emotions or a designer stimulating your senses. Personally, if I had to articulate what I do as I dance around the frame, I would say I'm trying to frame my pictures by arranging visual elements for maximum impact and communication.

We don't always do it on a conscious level, but with experience we learn to constantly scan the viewfinder, looking at the placement of lines and form, the balance, the relationship with foreground and background elements, and the scale between them.

This perfect storm of picture elements common to many great images is mostly out of your control, but there's much you can do to maximize your chances of being in great light and in the best camera position with the exposure set, and having the right lens ready to trigger the shutter at the decisive moment. Getting through the volume helps you master the technical side so you can concentrate on the most important part of the photographic process: seeing and capturing compelling, meaningful, personal images that communicate to others what you think is beautiful, important, funny, sad, or just plain worth recording.

The creative pursuit of photography requires a melding of both the physical act of shooting a picture and the cerebral process of seeing and determining what, when, and how to shoot it. "Working it" helps us see the world in new ways while forcing us out of the comfort zone we often tend to curl up in.

The great Henri Cartier-Bresson articulates his idea of "working it" when he describes his process of framing and shooting an image.

"The difference between a good picture and a mediocre picture is a question of millimeters. A small, small difference. But it's essential. If I take the picture from there, it's another arrangement of there, there, there. It's very small moves I'm doing. I'm not jumping up and down. It's a relation between your nose, your eyes, the window behind, and that's my pleasure to establish these relations. Sometimes there's no picture. Alright? There's no picture."

—Henri Cartier-Bresson

3.6 Some moments are fleeting and will never be repeated. Catch them if you can. © Steve Simon

The compositional dance is also about tweaks in technique. The subtle differences in depth of field from one stop to the next can perfect and sharpen your vision for the final photograph, as can the proper blur-inducing or life-stopping shutter speed.

THE MOMENT

The idea of time is important to photography—not only the time you invest in shooting, but the duration of the shutter's opening. A fast shutter speed can stop time, whereas a longer, slower shutter speed can transmit to the viewer the illusion of movement.

Images can often get more interesting with the passage of time. Clues as to when the picture was taken are revealed in the frame through cars, fashion, haircuts, or the electronics of the day (or lack thereof). As images get older, they can become precious historical records.

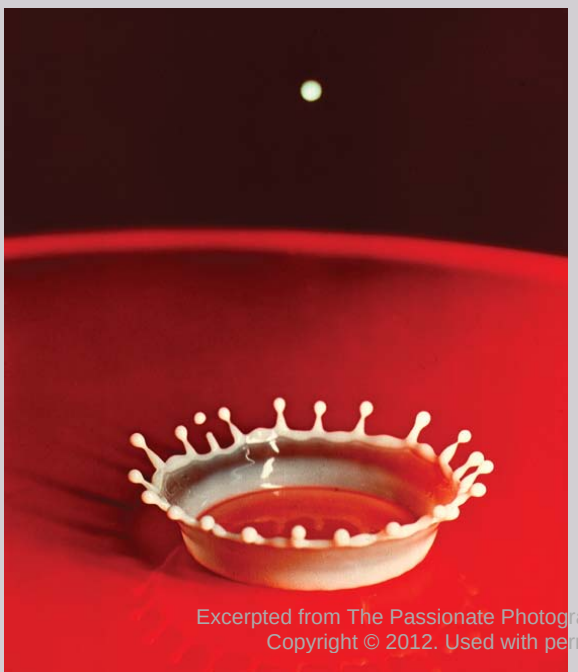
When I traveled through the United States a few years ago, I was fascinated by the many places I encountered that had a feeling of being stuck in time, which became part of the subject I tried to capture.

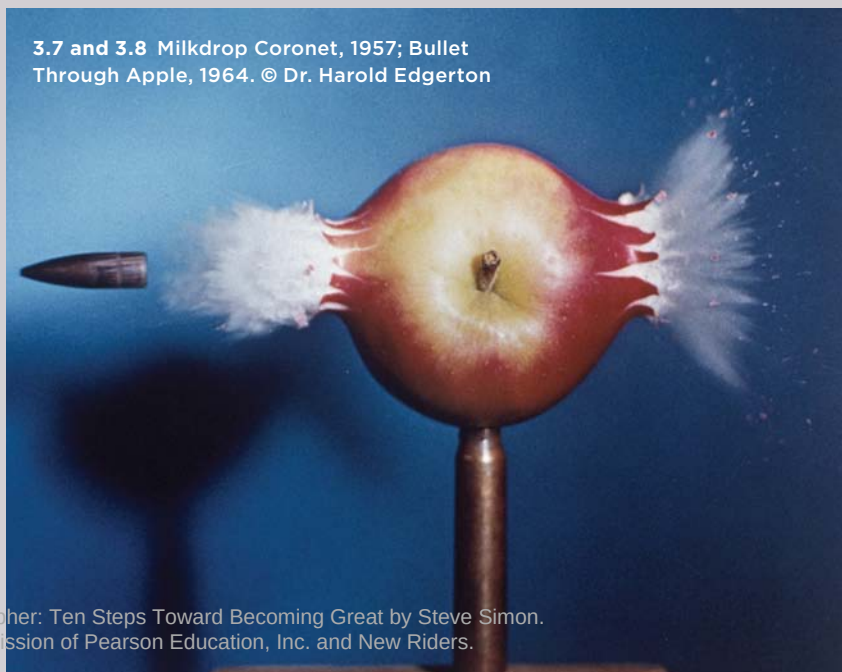
Opposed to timeless images are the fleeting moments captured by the camera's fast shutter. There are no redos in these images; they are never to be repeated (**3.6**). The ability of the photographer to capture the precise moment when all the elements within the frame come together and are frozen by the press of the shutter release is a talent as well as a skill to be developed.

It was Henri Cartier-Bresson who coined the term *the decisive moment*, describing the perfect, peak moment frozen forever in a photograph.

Shutter speeds in particular help to separate photography from other visual media. We can't see a frozen moment in real life with our eyes but we can in photographs. Look at the pioneering work of Dr. Harold Edgerton, the inventor of the modern strobe (**3.7** and **3.8**).

Edgerton did what great photographers and artists do every day: they show us our familiar world in a new way. Whether it was the beauty of the "crown" created when a droplet crashed into a pool of milk





3.7 and 3.8 Milkdrop Coronet, 1957; Bullet Through Apple, 1964. © Dr. Harold Edgerton

or the awesome power of a bullet exploding through an apple, Edgerton was able to show us the innate beauty in a world of stop-motion that we had never seen before, with flash durations of 1/10,000th of a second or less.

That same spirit of seeing in new ways is a key to doing work that upends our traditional view of the world. Embracing that new way of looking at a familiar subject is the end result of working your compositions.

However, the art of composition is not a science. Photography is personal. It takes a long time for photographers to learn to trust their intuition, especially when the creative process can feel so technical when using a tool like a camera.

WORK THE SCENE

Once your photograph is found, working the scene can mean a subtractive process as you eliminate clutter, cleaning up and organizing image elements to focus attention on what you deem important. Scan the edges of the frame to make sure you're not missing anything, and look for details that can improve the image by cropping them out or including them within the frame (**3.9–3.14**).

Sometimes there is an energy and movement created with a strong composition, where the lines and curves of image elements keep the viewer's eye inside the frame. Then there's the content itself, and what it might mean to—and how it will be interpreted by—the viewer.

3.9–3.14 Working the scene. The first shot was my starting point, but as Suzane Nyirabukara walked away from me toward her home in Kigali, Rwanda, I thought it was a more interesting shot from behind. I followed her, shooting and cleaning up the frame as I went. © Steve Simon

CHANGE YOUR VANTAGE POINT

As we wander through life, we see the world from perhaps our most common vantage point: standing up, at eye level, and at a distance from our subject that can be described as our comfort zone—not too close, not too far away. In the compositional dance, *this is just the starting point for photography.* I'm advocating you consider shooting a little more than you normally do, which will make Step 7, "The Art of the Edit," a bit more challenging. But having to make difficult editing choices is a good thing; it means you're getting lots of strong frames.

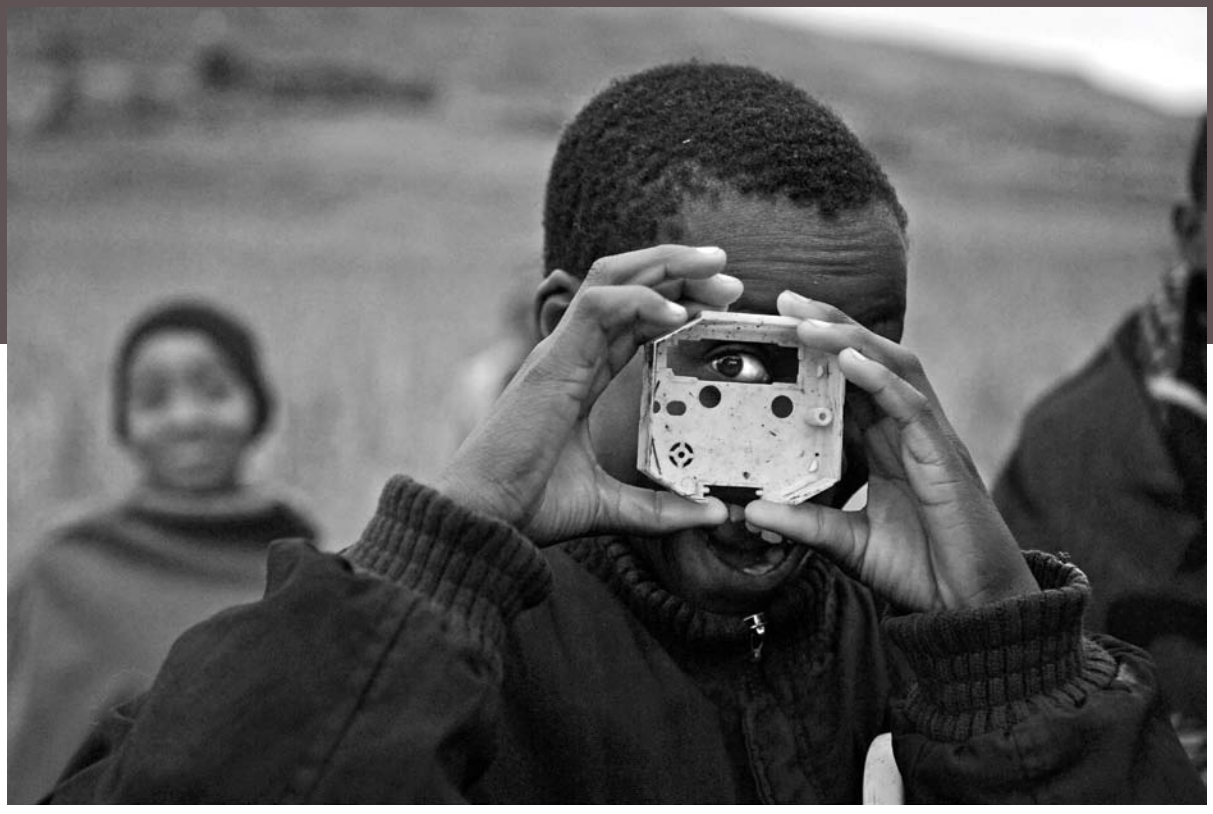
Filling the frame is often a good idea and can help define the focal point of your image or the point of interest that makes your photograph unique. My photographer friend Bill Durrence has a mantra that I also share because it helps many photographers find aesthetic focus: Take the picture, then move three steps closer. Take another, then move three steps closer. Repeat (**3.15–3.17**). We need to shake ourselves out of our comfort zone and see how things look from different angles and perspectives—sometimes uncomfortably close.

Show viewers of your work a new view of a common scene. Explore different points of view by getting down low, up high, in close, or some other unexpected camera position. This is where the dance should take you. You can't be timid when determining your camera position. Find the best place to shoot by boldly exploring the scene.

National Geographic photographer Sam Abell spoke about how the photographic process is often a form of chaos with much that is out of your control. What you can control is the framing. Once selected, if life is moving about within the frame, with luck and timing all the forces come together to produce a great photograph. But much is out of your hands.

"Making a picture just right takes time, even when the thing you're photographing isn't moving. Instead, you do the moving—closer, not so close—change lenses, commit to a tripod, micro compose some detail, step back, reconsider, recompose, repeat. And when it looks right it also feels right—just so."

—Sam Abell, from *The Life of a Photograph*



3.15–3.17 By moving in three steps closer, then three steps closer again, I ended up with a much more powerful image than the one I started with. © Steve Simon

THE PROBLEM WITH ZOOMS

So many of us are using zooms these days, and with good reason. The quality of zoom lenses is now so good that they rival the quality of prime lenses, which have traditionally maintained optical superiority.

It used to be that if an SLR camera came with a lens it was usually a 50mm "normal" lens, but today's DSLRs almost always come with zoom lenses. I maintain that for new photographers in particular, zooms present too many choices, adding to the overwhelming number of decisions that already have to be made. I suggest using fixed focal-length lenses when you hit the compositional dance floor, or shooting with zoom lenses racked to either extreme and zooming with your feet, as Diane Arbus suggested (**3.18** and **3.19**). With experience, you will learn when to finesse your compositions with slight adjustments of the zoom's focal length.

In the meantime, there are several other choices to be made. Decisions about camera angle, shutter speed, aperture, distance, light, and the moment the picture is taken all have profound effects on what will be emphasized and communicated in the final photograph. By working through a number of these technical scenarios, you can later determine what best resembles your vision of the scene. Give

3.18 and 3.19 You can see the compression and limited depth of field in the image of the young boy in Kenya taken with an 85mm lens (right) and the blueberry pie–eating portrait shown with a 24mm lens at close proximity. There's an intimacy that the wide angle gives that you can use to your advantage. Mmmm, pie... © Steve Simon

yourself options. Try them all and learn. Working the scene allows you to make strong images with subtle degrees of difference. And with experience, you will have a clearer idea of which technical approaches to employ.

We have some control by choosing how we work. Different lenses, from wide angle to telephoto, change and alter shapes and relationships between foreground and background objects. Longer lenses give flatter, more compressed perspectives, whereas wide-angle lenses communicate intimate perspectives, which "read" and are communicated in the final image.

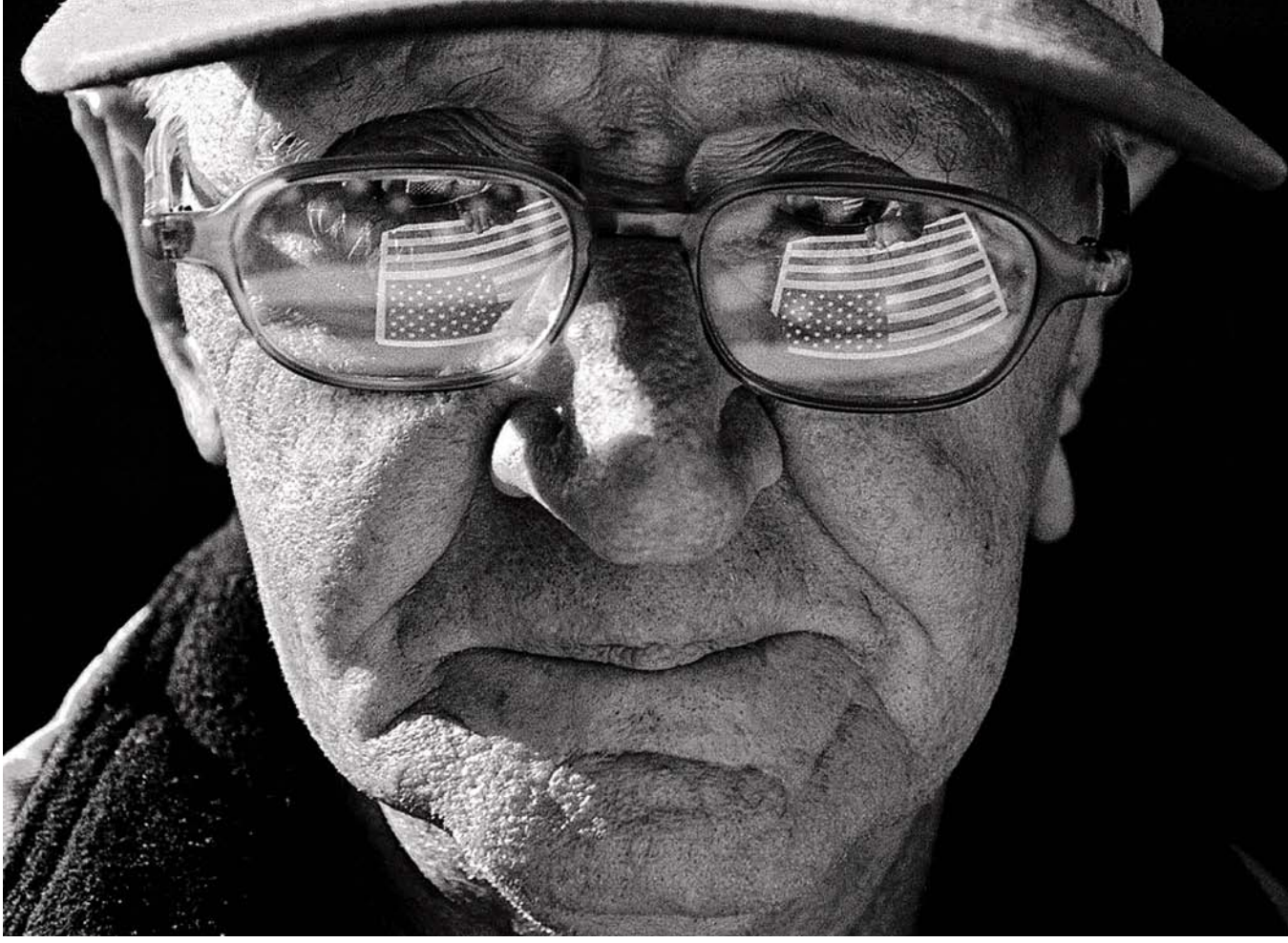
When time allows, it's a good idea to stop, think, and strategize because there are lots of decisions that need to be made. Choosing selective focus or maximum depth of field; blurring through slow exposures or stopping the motion entirely; determining sharpness and clarity—each of these decisions tells a different story. We decide what story to tell. Often you need to work through a number of these technical scenarios to determine what best resembles your vision of the scene.

I tend to use wide-angle lenses most often, for the more intimate depiction of the subject and the scene that I like for my work (**3.20**). Just be careful when you use them. Whenever possible, keep the lens perpendicular to the subject to minimize distortion. I'm also careful when using very wide lenses. I don't want the first thing the viewer of my image to say is, "Wow, that's a wide-angle lens that took that." I want the viewer to see the content. This is why extreme wide angles should be used carefully and with caution.

To play with new angles and camera positions, you might want to try your camera's Live View feature, which can be very helpful if you want to get down for a very low angle or hold it up over your head for an elevated perspective. In what we used to call the "Hail Mary" shot with film cameras, I can hold up my DSLR with LiveView activated and actually see and frame the image with hands extended high.

CHOICES AND LIMITATIONS

The compositional dance is about figuring out a way to move you and your camera, which in turn moves the smallest of details inside your viewfinder for maximum visual impact. You can make use of all photographic techniques to create the atmosphere or emotion you are feeling and want to transmit. It's



3.20 Don't be afraid to move in close in order to frame your subject with a wider lens for a more intimate view, like in this image of a man attending the Veteran's Parade in New York City. © Steve Simon

about recognizing and understanding what it is that attracted you to the subject matter in the first place, and then determining—through concentration and instinct—how best to communicate those feelings through the photograph.

Sometimes you need to stop and think about what you're doing, making sure you're heading in the right direction with regard to your approach to the subject. Having a clear vision and idea of how you want to render your subject is half the battle. It gives you direction and helps guide you to get what you need for the particular assignment or project.

It's not a question of recording a literal description of what's in front of you, but rather creating an image that provokes an emotional response from your viewer—perhaps responding in the same way you did when you decided to take the photo in the first place.

Even for experienced photographers, working the photo is all-important. Sometimes in the field I think that one shooting situation or photo is going to be "the one," but it isn't. Even after a life of obsessing with photography, I'm never really sure which photograph will end up being the best. Sometimes it is one I don't even remember taking: a look, a gesture, a spontaneous moment captured on impulse that was so fleeting it was not consciously seen.

3.21 and 3.22 This woman inside a church in Lesotho was very emotional and expressive, so I continued to photograph, varying my distance moving a bit closer, then further back and chose the best frame later when editing. You want to give yourself some difficult decisions in post by doing a good, thorough job in the field. © Steve Simon

It is one of my greatest joys in photography—the unexpected surprises that pop up on my computer. So, I advocate that you keep shooting as you dance with your camera—all the while, feeling your way through, shooting on impulse and taking chances (**3.21** and **3.22**). Your medium is digital; you can always delete later, so shoot freely.

MORE DECONSTRUCTION

Okay, let's talk a little composition theory. To help you work your compositions more thoroughly, let's discuss the visual elements that contribute to the success of the image, then the arrangement of those elements within the frame. These choices are often intuitive, but they come from experience. As we develop our critical thinking skills, it gets easier to articulate our feelings about photographs. And the more we study what are acknowledged to be good photographs, we see what is common among strong images—the characteristics they share, as well as the picture components that make the images communicate so powerfully.

Let's break down some of the picture elements that can be used to your advantage as you work out the most effective framing for any particular subject matter.

Aesthetically, the elements include *shape*, the two-dimensional outline of an object; *texture*, the surface of the shape that may or may not be visible depending on the way the light hits the surface; *form*, the three-dimensional aspect of the object; *color* or *tone* (black and white); and, of course, *light*, which will have major impact on how all those elements will be perceived.

Color can dominate an image and contribute to the meaning in a photograph. Former *National Geographic* photo editor and *Washington Post* multimedia guru Tom Kennedy said that good color "amplifies the content" of a photograph.

But it can also be a distraction. When shooting color, it's important to locate potential color distractions and find ways of framing that minimize them. This is why monochromatic color images can be so effective, and why the golden hour is a time many photographers choose to shoot, to bathe the image in warm light that tends to minimize diverse color distractions. The bonus is that the sun is low in the sky, and it adds a three-dimensional look to the landscape as your primary subject or back/foreground (**3.23**).