

Dear Walt,

Glad you liked the *Sgt. Pepper* analogy in my last letter. I know you think the album's overrated and prefer the inventive *Pet Sounds* by the Beach Boys. We need to get some coffee soon and debate the greatest rock albums of all time.

In your last letter, you challenged me to think about how the disciplines of an artist affect how we do ministry. What a challenge! Here's the first discipline, learning how to look.

I love the opening line from Anne Dillard's book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "It's still the first week of January and I've got great plans. I've been thinking about seeing."

Seeing or looking are so fundamental to the arts that we take them for granted. Artists discipline themselves to see what others miss. Poet Kathleen Morris writes that poets are people "who by training and experience had come to appreciate the small things of the world." Poets appreciate the small things because they're looking.

Leonardo Da Vinci called observation the *saper vedere*, "knowing how to see." He recorded the minutia of bird feathers and wings in flight that remained unconfirmed and not fully appreciated until the development of the slow-motion camera. Da Vinci wrote, "He who loses his sight loses his view of the universe." The twentieth-century novelist, Flannery O'Connor, echoed Da Vinci when she said, "The writer should never be ashamed of staring."

What I appreciate about artists is that they open our eyes to see the world in new ways. They take what is often familiar, things we no longer bother to look at, and jar our senses to show us what we've been missing. Artists are like another set of eyes, helping us see the world in new ways.

A little known truth, Walt, is that seeing is essential for spiritual growth. Consider Matthew's Christmas narrative. The magi saw the Messiah's star in the east and went looking for the Savior to worship (Matthew 2:1-12). They came to King Herod, expecting the Jews to know the location. The Jewish religious leaders knew the location ("in Bethlehem in Judea") but they missed the star--they weren't looking. Some pagan wise men looked, expecting a Messiah, and came to worship. The religious people missed it.

Jesus equated the lack of sight with spiritual obstinacy in Matthew 13:

*Though seeing, they do not see . . .
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.
For this people's heart has become calloused . . .
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes . . .
and turn, and I would heal them.*

How do we look but not see? The scribes and teachers in Israel knew the prophecies, they **looked** into the Scriptures, but they didn't see. Seeing means

having spiritual discernment, the ability to peer into God's purposes. We can be guilty of looking but not seeing when we fail to peer into the souls of the people around us.

I think there are three ways of looking. One way is the disinterested gaze of looking at someone or something but the observations don't register in our minds. The second way is looking and paying attention so that certain details and actions are recorded in our consciousness. The final way is the one exercised by the magi; the type of looking that Jesus challenges us to do. This is seeing to understand, the ability to peer into another's soul.

You've probably experienced this, Walt. You meet a friend for coffee or a meal and you look with attention. You see the color of their shirt or what they've done to their hair. People trained to see move beyond the superficial and notice the little things--the slight expressions of the mouth, the tone of the voice, or the raising of the eyebrows. Observing these clues becomes a window to one's soul, helping us to discover a person's concerns, hopes, or fears. Artists know how to do this. Disciplemakers should also learn this skill.

After living for years on the plains of South Dakota, Kathleen Morris observed, "Maybe seeing the plains is like seeing an icon; what seems stern and almost empty is merely open, a door into some simple and holy state." When we look only with the disinterested gaze or the look of attention, we miss the door to a friend's soul.

Like any quality of the artist, learning to look is a discipline to be cultivated. This type of looking is hard for me, Walt. I can be so self-absorbed that I don't see things. A recent visit from my friend Tyler taught me how self-absorbed I can be.

Within ten minutes of walking into my home, Tyler complemented us on our home furnishings, the taste of our food, and inquired about how we were doing since the death of Peggy's mother. Tyler was looking--he observed our home, tasted our food, and peered into our souls. When we learn to look into another's soul, we begin to minister deeply to people. To do this means focusing on others and not on our selves.

To truly see means moving beyond the superficial and discarding personal agendas. Without really looking, we put people into our preconceived and superficial boxes. When we do this, we face the rebuke of Jesus, guilty of looking but not seeing. Looking is the ultimate act of discovery.

Ministry is all about artistry, Walt. Good artists, and good disciplemakers, learn to look. The poet and mystic, William Blake talked about seeing "eternity in a grain of sand." Good disciplemakers know how to look to find eternity in the smallest events of life. Let's apply Dillard's example and begin thinking about seeing--really seeing--the sight needed to peer into people's souls.

Learning from the Master how to look,

Price