

From Chapter Four "Learning To See" in *What We Ache For* :

. . . In creative work we seek to add our consciousness to what the world offers to us in ways that create new stories, images, and sounds that reveal insights, patterns and truths we may not have seen before. But to do this we have to be able to get our conditioned responses- the belief, for instance, that water should necessarily be depicted in paintings as blue- out of the way so we can see the fullness of the world within and around us. This is harder to do than we might think. From our earliest childhood we have been taught to see in mutually agreed upon ways. When my eldest son, Brendan, was in junior kindergarten his teacher asked his father and I to come in for an interview to discuss Brendan's perfunctory participation in classroom art projects. Mystified, I packed up several pieces of artwork Brendan had done at home and went to the school. The teacher, clearly frustrated with Brendan, showed us picture after picture that he had drawn in school in response to directions she had given the class. When she'd asked the students to draw a picture of the place they lived he had drawn the outline of a black box with a red triangle on top. Beside the "house" was a green ball atop the brown stick of a tree trunk. A yellow ball in the upper corner was presumably the sun. All the pictures he had drawn at school had clearly been done quickly and without much thought or care. I spread out one of the pictures from home on the teacher's desk. Every inch of the paper to the edges and corners was crowded with images at different angles, in a multitude of colors and with little or no regard for the laws of gravity. There were kings with gold crowns at the top of the page and huge birds flying through the air beneath them surrounded by multicolored forests and strange animals and people engaged in different activities.

The teacher stared in disbelief at the contrast. "Well," she said at last, "clearly Brendan does not find my directions inspiring." I refrained from asking why she felt compelled to direct four year olds in creative expression. Was it important to evaluate them on their willingness to comply with another's way of seeing? Why not just turn them loose with paint and crayons and paper? She looked at Brendan's father and I with real concern. "Brendan," she stated emphatically, "is not going to do well in the public school system. He is not a team player. He does not care enough about what others think about what he does." His father and I, not as free of the desire to have others think well of us, suppressed our smiles.

She was right. Brendan did not do well in the public school system. Living by the rhythm of your own inner drummer, or by the map of your own creative imagination in whatever form that takes, holds its own challenges. But perhaps it is easier to deal with being out of step with the world around you than it is to find the creative impulse if you can only see the world in narrow preconceived ways. And external authority- the voice of the parent or teacher or media source that tells us how to see- is not the only or the most tenacious authority we have to shake off in order to see things in a variety of ways and let our imaginations respond unfettered. Recently, reading spiritual teacher Krishnamurti's admonishments not to surrender to the very normal human desire for certainty and security by acquiescing to any external authority's notion of how things are, I was feeling pretty self-congratulatory. Having been through the fire of studying with and then leaving a spiritual teacher, having reached the age of fifty and finding myself less inclined to court others' approval, I was feeling relatively free of the influence of external authority on my ability to see the world around me.

But as I read further I discovered Krishnamurti asking for something more, asking us to see what is without relying on the authority of our own experience. For the first time I considered how, despite my resistance to external authority, I often allow the authority of my experience- that which has come before- to shape and shade how and what I see in this moment, including how and what I remember of the past. Of course, experience can be useful. When I get in my car to drive on icy roads it's important to remember what I learned from last year's unexpected and abrupt trip into the roadside ditch. But when I am observing the world and myself, when I want to take in the raw material of creativity, my past experience conditions my mind and often dictates what I will see and how I will see it, narrowing the range of material to which I can bring my imagination in order to create stories or poems or images. Giving my experience authority over my seeing I do not expect to see beauty at the garbage dump, so may miss the way the piles of snow-filled tires make black and white patterns of light and shadow. My mind, conditioned by the authority of my experience of growing up in a small town does not expect to see a story in my weekly visit to the local post office, and so I may miss really seeing the woman who hands me stamps and parcels, may not even notice the exchange we have or consider the meaning I might have found in a story about our encounter.

One of the easiest and most enjoyable ways to become aware of your conditioned way of seeing, to open to new perceptions, is to spend time with people who see things differently than you do. Most of us spend time with people who share our worldview, people who think and see in similar ways. It gives us comfort to have the authority of our experience reinforced by another's experience. Being with those who have had different experiences and so see differently not only opens us to new perceptions but helps us become aware of our habitual blinders.

Years ago a talented and innovative composer came to study shamanic ceremonies with me. During one retreat I facilitated she took a tape recorder down into the gorge that ran through the property where we were staying and recorded the sound of the water rushing past the rocks and echoing off the cliffs on either side of the river. These sounds became the inspiration for and part of her later compositions involving electronic music combined with the sound of the human voice. Watching her work and learning to appreciate her music I started to listen differently, to move past expectations about what I would hear in different settings, to suspend instant judgments about what sounds were pleasant or musical, to perceive a much wider range of sounds. I began to notice relationships between sounds, began to imagine a layered wholeness in the sounds of our inner and outer worlds.

I am fortunate to live with someone whose ways of seeing are very different than my own. While this can sometimes lead to lively debate and points of contention it also presents on-going opportunities to expand my own ways of seeing. My husband, Jeff, is a talented photographer. Often he takes pictures of things I don't even see: the rich colors and textures of peeling paint and rusting metal on a shed wall; the delicate lace of melting ice set against the dark wet wood of the back deck framed by sun-sculpted snow; shadows in doorways or windows that hint of other worlds. Also, where I am a mystic, Jeff is a scientist. I meditate, read poetry and study metaphysics; Jeff designs computer hardware, builds telescopes and is an avid astronomer. We have different areas of expertise but because the world is inherently inter-connected, when we can set aside our preconceived notions about both the world and our own abilities to comprehend what is unfamiliar, we offer each other new ways of seeing and imagining the world we share.

Recently, thinking about time, I asked Jeff to explain to me how atomic clocks work. After he explained cesium resonances to me we began to talk about the human preoccupation with measuring time precisely and the adjustments made to calendars over the centuries. Jeff told me about the advent of the Gregorian calendar in 1582. As the new calendar was instituted ten days had to be dropped in order to bring the dates into alignment with astronomical data. There was apparently considerable unrest about this at the time as the poor and uneducated feared the rich and powerful were trying to rob them of ten days of their lives. This got my imagination going: What if you really did have to wipe out ten days of your life? What ten days would you never be willing to surrender? What ten days would you be happy to miss? And what if a gap really did exist in time? What would happen to the continuity of cause and effect? What would happen to all the things that would have or could have happened in those ten days and the things they would have caused? Possible elements of science fiction and fantasy stories began to percolate in my imagination.

Sometimes it just takes a shift in perspective to help us see the world a little differently, to spark the imagination in new ways. Young children are particularly good at teaching us how to see past our conditioning, how to let what we are offered stir the imaginative mind. They simply don't have much experience. Everything is new to them. The stones in the driveway, the difference in the texture and taste of the round and the square sides of the crust on the bread, the way the cat washes herself- these are all fascinating when you are five and can lead to endless imaginative speculation. I remember preparing dinner one night when Brendan was about six years old. He was sitting at the kitchen table, silently and slowly opening and closing his mouth. I looked at him and raised my eyebrows in query. "If we could unhinge our jaw do you think we could fit a bowling ball into our mouths?" he asked thoughtfully. I just shook my head and laughed, delighted with the seemingly senseless but fascinating meandering of the imaginative mind. Recently CBC radio reported that a western Canadian university decided to use the relatively unfettered perspective and imaginations of children to teach engineering students how to think more creatively. They paired engineering students with boys and girls in grade three, asking the eight year olds to imagine what kind of furniture they would like to have in their rooms. Then it was up to the budding engineers to find a way of making the furniture the children imagined. Apparently a hover-chair and a bunk bed on giant wheels were two of the projects that delighted both those who had conceived and those who had designed and built them.

We have to become aware of and set aside our conditioned ways of perceiving in order to hear the rising symphony in the rush of the river, to see the beauty in a bit of ice, to find the story beneath a series of events, to imagine hover-chairs and beds on wheels. As Mary Oliver reminds us in her poem "Wild Geese," wherever we are, our inner and outer worlds are constantly offering themselves to our imaginations. We often simply do not see what is right in front of us. We look for and see what we expect, what has been seen there before. The things that are most familiar, the world of our daily lives, the emotions and physical sensations that quickly come and go are hardly noticed or are labeled and judged in some habitual way that moves us past them with little or no real awareness. Our mind quickly labels what it perceives as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, useful or useless and we move toward or away from what we see based on these often unconscious and automatic judgments.

Finding the stories we want to write, the play of light and shadow we want to photograph, the sounds we want to weave into songs in ways that are alive for ourselves and those to whom we will offer our work requires learning to see, to be aware, to pay attention. . . .