

Sermon by the Rev. Bill Phillips, delivered to the Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia, on Oct. 3, 2010

SEEING IS BELIEVING, Or IS It?

Recent Email from Jean Cardin about the retired old man who got a job at Wal-Mart. He always came to work a little late. His supervisor had a talk with him, first complementing his work and then mentioned his tardiness. The boss said, when you were in the military what did they say when you came in to work 15 minutes late? They said, "Good morning admiral, would you like a cup of coffee!"

During our sabbatical in the UK this past summer I had the experience of slowing everything down. It helped that we were riding trains and busses. There was no pedal to press to make things go faster. We usually got to the station about ½ hour early just to people watch.

During our trip we both slowly both began to see more and hear better (well a little bit better) we spent time in gardens; public gardens, private back yard gardens and national botanical gardens. An unusual thing began to happen; I smelled the flowers, I watched the bees pollinating, and I talked to the gardener. This phenomenon of increased awareness of surroundings began to spread to other activities.

When we took a wee hike or a long walk we became aware of the slightest breeze and didn't mind the rain. Many creatures we met like cats, sheep, goats,

pheasants, and peacocks pruned and seemed to like our attention. I slowly began to get in touch with the natural surroundings and my own natural pace and senses.

People watching became a daily pleasure. I noticed how much more playful children and teenagers are than adults. It is sad how dour and unhappy most adults appear to be. It is not necessarily true but it certainly appears so. I began to pay particular notice of the innocence and inquisitiveness of small children. Kids stop and look, smell and taste most anything and everything. Adults tend to pass by both beauty and ugliness with barely a look. Flowers as well as trash are overlooked. Adults usually don't see or enjoy the beauty nor do they claim or remove the trash.

Unfortunately as Scotland moves toward fast food, paper trash mounts in their communities as it does in ours. Darwin's ability to observe nature was extraordinary, but it may be that we all are far more able to see, smell, and hear than we realize. It may be that one of the more significant cultural and relational problems in society is our inability and refusal to slow down, stop, look and listen.

I believe that it is possible to rediscover an appreciation and respect of the natural world. I believe it is possible to reconnect to our senses of touch, smell, sight and hearing; to once again truly observe and experience the world that we live in on a regular daily basis. It is not natural or healthy to walk around not smelling tasting, hearing or seeing.

Lately, I have longed to discover a way of helping myself and others to slow down their living; to really be in the moment of their day-to-day existence. I have had strange fantasies and dreams of gathering all my friends to watch the birthing of a child or the hatching of a baby chick. It might affect things like bombing villages and blowing up strangers if the entire world could watch a birthing and the new mother nursing the new person. What if everyone who killed another human being, whether in a private war or a national war, had to dig the whole, bury the body, and apologize to the grieving family?

Our individual and collective disconnect from our own nature, the nature of others, and our natural surroundings makes it easier to destroy our self, other people, and our earthly home.

We have become too removed from our own liveliness and the lives around us. You see, this disconnect from nature and from the human experience is what makes it easy for people to become callous, to stay angry, to hate, and to kill themselves and to kill others. Charles Darwin, Albert Switzer and Mohandas Gandhi all knew---“ life is precious”---including you and me.

A couple of weeks ago I heard a fascinating story on NPR, maybe some of you heard it also. A 43 year-old man had been blind since the age of three. There was an accidental acid spill in his eyes when he was three years old. He had not seen anything for forty years. A surgeon implanted the latest scientific version of eye

implants and expected a full recovery of vision for the patient. The doctors were surprised when they removed the bandages and he could only see large shapes, but with no definition and no color. The patient, the family, and the physicians, were all disappointed and puzzled about the outcome. Today the blind man continues to need a white cane and only has a slight increase in his vision. However, the resulting research was interesting and important.

The continued blindness is caused not by his damaged eyes, but by his mind. The brain cells for sight were just forming when he was three years old. When the acid put out the light in the little boy's eyes the brain cells for definition, refinement, and color stopped developing. It is not the eyes which now continue the man's blindness it is his mind, the dead cells which never developed.

What a powerful concept and image for all of us. Our sight is dependent on our brain development or the lack there of.

Think of how our mind causes us to see certain things according to our thought processes. Suppose you are in Wal-Mart this afternoon and you see a disheveled, quirky, energetic, and powerful middle-aged black woman who wants to get to know you. What kind of thoughts, reactions, and behaviors might you have? Now suppose that same woman turns out to be Whoopie Goldberg or Queen Latifah. What kind of messages would your brain give you about this famous, talented, quirky, loving person?

I must confess that I think most people would first make all sorts of inaccurate, racially prejudiced presuppositions based not on our vision but our mental images.

Just how afraid would you be if you met Shaquill O'Neil or Charles Barkley but you did not know anything about them? These are of course two of the greatest basketball players of our time and two very bright and caring gentle giants.

Charles Barkley wrote a book "Whose Afraid of a Great Big Black Man?" which is about the prejudice he has encountered due to his color and his size. Once we discovered who any of these four people were we would want their autograph and be honored to have them to dinner in our homes; not to mention looking forward to a dynamic conversation.

Our mind's eye can certainly help us avoid danger, but our mind can also mislead us and cause us to see things that are not real. A mentally ill person who has visual hallucinations really believes that snakes are crawling all over them, they can see them. Sometimes we are visually ill; we see things not as they are but as we imagine them to be and we hesitant, cautious, and afraid.

Steven Hawking is probably the greatest scientific mind of our time. His latest book, "The Grand Design" is a must read. He describes the creation and workings of the universe in a way that we can just begin to understand. As you know he has had ALS disease for many years and has lived and worked far beyond any life expectancy for an ALS patient. For many years he had an implanted voice box.

His appearance is at first rather shocking. He is bound to a wheel chair, can no longer verbally communicate, and is not able to control any of his bodily functions. Steven Hawking looks decrepit. When I see him I always wonder how people would think of him and relate to him if they did not know he was Stephen Hawking. Would we steal his handicapped parking space? Would his looks cause us to assume he was handicapped and limited in intelligence because of his appearance? Probably!

Sometime ago I mentioned my friend David to some of you. As I prepared this, talk David kept coming back to my mind. I have spent many hours with David; we have had him in our home on Lake Lanier and on Jekyll Island. We own four pieces of his art. David is a world-class artist who has worked in sculpture and in painting. He was the lead artist for the 1996 Special Olympic Games in Atlanta. You see David was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy as a pre-teen. He is now fifty-five years old and has been in a wheel chair for over forty years. He has very little control of one arm and has become quite frail and fragile. He can no longer get in and out of the chair alone. David is one of the most talented and smartest people I have ever known.

I want to share him with you by sharing one story. In the winter of 1998 just before we moved from Lake Lanier to Jekyll Island Nan and I received a phone

call from David inviting us to come see him perform with a modern dance group.

(Tell the story.)

Conclusion:

Integrating our mind's eye and our natural eye is a visual gift, which we all have within us. Nurturing nature's gift can enrich and change our lives. Seeing can be believing! Amen!