



# "Seeing the Essence" in Your Photographs

by Noella Ballenger

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**Over the years I have made it a habit to collect old, wonderful books about my passions for art and photography. As the years have passed and my studies continued, my bookshelves seemed to expand of their own will. As students in my on-line classes and my workshops question me, I find these old resources invaluable. When I need to puzzle out a solution to one of my photographic problems, they always seem to give me the springboard that I need to find the solution. And when I need to come up with article ideas, they are right there as well.**

**So, knowing that I had a deadline for an article for Apogee, I went thumbing through some old books for inspiration. I found it in a 1979 book by Willis Peterson called "*The Glory of Nature's Form*". Mr. Peterson is both a photographer and a teacher who went on to become the director of the photography department of Arizona's Glendale College, as well as a major Arizona Highways contributor.**

**The first section in his book is in fact called "*Seeing the Essence*".**

**The title alone was inspirational and triggered all kinds of ideas for me, so with thanks to Peterson, I borrowed it for the title of my article.**

Let's talk about *seeing the essence* of an object or place as Mr. Peterson expresses it, as I feel it and how you can develop a sense of awareness that will lead you to finding your own sense of "*the Essence*".

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Willis Peterson says in his book that, "An image must have a vibrant composition so that it will live. It has to inspire a thought. It has to communicate a statement--this is spring, or this is fall or this is love or this is youth, etc." But then he says, "It needs to take that additional step of discovering the spirit or essence associated with the subject's physical being." Tall orders for sure.

When I think about my photography, I certainly agree with all of those prerequisites, but in my mind it is a little different ... or perhaps I just express it differently.

I want to break some of this down for you and see if we can develop these ideas together.

Compositions have to grab the viewer's attention. And while I have never used the word vibrant to describe a composition, that word certainly fits. The photographer must demand that the viewer first look at the image and then manage to keep their attention and involvement.

This certainly will inspire thought and communication between the photographer and the viewer. To my mind, this doesn't have much to do with the essence of the subject, but it has more to do with the techniques that you can learn to use to communicate.

So what about the subject? I think that this is where the *seeing the essence* comes into play. I like to think of it as simplifying things--getting to the heart of the subject. How do you convey an entire forest with a single leaf, an entire ocean with an edge of foam from a wave, or perhaps fields and fields of grain with a single stalk?

There is a moment when I am photographing a subject from many angles, in many ways, that something inside of me says, "Ah, now you're on the right track!" A different feeling comes into my fingers and that seems to take over. I call this feeling intuition, but it is really a depth of knowledge that comes from studying thousands and thousands of images in both photography and other art mediums and from countless hours of ripping into my own images and trying to find what worked, what didn't and why. And when those moments of work are finished, I am depleted. It's done and I know that something special has happened. This is the connection that the aware nature photographer makes with the subject.

Now, let's go through the process of doing this.

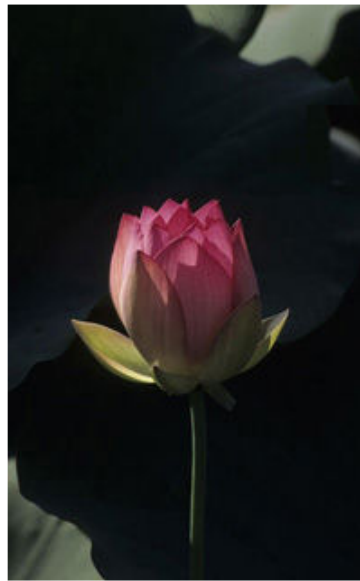
You stop because you have seen something that attracts your attention. Always take that first image just as you originally saw it. This is where most of the casual photographers begin to be separated from the not-so-casual photographers. The difference is that the casual photographer stops there with one shot or repeats that initial shot several times without thinking about what triggered that stop. The more aware photographer begins to question what it was that made the stop necessary. Was it the flower along side of the road? Was it the lake in the background or the mountain in the distance? Hmmmm...just exactly what is it that grabbed your attention?

So then you start to work setting up your shots--remember I mentioned shooting a subject in many ways...vertically, horizontally, moving to different angles, using different lenses, f-stops etc. These are all things that help you define what it is that grabbed your attention in the first place. By exploring carefully your surroundings and the subject that you want to emphasize, you are well on your way to seeing and defining the essence of your image.



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**I loved the look of the flowers and the early morning light was strong and intense, but when I looked more closely I was distracted by the out-of-focus tree trunks in the background and the bright petal hanging on to the seed pod on the left. What attracts me is the one flower.**



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**Should I isolate this flower more and go vertical? No, that doesn't work at all for me.**



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**I love the shadows of the leaves on the water, but the flower takes a back seat to the leaves and shadows, so that is out.**



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**The flowers are dainty and beautiful. I like the soft light, but there are too many flowers in this shot.**



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**Ah, now this is much better. Soft light to go with soft flowers, but still not quite the impact that I want. I want my viewer to see just one flower.**

But there is still more--a major final step. That final, very important step comes when your intuition kicks in and you just know that you hit it right. It's difficult to explain and even more difficult to develop, but it is when all of those wonderful senses you have and the subject matter come together to define what it is that is the most important part of the subject and how it fits into its surroundings. And it is in knowing that you captured that "essence" in the strongest way possible. Mr. Peterson says it is "...his credo of nature photography--defining in an image the 'essence' of life."



Here are some questions to ask yourself that should help you get closer to seeing and photographing "the essence" in your work. You might want to put these on a small card to keep in your pocket when you are out in the field.

1. What grabbed my

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**Better yet ... in fact, this is what I want to show and what I want to say about these flowers. It is the intimacy of the shot that I really like because these are delicate, intimate flowers. The focus is right on the flowers with the dark leaves taking a supporting role. I think the glimpse of the center of the flower along with those dainty petals and soft light captures the "essence" of the lotus for me.**

photos as needed, so I don't miss the present opportunity. Tomorrow it may look totally different and be gone.

4. What is the subject about and have I shown that—is it vibrant and demanding attention?
5. How does the subject relate to the world around it and have I shown that--does it take the viewers imagination beyond the photo itself?
6. Have I clearly shown what I want the viewer to see? What does it tell the viewer?
7. Did I capture the "essence" of the subject in this image?

And do remember, photography is very subjective--you should go with what *you*, as the photographer, feels that "essence" is.

**Here are some examples of when I felt that it all came together for me. This was after many shots and using various techniques, before I felt I captured the essence of the subject--the moment and the feeling.**

attention?

2. What can I eliminate from the composition to help emphasize the subject?

3. Have I changed angles, lenses and exposure to make the subject stand out?

Have I taken as many



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**Hummingbird** – I was photographing a friend’s hummingbird feeder late one afternoon. The sun was setting behind a distant mountain and it presented the perfect backdrop for the birds. This shot seems to say so much about the bird, its feeding habits and its swift flight.

**Owl Family** – I was told about this Great Horned Owl nest and spent about 3 weeks going out each evening to photograph the birds. About this time of day, Mom would fly in and there would be some activity as the babies were looking for food and busy flapping to strengthen their wings. In this quiet moment, I was able to capture this lovely family portrait.

**Grain field** – While traveling through farm areas in Washington state, I saw miles and miles of rolling hills covered with grain. How could I tell the story of these beautiful fields because we city folks don’t always understand or appreciate this farming environment. I was really working hard when a refreshing breeze came up and the grain began blowing in the wind. I slowed the shutter speed to capture the movement of the breeze through the grain and knew that I had the image I wanted.

**Sand dunes** – What is the “essence” of a sand dune? In Death Valley the dunes can be stunningly beautiful near dawn. Climbing a dune can be difficult but once you reach a ridgeline and can see into the distance it is worth it. I love the shape and the soft light but while some photographers would work to keep all footprints out of their shots, I felt that the trace of footprints helped tell the story of the sand dunes. Where do those foot prints lead and what is just over the next rise? That is the story I wanted to tell.

**Ocean wave** – This is one of my favorite images because I learned so much from taking it. I had spent a wonderful couple of days along the Oregon and Northern California coasts. There is so much to see and photograph but I was still dissatisfied. It felt like I had something more to do and I just couldn't figure it out. I had parked my car and was just enjoying the sunset when I saw how the wave would come in and smack the rocks. Suddenly all of the work of the last couple of days came together for me here. I love the wildness of the ocean and its restlessness. Even the violence of a storm or wave smashing into the shore is more exciting and more beautiful to me than the calm. This shot says "ocean" to me in a way that no other does.

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**Would you like to learn more and become an even better photographer? Be sure to join Noella in one of her online classes presented through Apogee Photo. You'll want to get signed up today - [just click here.](#)**

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