

Front Lines of Life

The ultimate privilege and luxury in life is simply walking in the great outdoors. When you're outside, you exist outside the passage of time. While moving your physical body, observing life, photographing—the past and the future are not your concern. When you're out there, on the front lines of life, engaging with humanity—not only as a bystander or observer, but as an active participant in life itself—you become connected to the eternal now.

Motivation

I prefer to set my body in motion without preconceived notions of what I will find. In order to become motivated, one must simply *move*. Even as I type this essay right now—this morning—I'm walking with my 40-pound plate carrier. It's around 5:30 AM, and I'm by the beautiful river. I just wake up, throw the camera in my pocket, and go. I don't think, plan, or overanalyze anything.

When I was a university student in Baltimore, I'll never forget the first days when I decided to walk the streets with my camera. Just nearby my dorm was downtown Winchester, a neighborhood in West Baltimore—particularly in places where *The Wire* was filmed. You hear about all the danger, drug trafficking, gang violence, etc. These places can strike fear in you.

However, when I picked up the camera and first started exploring, I just went out there without any real clue of what to expect. All I really had to do was step out my door and walk a few blocks down the street—and I was in another world entirely. I slipped my Ricoh GR2 into my front right pocket and started to explore.

But the first step is critical: **letting go of all expectations.**

Detach From the Outcome

As I traveled around this neighborhood with my camera, I found myself in the spirit of play—photographing a playground, specifically, where children were hanging out. One moment that sticks out is when I approached this beautiful mural behind a school with a basketball court and made one of my first successful street photographs.

I approached the people playing, asked for permission to make some photos—the scene was just perfect, with this beautiful backdrop and golden light. As I became a fly on the wall, I started to photograph. I had no idea what I could make at that scene, but I could just sense the possibility of something magical.

By building rapport and trust with the subjects, I was granted permission to make a much more intimate photograph—both in physical and emotional proximity.

But just to the left of me, young men were gambling on the street—money and dice on the ground—and suddenly a fight broke out. I remember making a quick photograph of that fight, then walking home with my head held high, feeling like I had just gotten away with something. I remember smiling so much on my way home, like “Holy shit—I can’t believe I just got out of there.”

I went back to my dorm, imported my photos, and was so happy with the results. I had no clue what kind of photos I was making at that moment. Little did I know that this photograph would win **first prize at the Miami Street Photography Festival Photo Slam**, judged by Martin Parr. It was even more special because he spoke live about my photograph—and there’s video footage of it. At the time I submitted the photo, I had zero idea it could win anything. I was a noob, just getting started.

Intention and Manifestation

Throughout my journey as a photographer, I’ve dedicated my mind, body, and spirit—with everything I have—to make the images I’ve come home with. From that day onward, I never thought the photos I was making were just happy accidents, luck,

or chance.

For instance, one day it was raining in Baltimore, and I decided to put on my rain gear, pick up my umbrella, and hit the streets with the **intention** of photographing a rainbow. I'll never forget studying the masters of photography at the time—specifically Alex Webb—and all the beautiful rainbow photographs he made.

I told myself: *I can absolutely achieve this. I just have to go out there with the intention of doing this.* I had to actually put my mind, my body, and my spirit out there onto the front lines of life—and give it all I got.

So I did. I wandered around West Baltimore with my Ricoh GR2. People were moving in and out of the scene. I had a stationary subject drinking from a cup on a corner as others gathered for shelter from the rain. I started to photograph—chipping away at the scene. Suddenly, the rainbow revealed itself in the background. I adjusted, worked the composition, and lined it all up with the foreground subjects.

In that moment, I was **overflowing with joy**. I had gone out with the intention of photographing a rainbow—and I came home with a strong photo. It had layers, complexity, and a clean composition.

While I believe it's critical to detach from the outcome itself, if you go out there with a positive attitude, with intention, dedication, consistency, and repetition—you **manifest** anything. You can photograph the dreams in your head. You just have to throw yourself into the unknown.

The Best Photographs Require Risk

One day when I was photographing a girl holding a flower in front of a mural during a barbecue, a car came drifting by—**shooting** at everyone nearby. I was literally in the middle of a **drive-by shooting**. I picked up my camera, shoved it in my pocket, and ran back to my dorm.

Needless to say, photographing in Baltimore during my early years set me up with nerves of steel. It gave me courage. It prepared me for anything.

I'd say photographing in **West Baltimore** is the reason I'm the photographer I am today. It's a more intense and difficult approach to photography—the documentary approach—as opposed to sidewalk surfing in a place like New York City. If you can photograph in West Baltimore, you can photograph *anywhere*.

The Road to Jerusalem

In 2017, I studied abroad in Jerusalem at Hebrew University. I had this grand idea of making a photograph of the **separation wall**.

Sure, I wandered the Old City and surrounding neighborhoods—but my first goal was to travel throughout the West Bank to photograph the wall. So I did.

After doing some research, I discovered Shu'fat Refugee Camp nearby in East Jerusalem. All the media surrounding it was negative, doom and gloom. It made it sound like I absolutely should *not* go there.

But I simply hopped on the light rail to see for myself.

This is the beauty of being a photographer—you become your own news outlet, your own journalist. Through personal experience and photographing, you get closer to truth.

I passed through a metal detector, had my bag x-rayed, showed my passport to the Israeli soldier, and walked through the barbed wire turnstile—now within the walls of Shu'fat.

Walking along the wall, I thought: *What is this place? Why is this wall here? Why is there so much trash everywhere?*

Honestly, it felt like a **gigantic prison**.

Persistence and Play

Week after week I walked that wall. I found almost nothing—some trash, dead dogs, maybe a kid or two.

But I kept going. I made photographs of a man selling watermelon out of his car. I was invited into homes, drank tea, shared lunch with construction workers. One day I even boxed a stranger—kind of play-fighting with a Palestinian man. Another day I climbed down a ladder onto a construction site and helped carry beams.

Through repetition, I returned to the same locations again and again. One day, while walking along the wall, a rock came flying down and smacked me in the back of the leg. Kids came running. One picked up a baby stroller and threw it against the wall.

It was one of the most **random, chaotic scenes** I've ever witnessed. So, of course, I made photographs—juxtaposing the looming wall with the flying stroller and the children. A shadow loomed. A mysterious moment was captured.

I walked home feeling **accomplished**. I had set out with intention. I embraced danger. I made the photo.

Conflict Photography

After photographing the wall, I traveled throughout different cities in the West Bank. One time the bus stopped at a checkpoint in Qalandiya. There was smoke, fire, and gunshots.

I stepped off the bus. Israelis and Palestinians were in an uproar.

I'll never forget being on the Israeli side—raising my camera—only to see a soldier radio in from the tower to **fire tear gas directly at me.**

My eyes filled with tears. I could barely see. I ran through alleyways until I reached the Palestinian side. There, they greeted me warmly and even gave me a reflective vest so I'd look like a photojournalist.

I pushed further and further into the chaos—hiding behind barriers, then pushing out to the front lines. I remember tripping, falling, getting back up—still photographing.

That was only the first time I photographed conflict. But it wouldn't be the last.

The Road From Jerusalem to Jericho

In 2018, I returned to Israel to volunteer on a kibbutz, hoping to continue making work. But after a month, I felt stale. My photography was suffering.

So I packed my bags, got on a bus, and took the road to Jericho.

I arrived around midnight. Nobody knew I was coming. I knocked on the hostel door where I'd stayed before—and they let me in. I stayed as a volunteer for two months.

Each morning I'd wake up, eat pita, eggs, hummus, dates, sweep floors, take out trash, make beds—and by 11 AM I'd hit the streets with my camera.

I started following a man named Mohammed. He lived alone, a refugee who had built his own home. I watched him get dressed, brush his teeth, build extensions of his house. We'd go to Hassan's house, water the garden, chat, then go about the day.

We hiked the **Wadi Qelt** mountain range—through dry, brutal desert.

During this trip I even slept in mosques across Jericho, traveling with a small group of men and an imam—praying five times daily, fasting, sharing meals on one big plate—usually pigeon, rice, and potatoes.

I learned about Muhammad—how to pray, wash, sleep, live like him.

Though I was making photographs, it was ultimately a **spiritual journey**.

Off the Grid

In 2019, I joined the Peace Corps. Living **off the grid** in rural villages was one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

There were no faucets, but somehow, people were **happier than Americans**.

There was a hierarchy between **God, tribe, and land**.

I lived in a mud hut, fetched water from a well, cooked over a fire, slaughtered goats and chickens, and prepared food by hand.

Women carried babies and firewood. Men built churches. Boys made bricks. Girls cleaned and prepared food. Everyone had a role.

At the center of the village was the church, the altar—the symbol of **sacrifice**.

Everyone strived to live like **Jesus**. And because of that, there was no need for police or government bureaucracy. The community flourished.

A Spiritual Journey

I spent two weeks sleeping under tents made of sticks and tarps. Hundreds of Zambians gathered for a Seventh-Day Adventist church camp by the lake.

I shared a deep connection with my host father, even through language barriers.

One day, there were **baptisms** in the lake. I stood knee-deep in the water with my camera, photographing hearts and souls pouring out into the water.

As they rose, born again—overflowing with joy, tears, and happiness—it struck me:

It doesn't matter how many riches or material things you have in this world. The **riches you store in heaven**, your relationship with God—that's what provides **true spiritual wealth**.

That's what lasts.

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