

The Eyes Have It
March 19th, 2023
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What would it be like to look out upon the world through artist's eyes...through the eyes of artists like Georgia O'Keefe or Claude Monet, through the eyes of Zora Neale Hurston (who wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) or Herman Melville (the Unitarian who wrote *Moby Dick*)? What would it be like to see through artist's eyes, through the eyes of the soul? Maybe we can only imagine how rich and how loving that would be. Maybe we can only imagine how cared for we might feel...how nurtured. As Sweet Honey sings,

You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms,
You said you'd hold me till the pains of life were gone.
You said you'd comfort me in times like these
and now I need you

In *Wanting Memories*, the song from which these lyrics were taken, Sweet Honey describes this nurtured feeling so well.

How many of us have the dream of being so dearly loved in life? How many of us have, at times, disparaged this lovely dream? And how often do we find ourselves desperately cleaving to it, against the odds and against the grain...holding on, as if for dearest life?

Can we see life's journey in this way? Can we truly see through artist's eyes?

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, March 19th. This is the very eve of spring in Vermont. So, of course, it snowed a little bit last night. March 20th is the very first day of spring. I've decided. I'm wearing shorts. Tomorrow also marks a solemn anniversary. Twenty springs ago, in 2003, American military forces began an incursion that became widely known by its code name—Shock and Awe. As we light the chalice this morning, may we do so in the name of peace. May we look out for peace with most beautiful eyes.

"I've got big eyes for you, Lady Day." Lester Young used to say these words to Billie Holiday, so affectionately. Lester Young, the brilliant tenor saxophonist from the middle of the 20th century. They called him "Prez." He was a lovely man. He was an innovator. He was a great and subtle artist.

Born in Mississippi back in 1909, Lester Young played his horn for quarter of a century. He died in New York City when he was only 50 years of age. In his short time on Earth, he delivered incredible beauty to the world. He was singular. He was unique. No one could play like Lester Young. Many would try but none were ever as good. No one was ever as beautiful, ever as fine as he.

In the late 1950s, Lester Young played a blues with Billie Holiday—*Fine and Mellow*, a song she wrote in 1939. He played and she sang it and the energy between them was just incredible. It is mesmerizing and tantalizing seventy years later. Billie Holiday was so incredible...but it wasn't the words that she sang that made it so. It was how she sang them. Her words were...

My man don't love me, he treats me oh so mean
My man don't love me, he treats me oh so mean
He's the lowest man...
[have you got it? ...yes]
that I've ever seen

Her words were these but the way that she sang them made us seeing them differently. The way that she sang them meant something new. I don't know how she did it but I heard her sing so clearly, "I am a child of God—blissfully imperfect, refine and complete." It wasn't what she said but it was clearly what she was saying.

Strangely, it isn't hard to take in the paradox. It is as natural as the rain...you just have to choose to see the rain for yourself. Use your soul eyes.

And Lester Young and the other musicians, they were all supporting her—Lester, in particular. He was supporting Billie Holiday with love. He was showering her with marvelous melodies and with the beautiful flowers of life...sensual and naughty, burning and brash...foolish, sexy and wise. It's a beautiful piece of music.

Lester Young is remembered for many things and this is certainly one of them—the way he had big eyes for Lady Day.

A fellow musician named Charlie Mingus remembered Young so reverently—Charlie Mingus, the wonderful bassist, the brilliant composer and great artist. His remembrance was captured well in poetry. An artist writes,

When Charlie speaks of Lester
You know someone great has gone
The sweetest swinging music man
Had a Porkie Pig hat on

Lester Young was known for his constant wearing of a Porkpie hat.

A bright star
In a dark age
When the bandstands had a thousand ways
Of refusing a black man admission

Racism was such when Lester Young was on the scene that the artists had to enter venues through back doors for their own performances.

A bright star
In a dark age
When the bandstands had a thousand ways
Of refusing a black man admission
Black musician
In those days they put him in an
Underdog position

Underdog. A reference to a book entitled Beneath the Underdog, the Charlie Mingus autobiography. The poet concludes, singing,

Tonight these crowds

Are happy and loud
Children are up dancing in the streets
In the sticky middle of the night
Summer serenade
Of taxi horns and fun arcades
Where right or wrong
Under neon
Every feeling goes on!
For you and me
The sidewalk is a history book
And a circus
Dangerous clowns
Balancing dreadful and wonderful perceptions
They have been handed
Day by day
Generations on down

This poetry fascinates me...such beauty from such difficult experience...and the idea that we are dangerous clowns performing in a circus of some kind, balancing the dreadful and wonderful contradictions that have been roughly delivered to us...unable to see things for ourselves.

You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms,
You said you'd hold me till the pains of life were gone.
You said you'd comfort me in times like these
and now I need you

So begins the first verse of a song called Wanting Memories, the chorus of which is as lovely. You may know it.

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me,
to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.
Since you've gone and left me, there's been so little beauty,
But I know I saw it clearly through your eyes.

This is the refrain. It is a lovely sentiment in its fullness but I want us, this morning, to focus our attention only on the first two lines.

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me,
to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.

Can we sing this part together?

I am sitting here wanting...
memories to teach me...
to see the beauty in the world...
through my own eyes...

The eyes have it.

Our eyes are so important...no matter how they well function... That's not the point. The point is not outsight, what we see in terms of vision. The point is the insight...and as they say, the eyes are the windows of the soul. This is what they say...and I believe them in my heart. I believe the poetry of this idea. I believe that soul energy enters us, like light through panes of glass...through windowpanes, stained glass and otherwise. The light gets in somehow and the light gets out again—through windows, through doorways, through walls that have fallen down... Fallen within me, the myth of my own becoming...the idea that I have within me, the idea of me as a self-made man...which is a dream-like fantasy. A hallucination that I enjoy. And here we have another seeing metaphor—the hallucination. A hallucination is “an experience involving the apparent perception of something that, in actuality, is not present.” It's like a mirage. It is an optical illusion. The eyes have it once again, indeed...but this time, they're playing dirty tricks on us. What we see (or what we think that we see) cannot, in every case, be trusted. Our eyes are not always dependable, not always honest, not always trustworthy. This is one perspective, one way of looking at things.

But here's a question for you. What happens if we go in the other direction? What happens when we try the opposite?

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me
to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes

The eyes have it...no matter how well they function. The eyes are the windows of the soul. I believe the poetry of this idea. Soul energy enters us and exits us, like light through windowpanes. It gets in and it gets out—through windows and through doorways, through an openness that arises some how in me... Rising within me, the faith of feeling the earth beneath my feet, the once-frozen earth, now thawing like some fantastic catastrophe...of mud and slush in the angled sunlight of early spring (whatever “early spring” means here up in Vermont...it starts tomorrow, remember. It starts quite promptly...at 5:24pm).

So, look out on the day tomorrow, precisely at that time, and you will see the changing of season. The change will be so subtle, though. We will need great eyes to see. We will not need “big eyes,” like those that Lester Young had for Billie Holiday. We will need great eyes. There's a difference.

Do you have great eyes? Do you have eyes that are great enough to see the subtle changes in life? Do you believe that I have eyes that are this great? [] Tell me more about my eyes.

They used to say that Elizabeth Taylor had the most beautiful eyes. They say the same thing now about Adriana Lima from Brazil. Harrison Ford and Alicia Keys, Scarlett Johanson and Bruno Mars... They are among the many who are said to have “great eyes.” But what does that mean on a spiritual level...or should we just to remain superficial about it? Should we just look upon their beauty and leave it at that?

When you think about the eyes of the people that you know and love, who among them would you say has eyes that are most beautiful? [?] Looking in and looking out, whose eyes are the greatest? It's important to frame the question in this way. Most of the time, we don't. We tend to evaluate the greatest of one

another's eyes in one direction only—from the outside, looking in. Once again, I ask: What happens if we go in the other direction? What would happen if we were to evaluate the greatest of one another's eyes, this time, from the inside, looking out? Instead of asking ourselves, "How do I look?" we could be asking ourselves, "How do we see?" How differently do you and I actually SEE the world in which we live? How differently do you SEE the world from one another?

Years ago, I came across a fascinating photograph that revealed to me how powerful a question like these can be. It was a black and white photograph and it was taken in the 1970s. It was a street scene in London, I believe...and on the right side of the frame, a dark-skinned and barrel-chested man in denim overalls was running, full steam ahead. Behind him and giving chase, there was a bobby, a British police officer, a white man in full uniform complete with the big, furry hat, also running at full speed. His night-stick was drawn. And the caption asked the question: "What do you see? Do you see yet another instance of racist, police brutality in London? Or is the bobby in the right, a faithful police officer chasing a bona fide criminal?" The great reveal was that the real answer to this question was: "None of the above" for not featured in the photo, outside of the framing, was a third man running who was also as running as fast he possibly could. This third man was the real criminal. The plain-clothed police officer (the dark-skinned and barrel-chested man in denim overalls) and the uniformed police officer (the light-skinned, bobby with his furry hat and his night-stick) were partners. They were both chasing the third man.

We often think that we are standing on the outside, looking in but very often, it's the other way around. Very often we are actually on the inside, looking out...seeing through the lenses of cultural bias.

The American philosopher William James once said, "A great many people think [that] they are thinking [for themselves] when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me,
to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.

What do we have to do to make this happen? Who do we have to be to see the world through our own eyes.

The Matrix, the old action movie, came out on Easter weekend in 1999. Twenty-four years later, I'm still talking about it. I'm not surprised...because The Matrix is about the greatest possible adventure of them all, the adventure of becoming one's best self. It's really hard to do. It's arduous. It takes everything we have.

Fairly early in the film, Neo (the hero, the main character) is rescued from the world of illusions. He winds up in a hospital bed in an operating room. He is highly disoriented. "Am I dead?" he asks but in the deepest sense, the opposite is true. Neo has been reborn. Remember, it came out Easter weekend. So, this idea had resonance.

A doctor was working on Neo, trying to facilitate his recovery. Neo asked him, "What are you doing?"

And the doctor says, "Your muscles have atrophied, we're rebuilding them."

It perplexes Neo. This answer doesn't make much sense...but he doesn't push for clarity. Instead, he goes in another direction. He asks, "Why do my eyes hurt?"

And the doctor says, profoundly, "[...because] you've never used them before."

Neo is a full-grown adult. He actor who played this character was 35 years old at the time. Imagine that. NOT using your own eyes for the first 35 years of your life! It's sounds crazy, right? [] Nonsense. Actually, it happens almost all the time. Sometimes, it takes much longer. It's really hard to see the world through ones own eyes.

It's counterintuitive, I know, but, truly, it takes us a very long time to see. It's hard work not to see through the eyes of other people. It's really hard work. It means becoming genuinely present to one's self. It means becoming present to and fully accepting of one's self. That level of internal intimacy can be scary...and quite challenging. It's hard to settle in, to become inwardly attuned... It's hard work to quiet down, to allow ourselves to know our own, inmost peace...

It's really hard to accept ourselves with all of our imperfections. I, for one, strongly prefer my pretenses and my illusions...or, at least, my ego wants me to prefer my pretenses and my illusions...because the world, as my ego presumes to have contained it, is so much easier to control. When I can still pretend that I actually have such a power, I'm satisfied...satisfied with the world and with my place inside of it. When I stop pretending, when I am more honest with myself, I find that my soul prefers the honesty of the chaotic maelstrom of life. I discover—and I rediscover—that I can find peace in all the madness. I can find great beauty in imperfection. Each of us can. We just have to learn to see with our own eyes. It's real, hard work. It's truly an art...and I'm not the only one who thinks so. Artists like Georgia O'Keefe and Claude Monet would agree. Especially Claude Monet, the French painter, because his eyesight was so bad (or was so bad in the eyes of other people).

Monet Refuses the Operation

BY LISEL MUELLER

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,

and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolve
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?
I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

We must learn to see through eyes of great artists which is to say that we must learn
to see with our own eyes.

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me,
to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.

Can we sing this part together?

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.