



# **Creative Ways to Enrich Your Life With Photos**

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*Modern Digital Scrapbooking, Beautifully Simple*

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by Nan Scott

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## Introduction

It's common knowledge that, when homes are threatened by fire or flood, photos are the first material possession that people rush to save. Their value is undeniable ... but do we take full advantage of their positive potential in our everyday lives?

I have a firm belief in the power of personal photographs to improve and to even change lives. My life has been enriched because 16 years ago, I began to very consciously use photography to strengthen my family identity (the whole story can be found on my website). Over the years, my experience as a graphic designer has reinforced to me the power of visual imagery as a force for lifting the spirit.

The next few pages will present some philosophy and practical ideas that will start you thinking about ways you can increase the impact of photos in your life. They include space for you to jot down your own impressions and ideas as you read.

I sincerely hope your life will be richer for what you learn!

## Believe in the Power of Imagery

I know it sounds strange, but merely becoming AWARE of what photographs can mean in your life is a start.

Research has shown that when a person is hooked to electrodes measuring automatic responses to stimuli, and is then shown images of intense emotion, their bodies react involuntarily. If they're shown violence, their "flight or fight" instincts kick in; if they see serenity, their pulse and breathing slows. We respond emotionally to visual stimulus, whether in beautiful art, disturbing news images, or a photograph of nature's magnificence.

I believe that we respond with even more emotion if the images we see stimulate our personal memories or portray people we care for.

We might be indifferent toward a photo of a one-year-old smearing cake on their face during their birthday party. But if it is our daughter, now in high school and frequently demonstrating a rebellious attitude, we feel wistful and remember the happiness of that day ... in fact, we actually FEEL the happiness of that moment. And that teenager, even if she doesn't remember the

moment, feels a little something as she sees mom and dad (so annoying in the present) beaming in proud amusement as they watch her.

To increase the impact of personal photography on your life, first appreciate its power. Yes, it's a small part of your life, but like so many small things, its meaning over time can be significant.

### *Be a Personal Photojournalist*

Your stories are worth telling. You don't need to be on the cover of People magazine to have value; you have value by your very presence on earth. And the events of your life are every bit as extraordinary as any celebrity's. Don't let the media that surrounds us convince you that if you're walking into Chuck E Cheese instead of down the red carpet, your life is not interesting enough to warrant photos and stories. It is! Be the paparazzi of your own life. You're fascinating!

Since photographers probably aren't trailing you, it will be up to you to take the photos and tell your stories. Don't wait for someone else to tell it. Step up to the plate ... your family and friends will thank you, and so will future generations. That means you probably need to take more photos ... of more events ... than you already do.

Many of us are hesitant to bring out the camera during large or small moments because we fear we'll hear the groans of family and friends who will be forced to interrupt the moment to pose (again!). But if you become adept at shooting candid photos, and don't intrude on the event, people will pretty much forget you're there (just ask participants on reality shows).

And if you think you need to bring the group together to pose them—so be it. Just be quick about it.

It doesn't hurt to develop a thick skin if people are a bit resistant as you take more photos. They'll forget over time that they found you a little annoying, and they'll love to look at those images in the years to come.

### *Know That No Moment is Ordinary*

It is expected that your camera will make appearances at major occasions. But much of the fabric of your life is woven from small moments that—in retrospect—aren't small at all.

A wonderful play called "Our Town" features characters that are able to relive an ordinary day after passing from this life. As they watch, they feel acutely the beauty and fragility of the moment they did not realize at the time.

How much richer our lives would be if we realized our ordinary moments are significant, as well as the major events.

We'd be more likely to bring out the camera and take a few quick shots. And those photos, as much or more than those of the big productions, would be infinitely meaningful.

As well as capturing moments in time, think about taking photos for pages that will express "you"-ness. Your opinions. Your idiosyncrasies. Your favorites. These pages can be a blast to make and a delight to look at in the future.

Take a moment and think about these questions:

Every day, I  
Every week, I  
Every month, I  
My car  
My pets  
Where I love to shop  
The friends I talk to most  
My favorite outfit  
A typical Saturday  
My favorite meal  
My favorite way to relax

It's fun to write about, isn't it? And even more fun to photograph AND write about. And there will be even more rewards in the future, as you see how much you change over time. So have fun now, and later, too.

*Carry Your Camera—Everywhere!*

Yes, that's an exclamation point. I've been accused of using them too often in my writing (you should see my emails) but this tip truly deserves it. It dovetails with previous topic; don't think you

only need to carry your camera to birthday parties and graduations.

It goes without saying that if you get in the habit of carrying your camera, you'll never have to say "Dang it! I forgot my camera!" as you realize that in the rush of leaving for an event, you forgot it.

The other benefit of carrying a camera is that you will become more and more aware of photo opportunities and knowing what a good shot might be. It is a cause and effect that has a great benefit: your camera will make you more aware of photo ops, and noticing photo ops will be incentive to always carry your camera.

You may think that the camera on your cell phone is a good substitute, but most don't have great resolution for printing. However, a cell phone photo is better than none at all. In the very least, learn how to use your phone's camera feature AND how to download them to your computer!

While we're talking about photography, it goes without saying that a great investment of your time would be learning more about photography techniques. You don't have to take a college course; just check a book out of the library (I'm a big fan of "dummies" books for basic information presented in a lively, conversational way). Even my Quick Tip #7 has a few ideas for improving your photos.

Unless you are a professional photographer, your spontaneous great photo ops will not necessarily be moments of unusual beauty or graphic composition, but moments of emotional significance. Carrying a camera increases your subconscious awareness of the beauty of passing moments. And that's a good thing.

### *Take a Lot, Toss a Lot*

No one (as far as I know) ever lamented that they took TOO MANY photos of an event. On the contrary, we often look at the photos of a particular day and wonder "Where is the picture of Heather? I know she was there!" or "They should have taken a picture when the cousins were dancing!"

The lesson is, we may not know what memories will stand out, in the moment they occur. Don't hesitate to make sure you get at least one shot of everyone who was there, and shots from the beginning, middle, and end of the event.

Even photos BEFORE and AFTER the event (as in dressing for the prom, or cleaning up balloons after a party) contribute greatly toward telling the whole story. Don't leave them out.

With digital photos, it doesn't cost any more to take 20 photos than 2. When you download them, you can quickly discard truly unusable photos (blurry or dark) and separate them into "Use" and "Don't Use." Only your best photos go into "Use" for printing or sharing, but don't discard "Don't Use." You may someday revisit them (or your children will) and find there is some significance over time.

And don't forget to keep a photo inventory, even if it's just jotted down, separate from your digital files, so you can quickly find photos of an event as you create a scrapbook page or blog entry. (I happen to have inventory sheets in Quick Tip U, Quick Tip # 4).

If no moment is ordinary, no photo is either. If it captures any detail of a moment in time, it is valuable. Don't worry about taking too many.

### *Carry a Notebook and Use It*

I recently heard a poignant quote from journalist Anna Quindlen. "There is one picture of [my three children] sitting in the grass on a quilt in the shadow of the swing set on a summer day, ages six, four, and one. And I wish I could remember what we ate, and what we talked about, and how they sounded, and how they looked when they slept that night ..." (Loud and Clear [2004], 10–11)

There really is no way to preserve perfectly every moment. Even photos fall short of portraying life. Videos come closer, I guess, but we're limited by how inaccessible they can be once they're shot. And even videos don't answer the question of how you felt during the moment.

The answer, of course, is to supplement your photos with writing. Thoughts are transitory and only words can preserve them. The same goes for the details that may not be apparent in photos, which might include the context, names of people we are only acquainted with or places we don't frequent (such as the name of another mom on the baseball). A great detail to include in

your notes is “overheard conversations” from the event, which make you laugh (or think) at the time but are quickly forgotten.

The textural details that might not be visible—sounds and smells, for example, provide rich detail to journaling.

Most importantly, a quick sentence or two about how you felt—or others, if you know—become poignant with time. Why was the event significant? What emotions did you feel?

However you end up using your notes—whether in a blog, as journaling on a scrapbook page, or part of a journal or diary—your written words are irreplaceable. Don't lose the context and emotion!

And, you can treat yourself to wonderful decorated notebooks rather than just the plain spiral-bound. Urban Outfitters has cool, contemporary ones.

### *Display Photos in Your Home*

When realtors stage a house, one of the first things they recommend to sellers is to remove all family photos from shelves and walls. Potential buyers can be “scared off” by highly personal images and can have difficulty picturing themselves in the home. Obviously, photos displayed in a home are very personal and powerful.

I believe wholeheartedly in Benjamin Franklin's statement that “First we shape our interiors, then our interiors shape us.” I love creating a home environment that is peaceful, stimulating, and personal. And bringing in the element of personal photographs adds a depth that nothing else can.

And for children, seeing photos of themselves in their home makes them feel valued, as well as offering the benefit of reliving the joy of happy moments.

I have some beliefs about the use of personal photos in a home that may conflict with what you already do. Please go with whatever you feel good about. But I offer these suggestions for those of you who are hesitant to display photos into your home, either because you are afraid of being tacky, you feel you just don't have good enough photos to display, or you don't know where to start.

Here are a few commonly-asked questions I've encountered as I've helped friends decorate. Just remember, if you already do things differently and are happy with the results, awesome! These are just ideas that have worked for me.

Which rooms are appropriate in which to display photos? Some would say only personal areas such as bedrooms, or maybe family rooms. I say, all of them. You just need to be more judicious about the more public, formal areas; be more conscious about making sure the frames and scale of photos are less obtrusive and/or more formal.

When is it appropriate to use color vs. black and white? Remember that a black and white photo lends emphasis to the subject, texture and composition of the photo. With color, the color often IS the message. Black and white photos will always look less obtrusive in an interior.

Can I use multiple photos together? By all means! But it is best to unite groups by theme, such as

Frame color

Mat color

Subject

Size

Do I always need to use a mat? Generally speaking, yes, except for snapshots displayed in frames on shelves. Mats give visual "breathing space" and allow your eye to focus fully on the subject.

One great thing about digital photography is that you can now create inexpensively "matted" photos simply by creating a document in the full size of the frame, using a background color or pattern, then placing a photo in the desired size in the center.

Should I hang only professional portraits? No. Professional portraits CAN BE wonderful, although some are stilted. Try to use your own snapshots, enlarged, converted to black and white, and creatively cropped (cropped so the background is largely eliminated).

How do I hang groups of photos on the wall? Here are a few tips from someone who's learned, after making far too many nail holes!

\* The rule of threes: remember photos look best when hung in odd numbers. OR, make a grid of

any number by making evenly spaced rows.

\* Even margins between frames usually look more relaxed.

\* Don't hang a single photo (or any other artwork) higher than eye level. Groupings may break this rule, but make sure the visual weight of the group is eye level.

\* To design a wall gallery, take your frames and trace around them onto kraft paper (or packaging paper) to make same-size placeholders. Use plasti-tak (the gummy stuff that hangs posters) or blue painter's tape to hang the paper templates on the wall. When you like the arrangement, make a small pencil mark at the top corners.

You can then hammer a nail directly through the paper in the correct spot, after taking stock the hanging apparatus on the back of the frame,

OR use my absolute favorite hanging tool (drumroll): 3M Command Strips.

These amazing little wonders come in different strengths for different weights of frames, and the package will show you where and how to apply them. You can remove the frame from the wall and reposition it slightly to make the frame level; best of all, you can remove the strip altogether when you need to, without any damage to the wall. Great for apartment dwellers.

Can I use my snapshots to decorate? Absolutely. Some of the most wonderful moments are captured in less-than-perfect photos. To get the most bang for your buck from snapshots, keep them small (4 X 6 or 5 X 7) and cluster them on table tops, window sills, and bookshelves.

Where can I find inexpensive frames and mats? Custom frames and mats are incredibly expensive. Craft stores often carry unfinished frames and cans of matte finish spray paint. I've created gallery frames with black and white frames that look stunning. Create "custom mats" digitally (see previous comment).

For beautiful examples of how to incorporate photos into interior design, I often go to pottery-barn.com for inspiration.

### *Create Meaningful Printed Albums*

Are paper-based photo albums a thing of the past?

Some tech-savvy people would say “yes.” With the amazing variety of ways to shoot digital photos, perform post-processing with Photoshop, and share online with friends and family (through email, sharing sites or blogs), why create paper-based albums? Won't digital creation and storage, and online sharing, work just as well as old fashioned ways of sharing photos—and won't they do it more quickly, with less environmental impact?

Yes, people love to see the images you send online and will feel joy as they share in your moments ...

Yes, they enjoy reading your notes or blog entries, to get the full story of those moments ...

Yes, online storage of your photos is likely to be very safe well into the future ...

But there are overriding reasons to still create printed albums even as you take advantage of digital creation and online sharing, all based on the overriding desire to enrich your life by increasing the positive impact of your photos.

Why do I believe this? It all comes down two things: comfort and sociability.

The comfort factor. As much as I love my laptop, I've never curled up with it in front of a fire. I have swung in the hammock with it, but it would have been hard to do with a toddler on my lap. I have looked at loved one's images online but frankly, I seldom go back in time to posts from over a year ago.

Years ago, when ebooks first appeared, there were some who felt the days of the printed book were numbered. Why go to a bookstore and spend money for paper when you could download it with the click of a mouse and read it on a screen? Not to mention the ecological impact of paper production ... Well, printed book sales of \$25 billion (yes, that's a b!) in 2007 show that prediction was anything but accurate. Why?

Again, I submit it is the comfort factor. Books are portable. They're reliable. They're easy on the eyes. Instinctually, I believe that it is just more comfortable to read a book, so that's what we

do—particularly when reading for pleasure (I'm confident that the amount of online information dissemination surpasses print for purely business purposes).

Likewise, when we look at personal photos (which is purely for pleasure), we're likely to choose comfort when given the option. Owning printed albums dramatically increases the positive impact your photos will have, because family members will actually take the time to view them!

The sociability factor. For years, our children have enjoyed getting out the albums and reminiscing with each other, or with me. Not all the time, but at least a few times a year, and some kids more than others. When new boy/girlfriends are introduced to the family, my children still pull out the albums and share them. When my middle schooler gets out the albums, he ALWAYS wants company!

And now, my grandchildren love to sit with me and learn about at their parents at their age. It's tremendously entertaining, and provides the opportunity to just chat; there is just something wonderful about sitting comfortably beside someone you love, turning pages, and talking ... something that sitting upright in front of a computer screen, alone, can't equal.

Digital album creation. That being said, I am 100% in favor of taking advantage of technology to create those paper albums.

I do respect TREMENDOUSLY the artistic talents of people who handcraft album pages. Scrapbooking is a multi-billion dollar industry in the US alone; most of it is from sales of paper, albums and embellishments for the hobbyist, who can spend hours on a fantastic page that frames a photo and gives it a context. I also am blown away by the etsy.com hand crafters and the modern, totally contemporary artwork and objects they create with paper.

But as a graphic designer, and an extremely busy person, I love the fact that programs like Photoshop Elements allows me to create wonderful pages FAST, print them (as many copies as I like), and share them online. Granted, the pages don't feature the intriguing textures of hand-made papers and creative 3-D embellishments, but as someone who prefers modern design, those things are less important than sheer speed and ease of creation.

My recommendation? Learn how to quickly create digital pages; share those pages online; and print them for albums your family can access easily.

### Give Great Gifts

What are the most meaningful gifts? While all gifts are appreciated, the ones that bring the most joy are the ones that let the recipient know they're valued. Gifts that include photographs usually fit the bill!

Many of us give parents and grandparents school pictures or sports pictures. Or, we send photo greeting cards for holidays. But there are many different gifts of photos that can bring tremendous joy—both in the moment they're opened and well into the future. Here are some ideas:

\*Yearly scrapbooks. Grandparents probably have plenty of lotions and fruit baskets. They would probably love an album showing the activities of the year. The beauty of digital scrapbooking is that you can just print extra sheets of your own pages and give them the whole set, or just the ones you think are most meaningful to them.

Or, you can create an album that just has one double-page spread for each month ... or each season. You can make copies for both sets of in-laws, if you like. You could give them new albums each year, or just start the tradition with the gift of a fairly large album and insert new pages annually. My sister-in-law began this custom years ago and now has six beautiful albums prominently displayed on a coffee table. They're inviting to guests and fun for family to peruse.

\*Memory books. If you spent time with a loved one through the year (for example, you visited for a week in the summer, or took a vacation with them), put together a small remembrance book that combines journaling on the event with your photos. An 8X8 album is perfect.

\*Tribute Album. Birthdays, Father's Days, golden anniversaries etc. are wonderful times for this gift, which takes a bit of doing but is incredibly thoughtful. Several weeks before you want to give the album, contact family and friends and ask for their photos and written remembrances of the person. Compile these into digital pages and put into a beautiful album. Present it at the event.

\*Signing mat and photo. You probably know that signing mats have become extremely popular at weddings. But why limit this to weddings? Signing mat photos make wonderful gifts. It's a breeze to create an inexpensive "matted" photo by dropping 4 X 4 square image in the center of a 12 X 12 digital page, using any light color or light, low-contrast pattern for the background. Have it printed, then bring the page and some Sharpies and let the guests sign the background.

Be sure to bring a coordinating 12 X 12 frame so the guest of honor can take it home and display it proudly. Or, they can become pages to insert in their Tribute Album.

We did this for my daughter's baby shower, using a pregnancy picture and asking everyone to jot down their advice to the new mom on the "mat." We painted a frame in a coordinating color and even added "Welcome Caddison" in white vinyl letters on the frame. It's hanging in the baby's room right now, but when it's no longer hung, it becomes a memorable scrapbook page.

\* Framed photos. Make it easy for a loved one to use your gift by framing the photo to fit their décor, rather than just giving them a print.

### *Give the Kid a Camera*

Giving a child a box of crayons and a blank tablet opens a world of creativity for them; so does giving them a camera. It goes without saying that their lives will be enriched by this magical hobby. So will yours, as you gain more insight into what your child thinks is important and beautiful, and as you use their photographs in a variety of ways.

There are many reasons why photography is a great hobby for kids of all ages:

- \* It encourages artistic expression.
- \* It teaches them responsibility for their possessions.
- \* It leads to other creative projects.
- \* It helps them understand technology.
- \* It shares their world with those around them.
- \* It allows them a fresh perspective on the everyday in their lives.
- \* It leaves a lasting history of the child's personality and perspective for the future.
- \* It allows a child to participate in recording family history.

\* It helps their self image by feeling trusted with an adult hobby.

Naturally, I recommend digital photography. Although there are still film-based kids' cameras out there, I can't think of a reason to not go digital, especially because kids can snap away without wasting film. And I was surprised at how (almost universally) bad film-based photo quality was rated in customer reviews.

When can kids begin taking pictures? If your child only wants to PRETEND to take photos, there are toys out there with wonderful bells and whistles! But many parents of two- and three-year-olds report that their child joyfully snaps photo after photo, completely understanding the concept of what they are doing, and loving the (often blurry) results.

Toddlers and preschoolers, of course, are probably not ready for the responsibility of a camera that can't be dropped over and over, but some of the heavy-duty kids' cameras can withstand just that. You'll sacrifice picture quality, of course, but for the little ones the joy is often in the snapping. It looks like the photo quality is similar to that of camera phones; probably good enough for the little ones to feel a sense of accomplishment.

These kid-friendly cameras may be worth considering:

VTech Kidizoom Digital Camera

Fisher-Price Tough Kids Digital Camera

Little Tykes My Real Digital Camera

Sesame Street Real Digital Camera

As kids get into the elementary school years, they may long for the kids' cameras emblazoned with Hannah Montana or Spiderman. But beware! At that age they will also actually care that their photos look decent. And from the reviews I've read, some of the highly decorated cameras have extremely poor quality LCD screens AND very poor images, even when viewed on the computer (let alone printed).

As well as the character-based cameras for the six to 10 age group, there are some cameras that look more like the adult versions, but are a bit less expensive and are specifically designed for kids. However, reading reviews for these cameras showed that they may not stand up to the normal handling of kids this young, and the photo quality is decent but far below adult camera standards (similar to a low-res camera phone).

Some parents, when their kids reach the age of a genuine interest in photography, allow them to use the family's point-and-shoot cameras under certain conditions; for example, the strap must be secured around the child's wrist, and they can only use it only with the parent present. The caveat would be that if your child has an accident with the camera (drops it in the sand, for example), would it be a major family disaster? If yes, it might be best not to risk it! Relationships are more important than a 10 ounce piece of metal and plastic.

As families get new digital cameras, many parents give their children the old ones. This is what we've done in our family. Or, you may want to make the investment of a new camera as a gift. Some of the sturdy, less expensive point-and-shoot alternatives for the 10 to 13 age group might be

FinePix F700

Sony Cyber Shot DSC-S600

Samsung S850

Kodak EasyShare C533

Now that they're using more expensive equipment, you can guard against potential problems by

- \* Including a sturdy, padded case with the gift. The case can include room for the cords, docks, batteries, chargers, etc. as needed.
- \* Making sure the child has a specific place the camera is stored, so they don't have to search a messy bedroom when they need it.
- \* Reviewing the owner's manual with your child, making sure you both understand how to operate it.

Your kids will have a blast taking photos of their world. How can you use their photography to enrich their lives, and yours?

- \* Let them create their own scrapbook. Adobe Photoshop Elements is user friendly for most middle schoolers. Teach them the basics and let them create their own 8 1/2 X 11 pages so they can print pages on your home printer and put them in three-ring binders with page protectors.

\* Create a scrapbook just for their photos. You can easily use their photos on any size Clean Sheet layout. Remember that “kids cameras” are sometimes low-res so you’ll want to avoid large photos. Let them tell the stories of their photos in their own words, and type them up as journaling.

\* Share their photos with friends and family. Post them on your sharing site and people will get a kick out of their unique perspective!

\* Create an “artistic” collage for framing. Digitally create a 9-photo, 12 X 12 page (three rows of three small, square photos) to showcase your little one’s photos. Converting them all to black & white will make them look artsy and interesting!

\* Store the digital files in a safe place. You need to be the one responsible for keeping the digital files safe and accessible. Your teenager will love looking at photos they took at age four; will you be able to find them?

The best benefit of teaching a child to take photos will be to instill a lifelong love of photography, a sense of accomplishment, and the desire to tell their own stories.

And if that’s not enriching, what is?