

*“You know, so often it’s just sticking around and being there, remaining there, not swooping out in a cloud of dust; sitting down on the ground with people, letting children look at your camera with their dirty, grimy little hands, and putting their fingers on the lens, and you let them, because you know that if you will behave in a generous manner, you’re very apt to receive it, you know?”*

— DOROTHEA LANGE

Anyone can push the shutter button on a camera and record an image on film, but recording storytelling images on film takes thought, preparation, timing and a little luck. Here’s some tips on putting some heart and soul into your photographs:

- Behind every good picture there is a good idea. Behind every successful photojournalist is an idea person. Bob Gilka, former director of photography for *National Geographic*, said that the photojournalism industry is up to its armpits in good photographers but up to its ankles in photographers with good ideas. If you develop your ability to come up with good ideas, you’ll stand out from the crowd. Good ideas come from drawing from personal experiences, getting to know your community (your high school), keeping up with the news, being curious, talking to people and listening.
- Look at great pictures. An aspiring artist studies, and even emulates, the masters. Photography is no different. Studying the pictures of the masters will educate and inspire you.
- You should carry your camera with you at all times. I know it’s heavy, but not nearly as heavy as your heart when you miss a picture because you didn’t have your camera with you. Don’t leave home without it.
- When you get to your assignment, talk with your subject. Your conversation may reveal another time or place or event that would increase your chances of getting a visually storytelling moment. This conversation will also establish a rapport and trust with your subject. Talking with your subject also helps with gathering information to write your caption. Finally, good story subjects often make good sources for other ideas – listen for them.
- The above will put you in a position to make great photographs; now you need follow through with a great picture. Sometimes you just get lucky. More often you don’t. But there are some ways to increase your chances of making a visually compelling image. First, before going to your assignment, try calling ahead to talk with your subject – having a good idea of what you are getting into before you get there will help you to better anticipate where you need to be and when you need to be there. Understanding the process will give you an opportunity to shoot beyond the process and capture storytelling moments. Second, talk to the reporter/editor involved to make sure you have a good handle on what the story is about – COMMUNICATE. Third, arrive at your assignment location early and stay late – the best pictures are often ones that are not part of the plan, ones that you could never have anticipated. Fourth, take a light meter reading as soon as you arrive at the scene. Look for a high angle that might give you a good vantage point. Look for great light, not just light that will expose your film. In short, be prepared so that when the moment happens you can concentrate totally on it and not the technical stuff. Fifth, shoot a lot of film. Film is cheap compared to having to return to a situation to fix what you did wrong the first time. It will force you to try different angles and wait for different expressions. It will ultimately allow you to make the inevitable mistakes in the picture-taking process and still produce a technically excellent, visually compelling moment. Finally, don’t give up on a situation too easily, but understand that some situations are just not visually interesting. Sometimes you need to ask more questions and find alternatives. Being resourceful is one of the greatest assets of an effective photojournalist.
- Be patient. Be curious. Listen. Above all, treat your subjects with respect. If you treat your subjects as people first and a story subjects second they will open up to you in ways that will allow you to shoot pictures with depth and with feeling.