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Learning to See: Epiphany in the Ordinary

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"Woven together in love"

A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life

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Learning to See:

EPIPHANY IN THE ORDINARY

by Douglas Burton-Christie



To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.¹

—Mary Oliver

WHAT DID YOU notice today?" My three-year-old daughter, Julia, wants to know. We have been playing a game lately of asking and trying to answer that simple question. There are only two rules: you can't say "nothing" (unless you don't feel like playing), and you have to try to describe what you noticed, to say "what it is *like*." We started playing the game recently after Julia began attending preschool. I realized that I did not know much about how she spent her days. If I asked her what she *did* that day, I usually got a brief "report." This question did not seem to interest her much. Occupied with the vivid landscape just then unfolding in her imagination, the morning's activities seemed to fade into an indistinct blur. So now we concentrate on the particular, on what has impressed itself on her senses.

I learn a lot more this way. One day she told me about looking up from the playground and seeing a flock of white birds flying overhead, sharp against the blue sky. Another day it was the sting on her face of sand tossed by a rambunctious playmate that impressed her and remained with her until we met that evening. Upon returning from visiting her grandma in Monterey, she told me of seeing a slick-skinned sea otter wheel around on its back, hold a shell close to its breast, crack open a sea urchin by banging it against the shell, and swallow it down (she demonstrates). Another day, she tells me of the sweet notes of bird song floating down our chimney; is there a nest up there, she wonders? Piece by piece, I learn about her world.

I am also learning about my world. The game, after all, includes both of us. She asks me what *I* have noticed that day. Since we have begun playing, I have found myself noticing a lot more. So I tell her of what I noticed while sitting in our backyard one recent morning: deep crimson shoots of new growth on our apricot tree, glistening with dew; emerald green slivers of young grass pushing up through the soft, dark earth below; hulking skeletal trees—Chinese elm and pepper not yet in leaf—etching the blue-gray sky; a mourning dove's low plaintive cry; the delicious honeyed fragrance of freesias; Julia's miniature orange and yellow car (which she drives to Santa Monica) stand-

¹Mary Oliver, "Yes! No!" in *White Pine: Prose and Prose Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994), p. 8.

ing stranded, door slightly ajar, on the bright pavement, awaiting her return.

She listens attentively. She is not bored. She wants to see these things, taste them, smell them. As I do when she describes for me what she has noticed. There is also this: I often notice a light in her eyes, a spark of sheer pleasure as we exchange our miniature portraits. I imagine she sees something in my eyes, too. Nor is this light confined to our eyes. Somehow it shines through the mundane realities we describe and offer to one another. It is this light as much as the things themselves that catches my attention, that draws me in. Or perhaps I should say it is the light refracted *through* the things, seen nowhere else but in the particular things we notice and describe, that catches and keeps my attention.

Jesus said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8, NRSV). He did not say precisely where or how such vision arises. Nor did he prescribe how one acquires the purity of heart that allows the vision of God to unfold. Increasingly, though, I find myself thinking about the concrete, particular *locus* of visionary experience, its rootedness in the physical world. And I find myself considering the quality of attention necessary for seeing anything. Too often, it seems to me, we assume that "seeing God" requires us to pass entirely beyond the material world. Or that we must move into a space so radically interior that the living world disappears from view. Neither of these ideas is consistent with the Christian understanding of the Incarnation. Nor are they consistent with Jesus' habit of rooting his speech about the Kingdom in the living world; in his parables of nature, his healing miracles, the great epiphanies at Mount Tabor and on the Sea of Galilee, the vision of God is mediated by the things of this physical world.

Perhaps we need to read the sixth beatitude in light of this larger pattern, as calling for an integration of the poetic and the visionary. Is it possible to read this beatitude as a call to live with the poet's undivided attention toward the shape and texture of our living world? As a call to evoke, by describing the world carefully, the creative spirit that pulses deep within all that exists? As a call to become pure of heart by learning to see particular things? Perhaps poetry is as necessary to our quest for God as prayer. As I gradually learn to see the faint tracings of spirit in the world through the eyes of my daughter, I find myself wondering whether poetry and prayer are perhaps the same thing.

A WORLD AFLAME WITH VITALITY

JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH, the eloquent chronicler of the desert regions of Arizona and New Mexico, once said: "It is not easy to live in that continuous awareness of things that is alone truly living...the faculty of wonder tires easily... Really to see something once or twice a week is almost inevitably to have to try to make oneself a poet."² The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart once exhorted his hearers (and himself) to

*apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar—I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.*³

Is it really this simple? Perhaps. But only if one is willing to attend carefully to what is unfolding before one's eyes. Eckhart, like Krutch, appears only too aware of how difficult it is to "live in that continuous awareness of things that is alone truly living." Still there remains the possibility that such sharpened awareness—what Krutch calls "the faculty of wonder" or what Eckhart refers to as the apprehension of God "in all things"—can indeed be cultivated. It requires time, patience, and attention. It requires a willingness to "make oneself a poet."

The work of twelfth-century mystic and visionary Hildegard of Bingen increasingly has been on my mind these days. I think of her in part because the unfolding of her visionary experience began when she was only three years old, the age of my daughter. I think of her, too, because the border between her interior and exterior landscape was apparently so permeable: the living light that appeared in her visions suffused both her soul and the living world around her. And I think of her because she struggled so long and hard to "make herself a poet," searching throughout her long life to find language adequate to express the truth of what she had experienced.

*What did
you notice
today?*

²Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Desert Year* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), pp. 37-38.

³Cited in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and the Environment*, ed. by Roger Gottlieb (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 46.

In the year 1175, at the age of seventy-seven, Hildegard wrote a letter to Guibert of Gembloux, describing to him her early experience of the *umbra viventis lucis*, the “shadow of the living light,” and its enduring presence within her.

From my early childhood, before my bones, nerves, and veins were fully strengthened, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time, when I am more than seventy years old. In this vision my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples although they are far away from me in distant lands and places. And because I see them in this way in my soul, I observe them in accord with the shifting of clouds and other created things. . . . The light that I see thus is not spatial, but it is far, far brighter than a cloud that carries the sun. I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it; and I call it “the reflection of the living light”. . . . At no time is my soul deprived of that light. . . and I see it as if I were gazing at a starless sky in a shining cloud.⁴

Seeing only happens when... It is difficult to imagine such an extraordinary experience unfolding in the soul of a three-year-old child. Nor is it easy to imagine what she would have made of it. But even though Hildegard initially had only the faintest sense of what these visions meant, she eventually came to draw great strength and inspiration from the memory of her soul being bathed in light. Barbara Lachman, in her wonderfully vivid portrait of a year in Hildegard’s life, imagines the unfolding of the “shadow of the living light” in the young girl’s soul this way. Lachman’s Hildegard reflects:

One of the few things I recall from the days before St. Disibode’s, as a very small child, is that peculiar quality of light one Midsummer Eve in which I began to see with my inner senses; first, the figures were in silhouette, the way they look in the west as the sun sets and shapes of trees or a single twisted branch make dark calligraphs that seem to come forward. It took months before the light really filled the figures and brought them to life, colors

⁴Ep. 2, Pitra 332-33. Cited in Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 6-7.

gradually permeating the shapes as they began to assemble themselves into larger figures, recognizable physiognomies, whole landscapes. But one day, there it was, bright and wordless, a mysterious, silent world. . . .⁵

Here is an exquisite evocation of unfolding self-awareness and interiority. It is an unfolding that, in Hildegard’s visionary experience, will come to permeate every aspect of the living world. As she eventually comes to realize, the light shining within her is the same light that radiates forth from the created world. It is *Sapientia*, the Wisdom of God. . . . *we risk a relationship with the world*

Sapientia is closely associated in Hildegard’s visionary world with the Shekinah of Jewish mysticism, with the Spirit of the Lord that “filled the whole earth” (Wisd. of Sol. 1:7). Wisdom is the elemental force, the élan vital that invigorates nature and breathes new life into the soul. In a sequence on the Holy Spirit, Hildegard exults in the Spirit who makes the universe fruitful and one:

*O mighty passage, penetrating all
in the heights, upon the earth,
and in all deeps,
you bind them and gather them
all together.
From you the clouds have their flowing,
the ether its flight,
the stones their moisture,
the waters spurt forth in streams,
and the earth exudes verdure.⁶*

Here is a vivid sense of universal life, a world aflame with vitality, pulsing with *viriditas*, “verdure,” “greenness.” *Viriditas* is for Hildegard one of the key manifestations of the Spirit’s creative power in the world. Thus, too, the “greening” of the soul and the greening of the world are two moments in a single continuous process. Attention to the Spirit means learning to attend to the living world in all of its palpable particularity. The “vision of God” emerges nowhere else but within that living world.

⁵Barbara Lachman, *The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen* (New York: Belltower, 1993), p. 87.

⁶Leider no. 19: 232-34. Cited in Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, p. 67.

Purity
of heart is to
notice one
thing

The practical effects of this sensitivity to *Sapientia* are striking. Hildegard gave extraordinary attention to the physical world, not merely because of its perceived theological significance, but because she saw the cultivation of intimate knowledge of the world as an important means of mediating the power of the living light to others. She studied extensively the particular characteristics of certain herbs and gemstones for example, especially those known to have healing properties. Her own monastery at Rupertsberg cultivated many of these herbs in its garden. John Riddle, historian of medieval pharmacology and medicine, has noted that for Hildegard there was no artificial sense of division between the kitchen, the pharmacy, the fields, and the church. If part of the work of the poet is to create metaphors that allow us to see things in a new light by placing them in unexpected relationship with one another, Hildegard must certainly be counted not only as a visionary but also as a great poet. She sees *Sapientia* living and moving through all of these domains, the particular and palpable illuminated and held together within the shadow of the living light.

A CAPACITY FOR BOUNDLESS WONDER

CAN WE LEARN to notice and give voice to the presence of *Sapientia* in our own places? I believe we can. And we have much to learn, I think, from the remarkable flowering of regional writers and poets of nature that is taking place in our midst. I think of Richard Nelson's intimate portraits of the Alaskan wilderness, Denise Levertov's growing body of poetry created under the shadow of Mt. Ranier in the Pacific Northwest, Terry Tempest Williams's searching essays on place and spirit in the Great Basin region of Utah. There are Barry Lopez's deeply ethical and imaginative probings of the relationships between human beings, animals, and the Arctic landscape, Wendell Berry's essays, poems, and stories set in the tobacco fields of Kentucky, Gary Snyder's lifetime of poems and stories rooted in the Yuba watershed on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada, Annie Dillard's luminous meditations on the Appalachian Mountains, Mary Oliver's intricate renderings of spirit and place near Provincetown, Massachusetts, Norman

Maclean's evocation of the rugged landscape around the Big Blackfoot River in Montana.

Wendell Berry says: "I have come to feel that there is here in North America a hidden place obscured by what we have built upon it, and that whenever we penetrate the surface of the life around us that place and its spirit can be found."⁷ By digging into particular landscapes, paying careful attention to the shape and character of such places, these regional writers and poets are calling us to notice the world we inhabit and to discover there the faint traces of the Spirit. They are creating on our continent the equivalent of what the Australian Aborigines call "Songlines," an intricate network of sacred places celebrated by those who know and cherish them in ever expanding sung narratives.⁸ They are helping to teach us something the Aborigines have long known, that "an unsung land is a dead land." In singing the songs of place, they are helping to show us what it might mean to inhabit the places in which we now live, to drink deeply of the spirit of these places.

It takes patience to learn to see a place. And humility, a willingness to suspend judgment and let a place reveal itself on its own terms. As John Haines has noted, "The land gives up its meaning slowly, as the sun finds day by day a deeper place in the mountain."⁹ Barry Lopez describes the intricate pattern emerging from close observation of the landscape along the Charley River in eastern Alaska.

What is stunning about the river's banks on this particular stormy afternoon is not the vegetation (the willow, alder, birch, black cottonwood, and spruce are common enough) but its presentation. The wind, like some energetic dealer in rare fabrics, folds back branches and ruffles the underside of leaves to show the pattern—the shorter willows forward; the birch taller, set farther back on the hills. The soft green furze of budding alder heightens the contrast between gray-green willow stems and white birch bark. All of it is rhythmic in the wind, each species bending as its diameter, its surface area, the strength of its fibers dictate. Behind this, a backdrop of hills: open country recovering from an old fire, dark islands of spruce in an ocean of labrador tea, lowbrush cranberry,

⁷Wendell Berry, "Speech After a Long Silence," *Sewanee Review* (CIV): 1 (Winter 1996), p. 10.

⁸Bruce Chatwin, *Songlines* (New York: Viking, 1987), pp. 2, 13.

⁹I was unable to locate the reference for this quotation.

*fireweed, and wild primrose, each species of leaf the invention of a different green: lime, moss, forest, jade. This is not to mention the steel gray of the clouds, the balmy arctic temperature, our clear suspension in the canoe over the stony floor of the river, the ground-in dirt of my hands, the flutelike notes of a Swainson's thrush, or anything else that informs the scene.*¹⁰

HERE ATTENTION to what the land presents means cultivating not only a precise awareness of individual things but also a sense of pattern. The individual species of trees come alive and speak as a whole, their subtle variations in color and form comprising a rich, complex vision. This is not unlike what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins referred to as “inscape,” that subtle pattern and texture of particular things which, for the attentive, can open suddenly onto a shimmering world of spirit.

Seeing happens only when we risk a relationship with the world. Often this means risking a metaphor, finding a way of “seeing as.” Annie Dillard, who among contemporary writers has been acutely attentive to the presence of the Spirit in the world, risks just such a relationship in her description of a flight of starlings:

*They gathered deep in the distance, flock sifting into flock, and strayed towards me, transparent and whirling, like smoke. They seemed to unravel as they flew, lengthening in curves, like a loosened skein. I didn't move; they flew directly over my head for half an hour. The flight extended like a fluttering banner, and unfurled oriflamme, in either direction as far as I could see. . . . The flocks each tapered at either end from a rounded middle, like an eye. Over my head, I heard a sound of beaten air, like a million shook rugs, a muffled whuff. Into the woods they sifted without shifting a twig, right through the crowns of trees, intricate and rushing, like wind.*¹¹

Learning to see means learning to “see as.” It means using metaphor to bring the world into bold relief, to rescue it from obscurity and oblivion. Such an effort is a kind of response, a

¹⁰Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Scribners, 1988), pp. 78–9.

¹¹Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 39–40.

recognition of the startling beauty of the starlings' flight, an attempt to etch it into memory. Noticing is self-implicating. To see and describe the starlings' precise movements and habits is to be drawn into relationship with the world. It is a way of kindling intimacy.

But are we prepared to attend to what is unfolding around us with the devotion and care required to really experience such intimacy? I think of the story of Philemon and Baucis, recounted by Ovid. Of all those in the surrounding countryside visited by the gods, only this old impoverished couple was willing to offer them hospitality. And for this the gods blessed them abundantly. Rembrandt's painting of the tale, which hangs in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., suggests the tenderness and power of this encounter. The gods gaze gently toward Philemon and Baucis, hands outstretched toward their hosts in a gesture full of gratitude. The old couple, heads bowed slightly, regard their visitors with a mixture of awe, humility, and longing. A blazing light shines forth from their midst, as the visitors and the old couple sit together, rapt in silence.

*We
must begin
where we
are*

Søren Kierkegaard noted once that “purity of heart is to will one thing.” Perhaps we should also say this: “Purity of heart is to notice one thing.” To see something clearly, in all its distinctive particularity is, potentially, to see the world ablaze with light. Perhaps this is what the sixth beatitude is really calling us to—the cultivation of a capacity for radical attention, for boundless wonder. How else will we ever learn to catch glimpses of the sacred coursing through the living world? “Love calls us to the things of this world,” suggests poet Richard Wilbur.¹² Isn't this what Hopkins meant by calling us to attend to the mysterious presence of God in and through all that is? “Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder, / His mystery must be instressed, stressed; / For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.”¹³



¹²Richard Wilbur, “Love Calls Us To the Things of This World,” in *New and Selected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), pp. 233–34.

¹³Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Wreck of the Deutschland,” in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, selected with an introduction and notes by W. H. Gardner (New York/London: Penguin, 1953), p. 14.

WE MUST BEGIN where we are. With the help of my daughter, Julia, I am gradually coming home to the place in which I dwell. I am learning to discern here the faint tracings of Spirit in the shape and texture of things. And so I sometimes share with her what I have noticed, a small gift for her, a discipline for me:

Yesterday morning the sky was filled with billowy cumulous clouds. All day long they drifted across the sky. The San Gabriel mountains were dusted with snow. Late in the afternoon the clouds turned darker, light gray to dark blue-gray but many still brilliant white. And the sky powder blue. Walking out of my office the sky had turned to fire, huge cumulous clouds to the west etched in red, pink, orange. Later, a long line of ink black clouds toward the southwest, utterly flat on the bottom and soft, rounded on top. Like a train moving across the night sky.

Sometimes we move through the world together, helping each other see and love its mysterious beauty. At dusk, we walk outside into the backyard to smell the newly blooming freesias. A slight, sweet, buttery fragrance. Then looking up, two enormous thunderheads traced with red and orange. "They look like they are on fire," Julia says.

Later that evening, walking down the driveway, I look up to see another huge luminous thunderhead, standing boldly against a blue-black sky. It is ringed by stars, with a crescent moon rising in the west. I come back inside to get Julia. As we walk outside, her eyes get bigger and bigger: she sees everything immediately. Wrapped tightly in a royal blue afghan, she gazes all around the night sky. "Like soft balls of cotton," she says of one group of clouds. In another part of the sky she sees thin wispy strands like the end of a broom. "It's bimulous, Daddy," she says finally, describing the evening with a word from one of her favorite books. Then we fall silent, perched together on the warm pavement, looking, looking, the night sky washing over us.

Brown Dog

by Jean M. Blomquist



DAVID KEEN