

The Truth About Candid Street Photography (Be a Human First, Photographer Second)

What's poppin', people? It's Dante.

Currently, I'm walking around Philadelphia, and today I wanted to share some thoughts about the candid nature of street photography.

I think street photography has **everything to do with how you engage with humanity**.

Your personality is on display through the frames that you make.

If you're shy and reserved, using a zoom lens and photographing people from across the street, those qualities remain in your photography. You're making candid photographs, but they're often more about **geometry, light, and form** than genuine engagement with people.

Maybe that's simply who you are.

Then there's the documentary photographer.

They're seeking to go deeper. They embed themselves within communities. They aren't afraid of conversation, confrontation, or connection.

I've realized over the years that this is the approach I've naturally gravitated toward.

It isn't about abandoning candid photography.

It's about expanding what candid photography can be.

Learning to Be Human First

The first time I picked up a camera and practiced street photography was here in Philadelphia over a decade ago.

Later, when I moved to Baltimore, I realized I had to learn an entirely different way to play the game.

Walking through neighborhoods like Sandtown-Winchester, I couldn't simply wander around making candid photographs the same way I would in Center City Philadelphia.

That approach wouldn't work.

It forced me to learn something much more valuable.

Be a human first. Be a photographer second.

That's the shift.

Many photographers work in cities like Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles where crowds allow anonymity. You can simply walk, observe, and quietly make photographs.

But if you're in a small town...

If you're somewhere people immediately notice you...

You have to engage first.

Photography comes afterward.

Becoming Part of the Scene

For me, that meant returning to the same places repeatedly.

I'd stand near bus stops.

I'd talk to people.

Eventually I became a familiar face.

Trust slowly developed.

People began recognizing me.

I'd explain that I was learning photography and that I was simply curious about the neighborhood.

Eventually I asked permission to make portraits.

Then something interesting happened.

Once people trusted me...

I could begin making candid photographs naturally.

When you know how to engage with people, eventually you become a fly on the wall.

Street Photography Is More Nuanced Than People Think

Too many people think candid photography has rigid rules.

That you must make photographs without people noticing.

That interaction somehow invalidates the work.

I don't believe that's true.

If you travel around the world simply running around making "gotcha" photographs, you'll only get so far.

More importantly...

I don't think the work becomes very interesting.

Instead...

Make your presence known.

Smile.

Say hello.

Acknowledge strangers.

Be open.

When you engage with humanity first, something changes.

You gain more time.

More trust.

More freedom to compose.

Better timing.

Most importantly...

You gain emotional proximity.

Not just physical closeness.

That emotional closeness creates more complexity within the frame.

Photography Opened the World to Me

Traveling throughout Israel and Palestine...

Zambia...

The villages and slums of Mumbai...

I've realized the camera isn't just a camera.

It's a passport.

It's a key.

Photography has opened doors for me that otherwise would've remained closed.

I've been invited into churches.

Mosques.

Synagogues.

People's homes.

I've shared coffee.

Tea.

Meals.

I've climbed mountains with strangers.

Photography became a byproduct of living openly.

Treat photography as a byproduct of your experience as a human being.

A Lesson From Israel

I'll never forget arriving in Israel in 2017 while studying abroad in Jerusalem.

One of the first places I visited was the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

There was almost nobody around.

Just one farmer.

Two boys.

A herd of goats.

I didn't speak Arabic.

I barely knew how to communicate.

But I approached them with openness.

I smiled.

I said *Salaam Alaikum*.

Then I pulled out an Instax camera.

I made a portrait of the farmer.

I handed him the print.

The boys immediately ran toward me wanting photographs too.

Those little prints became gifts.

From that moment...

Everything changed.

The camera became more than something that takes.

It became something that gives.

From there I was invited into homes.

People offered to show me their neighborhoods.

And throughout those experiences...

I continued making candid photographs naturally.

Bring an Instax Camera

If you're traveling...

Bring an Instax camera.

Gift photographs to strangers.

Watch how stories begin unfolding around you.

That one small decision changes the entire dynamic.

It helps overcome fear.

It builds trust.

It allows you to get physically and emotionally closer to people.

And suddenly...

Photographs you never thought were possible become possible.

Beyond Sidewalk Surfing

I joke sometimes that many photographers simply go **sidewalk surfing**.

Ricoh in the pocket.

See a moment.

Pull it out.

Click.

Keep walking.

There's nothing inherently wrong with that.

But I believe the strongest street photography often happens when you're immersed inside an experience.

Not simply passing through it.

That requires time.

Consistency.

Returning again and again.

The technical aspects of photography—composition, light, timing—matter.

Of course they do.

But I honestly think the hardest obstacle photographers face isn't technical.

It's overcoming the fear of engaging with another human being.

There Are No Rules

Don't let the internet convince you there's only one correct way to make street photography.

There isn't.

There are no absolute rules.

Play the game your own way.

We're all different people.

With different personalities.

Different experiences.

Different ways of connecting with the world.

Street photography is simply an open-world exploration.

All you need is a camera.

A good pair of shoes.

And somewhere to wander.

Turn left.

Turn right.

Walk toward the bridge.

Explore Old City.

Follow your curiosity.

You never know what's waiting around the next corner.

When you're open to possibility...

You're open to better photographs.

But even more importantly...

You're open to a richer life.

Photography becomes filled with purpose and meaning far beyond making a great picture.

That's what candid street photography has given me.

And hopefully these thoughts encourage you to go explore your own town...

Meet people...

Have experiences...

Bring your camera...

And allow photography to become a natural extension of living fully.

Peace.