

The Many Ways of Seeing

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Kearsarge Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
The Stone Chapel, Proctor Academy
Andover, New Hampshire

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Words for Reflection:

“For You,” Walt Whitman

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you,
whoever you are;

Those who govern are there for you, it is not you who
are there for them;

All architecture is what you do to it
when you look upon it;

All music is what awakes from you when you are
reminded by the instruments;

The sun and stars that float in the open air;
the apple-shaped earth and we upon it.

The endless pride and outstretching of people;
unspeakable joys and sorrows;

The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see, and
the wonders that fill each minute of time forever;

It is for you whoever you are – it is no farther from you than
your hearing and sight are from you; it is hinted
by nearest, commonest, readiest.

We consider bibles and religions divine- I do not say
they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you,
and may grow out of you still;

It is not they who give the life – it is
you who give the life.

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,

in things best known to you,
find the best, or as good as the best –

Happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place –
Not for another hour, but this hour.

The sermon: “The Many Ways of Seeing”

Most of you are aware that I’m among the ministers who provide chapel services to both Woodcrest Village in New London, and the Clough Center at New London Hospital. These services are grounded in traditional Christian traditions, since probably ninety percent of the two congregations are from Mainline Protestant denominations, with a couple of Unitarian Universalists in the mix. I, of course, come with my free church, UU, progressive take on religion, which seems to work for all who attend.

We use a hymnal at each of these services which includes many of the hymns that many of us here know, alongside some of the more Evangelical hymns that I’ve never before used in services. Among the hymns of the former (traditional) category is called “Open My Eyes.” It has a haunting, lyrical melody, with these lyrics:

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp, and set me free.

Open my ears that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear
And while the wave-notes fall upon my ear,
Everything false will disappear.

Open my mouth and let me bear
Gladly the warm truth everywhere;
Open my heart , and let me prepare
Love with Thy children thus to share.

This little hymn was written in 1895, by Clara H. Scott (1841-1897). The hymn was brought to my attention by one of the Woodcrest folks, and once I read and played it through on the piano, it took me quite a while to put it away.

I've called my sermon this morning "The Many Ways of Seeing." This is a title I've borrowed from a book by Janet Gaylord Moore, published in 1968. Ms. Moore was an artist and teacher at a private school in suburban Cleveland, as well as at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The book is basically a book to be used as a tool in teaching "Art Appreciation", but it also serves as a kind of general manual of how to *look* at things – not just to learn techniques and rules of what art is all about, but rather to help its readers to learn the joy of looking itself, looking at everything in our line of sight, and *seeing* something in that everything, something that's part of our selves.

I'm going to quote from an article about Janet on the occasion of her receiving a special citation for distinguished service to the arts:

"An apocryphal story: During a visit to the Louvre Museum with her family at the age of three, Janet Gaylord Moore was suddenly nowhere to be seen. A frantic search finally located the child standing thoughtfully before the Mona Lisa. It's a pity we don't know what was going through her mind, introduced as she was to the best work of da Vinci at an age when most children are just discovering 'Curious George.' As it turns out, this adventurous little girl would become a legendary expert in the language of painting who show two generations of Clevelanders how to look at art and indeed become known as one of the foremost art teachers in America.

Janet was fond of quoting the 15th-century Chinese poet Li Li-Cheng: 'First we see the hills in the painting then we see the painting in the hills.' One can picture the young Janet walking to the schoolhouse in Hanover, New Hampshire, slate and books' swinging by a strap from her shoulder, and beginning to notice things in a new way.

As an art teacher, Janet would repeatedly urge her students to 'get out into the country, or into a park, or into the woods, onto water, anywhere where you are in direct contact with the world of nature.' In so doing, she promised they would encounter an infinite variety of forms that would provide an antidote to a narrowing of the sense of possibilities induced by mass-produced (and therefor standardized) culture. This was also, she said, the best way to learn how to look at art. 'Without such a personal awareness of nature's forms,' she said, 'many of the delights and rewards of painting, sculpture, and architecture will be forever lost to you.'"

"The many ways of seeing." This is not a sermon on art appreciation, even though such appreciation may be enhanced a little bit by hearing what Ms. Moore has said. This is a sermon having to do with "seeing" – the many ways that "seeing" occurs."

Now that we're into summer weather, whether or not it's "officially" summer, this is the perfect time to "get out into the country," as Janet has encouraged us to do, and see if we can't

focus on that infinite variety of “forms” that “provide an antidote to a narrowing of the sense of possibilities induced by mass-produced (and therefore standardized) culture.

We who reside here in northern New England, of course, are pretty accustomed to getting out in the country. We don’t, in fact, need to get out into it, since we live in the midst of it. The question, though, is whether we still stop to gaze upon or study that “infinite variety of forms” of which Ms. Moore speaks. A tree is a tree, isn’t it? Well, yes; I suppose it is.

But when we actually look at the tree that’s in our sight, and study it for a while, it can take on a new meaning: We have actually *looked* at it and somehow, touched it with our gaze. It’s *our* tree now – a single tree in the midst of millions and millions of trees. It’s been singled out. We know something about it because in our *seeing*, we have *created* something, a kind of relationship that goes far beyond our ordinary sensations of sight alone. Something has happened here. We have an image implanted in our minds.

Now before we go any further: Let’s take a breath and refrain from thinking that the minister is succumbing into a kind of obsessive-compulsive delusion. Let’s say that I’m the one who’s had this experience I’ve just described. The tree is still a tree – I’m not going to take it out for lunch or anything. But something has happened *within me* while I was studying the form and design of this elegant creation before me. It was I who chose to do the looking, and it was I who did the seeing. This experience of ours, of looking and seeing and maybe even understanding something that was never before understood: This is what human beings are all about, and it’s what art is about. Let’s think again about studying nature, though, but with a tip of the hat that acknowledges what human beings, with all their talents and skills, have wrought through their accomplishments, as well as their failures.

Let’s go back to some of the words of Walt Whitman that we heard in our Words for Reflection this morning: “All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it.”

“All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments.”

“The sun and stars that float in the open air; the apple-shaped earth and we upon it.”

“The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see, and the wonders that fill each minute of time forever.”

“The endless pride and outstretching of people; unspeakable joys and sorrows.”

“Will you seek afar off? You sure come back at last, in things best known to you, find the best, or as good as the best – Happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place – not for another hour, but this hour.”

Mark Rothko, the great abstractionist painter of the twentieth century, liked to think of his paintings as living things, and suffered from a certain degree of separation anxiety every time he saw one of his canvasses go out the door of his studio.

To quote Rothko: “The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when painting them. And if you say you are moved only by their color relationships then you miss the point. The fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions.”

A painting is a painting is a painting? Not for those who take the time to *look*, and the time to *see*, for a painting looked at, or seen, becomes part of who we are. (Not everybody “gets” this, of course, but everybody has *something* that *makes room* for something that’s of value and that forms his or her character, even if it’s that motorcycle parked in the back yard.)

How many ways are there, for people to experience “seeing?” Probably an infinite number, I should think, each one of them valid for a singular valid human being. For most of us who gather on Sunday mornings, or Friday evenings, or for whatever time, it’s our religious component that makes seeing possible. But even religions begin with looking and seeing.

Back to Whitman’s poem: “We consider bibles and religions divine; - I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still; it is not they who give the life – it is you who give the life.”

From time to time I see church advertisements that read something along the lines of “Come to our church and see what God is doing!” As an “a-theist,” that kind of thing drives me a little nuts. Were I to be shopping for a church community, I’d like to hear what the people of the church are doing. It’s people who make a church a sacred place. It’s tradition and wonder and mystery and comfort and humor and gratitude and hope.

I like to think of religion as a work of art. That may seem a little peculiar to some of you, but think about it: Religion is composed of so many of the things that art brings to us. Storytelling, for example, wonder, mystery, harmony, all the things that make up who we are, and how we become who are. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. It’s all a matter of what we put into it.

As the activist and author Jerry Mander has said: “We evolve into the images we carry in our minds. We become what we see.”

To see, to really see, is to look carefully and caringly. It is to look into our neighbor’s eyes, and see the original, unique, and precious being that person is. It’s to listen to a Mahler symphony without falling asleep. It is to help a friend through a difficult time. It is to forgive those who may have hurt us, and to forgive ourselves, for the less-than-kind things that we may have ourselves done. It is to be at peace.

Finally, a quotation from Antoine de saint-Exupery’s “The Little Prince: “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Closing Words:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

– William Blake

