

Learning to See

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Teach people to see. —William Ellery Channing

Ancient Witness: Mark 8:14-21

On the trip to Europe that I took a number of years ago, one of the highlights was visiting the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam. I have always loved the impressionists, and among them Van Gogh was one of the very best.

You could see his development as an artist, his evolution. When he was young he used to visit the Rijksmuseum and look at the work of the earlier Dutch painter, Rembrandt. Then somewhere in the mid-1880's something began to happen. His work changed from being mainly representational to something new, something innovative. The new, bold use of colors and brushstrokes were not seen before. It was, I think, the moment of creative genius. He was on the leading edge of a new movement, a new perspective of art, which he shared with his colleagues including Gauguin and Lautrec.

Of course, as amazing as Van Gogh was, he received little recognition. He was poor most of his life and despaired that he was depending too much upon the support of his brother, Theo, who had his own family to provide for. And then there was his depression and epilepsy, and finally his suicide in 1890. I wonder if his inner torment and disabilities contributed to make him such an amazing artist. (How often do our weaknesses and pain lead us to become better human beings?)

There was this great line from one of Vincent's letters to his brother Theo. He was talking about artists and painters and said that their job is "to help people *see*." That line stayed with me for days. Maybe this is why I like him so much.

To me, an artist isn't supposed to represent reality, objectively and purely. I don't like paintings that look like photographs. I start with the assumption that our normal way of seeing, paying attention, and perceiving is very limited.

For me, any art that claims to represent reality, to capture it wholly, to contain it, is an arrogant thing. That's like a preacher claiming to have *the* Word of God, as if the Word of God can be held by any human words or scriptures. Literalism in any form is arrogance. No, I think that the best that an artist can do is focus on an aspect of the greater reality, highlight and celebrate something that is not normally seen or appreciated, to help us see what we ordinarily would miss.

I think that this is true for other forms of art as well. They help us to see, to feel, to perceive, to experience the fullness and the exhilaration of being a human being. Maybe I believe this about artists because this is how I view what Jesus was about and what I like about my job.

Jesus, the central figure of my own religious tradition, was about helping people to see, and in more than merely the literal sense. The stories of his miracles, such as his restoring the sight to

the blind, could have happened, historically. Charismatic leaders have been able to help heal people for generations, perhaps with psychosomatic illness. The mind and the body are linked, and the healing power of the mind can be very powerful. And the ritualistic actions can help people tap into that power. Jesus in his compassion and desire to help could have been one of those kinds of healers. But these stories, it seems to me, are primarily metaphors for something larger going on.

Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, a spiritual leader, was about helping people to see on a much broader, spiritual level. And *this* kind of sight gave people not just a clarity of vision, but it also helped them perceive with compassion, tenderness, joy, courage and passion. It helped people see potential and possibilities in their lives with eyes of hope.

Jesus was called savior, which means healer, because he helped make people whole, which means to be healed, in body, mind and spirit. His healings show the relation between sickness and guilt and between the desire to be healed and fear of being healed. They describe the attitude that makes healing possible, which is a trust in something greater than ourselves that transforms and heals. Charles Birch, an Australian biologist and theologian, wrote,

There are two ways of living, a sick way which is unauthentic living and a healthy way which is authentic living. In unauthentic living we allow ourselves to be molded by what we think others expect of us...

Yet it was these sorts of people who brought themselves to Jesus; split, contradicting themselves, disgusted and despairing about themselves, hateful of themselves, hostile towards everybody else, afraid of life, burdened with guilt feelings, accusing and excusing themselves, fleeing from others into loneliness, fleeing from themselves. Jesus gave them back to their real selves as new beings.

Jesus, like other authentic spiritual leaders from other traditions, helped people see themselves and their lives in a new way, and this was freeing, liberating and healing. One of the ways that Jesus talked about this was the image of the kingdom or reign of God. He believed that this domain of God was an invisible realm and that most people, whether naïve or sophisticated, are oblivious to it. In the (extra-canonical) Gospel of Thomas it says,

*His disciples said to him, "When will the Father's imperial rule come?"
"It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!' Rather, the father's imperial rule is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it."*

And in Luke there is a very similar passage where Jesus says to the Pharisees,

"You won't be able to observe the coming of God's imperial rule. People are not going to be able to say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'Over there!' On the contrary, God's imperial rule is right there in your presence."

And so the reign of God is not normally visible. It cannot be seen by eyes conditioned by the world. By conventional standards of the everyday world, the default world, the divine domain is simply invisible. And yet when we are able to see it, feel it, perceive it with our intuition; we get

in touch with its transformative and healing power. And it is a continual process. Seeing and feeling can open us up and allow us to see and feel even more.

Marcus Borg reflected on why this hidden kingdom is so difficult to see, why we are so often unaware of the presence of the sacred. He said,

Although we are spatially close to God (for we are in God), we are epistemologically distant; our senses are geared to knowing one level of reality—namely the world of matter and energy, time and space. We are capable of perceiving more; as the nature mystic Loren Eiseley suggests, we humans are like the Brazilian amphibian fish whose eyes have two lenses, one for seeing under the water and one for seeing above the water. But most of us most of the time have cataracts on our second lens. We commonly do not perceive the world of Spirit.

In other words, the old axiom, “seeing is believing,” is reversed. Jesus, in his parables and teaching, in his actions and healings, was trying to get people to see something that is there all along. For Jesus it’s the other way around: “believing is seeing.” It has to do with a state of mind and a state of heart. When we learn to trust life, trust Reality, trust the benevolent presence in the universe, our vision is expanded and our sight is restored. The contrast between Jesus and “doubting” Thomas is that Thomas said, “I’ll believe it when I see it, when I see the raised body with the nail holes in the hands and feet.” Jesus said, “You’ll see it when you believe it.”

Jesus often described this as a process of unlearning, of stripping away, of self-emptying, of becoming like a child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew Kelty, a trappist monk put it like this:

*You do not have to be holy to love God. You only have to be human.
Nor do you have to be holy to see God in all things.
You have only to play as a child with an unselfish heart.*

This is why authentic religion is more concerned about teaching people *how* to see, not *what* to see; not *what* to know, but *how* to know. As Richard Rohr says, “Spirituality is always about *how* to see.” But, it seems to me, too much religion focuses on the *what*—what to believe—on doctrine and dogma—and not on the *how*—how to believe, how to experience, how to become aware, and how to see the Divine Reality.

For Jesus, this unseen loving aspect to reality has special significance for those who are unloved, forgotten and discarded. The invisible realm is populated with the poor, the destitute, the grieving, the hungry, the unwanted children, the outsiders and outcasts. Like John Newton, the former slave trader who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” when he was able finally to *see*, his life was transformed from greed, grasping and selfishness, from viewing human beings as commodities to be bought and sold, to one of loving, serving and respecting the basic human dignity of others.

In the passage from Mark that we read today, the gospel writer has Jesus say “beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” What does this mean? Well, these were the two powers with which Jesus experienced opposition and conflict. The yeast of Pharisees was the religious institution more concerned about itself and with rules than the transforming presence of God—a religion that had become irrelevant to justice and compassion. The yeast of Herod was

the wealth, violence and greed of an empire in which a tiny elite engorged themselves while most of the others suffered or died. These two powers were woven into the fabric of society and affected every aspect of life.

Jesus was called *the Christ* or *the Anointed One* by the early followers because they saw him as singled out by God to *liberate* people from this kind of dysfunctional and destructive system.

For Jesus, seeing had as much to do with one's *heart* as with one's eyes. In Mark's story, Jesus says, "Are your *hearts* hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see?" For Jesus, even if you have good eyes, one cannot see if one's heart is messed up. He was saying, "Have you become blinded by those in religious and political power who say the status quo is acceptable? That everything is just fine?"

Then, according to Mark, Jesus asks them to remember the feeding of the 5,000. He reminds them that when our hearts are soft and open we can see the deep reality of the situation. We can see there is an abundance of God's compassion for everybody, not just a chosen few. We can see an abundance of things necessary for Life. We can see that there is enough for everyone. Hunger is not inevitable. Starvation is not necessary. Poverty is inexcusable. Scarcity is a lie. We live in an abundance that God's spirit can help us *see* with softened hearts.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear* there is a conversation between Lear and Gloucester. Although Lear can see physically, he is blind in the sense that he is unable to discern the true forces of good and evil in his kingdom. He asks Gloucester, "How do you see the world?" And he answers, "I see it feelingly."

This is seeing in the sacred manner: to see with our heart, with compassion, with an awareness of the pain and suffering of others—to see feelingly.

I'll end this morning with a favorite story told by that famous biblical scholar and humanitarian, Albert Schweitzer:

A flock of wild geese had settled to rest on a pond. One of the flock had been captured by a gardener, who had clipped its wings before releasing it. When the geese started to resume their flight, this one tried frantically, but vainly, to lift itself into the air. The others, observing his struggles, flew about in obvious efforts to encourage him; but it was no use. Thereupon, the entire flock settled back on the pond and waited, even though the urge to go on was strong within them. For several days they waited until the damaged feather had grown sufficiently to permit the goose to fly. Meanwhile, the unethical gardener, having been converted by the ethical geese, gladly watched as they finally rose together, and all resumed their long flight.

And so, a spiritual community is a place where we learn to see. It is a place where we open ourselves to the compassionate presence of God again and again, and like Paul, have the scales fall from our eyes.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)