

The Mouth of The Kenai

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Plugged In: Parting shots — smart use beats new gear

By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter

As the Redoubt Reporter embarks upon a well-deserved vacation, it's a fitting occasion for summing up our nearly eight years exploring technology and photography.

Originally, Plugged In was a weekly computing and networking technology feature. As those technologies matured, they became quite reliable, affordable and slow to change, reducing the need to frequently upgrade hardware and software. The maturing of those computing technologies is excellent news for all of us who rely on them daily, but yields few new topics, certainly not enough to sustain a fresh weekly feature for eight years.

Enter digital photography, a combination of art and science that appeals broadly, is more accessible for most people, and still surging forward with few indications that its steady technical improvement is slowing. Even though new digital imaging products cannot break the iron laws of physics, increasingly clever electronics now produce technically superior results, sidestepping former limitations. Even though camera makers don't seem to turn much profit, each quarter brings new and better products.

While out of state a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to see a number of vintage prints made by Ansel Adams and other famous master photographers. It was evident that, judged solely on final printed image quality, digital photography is a superior technology, capable of readily producing reliably higher quality results, even when printed very large.

Used carefully with good lenses, even midlevel digital cameras using Micro Four-Thirds, APS-C and full-frame sensors have the potential to produce higher quality images than formerly made with bulky film cameras. Compared with larger format film cameras used by now-famed masters, careful digital imaging shows better controllability, higher sharpness, reduced graininess and better dynamic and tonal range. Oh, and you can have color images with no greater difficulty, and image stabilization enables quality handheld photography even in dim light.

So, if you bemoan the passing of easily scratched silver films processed with toxic chemicals in the dark, producing potentially uncertain results, then you'll bemoan without me, and I've processed film for more than 40 years.

So, as this column rides off into an oversaturated digital sunset, I'd like to reflect on a few broad, enduring fundamentals:

Computing technology

- Make your choice of computing hardware and operating systems based on what's needed to run the best software for your particular needs. There is no single solution that's right for every person and every need.
- Always prefer open data formats that do not become obsolete and that can be migrated periodically to newer programs and computing hardware.
- Internet-based cloud computing may become a good choice in the foreseeable future but it's not yet a mature technology. It's currently limited by security concerns, usage fees, long-term vendor reliability and restricted bandwidth and data storage.
- Smartphones can be handy and fun but are not yet suitable for serious business and professional use, particularly when you may need later documentation for legal or business reasons.
- Back up your data frequently, make full backups every time (not unreliable, "incremental" backups) and store those data backup devices off premises. A backup does you no good if it's destroyed by the same property casualty that destroys your primary computing equipment.
- Due to bandwidth and cost limitations, Internet-based backup is suitable only for backing up relatively small amounts of data. External hard disks attached to your computer through a hard disk dock remain the fastest, least-expensive and best way to back up your data, whether years of photographs or critical business and professional data.

Digital photography

- Virtually every large-sensor digital camera made since 2013 is capable of producing professional-quality results when used carefully.
- Rather than constantly buying the latest gear, it's far more useful, and less expensive, to learn the fundamental principles of photography and how to deal with the strengths and weaknesses of your existing camera.
- Sixteen-megapixel resolution is adequate for nearly all foreseeable needs, even very large prints. It's far more than you'll ever use for posting online.
- Digital SLR cameras require regular focus calibration and adjustment for optimum results.
- Cameras, color monitors and printers should be calibrated together as a single, start-to-finish system to ensure accurate, vibrant color images, more reliable results and reduced materials waste.
- Saving images files in a RAW format provides the best audit trail, greatest versatility and the ability to salvage many incorrectly exposed images. If desired, set your camera to save both a JPEG image for immediate use and also a RAW file for later use.
- Wherever possible, use a nondestructive post-processing program that works directly with RAW format files, such as Adobe Lightroom, rather than an editing program like Photoshop that requires irreversible conversion of original RAW image files to older, "baked-in" formats like TIFF or JPEG. I prefer Lightroom for general use and DXO Elite 10 when I need to salvage an image file.
- Upgrading your RAW imaging-processing program is often equivalent to upgrading older camera bodies and mediocre lenses.
- Camera shake, slight blurring caused by subject motion, subtly off autofocus and failure to manually compensate exposure for nonstandard light conditions are the most common causes of disappointing photos, more so than deficient gear.
- Rather than constantly upgrading to the newest, higher-megapixel camera body, invest in the best interchangeable lenses you can afford. They'll be useful for decades.

- Control depth of focus by using a wide lens aperture when you want to emphasize your subject by blurring out the background, and a smaller aperture when you need more depth of focus.
- Most lenses work best at midrange apertures. Good, single-magnification “prime” lenses are usually sharper and smaller than equivalent zoom lenses.
- Effective image-stabilization hardware helps a great deal under dim light, but don’t forget a good tripod, the best and least expensive image-stabilization hardware of all.
- Use the lowest ISO setting that allows a fast-enough shutter speed and the best lens aperture for the situation. If you’re saving files in RAW formats and you’ve got a large-sensor camera that’s not more than three or four years old, don’t be afraid to increase ISO to 1,600 or 3,200 when needed.
- Digital photography is the most feasible route to personal creativity for most people, but its very ease tends to encourage clichés and copying the work of others, rather than finding what’s individually unique and true for yourself. We’ve discussed some salient points in our three prior February 2016 issues, online at <http://www.redoubtreporter.wordpress.com>.
- Have a few general projects and possible exhibits in mind and make images that may fit a possible later exhibit theme.
- For a good overview of photography as art since its invention 177 years ago, there’s no better resource than the readily available “The Photo Book” by Phaidon Press.

So that’s it. Time to ride off into the Technicolor digital sunset despite the faint calls of, “Shane! Come back!” But again, who knows what the future holds?

Local attorney Joe Kashi received degrees from MIT and his law degree from Georgetown University. He has published articles about computer technology, law practice and digital photography in national media since 1990. Many of his articles can be accessed through his website, <http://www.kashilaw.com>.