A Very Short Explanation of Portrait Lighting

By Bruce Philpott

The next time you're looking at a sunset, turn around and look behind you, directly away from the sun. I'm not talking about the sky – look at how flat that landscape seems to be. It's as if it's on a single, painted plane. Now look to your left or right and you'll see how that low sun, ninety degrees to one side, dramatically shows us the shapes of the landscape, buildings and people.

What you're seeing is how shadows describe shapes; how they inform us of what size things are and how far they are away from each other. Shadows show us the depth of the landscape or any subject.

When a light source is behind you or mounted on your camera, you hardly see any of those "informing" shadows, so the viewer doesn't have any visual clues as to the depth or textures of your subject.

As you move your light off to one side (or as you move around the subject, when it's a stationary light such as the sun), you begin to see shadows which give dimension and "feel" to your subject. The further you move the light (or yourself), the stronger the effect.

Lighting guru Dean Collins once showed a wonderful series of slides. The first one looked like a flat gray card filling the camera's view. There was a little dark smudge near the center on the next one. Then the smudge got larger, then larger. Soon other dark areas started to show on this gray field. Eventually some of us recognized that we were seeing the facial features of a beautiful model. Laughter slowly spread around the room as everyone caught on that we were seeing shadows which described the features of a human subject. We were still seeing just the gray panel (it was a sheet of rubbery latex stretched tightly

For the photo at the left, I put my softbox main light right behind the camera giving lighting as flat as I could without using a ring flash. That's the extreme of what you get when the sun (or other light source) is directly in line with the camera's lens. For the photo at the right, I put my softbox nearly 90 degrees around the subject and about three feet above the subject's eye level. This gives me shadows under the eyebrows, nose and lips and shadows on the side of the forehead, nose and cheekbone, describing these features far better than the flat light at the left.

on a frame) but as the shadows of the oblique light started to show, we could see the features of the subject, even though we were still looking at the gray latex sheet.

As the slide show progressed, with the model's face pressed fully into the latex sheet, he moved the single light source from high and to the subject's side closer and closer to the camera until it was nearly on the axis of the lens. As the light moved, we saw her features less and less, until, when it was at the camera, we could no longer distinguish her features.

That five minute slide show changed how all of us saw lighting from then on.