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In praise of gazing

Joyce Rupp | Nov. 22, 2011 Soul Seeing

One misty autumn morning I was taking a walk around a pond next to a retreat center. I let my intellect take a vacation and just gazed at what was before me. The clear water, the thick woods beyond, the steep, grassy hill, each took me in and held me until I was transported to an easy peace. I felt a trace of that ?thin veil? Celtic lore uses to describe situations when the visible and the invisible mesh.

I began pondering the difference between *gazing* and *gawking*. Gawking has a negative connotation, like prying, but isn?t always so. Sometimes it?s just plain curiosity about what is going on. Gawking, however, is radically opposed to gazing. When we look around in church to find out who?s there and what they?re wearing, or when we drive slowly past an auto accident to see how badly the vehicles are damaged, that?s inquisitiveness. We intend nothing more than to glean information.

Gazing is the opposite. It begins with an external look but ends with an internal stirring. Gazing is soul seeing.

A silent bond gradually occurs when we gaze. John O?Donohue writes in *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* , ?When you really look deeply at something, it becomes a part of you.? He relates the story of a journalist going to interview the chief of an indigenous tribe in South America. The journalist presumes they will spend the time conversing about the chief?s life and beliefs. Instead, the chief sits quietly and gazes upon him. Gradually the journalist is drawn to return the gaze. They sit this way, gazing at one another, for two hours. O?Donohue writes, ?After this time it seemed as if they had known each other all their lives.?

That is the beauty of gazing. We come with an attitude of openness and receptivity. We slow down, pause. This way of looking with soft eyes and nonjudgment moves us to a quiet place of respect and awe. We can gawk at a person, a bird or a flowering bush and miss the inherent beauty, but when we change our looking into gazing that beauty comes home to our soul. It moves us toward a wordless knowing. The reality of the oneness we discover in gazing both humbles and exalts us.

Gazing is at the heart of contemplation. I was reminded of this in a letter I received yesterday from a former participant in a retreat. Mary Jo described ?an ordinary drive, on an ordinary day? when she was ?blessed with a view that was anything but ordinary.? Without her knowing it she moved into a contemplative experience which she described as ?resting inside that moment.? (Such a lovely way to speak of gazing.) She told me that simple wildflowers on the side of the road caught her attention and drew her to a halt. As she gazed upon the flowers she ?felt sideswiped by their loveliness. ? All the nagging little concerns within me were whisked away.?

Something similar happened for me two weeks earlier, only it was a person, not flowers, who drew me deeper. I was at a hospice facility visiting Jane, who was days away from death. The weakness of her body was overtaking her and she barely had strength to whisper. I sat by her bedside gazing with kindness while she, with the luminescent radiance of the dying, looked into my face with such love in her eyes that I nearly crumpled.

Deep, deep went our two souls. No words. Just a mutuality that echoed the great love that embraces the world. In that space by the bedside we met the divine in one another. I knew then what Macrina Wiederkehr suggests in *Abide: Keeping Vigil With the Word of God*

: ?You do not have to surrender the beauty of the earth to know God. You need only to look at the things of this earth with the eyes of the Beloved.? Jane and I never spoke a word about God, but we experienced God?s loving presence as we gazed at one another.

In our world of hostility and fear, the peoples of our earth, and the planet itself, cry out for respect, kindness, tenderness. We will have peace and prosperity only if we learn to gaze rather than gawk at one another. If we can look toward the other with the intention of receiving rather than judging, we will be moved deeper into our soul space, where divine love transforms harshness and revenge into compassion.

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