

Believing is Seeing

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Reading: from *The Zen of Seeing* by Frederick Frank

It was one of those formative experiences that radically change your perspective. It had a lasting effect on the way in which I view my religious beliefs and my ministry. Some forty or forty-five years ago I was one of a small group of Unitarian Universalist ministers who spent a day at Princeton University with Hadley Cantril, founder of the perception laboratory there. Let me tell you about just one of the many experiences he put us through.

We were taken into a windowless room in which all of the surfaces were covered with a black, non-reflecting fabric. We were seated on a bench and the lights were turned off, leaving us in total darkness. Then two yellow balloons appeared on the wall about ten feet in front of us—obviously they were being lighted from somewhere, but we could see nothing but the balloons, not even the black wall behind them. Then he said, “I want you to tell me what the balloons are doing. As we watched the balloons began to move, one toward us, the other away from us, and then reversed. In and out they moved several times—or so we thought. No, more than “thought”—we were sure that’s what they were doing.

Then Dr. Cantril put the lights on and showed us what was really happening. Each balloon was equipped with a device that could inflate or deflate it, synchronized with another device that could make the light brighter or dimmer. What was happening was that he was inflating the size of one balloon and at the same time making the light on it brighter, and simultaneously deflating the size of the other balloon and making the light on it dimmer. They weren’t moving toward or away from us at all! Donald Harrington came out of that room, shaking his head and saying, “There goes my rational religion!”

What was happening? Why were we so sure of ourselves and yet, dead wrong? Dr. Cantril explained to us that our brains had been programmed all of our lives to understand that a light looks larger and brighter as it comes toward us and smaller and dimmer as it moves away from us. Put the two together and the eye is sending a powerful signal to the brain and the mind is translating that signal into meaning that the object we are viewing is coming toward us or moving away from us.

An obvious real life parallel to Dr. Cantril's balloons is driving at night and meeting a car on the road. How do you know it is coming toward you? Well of course, the lights are getting larger and brighter. But you also know that it's an optical illusion—the lights aren't really getting larger and brighter. They only look that way because they are getting closer. Your mind is programmed by lifelong daily experiences to make that interpretation and you do it automatically, without even thinking about it.

What Dr. Cantril did in his laboratory was to trick us by creating the signals—the balloons getting brighter and larger—but without the movement toward us and away from us. Because of the beliefs we brought into that room, we were sure we knew what was happening when, in fact, we were dead wrong! We were seeing what we believed!

Many of you are probably familiar with Plato's famed myth, "The Image of the Cave." A group of people is in a cave, with a fire behind them casting their shadows on the blank wall at the back of the cave. They are prevented from looking to the side and seeing each other and their shadows are the only reality they know. They will refuse the admonitions of someone from outside telling them that what they are seeing is only shadows and there is a real world to be found outside the cave. If necessary, they will kill the outsider who attempts to force them out of the cave into the real world.

It reminds me of T.S. Eliot's observation that, "Humanity cannot bear very much reality." And of W.H. Auden's, "We would rather be ruined than changed; / We would rather die in our dread / Than climb on the cross of the moment / And let our illusions die."

"Seeing is believing." It's an ancient proverb going back at least to the second century B.C.E. "I'll believe it when I see it," we say. These are the voices of the skeptic, the voices of persons who place a lot of trust—too much in my opinion—in their own rationality, persons who are sure they can clearly separate the true from the false, the right from the wrong. By the end of this sermon I hope to convince you (1) that you often can't, and (2) that while sometimes you may believe what you see, but more often you see what you believe.

But this is not a sermon about optical illusions. The proposition that I would put before you this morning is that something very similar takes place in our perception of values in religion, philosophy, politics, morality, ethics, theology,

etc. It gets to the very heart of how we think, how we feel, how we interact with the people around us, with the environment, with world in which we live and move and have our being.

Optical illusions baffle us because they set up a conflict between the eye and the mind. The drawings in your order of service—the Roman pitchfork and two by M. C. Escher—confuse us because our eye is picking up an image and sending it to the brain, and the mind is rejecting it. Some of you are old enough to remember the old television series, “Lost in Space” in which the Robinson’s robot gave birth to a new phrase in our language: “That does not compute.” What he was really saying was, “My brain is already programmed and the new information does not fit with it; therefore it must be incorrect.” Keep that sentence in mind; it’s what this sermon is all about. “. . . the new information does not fit . . . therefore it must be incorrect.”

Optical illusions such as those in your order of service can sometimes create an eye/mind conflict so severe that people can become disoriented and even nauseous by looking at them for an extended period of time. If you have difficulty just looking at them you can imagine the problems I had in drawing them for this morning’s bulletin! With the Roman pitchfork the rebellion of my mind from my eye was so great that I couldn’t make my hand do what it had to do and finally had to draw the square, closed end, then cover it with a piece of paper and draw the three pronged end.

As is so often the case, we resort to physical analogies to help us understand the nonphysical realm. Let me use a computer model to clarify my point. Your whole body is the computer. Your brain is the hard drive where memory is stored. Your mind is the software, the programming of the brain with all of the experiences of your life. Your sensory organs—eyes, ears, tongue, nose, and skin—are the keyboards, scanners, disc-readers, etc. by which information is loaded into the brain. Your experiences of what you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch are continually being downloaded into the brain. Sometimes the hard drive crashes—we call it a mental breakdown. I wonder if we may even run out of memory—sometimes I think that if I could erase some of the useless trivia stored in there I might have room for some of the more important things that I seem unable to remember. And we all know the difficulty we experience when an older computer with older software—me at 81—attempts to interface with a newer model with up-to-date software—a teen-ager! (I had too much fun playing with that analogy and strayed from my point. Sorry.)

A recent visit to my audiologist made the point in a non-optical way. I was in a soundproof room and she was reading a list of words to me through headphones and I was to repeat them back to her. At one point she said “up,” and I repeated “up.” Then she said “bells” and I said “down.” Her word didn’t sound anything like “down,” so why did I make that mistake? Obviously I had associated “up” with “down” and already created a mental belief that “down” would be the next word. I know what I believe; don’t bother me with facts!

I have a vivid teen-age recollection of an encounter with a born again minister in a Methodist youth camp. He believed the Bible was literally the revealed word of God and also that God’s revelation had come to him directly in his conversion experience and prayer life. After some minutes of disagreement between us he finally said, “You wouldn’t argue with God, would you?”

He meant no arrogance. I liked the guy and respected his integrity. But we were both starting with such different beliefs and assumptions that there was no way we could come to the same conclusion. We each saw what we believed.

The late Duncan Howlett, one of my mentors in the 1950’s brought that incident back to me when he wrote, “If you disagree with someone’s conclusion but cannot find a flaw in your reasoning or theirs, go to the assumptions with which you both began and there you will find the basis of your disagreement.”

Another example: I went to a Methodist theological school where one of the requirements was a course on world religions. In the first class session we were asked to define “religion.” One student said: “Belief that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior.” “What about other religions,” he was asked, “Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism etc.?” “Those aren’t religions,” he replied. “They are only philosophies.”

And one more: In the 1930’s and ’40’s there was a great controversy among American Protestants over the role of the missionary. Was it to uproot indigenous religions and replace them with Christianity or was it to work with the indigenous religions to meet human needs? The Kraemer/Hocking series of debates on the issue was published in book form. Hocking, noted that a version of Jesus’ golden rule—“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you”—was found in virtually all the religions of the world. “What,” he asked, “is the difference whether Jesus said it or someone else said it?” “When Jesus said it,” replied Kraemer, “it was Truth. When the others said it, it was merely a value.”

What happens is that our understanding of whatever may be presented to us at a given moment is conditioned and interpreted by all of the previous experiences of our lives, even the unconscious, as we have learned from depth psychology. And when, as is often the case, new experiences come into conflict with previous ones we either (1) adopt the new one and discard the old one (conversion), (2) keep the old one and reject the new one (dig in our heels), (3) try to blend them (which doesn't work if they are really incompatible), or (4) become disoriented with some degree—major or minor—of mental illness. That's a much too simplistic description. Real life is not a single straight line series of cause and effect events but a much more complex network of interaction of all of the experiences with which we have been programmed since the moment of our conception.

The implication of this is that if the life and ministry of the church is in the shaping and development of human values we need to better understand how that process works in the human mind. The racist, the chauvinist, the tyrant, the militarist, the fundamentalist, and the Unitarian Universalist (Like the company I've put us in?) all carry values that were inculcated in us through our life's experiences. Whether we are seeking to develop some kinds of values or oppose others, we need to understand how those values are formed.

Consider the question of language. Cultural anthropologist Lister Sinclair writes, "... we begin by speaking as we think but end by thinking as we speak. Our language is an expression of our culture shaped by the way we are brought up: and on the other hand, the way we are brought up is shaped by our language." I think we would agree that bringing up a child using terms such as "nigger," "fag," "wop," "bitch," "kike," "wetback," etc. would be shaping that child's attitudes. But aren't we also shaping values when we use masculine pronouns in reference to both male and female persons? Yet many who would not think of using "nigger" or "bitch" view the issue of using gender-inclusive language to be nonsense.

Educators have been telling us for a long time that beliefs developed through experience are more powerful than learning from books. As Mark Twain put it in his inimitable way, "Anyone who has ever attempted to carry a cat home by its tail has learned a great deal that he (or she) otherwise would not have learned."

Consider the swastika is a form of the Christian cross, commonly used in Greek churches and often found in churches in Western Christendom. I have seen them in the repeated design in the tile floors of Catholic churches in Spain. But what church could use it now? The nightmare of Nazism altered our perception of the

swastika, and the programming of our minds by that experience creates a totally different response than we would have had seventy years ago.

In the early 1960's I was conducting a church service in which we were singing that magnificent Haydn hymn, *Light of Ages and of Nations*, when a woman in the congregation dashed out of the church. I assumed she was ill and phoned her after church to see what had happened. She didn't want to talk about it then but made an appointment to see me the next day.

She told me that she was a Jewish child in Germany during the holocaust. She and her mother had hidden under the porch of their house when the German soldiers were going through the streets of the town rounding up Jews to send them to the death camps. The soldiers were singing *Deutschland, Deutschland, Uber Allis*—the German national anthem under the Nazis; the tune was the Haydn. Her experience of the holocaust, totally outside the experience of the rest of us, turned that beautiful Hayden hymn into a nightmare.

As you leave the sanctuary this morning I invite you to take a look at a couple of items. One is a book of M.C. Escher drawings. The other is a photograph of a Fed Ex truck taken by the late Robert Freedman. Robert was a photographer and an artist who possessed a unique capacity for seeing patterns that most people would miss, and he taught me a lot about believing and seeing. He challenged me as I challenge you to find the arrow on that Fed Ex truck. Hint: If you can't find it you are probably starting with an incorrect assumption. Speak to me and I'll give you two words to change that assumption and you will be able to find it.

This whole question of how we perceive our shared values in our church has a lot to do with the sense of community within the church. It is experience that shapes our perception of values, the common experience, shared by adults and young people that brings a church community together in its values. That is why the Sunday service is so important, not for the minister's sermon but because it is the one event in the week designed for everyone's participation. That's why we call it "common worship," why the Anglicans call their order of worship *The Book of Common Prayer*. Those common shared experiences are what bind a collection of individuals into a religious community. I hope that playing with a Möbius strip with the children this morning will lead to some family conversation about believing and seeing.

This means that if we wish to exercise some intentionality in the way in which we shape our values, both personally and as a community of faith, we need to create

experiences—reverence for life, respect for our planet, ethical values of love and respect in our relationship with other human beings, etc. We need to share the common experience of perceiving the world through the eyes of an Annie Dillard, a Martin Luther King, a Rachel Carson, a Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Theodore Parker, a William Ellery Channing. We need the sense that life is a miracle, to sense what Walt Whitman sensed when he said, “A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.” And we need to incorporate these experiential values into our religious education—for both adults and children—our rituals, our social action, our music, our coffee hours, all of our coming together in our community of faith and our reaching out into the larger world.

Remember that comment at the beginning of this sermon: “... the new information does not fit ... therefore it must be incorrect.” But why make that assumption?

Channing, Parker, and other early American Unitarians made the point that religious beliefs and values all came from human beings, that revelation and insight did not end just because a body of beliefs were canonized as sacred scripture. But Whitman said it better than any of them:

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are ...
 We consider bibles and religions divine—
 I do not say they are not divine;
 I say they have all grown out of you and may grow out of you still;
 It is not they who give the life—it is you who give the life.

Isn't that very close to what Jesus meant when he said, “The kingdom of God is within you”?