



Mercy Global Action: Contemplative Seeing

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As I ponder the theme of contemplative seeing, I center myself in my solitary “home office” in Sacramento, California from which I have been zooming world-wide since March 17, 2020. From here I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Maidu and Nisenan peoples, and I invite the reader to do likewise from your location. I pause to consider the planet from which I have evolved, and on which we are all spinning together (North and South) at *approximately* 1,000 mph/1,600 km/h; moving together around the sun at an orbital speed of 67,000 mph/107,000 km/h; and cradled within the Milky Way Galaxy, swooshing in the direction of Andromeda at 1.3 million mph/2.1 million km/h. (1) With all that movement, I endeavor to be still, recalling T.S. Eliot’s enigmatic line, “The light is still at the still point of the turning world.” (2) And now I am realizing, to paraphrase a line from a Jackson Brown song: What I’ve been seeing isn’t what’s been happening at all! (3) Nothing is still, not even me! Perhaps the light is still, and light is necessary for accurate seeing. Or is it? Theodore Roethke begins one of his poems thus: In a dark time the eye begins to see: In a dark time the eye begins to see. (4)

In the daylight, my brain interprets and attempts to make meaning of what my eyes look upon; at night, in the dark, through my spider-webbed, dust covered window, a galaxy light-years away reveals its light to my myopic eyes. I don’t know the details but I am drawn into mystery, and grasp for a moment the hidden wholeness of things. (5) This awareness steadies me during the daytime when I have to face my barely aware complicity in the suffering of the world, especially of my dark brothers and sisters- suffering caused by my smallness of vision and that of my light-skinned ancestors. Perhaps our ancestors should have evolved to sleep during the day when we are enveloped in a womb of limited seeing created by a blue sky and a too-bright sun that shuts out the light of the stars and makes us forget the vast elegant creation within which we are intimately and inextricably connected. Had we evolved to be awake at night, maybe we would wonder more, praise more, love more in a night that offers us a view into infinity, a view of our particular context within the whole. Perhaps we would have had less need to dominate and control. But that is not how we evolved. In a dark time the eye begins to see.

This past year, the global coronavirus pandemic focused our attention long enough for us to realize that we humans are ultimately not in control of nature’s processes; however, with contemplative seeing, we can choose how we live together on this finite planet. The brutal murder of George Floyd focused a light on the unacknowledged violence of racism, not only in the US, but also throughout the world. People said and continue to say that “we are living in such dark times,” each time using the word dark as if dark is evil and light is good. Indeed, the pandemic made it seem as if a light had gone out, and many realized in the solitary gloom of confinement that what they had been seeing wasn’t what was happening at all. Discovering that George Floyd’s murder was anything but an isolated case brought a

glimmer of insight into eyes that had been fogged over with delusion and ignorance of the impact of racism and its many manifestations. The primal fear of the dark- dark people, dark woods, dark moods had programmed light-skinned people to pit light against dark in a never-ending battle for domination and supremacy. In a dark time the eye begins to see.

Contemplative seeing is the willingness to sit in the dark and let the truth reveal itself to my inner and outer eyes without my need to control the outcome- to let the truth “dawn” on me- and in that dawning, to be transformed. Perhaps, this was the state of the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. (6) They are downcast and dejected, disappointed that what they expected had not happened. “Our own hope had been...” They couldn’t get past their view of how they wanted things to turn out. The resurrectional transformational leap required of them from their limited perspective was impossible (even after living with Jesus, witnessing his healing works, and hearing his teachings on the meaning of the reign of God). They did not contemplatively see what was happening until Jesus accompanied them personally (not in a group), until their hearts burned within and they finally recognized him in the breaking of the bread. He did not hold their weaknesses against them on that road; he had already forgiven them:

Jesus’s last breath was a word of forgiveness
He broke through the barrier
of the hardened heart and loved
to the end that never ends.

Forgiveness *is* resurrected life,
The power of hope joins the power of love
And gives birth to the power
Of the future. (7)

In this so-called dark time, what will we let our eyes contemplatively see- we, whom the universe, “mother of all life, doesn’t [see] that it [sees] until we arrive?” (8) We have inherited a great responsibility, and the future of our planet depends to a large degree on how we choose to live from now on. Will we be informed by the experiences of those whom we may have overlooked in our certainties? Will we help repair the wrongs inherited from our ancestors in ways that lead to freedom and love rather than in the prolongation of suffering? “For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?” (9) Maya Angelou, in her poem, “A Brave and Startling Truth,” invites us to contemplatively see and distinguish what is brave and what is startling; she believes in our capacity to be transformed if we choose to engage in the necessary difficult decisions:

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is *when*, and *only when*
We come to it. (10)

Let us pray with Catherine McAuley: “Teach me to cast myself entirely into the arms of your loving providence with a most lively unlimited confidence in your compassionate tender pity.” (10) Help me to see beyond my myopic vision to that which leads to freedom and justice for all- “a condition of complete simplicity- costing not less than everything.” (11)

Resources

1. Andrew Fraknoi, “How Fast Are You Moving When You Are Sitting Still?” Foothill College & the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 390 Ashton Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94112, # 71, Spring, 2007.
2. T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *Four Quartets*, HBJ Book, New York and London, 1943.
3. Jackson Brown, “Fountain of Sorrow,” in album *Late for the Sky*, 1974.
4. Theodore Roethke, “In a Dark Time,” *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, Doubleday, 1961.
5. Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2009.
6. Road to Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35.
7. Ilia Delio, *The Hours of the Universe: Reflections on God, Science and the Human Journey*, “Vespers,” Orbis Press, NY, 2021.
8. Delio, *op.cit.*, “Matins.”
9. bell hooks, www.brainyquote.com
10. Maya Angelou, “A Brave and Startling Truth,” published in a commemorative booklet for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the UN, Random House, NY, 1995.
11. Catherine McAuley, *Suscipe*.
12. T. S. Eliot, *op.cit.*, “Little Gidding.”