I was photographing in color, and found my voice, my style, and my approach to be very comfortable. However, there was something in me that was seeking discomfort and change, in order to grow. I felt like I hit a wall, that this phase, period of life, was now behind me. By letting go of the old, and embracing the new, I've been giving my life so much more meaning, and finding so much more joy in my life and photography.

I've decided to start making pictures in a way that embraces my true and authentic self. I'm simply allowing myself to follow my child like curiosity, and photograph the places that are closest to me, such as my hometown, Philadelphia. In the past, I've always looked for the next best picture, or the more interesting location to photograph. I think over time, I photographed so many interesting things, that it became too difficult to find something better, which led me to a wall. **Now, I simply let life flow towards me.**

I was always on the hunt, traveling, and living a nomadic lifestyle. Now, in my hometown, Philadelphia, I think I found my life project. Who knows, I'm sure the road will take me to Rome once again, maybe even back to Jerusalem, and other

places in the world. However, I am very content with my hometown, living here, and photographing here. I actually think that I finally found a way where I designed my life where I can photograph here forever.

One critical thing that I've realized was that my process was holding me back from evolving. I need simplicity in life. I desire for my life, work, and photography, to be easiest as possible. By embracing a compact, digital camera, and black-and-white, I can simply snapshot my way through life. I believe I found the simplest solution possible to making a photograph, and believe that there is no turning back. not only is this a simplest solution, but it is the easiest solution. Because it is the easiest, I ultimately have the most fun that I ever have had in my life as a photographer. This should be the goal anyway, to have fun.

Because I'm having so much fun with my photography and life lately, I have such an abundance within me, and I'm so eager to share. I've decided to remove myself from social media, such as Instagram, and make my own website blog. I've also decided to speak candidly on my YouTube channel, sharing, whatever is on my mind, in a stream of consciousness style. I believe this is a really authentic way to make videos, into something that is bringing my life so much joy. I've always simply love to create, share, make videos, photos, etc. By removing any analytics, likes, and comments, I make things For the sake of making things, because I simply enjoy doing it. I no longer need an audience, and have bigger goals in life, such as impacting the world in my own way. I've realized that in order to change the world you must change yourself. Even if I only impact the life of one other person, I consider myself successful.

I'm starting to think that this change is one of the greatest things that's ever happened in my life. I've never been so mentally and physically strong, confident, and healthy, in my life. By embracing authenticity, I have freed myself, unshackled, untethered, and can now fly higher. **Perhaps through authenticity, and the creation of art, we can champion mankind, and elevate the human experience to a new height.**

Follow your intuition

One of my favorite Arabic words that I learned throughout my journey in Jericho is

Inshallah, or God willing

I believe that there is a reason why they say “trust your gut.” We all possess a Godlike intuition. Maybe it’s the voice in your head, or your conscience. When you embrace your authentic self, you become more in tune with your intuition. By following your intuition, you discover your path that you are meant to be on.

I’ve never felt like I fit in anywhere. I’ve always been a nomad, a wanderer, living life on the road, from place to place, experience to experience, trying new things. I’ve lived in both Israel and Palestine, volunteering as a farmer, gardener, and even joined the Peace Corps where I served as an aquaculture promotion specialist in rural villages of Zambia, Africa. I’ve worked in offices such as City Hall in Philadelphia, worked in politics, and even as a photojournalist. One thing I’ve realized is that making pictures for work completely kills the joy of photography for me, and that is something that I will not pursue. However, I know where I belong, as I have trust in God, and he told me to return to the garden.

The happiest I’ve ever been in my life was when I was working on the farms, off the grid, in the villages of Zambia. I’ve always enjoyed traveling, volunteering, and gardening. Even during my time spent in Palestine, in Jericho, I would visit an old man’s house, Hassan, and water his garden, just for fun. I enjoy spending time with my godmother, tending her garden, and growing tomatoes. This is something that I genuinely enjoy doing, being outside, in nature, and embracing the physical. The problem with a lot of modern life, especially in a city, such as Philadelphia, is that most work is within the digital world. This is why I’ve never been able to find my place in the city, and would always leave, as nothing felt meaningful there.

I began thinking to myself, how can I live life in reverse? If I was retired right now, what would I be doing with my time?

I came to the conclusion that I’d probably be at a garden, in a park, spending time outside, in nature, reading, thinking, writing, and making art.

This past summer, I’ve been working as a horticulturalist, and absolutely love it. It’s so fulfilling to clear out some land, give life to nature, plant some flowers, tend exotic trees, pull weeds, and create things. I like seeing the result of something that I make, or work on. I like being physical, I enjoy hard work, and I love the heat of

the sun. I've realized through my intuition that I belong in nature, and that is where I currently spend the beginning of my day now. I love waking up early, catching the sunrise, and enjoying Philadelphia's green spaces. I don't consider what I do as work, but I consider it physical leisure. I want to live a life in perpetual Otium, like I am in Ancient Rome, spending my time thinking, creating, and making art, so that I can become the greatest artist that I can ever be.

Ultimately, it was William Penn's plan to make Philadelphia a greene countrie towne, and I want to embrace his ethos of what Philadelphia is, by finding balance between the urban life and countryside.

I enjoy my solitude. It is difficult for me to fake a smile, and pretend, which is what I realized happens in most office work and regular jobs in general. **By following my intuition, and embracing my authentic self, I found a new vocation in life, giving my life so much meaning.**

Metamorphosis

Over the past two years I've gone through a big change, a metamorphosis. After reading "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" by Friedrich Nietzsche, I learned that the concept of a metamorphosis is a spiritual transformation of overcoming yourself in the creation of new values.

You begin as the Camel, taking on the weight of societal norms, expectations, and duties without questioning them. The next stage is that of a lion, the spirit of rebellion and desire for freedom. This means, saying no to the previously accepted path, and asserting one's independence. Finally, you transform to the child. Children are creative, playful, and have the innocence to create new values and perspectives without the constraints of past beliefs. Now, as a child, you say yes to life and embrace the sense of wonder and possibility of the future, creating your own identity and values.

I feel like a snake that shed its skin. I feel like a butterfly that was a caterpillar, once in a cocoon. I feel like a bird, courageous in flight, but playful like a child, dancing through the air. I feel like a child again.

I realized that I love Philadelphia because it is the most walkable city in the country with so many parks and green spaces. I do not need a car, nor do I desire a car. I do not desire praise or material luxury. I enjoy the simple life and have found a way to design a life that suits my personal preferences. I realized that I do not need breakfast or lunch, and don't really need much from this world in general. I want nothing to do with the rat race, and the endless pursuit for what I believe is nothing of value. I've realized the natural biological goal for humanity is to form families, and make more children. While this is a goal that I would like to achieve, I've also let go of the outcome, and I'm perfectly content in solitude, creating my own children, or art.

I desire to remain a child forever.

I want to return to the woods, building forts with sticks, bridges with stones, and climb trees again. I don't want to take myself or my life so seriously, and create from an abundant state, in the spirit of play. I want to affirm my life, through an endless cycle of creation, destruction, and rebirth. **I want to live a life full of meaning, and I am so grateful for art and the way it allows me to give meaning to the mundane.**

Onwards, Dante