



Dan Naumovich: Grit your teeth and say 'Cheese'

*Sunday, December 23, 2007*

The word painstaking often is applied to the process that filmmakers undertake when bringing their vision to life. With all due respect to the likes of George Lucas, they have no idea what painstaking is until they've tried to get my four kids to pose for a Christmas card picture.

I seriously doubt that Lucas ever had to admonish Harrison Ford for putting Mark Hamill in a headlock while the cameras were rolling. Yet that is one of the many outbursts and shenanigans that my wife and I had to endure while trying to capture on film the peaceful nature of our children during this season of goodwill.

Let me say that I love Christmas cards, especially those sent by family and friends with children. I look at all of the happy faces and think, "Wow, I wonder what level of hell they had to go through to get that shot."

My wife and I thought we'd make it easy on ourselves this year by including just the kids in the picture. In past years, after the 50th take or so, it was difficult to mask our frustration beneath a veneer of fake holiday cheer — we thought it best to stay behind the scenes.

Over a three-week period we organized countless photo sessions, breaking many child labor laws in the process. We shot indoors and outdoors. We posed the kids on the carousel at the mall. On two different days we went to the Festival of Trees, hoping that the splendor of a hundred Christmas trees would capture our children's imaginations and compel them, for one split second, to all look into the camera and smile at the same time. They never did.

Not that my kids are particularly difficult, mind you. Nobody was demanding to be shot from a certain angle or complaining about the lighting, although Tessie did dish out some diva-like attitude one day when she insisted on wearing black while the other three were coordinated in browns. I won't be surprised if she shows up to next year's photo shoot with her publicist in tow.

Despite the wardrobe uproar, the two girls generally were compliant and well-smiled. The boys, on the other hand, were boys.

Newton's law of photographing children states that a boy in motion will remain in motion unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. The force in this equation is the threats and bribes we offer to induce stillness. Unbalanced describes our mental state after each of these attempts fails to halt their perpetual motion. Nice law, Newton.

Two years ago, after many failed attempts at a group picture, I Photoshopped four separate

headshots into a window-pane design. Each child was smiling and content. My wife, however, thought it looked bad that the only way our four kids could be composed in one picture was through the magic of digital enhancement. So we forged ahead.

I returned home from work a couple of weeks back to find the kids in their Midnight Mass finery. A decree had been issued: there would be no dinner until we got the shot we were after. At some point, as the shutter flickered away, the fates smiled upon us and all four stopped fidgeting and smiled in unison. It was too quick for the human eye to see, but the camera captured the nano-moment and we all were allowed to eat again.

It's easy to blame the kids for this seasonal stress, but really, we bring it on ourselves. If we'd ditch the pretense that our lives are the stuff of Currier and Ives, we'd probably get the perfect shot in just a few takes. There might be tongues hanging out and wrestling holds being administered, but that's what Christmas looks like in our house.

*Dan Naumovich can be reached at [dan@naumo.com](mailto:dan@naumo.com). Rejected Christmas card pictures can be viewed at <http://blogfreespringfield.com>.*

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