



## Introduction

*"If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough."*

War photographer Robert Capa

*"Distance leads to enchantment."*

An observation in a fortune cookie.

In Tech Sheet 6, Part 1 of Back to the Basics, we talked about how unconventional framing could enliven an image and make it more engaging. The photographers proximity with their subject can also capture the viewers interest. Proximity and unconventional framing are actually related. They are

not identical twins, but more of the fraternal variety. What you usually do to one can seriously affect the other. They can at times appear to look identical yet there are some subtle differences between the two.

Dennis Carlyle Darling

## Proximity

Photographs that suffer from proximity problems are images that have their main center of interest located so far from the film plane that the subject gets swallowed by the surrounding background and loses its power to communicate. Graham King has coined the terms "the lonely figure" or "the distinct subject" syndrome to describe this photographic ailment.

Historically speaking, this distant subject syndrome was probably brought about by the same reason that causes the overabundance of center-weighted photographs to be made. People were not sure of what they were getting on the film, so they not only had the subject move in away from the edges of the frame, but also step back away from the photographer to insure that they would appear in the finished print.

Today we are able to moderate our fear of placing the subject closer to the camera far better than we have in moving the subject away from the center of the frame towards the edges. Experience has taught us that we see in the viewfinder is what we are going to get on the film. We have



Cameron

© Dennis Darling

gradually allowed the subject to move from the background into the middle ground, but unfortunately this has been the limit of our courage.

Each culture has created a sphere of personal space that most individuals within that particular culture feel comfortable operating within. In Arab countries, for instance, the space in which people interact is much closer than ours. People who live in large cities seem to need less space for interaction than those living in rural environments. Sociologists call this our personal "bubble."

We also have a comfort zone we tend to respect when we take photographs. This bubble tends to stretch out before us a greater distance than our interpersonal space. For a majority of us, the middle ground, or about a dozen feet away from the subject, is the distance that feels right for making a photograph. Unfortunately, the distance that feels good for us and the

distance between the subject and camera needed to make a successful image are often at odds. Without self-determination and discipline, our comfort zone wins out. Our portfolios are filled with middle-ground pictures. Try as we may in the darkroom, no amount of darkroom magic will disguise the fact that we should have been closer to the subject when we made the exposure.

Several things happen when we fail to get close enough to our subject when making a photograph. The first is the most obvious. When the subject is positioned too far from the camera, you lose detail. When photographing people, detail is power. If the subject is indeed the main reason why the image was made, then in many cases it should have the most clarity, both in size and in detailed information.

When your subject is too great a distance from the camera, you lose the sense of intimacy that might have been transferred to the viewer. Closeness equals involvement. It is difficult to bring the viewer into an image and become



Cairo Egypt

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Kashmeir

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Rainbow Family, East Texas  
© Dennis Darling

involved with the subject matter when the center of focus appears as a tiny pinhead within the frame's boundaries.

Subjects placed too far back in the frame tend to have to fight for attention with secondary information. Backgrounds play a crucial role in how an image is perceived. A steady diet of images without backgrounds would be extremely tedious. But amateurs go overboard and tend to load their photographs with visual clutter. Distracting backgrounds abound in their photos and envelop the subjects with chameleon-like intent. The viewer has to search for the focal point of the image. There is no orderly progression of visual elements from important to less important to incidental. There is no hierarchy of visual information. Everything is of equal value.

This is why many professional portrait photographers prefer to work within the confines of a studio. Photographing against a blank background isolates the subject and makes available the characteristics of the subject with a greater clarity than if the subject is entangled with a busy and overpowering background. Yet photographing in a studio is not always the most desirable or practicable route in making a photograph.

Photographers can get greater clarity and simplicity and retain valuable environmental background information by simply moving the subject closer to the lens.

As the subject to lens distance decreases, several things take place. The subject becomes more pronounced in the frame and establishes a definite focal point for the viewer to fix upon. Details of the subject become more apparent and complex. The subject acts as a foil blocking out some of the background and simplifying the image. In many cases, depth-of-field becomes a player and bestows upon the main subject a sharpness that it denies the background.

What if a large expanse of background is best for the desired effect? Simply use unconventional framing in combination with close proximity. Photograph the subject in close but shift the focal point to the edge of the frame and allow the background to take over the center ground. (A wide angle lens was made for this situation.)

In summary, proximity creates a sense of intimacy between viewer and subject. It creates a presence not allowed when the subject is farther removed from the viewer's gaze. It presents the viewer with a visual hierarchy of elements and suggests the most important part of the image. Proximity allows the viewer a closer look at the subject matter while minimizing the other elements within the frame. Proximity, used in unison with its twin, unconventional framing, can help you present the common in an uncommon and alluring fashion.

Practice visual ordering through the use of proximity. Try not to settle for the obvious middle ground solution. Adopt a questioning attitude about the image you are about to make. Ask yourself what is



Mardi Gras, LA  
© Dennis Darling

significant about the subject you are about to photograph. What about secondary information such as backgrounds? What elements really contribute to the meaning of the images you want to make? Can depth-of-field be used to enhance the statement you wish your images to make? Simplify. Get close. Break the bubble.

The following is a short list of books that contain excellent examples of the use of proximity in relationship to subject:

Davidson, Bruce. Central Park. Photographs by Bruce Davidson. Essay by Marie Winn. Preface by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers. New York: Aperture, 1995.

Mark, Mary Ellen. 25 Years. New York: Little Brown & Company, 1991.

Nixon, Nicholas. Photographs From One Year. Carmel, CA: Friends of Photography, 1983.

Lyon, Danny. Conversations with the Dead. Photos. of Prison Life, with the Letters and Drawings of Billy McCune #122054. Text by Philippe Carles. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971.

## About the Author: Dennis Darling

Dennis Carlyle Darling's books and photographs have won numerous photography and design awards and have been featured in such publications as *American Photographer*, *CA Magazine*, *Camera*, *Creative Camera*, *Photographis* and *Popular Photography Annual*. His work was recently featured in the Nov./Dec. 2000 issue of *View Camera*.

Darling is currently a professor and the director of the visual communication area of studies in the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. He is also one of the founding members of the Texas Photographic Society and is currently a member of the Advisory Council.



Dennis & Helen Darling  
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The Texas Photographic Society is a nonprofit organization of amateur and professional photographers whose purpose "is to support contemporary photography as a means for creative expression and cultural insight." With over 700 active members from 28 states, TPS focuses on the education and artistic development of its members and the community by

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