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**DEWITT JONES**  
WILDERNESS  
WISDOM:  
*How It Can  
Work For You*

By Susan Stroh





***"The National Geographic has a wonderful vision. What they charged me with, every time they sent me out, was to celebrate what's right with the world, rather than wallowing in what's wrong with it."***

You take your seat with a feeling of anticipation and impatience, of too much coffee and not enough sleep, and a burning desire to get home. It's time for the last event of the convention, the obligatory motivational finish--the last hurrah. A few of your colleagues arrive early, but most are late, hurrying into the hall, cell phones glued to their ears.

Your marketing director takes the podium and announces keynoter and inspirational speaker Dewitt Jones. He reviews a long list of accomplishments: Academy Award nominations for two films, a twenty-year stint as a photojournalist with National Geographic, an equally successful career in advertising and nine published books.

Surprisingly, there's no big band entrance music. Good, you're not comfortable with the hype of change masters. Instead, Dewitt Jones takes the platform with the easy-going manner of a guide who's going to take you on a nature trek--an adventure. His first words are disarming: "I bet

some of you are asking yourselves, 'Now just why did I come here today to hear a landscape photographer speak?'" The audience laughs, he smiles knowingly. "Look, the only reason I'm here is to share with you the very best that I've learned in my life."

This gets your attention, but you've heard a lot of speakers in your corporate career. Will this one tell you anything new? The world is changing much too fast for repackaged platitudes. You need solutions, not rhetoric.

Not long after Jones begins speaking, the hall darkens. Spectacular photographs of mountains, rivers and canyons fill the huge projection screen. Dewitt lets you know he's going to touch on four topics: vision, passion, purpose and creativity. He speaks over the photos, "The National Geographic has a wonderful vision. What they charged me with, every time they sent me out, was to celebrate what's right with the world, rather than wallowing in what's wrong with it."

More engaging pictures fill the screen, faces of people bespeaking different cultures, people at work and at play.

You begin to relax.

Dewitt goes on, "I believed that vision and the more I did, the more I'd see it everywhere. They'd send me out to places I'd never been. I'd believe there would be incredible landscapes for me to photographs--they'd appear. I'd believe those landscapes would be filled with wonderful people, they'd be there.

"It was a vision that changed my life. When your vision for your business or life is clear and juicy enough, then passion and creativity will be there as well. And where there's passion and creativity, discipline and commitment are non-issues. I know that because I've lived it."

You surrender a bit as you marvel at a photo of cobwebs balancing droplets of dew, glistening in magical morning light.

Dewitt continues, "Yet as I embraced this vision, I began to see the conflict between the vision of National Geographic and the world-view I'd been raised on from the time I was a child, my intellectual paradigm. You all know it, that zero-sum game: 'the law of the jungle, eat or be eaten, my win is your loss, second place is the first loser!' But that's not what nature was showing me." The photo on the screen dissolves to a sunset shot of a

city with purple snow-covered mountains looming behind it. "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."

The next photograph transports you to the edge of a forest where deep inside, the ground fog glows with inner light.

"Hey, come on, nature never stood in front of a forest and said, 'There is one great photograph here. One photographer will find it and the rest of you will be hopeless losers! 'No,' nature says, 'How many rolls of film do you have? I'll fill them up with beauty and possibilities beyond your wildest imaginings.'"

More forest looms before you, majestic treetops seen through fans of fern, a seedling with sprouts of miniature white feathers.

Dewitt continues, "The wilderness showed me that I was being given a choice--between a philosophy based on scarcity and one based on possibility."

Dewitt walks across the stage without flailing his arms, his voice alone commands your attention. Your impatience eases as your trust is on the rise.

Backed by a photo of a chasm in an arid stone cliff, he continues. "I finally just decided that no matter how dry and desolate, no matter how bleak and devoid of possibility a situation might seem, if I just believed I could fall in love with it, I would find a perspective that transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary." The desolate desert cliff dissolves into a view from inside the chasm, glowing with rich orange sunlight reflecting off the dusty clay of the interior walls. Dewitt says, "Nature was teaching



me one of her more important lessons. Time and again, she would show me that there is more than one right answer."

That message hits you on a visceral level as photo after photo of fields full of Easter lilies flash before your eyes. The first shows a worker picking lilies in a vast field, a barn and streaked sky in the background. The second is taken from below, deep within the lily row. The last gives a bird's eye view from a chopper hanging above the field of flowers. This guy was having a ball finding answers: different ones, right ones, all surpassing excellence.

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"So many things begin to change when you come at the world from the perspective of more than one right answer," says Dewitt. "First of all, you don't stop at the first right answer--that's just doing your job. But if you really believe in multiple possibilities, then you'll press on and look for that

next right answer and you'll do so not in terror, but comfortably. Knowing it's going to be there, you begin to embrace change and can reframe problems into possibilities."

There's that dreaded word: change. But Dewitt handles this well, with facts. "We are educated to believe that there's only one right answer by the way we are tested in school. By the time we graduate from college we've each taken some 2500 multiple-choice tests all based on the assumption that there's only one right answer. It's engrained, drilled into us over the years." You hope your boss hears this!





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Dewitt continues, "We're thrown out into the world after school and are asked by our bosses to be creative, think out of the box! That's not easy when we've spent most of our life being told there's one right answer. Just like in school we're looking for the answer that will get the boss's approval. And that's usually not the creative answer, it's the safe answer."

As Dewitt's photographs take you on an expedition around the globe, you realize he's also leading you on an internal journey. And there, it is not all beauty and light. Dewitt's philosophy is simple but paradigm shifting and in that shift there is emotional turmoil you hadn't anticipated. You can't help thinking about some of your wrong answers; times you didn't take a fresh perspective and suffered the consequences. But before you can indulge in regret--Dewitt interrupts your thoughts by addressing this issue. He tells how he learned from photography that bad answers are the result of simply missing what's important in the photo, of forgetting to ask yourself what it is you're falling in love with.

As he speaks, you are being shown a photo of a child in a hammock. It's not a great picture. There's too much to look at and the girl is all feet and legs. Dewitt decides that what he's falling in love with is her ease, her sense of peace, so he wants to enhance that and get rid of everything else. The next



one's nice, he is definitely on to something. The final photo is the winner. It's a touching close-up of the girl's sleeping face through the strings of the hammock. The lighting seems ethereal, not of this earth. Dewitt quotes Michelangelo, "I saw an angel in the stone and carved to set her free." You feel this message in your gut: mistakes can lead to solutions if you keep looking.

"In photography I worship change!" Dewitt says. "It's not the status quo that makes good photography, it's change. How many times have I prayed for the weather to shift, for an eyebrow to raise, for light to become a little more golden? More times than I can count. If I see its value so clearly in my photography, why does it frighten me so much in the rest of my life? None of us wants to get older, or to face uncertain times that demand change. But I have begun to see that this awesome change curve we hear so much about, this phenomenal rate of change in today's society, is really my ally. In fact, if I view it from a slightly different perspective, it isn't a change curve at all...it's a possibility curve. I know from my photography that's true, can it be that for the rest of my life?"

"An accelerating possibility curve, it's just an extension of more than one right answer. Over one hundred and forty-three years ago Charles Darwin wrote, 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent but the ones most responsive to change.' Today he might have penned, 'the ones who have learned to embrace and utilize the possibility curve.'"

Dewitt suggests how the idea to celebrate what's right with the world is important to business: "First of all, negativity can paralyze us. Look at what happened after September 11th. Creativity wasn't foremost in our minds, coping was." The room is completely silent. "Yet by celebrating what's right with the world, we regain our perspective, be become open to the possibility of falling in love with the task at hand. If we fall in love with something, we have passion. If we have passion, we have energy. By celebrating what's right, we find the energy to fix what's wrong."

Sitting alone in the dark, you realize he's right. Your own analyses are too often riddled with what's wrong, without pointing out things that are right and yes, celebrating them. Is it really that simple? No, probably not. But it sure looks like a way with more

possibilities than what you've been trying.

The rest of the presentation is captivating, there's laughter and more head-nodding from the audience, but you're already thinking of the changes you're going to make in your life when you return home. When Dewitt moves to the finale and the audience members are on their feet, the lights go up and you feel refreshed, rejuvenated.

You know that this time you're not going to rush away after a few perfunctory good-byes to colleagues. You want to speak with Dewitt, thank him in some way. When you get up to where he's greeting people, strangely the words don't connect with your feelings quite yet, so you use the third person. You ask him, "Do you change many lives?" Dewitt gives a hearty laugh, then, still shaking your hand says quietly, "No, I just give speeches, people change their own lives."

