Kealaikahiki Point, Kaho'olawe, Hawai'i 1994 © David Ulrich

Chapter IX

Learning to See: Vision and the Creative Process

I wish I could find an event which meant as much as simple seeing.
Theodore Roethke

Only that day dawns to which we are awake.
Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden*

Rilke begins an essay thus: *I am learning to see. I don't know why it is, but everything enters me more deeply and doesn't stop where it used to. I have an interior that I never knew of. Everything passes into it now. I don't know what happens there.*

One page later, he continues: *Have I said it before? I am learning to see. Yes, I am beginning, It's still going badly. But I intend to make the most of my time.*

And later in the same essay, the poet writes: *I think I should begin to do some work, now that I am learning to see. I am twenty-eight years old, and I have done practically nothing.* These words, written when Rilke was a young

and unaccomplished poet, reflect an experience universal amongst artists: the recognition of the power of seeing to touch our inner lives deeply and mysteriously — and the need to cultivate this capacity.

How do we develop the gift of observation? While there are many forms of seeing, as previously outlined, direct observation forms the core of what we regard as our vision. The ability to observe, and to see and feel the world deeply, is a learned capacity. For centuries, artists have traditionally been beacons, guiding the way for this form of vision. Their insightful observations inform us, delight us, challenge us, move us to joy or tears, and at times, call us to passionate action.

The foremost picture magazine of American culture throughout the middle of the Twentieth Century, Life Magazine, — showcasing many of the finest photographers of its era — was characterized by the following statement:

To see and take pleasure in seeing;

To see and to be instructed;

To see and to be amazed.

With the complexity of the foregoing chapters behind us, I will now admit: seeing is a simple act, one filled with great pleasure and promise. What is asked for is the ability to be open, to be transparent, to allow the world to enter us deeply and fully — to interpenetrate us. However, as we are, in our present condition of fragmentation and disassociation, from our being and surroundings, many tools are needed to learn this ingenuous, yet deceptively difficult act.

In this, is found one of the great paradoxes of awakening. It takes rigorous intent, much knowledge and guidance, a heightened awareness, and the presence of grace to learn something of the potential of human vision. When it does arise, through our efforts or as a "gift" from within, a true moment of seeing is a wondrously simple and uncomplicated state of awareness. And, in these awakened moments, we find ourselves saying: "why can't I be here, in this state, all the time. It is so clear; so natural; so elegantly simple." As Rumi is prone to say in recognition of our vigilance: it is *like this.* Then comes rushing forward, returning to us, all the varied inner voices: distracting thoughts, reactive feelings, and the self-limiting, tightly constricted concerns which prevent the purity of seeing. And so it is for most of us…

The ability to be present constitutes our human birthright. Why must it be so complicated, and why do we make it so difficult? It often seems that everything conspires against this natural activity. And it does. Our emotional reactions, associative mind, conditioned ego, and disconnection from the body are everyday facts that impede awareness. Yet… seeing is direct and

incisive, capable of beaming through the fog that eclipses clarity and obscures reality. It is a highly satisfying and nourishing activity filled with much *pleasure*, *instruction*, and *amazement*. Alexis Brodovitch, art director of another prominent magazine at mid-century, Harpers Bazaar, would send his photographers — *proteges* who included Arbus, Avedon, and Penn — into the field with one dictum: *astonish me!*

Like all else that we have considered, we must learn the gift of observation. It is an acquired skill, at least as adults. And we must learn to do so in the midst of our lives, not only in quiet moments of contemplation and solitude. The world, our creative work, and the others we interact with; they need our presence, our real attention.

Seeing needs cultivation. Observing our surroundings, observing others, observing the dynamics of human society, and witnessing the forces of the natural world is the key to knowing about the universe. Perhaps the only key. Imagine — the vast storehouse of human knowledge in science, medicine, art and literature, psychology, religion and philosophy, astronomy, technology, language, and every subject imaginable — and from all cultures in the recorded history of the world — and maybe beyond that. How did we ever achieve this enormous, majestic, unknowably-large sum of knowledge in such

a relatively short time, a matter of only centuries? Don't we stand in awe of our collective selves — of humankind? And imagine this: in all likelihood, we have only scratched the surface, uncovered an infinitesimally small portion of what we can know about the world and the essence of things. We often think there is nothing more under the sun to be discovered. Do we really believe this?

Discovering the world is round,, discovering that the planets revolve around the sun, discovering fire, or the wheel, or that the stars are suns, many light years away — all of these things, and everything else we know, grow from the ability and propensity of human beings to observe, take notes, compare, and observe again and again. The impulse to observe grows from human curiosity, human interest, and human endeavor — to better our lives and those of our children. In all fields, we have only begun the pursuit of knowing.

It is now up to us. The future rests in our hands. The ongoing pursuit of human knowledge, of bettering the world, of discovering cures for disease, of healing the environment, of exploring the universe, the farther reaches of outer space and the deepest regions of inner space; these are our responsibility, our necessity. Those who have gone before have added their wisdom and insights. Now, it is our turn. And all we need to do is observe. Observe, observe, observe. With attention.

Worlds await our discovery, and we await to discover the contribution we will make to this evolving sum of knowledge about the universe and ourselves.

Let's begin the journey of observation. Where do we start? Careful, attentive observation is difficult. It requires going beyond ourselves, seeing and empathizing with the moment in front of us — and not thinking about dinner, our new date, yesterday's work crisis, or tomorrow's challenges. It asks that our minds be empty, our emotions clear, and our bodies responsive to the shifting energies of the moment. Self-centeredness, in the words of the Dalai Lama, is the greatest obstacle to our enlightenment.

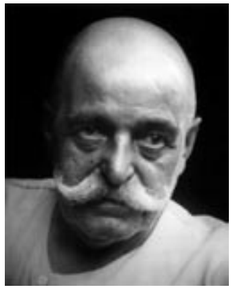
In the instructive text, Acting: The First Six Lessons, Richard Boleslavsky writes of a conversation between the teacher of acting fictionally featured in the book with the stubborn Aunt of his principal student. The Aunt's comments provide for us a succinct and widely expressed criticism of many of the exercises and tools found in this book, and in other similar texts designed around methods of increasing awareness. She offers her strongly held views. She emphatically does not believe in all the various theories, methods, psychological exercises, and analysis that actors, including her niece, pursue to improve their craft. She makes the point, to be an actor, one must act, and that's that.

The elder statesman of the theatre declares that a talent for acting, or for any creative activity, needs cultivation. He goes on to patiently explain how actors prepare, how they develop the memory of their bodies and feelings through sharpening their sense of observation. And he challenges the Aunt to try an exercise.

The exercise given is quite simple and one that brings great benefit. Take a period of time daily where you resolve to observe all that is around you, in as much detail as possible; and later, try to recall the results of your observations. As much as possible, do not allow the many nuances of the unfolding scene, of which you are a part by your very presence, to escape your attention. During the recall period, you may even try to re-enact the scene, down to its smallest details, within your mind's eye. Initially, it may be necessary to find relatively quiet moments to observe. As one gains the skills of observation, this quality of focused attention may be brought into the very midst of one's busied life.

The Aunt then caustically asks what the gift of observation has to do with acting.

He answers: *A great deal. It helps a student of the theatre to notice everything unusual and out of the ordinary in every-day life. It build his*



Russian sage G.I. Gurdjieff

G.I. Gurdjieff suggests observing an object and asking the following questions. Answer the questions according to your knowledge and experience:
1) Its origin
2) The cause of its origin
3) Its history
4) Its qualities and attributes
5) Objects connected with it and related to it
6) Its use and application
7) Its results and effects
8) What it explains or proves
9) Its end or future
10) Your opinion, the cause and motives of this opinion

memory, his storage memory with all visible manifestations of the human spirit. It make him sensitive to sincerity and to make-believe. It develops his sensory and muscular memory . . . . It opens his eyes to the full extent in appreciation of different personalities and values in people and works of art. And lastly, Madame, it enriches his inner life by full and extensive consumption of everything in outward life.

As a rule, I believe that inspiration is the result of hard work, but the only thing which cans stimulate inspiration in an actor is the constant and keen observation every day of his life.

The young student, known affectionately as The Creature due to her inexperience and eagerness, steps in to affirm what her teacher has been describing. She relates how the practice of recalling and re-enacting has increased her alertness dramatically and made her life "rich and wonderful."

This exercise helps those from all walks of life. Simply look. Carefully. Ask questions of what you see. Let nothing escape your gaze. Maintain a wide and deep attention to your surroundings. Learn to think about what you see. And closely examine the afterimage, the residue that your impresssions leave upon your memory. Sometimes, the remembered image can provide clues and insights that were observed but not consciously recognized in the moment of seeing.

Don't we wish to awaken and be aware of the multi-sided significance of what is around us? Don't we want to see beneath the surface, into the very dynamics and forces which shape the appearance of things?

Methods of observations differ according to one's preoccupation. Actors may choose to develop their muscular and emotional memory through observing postures, gestures, and tones of voice. A physicist may see the world as an expression of natural laws. A psychologist may observe the dynamics of human behavior. Painters and poets may favor subjective vision: observing what the sights and sounds of the world evoke within themselves.

Let us now look to the artists, the seers of our time, for inspiration and guidance. Many visual artists and writers, as well as those in theater and film, give evidence of careful and thorough observation of the world surrounding them, often giving intimate glimpses from within their immediate environment. In many cases, the particular quality of their observations form the basis and content of their mature work. In teaching poetry, Theodore Roethke would encourage his students to look and observe carefully — suggesting, *nothing seen, nothing said.* And: *First I must look, then I must learn.*

In literature, many passages that express simple seeing have imprinted themselves on my memory due to the strength of the artist's observation. I will never forget, for example, Annie Dillard's description of her mother's hand,

as seen from a child's perspective in An American Childhood. She marvels at the loose, leathery skin that could be pinched at the knuckles and lifted away from the bone, so unlike her own skin, still giving a smooth and tight enclosure of the bones and tissue in her youthful hand. Or, we have Edward Abbey's description, in Desert Solitaire, of the desert surrounding his ranger's cabin in the outer reaches of Arches National Park. The extraordinary silence punctuated by the normal sounds of small desert animals, as well as a visual rendition of the relentless light and heat, is strongly evoked. And Thoreau's revealment of his intimate relationship with the sights, sounds, and changing conditions of Walden Pond is legendary, as is Whitman's incantation of the twenty eight young men bathing at the shore: *The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair, Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.* These, and many other descriptions found throughout literary works, portray the keen, penetrating gaze cultivated by writers and poets.

From this decade, Michael Ondaatje's description of the downed airman and his experiences in the novel The English Patient is extremely well-told and reflects a highly detailed gift of observation.

Writers, photographers, and visual artists of all persuasions develop methods of observation which serve their own interests as well as conform with

the inherent demands of their medium. Barry Lopez, reminds us, in the article *Learning to See*, how different these methods may be — in this case, between his own activities as a writer and photographer. He recalls a seminal moment where — *he could grasp more easily a complex misgiving that had been building* — which led to letting go of his active involvement with photography.

Lopez writes of an encounter with a polar bear off the north coast of Alaska, one that lasted for a few minutes as he followed the bear over and around several ice floes. After returning to dry clothes and a hot shower, he attempted to recall the details of his encounter, asking of his memory to provide sufficient information to fill the missing gaps in the sequence of events. He then realized how important memory was to his work as a writer. As he was watching the bear, he missed crucial details while attending to the camera exposure and trying to frame the scene from a moving boat.

As a writer, he had trained himself in the discipline of observation and recall. Memory of the critical details and nuances of a scene, and re-playing the event in the mind's eye, is seminal to his writing. He sensed, in that moment, that he would never use a camera again. The act of photographing actually impeded the process of seeing and distracted him from careful observation.

Over time, Lopez pondered the larger implications of that event and

came to the conclusion that photography could, if not used correctly, become a stand-in for direct observation. Our generation, he feels, is so obsessed with recording events and preserving moments with a camera that we confuse living an experience with committing it to film. *The advertising injunction to preserve family memories by taking photographs had become so shrill a demand, and the practice had become so compulsive, that recording the event was more important for some than participating in it.*

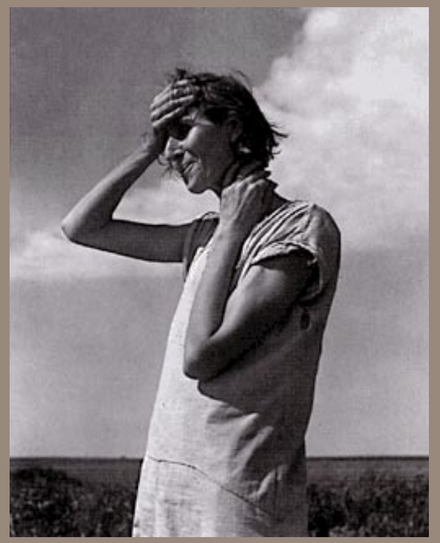
Each medium has its own demands, its own expressive strengths, and its own inherent limitations. While Lopez addresses concerns indigenous to the art of writing, where recall is crucial and necessary for the creative act, he does acknowledge that photography can serve the process of observation in the hands of those who persevere. He writes, in the same essay, of Robert Adams's work, who is able to evoke in a photograph the light and atmosphere itself, *making it visible like a plein-air painter.* Lopez recognizes the power of the photographic medium in those who bring intelligence and compassion, illumination and grace to their seeing of the world through a camera.

Photography can be employed as a means toward a heightened awareness, providing an excuse for looking, for interacting, and for savoring the moment. Photography can underline and intensify a moment. Or, as Lopez asserts, it may become a substitute for direct experience; in which case, it impedes the ability to look. But there can be no question — the act of paying attention, of looking deeply with a camera, has resulted in an extraordinary body of images, recording and interpreting our world, over the mere 150 years that photography has had to offer up its bounty.

Historically, Edward Weston's monumental images of vegetables and shells pay homage to the everyday, seeing ordinary objects as a representation of elemental life forces. He describes, in his Daybooks, the "flame of recognition" found in a moment of direct seeing, where the subject matter is seen in a deeper light, as an expression of universal energies — *the intuitive understanding and recognition relating obvious reality to the esoteric.* According to Weston, the artist is a link between worlds, expressing the inexpressible, making visible the invisible. The underlying energies of a scene or object — felt or sensed by the artist — can be rendered in material form through the eyes of great photographers.

In a similar vein, Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs, decisive moments of human interaction, are filled with grace, formal elegance, and compassion for the human condition. His work celebrates the moment of revealment, where the subject and the visual elements of the scene combine

Candy Cigarette, 1989 © Sally Mann



Migrant Mother, Nipoma, CA 1936
© Dorothea Lange Archive

Houses and Billboards, Atlanta, GA 1936 © Walker Evans Archive

to form an organized whole, an insightful document drawn from the chaos and complex fabric of life itself. Cartier-Bresson believes that events build to a climax, a single defining moment that uncovers the essential nature of the scene — where the subject, the juxtaposition of forms and shapes, the light, and environmental elements conspire to assist the photographer. And this decisive instant is only recognized through moment-to-moment observation, never allowing one's attention to flag, and diligently following the unfolding scene through the viewfinder.

Madrid, Spain 1933
© Henri Cartier-Bresson/Mqagnum

Walker Evans's cool and detached observations of the signs and symbols of American culture in the 30's, and Dorothea Lange's commentaries on the sad dignity of the human condition give evidence of a deep and abiding sense of gazing on and caring about the world.

In recent times, Sally Mann's photographs of her children, seen in their most intimate daily moments, reveal the process of growing up in the rural South with post-woodstock generation parents. They are, at their best, collaborative observations between artist / mother and self-possessed child. Richard Misrach's epic series, *Desert Cantos*, consisting of large-scale photographs of the California / Nevada desert, see the desert as a place unto itself, filled with fragile beauty and the disturbing evidence of humankind's

Cartier-Bresson writes the now famous manifesto in his classic book of photographs, The Decisive Moment: "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression."

worst acts — weapons, toxic waste, and insensitive development — and as a symbol for the condition of the earth world-wide. They are alternately hopeful and profoundly disturbing observations. What have we done to our world, they ask?

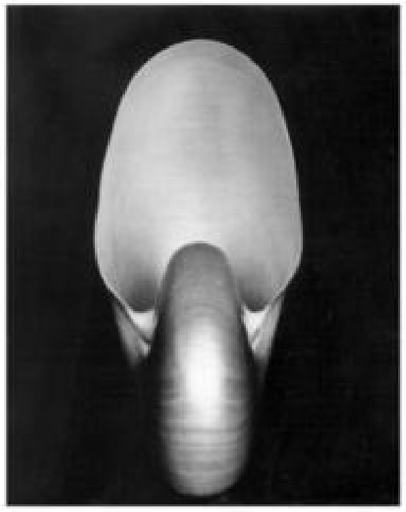
These works, and many other photographic testimonials, bear witness to the power of seeing and faithful observation — true to the artists intent, the world itself, or more usually a potent mixture of both.

In painting, who can forget the exquisite light — of the lower Cape, rural America, and cities at night — found in Edward Hopper's work? His observations make visible the intangible, the deeply felt presence of radiant light which suffuses the world. Or, who among us has not been moved by Georgia O'Keeffe's life's work? — of painting those particular scenes where she found a resonance with, in her own words, *shapes and ideas so near to me — so natural to my way of being and thinking.* O'Keeffe's canvases of flowers must be viewed as one of the great observational achievements of modern art of the twentieth century. She enlarged single small flowers on to a large canvas, bestowing an intimate subject with epic proportion and scale.

Artists not only carefully regard their surroundings, but see themselves reflected in the world around them. A complex balance must be created

between the inner and outer worlds. Our drives, compulsions, interests, passions, complexes, and indeed our very state of being is what we see mirrored in the surrounding world. In earlier chapters, we have explored elements of this relationship between an artist's work and their inner life — and much has been written elsewhere on the subject. Edward Weston's photographs of shells and vegetables and Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings serve as excellent examples. In both cases, we see not only a magnified view of the essence of flower, or pepper, or summer squash, but also something of the artist's character portrayed and revealed intimately through their work. Although both O'Keeffe and Weston strongly resisted this form of interpretation and "reading" of their work, the fact remains: we cannot divorce ourselves from our own seeing. Even modern physics agrees. We see what we are — and conversely, we are what we see.

Embedded in our very nature, I believe, is the impulse toward storytelling. And what better way to tell our stories than through paint, well-crafted combinations of words, the light from a lens focussed on the world, or through the human voice and body. We tell of what we see and how we see it. This is one aspect of the potency of art. Simple seeing is a gift, albeit a fragile one. I would implore us all… to never take the sheer physical act of



Shell, 1927 © Edward Weston Archive

Black Iris, 1926 © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe

A unique voice of sensitivity — and lightheartedness — is heard in O'Keeffe's own comments on the flower paintings: *A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower — the idea of flowers. You put out you hand to touch the flower — lean forward to smell it — maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking — or give it to someone to please them. Still — in a way — 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. If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small.*

So I said to myself — I'll paint what I see — what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it — I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

Early Sunday Morning, 1930 © Edward Hopper

Night Hawks, 1942 © Edward Hopper

Battleground Point #01, 2001 © Richard Misrach

Battleground Point #01, 2001 © Richard Misrach

seeing for granted. It is a precious, invaluable resource. My question is merely this: do we truly make full and bountiful use of this often underutilized and underappreciated capacity? Can we regain the sense of the miraculous quality of sight and observation?

Many have become jaded and cynical, not believing that the world itself is worth our efforts toward observation — or at least that it is not as interesting as television and movies. So much of what we know of the world is now mediated through electronic forms of communication. I went recently to a Rolling Stones concert, was seated somewhere in the first twenty rows, and often caught myself watching the gigantic TV monitor above the performers rather than the musicians themselves. Our seduction with media and our many forms of arrogance and cynicism toward the world prevent real seeing. Acts of heroism occur every day in our lives; moments of wonder and awe, hints of the sublime, are available to us at the bus stop, the grocery store, in the woods, and even within our own homes and immediate environment.

Sometimes it is downright strange how blind we are to our current reality. This morning I woke up in Cleveland, drove to the airport through a blizzard with temperatures hovering around five degrees and am now, this evening before dinner, writing these lines on Maui, where the temperature is in the mid-80's. For most of the day, I along with several hundred others,

hurtled through the air, six miles above the earth, in the steel belly of a massive, cylindrical object zipping over the earth at 500 miles per hour. What a remarkable phenomenon. During this time, we were perfunctorily indulged with plastic food, asked sharply to keep the window-blinds shut so people could watch the homogenized, family-style movie on a blurry, un-corrected color display monitor. All the while, we were engaged in an incredible act, crossing continents and oceans at nearly the speed of sound, but no one bothered to look. All windows were shut and everyone was insulated in their inner world, not wanting to speak or acknowledge their too-close neighbor. And the sheer wonder of it all, of flying over shimmering, changing landscapes went completely unnoticed. My heart leaped when the islands finally came into view after 2500 miles of empty ocean, but no one seemed to care. Let's just land and get on with it, their bodies and attitudes said.

We have become jaded to the very marvels of our existence. William S. Merwin writes in the poem Airport:

… we travel far and fast
and as we pass through we forget
where we have been

We no longer celebrate the ordinary. And with contemporary technology and science, the extraordinary has been stripped of all meaning. Artists help us return to a sense of wonder and give back dignity and respect to the moments of our lives.

We can do this: we can observe, Bonnie Friedman writes. *Things are saturated with significance.* From our sincere observations, from the attention we are capable of bringing to the moment, the creative impulse arises. We wish to tell the story; share with others; and respond to what we see in words, song, paint, or silver halide. It seems a part of the human condition to want to communicate in this way. What we see and feel deeply, we are moved to express. What we learn about ourselves and others, we wish to make a record of, transcribe in some fashion, or express in symbolic form. Our discoveries seem amplified when shared. And conversely, working with an art form invites and encourages fresh seeing. Observation is the crux. It calls forth power, grace, and insight discovered through the long, lingering look. Seeing is knowing and learning, and taking pleasure in the simple fact of what is — in the *whatness* of things.

We shall end this section where we began, with Rilke's efforts in learning to see. And where does he begin this effort of observation? In the life of an individual found in their face: *It never occurred to me before how many faces there are. There are multitudes of people, but there are many more faces, because each person has several of them. There are people who wear the same*

faces for years; naturally it wears out, gets dirty, splits at the seams, stretches like gloves worn during a long journey. They are thrifty, uncomplicated people; they never change it, never even have it cleaned. It's good enough, they say, and who can convince them to the contrary. Of course, since they have several faces, you might wonder what they do with the other ones. They keep them in storage. Their children will wear them. But sometimes it also happens that their dogs go out wearing them. And why not? A face is a face.

Other people change faces incredibly fast, put on one after another and wear them out. At first, they think they have an unlimited supply; but when they are barely forty years old they come to their last one. There is, to be sure, something tragic about this. They are not accustomed to taking care of faces; their last one is worn through in a week, has holes in it, is in many places as thin as paper, and then, little by little, the lining shows through, the non-face, and they walk around with that one.

This passage, I feel, represents a moment of close observation — imbued with insight, humor, and great compassion. Many depictions are found in the annals of literature and throughout the history of art that bring the simple act of seeing to life.

Mr. Bennett, Vermont 1944 © Estate of Paul Strand

Only that day dawns to which we are awake. Henry David Thoreau wrote this stirring passage in Walden nearly 150 years ago that conveys a timeless, ringing truth. Without clear intent and some measure of awakened attention, the world passes us by unseen and unnoticed. Reminiscent of the Zen riddle, if a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Awareness is integral to experience. We cannot genuinely interact with the world in sleep, we cannot feel that which glances off our rigid, aloof, distracted, and superficial attention. We cannot see fully and directly until we shake the sleep from our eyes and uncloud our being.

What does he mean — to awaken? Thoreau implies that we are asleep. And aren't we? We do not see or experience the nuances, the subtleties, the underlying energies of the world or the dynamics of our own lives. The world goes on; we are not here, in this moment, to fully receive it. Do we ever really see faces, for example, as Rilke has so adroitly observed them? Or do we feel the world around us, in all of its livingness — with its many marvels and contradictions. The wonder, the pain and pleasure, the richness of the world slides by, as our lives fleetingly pass, without our authentic presence, in the here and now.

In Walden, Thoreau has much to say of this. *Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous.* Thoureau and many

others believe that our lives are built on illusory foundations — that our petty, daily concerns and consumer longings are only the vaguest shadow of reality. Through his inspiring experiment at Walden Pond, he teaches us to slow down, open our gates of perception, and *discover that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence.* Thoreau claims that, all too often, we allow ourselves to be deceived by superficial appearances and passing pleasures, that we slumber peaceably in our mundane routines while the real world awaits our awareness.

Minor White would often ask his students: Don't you wish to be more present, to truly and fully experience the moments of your life?" This reminded me of the legendary question Alfred Stieglitz asked Minor White after the latter returned from the war: "Have you ever been in love, really in love? *Then,* you can photograph."

Implicit in these questions is the recognition of a scale of being, of degrees of consciousness, of the relativity of our experience and attention — an acknowledgment of our constantly shifting inner states, and the lack of a stable, lucid presence. The search for ourselves begins with a recognition of this lack, that we are not here now, fully present in this moment. We are in the past, commenting on what has taken place, or locked within emotional reactions arising from past experiences, unrelated to the now. Or we are in the future,

looking forward to tomorrow, making plans, wanting the now to be different, and dreaming our "great dreams". What does, what could, awakening mean in our present state of disassociation, of alienation from the present moment?

Each of us knows the experience. Gifted moments of intense clarity and vibrating, resonant awareness have graced our lives. However, these moments come… and go again. They are dependent on chance or external circumstances. Although we may wish for them, we are not in possession of a reliable key. We cannot induce, invite, or intend their appearance in our dimmed, ordinary, half-conscious state of being. That is perhaps why many climb mountains, participate in extreme sports, and do what seem like insensible things. We long for the shock of clear-headedness and vibrant, rich feeling.

I mentioned, earlier in this book, another Rilke phrase: *the grace of great things*. Isn't every moment, fully seen and experienced, a great thing? And don't these moments represent the seminal experiences of our lives — the ones we really remember? Usually, only moments of great trauma, danger, intense beauty, or extraordinary conditions bring us to this state of awakening. Why? What about the rest of our lives, the thousands of ordinary, uneventful days that quickly pass into years and decades?

When I was a young teacher in the late 70's, some of my students were Vietnam veterans returning to college on accrued benefits from their years of service. Many of them would not talk of the war — and for good reason. It was too close, too terrifying, too painful, too utterly removed from the experiences of civilized humanity.

Those that did talk of their combat experiences affirmed one consistent and surprising phenomenon — the momentary experience of the sublime in battle, where their senses were heightened, their attention was sharply focused, and a feeling of ecstasy in the midst of the terror would overtake from time to time. The fear was overwhelming, and the need for sharp attentiveness in the moments of conflict was pronounced — one's very survival and that of one's comrades depended on the ability to be here, now, and respond accordingly. A momentary slip of attention . . . what might the consequences have been? How different this is than our present condition. Our lives are generally very comfortable — maybe too much so. What depends on us — on our attention? We forget ourselves and the essential matter of our lives constantly. No big deal. There's always tomorrow. Discipline is distinctly uncool. "Chill out," we say. It is cool not to care.

We laugh at our foibles and contradictions, our forgetfulness, our

lack of inner unity, our lack of attention and care in the varied moments of our lives. “It’s OK, no problem.” We pat each other on the back, “don’t worry about it.” Little depends on our attentiveness, our care. Yet, in truth, everything does.

The greatest truths are revealed in each moment and in every manifestation of life. *All truths wait in all things, They neither hasten their delivery nor resist it*, declares Walt Whitman. And to *see the universe in a grain of sand*; this legendary phrase speaks of a quality of perception that is possible for us, even today. But how do we approach awakening to the present moment?

We cannot do this alone; guidance is needed. Authentic teachings are available to sincere seekers if we can magnetize ourselves to discriminate between the widely varying quality of influences that we encounter. We must be careful and mindful. Watered-down versions of spiritual teachings abound, representing subjective dilutions and distorted amalgamations of the world’s great traditions. In the words of Ken Wilber, we should distinguish between *transformative* spiritual practice, which offers the means for true growth of being, and mere *translative* teachings, which speak only to the mind. We must heed our intuition and deploy good judgment if we wish to find the methods and influences that will help us on the way. We hope to find, according

to don Juan, a “path with heart” — that which works for us and suits our temperament and being. Fellow travelers on the search are also needed, to share and exchange, and to be reminded when we are most asleep — there are many gradations of awakening within ourselves. And a wish to awaken is paramount. We must see and accept that we are not present most of the time.

It is easy to fool ourselves. We are prone to imagining, to seeing things upside-down, and believing that our propensity for coolly reasoning our lives, or sentimentally emoting our lives, represents true awakening. Paradoxically, the initial step toward awakening is the recognition that we are asleep. When we begin to see the haziness of awareness that governs our existence and witness the forces that continually pull us away from clarity and presence, we are in a transition state — similar to those few moments between wake and sleep when we first arise in the morning.

Wakefulness has a form, a unique taste, and an unmistakable force. It often comes as a shock, a surprise. We can look to those rare moments that exist in all of our lives, where, for a moment we emerge from our sleep. It is akin to surfacing from a vague watery depth, where everything is unformed and dark. We break the surface of the water, into the intense clarity of daylight, and suddenly realize *this* is what we want, *this* is our birthright, *this* is the momentary answer to our quest. *Like this*, says Rumi.

clouds (cirrocumulus ondulatus), fool's pond 6.30.96 11:41 - 11:56 pm
© Richard Misrach

We are awake and alive. We are one whole. The world becomes vivid; three dimensional space opens; colors, shapes, tones, and nuances reveal themselves in a manner we have not hitherto recognized. We sense the livingness in our body; we feel ourselves and the energies of our surroundings. A rose is a rose, a river is a river, a mountain is a mountain, and a person is *that* person. We may begin to sense and perceive elements of the noumenal, the invisible world. Thoughts become material. We intuitively recognize new gestalts within ourselves and in what or who is in front of us. Looking deeply into the world reveals energies, interlocking, endlessly relating, interpenetrating — and of different qualities, different levels of vibration. Our touch, smell, hearing and all senses are heightened. We listen to ourselves and the "sound of the day" or the vibrations emanating from the object of our attention. And we see, clearly and directly.

We allow for the mystery and we allow for the simplicity.

Returning to Rilke's phrase, *the grace of great things*, it becomes clear that certain influences, certain works of art and music, certain exceptional individuals, certain ideas, certain teachings — and nature itself — have the power, if we truly open to them, to nourish our search for an awakened presence. And we must seek these finer and nourishing influences. Without

Coltrane on Soprano, 1963
© Roy DeCarava

them, we are on a steady diet of media-derived images and sounds, the weary manifestations of conditioned thoughts and emotions, and the world according to me, which is limited and incomplete.

The capacity of art to feed our souls and assist the process of awakening is widely acknowledged. What is art if not transformation and refinement of energies? Raw materials are transformed, uplifted into a refined state, guided by human consciousness and creative imagination. Experiences are distilled from a personal, intimate, and highly subjective realm into universal expressions of our shared humanity, becoming soulful affirmations for others. The spacious perceptions of artists — expressing their longings, their agonies and bliss — are imbued into their works, creating a resonance in the viewer where feelings are intensified and thought evoked. Certain frequencies of vibration — carried by colors, shapes, lines, word patterns, and musical tones or melodies — can correspond to those same frequencies within ourselves. When painters, poets, musicians, or dancers distill their experiences to an essential core and express a refined sensibility, viewers find that those same qualities within themselves are activated, stimulated, and awakened. Why else is it that a line from Rumi or Rilke, music by Bach or Beethoven, or shapes and colors by Rothko or Pollock can create such an intense response? The

making of art is, at its best, a disciplined practice; of refining word patterns, finding subtle relationships of form and color, or fine-tuning movements of the body, which may heighten wakefulness, increase mindfulness, and cultivate an opening of the heart. Creativity encourages a widening and deepening sense of being — for both the artist and the viewer.

Artmaking (or viewing works of art) leads us in two directions at once: back to ourselves and more deeply into the world. Rilke writes, "Know then that art is: the means by which single solitary individuals fulfill themselves.… art is: a path toward freedom. We have all been born in chains. A few forget their chains: they have them silver-plated or gilded. But what we want is to rend them; not through ugly or brute force; our desire is to grow out of them.… Therefore the artists way must be this: to bridge obstacle after obstacle and to build step after step, until at last he can gaze into himself." Penetrating deeply in both directions, within and without, where we begin to experience the wholeness and interconnectedness of life, is one of the most significant movements of perception that art may call forth. If we view the human being as only a result of social and cultural conditioning, as many today are disposed to believe, we are leaving behind one essential feature — that we have an original face, an authentic self, a unique soul. Not all of our impulses stem from subjective conditioning.

Thomas Moore articulates this attitude: *Once we allow mystery, in nature and in our definition of a person, then we discover that our current technological and therapeutic responses are extraordinarily inadequate. We begin to appreciate the role of the arts, not as entertainment, but as servants of deep vision and subtle sensibility. We see the need for piety, an attitude of respect for the vast realm of experience we know little about and can't begin to understand.…*

A certain kind of simplicity, the kind characteristic of a Gospel parable, a Sufi poem, a Zen story, a Dickensen verse, or a scene from Beckett, accompanies the descent of spiritual attention to the lower, earthier regions of the soul. As that attention lowers, it casts a glow on everything mundane, making sacred and secular not opposites, but inseparable companion qualities in a world not torn into spirit and matter, mind and body, or even soul and spirit.

An active involvement with art represents a search for self, a call to a deeper level of awareness of oneself and the surrounding world. As artists work on themselves, seeking deeper connections and clarity of vision, they may in turn, assist in the awakening of others. It is reciprocal. Through creativity, we help ourselves and each other. We may begin to see the world as an exchange of energies which have a certain substance, a certain rate of vibration, and which have their own integrity, apart from our conditioning. Beyond all subjective content, the artist participates in recognizing and expressing the patterns of energy that build and constitute the world. The search for beauty, in this context, represents the humble acknowledgment of a divine order. This form of perception contains the seeds of a greater objectivity. The livingness of a tree, the genetic blueprint of an oak found in an acorn; the genetic pattern we are born with, our essence; these things exist independent of our beliefs and desires. These patterns, which at their deepest level represent who we are, can be glimpsed through the masks of our conditioning and upbringing. Creative expression helps us to see through the masks which hide us from our true selves. We see ourselves, with the potential of who we really are — not the shadow world of illusion, but with hints of the luminous reality of existence.

And our conditioning itself — social, cultural, familial — is open to our direct observation. Though its influence is often hidden — and sometimes subversive, in the sense that it represents the underlying motivations for many of our actions — it is observable. And art is a means, a line of approach, toward exploring both of these elements: our conditioning and our essential nature. Indeed, we find in the greatest works of art universal impulses expressed through the unique circumstances and the particular tenor of their times.

To explore and examine the world through seeing — what help us? Having a medium is a blessing; whether photography, painting and drawing, writing, or music and dance. We challenge ourselves through engaging in activities that require close observation and seeing. The writer needs to observe and recall, searching one's memory banks of impressions and experiences. The writing of this manuscript, for example, has necessitated revisiting many moments, places, and people of my past and re-membering, piecing together fragments of memory into a meaningful whole. Memory is a function of our attention. Barry Lopez stated earlier he could not fuddle with a camera — f-stops, shutter speeds, and composition — and still bring enough concentration to the moment so that he could fully recapture his experience with a polar bear.

The photographer needs to be attentive to the many nuances and elements in *this* moment, in *this* place, and with the *whatness* of the subject.

The painter or sculptor is sensitized to visual elements: shape and form, line, color, volume, and surface qualities, as well as the concept or subject. As Georgia O'Keeffe observes: *The meaning of a word — to me — is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definitive statement than words.* When artists draw or sketch, their powers of observation are called forth. Quick sketches, gesture drawings made while viewing the subject, and not looking at the drawing paper, are a highly useful exercise for sharpening one's powers of seeing.

Many times we have been touched by works of art which remind us of the gift of vision, of sight and insight. A moment of seeing, interpreted through the artists mind and hand, is like a bell which sends its energy into the atmosphere itself, for the benefit of those that wish to receive its vibrations.

Art reminds and invites us to look. How often do we take the time to really look: at a work of art, an object, or another? To see is an act of intent, a conscious endeavor — one that begins with observation. All we need to do is make the effort. We know this much: that we can give our attention, interest, and care to the mutually related inner and outer worlds. Just look. Much will spring to life from this simple activity. The impressions that we may receive are boundless in their richness and variety, and lie just under the surface of the

usual superficial glancing that we call our seeing. Bonnie Friedman reminds us: *Things themselves are translucent with meaning.* Once we penetrate the thin outer crust of things, the world reveals itself with a significance we cannot imagine.

Wakefulness arises through our efforts, not by accident. Although we may have spontaneous moments of awakening, brought to us by grace or as a result of past efforts, these states of presence are rare. When they do come forth, we may examine them and question what led to their arising. What do they depend on? What is taking place in our inner world at these moments — in our bodies, feelings, and minds? Memory of these moments is like a thread of pearls, helping us to return, to find our way back. We find consistent features in these moments of awareness: emptiness, the ability to be receptive — an active stillness; mindfulness, the state of being attentive — embracing both the inner and outer worlds; and purposefulness, the capacity to try, to make the effort and stay focused — to concentrate, and simply return when we lose the thread of awareness, again and again.

Try… to observe. Let's not just wait for our eyes and mind and heart to fall accidentally into the right relationship, gifting us with a moment of fresh observation. Let the act of seeing itself become our medium of creative interaction — a path with heart, a pathway into the world.

Seeing is an adventure, a foray into the unknown. It is a means of enriching our world, a source of great joy and pleasure, and a way toward knowing our place, our calling — what needs to be brought forth through us. To *read the image* of a person, place, or event; and to respond accordingly is an art of the highest order. To see what is — and then to act responsively, with sensitivity, subtlety and grace — is the measure of our humanness.

For eighteen years, I lived within close proximity to Walden Pond. It was, for me, a place of refuge — and I would visit its shores frequently. After a day of teaching in the city, after working in the darkroom or studio, or in the summer when going for my daily swim, Walden helped to clean my house, to maintain my interior and keep it uncluttered. It taught me to slow down and simply asked me to *be.* It is a place of still energy, where I could quiet myself, receive the impressions of the Walden woods, the transparent water, and the ever changing light and sky — and allow them to penetrate me. How well I understand Thoreau's insistence on inhabiting "his" cove on the very edge of the Pond — in the woods, instead of in the town of Concord a short distance away.

In the second chapter of Walden, entitled *Where I Lived and What I Lived For,* Thoreau writes: *Morning is when I awake and there is dawn in me . . To be awake is to be alive. . . . We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical means, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look… To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.*

To see means allowing oneself to be present… *simply that.* To be aware… *simply that*. To occupy this moment… *simply that*. To observe… *simply that*. To act from our seeing… *simply that*. To bring oneself into the world with integrity and sensitivity… *simply that*. To know the world and oneself directly, in the here and now… *simply that*. To awaken… *simply that.*

To be open and permeable to the world around us, passing through us and within us… *simply that.* This is our becoming and our wish to be.

And one knows the taste of pure water.
