I’m Dewitt Jones. I’ve spent my life wandering the globe as a photojournalist photographing stories for National Geographic. I’ve seen some incredible sights. And I’ve learned that amazing things are out there for all of us to see everyday- no matter what we are doing. Whether we see them or not depends on our perspective, our point of view. In short, on our ability to be creative.

We all have that ability. How do we access it? How do we bring it out? Everyday. In everything we do.

What is creativity? Well, having spent my life in one creative endeavor after another, I can tell you it’s not something magical or mystical. It’s something very simple. To me, creativity is just a moment. A moment. A moment where we look at the ordinary but we see the… extraordinary.

Happens all the time in my photography. Look at the ordinary, see the extraordinary.

We’ve all done it. We’ve all had those moments where life was extraordinary. And you know how great it feels when that’s happening. To me, it feels like falling in love. Not the most professional, businesslike image. I’m sorry, that’s what it feels like.

And it really doesn’t surprise me, because I think at the base of it, that’s what creativity is. It’s just falling in love with the world. And when we’re in love with the world, we’re in touch with a source of incredible energy! We call it passion! What most of us wouldn’t give to be connected to our passion on a daily basis.

We all have that potential just like we have the potential to fall in love. How do we bring it out so that we can find extraordinary solutions to the challenges we face everyday?

I need my creativity everyday. Because I’m not out here on vacation. I’m going to work, just like you and I’ve got assignments and I’ve got deadlines and I’ve got performance reviews. Going to work just like you everyday and trying to add value to what I do. We all do it. How can we do it better? How can we use our creativity everyday to make our work, and our lives, truly extraordinary?

I think many of us were raised thinking we could never be creative. When I was growing up, creativity was always associated with art. Art was associated with painting and sculpture. If you didn’t do that, you were out of the loop.

And yet, if creativity is just falling in love with the world, then in every act, I have the potential for doing something creative. My life can be my art. Whether I’m taking a photograph or talking to a client, raising a family, volunteering in my community, every act has the potential to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Creativity is a matter of perspective. Let me explain. The first thing I have to decide as a photographer is: What lens do I have on my camera? In other words, what perspective am I going to view a problem from to find that extraordinary view? And if I don’t have the right perspective going in, I don’t have a chance of finding something truly extraordinary. I remember a photograph I took of Yosemite Falls… not a bad photograph. I had already gotten rid of a lot of things that might distract you from viewing the falls, like the parking lot I’m standing in and the visitors’ center. But a lot of people would have said, “That’s a great photograph, Dewitt!”

But as I looked through the lens, I thought, “Is this really the essence of Yosemite Falls? Is this what got me so excited that I ran all the way across and meadow and set up my cameras?” I realized it wasn’t.
What had drawn my eye up there in the first place was just that area way down at the bottom. Just that tree and the falls behind it.

I had the wrong lens, the wrong perspective. The wrong angle of view. And when I changed my perspective, then I found a real photograph!

The lens we chose when we view a problem is critical. Our perspective is what holds the key to whether the solution is ordinary or extraordinary.

So first we have to find the right perspective. If we can't learn to change lenses, we’re trapped. But I’ve learned there's always another perspective. And when we believe that, it can transform the whole way we look at life.

In fact, that’s probably the most important thing about creativity that I’ve learned from my photography. There's more than one right answer.

But it seems so simple, but it is the key to creativity. There are a thousand ways to come at a problem to find a creative solution. And I know that so clearly from my photography but sometimes it's just so hard to bring over into the rest of my life. Geographic sent me up to the town of Smith River on the north coast of California.

They raise about 80 percent of the Easter lilies in the country around that village and that was the story I had to tell.

This was my first solution. I’ve got a frame with picked lilies and unpicked lilies and the boy picking them and good body language as he puts them in the box. Little bit of the region's weather and the architecture. One right answer. Pretty good one.

But I'd never think of stopping there. As a photographer, I immediately grabbed another lens, walked over a couple rows, knelt down and found... another right answer. Same parameters of the problem now seen from a totally different point of view.

My favorite right answer that day was this one. Three right answers. So many things begin to change when you come at the world from that perspective of more than one right answer.

First thing is, we don't stop at the initial right answer. That answer is just doing our job. Anybody ought to be able to come up with one right answer.

I remember another forest I was in one time. The Geographic sent me up to the Red Woods. Beautiful place, but one that had been shot a million times. I was going to have to come up with another perspective. And I was out there in the morning and it was gorgeous, but I was shooting post cards. Nothing new, nothing different. I could go down to the visitors' center and buy something like this, it was not going to shake them up at the Geographic. I had to find the next right answer. But I know it's there, so I just kept going, you know. And eventually I’m down on that path, in the mud, looking up through some rhododendron and I saw this photograph, and I’ve sold this photograph more than any picture I’ve ever taken in my life.

When we work from that perspective, then as we press out looking for the next right answer, we do so not in terror, but comfortably, knowing that it’s going to be there for you. And you begin to embrace change, rather than fear it. We begin to hit the world with a sense of abundance, rather than scarcity. And you just get more and more comfortable with reframing a problem into an opportunity.

Problem... opportunity.

Problem... opportunity.

Reframing a problem into an opportunity, finding another angle and being comfortable and confident that that next right answer is going to be there for us. Now you can’t do that and you won’t do that if you’re afraid to make mistakes.
That's my photograph. I took it. Not very exciting. I've chosen a wide-angle lens that distorts this poor girl's feet till they're as big as her face. Certainly chosen a horrible moment to photograph her face. Overexposed light in the background. There is not much to redeem this photograph except that it's my daughter and I think she looks good in any situation.

If I was afraid to make mistakes, this would be the kind of photograph to just make me pack up my cameras, put them in the closet, never take them out again. But I'm not thinking about that.

Do you know that the average Geographic article is shot in 400 roles of film? 400 roles. That's over 14,000 images to get the 30 that go in an article! I'm not thinking about making mistakes. I'm looking for the next right answer.

Something's exciting me here. I stayed with it, a few minutes later she fell asleep. And I took this photograph. Cleared out the background, used light to bring you in on her. But still, what's the essence of this picture? What's the next right answer? There's the photograph. There's the photograph.

And if I was afraid to make mistakes, if I never took the risk to think out of the box, to press out against my own comfortable envelope, I'd still be back here, wondering why it didn't work.

Now, I don't like to make mistakes. I want those things that I execute based on the best information that I can get at the time. I want them done with the best technique that I can train myself to. I want them in alignment with my personal vision and my employer's vision. And then hey, if it's a mistake, how do I learn from it? How do I turn a win/lose situation into a win/learn situation? How do I turn it into a little victory and how do I put those little victories together to move from something like this to something like this?

Because when we're not afraid to make mistakes, and when we really believe that there's more than one right answer, that's when we begin to break the patterns in our lives.

Patterns, systems, they're incredibly important. We can't function without them. But we all know that if we let our patterns go too long unquestioned, they become our prisons!

I remember a shot I took in the wine country. Hold on this photograph long enough and you lose interest. The pattern just becomes repetitive; it's just same old same old. But if we break that pattern, don't destroy it, just question it... Add the red bucket and the whole picture changes. Just as you're beginning to get bored with the pattern, the bucket shakes it up and makes your eye look at it all over again.

That's what we have to do. Break the pattern. It may be the first step in learning how to fly.

Because when we break the patterns, then everything is always in question, even when it's going well. You're always saying, "Why do we do it this way? How can we do it better?" And it's that perspective that will really allow you to bring vision into focus. Because whenever we can get that critical focus, we always discover that we can do a lot more with a lot less.

Whenever my photographs do that, they become simple and powerful and strong.

We find that sense of positive synergy where the whole becomes so much greater than the sum of those well-focused parts.

We've got the right mind set for creativity; the right vision. But there's something else we have to do so that we don't miss those extraordinary moments.

We have to train our technique. That's critical because vision without technique is blind.

I want my technique honed to a razor's edge so that when there is a decisive moment, when that foot lifts off the ground, I'm not worried about what film is in my camera. I'm there, ready to capture that extraordinary view.
So first we have to train our technique and then we have to put ourselves in the place of most potential. The place where I have the most possibility of finding multiple right answers.

I remember one time I was shooting an aerial of Lake Powell in Arizona. And I looked down from the plane and I saw a car there at an uninhabited part of the lake. A car and a road. I didn’t even know anybody could get out there. And yet seeing it, I knew it was possible.

And knowing it was possible, I went back and I studied charts and I figured out a particular day that I wanted to be there and I rented a 4-wheel drive. And I was there the night the full moon rose over the lake. And when you’re there, in the place of most potential, those right answers just keep coming.

Life presents us with windows of opportunity, what the French photographer, Cartier-Bresson called, “decisive moments.” Moments where it all comes together. And we have to be ready to take advantage of them.

Sometimes they’re there just for an instant. Other times, they require great patience. Days, months, patience to focus the vision and wait.

Same shot, three months later.

Having the vision, training our technique, putting ourselves in the place of most potential, being patient and being ready to take advantage of those windows of opportunity.

So creativity is not just about vision and passion. It’s about technique and perseverance as well.

It’s a balance of emotion of intellect that springs from really caring about what we do. Really caring. Really caring about the people that we work with and the projects that we work on. Really caring. When the people I photograph know that they are as important to me as my pictures, they open like flowers. And I find that the light that really lights my pictures is not the light from the outside. It’s the light from within.

Now let me show you how all these techniques go together. I was on a shoot over in Scotland for Dewar’s Scotch. I had to photograph salmon fishing on Scotland’s River Tweed. I’d done my homework. We came down that windy road to the River Tweed. I had images of backlit salmon and silver cataracts and leaping fish and that windy road delivered us and there it was. It looked like the East Sandusky River, the River Without Drama. My art director was carsick, he said, “You figure it out, Dewitt.”

And so it was up to me. How many times is it up to you? I got talking to one of the guides, the gillies. The gentlemen there in the foreground. Each beat of the river has a different gillie, a different guide and they know every rock and every shoal and every riffle. He told me that salmon fishing in Scotland’s a very formal affair; you wear a coat and a tie and a hat and chest waders.

Then he told me that when you catch a salmon on his beat, you bring it up to the fish house and there’s a leather book and in that book is listed every salmon that’s been caught on that beat in the last 100 years. Now I’m getting intrigued. And then he said, “You know Dewitt, there was a mist on the water this morning. That’s unusual for this time of year.” My intellect climbed all over it and said, “I want to be in the place of most potential.”

So I’m out there 2 hours before dawn and when the sun’s coming up I got the boats I got the fisherman I got the gillie. I got the right lens, I got the right focus. I got my first right answer. Then my intuition said, “Turn around Dewitt, you’re shooting the wrong way.” Yes sir, I listened, now it was really getting good. I’m trying to pay attention. My intellect finds that that light is going to come up behind those trees in the background so I yell at the guys to get down there, because I want to be in the place of most potential.
Now it’s really getting nice. I’m not worried about making mistakes, I’m looking for the next right answer, and they just kept coming. And this was the final ad: “Why would a man rise before dawn to fish for salmon on Scotland’s River Tweed? Why indeed! The good things in life stay that way.”

I’ve shared with you some of the techniques that I use to access my creativity. And I hope that you can take them and apply them in your own lives. Because by being creative, we really do fall in love with the world and in that act, we transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

There’s a line from the Bible that says, “The banquet is laid though nobody comes.” And when I’m being creative, I see that life really is that banquet, all around me, all the time, presenting me with endless possibilities. Showing me a world full of light and beauty.

And I know if we let that beauty fill us up, that it will come out in a thousand ways. In the quality of the way we conduct ourselves, in the caliber of the products we produce, in the depth of service we give to our clients and our customers.

In the way we treat our families, in the service we give in our communities, in the stories we tell to our children at bedtime.

That perspective, that window, is always there if we’re open enough to see it. And when we see it, the world truly is extraordinary.

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