

Through drawing we are, literally, drawn out into the phenomena.

Sauntering of the Senses

Another kind of exercise complements this focused attention to detail in observation and drawing, an exercise that asks us to let our attention spread out and wait to find what comes toward us. Here we don't predetermine what we attend to but, in a sense, invite the world to speak. Thoreau describes the intention:

I must walk more with free senses—It is as bad to study stars & clouds as flowers & stones—I must let my senses wander as my thoughts—my eyes see without looking.... Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object, let it come to you.... What I need is not to look at all—but a true sauntering of the eye. (September 13, 1852; in Thoreau 1999, p. 46)

This is decidedly difficult. In a course called "In Dialogue with Nature," which took place on one Saturday per month for ten months, we took a walk each of the ten afternoons into a forest and wetland preserve. I said we would go out and, at first, simply attend to what caught our attention. I gave no further instructions for this part of the walk, which was definitely not easy for everyone. As one participant wrote in her evaluation, "I found this the most challenging part of the day—being with the elements of weather, and also noticing my observation skills and memory sadly lacking. I would welcome less time doing this." But others responded differently: "I really enjoyed experiencing the same place in all of the seasons and in all kinds of weather." What we all took with us from month to month was a sense of open expectation about what would be different each month. We couldn't know ahead of time; we had to go out with our legs and attentiveness and see what would come to meet us.

The intent of going for an unstructured walk (which is also not easy for the teacher!) is to encourage what Thoreau called "sauntering

of the eye.” The walks actually oscillated between the more open expectant perceiving and the shift to observing closely what caught our attention. On the walk in October we noticed the vibrant and radiant colors of the leaves that shone to us not from the tree tops but from the forest floor. The forest floor was alive with color from the leaves that had descended in the past days from the tree crowns. We picked up some of the leaves and looked at the variations in color—and also noted the tree species. In November, reaching the same spot in the path, the forest floor was now muted, having turned a more homogenous yellow-brown. On the October walk I also noticed that a small tree was flowering—radiant little yellow flowers. Since no one else called attention to these flowers, I did. Everyone looked and was intrigued: a tree that flowers in October, when everything else in nature seems to be receding. Each time we returned to this spot in the coming months we looked at the tree. The flowers faded and fruits began to form. Over these months we made acquaintance with witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*).

It was clear that participants on the walk often needed me or others to help them get out into perception and to be receptive to what was there to be perceived. But precisely that experience is educative. It is much easier to describe a plant in detail than it is to go sauntering with open senses. In the latter case we must willfully try to open our attentiveness and invite the world in—we have little control, and that is both unsettling and cathartic.

One exercise that helps bridge the gap between controlled focus and the ability to saunter with the senses is to choose a broad sensory focus for attention. For example: I go for a walk and say to myself, “I will focus my attention today on colors.” Or I will focus on smells, or on sounds. This focus by no means determines what you will see, smell, or hear, but by narrowing your attentiveness to a sensory modality you are more receptive to that realm of experience. One day I was walking in the above-mentioned forest and wetland preserve with the intent of paying attention to light in the forest. I began noticing what I otherwise took for granted and had not really seen at all: the dark areas, the spots that were very bright, the more diffuse

columns of "sunbeams." The wind was blowing on that day, so there was an ongoing play of changing illumination. At one moment a spot lit up brightly, changed form, and disappeared. I was strongly struck by this appearance. I don't know why, and I cannot describe it any further. But it was a deep experience and one that I can remember back to, although that memory is by no means the same thing as the one-time, striking experience itself.

I apply such sauntering of the senses in my research. Let me give an example. I have studied the skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*; Holdrege, 2000b). It grows in the wetland area of the forest preserve and over many years I have visited the skunk cabbage colony. Sometimes I go there with a specific question or task in mind: Are the flowers out yet? What are some of the main differences between the small plants and the large plants? Can I find seeds? Other times I go out with a more open frame of mind—my attention is naturally drawn to skunk cabbage, but I am not focusing on any particular task or question.

One March afternoon I went down to the wetland in the mode of sauntering of the eye. The sun was shining through the leafless shrubs and it warmed my face. My eyes were wandering over the skunk cabbage flowers that were just emerging from the cool muck. Then I noticed a few honeybees. I watched those bees fly in and out of the bud-like leaves that enwrap the skunk cabbage flowers. In a flash I realized that I hadn't seen any bees yet that year. The first bees of the year were visiting this plant. What a wonderful meeting of bee and skunk cabbage that I had never seen before. I was in the right place at the right time. I had been going regularly each year to the wetland on early spring afternoons, and yet I hadn't seen this before. I'm pretty sure I may have continued to overlook the meeting of bee and skunk cabbage had I not been practicing a "sauntering of the eye." I would have been too preoccupied with other things on my mind that would have blocked my ability to be present with what was occurring around me. Having seen this event caused great joy, but it also sparked a small revolution in my understanding of skunk cabbage and bees.

I have described two complementary types of sensory observation exercises. In the one case—the example of the plant observation—we go out with our attention to meet something particular and take it in with all its details. We move with our senses and attention in and through the phenomena. In the other case, we try to create a kind of open receptivity that allows us to take in what appears at a given moment.

Every perception of a thing or situation has these two aspects—focus and receptivity. Without these there would be no perception. By carrying out such exercises in both directions, we are honing our capacities to perceive the world around us. In this way we can shift into a sensory mode, being with the things themselves. The two kinds of exercises actually reinforce one another.

One day I was struck by all the white feathery globes of fruiting dandelions that seemed to hover over the rich green grass. I then took some time to look at the globes more carefully. Each consists of an array of compact fruits still barely attached to the top of the stem, each of which sends out a fine filament that radiates out into the fine hairs that together form the circumference of the globe. The spheroid globes make a regular shape, although the individual fruit extensions are not all the same length; some are shorter, some are curved, and together they form the globe. A structure you can only be amazed at, and you realize: I have not begun to fathom the genius of this organism. Two days later we had—in the middle of the night—a violent storm with heavy rains and strong winds. The next morning I looked out the window and noticed that all the globes were gone—the storm had dispersed them into the wider world. How many times have I looked out a window in “dandelion season” and never noticed the disappearance of the globes?



I was attuned to dandelions by having taken some time to look at them carefully, and, enlivened by them, I did not overlook their subsequent transformation. So it happens: the world catches our attention although we are not attending to what draws us out of ourselves—I wasn't intending to look at dandelions when I crossed the yard and noticed the globes; the globes stimulated me and I looked more carefully and was even more amazed. By going into the phenomena in their details I awaken more to the world. Then I am more open to that part of the world which I have noticed and don't pass by it so easily.

Exact Sensorial Imagination

When we have made the effort to perceive carefully, this interaction leaves an impression on us. We can remember, at least to some degree, what we have seen, felt, smelled, touched, or heard. So after we have carried out a variety of observation exercises, I request that participants in courses willfully re-picture or re-create in their imagination what they have perceived. Picture the color of the stem and how it changes from bottom to top, feel the consistency of the stem by imagining the feeling of the pressure you applied to it with your fingers, reawaken the fragrance of the blossom and dwell in it for a moment. In this way we can build up a vivid picture of the plant we have observed or of the forest we have walked through. By doing so we awaken in ourselves what we have met through sensory engagement. We can actually remember much more than we realize, and, moreover, sometimes the hue of green or the shape of a leaf will speak more strongly in our inner picturing than it had in the moment of observing.

During a course I ask participants to make re-picturing into a daily practice: picture in the evening or morning the plant or environment with which we have been concerning ourselves. We talk about the experience of picturing, and people share their questions and approaches. It is fascinating how differently people picture. Often people notice that they couldn't picture something because they hadn't really looked at it.

What is the significance of inner re-picturing, which Goethe called “exact sensorial imagination” (1995, p. 46)? First, it is a practice that allows us to connect ourselves consciously and vividly with what we have experienced. We bring to awareness what would otherwise sink into a sea of potential memories. We willfully call up these experiences and enter into them with our picturing activity. This activity is imbued with feeling: not reactive feeling but feeling as a connecting agent, an inner sensorium for qualities.

As in perception we go out to things and invite them in, so in exact sensorial imagination we re-create and enliven within ourselves what we have met in experience. In this way we connect deeply with the world we meet in sensory experience. One course participant described how the work in a course created “lasting experiences of the plants through the practical observation and visualization exercises—I feel I have ‘met’ two plants, as many of my perceptions still live fresh in my imagination.” We have taken the plant in and now we move it in us. Or, said differently, we come into inner movement by re-creating in imagination the qualities we have perceived. We can thereby become more aware of these qualities.

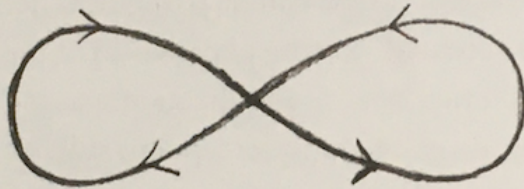
Second, this practice can help us to notice that we need to perceive more carefully if we are going to be in a position to faithfully re-create in ourselves a vivid image. This realization motivates a return to the phenomena.

Third, it is an aid to overcoming the tendency to think abstractly. In exact sensorial imagination we are using our mental capacities to get closer to the concrete sensory qualities. This contrasts starkly with an abstract frame of mind that uses concepts to explain and interpret what we perceive. Exact sensorial imagination lets our minds practice concreteness instead of abstract distancing.¹

We can view the perception exercises described in the previous section and the practice of exact sensorial imagination as two polar practices that enhance each other. Both need to be practiced. By going out into perception and openly taking account of what the world offers we inform experience with the richness of the sensory world. Through exact sensorial imagination we connect these experiences

with ourselves and at the same time become inwardly active. The world comes to life in us. We can practice a kind of pendulum swing between going out and bringing in and enlivening, going out again, bringing in and enlivening. My personal experience is that by doing this, both perception and picturing are enhanced. Through careful perception I participate in the phenomena. This gives me a wealth to re-picture. Through vivid re-picturing my attentiveness to the world is enhanced. I perceive vividly and more can be disclosed in any moment.

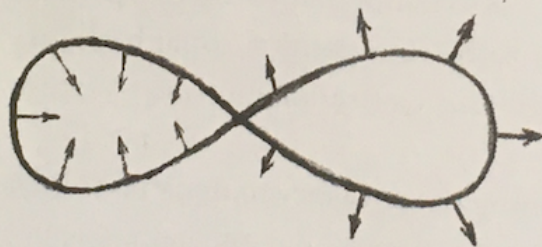
The following is a symbol of this oscillation. Imagine moving along a figure eight. Starting at the middle you swing out into the



lower part of the curve and around upward and back to the middle, swing down and out to the right, up and around back to the middle.

It is important to think of this oscillation dynamically as a movement.

Now we can imagine that during this continuous movement around the figure, our attention is directed outward as we move on



the right half of the figure, turns inward on the left half of the figure, and then turns outward again as we move along the curve. In perception we move out into the

world and then take what we have experienced into ourselves. Out of our own activity we can then enrich our experience of the outer (through, for example, exact sensorial imagination) and then move back outward. We are moving into the world and the world is moving into us. When we move far out into the world, we can move far into ourselves; this allows us, in turn, to expand more into the world. "Outer" and "inner" can no longer be viewed as two distinct realms; they are two aspects of one oscillating activity. We are, inasmuch as we bring forth this dynamic movement, interfaces in which we and the world continually intersect in vibrant activity.

Openness and Preconceptions

At present I am preoccupied with sense-impressions to which no book or picture can do justice. The truth is that, in putting my powers of observation to the test, I have found a new interest in life. How far will my scientific and general knowledge take me: Can I learn to look at things with clear, fresh eyes? How much can I take in at a single glance? Can the grooves of old mental habits be effaced? This is what I am trying to discover. (Goethe; September 11, 1786 [1982, p. 21])

As roots are stimulated in their growth through the soil conditions they encounter, so are we stimulated through our encounters with the perceptual world. Goethe “found a new interest in life” through putting his “powers of observation to the test.” Since Goethe was an unusually sensitive and attentive observer, it seems at first odd that he needed a kind of challenge to stimulate his perception and to “look at things with clear, fresh eyes.” At the time he entered these thoughts into his journal he was thirty-seven years old, a famous writer and poet. In addition to his literary creations, he had carried out an array of scientific studies in optics, geology, botany, and comparative anatomy. Moreover, during the previous ten years he had taken on more and more responsibilities in the small dukedom of Weimar. He was privy councilor, president of the ducal chamber, overseer of buildings and mines, president of the war council (the army had 660 soldiers), and director of the drawing academy (see Richards, 2002, p. 355f.; Barnes, 1999, p. 27). He had come to a point in his life where he felt stifled. He needed a change and decided that he must leave Weimar and gain fresh experiences. He hoped that the world would breathe new life into him. He decided to flee Weimar, incognito, and go to Italy. He remained there for two years.

He wrote the above words soon after he had crossed over the Alps and arrived in northern Italy. Freed from all outer responsibilities, he immersed himself in perceptions. For example, when he was traveling through the Alps by horse-driven coach he noted both new species of

plants and species he was familiar with. But the familiar plants were different: "In the low-lying regions, branches and stems were strong and fleshy and leaves broad, but up here in the mountains, branches and stems became more delicate, buds were spaced at wider intervals and the leaves were lanceolate in shape. I observed this in a willow and in a gentian, which convinced me that it was not a question of different species" (September 8, 1786; Goethe, 1982, p. 15). He felt, as he put it, "a new elasticity of mind" (Goethe, 1982, p. 21).

The immersion in all the new experiences helped Goethe to efface the "grooves of old mental habits." And yet it is also clear that the willow and the gentian in the Alps spoke to him strongly because he had previously engaged in the study of plants. His knowledge of plants allowed him to see what others would have ignored, and at the same time his knowledge grew as it was illuminated by the encounter with a different situation.

The seed has developed out of the plant's activity and growth in the past year. When what has been stored in the seed becomes fluid, the plant can grow anew and enter into its environment. Likewise, in human life each present experience is informed by past experience. We are not unformed wax onto which the world imprints itself. We bring much with us into every sense experience and yet we do not want to be constrained by mental grooves. We want to be open to what we haven't noticed and to what we don't know. Thoreau states in his characteristically forceful way how our past learning and knowledge can encumber our perception:

It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know. I do not get nearer by a hair's breadth to any natural object so long as I presume that I have an introduction to it from some learned man. To conceive of it with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange. If you would make acquaintance with the ferns you must forget your botany.... Your greatest success will be simply to perceive that such things are, and you will have no communication to make to the Royal Society. (October 4, 1859; in Thoreau 1999, p. 91)