



SEEING WITH EYES OF THE HEART

Description is revelation. Seeing is praise.

—Chet Raymo

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust

You were within me, and I was outside, and it was there I searched for you. . . . On entering into myself I saw, as it were with the eyes of my soul, what was beyond the eyes of the soul, beyond my spirit: your immutable light.

—St. Augustine

The Spiritual Senses

There is a long mystical tradition of understanding that our five physical senses of taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing have five parallel mystical senses that operate in similar ways. Just as our physical senses help us to perceive and encounter the world, so our mystical or spiritual senses help us to perceive and encounter God. The

spiritual journey is, in part, about awakening these capacities and cultivating them. Sense here refers to a faculty of spiritual perception or experience. These spiritual senses are subject to decreased capacity because of our human limitations but can be cultivated through practice and grace. Part of the spiritual journey is learning how to see, not with our physical eyes, but with our spiritual eyes. Spiritual seeing simply receives the present moment without judgment or trying to make plans or set agendas, which is a lot more challenging for most of us than it might sound.

The third-century church father Origen was the first to develop this idea of the spiritual senses, which is rooted in scripture. Origen writes, “After thorough investigation one can say that there exists, according to the word of Scripture, a general sense or faculty for the divine. Only the blessed know how to find it, as we read in the Wisdom of Solomon, ‘You discover the divine faculty of perception’ (Proverbs 2:5).” He describes how the spiritual sense unfolds:

This sense, however, unfolds, in various individual faculties: sight for the contemplation of immaterial forms, as is evidently granted in the Cherubim and Seraphim, hearing for the discrimination of voices, which do not echo in the empty air, taste in order to savour the living bread which came down from heaven to bring life to the world (John 6:33), and even a sense of smell, with which Paul perceived those realities which caused him to describe himself as a sweet odour of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15), and finally touch, which possessed John when he states that he has touched with his own hands the Word of life (1 John 1:1).¹

In the gospels, blindness is used as a metaphor for being unable to see truth. St. Augustine wrestles with this idea in his book *City of God*, where he describes the vision we are to have one day—*visio dei*, or the clear sight of God. In the book of Exodus (33:18–23), even Moses who comes face to face with God when asked to see God’s glory

is granted only a glimpse of God's backside. Our human capacity to perceive is limited because God's full glory is too radiant for us to bear fully.

Yet the graced eye can glimpse beauty everywhere, seeing the divine at work in the hidden depths of things. It is so easy to let our senses be dulled and to settle for the ordinary. Often, life seems to be just what it offers on the surface; as Ecclesiastes puts it, "there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). The technology, speed, and busyness so prized by our Western culture foster a habit of blindness. For all the bustle, a dreary sameness comes to mark the places where we live. We forget that there is a vast depth beneath the apparent surfaces of things.

The eye of aesthetic spirituality sees more than other eyes. Art in general, and photography in particular, helps to facilitate this awakening by granting us epiphanies through its transfigurations of the ordinary. We come to know more than what appears within our line of vision.

As we begin to look at cultivating our capacity for spiritual sight through the medium of photography, there are insights and principles we need to first explore, even before we bring the camera to the eye and open the lens to the world, revealing what is beneath the surface. Beauty is one dimension to explore.

On Beauty

Some, like Augustine, have used the word "beauty" as a name for God, a name that expresses something about the divine nature. Beauty has long been considered one of the great means through which God is revealed to us. To experience beauty is to have your life enlarged—an aesthetic spirituality is about seeing the beauty of God in more and more places. We might begin to see all of life as what the Celts called a "thin place," where heaven and earth are close together.

When our eyes are graced with wonder, the world reveals its wonders to us. What we see is determined by how we see, and each

of us is responsible for how we see. For poet John O'Donohue, seeing is not merely a physical act: "The heart of vision is shaped by the state of the soul. When the soul is alive to beauty, we begin to see life in a fresh and vital way." Contemplative practice is one way of taking responsibility for "the how" of our vision. And photography is one path that can help us to cultivate this capacity.

There is a scene in the film *American Beauty* that demonstrates this kind of graced sight. A white plastic bag is caught in the wind, in front of metal doors covered with graffiti. The bag dances in different directions, up and down, side to side, lifted and lowered by the air. Through the lens, the audience is invited to a slow, deliberate seeing, and what begins as a piece of litter on a dirty street becomes a symbol of how, even in the toughest and least expected places, beauty happens. Ricky Fitts, the character showing this image to his friend, murmurs, "Sometimes, there's so much beauty in the world, I can't take it—like my heart's going to cave in."

For brief moments, something transfigures the world around us, as it reveals beauty's radiance. These moments wake us up and train our perceptions. The purpose of art is not to send us to an alternative world but rather to return us, even as our vision has been renewed, to the realm of the ordinary. We don't have to go out and try to take "beautiful" photos. We simply need to pay attention and foster a different kind of seeing.

Jesuit theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar believed that the word "glory" in the Bible indicated the beauty of God. Of truth, goodness, and beauty, the three transcendental attributes of God, it was beauty that, for von Balthasar, was the least obscured by our fallen nature and therefore provides the clearest path to the Beatific Vision. Human encounter with the divine begins in a moment of aesthetic perception, in that glimpse of radiance, mystery, and meaning that we can see in a work of art or in the natural world. In the gospel story of the Transfiguration, beauty becomes a window onto the divine. The burning light that once appeared to Moses in the bush now radiates from Jesus

himself: “His face shone like the sun” (Matthew 17:2). For Gregory Palamas, it was the disciples who changed at the Transfiguration, not Christ. Christ was transfigured “not by the addition of something he was not, but by the manifestation to his disciples of what he really was. He opened their eyes so that instead of being blind they could see.” Because their perception grew sharper, they were able to behold Christ as he truly is. This journey into photography as a contemplative practice is a journey toward transfigured seeing, toward seeing the world as it really is. By bringing the camera to the eye and allowing an encounter with the holy to open our hearts, we have the possibility for a transformative potential from the photographic encounter. Look through the lens and imagine that it is a portal to a new way of seeing. Let the focus of the frame bring your gaze to the quality of light in this moment or the vibrancy of colors. Like in the film *American Beauty*, let yourself be willing to see the world differently, so that what others see as garbage becomes transfigured through your openness and intention. This isn’t always easy, and ultimately it is God’s work in us; we just create the right conditions to receive the gift.

Painter Georgia O’Keeffe wrote, “Nobody sees a flower really; it is so small. We haven’t time, and to see takes time—like to have a friend takes time.” We will only “really see” a flower if we train ourselves to do so, and this training takes time and practice. To peer into a deeper reality is a metaphysical endeavor, requiring that we “see” with more than merely our eyes and that we sense with more than merely our natural senses.

The Art of Beholding

Open my eyes, so that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.

—Psalm 119:18

God's presence is always before us. The invitation is to shift our vision from seeing the obvious and expected with our physical eyes to beholding the sacred within any given moment with the eyes of our hearts. The word "behold" appears throughout scripture as a way of calling our attention to something important, inviting us to see differently, to observe with care.

Are you familiar with those visual images that on the surface just look like black and white wavy lines? When you sit with it for a while and let your vision relax, suddenly a three-dimensional image emerges. What seemed to be a meaningless pattern actually reveals something beneath the surface. Your visual perception has shifted, and with that shift you can suddenly see differently than before. You are now able to enter a world that was previously invisible to you but was present the whole time.

The art of beholding is like this. "Behold" means to hold something in your gaze. To behold is not to stare or glance; it is not a quick scan or an expectant look. Beholding has a slow and spacious quality to it. Your vision becomes softer as you make room to take in the whole of what you are seeing. There is a reflective and reverential quality to this kind of seeing. You release your expectations of what you think you will see and instead receive what is actually there, while in the process everything can shift. Frederick Franck, in his book *Zen and Art of Seeing*, writes about the patterns we anticipate: "By these labels we recognize everything, and no longer see anything. We know the labels on the bottles, but never taste the wine."

When you cultivate the art of beholding, you nurture your capacity to see the world with the eyes of the heart. Hold your camera in your hand and open yourself to grace and revelation hidden in each moment, just beneath the surface of what seems to be another ordinary moment. Remember, we aren't so concerned here with the technical aspects of photography. Your camera isn't just a tool but a portal.

We are so used to using our capacity for vision to take in our surroundings quickly, to scan over things, to look over or observe, and to confirm what it is we are already thinking. Seeing in this other way takes time and patience. We can't force the hidden dimension of the world to come forth; we can only create a receptive space in our hearts in which it can arrive. In our photography practice, this needs to be cultivated again and again.

Carmelite William McNamara described contemplation as a "long loving look at the real." It is long because it takes time and slowness to see the holy, shimmering presence beneath the surface of things. It is loving because the contemplative act is one that arises from a place of compassion. It is a look at the real, at the truth of things as they are, and not how we want them to be. This means that sometimes when we behold, we see suffering, and we have to stay awake to that experience.

Contemplative seeing and beholding are conscious acts of becoming receptive and dropping as much as possible, our own ego desires and projections. It is only from this space of openness and wonder that we truly see the movement of God in the world.

The Heart as the Source of Vision

You've got to get out of your head and into your heart. Right now your thoughts are in your head, and God seems to be outside you. Your prayer and all your spiritual exercises also remain exterior. As long as you are in your head, you will never master your thoughts, which continue to whirl around your head like snow in a winter's storm or like mosquitoes in the summer's heat.

If you descend into your heart, you will have no more difficulty. Your mind will empty out and your thoughts will dissipate. Thoughts are always in your mind chasing one another about, and you will never manage to get them under control. But if you enter into your heart and can remain there, then every time your thoughts invade, you will

only have to descend into your heart and your thoughts will vanish into thin air. This will be your safe haven. Don't be lazy! Descend! You will find life in your heart. There you must live.

—**St. Theophan the Recluse**²

In the innermost depths of my heart I transcend the bounds of my created personhood and discover within myself the direct unmediated presence of the living God. Entry into the deep heart means that I experience myself as God-sourced, God-enfolded, God-transfigured.

—**Kallistos Ware**³

In the writings of scripture and the Christian mystics, the heart is considered to be the primary organ of our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Across religious traditions, it is considered to be the dwelling place of God or Spirit. The heart is at not only the center of our being but also the center of Transcendent realities with which we come into communion through the heart. It is the organ of divine revelation and sense perception, the place from which the spiritual senses operate. St. Benedict begins his Rule inviting us to “listen with the ear of our heart.”

The heart is an axial point, a center of unity within the person as a whole. It is an ancient metaphor for the seat of our whole being—to be whole-hearted means to bring our entire selves before God, our intellect, our emotional life, our dreams and intuitions, and our deepest longings. The heart is “at one and the same time a physical reality—the bodily organ located in our chest—and also a psychic and spiritual symbol. Above all it signifies integration and relationship: the integration and unification of the total person within itself, and at the same time the centering and focusing of the total person upon God.”⁴

The heart is not just active but also receptive. The heart is the place of meaning-making, where we discover how we are called to

be in the world. It is the ground of our being and a symbol of the wholeness of who we are. When we engage photography as a contemplative practice, we are creating art from a heart-centered place. The “eyes of the heart” are eyes that see differently than when we approach things from the mind. Just like the camera, the heart has the capacity for turning its lens toward what it longs to see and then choosing its focus.

Cynthia Bourgeault, in her book *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart*, writes that the instrument we are given to engage most fully in life is our heart: “Not our mind alone, certainly, nor simply the undisciplined riot of our subconscious, but something that both unifies and transcends them from a place of deeper wholeness. Spiritually understood, the heart is an organ of astonishing perceptivity and versatility that when fully awakened and tuned allows us to play our part in the dynamism of creation.” The heart, she goes on to say, is not the opposite of the head, nor primarily the emotional receptor. “Rather it is a sensitive, multispectrum instrument of awareness: a huge realm of mind that includes both mental and affective operations (that is, the ability both to think and to feel) and both conscious and subconscious dimensions.”⁵ The heart is able to perceive the deeper order and coherence of things that on the surface seem random or chaotic. It is through the heart that we can see beyond, beneath, and through. In working with the camera, we can access the heart as this “multispectrum instrument of awareness” and allow our photos to become a conduit for this kind of vision.

“Taking” photos with the head is often an act of analysis or grasping, as when we try to either capture an image or make one that is aesthetically pleasing. “Receiving” photos with the heart is an experience of grace and revelation, an encounter with the sacred.

Miksang and Buddhist Perspectives

Related to Bourgeault's exploration of the heart as the organ of spiritual vision that welcomes in the fullness of possibilities before us—and not just what we expect to see—there is a Buddhist practice of contemplative photography, currently taught under the name of *Miksang*, which is a Tibetan word that translates as “good eye.” This Buddhist practice of cultivating contemplative vision developed from the teachings of the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The goal of *Miksang* is simply to experience the world before distinctions like “beautiful” or “ugly,” and “worthy” or “unworthy,” get in the way—to see and appreciate the nature of things as they are and express it without interpretation.

This Buddhist form of practice is not meant to be a form of self-expression; in fact, a letting go of “self” is actively cultivated. *Miksang* seeks to develop a calm and centered state of being in the midst of receiving images, leading to a posture of openness.

In both Christian and Buddhist forms of contemplative photography, the focus is on practicing this way of seeing and being with the camera, letting it spill over into the whole of your life and shift your perspective, so that slowly you are able to see beneath the surface of all life and discover the shimmering presence of truth in all moments. In the contemplative life we begin to explore paradoxes at the heart of things, where we learn to see beneath the labels we apply to everything, so that we don't look actively for “beauty” but allow all things—even those that repel us or bore us—to have room in our vision and consciousness. The paradox is that in the Christian practice, when we free ourselves in this way, we discover a new way of understanding beauty through the camera. We may find that beauty is truly shimmering everywhere, moving our hearts even in the midst of decay or destruction. This is the power of the lens—to help us make space in our field of vision for things regardless of their

perceived aesthetic value, so we might discover a deeper landscape, full of unexpected beauty.

The Third Eye

Theologian and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes about three kinds of vision in his book *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*. The first kind is our physical vision on the level of seeing the world with our senses. The second kind is a vision that comes with knowledge, as we begin to explain other aspects of the world through learning about them. This vision brings together imagination, intuition, and reason. The third kind of vision Rohr describes as tasting, where we remain in “awe before an underlying mystery, coherence, and spaciousness” that connects us with everything else.⁶ The third eye is unitive rather than dualistic. It brings together what seems in opposition on the surface of things.

Rohr goes on to say that the first eye seeing is important; the senses matter. The second eye seeing is also important, but knowledge is not to be confused with depth, or having correct information with the transformation of consciousness itself. The third eye seeing builds on these first two but ventures deeper. “It happens whenever, by some wondrous ‘coincidence,’ our heart space, our mind space, and our body awareness are all simultaneously open and nonresistant. I like to call it *presence*. It is experienced as a moment of deep inner connection, and it always pulls you, intensely satisfied, into the naked and undefended now, which can involve both profound joy and profound sadness. At that point, you either want to write poetry, pray, or be utterly silent.”⁷

From the perspective of photography, our first kind of vision is what we see through the lens. The second kind of vision involves all of the thoughts and judgments we make as we compose an image: about what the image means, about whether it is “good,” and