Chapter Nine

Kealaikahiki Point, Kaho'olawe, HI © David Ulrich

Learning to See: Vision and the Creative Process

I love the mystery of art. Through the creative process, deep perceptions of the artist are translated into physical form. What the artist sees and feels is energetically imbued into the work. How we use color, shape, line, tone, or words can become an authentic mirror of our deeply felt experiences, our most compelling ideas, and our latent unconscious drives and compulsions. Art reflects the spectrum of our humanity from the light-filled world of compassion and empathy to our darkest, deepest secrets.

Through art, above all else, I learned to see. Even more than losing an eye or studying with extraordinary teachers, art revealed to me the depth and dimension of our human potentialities. Certain artists touched my spirit and opened my heart. Their efforts and works gave me insight into the wisdom of vision.

In the years following my injury, I finally came to one joyful realization: I still loved to observe the world, and I came to appreciate the observations embedded in art

and literature as harbingers of our deepest experiences, our most resonant truths, and our most troubling challenges. Art reveals. Art reflects. Art challenges. Art confronts. It disrupts our well-worn complacencies. And art can heal. Art helped me believe in the world once again after the wakeful impertinence of my injury. A photographer losing an eye. How tragic, yet lucky. Ironically, losing an eye has brought me in touch with the spaciousness of vision. In facing the challenge of learning to see, all over again, art offered a bountiful plate of incisive observation. It gave me strength and courage—and inspiration to write, to photograph, to teach. My reduced vision helped me experience art on a more subtle, refined level. I listened with the inner ear, I touched with the empathetic hand, and I engaged the myriad forms of the body's knowing. Without excess visual stimulation, my mind was more still and receptive, open to the communicative intent of the artist. I learned to read the explicit and implicit forms of meaning in art.

Art for me was not a solitary activity. I was involved with people who make art in many ways: as a teacher, student, collaborator, writer, and friend. I collaborated on many projects and explored the art of seeing in many ways and with numerous people. I undertook many exercises in seeing and perception both with my own work as an artist and within the classroom.

During my early years of teaching photography, academia was more open to experimental exercises in perception. In my graduate program, for example, one of the teachers sponsored a practical experiment based on certain questions that were asked by students. The inquiry revolved around whether creativity was enhanced or diminished by getting high. We made images under the influence of marijuana and hallucinogens, and then made images without drugs. The findings were clear and unambiguous. While under

the influence of drugs, we thought and felt that creativity was heightened. But the evidence proved otherwise. Our images were consistently stronger, our perceptions went deeper into the nature of the things when we were sober. The drugs altered our perceptions of our own creative process but bore no heightened results. For myself, I found consistently that the exercise in heightened awareness given by Minor White and detailed in the appendix offered an organic means toward greater expansion of consciousness, more so than the ingestion of psychotropic drugs.

In other instances, certain practices were common features in portrait and figure workshops. The faculty would ask each student to begin the class with a nude self-portrait. The second assignment involved photographing each other nude. In this instance, perception was heightened. The vulnerability and intimacy, along with hints of sexuality, served to open the participants to their own spacious perceptions and a more fluid creativity. Classes such as this often began with some form of ritual connection between participants. Sitting in a circle, holding hands in silence, and looking at each other in an open eye meditation initiated a collective exploration of creativity and the subject at hand. Many teachers commented that sexual energy often sparked a heightened flow of creativity. Group energy often led to the appearance of a collective intelligence in which each participant found an expansion of vision facilitated through working with others.

During the eighties, these types of practices and experiments became highly inappropriate in the classroom. The secular nature of education in those days even prohibited meditation and yoga exercises such as those that Minor White used extensively and the mindfulness exercises that are employed today. Anything that

smacked of spirituality or sacredness was rejected and looked down upon. A tight rationality prevailed.

After working with Minor White and losing my eye, I wanted to explore the nature of perception, both for myself and with my students. However, the types of exploration that I envisioned touched on an experimental relationship with different forms of spiritual practice and involved the search for a collective intelligence that could infuse all participants with heightened experience and a broader perspective. I could no longer sponsor these kinds of explorations in the traditional classroom. I formed a small group of people, drawn from my contacts with students and others, that came together privately once or twice a month and met in each other's homes. We had no name. The group simply called itself *the workshop*, and met over a period of seven years. We held regular meetings to respond to each other's work, came together for weekend workshops, traveled together, and collaborated in creative projects and perceptual experiments into the nature of vision and creativity. Several individuals in this group went on to highly successful careers in the arts, such as Josiah McElheny, the contemporary glass artist who was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellows genius grant in 2006.

Working Beyond Resistance

One of the principal explorations in the workshop revolved around seeking freedom from the limitations of vision and the obstacles to creativity. Our attitudes keep us in check. When we are locked within our own intellectual or emotional dramas, our seeing is constricted and distorted. When we are open and responsive, the world opens and things reveal themselves as they are. We need to find ways to break ourselves open.

To this end, we experimented with means of testing ourselves and opening to expansive vision. For example, we tried staying up all night and reading poetry aloud, experimenting with elocution, reading with feeling, and meeting the resistance of fatigue and emotional discomfort. At dawn, we would go out and take pictures. One of the participants remarked that imagemaking took the place of dreaming, and symbolic images arose that revealed the work of the unconscious mind.

I learned that we need to challenge our ordinary ways of seeing. Our automatic vision, which is veiled by our preconceptions, is strong and needs to be shaken up. In another instance, we experimented with a day of silence, speaking to each other only when absolutely necessary. It became clear that our usual inner and outer talking was a means of upholding our attitudes and preconceptions. Once the talking was turned off, the silent world of seeing emerged with clarity and expansiveness. When still, our mind could respond to the outer world and resonate more cleanly with incoming impressions. This is difficult work. The challenge of not speaking helped us see how important words are to our automatic, unconscious ways of seeing and being.

Collective Intelligence

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Our group was together for years. We came to know each other well. We understood each other's potential and challenges, talents and obstacles. It felt like an extended family. We experienced the normal tension when people of different types come together in close contact. And we touched a collective intelligence that can emerge when people have genuine dialogue and listen to each other. We spent much time in the

workshop responding to each other's work, using many of the techniques offered by Minor White and other tools of my own device such as are detailed in the appendix. When people with different ways of seeing come together in dialogue, an interesting phenomenon emerges. The viewpoint of each person changes and grows.

The circle is an apt metaphor. Each individual represents a point on the circle. Some are next to each other; some are diametrically opposed—likewise with our points of view. Each person has wisdom to offer, and each person has a limited manner of seeing. The more points that exist around the circle, the greater the possibility of seeing the larger picture, not just our small part. And any solution, any meaningful response, will arise through seeing more, with greater clarity, the shape of the whole. When we gather together, energy increased and understanding is enlarged. Our point of view widens and expands. Something does pass between us as human beings that seems integral to the creative process.

In our workshop, we came to a much greater understanding of ourselves and each other, as well as deeper responses to art works, through mutual exploration and response. At times, it felt magical with a collective intelligence that would descend from the group atmosphere itself. I even wrote a book on collective intelligence inspired by my contact with the workshops and other long-term group endeavors of people working closely with each other.

Non-ordinary Sight

Each of us has the capacity for some form of non-ordinary perception. What we call extra-sensory perception generally means beyond the scope of the senses. However,

the question arises, which senses? Buddhism, for example, identifies six senses opposed to the western model of five. The sixth sense in Buddhism is known as Mind, or an awareness of the broad range of mental phenomena. Westerners have called the sixth sense, intuition. Mind can perceive what the ordinary, physical senses cannot. Here I draw a distinction between what we normally call the mind, which is the thinking apparatus, from the Buddhist conception of Mind, which is more related to awareness or, in its largest sense, consciousness. Many of the phenomena that can be perceived by the Mind are still imperceptible to modern scientific measurement. Ample evidence can be found of individuals with unique perceptual gifts of what we might call non-ordinary perception. Each one of us has these types of gifts and favors certain forms of perception. Some individuals have a gift for seeing, some for listening. Some have a finely-tuned sensitivity toward others, an innate capacity for empathy. And some might hear the voices of the muse and have the capacity to create art or music drawn from their perceptions. It is said that Einstein could visualize complex mathematical formulas as images. Though going deaf, Beethoven could "hear" the music being composed with his inner ear—all that remained was the need to write it down. The blind bard Homer is said to have recorded numerous epic Greek stories from his uncanny memory that resulted in writing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

In our workshop, we experimented with intuitive seeing or seeing directly from the deeper layers of the mind. Often, I borrowed exercises from Carlos Castaneda's don Juan, such as stopping the internal dialogue, finding one's spot, moving one's assemblage point, and seeing into the luminous nature of things. These exercises could not be approached through the rational brain. In a sense, they were impossible to perform by any

ordinary means. But the great value came in what was discovered by trying the exercise. It rapidly became clear that each individual in our group was gifted with certain kinds of perception and capabilities. Josiah, for example, had a remarkable and intuitive grasp of memory and history. He could "see" on the pages where a quote was inside a book and could turn directly to it. He was still a teen when he joined the workshop. Now, his current mature artwork reveals an intuitive grasp of entire historical periods, seen in a single glance. Others in the group could see within other people and perceive interpersonal dynamics and individual motivations. Another person in the group, whose parents were musicians and music teachers, could see the world through his images as an expression of rhythmic energy, revealing the harmonies and dissidences of visible life.

These forms of perception often arise through silence. As Krishnamurti remarks: "The quietness of the mind *is* intelligence." We need discipline to quiet the mind, and we need surrender to allow our own essential form of perception to emerge into view.

First Thought; Best Thought

At Naropa Institute, Chögyam Trungpa and Allen Ginsberg articulated a principle designed to assist poets and artists come in touch with their own natural wisdom and avoid imitation or clichéd approaches. It became known as "first thought; best thought." In my experience, this principle holds true in perception and creation equally. In perception, a moment exists before an incoming impression becomes appropriated by past associations or discursive thought. The perception is fresh and unmediated—for a moment. Then comes rushing forward into the mind all of our past data and entrenched attitudes. The sixth sense, the broad awareness of the mind, can capture the flavor of and

witness these first impressions, and even prolong them for several more moments. These fresh moments of perception are beyond the associative thinking of the mind and beyond our existing knowledge. We can see the truth of what is.

In the act of creation, for example with writing, first thoughts have boldness, elegance, and harmony. They arise from the deeper layers of the mind. While revision may be necessary, we can observe the difference on the page between the boldness of first thoughts and the labored finished quality of revised thoughts. Both are necessary, but in revision we must respect the power and force of the first thought, before the mind has a chance to endlessly comment on the expression and sometimes ruin it. In our workshop, we experimented in different ways with first thought; best thought. We would use the camera without looking through the viewfinder and make quick, intuitive camera sketches of a subject without laboring over framing and composition. For me, it was uncanny. Often I would do both: give precise attention to the frame *and* make quick gestural sketches with the camera without looking through the viewfinder. In most instances, chance juxtapositions within the frame would emerge in the latter, and the seeing felt fresh and alive. Generally, I preferred the image that was looser, in the moment when I wasn't trying so hard or looking so tightly.

As the leader of our workshop, I often found myself in the position of giving feedback and response to the participants work. I repeatedly tried an exercise that brought many insights to me and the group. In light of first thought; best thought, I would consciously not look at student work as they pinned it on the wall. I would wait until the very moment I walked up to the piece and see it for the first time, without knowing or rehearsing what I might say. Out of the experience of seeing the image, I allowed my

response to form verbally as I was looking. I responded in the moment, as I viewed the work for the first time. Every time I tried this exercise, it was a risk. I risked sounding stupid or ill informed. Or worse, I risked bungling my response to a student who was looking to me for advice and guidance. Yet every single time I tried this I found an elegance of response and clear expression move through me out into the class. Often, I surprised myself with my response and I learned from my own words, as did others. It was a humbling experience. I learned that my surface mind is not the preeminent instrument, that deeper layers of mind and body lie in wait just beneath the surface and need an appropriate challenge to emerge. First thoughts can be an expression of our natural wisdom.

Learning to Observe

Our group made many discoveries through careful observation and comparing our impressions. On a weekend trip to New York, we took on the task of observation in several ways. Going into several neighborhoods, we committed a predetermined amount of time for immersive attention, doing nothing but looking at the world around us and observing how the impressions were received within our bodies and minds. There were no cameras, no specific destination, and no talking. We strolled and simply looked. We would then verbally recall our impressions and compare them with each other. We did the same with art in museums and galleries. It became a fascinating study. Every one of us viewed the world in a different fashion and with our own coloration. Yet universal themes emerged in response to every object of our attention that everyone saw and recognized. It taught me much about the cultural and individual specificity of vision

compared with the universal aspects. It increased my skepticism of surface appearances. For example, most of us perceived when someone that we looked at was suffering, even though their emotions were beneath the surface of their outer demeanor. Also, we all recognized ill intent when we saw aggression and hostility on the streets even when it was expressed very subtly.

Just before the trip to New York, we were reading together the instructive text, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, by Richard Boleslavsky. In this book, Boleslavsky writes of a fictional conversation between an acting teacher, an elder statesman of the theater, 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 designed to help increase awareness. 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 is that.

The elder statesman of the theatre declares that a talent for acting, or for any creative art, needs cultivation. He goes on to patiently explain how actors prepare and how they develop bodily and emotional memories through sharpening their powers of observation. He challenges the Aunt to try an exercise.

The exercise he gave was simple and highly beneficial. 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 builds his memory, his storage memory with all visible manifestations of the human spirit. It makes 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 made her "ten times as alert" and served to make 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 recall and think about what you see.

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.

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How can 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.

When I was young, I hungrily absorbed the images found in the foremost picture magazine of American culture throughout the middle of the Twentieth Century. Life Magazine, which showcased many of the finest photographers of its era, articulates its mission statement:

To see and take pleasure in seeing;

To see and to be instructed;

To see and to be amazed.

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—protegés who included Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, and Irving Penn—into the field

with one dictum: *Astonish me!* Like all else that we have considered, we must learn the gift of observation and strive to cultivate the astonishment available through fresh perception. This 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 need our presence, our real attention.

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 investigate and 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.

The future rests in our hands. The ongoing pursuit of human knowledge, of bettering the world, 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—with attention. Worlds await our discovery, and we await the discovery of the contribution we will make to this evolving sum of knowledge about the universe and ourselves.

We can do this: we can observe, Bonnie Friedman writes. *Things are saturated with significance.* From our sincere observations, the creative impulse arises. We wish to tell the story; share with others; and respond to what we see in words, song, paint, silicon, 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. We want to remember our hard-earned lessons, make a record of them, transcribe them in some fashion, or express them 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. Many depictions are found in the annals of literature and throughout the history of art that bring the simple act of seeing to life.

Today, images are made reflexively, documenting every moment, every meal, indeed every daily experience with cell phone cameras. Studies of museum-goers have shown that cell phone image making in the museum actually decreases one's involvement with an object and impairs one's memory of it, *unless* one uses the zoom feature of the lens. The active engagement with zooming serves to increase recall and expand one's experience. Mediated observation, so prevalent with today's technology, cannot replace the effort to perceive the richness of the real world. The meaning here is clear: attention can be increased through some form of an active engagement with looking.

Looking at life through a digital device can distract us from everyday graces. 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.

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 focused 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 seeing for granted. It is a precious, invaluable resource.

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"Only that day dawns to which we are awake." Henry David Thoreau wrote this stirring passage in *Walden* nearly 150 years ago. He conveys a timeless truth. Without clear intent and some measure of awakened attention, the world passes us by unseen and unnoticed. Awareness is integral to experience. We cannot genuinely interact with the world in sleep, we cannot feel that which glances off our distracted and superficial attention. We cannot see fully and directly until we shake the sleep from our eyes and uncloud our being.

For eighteen years, I lived in close proximity to Walden Pond. It is a place of refuge and I would visit its shores frequently. Walden is a haven for seekers of silence. After a day of teaching, 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 quiet energy, where I could still 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.

Thoreau claims that "Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous." He believed 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 lenses of perception, "and discover that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence."

In reality, every moment, fully seen and experienced, becomes memorable. These moments represent the seminal experiences of our lives—the ones we remember. Usually, only moments of great trauma, danger, intense beauty, or extraordinary conditions bring us to this state of awakening. What about the rest of our lives, the thousands of ordinary, uneventful days that can quickly pass into years and decades?

Gifted moments of intense clarity have graced our lives. However, these moments come and go. They are dependent on chance or external circumstances. We are not in possession of a reliable key. We cannot always induce or intend their appearance. This 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. How do we approach awakening to the present moment?

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. Savoring the truth of our sleep ironically leads us into the present moment. When we awaken to our sleep, we are on the path of knowing the truth of what is; and that recognition combined with acceptance brings a powerful feeling, a yearning for the fruits of consciousness.

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. 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 particular nature 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 levels of experience. Looking deeply into the world reveals energies, interlocking, endlessly relating, interpenetrating—and of different qualities and levels of vibration. Our touch, smell, hearing and all senses are heightened. We listen to ourselves and hear the echo of the life around us. We see, clearly and directly.

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

Borrowing 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. We must seek these finer and nourishing influences. Without them, we remain 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 assist the process of awakening is widely acknowledged. Art reveals a 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, 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 in which 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 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.

An active involvement with art represents a search for self, a call to a deeper level of awareness of oneself and the surrounding world. Beyond all subjective content, the

artist participates in recognizing and expressing the patterns of energy that 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 that 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. Mohsin Hamid writes in the New York Times, "Sufis tell of two paths to transcendence: One is to look out at the universe and see yourself, the other is to look within yourself and see the universe."

And our conditioning itself—social, cultural, familial—is open to our direct observation. Though its influence is often hidden and sometimes subversive, it represents the underlying motivations for many of our actions—and is observable. 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.

Having a medium is a blessing; whether photography, painting and drawing, writing, or music and dance. Engagement with art brings us into the world. It encourages wakefulness and close observation. Every great art teacher encourages students to look. Poet Theodore Roethke asserts: "Nothing seen, nothing said." And "First I must look, then I must learn." To apprehend the world through vision represents the most primary

tool of learning. Theoretical understanding gleaned from reading critical texts must be in alignment with and a support for exploratory perception. Looking at great works of art from around the world, experiencing cultures and peoples directly, and looking deeply at conditions in one's home environment—combined with examining one's internal responses—form the basis of our work as artists. Art invites us to look and to awaken to our own way of seeing

Wakefulness cannot arise by accident. While we may experience serendipitous gifts of awareness, carried on the wings of past efforts or sharp experiences, the ability to awaken to our human possibilities requires intent, sensitive application of effort, and the time necessary for an organic unfolding. The appendix of this book offers a range of tools and exercises to heighten awareness and sharpen our powers of attention and observation.

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 into the world 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.

Art can only mirror what the eyes and heart see directly. What the mind can't know, the heart can see. Thoreau knew this: "I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that *is* which *appears* to be.

No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or

the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?" Thoreau was one of the clear seers of his day. His foray at Walden was a journey of awakening. He sets a broad example of careful, close observation that reveals the nature of things. Within the annals of literature I know of few works as profound as *Walden* in helping us learn to see. I marvel at the beauty and profundity of Thoreau's intimate insights into the natural world. His words are still a beacon for us today.

Like *Walden*, great art goes deep, seeing way beneath the surface. It reveals the underlying causes and energies of things and shows us what it means to be fully human. Great art and literature have x ray vision. They invite a vision that sees what is and where we aim to be. They invite direct perception, in the present moment, and offer proof of heaven or a direct knowing that life is energy, different qualities and levels, interacting interlocking interdependent. Art shows us that deep perception is available to us all if we strive to enter the present moment where depth and insight reside.

It was Thoreau's genius that Walden as a place and *Walden* as a book are in perfect accord. His observations well captured the soul of the place. I found a fullness of experience there. The ghost of Henry David inhabits his cove, the Pond, and the Walden Woods, and reminded me often of the necessity of direct observation and the boundless joys of perception. I always sat at the cove where Thoreau once lived. A pile of rocks commemorates the site; his spirit has helped generously awaken my sight.

When I wrote the first draft of this book, I was in early middle age, fifteen years after the injury that extinguished the light of my eye. Now, I am in late middle age and have recently acknowledged the thirty-year anniversary of losing my eye. What has changed in the last fifteen years, or indeed in the last thirty years? It's hard to say, because most of what I have learned is not rational or linear. A part of me feels like a sham. I know less with my mind than I did fifteen years ago or thirty years ago. I am certain of nothing, exploring everything. I am a mass of contradictions. I wrote this book with a certain authority, but I really know little about seeing. I am full of questions and yearnings about the nature of sight. Mostly, I've embraced the adventure.

I often feel like a phantom in time, an anachronism, teaching others how to see when they already believe they fully embody this experience. It has brought me great sadness and a certain resignation. I question daily how to formulate a teaching on the nature of sight in a way that will inspire people to understand the huge insufficiency of automatic, unconscious seeing.

The experience of losing an eye has shaped everything I am. The place that once held an eye is a void, an empty shell. This is at once painful and disconcerting and equally enlivening and illuminating. I still feel the pain and miss my right eye as one aches for a long-lost love. Yet, the emptiness I feel is a transformative experience. I am learning that I am not my body. I am not what I think of as myself, my self-image. And I am not my attachments and desires. I am something else: a luminosity, a genuine emptiness that can see and mirror the world back to itself. I hold within me a numinous core, a mysterious human awareness we call consciousness, that does not arise strictly from my eyes, but from every cell in my body. I am learning slowly to attach my sense of

self to this broader awareness and not to be limited by my corporal being and worldly identifications.

I no longer believe as much in surface appearances. We lie to ourselves all the time and spend a good deal of time propping up how we appear to others, seeking admiration and acknowledgment, and love. Yet love comes from within. The heart sees into the nature of things. It does not need sharp eyes or clear vision; it needs conscious awareness of my nothingness, of the great limitations of my ego which seeks to usurp the stage at every step. We must let go into the great unknown without expectation and without the inner attitude of *me-f*irst supported and promoted by the ego.

I have come to deeply understand that the world exists. A big, beautiful, tragic, complex world exists outside of myself. It deserves my respect and my great interest. We must see it, and come to know it. Ironically, this same world exists within myself. When I can perceive that my energies are the same as the world's and deeply aligned with others, I recognize that compassion and love are the ties that bind us together .The world contains mystery and radiance that our lifetimes are insufficient to know and experience. Yet we must begin. Luminosity and seeing from the heart are intertwined; we need to sense our own luminosity to see the world with love and compassion.

For a while after losing my eye, I couldn't see the objects in the world with clarity, volume, or depth. Everything was hazy, unfocused, and unbounded. All I could see was the light; the radiant, joyful, loving light. The light of the world entered me like food to a starving man. It entered my body and touched my feelings directly, without the intervention of the naming, categorizing mind. I knew without thinking: the light of the world was love—an everpresent, encompassing, and enduring impersonal radiance that is

love, nothing more nothing less. Love was everywhere and nowhere. It was in all places and concentrated in none.

I suddenly understood the saints who claimed to live on light alone, and the spiritual savants who speak of god's love on earth. It doesn't matter what you call it—god or a divine being, or an impersonal force—the Absolute radiates love in this world. Always. Even in the darkness of night, I felt the light within and beneath and beyond the night sky. Not being able to see objects taught me the profound language of light.

What Minor White suggested in the final exercise of many photography workshops took me years to fathom and came to fruition after my injury. He said: "Make love with light. Keep your mind busy looking at the light. Allow your feelings to work towards the sense of love. If you try to look for love, you will not see it… but if you look for light which you can see you will find love. We must let go of the mind… here we give it something to keep busy with so that love can find our hearts." I didn't even understand the words at the time he gave the exercise. Sometimes it takes years for planted seeds to begin to sprout. Patience is necessary—a broad waiting without anticipation or expectation

The light of consciousness reveals itself through the medium of love. Light and love are intricately intertwined. I understand my obsession with photography. It captures light. I have said those words many times, but now I understand something of their meaning.

I wish to be open and permeable to the light surrounding me, passing through me, and living within me.
