Opening the Lens of the Heart: Looking Out at the World, Seeing Inside Ourselves

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That was the beginning of my seeing—that shift in noticing not just what was in front of me, but what was behind that, and behind that. Seeing wasn’t just visual anymore; it was visceral. I wasn’t looking; I was searching, feeling, finding, reflecting, taking in, releasing... I walked unafraid into the deeper realm of vision, into that place where one looks for a match to what one feels inside. —Jan Phillips

A Clue for Our Life’s Journey

Many of us venture out into nature looking for signs of life with our cameras. We’re moved by something as we shoot, unaware that there’s more to the image than meets the eyes, that it contains, perhaps, an answer to a question, a clue for our life’s journey. —Jan Phillips

Back at the retreat house, as I gazed at the image I had photographed, something clicked. It wasn’t just one sapling that I saw; it was a hillside full of saplings. Whereas earlier in my ministry I had focused on one-to-one spiritual companioning, my growing desire is to work with hillides—that is, communities. This photo seemed to confirm the calling I am currently hearing: to accompany people within their communities as they learn together how to provide shelter to one another.

The revelation did not end there. I then had a turn to speak with a small group of four to five participants about my experience. (Specific guidelines are featured below.) Each participant composed a heart-awakening question for me and wrote it on an index card. They...
took turns reading out loud their question to me before handing me the index card on which it was written. I was invited to choose one question to respond to in the presence of the group. Here are the questions I received:

◆ How do you create a container for your students and others whom you companion?
◆ How would you honor or create ritual around the removal of the protective tubes?
◆ What are the tender, vulnerable shoots in you, and where will you look for community to help you strengthen and grow?
◆ What is your plan to protect more hillsides?

That day, I selected the last question—about my plan to protect more hillsides. It is a question that I had been in discernment about, and I knew it would deepen my discernment if I could explore it in the presence of the group. As I responded, I noticed two things: how much joy I heard in the tone of my voice as I described the wide array of communities in which I have had the privilege to serve and how emboldened I felt about the prospect of working with even more. After I finished, we paused together in silence before the next participant spoke.

Activity Guidelines

Part One: The Photographic Quest: Learning to Look, Listen, and Linger
Activity: To select an object or scene, and only one, to photograph. (This retreat activity is inspired by the work of photographer Jim Brandenburg. In 1994, Brandenburg vowed that the shutter of his camera would open and close only once each day for ninety days. His self-imposed project is featured in the documentary Chased by the Light, as well as a book by the same name, authored by Brandenburg.) This exercise is designed to hone attention at all levels: external, internal, and interior. Through experiential learning, we are invited to notice the difference between taking a photograph and receiving one. (Christine Valters Paintner observes in her beautiful book, Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice: “‘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” [19].)

Preparation: Allow yourself time to settle into stillness before embarking on your quest. Close your eyes, turn your attention within, and breathe deeply. As you open your eyes, set your intention to open the lens of your heart.

Process: Look closely at your environment. Notice the objects and scenes to which you are drawn, those that seem to speak to you and captivate your attention.

Listen deeply to your internal commentary—sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts—as you explore your environment. As you listen, notice which particular object or scene resonates most deeply for you (even though you may not understand why). Photograph that object or scene.

Linger intentionally with the image you have photographed. Consider:

◆ How does your picture connect with what is going on in your life at this time?
◆ What message does your picture convey to you? Does it offer an affirmation, a clarification, an invitation, or a challenge?
◆ What did you learn about yourself through this activity?

Part Two: Contemplative Conversations: Asking Heart-Awakening Questions
Activity: To cocreate an occasion for deep listening within ourselves and with one another.

Preparation: Remind all participants to activate the “do not disturb” setting on their cell phones. As a large group, review the conversation covenant before breaking into small groups. (You will find the conversation covenant at the Journey Conversations Project website, www.journeyconversations.org, or see Diane Millis’s Conversation—the Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction [121–123]). Move into small groups, and seek a volunteer to serve as timekeeper. Pause together to attend to your breath and the subtle vibration of your heart before inviting the first person to speak.

Process:
Speaking—Each person is invited to have a turn as
the focus person. She or he will begin by passing her or his cell phone around the circle. Group members are asked to maintain silence as they look at the photograph. After their photograph has been viewed, the focus person is invited to respond to one or more of the following reflection questions (up to four minutes). I have found that stipulating and upholding time limits—that is, offering each participant the same amount of time to speak—engenders trust and safety in groups. A recent study of over a hundred small groups at Google confirmed the benefits of “equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking.” Researchers observed that in the most effective groups, team members spoke in roughly the same proportion. On some teams, everyone spoke during each task; on others, leadership shifted among teammates from assignment to assignment. But in each case, by the end of the day, everyone had spoken roughly the same amount (see Duhigg).

- How does your picture connect with what is going on in your life at this time?
- What did the object or scene you photographed convey to you?
- What did you learn about yourself through this activity?

Offering the Gift of Questions—Other group members are invited to write a heart-awakening question for the focus person on an index card (one to two minutes). Heart-awakening questions invite the speaker to go a layer deeper—that is, to keep noticing and naming what’s at the core or the heart of the matter for them. Here are a few tips for writing heart-awakening questions (Millis, Deepening Engagement, 81–82):

- Ask open-ended questions that begin with the words how, what, where, when, in what ways, or tell me more about.
- Pay attention to key words and phrases that seem to have particular energy and meaning for the speaker and incorporate his or her language into your question (for example, What do you get jazzed about as you imagine taking the next step?).
- Pay attention to the speaker’s nonverbal expressions and incorporate your observations into your question (for example, I notice how your eyes lit up when you talked about seeing that deer for the first time).

Group members take turns reading aloud and offering their heart-awakening questions to the focus person (one to two minutes).

Responding—The focus person is invited to select one question to respond to in the presence of the group (up to four minutes).

Pausing—Group members thank the focus person and pause together to honor what has been shared before moving on to the next person (one minute).

Over the past few years, I have introduced these activities to participants in retreats as well as in classrooms, congregations, and workplace settings. To date, I have found that they work as effectively in “secular” settings as they do in faith-based ones; they have proven engaging with all age groups; and they are especially well suited for interfaith and intergenerational groups (as they honor each participant’s spiritual vocabulary—however limited or expansive). These exercises provide a hospitable gateway for introducing participants to both the fundamentals of contemplation—looking closely, listening deeply, and lingering intentionally—and a form of group spiritual companionship. I offer the following examples to illustrate their impact on participants. (Used with permission of the participants. I am grateful to Joe Delaney and Jean Thoresen for their willingness to share their photographs and write about their retreat experience.)

**Beholding a Noble Creature**

On a recent all-staff retreat for a law firm, attorneys and staff members met together in small groups of five. Joe, one of the attorneys, wrote the following about his experience that day:

Rounding a corner and passing though the restaurant entrance, I came upon the buck. Although stuffed and mounted, it remained an impressive figure. I snapped the photo and began to look. I saw antlers and ears, a firm snout and wide eyes. The animal was hunted, not a hunter; eyes on the side to see possible danger in all directions. But this buck was not scared; it was more of a protector of the herd. It had earned its antlers and white hair. It was a noble creature.
In my life, and practice, I meet many so-called successful people who have wealth, and positions of importance, and who would be considered modern day nobles. Yet few are really noble. Some are grounded but most are not. Their wealth sets them apart and most relish this sense of self-importance. Yet occasionally and surprisingly, I meet a truly noble person. One who is unaware of his/her nobility. The hunted in life, who nonetheless have been able to protect and provide for their family. Recently, I had a client who was a bit of a pest; calling frequently; asking questions with obvious answers; wasting my time. However, when I met him and his wife in person, I saw true nobility. A retired postman, he had walked a route for twenty-five years, delivering people's mail to their doorstep. He wore the scars of years working in the heat, the cold, the rain, the snow. Signing documents I saw
his hands were chafed and permanently red. I noticed his ankles and calves swollen and similarly blood red. He and his wife were selling their house in which they had raised their two children and made a home. He clearly loved his wife and had provided for his family. A simple man, he had carried the mail as well as the responsibilities of life for years. To me, this was noble.

I received the following questions from my colleagues:

- With your antlers, hair in your eyes, and white hair, that is, experience and wisdom, how will you nurture, guide, and mentor your children who are growing their own antlers and your associates at the firm?
• How do you feel you are able to pass on your knowledge to others?
• That deer will not age anymore, but if it did, what would it look like in ten years? Does it lose or gain nobility, less or more hunted?
• You mentioned the word nobility a number of times: what does nobility look like in your life?

I responded to the fourth question. Through this exercise I realized my need to work on being more empathetic. Everyone is annoying at times, including myself. But underneath the patina of life and position can lie true nobility. My postman client told me how professional I was and how grateful he was for my help. And I wondered: had anyone ever said the same to him?

**A Constant Companion**

At a recent all-staff retreat for a large Catholic parish, priests, deacons, and staff members met together in groups of four. Jean, the director of pastoral ministry at this parish, described what she discovered that day:

When we were given the assignment to take just one photo, I stepped outside with an assumption that I would take a picture of nature. How could I not with such beauty all around me? Yet as I turned the corner of the building I saw a young coworker sitting at the start of a path with the Stations of the Cross winding alongside. It took my breath away. I took the photo.

After my time to ponder with the picture I had taken, I shared with my small group that both of my daughters will be finishing school this year. One college and the other graduate school. We’ve recently had long and thoughtful discussions about the paths they will take in life and as a result I’ve found myself reflecting on my own life path full of twists and turns. While reflecting on the picture, I sensed it was both me and each of my daughters at the start of the path. I continued to share that while I didn’t always discern the right choices in life, my faith had been a constant companion. It was then that I noticed a statue of Mary at the very end of the path in my photo. I smiled deep inside. My faith has always been my compass even when I didn’t see it right away.

I received the following questions to ponder:

• How do you experience God’s call to go forward, or to linger, at one of the many stations/stages?
• As a parent, how have you shared the journey of your road with your daughters?
• As you reflect on the stations in your life, is there one you would like to return to?

I chose to reflect on question one. That question deeply touched me because I immediately realized how many times I didn’t “get” to linger. Words came flowing out of me as I shared the many times where an event such as the death of my infant daughter, or when a forced career change, pushed me forward when I had wanted to linger. A tinge of fear came bubbling up as I realized how content I am in life right now and I wondered out loud if I’ll be able to linger in this place for long. As I spoke of this hidden fear, I found comfort in the visual of my photo. Whatever station I move to next, after a long stay or a short visit, I move forward with the steps of faith.

**Our Ongoing Quest**

_The real thing about photography is that it brings you home to yourself, connects you to those things that fulfill your deepest longings. The divine soul within us longs to be expressed... Just as we yearn to be drawn up into the heart of God, so God yearns to be drawn out into the heart of the world._ —Jan Phillips

Participants consistently report how much they enjoy this activity and how much they discover through it. They express their gratitude for having an occasion to be listened to so deeply. They convey appreciation for having both their photograph and others’ questions on index cards, so that they can return to them for further reflection. In addition to these personal benefits, participants also report how much they learn about one another through these exercises. Whether it’s a person one has worked with for many years, or someone one has just met for the first time, others’ photos and their accompanying stories offer us an indelible glimpse into their essence.

My hope is that more spiritual directors will experi-
ment with these exercises as they offer:
1. Accessibility for persons of all ages and faith backgrounds, and applicability in a wide array of settings. Previous experience with photography or contemplative practice is not needed.
2. An opportunity to reframe our relationship with technology. These exercises invite us to practice relating to our electronic devices as portals, rather than obstacles, to contemplation and conversation.
3. A creative spiritual exercise for cultivating our capacity to discern personally, interpersonally, and in community.

The divine presence in our midst yearns to be received and revealed. By honing our attention to all that we encounter through the lenses of our cameras, may we learn to see more of the persons and things we meet through the lenses of our hearts. ■

References


Falling Leaf

Shaking off the dust accumulated over the season

Flapping your wings against twilight
At the border of night

Like a butterfly coming down to
Kiss the land
As if to listen to
The heartbeat of the earth

once in a lifetime ■

Yuan Changming