

Finding Focus

by David A. Huntsman, M.Photog., Cr.

It's an early April morning in the Smoky Mountains. I'm standing knee deep in the Roaring Fork Creek, the freezing water swirling past the legs of my tripod. I compose and focus in my viewfinder some of God's most magnificent works while singing to myself, which is something that comes without thought or effort when I am happy and relaxed. I'm focused so intently on the beauty before me that I'm not aware of my legs shaking and the aching in my joints from standing in the snow melt. I lose all concept of time, or anything else around me for that matter.

My mind is clicking on all cylinders, I am relaxed and enjoying everything that is this day. I'm not bouncing off the walls waiting to move onto something else. Total contentment has washed over me as I enjoy the sounds of the runoff, cascading and flowing swiftly over the rocks along the creek. I feel the light rain falling gently on my skin. The overcast above, creating a canopy of perfect light for the long exposures that makes the running water appear like cotton candy through my lens.

It's not until that evening that I realize I'm near hypothermic from the long day of searching for the perfect angle. This is an unusual day for me, staying focused on one thing for an extended period of time is just about impossible, except when photography has taken over my soul, my mind, and my being. Photography, the calm that fights back the ADHD, has given me a day of wonder and joy. These brief moments of peace, serenity and the sense of accomplishment are few and far between. Photography has graced me with a rare focus, a respite amidst a life of constant distraction.

Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder (ADHD) is an ailment that is very real and very hard to deal with, affecting nearly five percent of adults in the United States. It is a chronic disorder, with thirty to fifty percent of those individuals diagnosed in childhood continuing to have symptoms into adulthood.

Adolescents and adults with ADHD tend to develop coping mechanisms to compensate for some or all of their impairments. The symptoms of ADHD are especially difficult to define because it is hard to draw the line at where normal levels of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity end, and clinically significant levels requiring intervention begin.

Just trying to sit down and have dinner without the need to get up ten times to do something totally unrelated, can be a major ordeal. Trying to focus on a project or subject long enough to see it through is a nightmare. Feeling a sense of urgency to move on to the next thing, whatever it is, constantly weighing on the mind. Yearning to learn and to excel, wanting to do the things that others seem to do so effortlessly.

Like many of my colleagues photography piqued my interest at an early age, not realizing it would be the passion that would lead me out of a life of mediocrity. Looking back today, it has become apparent this gift was given to me for a reason.

Being the youngest son of service station owners, my life was as simple as any child could want. Growing up in Harlan, Kentucky, a small coal mining town and watching my parents work from sunrise to sundown made it easy to respect them. As a child with difficulties, it was a blessing to have two parents and a brother who loved me unconditionally. It was also a time when you could get on your bike and ride from morning to night and your only worry was missing lunch or being late for supper.

My mom is the most incredible person I've ever known. A very loving woman who once told me that if my grades got better in school she would let me pick anything from the coupon catalog that she knew I loved to browse. I am not really sure that my grades improved, but the memory of the Kodak Brownie coming in the mail is vivid to this day. The camera became my constant companion, taking it with me everywhere and photographing everything that caught my eye. The need for film and processing became an incentive for me to continue to work hard and become a better student.

Improving my scholastic skills was a constant struggle. I remember being an eight-year-old sitting in a classroom. The teacher hands me a test with simple yet wordy questions. It was frustrating reading part of the first question and then finding myself at the bottom of the page reading part of another question and then another but never having understood or completed the first question. Anxiety would set in as it would now be impossible for me to complete the test. The test is over now and the teacher begins to give out a homework assignment. Quickly losing track of anything said it becomes impossible to write down the assignment and focus on the teacher at the same time. I feel stupid, slow and different from my classmates.

The fear and frustration my parents faced running a small business in a poor coal mining town was hidden from me. My father was a man of principle and taught me early on that a man was only as good as his word. Talking one day to my father and complaining that I had spent six hours raking leaves for someone and was paid a very paltry sum, he asked if we had agreed on a price prior to the work. He went on to say that when you agree to do a job whether for fifty cents or fifty dollars you give that job everything you've got. My father passed away from his fifth heart attack just after my thirteenth birthday. Before he passed, he taught me a work ethic that has allowed me, in spite of ADHD, to stick to a job and somehow get it done.

My mother sold the service station and worked in a department store as my brother was finishing his senior year of high school. She decided to go to college at the age of forty one and become a teacher. Working at K-mart she put my brother and I through school. Never complaining, just digging in and doing whatever had to be done. This was one of my life's greatest lessons. She taught me that God never gives you more than you can handle and you should never give up.

Time passed, and my mechanical skills became quite proficient. I started racing motorcycles and working on anything that had a motor. My brother, who is four years older, invited me as a graduation gift to go to Daytona with him to Bike

Week. He had an Argus rangefinder camera and we took it with us to record the adventure. Arriving on Daytona Beach at sunrise after driving all night, I couldn't believe my eyes. He woke me up and all that was visible was water! The ocean in its splendor was right in front of me. He had given me the opportunity to photograph my first landscape image, an ocean sunrise. We then went to the track and I learned that it was really tough to photograph motorcycles running over one hundred and fifty miles per hour with an Argus rangefinder and a normal lens.

That summer my brother bought a Minolta SRT 100 that somehow became "my" camera. Photographing cars, motorcycles and rock bands for fun became my hobby, but it was getting quite expensive having film processed and prints made. Around this time, Harold Wingo, a scuba instructor and dental student, befriended me. He was an amateur photographer who offered me the opportunity to use his darkroom and equipment while teaching me the nuances of E-6 processing and black and white printing. Learning about bulk loading film from Harold, saved me enough money to continue to play with photography.

My life took on new meaning after meeting Lucie. She has been my soul mate and best friend for the past thirty three years. We met in April and six months later were married. Lucie, having been married before, made me an instant father to her daughter, Kelly, a seven-year-old girl who really didn't like me much. Three months after we were married we moved to Florida. This move proved to be invaluable in our relationship. Moving away from all of our friends and family forged a bond between the two of us that has helped us to weather many of life's storms. Instead of running back to friends and family, we relied on each other for moral and emotional support. Without her encouragement and acceptance, achieving the things that have become the most important to me would have been impossible to obtain on my own.

Purchasing a Canon AE1 camera started what was to be my first real plunge into my new found passion. Photographing my new daughter playing softball led me to discover that other parents wanted images of their children as well. That

interest fed my desire to learn more. Taking classes at the Maitland Center for the Arts introduced me to freelance photographer Bob Edgington, who was working for

Time / Life Publishing and was teaching a basic photography class. The class entailed shooting, processing and printing our images. It was humbling having Bob kindly telling me not to quit my day job even after more classes. Over the next few years my darkroom and camera system began to grow. There was progress, but not by leaps and bounds.

We decided to move back to Central Kentucky after only three years in Florida. My enjoyment of photography was continuing to increase. Still working as a mechanic and becoming a regular at the local garage where most of the racers hung out led to photographing their cars. This actually started producing some extra income. Entering one of my off-road race images in a contest at a local camera store led me to my first experience in competition, winning the contest made it even better!

My mom graciously agreed to loan me a corner of her basement laundry room to build my first permanent darkroom. It was here that I honed my darkroom skills and gained an appreciation of this process. Always being eager to share with others what has been learned I wanted to teach basic darkroom and photography classes. Tony Seelbach, the manager of the local camera store, introduced me to the people at Lexington Community College. They invited me to teach non-credit courses in photography.

As a freelancer for The Woodford Sun, a weekly paper in Versailles, Kentucky, I would shoot assignments and also submit additional images for filler. This public exposure would help me to become known in the area as a professional photographer. The request for portraits became more frequent and the time had finally come for me to start making decisions about a career in photography. The logical step for me was taking my first professional photography class at Winona School in Chicago. It was exciting to shoot the assignments each day and have the work critiqued the next morning. Winona gave me some basic knowledge but more importantly, a burning desire to be a portrait photographer.

Enrolling in a class by Charles J. Lewis to improve my business skills, I travelled to Cincinnati. Sitting through his program led me to a couple of conclusions. One, you had to have personality if you were going to make it as a portrait photographer. Two, you had to learn to sell your work. I came away with some very good information and ideas, adapting many of the things learned to fit my personality. One month later, my full time studio was opened. It was just three years into my five-year plan that my career as a full time photographer began.

It seemed as though the timing of my decision was right. Seniors, families and children appointments started to fill the calendar almost immediately. Many of the kids at the school knew me from my freelance work for The Woodford Sun, and by then my daughter was in her junior year of high school. I still remember coming into the kitchen after doing a projection session and telling Lucie about my first large portrait order. It was gratifying to know that you could make a living doing something that you love. It wasn't long before we had to build a camera room onto the house. The orders got bigger and my love of photography was growing in leaps and bounds.

While preparing for Triangle school, they gave me a list of the photographers from Kentucky who would be attending. Don Moore agreed that riding together was a great idea. Throughout the week Don shared in his quiet manner a lot of insight into photography, PPA, and print competition. Don has become one of my dearest friends. He was kind enough to invite me to his studio on an ongoing basis where he would gently critique my work and make suggestions of how to improve. Going back to the studio and trying his ideas boosted my skills. Bringing the work back to Don always brought an education, but it also became the foundation for my becoming an affiliated juror years later. Don had a kind and positive way of telling me what was right and wrong with my work.

Joining and spending time on the KPPA print committee got me excited about competition, but it was Don Moore's encouragement that started me entering and working toward the PPA Master's degree. He introduced me to someone he

considered to be one of the finest printers in the world, Linda Bass. Linda was very knowledgeable about what it took to make a great print. It was very educational to spend time with her, at first just hanging out while she was looking over my negatives. Later, she would invite me into the darkroom where I watched and listened to her work. Through my relationship with Linda, I met Mark Garber. Mark would become responsible for my current mantra. “Shoot for Loan and if you fall short, you will still have a merit image”

Seeking validation that I was a serious professional photographer, I began the quest to become certified. My work had vastly improved, but I still felt like an outsider. Doing my best to prepare for the exam, apprehension washed over me. At the beginning of the test, I flashed back to my childhood. The memories of failure, the lack of focus and my disability caused me to question what I was doing. This was a written test, one hundred questions, something that was never my strong suit; what was I thinking? Reviewing the questions it dawned on me that they applied to things I had already learned. My anxiety diminished as I began to answer the questions, determined to overcome my challenges and pass the exam. It felt good at the end, finding out that I earned my certification. I was fortunate to receive my Master of Photography Degree that same year. My next goal was obtaining the Craftsman degree. Teaching and sharing what I had learned at every opportunity earned the required merits needed for that degree.

My interest in print competition increased, so it was off to Winona to study with Roland Laramée and Harold Bovee at the judge’s workshop. During my journey to become an affiliated juror I met some very talented and sharing photographers who helped me understand how to evaluate an image. Learning to verbalize what it is that moves us and what disturbs us. It was also becoming clearer to me that it’s not just what you say but how you say it that makes you an effective juror.

Over the next few years my interest in portraiture began to fade. I was making an incredible living doing it but the passion was not what it had been. Like many things throughout my life, it was losing its luster. As usual photography with it’s

great diversity found a way to hold my interest. I returned to creating landscape images, my first passion in the world of photography.

It was during this period of my life I witnessed the same symptoms in my granddaughter that had plagued me as a child. By the age of seven, she was showing all of the same signs that haunted me throughout life. Her homework, which was very simple, took hours because she couldn't focus long enough to read an entire question before trying to solve it. She was unable to sit through dinner or watch an entire show on television without the need to do something else. Seeing her reminded me of my own personal challenges, recalling my struggle to reach goals that required great amounts of attention.

The struggles in my life have been ever recurring. While I have been making great strides in coping with my difficulties, there have been many setbacks. Never fully understanding what made me different than most people around me was challenging. It was difficult to focus on anything for a long period at a time. I could be sitting at the dinner table ready to eat but feel the need to change channels on the television, back to the table, then off to get something to play with to occupy my mind, back to the table, sit down and eat a bite. My socks are bugging me so I head to the bedroom to take them off, back to the table and eat some more, waiting for dinner to be over because there are so many other things to do. This began to bother me more and more, it was apparent there was something wrong.

While visiting with my physician concerning my anxiety and mild depression he suggested I see a doctor in Louisville that specialized in ADD and ADHD. It was odd, sitting in an office filled with children who suffer from this disability. These kids were young versions of me suffering through the same symptoms that I had endured throughout my entire life. I could sense how they were struggling to fit in and learn the things they would need to someday be successful.

One third of the way through the three-part testing the doctor sat down with me and asked about my level of frustration. He said to me on a scale of one to ten,

with ten being the worst, that I was at nine and I hadn't even completed the testing. He explained that there were drugs to help those with this problem. He further explained that like most drugs, they have severe side effects. Making the choice between the ailment and the side effects was something that was tough to come to terms with. Was I willing to live with the side effects of some pharmaceutical or learn to live with ADHD and its effects on my life?

My good friend Michael Timmons sensed my fading interest in portraiture and suggested that I start competing with the landscape and art that I had always done for my own pleasure. He suggested bringing some of my files up to his place where we could work on them. These times together taught me to find the image within the image and take my photography to the next level. It was also at this time that I ventured into the art world and began to do juried exhibits and shows, enjoying my craft in a new and different way.

It's a blessing that within five minutes of my house there are an incredible number of beautiful horse farms. Black and white plank fences running for miles along tree lined country roads. The wonderful barns, the designs created by the plank fences and the strikingly beautiful horses became the subjects of my photography. Panoramic landscapes intrigued me and my mind began to form images in long narrow views. I would look around and see these wide vistas and know that it was my opportunity to capture Kentucky the way it appears to me, wide and beautiful.

Photography with its many genres has managed to hold my interest and keep my mind busy. When interest begins to fade, another area opens up in my life, taking me down a different path.

When I photograph flowers, they don't present themselves to me as flowers, but as shapes, textures and colors. The vast variety of flowers in all of their glorious colors offer infinite possibilities and have held my attention for some time now. Similar to landscapes, they are calming and soothe my symptoms.

While exploring the American West I was fascinated to find the unusual colors at least compared to the lush greens of Kentucky. There are also unusual designs and motion in objects found along the way. The simplicity of the old cars with imaginary faces, the textures of an agave plant, and the movement of the grasses of the open plains, are but a few of the wonders the west has to offer.

I'm struggling to connect the dots for you as to how photography is one of the few things in life that seems to bring me into focus. It is the variety, many styles, vast subjects and mediums that allow me to not lose interest. I get extremely anxious prior to every photo session – no matter what type of shoot it is. Yet when the photography starts I am almost always able to focus on the task at hand. I have many options in my mental toolbox, which I have filled for over 30 years with the tools given to me by too many people to name. These people have shared their thoughts, styles, techniques, love and passion for photography. They have critiqued my work with invaluable insight, helping me to see differently and capture the things that are in my head. For just a short time during these sessions, there is a feeling of being a normal person with the ability to think, focus and create images from within my wounded mind.

Despite ADHD, I long to return to the feelings that I experienced in the Smoky Mountains while standing knee deep in the Roaring Fork Creek. I want to have those feelings of peace wash over me again, like they did that day. Through photography I have learned to compose and focus in my everyday life. I use the gifts that God has given me, to overcome my deficiencies and to accept the things that have been put in front of me. Remembering the words and lessons of my parents, that time is indeed at a premium and realizing that God does not give us more than we can handle.

I am not ashamed of my condition, but have learned to embrace it and to deal with it each and every day. I know that I can accomplish anything that I set my mind to. I have proven this to myself my entire life.

Finding focus is not easy for everyone, and certainly not for me. But it is a never-ending pursuit of excellence, a way of life, and a blessed life indeed.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Biography:

Opened his studio in March 1987 leaving a 14 year career as an auto mechanic. Dave's residential studio is located in Versailles, Kentucky. A small town of 8,000. The bulk of his portrait business comes from Lexington 15 miles away.

Huntsman Photography is a Portrait and Fine Art studio. Dave's work is available through his studio as well as in several galleries in Central Kentucky. On a personal note Dave and Lucie his wife of 33 years enjoy their 2 grandchildren, boating, ballroom dancing, motorcycles and just about any activity involved with water. Dave has been a certified diver since 1974 and is also certified as a Cave diver. It is Dave's belief that a well rounded life with many interest (including those outside of photography) make us better photographers.

He currently serves on the board of directors of Collins Classic for Children with Cancer and is the Photography Coordinator for Indian Summer Camp for Children with Cancer.

Dave has presented his programs at many State, Local and National Conventions. His "down to earth" and "honest" approach is the key to reaching many photographers with good solid information. He continues to teach at for local photography groups and camera clubs sharing his passion for photography.

Education:

Harlan Elementary School, Harlan KY

Scott County High School, Georgetown, KY Graduated 1972

Attended University of Kentucky (1973 - 1974)

Winona School of Photography

Assorted week long Schools

New Horizons Learning Center, Web Design Courses, Lexington, KY

Photographic Accomplishments:

PPA National Award

PPA Affiliated Jury Chairman

PPA Master of Photography Degree

PPA Photographic Craftsman Degree

PPA Certified (previously)

KPPA Presidents Award (for service)

KPPA Kentucky Award (for service)

Kentucky Fellowship Degree

Kentucky Degree of Photographic Excellence

Official Photographer for the Opera House of Lexington

PPA Service Merits (261)

PPA Speaker Merits (149)

Print Competition Awards:

Kodak Gallery Elite (first place) 2005
Kodak Gallery Awards 21
Fuji Masterpiece Awards 6
PPA Platinum Photographer of the Year (2)
PPA Gold Photographer of the Year (3)
PPA Silver Photographer of the Year (1)
Kentucky Photographer of the Year (seven times)
Kentucky Best of Show (eight times)
PPA Imaging Excellence Award
ASP State Medallion Award (2)
PPA Loan Collection Images (24)
PPA Exhibition Merits (99)

Service:

Member of Professional Photographers of America
Member of American Society of Photographers
Member of Kentucky Professional Photographers Association
Board of Directors Collins Classic for Children with Cancer
Coordinator of Photography Indian Summer Camp for Children with Cancer
Portrait Group Professional Photographers of America (past)
Board of Directors Kentucky Professional Photographers Association
Past President of the Kentucky Professional Photographers Association
Past President of the Woodford County Chamber of Commerce, Versailles, KY
Member of PPA Photographic Exhibition Committee
Chairman of KPPA Print Committee
Instructor for the PPA Judges Workshop