

THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM

GreenSpirit

magazine

Engaged spirituality for a living Earth



www.greenspirit.org.uk

The Art of Seeing and the Evolution of Being

EMMA KIDD

Five years ago, I encountered an aspect of thinking and perceiving that has profoundly altered the way that I see and live in the world. It has enabled me to have a much deeper understanding of the world, to see its aliveness, and to participate in its being in a much deeper, more soulful way. The transformative encounter was this; there is more to seeing than meets the eye, as what lies further upstream from 'what' we see in the world, is the cognitive process of 'how' we see the world. This literally turned my world upside down. I had just left a career in Hong Kong, designing and developing lingerie that was mass-produced in China. I left because I had seen, felt and touched too much of the coldness, isolation and destruction that was being brought on in the wake of manic industrialization and cannibalistic consumerism. The pain and suffering I was experiencing, and witnessing, led me to unceremoniously abandon my career and return to the UK to explore the bubbling questions that had suddenly reached boiling point within me. There I found Schumacher College, and it was on the first week of my MSc in Holistic Science that I encountered a crucial light which illuminated a possibility for *how* it could be that we have so much devastation and destruction in our world, and how we could go about changing it.

This facet of our human experience, the fact that there is 'more to seeing than meets the eye', is referred to by my incredible teacher Henri Bortoft as the 'missed dimension of cognition in perception', and has been explored extensively in his study of what he calls 'a dynamic way of seeing' in

his latest, and last, book "Taking Appearance Seriously". He was a great man, a former physicist and philosopher of Science who sadly passed away in 2012. Iain McGilchrist, a psychiatrist and writer, also has a masterpiece that I have been greatly inspired by, exploring the left and right hemispheres of the brain, "The Master and his Emissary" and deals with this 'missed dimension of cognition in perception'. Both of these have been pivotal to my work in education, and my lifelong intention of getting to know life in terms of itself, to contribute toward creating a happier, more loving and peaceful world. I would like to explore this 'missed dimension' with you first.

One way of *seeing* that is available to us when we perceive the world, and according to Iain McGilchrist is associated with the left-hemisphere of the brain, *re-presents* the world for us into organising ideas, concepts, symbols and abstractions, creating universal distinctions and separation between things. This allows us to analyze, and create maps of our generalized experiences of the world. This is very useful for our physical and intellectual navigation of the world and our communication of it. It focuses quite specifically on content and solid physicality, and occurs in all mammals. Think of a bird surveying a detailed patch of ground for a worm, it does this with its right eye, which coordinates its left brain hemisphere. At the same time it needs to survey the territory, the living context, for predators, and it does this with its left eye/right brain. Henri Bortoft describes this content specific, left hemisphere way of seeing as following the logic of solid



Participatory workshops exploring the art of seeing
© Emma Kidd

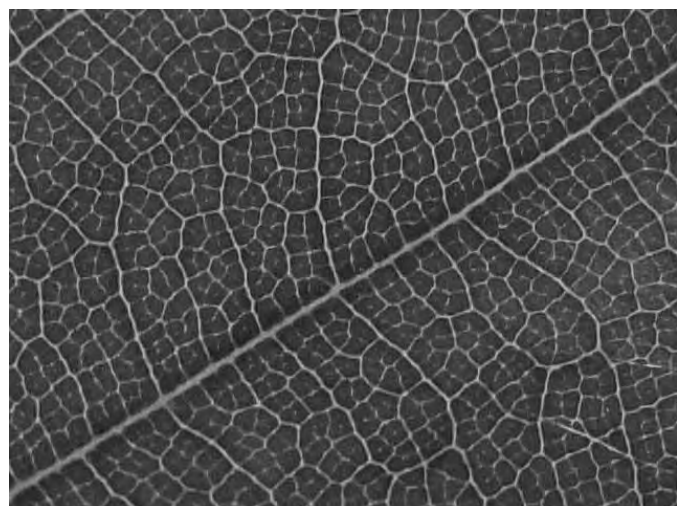


Participation in perception in a Devon garden
© Emma Kidd



bodies; it can name, label, analyze, quantify and focus on the separation of every *thing* that is physically 'there' before us. It creates a generalized picture of the thing in our mind, which Henri Bortoft calls the organising idea. We can then conveniently use the 'idea' of the thing when we need to refer to, or look for something at speed, and to communicate to others that we know something about this thing-in-the-world. The way of seeing enables us to bridge the chasm between my physical experience of the world and yours. By using generalized symbols, names and labels, we can communicate in a way that attempts to reach a shared understanding, enough at least for us to physically get by, together in the world. I call this way of seeing in-organic, as its qualities are static, fixed and absolute, which means that they contain no life – they only re-present it.

However, **before** the in-organic generalizations that this one way of seeing, the left-hemisphere of the brain, conveniently organizes for us; there is our experience of the dynamic living world, the territory *as it is*, which appears in terms of itself – organically, in its living-ness. This is the world that appears to us when we employ our other way of seeing, using the right-hemisphere of the brain. This has the effect of *presencing* the world we experience, on its own terms. This organic, dynamic way of seeing allows the phenomenon you wish to understand *to be* a unique, ever-



© Emma Kidd

changing *being*, and allows you to engage with it as a being that is *becoming*; individual, dynamic, alive and continually in process. This type of encounter is participatory rather than controlling; in relation *with* rather than separate from; enlivening rather than constricting. You can play around with this is yourself. Think of the idea 'tree' in your mind. What does it feel like, look like, symbolize? Draw your idea of a tree. Now go and spend some time with real trees. Focus your direct attention on their unique particularities, like the bark texture, leaf shape, the contours of its branches etc. The 'tree' idea in your mind's eye, and the idea you might have drawn down on paper, are the representations that your left-hemisphere fixes into place. Whereas to observe your direct sense experience of the actual tree, beyond what you think you know about it, put your right-hemisphere into action. Explore them both and feel the difference between them in terms of how you experience the idea vs. the real 'thing'.



© Emma Kidd

This applies not only to trees, but to everything that we 'think' about, everyday of our lives. Iain McGilchrist suggests that we have evolved into a pattern of cognition that allows the left-hemisphere to dominate our everyday experiences of life. And so due to its in-organic nature, we are then left with an inability to recognize, and to relate, to life in its livingness, and so instead we separate it from its living context and reduce it to the physical sum of its parts. This fixed way of seeing, that does not recognize the

dynamism of life, has been very clearly manifested in the human systems that we have created from the scientific revolution onwards; industrialization, capitalism, national centralizations of resources and power. I think that we are all experiencing the limitations that this in-organic way of seeing is facing, whether it be through the credit-crisis, being witness to climate chaos, frustration at continued privatization of national services, youth unemployment or the mechanistic nature of a healthcare system focused solely on pharmaceuticals and quick fixes.

Our capacity of *re-presenting* the world is just as integral to our ability to thrive, as our capacity of *presencing* the world as-it-is, but what we do need to recognize collectively is that an evolutionary over-emphasis on the left-hemisphere has led us into a hall of mirrors that is literally squeezing the life out of us. This then reflects the dead, static images of that hemisphere back at us, rather than enabling to us to see the dynamics of life itself, even if it is right in front us. We **can** escape it, and we can do it without losing all of the wonders that this over-emphasis on the in-organic nature of knowing has allowed to come into being such as the technology for the internet, and the engineering of mass-transportation. The path to evolving our way of seeing and being does not mean that we have to revert back to a pool of gooey oneness where there is no distinction between the one and the many. However, the current way of seeing ourselves, and the world, numerically as many 'ones' - all separate from and independent of one another and their surroundings - is leading us nowhere apart from a fast-track to mass-extinction.

I feel the evolutionary dance move that we now need to aim for, using the words of developmental biologist Brian Goodwin, is one of "Maximum freedom to the parts, maximum coherence to the whole." A way of seeing and of being that gives equal attention to content *and* context, to the implicit and explicit, to individual expression *and* collective cohesion. It calls for what Henri Bortoft has described as a 'dynamic way of seeing', and I believe that it re-addresses the balance between our use of the left and the right hemisphere. In mainstream education, business, international development and in politics we rely only on our abstract cognitive representations to navigate our way through life, in a way which is disconnected, disjointed and abstract – not true to life itself. Iain McGilchrist suggests that we need to learn to practise a cognitive pattern that starts with the immediate, dynamic lived experience of the right hemisphere, moves to the left to re-present it, and then goes back to the right again to create a broader, more contextual, living picture of life. This way of seeing which meets the world in terms of itself has the ability to *let go* of the abstract re-presentations, and to return to a stance of open receptivity, to meet the thing we think we know, again and again, with fresh new eyes. Put another way, we

learn "to stand in wonder before it". In this way we allow life to be and *to become*. In this process we not only think about life, but we allow life to live within and without us.

To embody this way of seeing, and way of being, we need to become actively welcoming and receptive. It is an *actively receptive* stance that is a step beyond imposed activity or mere passivity, and helps us to avoid the dualism of objectivity and subjectivity. It is an evolution in being human. It enables us to see with fresh new eyes, and to proceed with a child-like wonder, as if meeting something for the first time, every time that we meet it. This, in turn, allows our experience if it to become more alive, more dynamic, and profoundly more meaning-full – from which a respect, compassion and empathy for life naturally flows.



Emma Kidd © Emma Kidd

I try my best to embody this way of seeing in my writing and my teaching. I lead engaging, interactive, participatory workshops on perception in a number of different contexts such as sustainability, Eastern Religions, phenomenology, Goethean Science, creativity and well-being, at places such as the ASHA centre and Schumacher College. I am also writing my first book which aims to be a practical, down-to-earth tool for exploring and expanding your ways of seeing and being human, called "First Steps to Seeing". My website www.sensinglife.net holds all of my information, articles and poetry, and so please do feel free to get in touch if you wish.