

Celebrate What's Right With The World with Dewitt Jones

I'm Dewitt Jones. For 20 years I worked for National Geographic, photographing stories all over the globe. Creating extraordinary visions.

I learned a great deal from these visions— about society, about geography, about people.

But the vision that most changed my life was not photographic. It was an attitude, a perspective that exists at the core of the Geographic. A vision so simple yet so profound. A vision I'd like to share with you.

Celebrate What's Right with the World!

[TITLE] CELEBRATE WHAT'S RIGHT WITH THE WORLD WITH DEWITT JONES

We all have teachers in our lives, mentors that show us what's possible.

The National Geographic was one of those for me. Maybe it was for many of you. I use to read at night. Even after my parents told me to turn out the light and go to sleep, I wouldn't do it. I'd get a flashlight; I'd hide under the covers. I'd stay up and stare at those photos in that little yellow book. Pictures that showed me the possibilities the world had to offer.

I never thought I'd work for them. I never thought I'd shoot for them. They began to influence my life long before I even knew I was a photographer.

Why? Because they had a wonderful vision. What they charged me with every time they sent me out was to celebrate what was right with the world, rather than wallow in what was wrong with it.

That's why we keep them. We all do. I mean, it's a national sacrilege to throw away a Geographic. Because they celebrate what's right with the world. And nobody wants to throw that away.

When I was growing up, I used to hold that maxim I won't believe it, until I see it. Yet the more I shot for the Geographic, the more I realized that I had it backwards. That the way it really works is: I won't see it, till I believe it. That's the way life works.

Well, I believed it. I believed the vision of the Geographic and the more I did, the more I'd see it in everything.

They'd send me out to places I'd never been. I'd believe there would be beautiful landscapes to photograph. They'd appear.

I'd believe those landscapes would be full of wonderful people. They'd be there.

I'd begin every assignment, every day, every shot trying to celebrate what was right with the situation rather than what was wrong with it.

When I started, I had no idea how powerful that vision would be, how much it would change my life.

But vision controls our perception, and our perception becomes our reality.

Celebrating what's right with the world. It was a vision that had purpose and passion for everybody at the Geographic.

Do you have a vision like that? Not just for your organization, for yourself? A vision that you can put into six words. That every morning when you say those words you'd say: "Yes! That's why you're doing whatever it is you're doing."

Because when the vision is clear, then passion and creativity are there as well.

I know that. I know that because I lived it.

All of a sudden, I wasn't just looking at those pictures on the printed page. I was there. And what an incredible place there was.

From the highest mountains, to rivers drenched in sunlight, to rainbows in seashells. Everywhere I looked, there would be amazing beauty for me to photograph.

And in the Geographic's view, man was an integral part of that beauty. Not something separate. Just as beautiful, just as magical as anything else on the planet.

And when I celebrated the best in people, I could see that. I could see it:

In the faces of those at work, or the body language of those at play, those in their youth, or in their age.

Can you believe this guy? I thought this was going to be a good shot before he smiled.

I would see it. I would see that light that shines— not on us, but from within us. From within us when we trust enough to let it out.

It was the same light I'd seen in nature that didn't have to trust to expose itself but just graced us every day with the delicacy of a flower, or the fading light on Half Dome.

Yet the more I celebrated the beauty of the world, the more I found a conflict growing within me between the Geographic's paradigm and the world view that I'd been taught since I was a child. My intellectual paradigm.

You all know it. The law of the jungle. Eat or be eaten. My win is your loss. Second place is the first loser.

We live in that paradigm all the time. A world based on fear and scarcity and competition. It's true if you choose to believe it. But it wasn't what nature was showing me.

Nature was showing me incredible beauty standing just beyond the rat race saying "Hello, Hello..." Always there if I was open enough to see it.

I mean, come on. Nature never stood in front of a forest and said, "There is one great photograph hidden here. One photographer will find it and the rest of you will be hopeless losers."

Nature said, "How many rolls do you got, Dewitt? Bring it on. Bring it on. I'll fill them up. I'll fill them up with layers of beauty and possibility beyond anything you've ever imagined. Right down to my tiniest seed."

Do we choose to see those possibilities? Do we truly believe that they're there? Perception controls our reality and if we don't believe it, we won't see it.

I remember one time they sent me out to the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia. I came upon this great field of dandelions. But I just wasn't into it, and I started to say, "Well, the light isn't right, I'll come back tomorrow."

We've all been there. It happens all the time. At home, at work. "I just can't get into it. I'll do it tomorrow." And then tomorrow turns into next week and by the time I got back there ... no more dandelions.

I had puffballs. That wasn't the way I'd planned it.

And I was just about to leave when a little voice inside me said, “Come on, Dewitt, what’s here to celebrate? I know it wasn’t how you planned it, but what’s right with the situation? Where are the possibilities?”

Before I knew it I was into puffballs. Puffballs, puffballs! Over the puffballs, at eye level with the puffballs, under the puffballs, looking at them from every angle until ...whoa. Whoa. That’s what I found. It was there. It seemed it was always there if I was open enough to see it.

The more I shot for the Geographic, the more I realized what a powerful force our vision can be. As I celebrated what was right with the world, I began to build a vision of possibility, not scarcity. Possibility... always another right answer.

A vision that showed me that no matter how bleak and desolate, no matter how dry and devoid of possibilities the situation might seem, that if I was open to it, I could always find a perspective. In this case just by dropping down in that crack in the slick rock, and looking back. A perspective that would transform the ordinary ...into the extraordinary.

How open to possibility does our vision allow us to be? Open, really open. Even when we think we know what the answer will be.

I was shooting recently in Marine World and I had gotten the shots of the whales and dolphins. Heading back to the car, and I saw this kid standing in front of the dancing fountains. Dancing fountains, where the water comes out of one and goes out and goes into another and out and into the next one.

And this kid had his hand on the source! And he was ready and so was I. And he was waiting and so was I. And I knew what that answer would be. And I nailed it!

But, I’m not putting on the brakes; I’m not taking my eye off the viewfinder; I’m staying open. Because if I didn’t, if I thought this was it, I never would have seen... this one!

Celebrating What’s Right with the World. It not only keeps us open to possibilities, it gives us energy.

When I’m setting up a shot, I always begin by saying, “What’s exciting me? What’s here to celebrate? What’s the very best this shot has to offer?”

And then I try and enhance that and get rid of everything else.

Instead of starting out as we so often do by griping about what’s wrong with the situation, what’s right with it?

Because, by celebrating the best that allows us to fall in love with it. That connects us with our passion, that emancipates the energy.

By celebrating what’s right, we find the energy to fix what’s wrong.

As Michelangelo once wrote, “I saw an angel in the stone and carved to set it free.”

The right vision. It keeps us open to possibilities, it gives us energy, and it makes us much more accepting of change.

Change? Boy, as a photographer I’d pray for change. I’d get down on my knees and beg the weather or the wind or the light to do its thing. It was the status quo that would make my pictures boring and redundant.

In fact, I began to see that the very thing that so often frightens us today: that awesome change curve we hear so much about, the phenomenal rate of change in our society— is really my ally.

In fact, if I viewed it from just a slightly different perspective. It wasn’t a change curve at all. It was a possibility curve.

A possibility curve? Could I see it like that? I knew from my photography that it was true. Change is possibility. And the times of most change always hold the most potential.

So we live in an accelerating Possibility Curve.

Perhaps we can't control it, but we can learn to ride it like a surfer on a wave or a bird on a thermal.

To use its power to take us where we want to go.

To live in uncertainty, yet act with confidence.

Now that's something I could celebrate. And the more I did, the more I took all my skills and used them to ride that wave of possibility. The more I found in my photography and in my life that the difference between a good frame and a great frame is measured in millimeters not miles.

Good frame. A morning glory on the beach in Maui. Ten inches closer — Great frame.

Good frame. A cowboy at Bryce Canyon. Thirty feet away in the doorway of a barn — Great frame.

Good Frame. Sunset on the Golden Gate Bridge with the new moon rising. How could it get any better? Fifteen minutes later — Great frame.

When we believe it, we'll see it.

The power of vision is extraordinary. It transforms the way we look at the world. It can take us from flapping in the middle of the flock to soaring to heights we've never dreamed of. But we have to be willing to trust it, to come out to our edge.

Because it's here on the edge that we find the winds to take us higher.

And it's not just the external edges that we have to test; it's the internal ones as well. If we're going to really learn to soar, we have to know ourselves as well as we know our craft.

I realized that if I was going to take it higher in my own life, I had to spend time not just with what I do, but with who I am.

That's a lot harder; at least it was for me. Discovering who I was and being comfortable with it. A lot harder than taking a photograph.

And yet, I knew that was the move from good frame to great frame. That was the edge I'd have to press. That edge in each of our lives between success and significance. That subtle edge between being the best in the world and being the best for the world.

Not an easy shift. But every time that I'd lose faith that I might ever be able to make it, I'd meet someone who had and they'd serve as a beacon to show me it was possible.

I met such a person on Scotland's Outer Hebrides. Her name was Marion Campbell and she was the finest weaver in all of Scotland. She was a national treasure. She had been cited by the queen. And she lived in the tiny town of Plockrapool. And I had to photograph her.

And I went to her house and knocked on her door. She came out... lovely woman... and she said, "Can I help you?" And I said, "Yeah. I'm from National Geographic and I want to photograph you."

And she said, "Wait. My brother is very sick upstairs. He may be dying, and I'm taking care of him."

I felt like a complete idiot. I began to apologize, I backed off and she stopped me and said, "Wait, wait. Give me an hour and I'll be ready." And she closed the door.

And I wandered around the village thinking of the extraordinary presence of this woman. Why, when her brother was dying, would she give me time?

And then I heard the hand shuttle being thrown across her loom.

And I found her in her weaving shed lit only by the light of the window. And she showed me the yarn that she'd spun by hand. And she told me how she'd gone into the fields and scraped the lichens off the rock to make her dyes.

I was still nervous and embarrassed and I took a few quick photographs and I said, "Thank you, thank you. Fine, I've got it."

And I started to leave. And again she stopped me. She took me into her house. And she'd put out biscuits and she'd made tea. And she wouldn't eat till I had eaten.

And she invited me into her living room and she stoked the peat fire and we sat together. She talked quietly and simply and I kept thinking I was in the presence of a great sage. And I was waiting for some gift of wisdom.

And finally I said, "What do you think about when you weave?"

She said, "I wonder if I'll run out of thread."

It wasn't exactly what I thought I'd hear. She must have seen my discomfort because she smiled at me and she cocked her head and she said, "When I weave, I weave."

And in my own mind I heard, "When I weave, I weave; when I photograph, I photograph; when I serve, I serve; when I celebrate, I celebrate."

There's no use walking anywhere to preach, unless your walking is your preaching. And that evening, though her actions and her words, Marion Campbell showed me what it might be like to soar.

She was who she was. With discipline, with grace, with total lack of ego. She was a thermal rider. Not just the best in the world, but the best for the world.

Could I do that? Could I trust my own values and vision enough to step out beyond my own edge?

To find a new balance in my life. Not one of limitation, but one of possibility, not an either/or balance but a both/and balance between what I do and who I am.

A balance that would allow me to keep all of my intensity and focus and at the same time, not lose sight of those things that were really important in my life.

A balance that would allow me to take it all in 'till I was full to overflowing and then with gratitude, and with grace, to give it all back.

To be like the sunset that nature graces us with every evening. To put it all out there, to publish it in my life. The very best I had to offer without any regard to whether it was received or not. I know that whenever I can do this, wonderful things happen.

I photographed the Highland Games in Scotland for an advertising campaign for Dewar's Scotch.

And we were photographing these huge guys throwing these weights around, it was great fun but I couldn't get my eye off the guy with the coat. He was the judge.

And we shot some wonderful ads. But my intuition was just screaming at me to go meet this guy.

So when it was over, I went up to him and I said, "Have you ever done this before? You're bigger than all the rest of these guys."

And he said, "Aye, laddy, aye. I was the champion of Scotland for many years."

And I said, “Well, what do you do now ? “

And he said, “Well, I’m a farmer. I was a farmer then, I’m still a farmer now.”

And I said, “Well, can I come and visit you?”

And he said, “Well, I guess you could.”

So I dragged my whole crew down there the next day and..... Big Boy! And we found this weight that he hadn’t thrown in years. And we took him out in his front field.

Talk about being your own banquet. He was just lost in the very best that he had to offer. And so was I. I didn’t care if I was getting paid or shooting for Dewar’s. I was just falling in love through the lens. Celebrating what’s right with the world.

The art director took those pictures and turned them into this ad that said, “For 25 years Henry Gray won the cheers of the crowd in Scotland’s Highland Games and even now he likes to get out and throw his weight around in the privacy of his own backyard.”

This ad won all kinds of awards but I didn’t care. I got to meet Henry!

And a couple years later we were back in Scotland and near where Henry lived. And so we stopped and we went over to his house.

He showed us how he framed up the ad that we’d sent him.

He and his wife came out in the front yard and posed for pictures. And then he said, “Come here, laddy, I want to show you something.”

He turned that ad around and it was covered with signatures. And I said, “Henry, what’s this?”

And he said, “Well, laddy, you ran that ad all over the world and all of my relations in New Zealand and Australia and the U.S., they all saw it and they all called. And they said, ‘Henry, is that you?’ and I said, ‘Aye, it is me.’ And they said, ‘Well, we think we better come back and check on you.’”

And so because of that ad, they had the first Gray Clan reunion in more than 200 years!

You never know where it’s going to go when you publish it in your life. When you give it all back. You just have to do it and believe.

Incredible things happen when we’re open to possibilities

Because the world is an astounding place. I first saw that on the pages of the Geographic when I was a kid.

We can see it now, everyday, if we’re open enough to it. If we hold a vision that fills us with energy, takes us to our own edge and gives us the courage to soar.

That allows us, to Celebrate What’s Right with the World