

Seeing The Ordinary As Extraordinary

Techniques for unlocking your creative potential.

by Dewitt Jones

Creativity. It's not surprising it's the latest business buzzword. Our world is altering at an ever-quickenning pace; companies are finding that last year's solutions -- even last month's solutions -- are no longer relevant to today's challenges. Change is the hallmark of the 90's, and everyone is being asked to find solutions that offer something new, something different, something... *creative.*

And there's the rub. Because most of us simply don't think of ourselves as being creative.

For most of us, creativity is something difficult to define and even harder to implement. It is a word reserved for artists, and there is a very big difference between art and business. Art is creative; business is practical. Art is frivolous; business is serious. Art is to be indulged in only when all the 'important stuff' is done; business is the 'important stuff'. No wonder the subject of creativity sets off a palpable uneasiness in many of my audiences ... "Hey, I've spent my career attending to business, now you want art as well?!"

That is, however, exactly what the times call for. Having spent my life in one creative endeavor after another, I'm convinced that we all have great creative potential within us. To begin to connect with it, we first have to define it. Let me offer a definition: *creativity is the ability to see the ordinary as extraordinary.*

Seeing the ordinary as extraordinary is something we've all done. We've all had those moments when we've looked at a landscape, a person, or an idea and for an instant, or a month, or the rest of our lives, felt its true uniqueness.

I don't know about you, but to me those moments are like falling in love. Falling in love, I realize this isn't a very business-like metaphor, but indulge me for a moment. Because maybe, at the base of it, that's what creativity really is... *just falling in love with the world.*

Think about it. First, when we're in love with something, it really is extraordinary. We see its uniqueness, feel its potential, celebrate its excellence, are open to its growth. Second, when we're in love with something we take care of it; we treat it with respect and compassion. Finally, when we're in love with something we find ourselves in touch with a source of incredible energy...we call it passion.

Passion, flexibility, care and service, celebration. Isn't this the attitude you'd like to bring to your association every day? Well, it's what you put in motion every time you fall in love with the world, every time you see the ordinary as extraordinary, every time you are...creative.

The essence of creativity then is not a technique but an attitude; an attitude of curiosity, openness, and celebration. Our definition makes it something well within our grasp. Now what techniques can we use to access it on a daily basis so that we can find extraordinary solutions to the challenges we face.

From my years as a photographer, I've learned a number of methods to help me access that creative state. The more I practiced them, the more I realized that those techniques applied equally well whether I was creating a photograph, running an office, or serving a client. You could change the challenge, but the principles were the same.

Let me share three of these techniques with you, using my photographs as examples.

To find an extraordinary photograph, I need the right lens on my camera. In other words, if I don't view the challenge from the right *perspective*, I won't have a chance of finding a creative solution.



Consider the photograph of Yosemite Falls. It's seen from an angle, a perspective that offers quite a pleasant scene. An amateur photographer would probably be quite pleased with it.



But as I stared through the camera, I realized I had chosen the wrong lens. The perspective was O.K., but I'd seen it before. It offered nothing new, nothing extraordinary. I looked again, and as I began to fall in love with the view before me, I realized that what really drew my eye was not this view at all. Rather, it was just the juxtaposition of the silhouetted tree at the bottom of the frame and the surging water behind. The wrong lens -- the wrong perspective -- kept me from capturing the extraordinary view. When I corrected my perspective, I found the real photograph!

It's easy for me to change a photographic lens. It's often much harder to make sure I've got the right perspective on a business challenge. Yet, the metaphor from photography helps me daily. As an association executive, I might ask, "Do I have the best lens through which to see the vision of my

association? Have I found the right angle for explaining why two associations should merge? Do I have the right perspective for helping to build strong staff/board partnerships?"

We have to find the right lens; we also have to find the right focus. What are the elements of the solution that deserve the most attention? Within that right perspective, what are the elements that are most critical? In the



photograph of the falls, everything has to be in focus. Both the tree and the falls must be sharp, or you'll never see the magic of the vision. In the case of this photograph only one element needs to be clear. Only the little ground squirrel needs to be sharp while the soft background serves as a foil to draw attention to the squirrel. Here again, the photographic metaphor can be helpful in facing the challenges in association work. "Have I found the best focus for my association's strategic plan? Have I clearly focused and prioritized the programs and services that the association offers?"

The right perspective, the right focus, they're important. I found the real key to creativity, however, in another lesson from my photography: *There's more than one right answer.* It's a simple idea but one which can radically change the way you run your association and your life.

Throughout our careers, we too often fall prey to the belief that there's only one right answer. You either have it or you don't. Though my own thinking often pulls me in this direction, I find it simply doesn't match up with the world I see around me. As a photojournalist, I've reported on a

thousand different cultures finding a thousand different answers to the challenges they face day-to-day. As a photographer, I've shot hundreds of excellent photographs of the same subject. Our world just happens to be ambiguous, and that can be terrifying or, if seen from the right perspective, can be the very thing that leads us to open to our creativity.



National Geographic sent me to Smith River, California where they raise about eighty per cent of the country's Easter lilies. In Photograph #4, I've chosen a perspective that does a pretty good job of telling that story: picked lilies, unpicked lilies, the boy picking them, a little of the region's architecture and weather. It's *one* right answer. As a photographer, however, I would never think of stopping here. Almost as soon as I snapped the shutter, I reached into my bag for another lens, walked over two rows, knelt down and found... *another* right answer. Here were the same parameters of the problem now seen from a totally different point of view.



My favorite right answer that afternoon was Photograph #6. They were using a helicopter in the field, I got a ride and, looking down from 200 feet, saw the extraordinary in the ordinary.



Three right answers. It's so easy for me to think this way in my photography and yet often so hard for me to adapt it to other areas of my life. When I do, however, the results are remarkable. When we really believe that there's more than one right answer so much begins to change. First, we don't stop at first right answer. The first right answer is just doing our job. Any of us can come up with *one* right answer. But, and here's the key, as we look for the next answer, we do so, not in terror, but comfortably knowing that it will be there waiting for us.

In business and in life, we begin to celebrate those things that lead to multiple right answers. The diversity of our team or our work force, for example, becomes a real asset as we realize that everyone has something to contribute based on their own individual point of view. Or the concept of empowerment which we find is rooted in the principle that good ideas can come from anywhere.

As I work from the belief that there's more than one right answer, I find I'm approaching the world from a attitude of abundance rather than scarcity, from cooperation rather than competition. When I walk into the forest with my cameras, nature doesn't say, "There is one great photograph hidden here. One photographer will find it and be the winner. The rest will fail!" No, what nature seems to be saying is, "How many rolls of film do you have, Dewitt? I'll fill them all with right answers!"

When we bring that same attitude to our life, we become more and more comfortable with searching for that next right answer, with reframing problems into opportunities, with embracing change rather than fearing it.

So we've found a definition that makes creativity accessible to us; we've

opened ourselves to the possibility that there's more than one right answer. We've looked at the challenge we're facing and asked, "Do we have the right lens/perspective and the right focus?"

So why do we still hesitate? What's keeping us from seeing that extraordinary solution and manifesting it into reality? Could it be *the fear of Making a Mistake?*

Fear of mistakes is the single greatest enemy of the creative spirit. It haunts me in my business dealings, it looks through my lens, it stands at my shoulder every time I'm on the platform. Constantly it intones, "Don't take the risk. Don't try something new. Do it the way it's always been done." Again, it's my photography that shows me the foolishness of this kind of thinking.

The average *National Geographic* article is shot in four hundred rolls of film. That's over 14,000 photographs to get the fifty or so that make up an article. If I worried about making mistakes, I'd simply have to give up the profession. Time and again I've found that it's the ability to risk possible failure that has led me from the good shot to the great shot.



Consider Photograph #7. The famous French photographer, Cartier-Bresson, talked about the "decisive moment" in photography. Well, this is the "indecisive moment." My wide angle lens distorts the poor girl's feet till they're as big as her face. Her face is frozen at a particularly unflattering moment. There's overexposed light in the background. There's only one redeeming factor to this photograph and that's the fact that it's my daughter. And if I want to take her picture I will.



Boy, if I were afraid to make mistakes, this is the kind of failure that would make me pack up my cameras and never take them out again. In my photography however, I'm not worried about making a few mistakes, I'm looking for that next right answer. I knew something was exciting me about this situation. I kept at it. A little while later my daughter fell asleep, and with a few more intermediate attempts, I came to this vision of innocence and beauty. This is a vision worth capturing. Yet, if I'd been afraid to make mistakes -- if I wouldn't take the risk and try something new -- I'd still be back with the first image wondering why it didn't work.

I don't want to be afraid to make mistakes, but I don't want to make dumb mistakes either. I want the ideas I execute to be based on the best information I can get at the time. I want them executed with the finest technique, and I want them in alignment with my personal vision and my corporate vision. Then, if the idea does turn out to be a mistake -- what can I learn from it? How can I turn a win/lose situation into a win/learn situation? How can I turn it into a little victory and use it, as I did with my daughter, to press forward toward that next right answer; to reframe a problem into an opportunity?

Again, these are images that I hold up again and again as a metaphor in the rest of my life. *Don't be afraid to make mistakes.* I know there are decisions in businesses and associations that are "mission critical;" that have to be right the first time and every time. But if every decision becomes "mission critical" -- and that's certainly the natural tendency in business -- then our creativity atrophies and our mission of finding extraordinary solutions is doomed to failure.

Being creative. *Not being afraid to make mistakes; believing there's more*

than one right answer; finding that new perspective, that new focus.
Falling in love with the world. If we let it, creativity can infuse all the facets of our lives; and that when it does, life truly is extraordinary. *When we believe it, we'll see it.*