



Celebrate! Change Your Lens, Change Your Life

Transcript

I've spent my life as a photographer.
 Traveled the world for National Geographic.
 And I ended up here, on the island of Molokai.
 More time for reflection now.
 You know, I kinda like being at this stage
 of my life, to remember all the incredible
 places my cameras have taken me.
 And, I find myself asking: what did I
 learn? All those experience, what, what
 lessons have I taken from them?
 I'm asking that question now, but
 actually, you know, I wish I'd started
 asking a lot earlier in my life.
 Raw experience... it's empty.
 It's what we learn from it that
 makes our lives worthwhile.
 As I look back, I see that one of the
 biggest lessons I learned in life came,
 came from the Geographic itself.
 It was their vision. So simple, yet so profound.
 What they charged me with every time
 they sent me out, was to celebrate what
 was right with the world, rather than
 wallowing in what was wrong with it.
 It wasn't a perspective that denied the very
 real pain and suffering that exists on the
 planet. No, it was a perspective that put
 those problems into a larger context.
 A context that showed me that there
 was far more right with the world
 that there was wrong with it.
 A context where one could fill with
 gratitude for all they have been given.

Where one could fill with hope for all the
 possibilities we had yet to explore.
 Everywhere I went, it was my job to find
 the very best each situation had to offer.
 What a lens! What a perspective!
 They'd send me out to places I've 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 wasn't looking at those pictures on the
 printed page anymore, I was there.
 And what an extraordinary place there was.
 The more I traveled, the more I was struck by
 the breathtaking diversity of life on this planet.
 Thousands and thousands of species, plant
 and animal, all finding their own unique
 solutions to the challenge of living.
 Humankind was no different.
 A thousand cultures, a thousand ways of
 looking at the world, a thousand ways I can
 delve into the richness of human experience.
 When I celebrated what was right, the world
 seemed to say, "How many rolls you got
 Dewitt? Bring it on. I'll fill 'em up. I'll fill them
 up with beauty and possibility beyond your
 wildest imaginings, right down to my tiny seed."



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You know, my very first published photographs were on the pages of the National Geographic.

I still find that hard to believe.

I mean, it was crazy, but that's what happened.

I was twenty six years old and Bob Gilka, the head of photography at the Geographic called me back to their headquarters in Washington D.C. to give me my marching orders.

And, I remember, I remember standing in the lobby of what they call Explorers Hall, and I was looking at giant globes, and dog sleds, and submersible, and flags planted on Everest, and surrounded by the most beautiful photographs I'd ever seen in my life.

How was I gonna prove that I was worthy of working here?

And then I was taken upstairs and into Bob's office.

Bob, Bob was a blunt man just straight and to the point, and honestly a little scary.

Well that morning I was completely unprepared for what he said to me.

He stopped me cold. He changed the way I did everything from that day forward.

He looked at me from over his desk and he said, "You know Dewitt, the people who photograph for this magazine are the best in the world. You don't have to prove yourself"

I don't have to prove myself? I mean, honestly that's all I've been thinking about since I got the assignment.

"You don't have to prove yourself," he continued "but by God every day you had better improve yourself"

The words went in.

Don't prove yourself, improve yourself.

Bob was still talking, he said "you know I want you to spend your time everyday trying to be better than you were yesterday. If you learn something that'll help the others, well then share it, that way we'll all get better faster"

"Don't prove yourself, improve yourself. Otherwise you're fired."

Big first lesson, right out of the blocks.

I don't know how many times I've thought about it, how many times I've acted on it since that day in Bob's office.

Don't prove yourself, improve yourself. And you know living that lesson, I've come to see that life really is a lot more about cooperation than it is about competition.

It wasn't proving myself or taking others down that allowed me to succeed.

It was simply, consciously, continuously improving myself. Refining my skills, honing my wisdom, focusing my vision. Ultimately, the only person I was trying to surpass was me.

Don't prove, improve.

I can't begin to tell you how many times I've come down to this beach to shoot waves.

Same beach, same wave forms, yet, how many thousands of possibilities?

Will I ever be done with this project? Not gonna happen.

They're just too many right answers.

I don't know if I would ever have seen any of them if my photography hadn't taught me to believe in possibility.



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And I certainly never would have seen them if I didn't change my lens; if I didn't look at the situation from different angles, see it in different lights.

What if I only looked at life through my macro lens?

Well, most of the time my vision would be pretty blurry except when I was right up close to something.

I might see the pattern on the back of a seashell, but I'd miss the beauty of the seashell itself.

For that I'd have to change my perspective.

If I never used my wide angle lens, I'd never see the grandeur of the whole beach.

And, if I didn't have a telephoto, I'd miss the curl of the cresting wave.

I want a full bag of lenses for my mind, as well as my cameras.

I want experiences that, that shake me up and show me new perspectives.

I never want to be afraid to see things in a new light.

Change my perspective, change my photograph. Change my lens, change my life.

My choice, everyday.

I once had an assignment to photograph a winery in California.

And they vineyards were beautiful, but personally my life was fairly frantic at the time.

I was trying to find the right balance between my work, between my photography, and my family life.

And it wasn't working.

I just couldn't get it right.

I spent the afternoon with this master vintner, photographing him as he worked creating a great cabernet.

In the middle of the shoot I realized that he wasn't trying to find the right balance for his wine, what he was looking for was the right blend.

Blend. Far more stable.

Yeah, it took commitment and effort to bring it into existence, but once achieved blend seems far less likely to disintegrate into disarray.

I drove home that afternoon musing on the composition of my life. On its blend, rather than its balance.

When I thought about blend, it was much more, much more of a continuum, a perspective where I was able to see the relationship and rightness of many parts of my life.

Just as I hold both the peaks and the valleys of a mountain ranges as being absolutely essential to the composition of a great landscape photograph.

Blend allowed me to think "both, and," rather than "either, or."

And with inclusion came stability.

Joy and sorrow, work and play, my family and my business, all held with the same inclusion that nature holds the landscape.

It wasn't a big shift, but it was a huge change.

A life lesson hidden in a glass of cabernet.



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Some days I just can't believe how lucky I am to make my home here on Molokai.

It has the highest sea cliffs in the world.

Cliffs that fall three thousand feet, straight down into the ocean.

And I spend a lot of time up on these cliffs.

And recently, I was sitting right here about five feet from the edge, no no guard rails or anything like that on Molokai.

Just looking out over the ocean.

And all of a sudden, out of no where, shoot, hanging in the air, a frigate bird, a frigate bird with an eight foot wingspan, right in front of me, looking me right in the eyes five feet away.

And then shook, it was carried up on the wind and it was replaced by another and another and another until seven of them had graced my sight.

And they all kept circling up higher and higher so high I could hardly see them.

And then finally the first one dipped its wings just a bit and the others all followed suit, and they all glided, glided across the channel to the island of the Oahu.

And I was left alone looking out over the ocean.

And I thought, "Whoa, that was big, what does it mean?"

And I could almost hear Mother Nature whisper in my ear, and she seemed to say "Dewitt quit flapping and ride your thermals."

Quit flapping and ride your thermals? You know it seemed like nature was trying to teach me another lesson.

Maybe, maybe struggle didn't have to be my operative word.

Maybe getting to the next level of my life really was about learning how to soar.

Ok, ok where do those thermals exist, those winds to take us higher?

Man, I was standing there on the edge, but I had a feeling that that, that wasn't the edge that nature was trying to teach me about.

I had a feeling that if I was really gonna learn how to soar, it wasn't the external edges that I'd have to press, it was the internal ones as well.

To know myself as well as I knew my craft.

Because in each of our lives, you know, there is an edge, an edge between success and significance.

An edge where if we're going to take it higher, we have to work not just on what we do, but on who we are.

Not just to be the best in the world, but to be the best for the world.

And it's with that realization that those thermals begin to rise.

Success and significance.

You see it played out everyday in the lives of the Aunties here on Molokai.

So much wisdom resides in these kupuna.

As I photographed them over the years, each one of them has taught me so much.

But none more than Auntie Kauila.

Eighty-five years young, she has made so many contributions to this island, but none greater than hula.

She's taught hula for as long as she can remember.



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Showing others the way. Showing me the way as well.

Because for Auntie, hula is more than a dance, it's a way of being in the world. A way of grace and purpose and Aloha.

A'a i ka hula! she tells her students, dare to dance.

Even for me, behind the camera her words sink in.

Do I have the courage to dance my dance, live my vision?

Over and over again, her hands move, perfecting the gestures of the dance.

But it's the gesture of her life that inspires me.

She told me once, "I never ask, 'how do I fix what's wrong, I simply say to myself how can I make this better?'"

Always keeping your attention not on what's wrong, but on what's right.

And then, simply, daring to dance.

How many times have I sat like this watching a sunset? How many times have I looked around and found myself saying, "Dewitt, Dewitt you're the only one here. Whoever was putting this on wasn't waiting for you to show up. Whoever was putting this on was just going to put out the very best they had without any regard for whether it's received or not."

Yeah, I know that that sunset is caused by the angle of the sun's rays through the Earth's atmosphere.

But, that's not what the sunset feels like.

It feels like a performance.

A spectacular light show that has been in rehearsal for months, if not millennium.

And every time I see it I wonder, "Could I do that? Could I be like a sunset? Could I just put out the very best every day without any regard to whether it was received or not?"

Far too often the answer is no.

Far too often, something gets in the way of my being that open, that giving, that, that beautiful.

Yet, every time I shoot another sunset, the question comes up again: Could I be like that? And if not, why?

Is it my fear that gets in the way?

Fear that my best won't be good enough?

Fear that my best will be ridiculed?

Perhaps, even the fear that my best might not even be noticed?

Come on, come on, the sunset wasn't waiting for my affirmation or applause.

I could critique it all night and it would still do it again tomorrow.

Be like a sunset. That's a great lens to put on my life.

Another wonderful lesson, like all the others I realize I've learned over the years.

These lessons, they're all great lenses.

Lenses that changed my life.

Maybe that's the biggest lesson of all: change your lens, change your life.

Not proving, but improving.

Not balancing, but blending.

Not flapping, but soaring.

Celebrating what's right with the world.