



Clarity of Vision and Imagination - Charles Campbell

*“Sometimes I just go to another level – and react.”*

I never tire of photographing nature — there are so many variables, so many ways of looking at the same place or subject. I not only photograph what I see, but I try to capture what I feel. I think I’m becoming a better photographer because I have learned to remain open and receptive to what I feel and I combine that with working from my life’s experience. In the beginning, I started out direct and spontaneous. Now my work is more introspective. In this short essay I would like to briefly clarify how I go about capturing new images and how I work with my workshop students.

I like photos that have some special quality of light and are held together with strong elements of design. I have learned that if I

photograph what I respond to emotionally, then that emotion will come out in my pictures.

First I try to identify what it is that attracts my attention to a given situation. I identify the center of interest, then the direction and quality of light. Where are the lightest and darkest values in the scene? Next I study the composition. Is there balance and symmetry or a variety that makes a composition exciting? I look for S-shapes, curves, circles, lines, patterns, or mirror images. I'm also very aware of the vertical, horizontal and diagonal elements in a scene. Once I address these initial concerns, then I begin to simply my composition. Don't forget the edges and corners of the photograph. The way you crop the scene is one of the most critical yet undervalued techniques at your disposal. I pay particular attention to the light in a scene. I look for situations which seem to have an intensified clarity of light. That can mean the warm, golden glow from sunrise and sunset, or it can be the quiet, soft illumination that an overcast sky can bring.

How do I know if I have a good situation for taking a photograph? I look for three basic elements: a good subject, a good composition, and good light. These are the elements of an exercise I call the Pass/Fail Test. With this test, I challenge myself to look beyond the excitement of the moment. I objectively evaluate the subject, the lighting, and the composition. These are the "building blocks" of a good image. When all three elements are present before I take the picture, then I have a good chance of making a successful image.

I am doing my best work when I successfully take an intuitive leap. In other words, I go beyond the literal scene before me and let my imagination guide the way. Sometimes I just go to another level – and react. It's hard to describe. But it's the most rewarding type of photography when I can pull it off. The only way I can teach this is by osmosis. Stick by my side and you'll see how it's done. All the best photographers have this quality – the intuitive leap.

I assure my students that there's nothing wrong with emulating the work of another photographer, as long as the motivation is to use that photographer's photos as a point of departure or for an idea rather than to copy. Many photographers are worried about being unduly influenced by other people's work. They are afraid that they'll lose their individuality. But as long as you work from your feelings, your individuality will never be jeopardized. The photographers I'm fascinated with the most are often those whose work has no similarity to my own. They let me know that there are other options; there are other ways of expressing myself.

My top priority in teaching photography is to get the students past the point where they are fiddling with the buttons and dials on the camera. Once your technical prowess reaches a competent level, then you begin to unleash your creative side and make photographs that express a compelling, evocative statement. Look

how similar the words “image” and “imagination” are. A successful image dwells in your imagination before it is captured on film. The best images seem to happen when the delineation between craft and art vanish and personal vision and photographic technique take over as natural extensions of your imagination. This is the magic of photography!