



# *Grateful & Gracious*

## How to Take Photos of an Event AND Be Present For It

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psychology *for* photographers

(and other creative professionals)



## **EVER LOOKED AT YOUR PHOTOS AFTER AN EVENT, AND HAD A PAINFUL THOUGHT SURFACE:**

### **“I DON’T REALLY REMEMBER BEING THERE FOR THAT MOMENT”?**

Today in ‘photographer problems’: How do you decide between walking around with your camera capturing the laughing people, the pile of shoes by the front door, Grandma stirring the cider - and actually taking the moment in with all five senses?

And if you choose to leave the camera zipped in its bag, how do you deal with the inner pressure, guilt, or sadness of knowing you won’t have photos later?



**Today is the day you stop twisting yourself into knots over this.**

Let me share five simple practices I use to both be present an event AND have photos later.

Don’t worry, these ideas are interwoven so seamlessly that you soon won’t even notice you’re doing them.





## #5: BEFORE THE EVENT, ASK YOURSELF: WHAT WILL I USE THESE IMAGES FOR?

Confession: I once went through my personal photo archives and felt startled by what I found.

Scores of photos from parties I'd hosted which, though nice, will never ever see the light of day. Shots with rooms full of loose acquaintances I'm no longer in touch with. Creative angles of party decorations, when I would have been fine with 1-2 wide shots to remember the scene.

If I had asked myself honestly before each event "What am I going to use tonight's photos for?" I would have said "oh, I might want to remember this party decor" or "well sometimes it's fun to look back, you never know who will become a dear friend."

Fair enough.



**BUT. In at least 4 out of 5 cases, I could have accomplished those exact goals by taking 4 photos total, then gone back to the party.**

Let's admit that *sometimes* we take photos just to take them. We see golden light playing off the tree and our fingers itch for a shutter button simply because hey, cool light. We feel a sense of obligation (what if I want them later?). We've experienced a time when we really wanted our camera and didn't have it, and that memory haunts us.

There's nothing wrong with taking photos because it's fun, or to have 'just in case.' But if we want to enjoy being present, this means we have to cut back on distraction.

How do we distinguish between distraction and a shot that preserves meaning?



Before you even arrive at the event, ask yourself: What will you likely use these images for?

Let's elaborate:

- Will the images be fun quick album for social sharing, but have only a fleeting life in a feed?
- Will it just feel nice to have a few snaps on your phone?
- Have you ever gone to your computer a year later to look for images from an event like this?
- If so, which images mattered?
- Is something truly special happening (like multiple generations of a family getting together)?
- Might this be the only chance to photograph certain people together?
- Will people close to you likely request copies in earnest, because they want to print them?
- In the album of your life, would this event take up more than a page? (Would it even make the album?)



**Your answers will guide you in knowing how much your camera is going to be a fun distraction (or social crutch) versus a meaningful tool.**

If we can guess that these photos are never going to end up in an album, or even be sought out on a computer, we may need to opt out of sneaking into the kitchen just because the person slicing the turkey is fabulously lit.

Because what WILL end up in your album of memories is sitting and talking with an old friend face to face.

Chances are, you already know which gatherings contain potential photos that are worth added effort (usually: when far-flung family and lifelong friends get together). Those are more worth logging some dSLR time, 'just in case.'



The block party with a smattering of friends and a huge bunch of acquaintances? Maybe a few phone photos will suffice here.

So: What about you, and where does this event stand? This helps clarify the real number and quality of images you're likely to want later.

Whatever your answer:

#### **#4: DESIGNATE UP FRONT WHAT WINDOW OF TIME YOU'LL HAVE THE CAMERA OUT. ONCE THE WINDOW CLOSES, PUT IT AWAY.**

Three years ago my husband and I spent our holidays wandering the Christmas markets across central Europe. These are a photographer's dream: Repeating lights everywhere, gorgeous wares, wooden market stands, candles, piles of sweets - all against the backdrop of centuries-old gothic buildings.

Of course I wanted my camera out *the entire time*.

But with both hands on camera, leaning over every stand we came across, I had no room to hold my husband's hand, share this time with him, and really be in the magic.

Here's what we did: We set a specific amount of time when we'd both wander separately, then come back to a meeting point. I'd take all the photos I wanted, then I'd put the camera back in the bag and we'd walk hand in hand. (This had the added benefit of letting us both discover things independently and excitedly say "oh, you have to come over here, look at this!")



**I still use this technique! Designate a window, relish it, then put the camera away and enjoy being there.**





Attending a holiday party at someone else's house? I pull out the camera 45 minutes in, when the bulk of people have arrived. I spend 5 minutes taking photos, then go back to talking. (Remember how most of my past party reminiscing could have been satisfied by about 4 photos total? It doesn't take long to take a few snaps of the room and get together a couple groups for a nice shot. Aaaaand DONE.)

If I'm hosting my own Christmas party? Camera comes out for ten minutes just before the caroling starts, so I can catch the party atmosphere, decorations, and everyone gathering around the piano. After that, the camera goes back upstairs, and I come down to sing alto.

Thanksgiving day? I might split this in two - seven minutes during prep time to get people stirring and checking the oven, then seven minutes at the beginning of dinner to get the final dishes, the guests around the table, and the first bites. Then, done.



**If you feel to protest “but I can't possibly guess what moments will be ripe for photos!” then consider this:**

How do wedding photographers get their job done?

In part: They know a general timeline, identify possible highlight moments, and use that info. Yes they react as things come up but if *all they did* was react, they'd get behind. They plan a little: OK, at the end of the ceremony I will stand over here to catch them leaving, right after the dinner toasts I can take five minutes to scarf a snack before the dances start, etc.

Punchline being: Even high-pressure continuous-coverage events have things that are predictable, and moments that are more or less important to retelling the story of the day.

Parties are not that different. Since you're not on the clock for



continuous coverage, use those high points to your advantage.

If there's a visual highlight like candles and cake cutting, center your window around that. If it's a casual continuous open house, any one slice in time will probably yield beautiful moments that represent the whole. For most gatherings, these slices of time will give you all the images you'll need.



**You'll be more present knowing exactly when you'll be 'on.' Once you're 'off,' your eyes and mind settle.**

Bonus hint: Take cues from your own photo archives of parties and vacations: What are you glad you have? What makes you click past? There will be patterns in what you end up wanting, or not. If you take the time to look, you'll get faster at choosing windows ripe for photos, then letting the camera rest.

### **#3: WHEN THE URGE COMES UP TO TAKE A PHOTO OUTSIDE YOUR DESIGNATED WINDOW, PAUSE AND ASK TWO THINGS.**

So you've decided how important this event is, and set your time window accordingly.

Something will come up outside that window that will give you itchy shutter fingers again. When (not if, WHEN) this happens, ask yourself these two things:



**A) Is this a 'nice' image, or does it add to the story of the evening?**

Remember: Cool backlighting happens every day. Conversations with a friend you rarely see do not. If the backlighting is behind that friend, okay, that might add to the story of the evening. If it's a great-grandma crooning over your baby nephew, okay, yes, maybe that adds to the story.



If this image won't uniquely contribute to the who, what, when, where, or why of the evening - then it's probably redundancy and you're better off refocusing on the person you're with. Your sister may have just set a beautiful pie on the table, but if you already have a food shot, savor that scene in your mind instead.



**By the way, the “story” you’re trying to tell can span more than just this event.**

If you're deciding whether to be present for your daughter blowing out her cake candles, or Grandpa ceremonially plugging in the Christmas tree, consider whether a similar scene unfolds every year. Does this year's blowing out the candles add to the story of “Jackie's birthdays growing up” beyond what last year's candle moment did? Is there a reason you need two sets of photos of Grandpa doing the same thing? In the whole story of your life, it may well be ok to photograph a different part of the celebration this year instead, or have Jackie pose with the cake before the party this time. If you still want that memory captured, hand the camera to someone else for this year's moment so you can weave physical memories in with your photo ones.



**B) Can you actually make a good “quick image” here?**

Yes, a fine photographer can always make something out of nothing. Even so - not all shot opportunities are equal, especially for quick “oh just let me get this” grabs like the one you're probably considering.

At some events it's easy to rush to catch something, then realize darn, it's actually too shadowed/cluttered *to make the image I imagined in the time I had.*

This can happen even more at parties when you're trying to have a good time. You step out of ‘photographer mode’ and aren't thinking as critically as you would in a photo shoot.





So before you set down your appetizer plate to grab a camera, take that extra second to use your pro eyes. *Will this actually render beautifully, or will I just swipe past it later?*

If something will make a strong unique contribution to the story of the evening, and you can quickly make a good image, then grab the camera - and put it right back. As I've practiced this, I've found it increasingly rare that I need to make more than 1 exception per event, if I have to make one at all.

## **#2: TO GET GREAT 'ESTABLISHING' SHOTS, ENLIST OR OFFER HELP.**

One too many times I've thrown a party with a 7:00pm start, and at 6:50pm I'm simultaneously trying to bake the has-to-stay-hot appetizer while also changing into party clothes while *wait I need to take a photo of the decorations I spent all last night arranging!*



**Photos that establish the overall scene are great for remembering - and they can often be done before the event starts.**

If you're hosting, enlist some help - ask one trusted friend to come 20 minutes early to man the oven so you can freshen up and photograph the setup. (Bonus: Task them with refilling the punch bowl during your designated camera time window later, so you're not pulled in all directions. If you're going to take photos you want to enjoy taking them, not just snap quickly, rush back to hosting, then feel disappointed by the images later!)

If you're not the host, you can offer to come early to help with last-minute tasks and take some 'scene' or decor-focused photos before anyone arrives. That way you can savor the whole party knowing those shots are already safely on the card.

This last tip may go without saying, but just in case:



## #1: DON'T POST AND PARTY.

There's rarely a need to take a photo and post it while you're still at the event.

I promise, that group selfie will get just as many likes at 10:30pm as it would right now at 7pm. Or even - gasp - if you wait until 10:30am tomorrow morning.

Also, consider that posting and tagging people who are still at the event may result in dinging notifications and a net increase of people on their phones. The world does not need more of that.

(Personally, I have started applying this concept to entire vacations. Not only do I feel safer not posting in real time - *"Hey potential burglars! Look where I am! That's right, three thousand miles from my empty home!"* - but posting after a trip gives me a chance to reflect and share something more meaningful and big-picture than a nondescript *"Look where I am! Today was so beautiful!"*)

Try not to share the moment before you've finished experiencing it.



**That's the great thing about photos - they'll keep.**

## HOPE YOU ENJOYED PART 1 OF 3 OF THE GRATEFUL & GRACIOUS SERIES.

## SEE YOU NEXT TIME!





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