

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Seeing

for Harriette Hurie Ranvig, in honor of Earth Day

In my college years, I had the great good fortune to meet one of my heroes: David Brower, longtime executive director of the Sierra Club and elder statesman of the ecology movement. He said, “We need to tire of trashing wilderness. It’s not making us happy. It’s not making us healthy. [It’s] making us miserable and despairing. Killing trees, habitat, and animals, and separating ourselves from nature is making us all a bit crazy. We need to restore the Earth because we need to save the wild. We need to save the wild in order to save ourselves.”¹

There is the unvarnished truth, and there are our marching orders. David Brower did far more than his part, and left the rest to us. How to proceed?

We could share 10,000 good ideas, and I’d love that – to walk outside together, walk on the earth, and talk about all the ways that we, too, can save the wild and so save ourselves. Let’s do that sometime. For now, in these few minutes, I invite you to join me in a reflection on *seeing*, inviting a vision that leads us to make wiser, more compassionate choices about how we live as citizens of the blue green planet.

I recommend being swallowed whole by Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Written in the spirit of Henry David Thoreau, it remains one of my favorite books, perhaps because I first read it while commuting among the crush of humanity on the Tokyo subway. Annie Dillard writes, “Nature is very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t affair.... For a week last September, migrating red-winged blackbirds were feeding heavily down by the creek at the back of the house. One day, I went out to investigate the

¹ David Brower with Steve Chapple, *Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run*, p. 126

racket; I walked up to a tree, an Osage orange, and a hundred birds flew away. They simply materialized out of the tree. I saw a tree, then a whisk of color, then a tree again. I walked closer, and another hundred blackbirds took flight. Not a branch, not a twig budged: the birds were apparently weightless as well as invisible.... When I looked again at the tree, the leaves had re-assembled as if nothing had happened. Finally, I walked directly to the trunk of the tree and a final hundred, the real diehards, appeared, spread, and vanished....

“The Osage orange, unruffled, looked just as it had from the house, when three hundred red-winged blackbirds cried from its crown. I looked downstream where they flew, and they were gone.... These appearances catch at my throat; they are ... free gifts.... one show to a customer....

“It’s all a matter of keeping [our] eyes open...” she continues. “In flat country, I watch every sunset in hopes of seeing the green ray. The green ray is a seldom-seen streak of light that rises from the sun like a spurting fountain at the moment of sunset; it throbs into the sky for two seconds and disappears.... But I can’t go out and try to see this way. I’ll fail; I’ll go mad. All I can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing.... The effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle.... When I see this way, I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses....

“The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price.... The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise.... I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam....”

And here’s my favorite passage. Annie Dillard writes, “When [the] doctor took [off her bandages] and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw ‘the tree with the lights in it.’ It was for this tree I searched.... Then one day, I was walking along Tinker Creek, thinking of nothing at all, and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance....

“Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared.... The flood of fire abated, but I’m still spending the power.... still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck...”²

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Seeing is a spiritual practice. But let’s be quick to understand that eyesight has precious little to do with vision. “Launch into the deep,” says French philosopher Jacques Ellul, “and you shall see.”

Nineteen years ago, our own Harriotte Hurie Ranvig introduced me to the work of her spiritual twin, author and leader of the French resistance, Jacques Lusseyran. Like Harriotte, he was blinded in childhood and subsequently filled with light. From their keen and generous insight, we can learn something of what it means to really see. This is from Jacques Lusseyran’s *And There Was Light*.

“It was a great surprise to me to find myself blind, and being blind was not at all as I imagined it.... I saw light and went on seeing it though I was blind.... I was not light myself, I knew that, but I bathed in it as much as an element which blindness had suddenly brought much closer. I could feel light rising, spreading, resting on objects, giving them form, then leaving them.... At every waking hour, I lived in a stream of light.... I saw the whole world in light, existing through it and because of it.... [I had] the sense that I was being reborn. Since it was not I who was making the light, since it came to me from outside, it would never leave me. I was only a passageway, a vestibule for this brightness. The seeing eye was in me.”³

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The spiritual practice of seeing is the spiritual practice of a visionary: to look and see into the deepest nature of that on which we feast our eyes. The astronauts of the 1968 Apollo mission returned from space changed forever by what they had seen: they were the very first witnesses to a view of the earth from beyond the moon. Reflecting on a photograph, American poet Archibald MacLeish was moved to write, “To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in

² Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Chapter 2, “Seeing,” pp. 22-38

³ Jacques Lusseyran, *And There Was Light*, pp. 15-19

the eternal cold – brothers who know now they are truly brothers.”⁴

Seeing ... vision ... compassion.

My colleague of blessed memory, Rev. Max Kapp, wrote,
 ...Often I have felt that I must praise my world
 For what my eyes have seen these many years,
 And what my heart has loved.
 And often I have tried to start my lines:
Dear Earth, [Dear Earth,] I say,
 And then I pause
 To look once more.
 Soon I am bemused
 And far away in wonder.
 So I never get beyond *Dear Earth*.⁵

Beloved spiritual companions, “We need to restore the Earth because we need to save the wild. We need to save the wild in order to save ourselves.”⁶

We are, each of us, a passageway,
 a vestibule for brightness,⁷
 riders on the earth together.⁸

May we put ourselves in the path of light,
 launch into the deep,
 look, and see,
 and let *vision* lead us
 to make wiser, more compassionate choices
 about how we live as citizens
 of the blue green planet.

May we live as a bell, “lifted and struck.”⁹

⁴ Archibald MacLeish, *The New York Times*, December 25, 1968, p. 1

⁵ Rev. Max Kapp, *Gratitude*

⁶ Brower, *op cit*, p. 126

⁷ Lusseyran, *op cit*, p. 19

⁸ MacLeish, *op cit*

⁹ Dillard, *op cit*, p. 38

May we, bemused and filled with wonder,
never get beyond *Dear Earth*.