

## **Catherine Hall: Adding Empathy to the Equation**

By Michelle Perkins

Many people have asserted that a portrait says as much about the photographer as it does about the subject. Looking at Catherine Hall's evocative images, it's easy to see what they mean. Despite the diversity of her subjects, from upscale New York City brides to underprivileged Appalachian children, Catherine's images reflect a consistency of vision that arises from her empathetic approach to photography as a whole and to her subjects as individuals.

The ability to make this kind of connection is often an overlooked asset, especially among photojournalistic approaches that encourage photographers to remain detached observers. For Catherine, the objective stance has its moment, but it is not the only way (or necessarily the best way) to capture real emotions. "With things like the ceremony or the first dance—those iconic moments—I'll step back, but I'm not a photojournalist in the 'fly on the wall' sense," says Catherine. "The rest of the time, I'm interacting with my subjects. I love directing people and getting involved—and that interaction is what makes my work different from that of other photographers."

So neglected is the role of this connection between subject and photographer that Catherine reports her seminar attendees are generally more interested in learning how to get sponsors and make money than in how to elicit real emotions from the people they photograph. In her opinion, that may be putting the cart in front of the horse. Obviously, having good business sense and a solid marketing plan are important, but if you can't connect with your subjects, you're still not going to attain your greatest potential—either creatively or financially.

Images that reveal something genuine and uncensored about the subject have a wider and more enduring appeal than those that simply provide an accurate rendering of a person's physical appearance. "When things are superficial because the client doesn't trust you and doesn't let you in, or if you take an okay image and try to make it great by adding superficial tricks in post production, then it's not going to matter to anyone in fifty years. The heart of the image isn't there," Catherine says. "When someone lets you into their life, on the other hand, you're documenting the human condition. Everyone can associate with the pure emotion of a bride's father seeing her for the first time in her gown, or the bride glowing on her wedding day. If it's real, it's significant to everyone who looks at it. That makes it timeless, because the human condition doesn't really change."

So how do you go about making this all-important connection? Catherine credits both nature and nurture. Her mother, she says, was an important role model, and helped her to develop her ability to connect with people. "My mom is this incredible woman; when she walks into a room, it just lights up. She seems to be able to do this with everyone, whether it's a famous person or someone who's homeless. She's a good person and very open, and people respond by directly opening up to her. They not only like her, they trust her," says Catherine. "I think people really read intentions. Energy is contagious, so if you're positive about what you're doing, the subjects get excited, too. My subjects see me as someone who wants to create art, and create it in a positive way, so they open up to me. I learned all that from her." This connection is so powerful that a second shooter on a wedding job recently commented to Catherine that he couldn't believe how much the bride opened up to her. When Catherine mentioned that she had just met the bride that same night, he was amazed—he thought they had known each other for years.

If you didn't grow up with a gregarious role model like Catherine's mom, of course, there are other ways to enhance your skills. Catherine notes that her work around the world for non-profit organizations has had a big impact on her approach; working in Thailand or Vietnam, for example, she simply could not communicate verbally with her subjects, so she needed to learn how to get the results she wanted through her expression and body language—all skills she continues to use today. These shoots also give Catherine a chance to recharge her creative batteries. "Instead of walking into a wedding and just wanting to get it done, I'm fresh and wanting to do an awesome job," she says.

Catherine also attributes a great part of her success to simply going into each shoot with the right mindset. For many photographers, that means thinking more about the special moment they are a part of, and less about their bottom line. "I genuinely want to do a great job for my clients above everything else," she says. "When I was trying to decide what I wanted to do for a living, it was important to me to do something where I felt I was giving back. In photography, I felt there was a huge amount I could do—whether it was educating people, or helping non-profit groups, or documenting people's weddings with images they will treasure forever. They're all ways in which I'm hopefully putting something positive in the world."

As Catherine's work shows, making an empathetic connection with the person in front of your camera is critical to success. When it happens, the client gets the best possible results and the images will connect with viewers for years to come. To learn more about Catherine Hall, please visit [www.CatherineHall.net](http://www.CatherineHall.net).

Michelle Perkins is a professional writer, photographer, and digital-imaging specialist. She has written for PC Photo and is the author of numerous books, including *Professional Portrait Lighting: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers* (Amherst Media, 2006) and *Professional Portrait Posing: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers* (Amherst Media, 2007).