Day 22: Capture the Decisive Moment

When it comes to shooting, this technique is like the cherry on top of the sundae.

First, make sure you do everything else right. Don't overlook exposure, composition, focus, balance, etc.

But once you do, and you have your shot set up the way you want, it is time to think about how to take it to the next level. The best answer is usually to wait around for something else to happen.

Look for that peak emotion, or the height of the action, or special situation - then capture it.

Origins of the Decisive Moment

Looking for "the decisive moment" was made famous by a French photographer named Henri Cartier-Bresson.

He stressed having everything ready ("get your geometry right") and then waiting for the shot. This means setting up your shot exactly how you want it first. Get your exposure right, set up the composition you want, and you might even take a few shots of the background. But then you wait.

Keep in mind that sometimes this works out, and sometimes it doesn't.

Application of the Decisive Moment

Here are a few ways you might use this technique, depending on the type of photography you like to do:

- **Street photography (people)** - line everything up and wait for a person to come through the frame.
- **Landscapes and cityscapes** - you are often already waiting around for magical light. Now just watch for something else to happen.
- **Sports** – this is all about putting yourself in the right place and waiting for action to happen. You need to anticipate the action and be ready for it.

It is all about anticipation!

Additional Commentary

Whether you are capturing a person, a place, or a thing, it is constantly changing. If the thing itself isn't moving, the lights and the conditions are changing. As a result, the time you photograph matters. Not all times are equal. You want to capture peak emotion or the height of the action. Or perhaps it is a special way the lights hits the subject. We refer to that as capturing "the decisive moment."

That phrase was made famous by the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. He was a journalistic and street photographer who worked primarily in the 1940's through the 1960's. He was famous for capturing people at particular moments and at peak emotional times. In 152 he published a book titled "*Images a la sauvette*," which translates into English as *The Decisive Moment*.

If you just walk around looking for "decisive moments" you are likely to be disappointed. Things happen so fast that by the time you got your camera into position to take the picture, the moment will have long passed. The idea is that you anticipate events, and then be ready for them to occur. Usually, what you do is set up a picture and then wait around for something to happen. It is all about anticipation.

The actual concept is not that difficult to understand. A lot of additional commentary is therefore probably not needed, and I'm not sure what I would add anyway. Instead, I thought I would walk you through a few examples from my own photographs. These are not necessarily models you should strive for, but just some examples of things I was doing, and hopefully they will spur some ideas in you.

Wave at Black Fort

First, I will show a few shots from landscape scenes. There are scenes where I lined up shots of different scenes, but then hung around or timed the action to get a shot at a particular moment.

The first one is this shot of a wave crashing on a rock. I was walking on a series of cliffs on the island of Inis Mor in County Galway, Ireland. I liked the overall scene and I set up various shots, but had this nagging sense that they could be better.



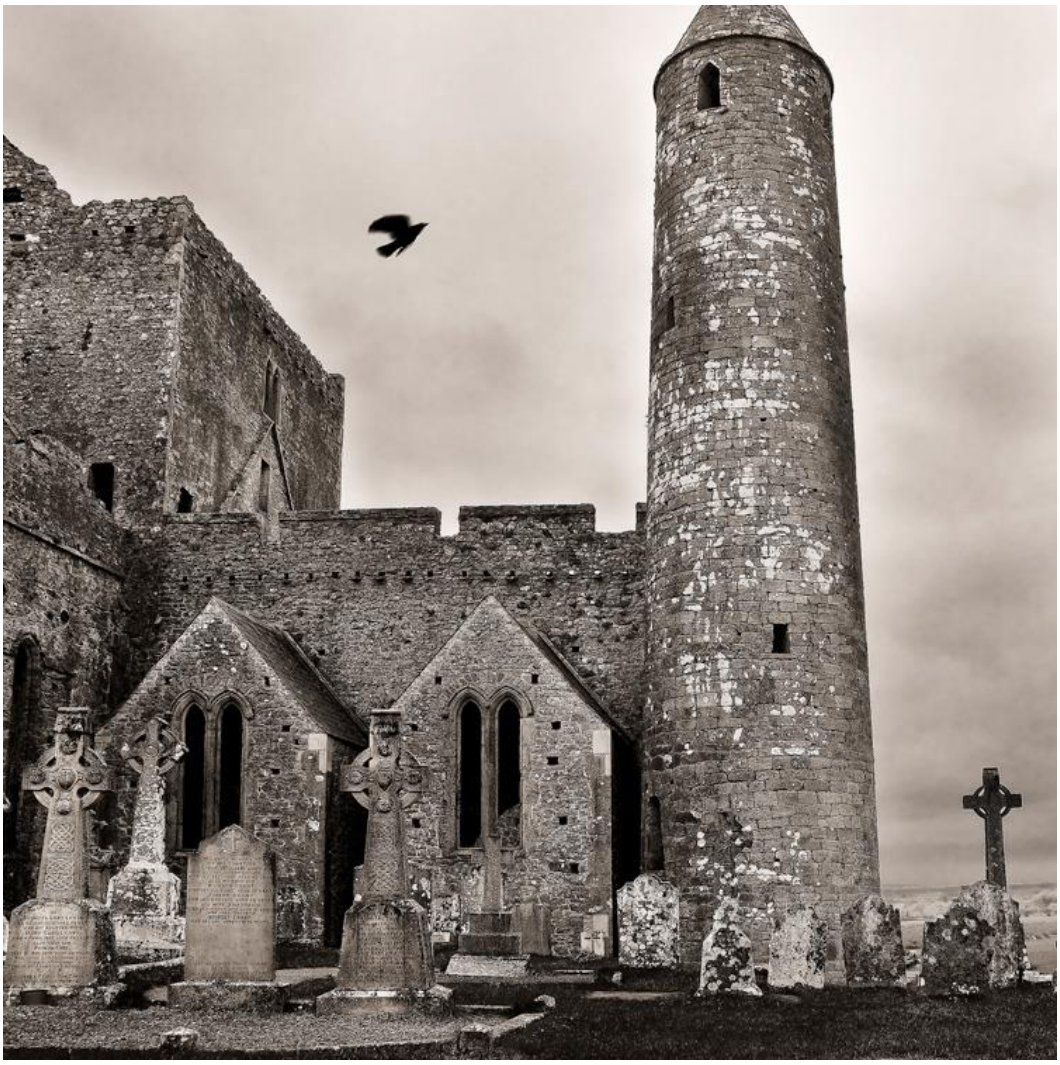
I noticed that every so often, a wave hit the rocks below in a particular way and exploded on impact. If you look at the picture below, you won't see a lot of big waves rolling in. Further, what waves actually came in usually harmlessly went past the rock. But every now and then, one hit just right.

This one hit just right and I captured it. Obviously, I had to use a relatively fast shutter speed to stop the action. To me, catching the wave at the right time added something more than a standard "nice view" picture.

Rock of Cashel

Here is another one from Ireland. This is a shot of the ruin known as the Rock of Cashel.

There isn't a lot of movement here, and therefore not a lot of opportunity to catch any decisive moments. Still, as I was walking around shooting I noticed there were some birds in the area. I set up and waited. When I saw this one near the top of the frame, I thought it would add something to the picture. I quickly took the shot.



Again, I think this helps create a mood to the scene that otherwise isn't possible. Without the bird, you are left just trying to use the lines and textures to create an interesting photo. That often can work just fine, but I think the added element helps.

Grey Whale Cove

I have already shown you this picture in the context of working the scene. The two concepts are related, so I wanted to raise it again.



The point here is that you are taking your time to get the conditions you want. In the context of "working the scene" you are moving around to make that happen. In the context of "the decisive moment" you are waiting for something to occur. But they are often related. In fact, you are often in a location moving around and monitoring. So you can be working the scene and awaiting the decisive moment at the same time.

Surprise

Most often, the decisive moment relates to people. In Cartier-Bresson's shots, there were always people involved. They might be jumping across boards, or expressing some emotion, or just walking along with a particular look on their face, but they always involved people. If you are interested in street photography, you should definitely check out his work. Even if you are not, we have a lot to learn from these methods.

One of my favorite ways to employ these techniques is at celebrations like birthday parties and Christmas parties. They invariably involve people opening presents and otherwise getting

surprised. I like to hang back with a big lens on my camera and get ready. Here is one such shot of my daughter opening a present.



People typically gather around when it is time to open presents, so you know it is going to happen. All you have to do is be ready. Be sure to use a fast shutter speed, and this usually means using a wide aperture and high ISO. You can apply this same technique at a variety of get-togethers.

Sports

One other way we can typically use the techniques involved with capturing the decisive moment is in sporting activities. All sports involve some action and peak activities. Sports photographers become adept at anticipating those times of peak action.

In my own case, I enjoyed photographing my daughter performing gymnastics. I learned that you get better the more you are able to anticipate what will happen. That starts with knowing where to place yourself. If you put yourself in the wrong place, you have no chance of getting a good shot. In addition, I needed to learn what parts of the routines would involve leaps, flips, etc. Things happen so fast that I needed to plan my shots a bit. I actually got to the point where I would focus on a point where I knew something was going to happen, and then wait for the shot to develop. (Of course, you cannot do that

in many sports). From there, you have to know when the action will happen. There are a lot of variables.



Will there be a lot of failures as you attempt to capture decisive moments? You bet. Sometimes you just won't see anything develop in front of you. Other times you'll just miss it. Don't let that discourage you.

The whole idea of special photographs is that they are very uncommon. As they say, "if it was easy, anyone could do it." With the skills you are developing in this course, however, you will be well poised to capture those special moments when they occur. But even with those skills, it takes time, patience, and a little luck.

That said, there has never been a better time to try to capture decisive moments. Remember that for the first 150 years of photography, every shot cost you money. Even 20 years ago, you had to buy the film and then pay to have it developed. And it only came in rolls of 24 or 36! Now you can shoot all day and it costs you nothing. Take advantage of it.

Day 22 Assignment

On Assignment, Part II

Description:

Yesterday, you went to a local landmark and shot for a famous magazine. Your pictures were a hit, but the editor now wants a shot with something going on. A person, an animal, a vehicle - some sort of *action*. As a result, they've asked you go to back and get the shot. Go back to the same landmark, set up your shot(s), and catch the decisive moment as it occurs.

Keys to Success:

- Build on what you did yesterday. Use some of the same shots - but this time wait for something to happen.
- Have your composition and exposure ready to go.
- The key isn't so much waiting as it is anticipating. Think about what you *expect* to happen.

Upon Completion of this Assignment:

The 3 keys to success per J. Paul Getty - once the richest man in the world - are (1) rise early, (2) work hard, and (3) strike oil. Of course, 1 and 2 are entirely under your control, but 3 is not. This assignment is a little like that, in that you have to put in the work, but you never know if it will work out. Still, if you don't make the effort, you have no shot of success. Maybe today is your day.