

In the Eye Abides the Heart

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By Rev. Martha Niebanck

First Parish in Brookline

Musical Meditation: *In the Eye Abides the Heart*

Words by Franz von Kobell; English Translation by Stephen Collins Foster

1. In the eye abides the heart,
Every pure and tender feeling,
All emotions worth revealing,
Through the eyes their charm impart.
Words are often clothed in guile;
For the lips with fear may falter;
E'en confiding smiles may alter--
Oh! believe not in a smile!

[REFRAIN]

- 'Tis the eye unveils the heart.
Every pure and tender feeling,
All emotions worth revealing,
To the eyes their glow impart.
2. If thy bosom heaves a sigh
For a fair and cherished maiden,
Though her voice with love be laden,
Mark the language of her eye
There each impulse of her soul
Beams for thee in truth and candor;
There her secret passions wander
There remain beyond control.

Reading: *from "Book of Hours"*

Rainer Maria Rilke

The hour is striking so close above me,
So clear and sharp,
That all my senses ring with it.
I feel it now: there's a power in me
To grasp and give shape to my world.

I know that nothing has ever been real
Without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things
And they come toward me, to meet and be met.

Reading: *Watching*

Elizabeth Marie Rissmiller

I watch you raise your children. I watch you in the parking lot scooting then out of the car, alarming them to the fact that they are making you late to church and asking them to hold an item you brought for some committee.

I watch you glance at them during the opening hymn and I watch your eyes trail their faces as they go off to Sunday school. I watch you quiet them at coffee hour and hold their hands as you lead them off to other Sunday events. I watch you watch them during the story. And I watch the hope in your heart for this life. The very life of your life.

I witness my own quiet attachment to many of your children. I watch with tears you do not see, at how they are a growing and changing presence. I look at a young man who now has a deep voice and whiskers and remember when he was a boy with dimples. I look at a young girl who moves like a gymnast, and remember when she was two years old and had little balance due to all that energy God grants two year olds. I watch too, and share many of your hopes. ...

I watch you raise your children. I watch your heart beat at the miracle they bestow.

Sermon

Michael so kindly sang a song for us—"In the Eye Abides the Heart"—because, even though it invites the listeners to believe that by studying the eyes of another we can see their true intent, I hear the title differently. "In The Eye, Abides The Heart," is an invitation into noticing the shape of our vision, the lens through which we experience "reality." I believe that we are able to make a spiritual practice of our seeing, that our heart can abide in our eye. I believe that the way we live our love can be known in the way we see

an *other*.” I believe that our lens is visible and palpable to the others we behold or watch.

Rabbi Paul of the first century of the common era would end his letters to community with the prayer that the community would “be given a spirit of revelation in the knowledge of (Love), having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which (Love) has called you.” Paul knew something about the grace and power that arises when the eye abides in the heart space of love—the power of “call” which invites us into a particular way of being that ultimately shapes our life.

The author, Frederick Buechner, describes the difference between seeing with the heart and seeing with the mind: “That day on the staircase when I met my first grandchild for the first time, what I saw with the eyes of my head was very small boy with silvery gold hair and eyes the color of blue denim coming toward me in his mother’s arms. What I saw with the eyes of my heart was a life that without a moment’s hesitation I would have given my life for. To look through those eyes is to see every kingdom as magic.”

I had to look through those eyes when I cared for my son’s new puppy this morning. We are looking through those eyes when we change diapers, when a house becomes a home, when we really forgive another or ourselves. We are seeing through those eyes when we care for the most vulnerable, when we place the good of the group above our own particular preferences.

I read Elizabeth’s Rissmiller’s ministerial musing on “Watching” in my first year of ministry. In that first year of ministry, filled with so much novelty and detail—so much to think about, worry about, obsess about, Elizabeth’s musing arrived like a letter from Paul. In her description of watching parents watch their children and seeing the hope that is at the heart of life, the very life of life, Rissmiller is naming the act of seeing with the eyes of the heart. She is doing more than “watching.” She is “beholding” with the power of meeting and making that Rilke knows in his poem. Elizabeth Rissmiller sent me words that blessed my seeing. I was given permission to look and see, not as a scientist observes, but rather, with the eyes of the heart enlightened. To behold others is enough. Seeing in with the eyes of an enlightened heart is to see the hope that I am called to embody.

I recognized the path as a familiar one. In my preparation for becoming a family therapist and later in my practice with a Buddhist community, this

notion of “lens” or “view” was an important principle and practice. On the very first day of family therapy training we are taught to see problems as opportunities. We were instructed in the art of seeing identified patients in the family as the creative growing force in the family system. When I first learned this paradigm I thought it was a form of professional lying or pretense. Over time I grasped that the really gifted therapists who make a difference, the ones who are part of healing a troubled family system, live a profound faith that problems are opportunities and that the person with the symptom is courageous and creative. I learned their posture of the heart by watching results but also by feeling how it was to be seen by the shape of their view—especially when I was the one suffering, confused, or difficult. I could feel their hope for me and for us together in their way of seeing, in the lens they used to watch my growth. The light in their eyes lit the path for my next step into a future of my own making.

I share a small clinical example I heard from the developmental psychologist, Bob Kegan: There was a young boy in a nursery school who was a real loner. The teachers were worried about him and used words like sociopath to describe what they saw as antisocial behaviors. A therapist was called in to observe the child. He had to search for him, but found him huddled in a far corner with a knife. He was deeply engaged in cutting a worm in half. Now that clinician might have concluded that the teacher’s fears were realistic at that moment, but instead he got closer so he could hear the boy as he carved the worm in two. He heard the boy saying, in a loving voice, “Now you won’t be so lonely. Now there are two of you..” In the next moment that little boy was seen in a new way, and probably was seen into a new way of being.

Have you ever had such a change of heart that changed the way you saw a person or a situation? I hope you also know that your change of view brought something new into being, something that needed that loving witness.

In the Zulu culture it is understood that we see each other into being. Their most common greeting is the expression: *Sawu bona*. It literally means, “I see you.” If you are a member of the tribe, you reply by saying *Sikhona*, “I am here.”

As Rilke wrote in the poem we heard this morning, we have the power to grasp and give shape to our world—things and people become real via our

beholding. We see each other into being. Our looking “ripens being.” Our judging and evaluating with the eye of the mind shrivels the mysterious being of an *other* into an objectified thing, an “It.”

Since it is in the nature of the Western mind to calculate, to judge, to evaluate, learning to see with the eyes of the heart takes practice. The practice begins with noticing one’s own vision—not to change it (because after all that would also be judging and controlling), but rather to simply notice the difference between the mind’s eye and the hearts’ eye. When we can experience the lens we are using we can begin to make a choice, to live out our freedom. When we can behold our little inner selves in the dilemmas of seeing, we can extend the compassion of the enlightened heart even to ourselves.

I once belonged to a Buddhist meditation community that practiced an open-eyed meditation form that was simply called “Klass.” As we attended to our breathing and the motion of energy through the body we also placed our attention on the third eye of the teacher sitting in front of us. The teacher would shift his gaze to each student in turn for several minutes. Part of the practice was to notice how the mind shaped the experience of that meeting. Sometimes he looked beautiful and loving. Sometimes he looked fierce and angry. Sometimes he looked full of lust. Sometimes he looked bored. Sometimes he looked curious.

Truth be told his facial expression was always the same, it was my seeing that changed. When a student would ask him about his fierceness or his loving or his boredom he would answer: “*The way you see is the who you are.*” I can still hear his voice when I think I know what someone else is feeling or thinking. I am grateful for that lesson that teaches me to catch myself projecting my own condition on others.

My practice now is *not* to stop projecting, which is really quite impossible, but rather, to consciously *choose* what I project as I “watch” others. When I am spiritually awake I choose to be curious, choose to be fascinated, choose to wonder what is needed. I choose to wonder what sort of fun we might have together. I try to keep others from being held in a consciousness of fear or contempt. Today George Bush is the Holy Grail, the Mount Everest of this practice of intending to see with the eyes of the heart.

In these days of apparent increasing violence and anxiety, a condition of fear evokes the posture of contempt and overwhelms my practice again and again. I lose my freedom to choose. When I catch myself seeing with critical eyes only I know it's time for sleep, for horizon staring, for prayer, for simply beholding your faces. When I notice that my lens is forming in the shape of a grandiose, know-it-all, adolescent bully I am awake enough to know that I need to remove myself from community, to take a time out. The poet David Whyte has a poem that speaks to that condition of not being fit for human company: *Sweet Darkness*:

When your eyes are tired the world is tired also.
When your vision has gone no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark where the night has eyes to recognize its own.
There you can be sure you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb tonight.
The night will give you a horizon further than you can see.

You must learn one thing, The world was made to be free in.
Give up all the other worlds except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet confinement of your aloneness to learn anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too small for you.

Parents and caregivers know something about having tired eyes. Any of us who work in difficult institutional systems know about living in a world that is too small. Many years ago when I worked in a family support program, the social worker counseled us to advise young mothers who were having trouble separating from their toddlers to find a religious community. She said that a single mother needs the experience of adults being glad to see her face each week. I didn't belong to a church at the time but when I did discover the Unitarian Universalist church in Canton, I found her words to be true. I had the experience of people's faces lighting up when they saw me enter the sanctuary. They beheld me with their gaze and ripened a presence in me which could meet and be met. Their faces said, "I see you." And my body responded with "I am here." They bestowed a miracle on my life for which I am grateful. We do the same when we greet the newcomer and seek after the

long-time member who has been absent. Actually beholding the real life of another enlarges the world for both.

And so I close this morning with a hope for us this day and for our ministry together. While we may not be able to stop the wars or the chaos on this globe, may we be able to be in a place that brings people alive with our seeing—a place where they can recover their freedom. May we know that this becoming, this quickening, is the new life that must emerge to save our children and their children. New life needs our loving witness. This is our call.

In the ancient words of the Rabbi Paul, “May this community be given a spirit of revelation in the knowledge of (Love). And having had the eyes of our hearts enlightened, may we know what is the hope to which (Love) is calling us.”

In a world without end, amen.