

Finding Joy finding passion (excerpt from "Take Your Photography To The Next Level" By George Barr)

What fuels my passions for photography?

Creating art was a basic need I've had ever since I can remember. (as a musician, then photographer)

A desire to exhibit vs a desire to sell vs simply a desire to create.

Being gear obsessed is not a bad thing - it's just not the same as being art obsessed.

What pictures moved me at a young age.

Arnold Newman Irving Penn Richard Avedon August Sanders David Bailey Albert Watson
Henri Cartier Bresson

Do you have masters whose work speaks to you. Name them.

What do your images mean to you?

Personal record of events in your life

A need for some artistic expression

A record of family memories

Simply a source of relaxation and escape from normal life

Fascination with modern technology (equipment)

George Barr reading:

Photographers go through stages of development, and while we don't all follow the same path, an understanding of our current level of skill, creativity and artistry is, I think, an important exercise. If we know where we are and we have an idea of where we want to be, it becomes a lot easier to determine the path from here to there and to take steps to get us there. Most of us have never given much thought to where we are in terms of skill, creativity and artistry, and even if we did, are not necessarily good judges of our own skills and levels so this is not a trivial process. While gradually and continuously striving to improve does in the end result in progress, I propose that we find a better and perhaps more direct route to becoming better photographic artists.

So, how do you assess your current level? What are the levels? Do all photographers go through the same levels in the same sequence? Is it a sequential process or can you skip steps and go back to a previous level? All good questions!

Even if you do understand your level, does that automatically imply you will move to the next level or is there some magic involved, or heaven forbid, some sweat equity to moving on?

Before describing the various levels, let me make clear that in fact I don't think this is a linear sequence from neophyte to grand old master, not for an individual photographer and certainly not for all. Depending on how you come into photography there can be huge differences in the sequence of steps, and at any point steps can be skipped only to be visited later on. That said though, here's a breakdown of the steps photographers often go through.

Rather than define levels by the equipment you use (which has more to do with style, habits, budget and the desire for toys, I will instead look at the quality of images you

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produce. Perhaps this doesn't address the photographer who only publishes to the web and never makes prints, but let's define their level by the kind of prints they are able to make (even if they don't normally make them)

Measuring Print Quality

Quality of prints can be measured in two basic ways, by the technical quality and the aesthetic quality. I think these two levels definitely do not go hand in hand. I am therefore going to describe them separately and fully anticipate that any photographer is likely to find himself at different positions down the two lists.

Let's start with the list that is almost certainly going to be the easier, that of defining one's technical level. Note that it's possible to be at two different levels of technical ability at the same time since they sometimes describe different technical issues.

Technical Levels

Level 1 Technical

4X6 drugstore prints are frequently flawed. Many are blurred, others are underexposed, horizons aren't level, heads are cut off, trees stick out of people's heads, prints look muddy or soot and chalk. People and mountains look miniscule. These are the kind of images which even beginners recognize as flawed. In a set of 20 prints, 12 - 15 are rejected by the photographer as duds. It's actually hard to be this bad in the age of auto focus and auto exposure but some find a way.

Level 2 Technical

Drug store prints are starting to look technically ok if not great. Self made 8X10 prints however show technical flaws - poor focussing, camera movement, colour balance issues, contrast problems. The photographer is sometimes disappointed in the results and other photographers spot the flaws easily. Any print adjustments made are not helpful.

Level 3 Technical

The prints look o.k. to your friends, you are starting to garner some nice comments, but when someone with experience looks at them, they note highlights that are blocked or muddy, shadows that are either solid black or unrelieved gray. Prints often show sharpening artifacts or colour saturation that is 'over the top'. Print controls are applied with a 'six inch brush' and the images show it. There remain small issues of sharpness and resolution.

Level 4 Technical

The prints are basically o.k. - focused, camera steady, overall right tonality, yet don't have that rich three dimensional look that expert prints seem to have. It's getting

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harder to describe the defects but when viewed next to good prints, definitely lack a certain something. Highlights are still not rich, shadows lack depth. Local print manipulation is fairly effective although sometimes too much or too little. They are adequate for a photo album but not to hang on the wall.

Level 5 Technical

8X10 prints look terrific and can't be criticized on a technical basis. There are some presentation issues – high gloss plastic prints, unattractive borders, borderless prints, prints too large for the equipment used to make them. Photographers at this level often insist on printing larger than the image can bear, relying on trick uprezing and sharpening algorithms to save them – they don't!

Level 6 Technical

There's nothing to criticize about either the image itself or its presentation. Print manipulation is competent and invisible. Prints show subtleties and have depth. Tones are rich and absolutely nothing is overdone. Unfortunately that just leaves the aesthetic issues, a much more challenging problem to solve.

So to the aesthetic levels. Again levels are not necessarily in sequence and more than one level can apply.

Aesthetic Levels

Level A Aesthetic

Images don't seem to have a point, they don't show things to advantage, they don't capture the peak action or the best pose and are the kind of pictures that only a generous person would complement. It takes no photographic skill or artistic experience to know these don't shine. We're talking the typical snapshot here that disappoints even the photographer and doesn't often make it into an album. The photographer wonders why he bothered to take the picture.

Level B Aesthetic

Images make decent snapshots – as memories of events and people and places they serve well even though they don't excite. No wow factor. The photographer is comfortable showing the prints around to friends who want to know what your holiday was like but he'd not likely take them to other photographers and the images don't reflect the excitement at the time of taking the image.

Level C Aesthetic

Images do generate admiration by friends but perhaps not photographers or artists. They capture peak action, best poses, dramatic lighting. They begin to show some awareness of composition and are almost good enough for the "New Sarepta Tire And Girdle Company" annual calendar. They have no artistic merit at this point and can be generally described as 'pretty pictures'.

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Level D Aesthetic

Images are starting to show value in and of themselves rather than as a reminder of something or someone special. It's easy to see that some effort has been made to compose the picture in ways that are interesting and that the photographer is being creative. There are elements of the image which don't quite work and it's the kind of image which makes you think that this would have been a great image if only I could reshoot it and fix X and Y. Some of the compositional elements work but not all. The photographer is within a few feet of the right place, a few hours from the right time. The image isn't strong however and it's message is not clear. There are elements in the image which distract from it's power.

Level E Aesthetic

Images are generally admirable and most photographers would react with 'wish I had taken that picture'. Composition is spot on, the subject interesting, the presentation of the subject effective.

The only thing missing is an emotional response to the image. You're inclined to say 'well done' rather than 'oh that's fabulous...' or 'wow' or 'that disturbs me', or some kind of emotional expletive. Images are starting to work on more than one level. Composition shows careful attention to detail, things are lined up exactly right in several planes. It takes more than 30 seconds to take in all that the image has to offer.

Level F Aesthetic

These images are very strong – they generate emotional responses. You might not mortgage the house to get one and they don't leave you weak kneed but they are wonderful. Most of us would be delighted to get a handful of images a year into this category. These images show us things we didn't know, they make a point, they illustrate and elucidate. Most of the images of the great photographers fall into this category. Responses to these images are 'awesome', 'right on', 'great', 'damn that's good' and like. it's possible to spend 20 minutes looking at a single image and still find new things worth seeing, new connections, new messages.

Level G Aesthetic

These are the great images of history – the ones, that make you weep or cry out or swear. These are the handful of images so exceptional that even the best photographers in history have only able to make a few at best. Here lies 'Pepper Number 30', but not many other Edward Weston images, this includes the best of Ansel Adams but not all. It doesn't mean that we mortals can't create an image that fits this category, we'd count ourselves lucky if it happened once. These are the magical images, the ones that glow, that so perfectly get the message across they become icons of photography. They might be 'Migrant Mother' by Dorothea Lange or the Steve McCurry Afghan girl portrait, the 'napalmed girl running' image, Winter Storm Clearing by Ansel Adams, and several Henri Cartier Bresson images.

Section 2

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Technical

1. 4X6 prints often have noticeable technical flaws - focussing, steadiness, framing.
2. 8X10 prints show flaws, print manipulation is either absent or flawed.
3. Prints look good to non photographers but not to experienced observers.
4. Prints have no obvious flaws but aren't rich, deep, subtle, three dimensional.
5. Prints look great though presentation lacks.
6. Prints look perfect.

Aesthetic

- A. Prints don't seem to have a point, and don't make good snapshots.
- B. Decent snapshots.
- C. Friends are admiring your 'snapshots'
- D. Prints starting to have artistic value for themselves.
- E. Prints are admirable but not wonderful - lacking emotional impact.
- F. Strong images, great composition, making the point, lovely!
- G. The handful of the very best images ever made - the icons of photography

Self Assessment

So you have gathered together a portfolio of your images and you are trying to see if you can assess your own level of skill. You have a rough idea from the descriptions of the previous article, but you are not sure. How about finding some published images in a magazine of good reproduction and holding them up next to yours. It might be worth \$10 to rip up a copy of Lenswork, Focus, B&W or whatever so you can get a better comparison. Alternatively compare your images on the web to those of better known photographers of similar interests. You may not be able to assess things like resolution on the web, but you sure can look at the more important issues of impact, composition, and overall tonality.

Obtaining Feedback

Ask your photographic friends

Next most convenient is to ask our photographic friends. A friend may not be an Ansel Adams but many at least know what a great print looks like and can point out the flaws of our images. We can tell a sour note even if we can't play the violin. Typically friends don't want to hurt your feelings so the information may not work as well as you hope, but the price is right. It is however, a lot to ask of your friends and perhaps isn't fair.

Join a local camera club

They often have contests and print critiques with guest experts. Friends who would be reluctant to criticize your photography individually, become more open at a critique and will offer useful comments. The feedback from fellow members reflects the quality of their work and usually is in the lower to middle levels, the quality of critiques depends on the skill of the reviewer.

Attend a workshop

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The single best source of feedback is to attend a workshop which includes print reviews (most do). Workshop instructors who have a track record have learned to provide useful feedback. For myself I attended a Fred Picker Zone VI workshop back in the 80's. Fred had some excellent instructors at the workshop and you received a variety of viewpoints and by the end of the workshop had a pretty darn good idea of where you stood.

The Virtual Workshop

You can help yourself without even going to a workshop by asking yourself some of the typical workshop questions.

What was I trying to say?

Did I say it in the strongest way possible?

Was there a different way to compose the picture to make it stronger?

Did I eliminate all extraneous features?

Did I find the best position, the best time to take the photograph?

Did I make a print which showed the subject to best advantage?

But I Don't Know Anyone - on-line critiques/feedback

<http://photo.net/photo-critique-forum/?category=All>

<http://www.altphotos.com>

<http://www.pbase.com/>

For most photographers I still have to strongly recommend the workshop as the single best way to get a sense of your position on the scale.

How To Translate Feedback Into Levels

Chances are, no matter who provides the feedback, they aren't going to point to level 3D, say, 'that's you buddy' see you around' and walk off. I think you'd be a bit upset if that's all they did, even though the premise of this series of articles is that this would be very useful information. No, you are going to have to interpret the comments made to determine your level.

I think it's fairly simple to interpret the technical comments and determine your level so I'm going to concentrate on interpreting the artistic merit comments.

Reviewers are looking for something good to say and what is said can tell you a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of the print. A comment that an image has a really nice matte is not a good start. If the work is original, interesting or strong, it's likely the reviewer is going to comment on those elements. A lack of such comments should frankly be interpreted as 'needs work'.

'What were you trying to say?' translates into I don't see a point to your picture and if I knew what it was I might be able to help you express it.

If the reviewer 'gets' why you took the picture then the message is fairly clear.

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Section 3

Initially I was fixated on getting to the next level, but it became clear that there was nothing wrong with suggesting something which could leap frog levels and produce big changes. I didn't think you'd complain.

Some fixes are simple - for example, holding the camera steadier - that can be done with practice. You can test just what shutter speed is your minimum, with and without coffee, at the beginning of a shoot and at the end. You can read any of a number of technical books which will teach you how to squeeze off a shot rather than stabbing the shutter release.

On the other hand, if what your images lack is emotional impact, not only is the source of the answer harder to find, it might take years of studying good images to figure out how to give your photographs impact. That sounds downright discouraging, but truth is, if what your images lack is impact, switching cameras, adding pixels, changing raw processors and trying harder are none of them going to help one bit.

How soon looking at good images will improve your photography is going to be a function of how hard you work at it, inherent talent, artistic background, and even more important, finding something to photograph that actually means something to you. Some can make fundamental leaps within months, for others it takes many years, but the point is that I think there are a lot of photographers who are frustrated because they have considerable experience but seem stalled in their photography.

Too many photographers practice what they are good at and avoid confronting their weaknesses - it's human nature to go with our strengths, but you can see that such a strategy is hardly likely to result in rapid progress. For example, there are many experienced hobby photographers who are quite expert at many of the technical aspects of photography and could even teach it, yet are weak at the aesthetic parts of photography - guess which they study and practice more!

The Technical Levels

Level One (*snapshots are technically flawed*)

Check the background before taking the picture.

Move in closer.

Master the skill of the shutter half press (Focus & Re-frame)

Level Two (*snapshots look good but larger prints show significant flaws*)

Use a tripod whenever possible and use the self timer or a cable release.

Read about depth of field and then go out and test it with your equipment

Find out what the diffraction limit is for your camera - ie. how far you can stop down before diffraction degrades the image more than increased depth of field improves it.

Learn to routinely make good exposures.

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Experiment, but keep the experiments simple.

Level Three (*friends admire but photographers see lots of flaws*)

Take your prints to someone who is good and get some feedback

Consider purchasing good prints.

Use magazines with top reproduction quality as guides to decent prints - Lenswork comes to mind as heads and shoulders above the others

Visit the websites of respected photographers to look at their images.

<http://photography-now.net>

Level Four (*prints look technically ok yet lack richness and depth*)

A workshop is almost certainly your best investment, though you have to be sure that the instructors are in fact great printers in their own right.

Take every opportunity to visit galleries and look at original prints.

Buy lots of paper and work hard. Don't make dozens of changes to an image without saving some intermediate stages so you can go back and change things - this is the single biggest advantage of printing digitally - use it. Don't keep printing for hours - stop and have a look at your prints the next day - we tend to have problems with image 'creep' by which I mean we get darker and contrastier as the day progresses and it's only the next day that we realize we went past optimum about three hours before we quit printing.

Level Five (*print presentation lacks*)

You just need to ask yourself does your portfolio present your work in the best possible light - immaculate prints which are easy to see, and in a format that is not too difficult to handle - nothing like a stack of glossy border less prints for picking up finger prints fast

Aesthetic Levels

This was always going to be harder to verbalize. I knew going in that whatever advice I had to offer, it was unlikely to be something you could pick up over a weekend. Sweat and commitment are required to advance aesthetically. That said, I do have some suggestions which might be of value.

Level A (snapshots are boring)

The essential problem here is level A prints don't show what the photographer intended. Pictures of exotic Caribbean islands don't look anything like as nice as you remember them. Family pictures don't show how cute your 3 year old niece is, mountains look unimpressive, sunsets look anaemic.

It's not that the message doesn't come across, rather simply that there does not appear to be a message at all. While there are hundreds of photography books which are helpful, there is one step which could be taken to quickly improve the quality of your images.

Ask your self the following questions:

Question 1 - what would I like the picture to show and what are the odds that if I shoot now, from here, that it will show it?

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It could be that beautiful Caribbean beach you want to show off from your holiday, or it might be your grandchild looking angelic just before dropping off to sleep, or it might simply be how great your roses were this year in the garden.

Question 2 - is there anything I can do right now to show it better? You could change position, zoom, or reframe.

Remember that moving left or right while still aiming at the subject changes foreground and background - could such a change improve the picture - simply Consider shooting the picture now from where you are (after all if you hesitate you may miss the moment), but then move around and move in and take a second shot after a quick look for an improved position. Sure this results in 50% wastage of shots, but few photographers ever approach 50% success rate and with digital cameras and no film costs, why not experiment.

Level B (images lack wow, they act as good markers for remembering a holiday but aren't likely to persuade anyone else to make the same trip)

Images have a message but it isn't clear. To make meaningful images, the photographer will need to identify the message and decide what elements of the subject add to that message and just as important, what are the parts which detract from same. Messages can be political - poverty, crime, war, pollution, etc, or they can be feelings - anger, calm, excitement, humor, or they can be about the character of the subject - weight, height, delicacy. The message can be about relationships - things that go together or in fact which don't and so are ironic.

Find the message you want to relate and work to show it.

Level C (images illustrate nicely but aren't art)

Level C photographers can take pretty pictures but moving on means starting to create art, actually putting something of ourselves in the images and making an image which means more as itself than as a great representation of the real world. This means 'making pictures' instead of 'taking pictures'.

Our images do a great job representing 'the thing' yet one would still rather have the sunset than the picture of it, be at the game instead of looking at the picture. We'd like to create a picture which would make you wince with the impact of the tackle, that shows football in a way sitting on the sidelines doesn't. It might show the pain, or the skill, the balance, coordination. It opens a little window into what it's like to be part of a football tackle. Somehow we need to create images which educate, entertain, inform, stimulate or otherwise create a connection with the viewer.

This is a pretty tall order. It's easy to imagine that you'd need to know something of football to be able to create that powerful image. You'd likely have to care about

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football and almost certainly you'd have to practice shooting for some considerable time to be able to show all this in a single photograph.

Short of signing up for a 4 year fine arts degree, how do you go about making a fundamental difference to your photographs. The traditional method has been practice, practice, practice. I would argue though that we are looking at a different type of photograph and practicing the old skill which was one of taking great snapshot, just isn't going to do it.

There isn't any simple step you can take or exercise that you can do in a matter of weeks to 'move up'. There are however some steps that over time will help. Below are some suggestions:

- 1) take a photograph appreciation course, or even an art appreciation course.
- 2) Study intelligent critiques of photographs - those on <http://photo.net/photo-critique-forum> <http://www.altphotos.com> <http://www.pbase.com/> are generally excellent and they spend at least as much time discussing what works as what doesn't which is extremely important.
- 3) Study books on art and books of art.
- 4) Spend some serious time studying a portfolio of your best work of the last year. You are looking for aesthetic issues so work with modest sized prints. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - a) what was I trying to show?
 - b) how effective was I in showing it?
 - c) what is there about this photograph which is worth while in and of itself rather than just as a representation of what it photographed (ie. why would I want the picture instead of the thing?)
 - d) what is there about this picture that would make someone else want to look at it?
 - e) what changes can I make to the image to improve the answers to the above.
- 5) Using the answers to your questions, go out and reshoot the images with the necessary changes. Ask questions again and if need be repeat cycle.

Level D (starting to be artistic but the message isn't clear)

We're definitely striving to be creative, we have found something that means something to us, but the message we create isn't clear.

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I have some suggestions for photographers who find themselves at this level:

- 1) It's necessary to make composition stronger.
- 2) Decide to work hard on the edges of your images.
- 3) Improving from this level means that anything at all that detracts from the image has to be eliminated.
- 4) Sign up for Photographic Workshop - from someone who's photographs you admire but who also has a reputation for being a good instructor.

Level E (images are admired by fellow photographers, yet lack emotional impact)

Level E is about going from admirable to wonderful. Problems of composition, lighting, presentation, and so on have all been mastered. Lots of images by the masters of photography are 'only admirable' and not wonderful so it's no disgrace to find yourself at this level, yet the question is: is there anything to be done to create some wonderful images?

At this point you are going from "I think that image would look good on my wall", to 'I HAVE to have that image, it says so much to me'.

It's inconceivable that you are going to make the majority of your images wonderful - no one has accomplished that yet in my opinion.

This raises the question - how can certain types of photography be powerful - emotional - containing a message?

So how to create wonderful images. You could go down to skid row and photograph 'bums'. You won't be the first. You might even get some good images but probably not. Whether you could justify such exploitation is a conversation for another time. The images might be more meaningful if you spent some time with these people and got to know them and took their images with their cooperation, perhaps after helping them for some months.

It seems to me that to start, you are looking for scenes which have an emotional impact on you. Then you go about trying to show that somehow. If on the other hand, you see something and think it will make an interesting composition, no matter how carefully you line things up, no matter how subtle the lighting, fine the detail, delicate the shadows - it's unlikely to create a reaction in it's viewers which you didn't see first. First you find the interest, then you find the picture, not the other way round.

So, first you find subject matter that is important to you, that you relate to, that you have some experience with, then you look for the good photograph. Too often we're desperate to take a good photograph so first we find the good image, then we hope to relate to it and somehow put that in the image - some chance.

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How you go about putting your emotional experience of the subject into the image is up to you. I like to think that sometimes I can do it, often I can't. I do know that the more often I shoot, the more I practice, the more successful I become.

Level F (wonderful but not iconic)

Even if I had been a photographer who created one or more of the iconic images of photography, I suspect I'd not know how to tell someone else to do it, never mind how I could repeat the effort for myself. Steve McCurry is a superb photographer, but there's only one Afghan Girl. Dorothea Lange took a number of powerful photographs but 'Migrant Mother' so perfectly says depression/suffering/heat/dust/discouragement it is the image everyone remembers. One can only say that the more often one is able to make images with a clear message and emotional impact, the more likely one is to one day create a future icon.

There are lots of wonderful tunes, yet there is something about 'Amazing Grace', especially on the bagpipes, which just grabs many people. I remember when it first started playing on the radio in the early 70's and was surprised at my reaction to it, and even more so when I found that others had a similar reaction. We're talking about photographs like that tune. That so many wonderful pieces of music don't grab you that way suggests an element of magic for which there are unlikely to be any rules, tricks or tips to make equivalent photographs, they just are...

In the end and even if none of the above advice works for you, I can't help but feel that knowing where you are at and where you want to go has to make the journey easier.

George Barr is a 57 year old family physician. The switch to digital a few years ago was like a light going on - my creativity was unleashed to a degree I'd never had before. It opened the possibilities of color work after almost 40 years of black and white only. A weekend workshop gave me the courage to show my work and has since led to being published in Lenswork, Black And White and also Black And White Photography Magazine from Britain and Focus magazine in the U.S. My website is <http://www.georgebarr.com> and my blog is at <http://www.georgebarr.blogspot.com>

Take Your Photography to the Next Level: From Inspiration to Image [ILLUSTRATED] (Paperback)

by [George Barr](#) (Author)

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