



CHASING THE *Light*
Improving Your Photography with
AVAILABLE LIGHT

IBARIONEX PERELLO

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VOICES THAT MATTER™

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IMPROVING YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY WITH AVAILABLE LIGHT**

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Dedication

For Cynthia, my biggest cheerleader

and

Mike Cohen, for the gift of learning to see.

Acknowledgments

Compiling a list of people to thank for all that they have contributed to the book that you hold in your hands is daunting. So many people have helped to inspire and encourage me that this list seems far too short. Thank you to:

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My family, who has, each in his or her own way, helped inspire the way I see the world.

The thousands of people I've met on my journey who have provided me the opportunity to turn my camera on them and record our momentary encounter during this all-too-brief time on Earth.

And God, for the eyes to see and the talent and the inspiration to make the most of it.

About the Author

Ibarionex R. Perello is a photographer, writer, and producer with over 25 years of experience in the photographic industry. His photographs and articles have appeared in numerous publications, including *Outdoor Photographer*, *PC Photo*, *Digital Photo Pro*, *Shutterbug*, and *Rangefinder*. He is an instructor of photography at BetterPhoto.com as well as an adjunct professor at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Ibarionex is the co-founder of Alas Media, a multimedia production company. He is also the host and producer of *The Candid Frame: A Photography Podcast*, which features conversations with the world's best emerging and established photographers.

Ibarionex lives near Los Angeles with his wife and their dogs, Spenser and Tracy.

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Foreword

When I first started reading this book, I immediately felt engaged with a passionate photographer who really cares about his work, and with someone who really wants to share his long experience with other photographers.

I have known Ibarionex since he worked for Werner Publishing, where, at the time, I was Group Editorial Director of the photo magazines. Ibarionex always had a passion for light, for photographing people, and for photography in general that came across strongly in his work and especially his photography.

That shows up again in this book. I love the photos and the stories you can see within them. Ibarionex knows how to get involved with life and capture that with his cameras.

But the book is so much more. Ibarionex has poured himself into the text to bring his perspective to photography to everyone. He shows us his photos and gives some perspective on how they were shot. I love the way he incorporates real stories of how he approached photographing certain subjects. He doesn't just tell you to be careful of photographing white clothing, for example, but tells you of his experience in photographing a young girl in her first-communion dress.

Ibarionex's joy in photography comes through, too, in both the text and the photos. These are positive photos that make you feel good about the world we live in, and they help you get to know the people in the photos as if they were good neighbors. His how-to explanations are the same, a positive, helpful approach that you feel good about reading. And you will definitely learn a few things.

This is a book that can be enjoyed and learned from simply by paging through the photos and reading the captions. Then it can be further savored while you learn about photography as you read the text. You will enjoy reading it the first time, and you'll return to it as a reference again and again.

—**Rob Sheppard**

Author, Photographer; Editor-at-Large, Outdoor Photographer Magazine

Introduction

There is no shortage of books dedicated to the topic of photography. Despite photography's relative youth, countless words have been dedicated to this craft, which uses a little magic box to convert the intangible quality of light into something tangible, a photograph.

I've learned from and been inspired by many of these same books, and I have to admit some feelings of intimidation at the thought that I have something to contribute. Yet, despite these feelings, I have every confidence that what I share here will help to contribute to your passion for photography.

It's not because I believe that my way is the better or best way to approach photography. I don't dare make that claim. What I do know, however, is that I've been blessed with the gift of seeing, and that gift has been nurtured by the words I've read, the photographs I've seen, and the photographers I've met. That gift becomes valuable only when I make the choice to share it with others. Sometimes that sharing comes in the form of a photograph, but it also takes shape when I help inspire others to discover their own unique ways of seeing.

If you become a better photographer as a result of the words and images in these pages, that's a wonderful thing. However, the worth of this book becomes much more valuable if you discover a completely new way of seeing with and without a camera. That's my hope for you.

Enjoy the chase.

1

Beginning to See

Each time I venture out with my camera, I'm filled with a sense of hope.

I'm hoping that I'll discover a subject that will inspire me to make a photograph. But not just any photograph—one that will allow me to combine my camera skills with my unique way of seeing. Yet, despite how simple the physical act of raising a camera to my eye and pressing the button is, producing something that satisfies my creative appetite is often a challenge.

I'm aspiring to capture a photograph that expresses how I feel about what I see. I want to communicate to the viewers the wonder I feel when I discover something unique and beautiful. I want them, for just a moment, to share how I see the world.



As a fledgling photographer, I often fell short of that goal. And even as I invested in more equipment and became increasingly proficient with it, the ability to consistently make the “great” photograph seemed elusive. Yes, I was able to make such images on occasion, but those moments seemed more attributable to luck than to any inherent sense of talent or skill.

Though I loved photography, I have to admit that, many days, I returned home from shooting feeling frustrated with my inability to capture what I had felt and seen within the frame.

I was simply pointing my camera at people, places, and things and “documenting” them on film or digital. The image looked just like the object that had drawn my attention, but there was little else there—none of what I *felt* while making the image, especially not the excitement I had experienced. The photograph may have been an accurate representation of what I saw, but it wasn’t an accurate representation of what I *felt*.

What made the difference? What was it that finally allowed me to produce the kind of images I aspired to readily and consistently create? The answer was a simple one: I started paying attention to what was happening with the light.

Awakening to the Light

The easiest way for me to explain the way of seeing that transformed how I work is with a photograph. This image of a mannequin standing alone on a downtown sidewalk exemplifies how being aware of the light led me to create one of my favorite photographs.

It was an early morning in downtown Los Angeles, on Broadway, a street that has become one of my favorite locations for photography. I was walking south on the west side of the street. I had chosen to walk there because the morning sun was illuminating patches of the west side of the street, while the east side was relegated to shadow. I knew I wanted to work with the warm, direct sunlight, even before I had discovered a subject to photograph. By paying attention to what was happening with the light, I was already creating an opportunity to take advantage of it once I discovered a subject.



I came to an intersection and was ready to cross when I looked to my right and saw the mannequin alone on the sidewalk. The sunlight, which was passing between tall buildings from the east, came down like a spotlight onto the figure, and I immediately knew that there was something special there. I quickly moved down the sidewalk, positioned myself just off the curb, and carefully composed my frame. I exposed frame after frame, carefully adjusting the composition and exposure.

People walked past, seeing the mannequin as nothing more than an obstruction in their path, but I saw something different: I saw how the direction of the light revealed the color and texture of the dress. I witnessed the contrast between the richness of the fabric and the dull, muted colors and textures of

**Canon 20D | ISO 200 |
f/8 @1/400th**

Being in tune with what was happening with the morning light allowed my eyes to find this subject. Without that awareness, the mannequin would've been just another obstruction on the sidewalk.

the sidewalk and storefront. I felt excited as I exposed the images, knowing that I had discovered and was capturing something wonderful.

This image likely wouldn't have happened had I not been aware of the light. Like many of the people out that morning, I would've seen the mannequin as just another object on the street, an obstruction to get around rather than something to admire, much less make a photograph of.

Each time I give a presentation or lead a workshop and this image flashes on the screen, I hear the reaction of the audience. I know that most of those people wouldn't have reacted to the mannequin in that way if we'd been walking down the street together. They wouldn't have seen it in the way I did, because they wouldn't have been observing the light. But through my photograph, they're able to see the light, the mannequin, the street, and the world in the way I did at that exact moment. Within that single frame, I'm able to take their hands and say, "This is the way I see the world."

So, even before I raised the camera to my eye. I was seeing my photograph because I was aware of the light. I was introduced to my subject because I was awake to the qualities of the light and the potential it had to transform the world around me.

Asking Yourself Three Simple Questions

This approach to seeing is based on asking yourself three simple questions:

- Where is the light coming from?
- What is the quality of the light?
- How much light do I have to work with?

The answers to these three questions are important because they open up your eyes not only to how the light impacts your subject, but also to what controls or features of your camera you need to adjust in order produce a successful image. But it has to *begin* with an awareness of the light.

In the following sections, I explain each of these three questions in greater detail.

Where is the light coming from?

Awareness of where the light is coming from—both its source and its direction—informs the settings you’ll use on your camera to achieve the best exposure. It also leads you to choose where to position your subject and/or your camera in relation to that light. As you begin to see where the light is coming from, you train your eye to analyze how many different types of light there are and how light is transformed when it comes into contact with different objects (for example, when it’s reflected off the surface of a large, white wall).

What is the quality of the light?

Once you know where the light is coming from, you can begin to analyze its physical qualities. If the light is coming from the bare midday sun, you see the harsh, deep shadows it produces on the opposite side of the subject and other elements in the frame. On an overcast day, that same sun is filtered through clouds, creating a more diffused quality of light, which softens the shadows and reduces the contrast between light and dark. If the light source is a candle, the light is not only soft, but very warm in color—markedly different from the light produced by the camera’s built-in flash, which has a harsher quality.

How much light do I have to work with?

This question is crucial, because it determines your ability to pull off a well-exposed and sharp photograph. On a bright day, you have an abundance of light to work with, which means you have a wealth of options when it comes to the combinations of shutter speed, aperture, and ISO that you can use. In a low-light situation (at dusk, for example), those options are more limited, and you have to make compromises—for example, using a slower shutter speed and sacrificing sharpness and/or using a wider aperture and sacrificing depth of field.

TAKING PICTURES WITHOUT A CAMERA

The process of paying attention to light can begin even when you don't have a camera in your hands. Take a moment to look around you right now. Where is the light coming from? Where are the shadows falling? Are there areas that are very bright, while others are very dark? Are there multiple light sources around you?

Seeing and evaluating light is a skill that you can develop throughout the day, even when you're driving a car or riding on a train. Wherever there is light, you have the opportunity to hone the one skill that can and will transform your ability as a photographer.

Letting the Light Guide You

Here's an example of a common photographic subject, a flower. I saw this flower and was attracted to it as a potential subject. I could've composed my shot to emphasize the flower's shape and color, made a couple of images, and moved on. Although this might've resulted in a good image, that image might not have reflected the qualities that made me want to photograph the flower in the first place.

Instead, I slowed down for a moment and looked at what was happening with the light and how the flower looked different depending on my perspective. When the flower was lit from the front, the image had one look, but when I positioned the camera so that the flower was lit from the back, suddenly a completely different image appeared in my viewfinder. The color and texture that appealed to me were revealed. I moved in closer to emphasize those details that excited me, and the light allowed me to emphasize them. The result was a photograph that expresses my personal vision of the flower. This image is a direct result of my awareness of—and my use of—light.

Canon 20D | ISO 800 | f/3.5 at 1/5,000th

The vibrancy of color created by the light hitting the petals is what I was responding to when making this image of a flower.





These images and many of the other photographs in this book are as much about the light as they are about the subjects. The photo may contain a person, a landscape, a tire, a door, but my goal for all these images is that they're more than just copies of those elements on paper. If that were all they were, I would've failed to express what drives my passion for photography.

REMEMBER: The first image you take is never the only one you can make. Take the time to slow down and really *see* the light interacting with the subject of your photograph. Let the light be your guide.

Canon 20D | ISO 800 | f/9 @ 1/320th

Though the first image was good, I wondered how different those same petals would look if I allowed the light to pass through them on the way to my lens. The result is a very different experience of the same flower.

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2

The Elements of Exposure

For the longest time, I was convinced it was the camera that could make me a better photographer. As my passion for photography grew, I immersed myself in countless photographic magazines and books. I drew inspiration from great photographers like William Albert Allard, Jay Maisel, Mary Ellen Mark, William Eggleston, and Gordon Parks, often scouring the caption information for insight into what camera gear these legendary photographers had used.

I had the mistaken belief that if I could only afford and own the same equipment that they possessed, I would improve as a photographer. So, when I was finally able to afford and purchase some of that gear, I was disappointed that there was little difference to be found in my photographs.

There was certainly the thrill of the pristine newness I held in my hands, but unfortunately, that momentary rush didn't translate into a different way of seeing and making photographs. The purchase provided a sense of new possibilities, but it wasn't automatically fulfilled merely because I had left hard-earned cash on the counter of my local camera store.

No, the fulfillment of that promise came only as a result of my stepping out with my camera and creating photographs over and over again. It was the practice of making images that didn't work—many of them—that eventually gave me the insight I needed to make better photographs more consistently.

But merely being prolific wasn't enough. I might have succeeded in making tens of thousands of images, but until I could use the camera to create an image that expressed how I felt, I was nothing more than a walking and talking copy machine. I had to begin evaluating the light.

The Challenge of Exposure

One of the things I expected each new purchase to provide me were solutions for problems that I continually faced in the field. One of those issues had always been exposure.

The goal was simple enough: Create an exposure that's not too light or too dark. Often, I just allowed the camera's automatic features to handle things for me, but sometimes the automatic features were off the mark. Even if I controlled exposure manually and referred to the meter in my viewfinder, sometimes the exposure was less than stellar.

The problem wasn't so much with the camera technology as it was with the fact that I simply didn't know how to meter a scene. I had no idea how or why the things in front of my lens could impact the meter reading and, consequently, my image. I just hoped that if I looked through the viewfinder and positioned

Canon 40D | ISO 400 | f/5.6 @ 1/310th

This street scene of a man holding a bible offers a wide range of tones and colors, which makes it easy for the camera's evaluative meter to provide an accurate exposure.



the needle in the right place or got the LED to turn from red to green, I'd be fine. Well, sometimes I was and sometimes I wasn't.

The reason for this was a simple one and the fault didn't lie with the camera: I was *using* the light, but I wasn't *seeing* it. And if I wasn't seeing the light and how it was interacting with and impacting the scene, there was little hope that the camera would be able to figure it out for me.

I was looking at the objects I wanted to photograph, but I wasn't considering the quality or the direction of the light. I wasn't seeing the contrast between the highlights and the shadows. And more important, I was not recognizing when certain objects reflected more or less light than other objects.

I was completely blind to the very things that could and would help me to make better choices—choices not only about how I would photograph a scene, but about how I would meter it.

The challenge was taking what I was seeing with my naked eye and understanding how the camera was interpreting it.

The Fundamentals of Exposure

Every camera uses three elements to control exposure: shutter speed, aperture, and ISO. Yes, your camera may have a wealth of other bells and whistles, but shutter speed, aperture, and ISO are at the heart of everything you do with your camera. They impact every photograph you make.

Shutter speed

Your camera has a shutter that blocks the light path from the film (if you're shooting with a film camera) or the sensor (if you're shooting with a digital camera). Every time you push the button to take a picture, you're releasing the shutter. The shutter moves out of the way, allowing the light to make the photograph.

Shutter speed is measured, for the most part, in fractions of a second. Most cameras offer a range of 1/8,000 second to 30 seconds. Your camera also may have a bulb mode, in which the shutter remains open as long as you hold down the shutter release button.

Traditionally, shutter speeds have been adjusted in full-stop increments: 1/1,000, 1/500, 1/250, 1/125, 1/60, 1/30, 1/15, 1/8, 1/4, and 1/2 second. So, when you increase the shutter speed from 1/60 to 1/125 second, you're letting half as much light reach the film or sensor. When you decrease the shutter speed from 1/60 to 1/30 second, you're letting twice as much light reach the film or sensor.

Today's generation of cameras allow you to choose intermediate shutter speeds such as 1/45 or 1/90 second, which provide you the means to refine your exposure in increments as small as one-third or one-half stops.

**Canon 40D | ISO 200 |
f/4 @ 1/500**

Staying aware of my shutter speed helps ensure I get a sharp photograph when I quickly raise my camera to capture a street scene like this.





Olympus E-3 | ISO 250 | f/3.5 @ 1/800th

The choice of aperture not only allows enough light for a good exposure but also provides me the capability to control depth of field, which results in the girl's face appearing sharp, but the rest of the scene appearing slightly out of focus.

Shutter speed doesn't just affect exposure. It also affects the way in which you capture motion. When you use a faster shutter speed, you freeze the action. When you use slower shutter speed, you see the blur of moving objects. Whether you want the motion to be frozen or blurred is a creative choice that can have an impact on what shutter speed you use, but for now, I'll limit the discussion to how shutter speed contributes to exposure.

Aperture

The aperture, or f-stop, of a lens also controls the amount of light used for an image. But instead of adjusting how long the light is let in, aperture controls the size of the lens's opening. Most lenses have a range of apertures from f/22 to f/1.2. Not every lens extends for this full range—your lens may not have options at the higher and lower ends of the spectrum, but it still has a range of some sort. The smaller numbers (for example, f/1.8 and f/2) represent a very large aperture that allows more light to pass through the lens, while the larger numbers (for example, f/16 and f/22) represent a smaller opening that restricts the amount of light passing through.

As with shutter speed, a full-stop change in aperture doubles or halves the amount of light. The full aperture stops are: f/2, f/2.8, f/4, f/5.6, f/8, f/11, f/16, and f/22. So, changing the aperture from f/8 to f/11 halves the amount of light, while changing the aperture from f/8 to f/5.6 doubles it.

You also can adjust aperture in one-third or one-half stops. Apertures such as f/7.1 or f/3.2 provide you the ability make more precise changes to exposure.

As with shutter speed, the choice of aperture influences the look of your image beyond the exposure. The aperture impacts *depth of field* (how sharp elements in front or behind your point of focus appear in the image).



**Olympus E-3 | ISO 1000 |
f2/8 @ 1/200th**

When light levels are low, you may need to increase the ISO in order to provide a shutter speed/aperture combination that produces an accurate exposure and a sharp photograph.

ISO

If you've ever shot film, you know that you choose films based on ISO. Film ratings included common designations such as ISO 64, 100, 200, 400, 800, or 1600. You choose a speed of film based on how much light you expect to work with. If you plan to shoot under bright, sunny conditions, ISO 100 or 200 would be sufficient. But if you think you might shoot under low light, you might choose film with a much higher ISO, such as 400 or even 1600. Higher-ISO films are more sensitive to light and give you the ability to capture well-exposed images even when the light is less abundant.

SHUTTER SPEED/APERTURE COMBINATIONS

Shutter speed and aperture aren't used in isolation—they work together to make the picture you want. To see how the combination of aperture and shutter speed work, put your camera in aperture priority mode and set your ISO to 100. Using a tripod or a stable platform, point your camera at a very bright scene and select the smallest full-stop aperture you have available on your lens (for example, f/22 or f/16). Note the shutter speed that the camera has selected. Assuming you're outside on a sunny day, the shutter speed will likely be at or around 1/125 second.

Next, change the aperture in full-stop increments (f/16, f/11, f/8, f/5.6, and so on), and make a note of the shutter speed selected by the camera at each of these stops. You'll see that as the aperture opens up allowing more light in, the shutter speed increases in full-stop increments, thus shortening the duration the shutter remains open. So, if you open the aperture one stop, the camera automatically compensates by decreasing the shutter speed one stop, ensuring the same quantity of light needed for an accurate exposure.

All those different combinations of shutter speed and aperture you just saw would all deliver exactly the same amount of light to the sensor.

The numbers for shutter speed and aperture can be confusing, but an easy way to visualize how they work is by considering a faucet and an empty water glass.

Imagine that filling the glass is the equivalent of achieving a good exposure. However, in this case, instead of using light, we use water delivered by the faucet. We want to produce just the right amount of water to fill the glass and we have two ways of doing that: We can fully open the faucet (the equivalent of a wide aperture, such as f/2.8 or f/2), which allows a large rush of water to quickly fill the glass. Or we can close down the opening (for example, f/16 or f/22) so that the water comes out in smaller quantities, requiring that the faucet be opened for a longer period of time. Regardless of what combination is used, they both end up delivering the correct amount of water to the glass.
