

FOCUS YOUR VISION

WITH DEWITT JONES

 TRANSCRIPT 

INTRODUCTION

I'm Dewitt Jones.

I've spent my life as a photographer with National Geographic.

I've seen hundreds of extraordinary landscapes, experienced different cultures, lived among fascinating people.

When I'd get a new assignment, the Geographic would simply say, "Dewitt, we want you to do a story on Madagascar. It's that way!" and send me out. Send me out alone to find the story and come back with the photographs that would fit in that little yellow book.

It wasn't always easy. I struggled with assignments, ran into problems, but in doing so, I learned a great deal about perspective and balance, about intuition and courage. About vision. About focus. And about myself.

Powerful visions.

Extraordinary visions.

Focused visions.

I made a lot of them for the Geographic.

And I've learned that when you're creating a vision, whether it's a photograph or a vision for your company or for your life, focus is always the key. Because without it, vision has no direction, no power.

Let me show you what I mean.

KEEP YOUR VISION FOCUSED

This is a ceremonial Indian kiva in the San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico. I show it to you not because it's a great photograph, but because it's an excellent metaphor of what my life looks like when it's out of focus.

Out of focus, you say? The picture looks O.K. to me. Well, on the surface, perhaps, but something deep inside is missing.

I mean, what's this picture really about? Is it the stairs in the foreground? Or the "Keep Off" sign? Or the kiva ladder coming out of the top? Or the people on the left?

The surface is sharp, but the vision is fuzzy. And as a result, the photograph has no power!

When I looked through the lens that morning, I thought, "Come on, Dewitt, what's the real vision of this photograph? What's its purpose?"

And I realized it was the ladder coming out of the top of the kiva that really had drawn my eye to the scene in the first place. And when I focused that vision, the picture got a lot simpler, a lot clearer, and a lot stronger.

That always happens when we can focus, when we can get a clear picture of what we're trying to do, and a clear understanding of how we're going to do it.

Whenever I can do that, my pictures become simple and powerful and strong.

Focus is the key.

STOP, LOOK, & LISTEN

So how do we find those clear, focused visions? The ones that help us solve our everyday problems or the ones that set the direction for our lives; the ones in alignment with our passion and our values.

When I show up in a new location, I never just start shooting. Great visions don't usually leap up to greet you. The first thing I do is stop, and listen, and look.

I need to slow down, to open up, to really experience and then understand what's around me.

Like sitting beside this stream, not just for a few minutes, but maybe for a whole day. Slowing down and taking it all in.

Amazing what you see when you slow down enough to really listen and look.

There's no use moving ahead until you have an idea of where you're going. There's no use pushing the shutter until you have a vision. And the vision simply won't come into focus if you're moving too fast.

HOLD ON TO THE BEST, LET THE REST FALL AWAY

As we slow down and look and listen, we begin to get the first glimmerings of a vision. A spark, an idea. Then we have to bring it into focus.

I begin by using my intellect to find the right balance, the right composition. I ask my intellect to analyze the situation and to discern what's really important and what's not.

And then I focus the vision.

Keeping my eye on the best in the scene . . . using my intellect to enhance that, and then having the courage to let the rest fall away.

Let me show you another example. I once had to cover the Butter and Eggs Day Parade in a little town called Petaluma. So I'm out there and I see a veteran about to hand a flag to a little girl by the side of the road and I think, great shot!

And I'm a professional, right, so I'm going to grab it. So I grab my telephoto lens and I ran over there and I missed it.

I missed it. Nobody's giving anything to anybody in this shot.

But it's a beginning. I'm closer to it, so I just keep trying, keep asking myself, "What's important? What's not?"

Did I get it?

No, I got E.T.'s hand over there on the right!

But I'm getting a clearer and clearer idea of just what the vision is.... of the balance, the composition I'm looking for. The hand, the flag, the moment. Hold on to the best and let the rest fall away.

I just keep trying again and again. Because the question isn't "How many times do you try?" The question is, "Did you get it?" "Did you get it?"

We all know how it feels when it comes into focus. It just goes, "Ka—Chung," and you've got it. And it's so beautiful. No matter what you're doing, and it feels so good.

TRUST YOUR INTUITION

Sometimes it's our intellect that guides us; that drives us to find that extraordinary vision.

Sometimes it's a part of ourselves that's much quieter, subtler. Our intuition.

Intuition. I don't care what you call it! The muse, the still, small voice within, it doesn't matter.

What does matter is that we learn to trust it.

Because so often, intuition can just cut through all the static and speak to us from the very core of our being and reveal spectacular visions that we never would have seen if we hadn't been paying attention.

I remember one time they sent me up to Alaska to follow in the footsteps of the conservationist, John Muir.

And I'd decided I wanted to photograph the glaciers of Glacier Bay. Gigantic rivers of ice. I'd done my research; I knew what I wanted.

I'd hired a pilot to fly me over the glaciers and I was standing out by the side of some nameless highway at 4:00 a.m. waiting for him to pick me up.

And I was there cold at 5:00. Frozen at 6:00, when I finally realized this guy was not coming.

And I was furious. I was furious because what I wanted to happen, it wasn't going to happen.

I couldn't even get my cameras out. I'm just standing there, my face all scrunched up.

And then this little voice inside said, "Look around, Dewitt." Huh? "Look around."

I looked around. I saw some Queen Anne's lace and some fireweed.

"Look around, Dewitt. Look at what's wanting to happen right here, right now."

And then I saw this picture. And this picture ran as a double-page spread in the magazine. One of the best shots in the article. And the pictures I finally took a week later of the glaciers? They never got out of the yellow boxes.

Trust your intuition. Because the more you trust it, the more you'll hear it. And the more it will help you focus your vision.

IT'S NOT TRESPASSING TO GO BEYOND YOUR OWN BOUNDARIES

If you want to find truly extraordinary visions, then you have to continually expand your horizons. You have to take risks.

Taking risks to find the best shot just seemed part of the job at the Geographic. But it's really part of all of our jobs. If we don't push the edge, we'll never expand our view.

Let me show you a wonderful example.

I was out in Zion, one of my favorite national parks, trying to get a shot of Weeping Rock Falls.

And I took this picture, nice picture, fine vision, but certainly not exceptional.

So I started walking closer to get a better shot. And I'm walking up the path, and like so many experiences in life, all of a sudden, I was surrounded by fences.

Guard rails. Guard rails! Telling me it would be dangerous to go beyond them. Telling me in no uncertain terms that this was the way to go.

You've heard it before: "This is how things are done around here." "We've always done things this way."

Well, the path led me up to a viewing platform that looked like a fortress and let me walk right to the end of the wall and then said, "You will go no further!"

There it was - the edge - it couldn't have been any more dramatic. "Follow the rules. Stay inside the lines! Don't go any further!"

And yet I looked out.

And I could see it, just beyond my grasp if I could just get a little further, if I could just get underneath the falls.

And I looked down at that edge and I said, "I'm out of here..."

And I was over it. Sliding and scrambling, hanging on, getting underneath the falls.

Was it worth it?

Oh, you bet it was!

Pushing out there. Changing the rules. Believing in myself. Taking risks.

They said I couldn't do it. What do you mean I couldn't? What were they going to do?

Hey, it's not trespassing to go beyond your own boundaries!

MAKE YOUR VISION BIG ENOUGH

I've been talking about a whole bunch of ways to focus our visions. Now I want to share with you something that may at first seem to contradict everything I've been saying:

The really big visions should never be focused too tightly.

The photographs I take on assignment; those are small visions, tactical visions. What the story is; what the whole assignment is about, that's a much larger vision, a strategic vision.

They'd send me out to do an assignment on France or Yellowstone. If I decided what the story was before I left, I'd be going out with blinders on. I'd never give nature room to work, to show me things I'd never dreamed of.

I remember an assignment on the ancient Anasazi Indians of the American Southwest. These were the cliff dwelling people of Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon, and Hovenweep. Their abandoned villages found by archeologists were in such good condition, that for years, the mystery was, "Where did the Anasazi go?"

Now that's a great, soft focused vision. I didn't have an answer to that question. Nor did I know, if I found an answer, how I would illustrate it. But the question set a direction for the story and allowed me to head off to New Mexico open and receptive.

As I did my research, I found that modern archeologists had recently uncovered the answer to the Anasazi's strange disappearance.

They discovered that during a great drought, the Anasazi had traveled southeast to the Pueblo tribes of the Rio Grande and had slowly been absorbed into their culture.

Well I visited those Pueblo villages. I knew the Anasazi had come here, but I could find no visual connection, no vision that would show me the lineage from a thousand years ago 'till today. My intellect kept trying to make an image appear but my intuition kept saying "It's okay, Dewitt. Just keep holding onto that big vision. Just keep asking that question and give nature time to work."

Then I heard about one ruin above the modern Santa Clara Pueblo that had been built in the time of the Anasazi.

I spent an afternoon in that ruin.

I saw a young boy walking there, I followed him back to where his family was working and suddenly, the vision that I had looked for for so long began to materialize before my eyes.

The ancient Anasazi ruin, the young boy leaning against the booth, Coca Cola in his hand, baseball cap on his head, Father's Chevy pick up in the background. There it was, the lineage of the Anasazi from the past to the present in one simple image; an image that I never would have seen if I'd focused my big vision, my strategic vision too tightly.

The really big visions in our lives should never be over focused. They set a direction, they describe an attitude, they define a set of values. But they must be big enough, loose enough to let the universe offer us a thousand ways to achieve them.

DO YOU HAVE JUICE IN YOUR CAMERA?

You know, if the visions of our lives are ever going to become a reality, we have to find the energy to manifest them. Where does that energy come from?

The answer I found was surprisingly simple and it wasn't shown to me by some great sage. I learned it from a five-year-old boy.

One summer, I was teaching a photographic seminar in British Columbia and I'd just sent all my students out in the woods to photograph. I'm getting my own gear ready, a big tripod, huge camera bag and I look up on the steps of the lodge where we're staying and there's this very intense kid.

He looks down at me, he says, "Do you have a camera?" I was festooned with cameras. I said, "Yeah."

And then I realized why he asked. Because he raised up his camera and he said, "I have a camera."

And it was a magic camera. It was yellow, it had a blue lens, it had a red eyepiece, it had a turquoise rewind knob with a little straw coming out of it.

And he said, "My name's Adam. Can I take pictures with you?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah. Come on."

So we went down in the woods and I set up my tripod, got my first shot. And then this kid was so cute, he squeezes in front of the tripod, pressed his little shoulders against it, raised his camera. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah."

"Great!"

I thought, "Well, that's cute, but I'm going to lose this kid after about five minutes."

Not this boy. Stayed right with me. Every time I'd set up my shot, there he'd be, squeezed in front of that tripod, raised camera. I'd never seen such perseverance, such determination, such focus.

And he stayed with me for a long time. Until I was setting up the last shot of the day and the light was beautiful and I had all my equipment piled on that tripod and Adam's just sitting next to me, watching. I got all of my gear, the very best that money can buy to translate my vision onto film, and man, I'm working it.

And Adam's watching and finally he raised his little face toward me and he said, "Does your camera have juice in it?" I said, "No."

He said, "Mine does!" Gave me this wonderful smile.

What a lesson! Does your camera have juice in it? Do you have passion? Passion, the energy that drives our technique. Passion, the power that allows us to manifest our visions.

Adam had it. Do you?

That energy, that force that lights up our lives.

Boy, I ask myself that question everyday and I think about Adam and his juice camera.

Do you have passion? Life demands that you do!

THE JOURNEY

When we understand how important our visions are, when we slow down enough to look deeply into ourselves or our business or our project, when we use both our intellect and our intuition to focus what we see.

And when we connect with that vision and, in doing so, release our passion.

Then we can truly see things in the right light.

We can bring our visions into focus. Look at a situation and quickly find its essence. And not only in a way where we see its value, but that others will as well.

And we can take our visions from good to great to truly extraordinary!

All of us are on the same great journey. A journey down a river we call life.

And on this journey, we are each our own boatman.

And if we're to run this river well, we must know our own boat.

Find a vision of who we are, what we stand for, and where we're going.

The way won't always be easy.

The river of life is fraught with turbulence.

Yet, no matter how rough the passage, if we can keep the vision clear, if we can hold the focus, if we can live in principle every moment of the journey, then we can make those visions a reality and live into our dreams.

It's your boat, it's your river, you're on it everyday.

It's an incredible journey we're on, in a world of immense possibilities.

So dream the dream, find an extraordinary vision, and keep it in focus.