

**STEVE MCCURRY
LESSON 11 – TELL A STORY**

**HOW DO YOU TELL A STORY WITH
YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS**

“The best pictures are ones that tell a story, that take us on a journey, perhaps an inward journey, that evoke some emotion, that make us laugh or make us cry...something that burns into our memory...a picture that changes you.”

Storytelling is the essence of Steve’s career. His aim has always been to make the unknown, known, particularly stories of deep emotion and human struggle. In this lesson, Steve gives his insight into using photography as a storytelling medium.

“I think the most important thing in covering important stories, issues that you care about, is to go into a situation with an open mind, with respect, and not to be too judgmental about the people.”

Steve describes the difficulties of this type of work; being confronted by challenging situations, situations very different from our everyday lives. But it is here that great photos are made.

“One of the great lessons I have learned in photography is that the journey is always more important than the actual destination.”

STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT LESSON 11 – TELL A STORY WITH YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

“The best pictures are ones that tell a story, that take us on a journey”

Produce a photographic project that captures emotion, perhaps evokes some emotion, that make us laugh or make us cry, but something that grabs us. It could be a story that reminds us about something. It could be just a picture of dogs on the street. But try to capture a real sense of someone’s emotion...something real. When you look at the photograph later you should feel the emotion you have chosen to capture.

Steve says “I never censor myself. I always make the picture and then decide later if it was the right thing to do. But again, you have to have that base line. You don’t want to be disrespectful. That’s really never a good thing. You don’t want to create ill will. You don’t want to upset people. I think that’s kind of the line you have to respect.”

TRANSCRIPT

The best pictures are ones that tell a story, that take us on a journey, perhaps an inward journey, that evoke some emotion, that make us laugh or make us cry, but something that grabs us and something that burns into our memory, something that we want to come back to, a picture that changes you. You want to have something, a photograph that really, again, tells some incredible story about life. It could be a story that reminds us about something. It could be a picture of dogs on the street.

...

One of the most heartbreaking issues I've witnessed in my travels is child labor. I'm often so astonished that you'll have a 12-year-old boy or girl who's working in a restaurant or in a factory. And they are often working sometimes 10, 12 hours a day. And you just can't imagine. You can't believe that this is happening as their childhood.

What children are supposed to be doing is being robbed from them, and they're not being able to live a normal, healthy life. I made this one picture of a boy who must have been not more than 12 years old working in a candy factory. And you can see that he's there. There's two adult men, and they're doing some operation.

And they got there at 5 o'clock in the morning. And he's working this sort of very heavy, hard work for eight hours a day, maybe longer. And just imagine. He's not going to school. His young, little body can barely keep up with the heavy load, and it's just not the kind of world we want to live in.

I think the most important thing in covering important stories, issues that you care about, is to go into a situation with an open mind, with respect, and not to be too judgmental about the people. I mean, in the case of child labor, this has been going on since the beginning of time. So often, children were required to go out and tend the animals, the flocks of sheep or whatever, and work in the fields. And they didn't go to school. So this is something that is not new.

When I was about 12 years old, I saw this incredible photo essay in Life Magazine about the monsoon in India, which is this incredible weather system which probably affects half the world. The monsoon is this heavy rain which comes seasonally, and it helps grow crops, helps renew life, provides water for billions of people. So I was in this

flooded village one morning. And the people had to move around the village mostly up to their waist in water because there was no place to go. They had to continue to live their lives in this monsoon flood.

And I saw this one man coming down the street towards us with this sewing machine which he had salvaged from his shop. It was rusted. It was probably ruined.

So as he was coming towards me, I started to prepare myself. And in doing so, everybody around the street started to alert this man that, oh, there's those foreigners. They're going to take your picture. You know, smile for the camera or whatever.

So this poor tailor, who was probably self-conscious and embarrassed about all these people shouting at him, kind of had this sort of smile on his face, which is sort of counterintuitive to having, you know, your life, your profession come crashing to an end with this destroyed machine. So as he kind of passed my camera, I photographed him with the sewing machine on his shoulder. In a way, to me, it talks a little bit about the resilience, about the fortitude, about people having to make do in bad situations, and the resilience of people and of human nature. And against all odds, we find some kind of strange to kind of power through everything.

You know, as you look at this picture, don't forget that the photographer, meaning me, had to actually be in the water as well. I spent two or three days up to my waist in water, walking around this town all day long. I tried at first to photograph from a boat, which didn't quite work. I couldn't quite position myself with the boat.

Then I tried these high fishing boots which come up to my chest. But they didn't work either because the water actually ended up getting inside the boots. So in the end, like with the other people in the town, I had actually had to jump in and be in the water with them, which actually was the best way to work because we were kind of all in this sort of dirty muck together. And people realized that I was kind of one of them.

I think the greatest lesson I had in taking that picture was you have to be ready and prepared at all times. Operating the camera should be second nature. You shouldn't even have to kind of think about it.

As this man came towards me, despite all the people shouting around, I just stayed on the picture. I wasn't really thinking anything more than how can I get this picture to focus? And am I getting the framing right? But it was such an incredible sight of this poor tailor with the

sewing machine perched on his shoulder, up to almost his head in water. It was just an incredible image, and I just knew I had to try and capture it.

So I photographed this girl in her pink dress, up to her waist in water. She was leaning on the white picket fence. And there was this kind of green algae which had formed on the top of the water, which I thought was a wonderful sort of color, you know, comparison or complementary colors.

And, you know, everybody in the neighborhood had nowhere to go. They had to stay in this neighborhood, this flooded area. I wanted to photograph it in several different ways. And I placed her in several different places in the frame, and I even shot some verticals.

I knew that this was one of the better pictures I had made that day, and I wanted to make sure I got it right. And so I wanted to take my time. So I spent a minute or two with her and made a few different options, rather than just, like, one or two frames. I took several.

It's a very incongruous scene in the sense that she seems very relaxed, very much at ease, despite the fact that she's up to her waist in water. But this village had been underwater for days, and they had become accustomed to living their lives in this water. And I, too, wandered in this water for the whole time I was there because there was no escaping it. But I thought it was a very successful portrait, a kind of environmental portrait showing her and then showing the environment and showing what it's like to live in a monsoon in that part of the world.

There are so many cultural traditions which I have photographed over the years. Many have disappeared. Some are now changed dramatically. I think it's important to have a memory of these cultural phenomena, these incredible events that take place.

In many cases, they're just not going to be with us. And the only record we're going to have of these events are going to be photographs. I photographed these men in Niger performing this sort of marriage rite of passage event.

And I was literally driving down the road in Niger, and we suddenly saw these people off on the side of the road. And we stopped to see what was happening. And this was, like, a festival, where these men were trying to, I would say, lure or perform for the young girls of the village. And this was a tradition that had gone on for eons.

Eventually, sometimes, these cultural events end up disappearing and end up being performed in a hotel lobby

as a cultural show. And so to actually see these things, to see these events in real time, happening naturally is incredible.

One of the great lessons I have learned in photography is that the journey is always more important than the actual destination. I photographed this picture in India in 1984 of some women huddled together in a dust storm, waiting for this very strong wind blowing a lot of dust and sand. And they huddled together, started to sing.

And I saw them off in the field as I was driving by. And my first inclination was just to roll the windows up and kind of power through the storm. But then I realized, wait a minute. This is an incredible opportunity with this very dramatic dust storm.

So I stopped the car, jumped out, ran across this field, and started photographing these women, who were completely oblivious to my being there. I made maybe 20 exposures, and then the wind stopped. The dust storm was over, and they went back to work. And the picture was over. But fortunately I was able to have the presence of mind to stop, even though we were on our journey to this destination, which in the end, this picture became much more important than anything we did at the destination when we got there.

One of my concerns in taking this picture was that, you know, the sand was going to get inside the camera, perhaps spoil the lens or whatever. And I think there are times in your photography when you sort of have to throw caution to the wind and say, you know what? This picture is so important that I'm just going to go for it.

I'm going to pull all the stops out, and I'll let the chips fall where they may. And I just can't let this opportunity slip away. You just don't want to be timid when great pictures are there in front of you.

I'd like to talk about this picture I made in Old Delhi Railway Station one morning. I got to the station not actually to photograph specifically, but to take a train to Calcutta. So when I was there on the platform waiting for my train to arrive, I had my camera, and I started photographing passengers waiting for their trains.

And it was just after sunrise, and there were these amazing shadows being cast on the floor. And I just started photographing. So you should always take every opportunity to work.

I hadn't gone there specifically to take pictures of the station. But I saw these incredible shadows, and I made a few pictures. And I love the composition, the way you

have the man reading the newspaper, lights coming through it, and then these figures walking, casting these really long shadows on the station floor. So I think it works really well as a kind of high contrast, early morning picture.

I think there's never a situation where you don't want to take a picture. You shouldn't take a picture. The only time you would hold back from taking a picture would be if you're disrespecting somebody, or you feel that you're invading somebody's privacy.

You don't want to create bad karma. You don't want to create ill will. You don't want to upset people. I think that's kind of the line you have to respect.

But I never censor myself. I always make the picture and then decide later if it was the right thing to do. But again, you have to have that base line. You don't want to be disrespectful. That's really never a good thing.