

EWEN BELL  
ReIMAGINE

SAMPLE READ AND CHAPTER PREVIEWS

CHANGE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY CHANGING YOUR PERSPECTIVE

# ReIMAGINE

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EWEN BELL

**This book is intended to help you with your journey and to explore the art of photography in greater depth and with deeper personal meaning.**

Your photography is an act of expression. It is more than merely reproducing a scene or rendering a moment for future recall. The act of taking a photo is filled with creative opportunity.

I want this book to inspire you as well as inform. It is balanced between philosophical ideas on photography and actual practical techniques. In your hands you are holding ten years of photography, teaching and travel. Please don't rush it.

The practice of photography demands both the creative and the technical but not always in equal measure. The camera itself holds a very small interest to me when compared to the joy of a photograph. It is within the image itself that the magic happens, when a moment is re-imagined firstly through the eyes of the photographer, and finally through the eyes of the audience.

My greatest joy in photography is to share what makes the world beautiful: to let others step into my world and see the elegance, joy and humanity that I have experienced. When they do, they make my world their own.

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FOREWORD  
by BRUCE PERCY

**AN INHERENT CURIOSITY IN ALL THINGS**

Being inherently curious in all things is, for all of us, at the core of our interest in photography. It is also the most important attribute we possess. For being curious about all things implies an elevated sense of perception about what is happening around us, emotionally as well as visually. Indeed, I often think that emotional intelligence is the greatest undervalued skill we photographers possess.

If we are capable of reading other's feelings, of understanding the rhythms of how people move through a city, or how the light interacts with a subject, then we are utilising our natural emotional intelligence in the right way, and the photographic journey becomes a much richer experience as a result.

In the pages that follow, Ewen goes to great efforts to show us that photography is all about these things. The technical does get covered, but it is often intertwined with the more important aspects of engaging with our surroundings and subjects. He understands that to make great photographs we have to become part of the scene, part of the story, and that we are ultimately reflected in the images we make.

As he says on page 15 of this book, 'the camera looks both ways'. Wise words indeed.

PLEASE ENJOY READING A SAMPLE  
OF ONE MY FAVOURITE CHAPTERS



WHY WE ASK  
FIRST

# WHY WE ASK FIRST

Asking permission before taking photos of a stranger is not just a matter of respect, it's also the path to better portraits and a more rewarding experience for you and your subject.

In the dim light before dawn I walked up the back steps to Swayambunath, the Monkey Temple, on the edge of Kathmandu. I come here for the sunrise, to see an orange ball of fire wrestle with the haze and pollution of Nepal's biggest city. The rising sun is a curiosity really, but the people who visit Swayambunath each morning to offer prayers are absolute treasures. They light butter lamps, burn incense sticks, prostrate themselves at the altars of gods, seek blessings from holy men and monks, and sing chants of joy that float across the suburbs below. It's a joyous place with or without a camera.

The light changes rapidly after dawn and offers new inspiration by the minute. Swayambunath is a peaceful and calm treasure in Kathmandu that rewards photographers as they struggle to master the more subtle challenges of portrait and street photography. It's also a great place to practise the gentle art of engaging with your subjects.

## Telephoto Stalking

When I first went solo with my photography I would shoot a lot of tour brochures, and as such got to meet more than a few tour guides who held an interest in photography as well. Often they'd pull out their camera and start showing me their work, with pride and eagerness to share their

talent. One fellow had bought a 70–200mm lens and wanted to show me a series of shots he took of a vendor in Thailand. He was standing across the street when he took the shots, peering in from a distance with the longest part of his telephoto. The images were mostly just of the head, sometimes a little of the shoulders too, and often not even that.

My guide thought the images were beautiful. I thought they were creepy.

Put yourself in that woman's shoes. If she did know that a photographer with a big lens was sneaking photos from across the street, would she be flattered or terrified? It was difficult to fully empathise with her perspective in this case, because the photos I saw revealed so little of her identity or spirit. She was anonymous and lost in the shots. The images were one-dimensional in the extreme. They could have been taken anywhere. Such a long lens allows little room to embrace context in compositions. There was no composition in these frames, just focus and grab.

Telephoto portraits remove any hint of connection between the photographer and subject. There's no story in such images: no layers, no context and no substance.

My guide wasn't thrilled with my response to his pictures. He defended his shots by suggesting that if he had asked first then the moment would have passed, that it would be gone forever. If you're standing across the road stalking a woman in Thailand, then it's quite possible there is no 'moment' that exists outside of your own mind.

There is a better way. Instead of stalking women with a telephoto lens, there is a path that leads to real moments and much more connected photography.

## Permission

Many people think seeking permission to photograph is ruining the moment, and ruining the image they imagine in their minds. Firstly, it's important to note that the desire to photograph does not override someone else's right to privacy. Portrait photography requires the most basic level of respect for other humans and if that's too difficult to manage, then maybe you need to focus more on landscapes instead. If you think it would be 'awkward' to surreptitiously sneak photos of strangers in your own neighbourhood, then try to apply those same rules of respect to the streets of Nepal, or Thailand, or Bhutan, or anywhere else.

If you're in a rush and just want to roll through a market or street scene at maximum pace while grabbing shots, and feel you don't have time to stop and chat to people, then don't expect to achieve any depth or joy from your photography. You get out what you put in.

Engagement is the essential ingredient here, and stopping to ask permission from people is the *beginning* of engagement, not the end of a moment. Spend a little while either talking to

them, or sharing a few photos on the back of your screen. Let them in on your art and photography. The more you engage, the less they have to fear from you, and the more they can be themselves. Connecting with people is the first step, and the real photography comes later.

Once you share a few photos and have a chat, or exchange of hand gestures, most people will happily ignore you. And that's the best part. They will return to their business, go back to selling produce or boiling masala chai. And that's when your most revealing photography will be possible. At this point, you have consent to be present and consent to be photographing. You are no longer a weirdo with a camera, and the more indifference they have to your presence the more intimate your captures can be.

Now that you are an intimate part of the scene, you have much greater flexibility over your connection with the subject. You can still capture moments with subjects looking directly at the lens, offering a smile, or moments when they are oblivious of the camera. It's your choice now. You can also shoot bits of texture deep within the scene, such as close-ups of hands at work. You see so much more by being up close, and hence can photograph so much more.

Whether you aim for direct portraits or a 'fly-on-the-wall' moment, by showing patience and respect you allow the subject to be less anxious or conscious of the camera itself. They are aware mostly of you, not the camera. This places you in a powerful position for editorial and journalistic photography.

It takes time. It takes effort. It takes kindness. There is work involved and it's not a 'hit-and-run' scenario. Treating people with respect and sharing your photography with the subject gives them a chance to share a little of themselves in return. It doesn't mean everyone will respond in kind, because some people simply don't want to be in front of a camera at all. This technique opens the door to some really lovely moments: real moments that you will be in the ideal position to capture through a wide lens because you're up close and immersed in the scene and the story.

A portrait is not just somebody's face: it's somebody's life.

#### Smile and Smile

When I talk about consent to photograph, I am aware that language barriers can prevent us from simply explaining what we're doing. This doesn't mean we can't gain consent, however. The key is to make it very clear what is being done, not to hide it or be secretive, and to wait for a positive response from the subject. This is not merely 'tacit' consent; it is waiting for a confirmed 'yes' even in the absence of language skills.

Another of my favourite places to shoot in Kathmandu is Boudhanath, the Tibetan stupa in a part of town where exiles and refugees escaped the Chinese occupation of the mid 20th century. At any time of day, there are people walking and praying around the stupa and prayer wheels, but late in the afternoon the crowds grow and the light turns golden. If I stand in one place, I will see the same faces go past over and over. And they see me too.

I try to greet my potential subjects with a smile first, and the camera second.

If I start with a smile, and offer it to strangers, then it's amazing how often they will return in kind. I stand in plain sight holding a camera, down low at my waist and aimed at the ground. I'm not hiding it. I want them to see my camera and be aware why I am there. I might wave my camera in the air to emphasise my intentions. If they smile again, then it's a good sign. If an old lady looks away in fear of the camera, then that's a bad sign. I act accordingly.

A measure of patience is needed to do this. I watch them walk past over and over, eager to capture but balancing that with respect. Only when I get a generous smile can I be sure. Once I bring the camera up to my face to compose, I may get a different reaction again. Sometimes they smile even more, sometimes they decide, 'Oh, no thanks.' I have to look for their response and then decide. It all begins with the smile.

The only thing worse than shooting subjects from across the road with a big lens is shooting subjects up close with a big lens. And I see plenty of that on my travels too. I see travellers with a 24–105mm lens marching through markets with singular focus on their photography, unaware of how their big lens feels to people when it's shoved in their face. I watch old ladies recoil as some tactless westerner, with a zoom lens where their head should be, walks directly at them and starts clicking. It's intimidating and just plain rude.



Newari Prayers | Nepal  
24mm @ f/2 ISO-100 1/125s



Boudhanath | Nepal  
24mm @ f/2 ISO-800 1/160s

This is why I try to approach people with the camera down low and lens definitively pointed away. I want my subjects to see me first, and the camera second. I want them to know that I see them as a person, not just a subject. If the first thing someone sees is the lens aimed at them, it's quite awful and impersonal and it's the opposite of engaging. It's intrusive with an element of aggression.

#### Monk Advice

Back in Kathmandu, waiting for dawn to appear at Swayambunath, I had a very unexpected experience. A little tea shop along the back lanes of the temple had a sign out front, and the door was half open. There was barely enough light to capture the sign, but it held charm for me. As I took the photo I heard a voice from inside. It was dark, and I couldn't see any people, just the voice.

I stepped inside and let my eyes adjust, and saw a monk sitting with his tea. I heard him more clearly as he repeated his request, 'Please don't take my photo.' I sat with him and had a chat, explaining what I was doing and showed him the photos. He went on to explain to me, however, a list of ways in which people 'steal' his photograph, sneakily and as if he doesn't realise what they were doing. He described so many techniques that I can't remember them all now. One of them is when people pretend to take a photo of a sign and then swing the camera to one side and photograph him instead.

What impressed me was the fact that he knew exactly what was happening. All those people employing sneaky tricks were not as clever as they thought. I took that in slowly and just listened to him talk. All these years I had been advocating to ask permission first, and here was a monk telling me what it feels like from the other side. I was moved.

The monk added, 'If people would simply ask me, I would gladly say yes. But they do not ask, they just steal.'

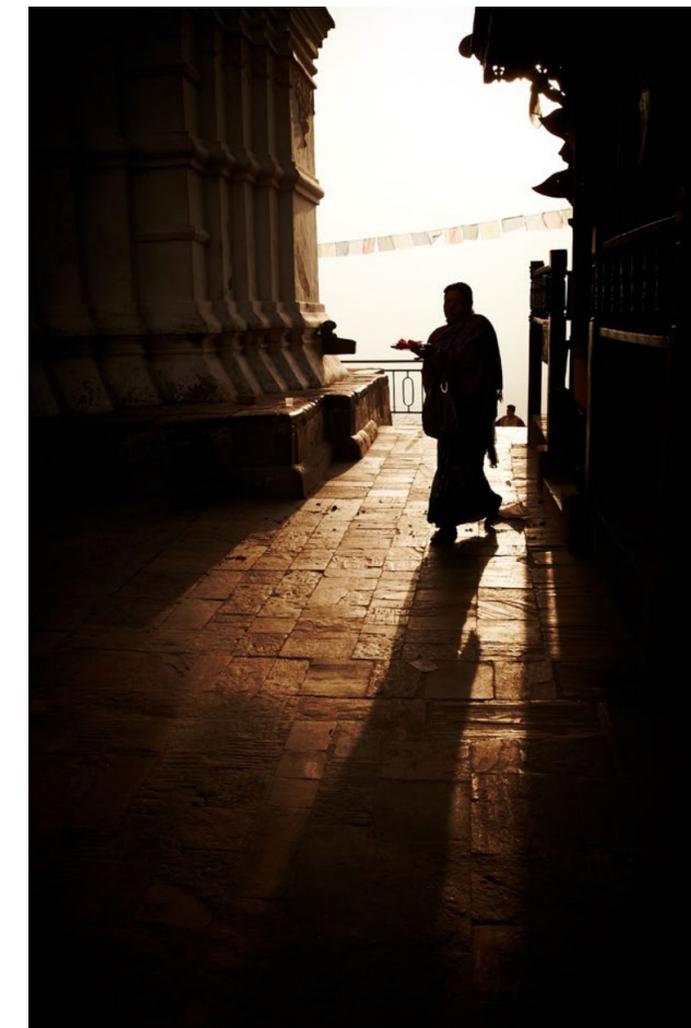
And that is why we ask permission first.

I know that feeling of fear when it seems a perfect moment is about to disappear, forever, and we just want to capture it. I know the pressure we place on ourselves to get the shot. I try to counter that self-driven pressure with the fundamental attitude when travelling of 'Don't try to get every shot: try to get your best shots instead.' Letting go of unreasonable expectations will allow us to enjoy our travel more, and the photography as well.

*As your skills with photography grow, so will your confidence in being patient and kind. You will not have to worry about missing a moment, because instead you will be creating a thousand new ones. Practise patience, share your smile, and leave plenty of time to 'go slow and get closer'.*



Pashupatinath | Nepal  
24mm @ f/2 ISO-400 1/800s



Swayambunath | Nepal  
24mm @ f/8 ISO-200 1/200s

THE OTHER CHAPTERS

## HOW TO BE CREATIVE

One of the greatest struggles we have as photographers is building our creative skills. For many of us it's hard to even define what creativity is. This feature is an attempt to give you a foundation to tackle creativity and some inspiration to build your own path.

## THE IMAGE GAP

Most of us have some kind of ideal in mind when we start investing our time in photography. We're not just learning for the sake of learning, we're setting out towards a particular source of inspiration. We're taking steps towards capturing an image that exists predominantly in our minds. How often do we end up at the destination we set out for?

## INTIMATELY PORTRAIT

When deciding to shoot your portraits with intense intimacy, the essential element is to get closer rather than shoot with a long lens. We want to fill the frame only with that person and the nuances that make them unique.

## INCLUSIVE FRAMES OF MIND

Many of us possess a natural tendency to shoot tight and crop even tighter. This is a dead-end for creativity that is thankfully easy to rectify. You don't need a new lens or camera, just a new perspective on how to think about composition.

## SLOW SHUTTER BASICS

A beginner's guide to shooting long exposures, with the help of a very good tripod and some neutral density filters.

## CHASING THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

Your guide to chasing the aurora borealis and capturing the moment on film. She is an elusive mistress, one that tempts you out into the freezing cold and darkest nights. She is gorgeous though; a mere glimpse worth travelling across the globe.

## INTO THE LIGHT

Nothing excites my creative eye more than pointing a lens directly into the sun late in the afternoon. Capturing the shafts, shimmy and seduction of light as it flares across the lens is the stuff of magic.

## STILLNESS OF THE MIND

Stillness of the mind allows you to focus on the task at hand and make room for your creative energy to flow unimpeded. This moment right here and now is all that exists, so it's worth bringing your mind back to the present to make the most of it.

## CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO BE CREATIVE

Changing your camera will do very little to open the doors to creativity.  
Changing your environment will make new perspectives possible.

## WHY COMPETITIONS SUCK

There are two things in the world of photography I really dislike: weddings and competitions. At least with a wedding shoot I can expect to get paid at the end of it, which therefore makes competitions my least favourite thing in the world.

## THE ONE ESSENTIAL FOOD SHOT

Most food shots seen in travel magazines were taken far from the controlled confines of a studio, and having the ability to add a great looking dish to your folio of photos is essential for any aspiring travel photographer. Here's a quick primer on how to set up that shot and make it work wonders.

## COMPETING FOR ATTENTION

There are two distinct goals in my bird photography. The first is just to get a damned shot of the bird. The second is to create a little art in the process. The two objectives are usually at odds with each other, yet one does follow the other.

## THE PERFECT LENS AND WHY IT DOESN'T EXIST

When it comes to lenses, there is no such thing as one-size-fits-all. You have to try a lens before you know if it really suits you, and sometimes you grow out of the old one and move onto something new. Just like us photographers, no lens is perfect.

## LEARNING TO LOVE THE DIGITAL DARKROOM

Not spending a little time processing your photos is the modern equivalent to collecting a bunch of prints from the chemist. If you're not committing to process those RAW files then you're only exploring half of their creative potential. The digital darkroom is where a world of possible interpretations can be brought to life.

## MANUFACTURING THE MOMENT

Reality is a cornerstone of photography. How readily do we cross the line separating creative from contrived, and are we fully aware when we do so?

## THE RISE OF FLYING TRIPODS

Drones are not just for videographers. The promise for stills photographers is to enter a new era of technology where landscape photography can trade the tripod for a drone.

## LIFE AFTER THE SHUTTER

A photographer has two lives, one out there in the big world taking photos and the other back in the real world trying to do something with them. The life of every individual photograph, however, is defined by what happens long after the shutter has gone silent.

## THE DEPTHS OF SHALLOW

Shallow depth of field is a powerful technique to have in your creative tool kit. It's not just about funky portraits either: it's good for almost every genre of photography.

## THE WORLD NEEDS MORE VERTS

There are three kinds of people in the world: introverts, extroverts and photographers. How does your personality impact on your exploration of the world through a camera?

## REPROCESSING

More than a decade ago, I travelled to Rajasthan and shot a series of images on the first iteration of the Canon 5D. In some ways, ten years is not a long time. Creatively, however, ten years is a lifetime.

## PUTTING THE PHOTO FIRST

When I travel with camera in hand my objective is to achieve something wonderful in the way of photography. It's about the photograph and what it represents. I believe that the photo should be more important than the photographer.

## GETTING IT WRONG

The more I make mistakes, the better my photography gets. The key to expanding our skills is not just relaxing those perfectionist tendencies, but to seek out the 'not quite right' and let our minds stew on it.

## ANGLE OF THE LIGHT

The key to shooting images that capture the moment is to let the light guide you, not the subject. Cameras don't see subjects or objects, they only see light.

## THE UNIQUE COPY

Taking a photo is literally the act of copying an original. My career is a little like that too, because ultimately I owe everything to somebody. I am offering my gratitude for the broad community around me that has made my world a wonderfully creative place.

## EXPERIENCE BEFORE EXPOSURES

Take a moment to be in the moment, before bringing out the camera.

## TALENT IS NOT ENOUGH

What hurdles are in your path to becoming the best photographer you can be? What opportunities exist for you to get over those hurdles? When is the right time to make the jump? Are you helping to make someone else's day a little bit better?

## TRAILS IN THE WEST

The fundamentals of shooting star trails is to collect a sequence of short frames and stack them to reveal the arc of the night sky. My preferred creative direction with star trails is to overlay the motion of the brightest stars across the fading light of sunset. The combination of warm sky and celestial light is the definition of 'painting with light'.

## WHY THE ICE IS SO NICE

The penguins are rock stars on journeys to Antarctica, have no doubt, but it's the ice that makes it so nice in the southern polar regions.

## ABSOLUTE BEGINNINGS

What is a RAW file? What is ISO? Why should I care about sensor size and how to control exposure metering? These are some of the fundamental issues that come up when travellers ask me for help.

## LESS IS MORE

Curating your work is critical to success and critical to pushing yourself forward. What you delete is just as important as what you present.

## FIVE PHILOSOPHIES FOR A PHOTOGRAPHIC CAREER

Being a photographer is not really about the camera at all. It's about you and what goes on inside your head. Here are five ways to be a better travel photographer and make the most of your career potential.



IF YOU LIKE WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN  
IN THIS SAMPLE PREVIEW  
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THANK YOU

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