



DOZIER BELL

SEEING
WHERE
WE ARE

LAURA SEWALL

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THINGS—between the peak of a mountain, the place of sunset, and the silent cove to the south—show us where we are. For navigators, this is locating one's self by means of triangulation, a relational perspective. The relationships between ourselves and the mountain, or the way we do or do not resonate with the sunset, show us "where we're at" on the internal psychological landscape. But because we have turned our focus of attention toward material things, toward static objects and unrelated possessions, the world of relations has slipped from view. As a consequence, we do not truly see either where we literally are or the truth of "where we're at." We do not fully see the relationship between the disappearance of frogs, on the one hand, and the paving of wetlands, on the other hand. Nor do we readily see the large-scale relationships between planetary health and personal experience. For example, with our eyes closed to the loss of frogs, we also miss the color and vibrancy of the world and the pleasure that naturally arises from a fully sensing human body. We miss sensing our engagement with sounds and scents, the sensuality of our bodies, and the feeling of belonging within a vital field of relations. It becomes a personal loss, "the extinction of experience." And so we suffer from a form of loneliness—as if we no longer know our home, or who the relatives are.

PERCEPTION—A PARTICIPATORY ACT

There are perhaps a million stories about different abilities and ways of seeing, stories that demonstrate the tremendous potential within the visual system. For example, we have the capacity to see the light of a candle at a distance of several miles. We may learn to discriminate between wavelengths, perceive microorganisms without a microscope, and see shadows in the light of a new moon. Tom Brown, a well-known tracker, sees tracks on hard rock surfaces. By looking at tracks, he knows if an animal is hungry, if she has just eaten, if she is newly pregnant. I am told that he can tell from a single set of tracks if there has been a miscarriage, if she is troubled or uncertain, if she is about to run or change direction . . . Kalahari Bushmen know when a visitor is arriving, still several miles away, by feeling a vibrational change in their hearts. In the realm of knowing one's place, Charles, the Tanzanian with whom I did research . . . never used a

compass and we were never lost. It was a matter of seeing where he was. Charles could also, from half a mile across the savanna, name any of the 120 baboons we followed. He could predict from a subtle shift in the color or texture of a baboon's skin the exact day she would be most fertile. And like Tom Brown, he could, in fact, see every phase of the female cycle. The stories about the power to perceive are endless.

Vision is a power. In shamanic traditions, vision is commonly believed to be the power to "catch" or receive images and visions and the power to "weave" together the human imagination with the sensible world. These are interdependent psychological processes, with the ultimate power of vision being the ability to co-create the world we see and act upon. Our actions upon the world further our co-creative influence. We reach out with our hands, with our choice, to touch and transform what we see. The world is thus influenced, handled, and shifted a bit. This makes vision a true power—particularly when it is a shared vision.

In contrast to the earth-based, shamanic traditions, Western psychology defines perception as "becoming aware of by means of the senses" or "the process by which sensory information is organized and interpreted by the brain." Although these definitions are accurate, they say nothing about creative power and little about having influence. These definitions highlight the "organizing and interpreting" that we do, implicitly referring to the fact that we carry some responsibility in the way we see the world, but this responsibility is not readily apparent in the definitions. In other words, Western science defines perception in relatively passive terms. The definitions say nothing about our intentional or embodied involvement in the process of seeing.

As an alternative to the scientific view, perception is increasingly thought to be an active engagement between ourselves and the sensible world. David Abram, an environmental philosopher, says, "Perception is not a cerebral event but a direct and reciprocal exchange between the organism and its world." Yi-Fu Tuan, a geographer, defines perception as "a reaching out to the world." According to Tuan, our capacity to perceive is minimized by passivity. Rather, he says, "the fingers must slide across a surface to feel," and "the eyes must roam across a landscape to see." He continues, "It is possible to have eyes and not see, ears and not hear." In other words,

WHAT IS THE QUALITY OF OUR PRESENCE AS A WILD WIND WRAPS AROUND US OR AS A LOVER'S LIPS TOUCH OUR OWN?

perception is a participatory act. Ralph Abraham, a complexity theorist, defines perception as the way in which human consciousness interacts with the electromagnetic field, or light. With reference to the co-creative power of vision, he adds that the easiest thing to affect by the power of mind, or one's intention, is the electromagnetic field.

A VISION OF WHAT COULD BE

[My work] is about the nature of our participation with the visible world. Are we participants or passive receivers? Does a sense of co-creative potential accompany our open eyes? Do we perceive the world with an eye toward acquiring more possessions? Is the world full of dead stuff for our consumption or is it alive and animated? Do we imagine a world soul with whom we might interact? And with reference to the shamanic traditions, how do we weave together our own psychological power with those of the natural world? How do we both deepen our individual experience and co-create a healthy world for our children?

Modern consciousness is conditioned to think in "either/or" terms. We tend to think of reality in black-and-white scripts. Given such habits of mind, we unintentionally separate ourselves from the world, forgetting that we are in the midst of a flood of penetrating light, that we are saturated by the sounds and scents that tell us who and where we truly are. We forget that these sensations directly influence our psyches, our bodies, and our very identities. In every open-eyed moment, we are threaded through with sensation, shifted by a sign, or contracted by a sound. We cannot help but react and respond. We cannot help but mix and merge our habits and hopes with the signs and signals of wherever we may be. But what are the habits and hopes? What is the quality of our presence as a wild wind wraps around us or as a lover's lips touch our own?

To me, as a kind of mystic scientist, perception is the dynamic ground of our many relationships with the world. Perception is the energetic movement between what is inside of us and what is out there in the world.

From the inside, perception is the act of receiving, transducing, and transforming vast amounts of energy. Visual perception is the transduction of electromagnetic energy, or light, as billions of photons and vibrating waves move into us. The light is transduced and translated into what we see, believe, and act upon. Depending on the quality of our presence and the receptivity of our bodies, perception may vary between extremes. We may, in some fundamental sense, be "blind"; our relationship with the world is thus minimized. On the other hand, we may be "perceptive" or profoundly sensitive in the moment of opening our eyes. And if the incoming streams of light, sound, and scent coalesce with a presence of mind and a truly participating body, perception may become the ground for a sensuous, even ecstatic, relationship with the world.

We often say, "Seeing is believing." From a psychological point of view, it is equally obvious that we tend to see what we believe, to project our private worldview upon the surfaces of the world. Do we believe in the possibility of an ecstatic relationship with the sensible world? Do we imagine *loving* the world we see? Our beliefs weave through our sensations and tend to appropriate reality in the interest of our own version of how the world is or should be or, perhaps, *could be*. Because seeing determines action, the recognition of both our projections and our internal powers to co-create the world has significant implications for the quality of our lives and for the quality of life on the planet. James Hillman, a radical Jungian psychologist, simply says, "By seeing differently, we do differently." And by believing differently, I must add, we see differently. 🌍

—Excerpted and abridged from *Sight and Sensibility: The Ecopsychology of Perception* by Laura Sewall (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1999).

LAURA SEWALL, PHD, earned her doctorate in visual psychology from Brown University and a master's in environmental law from Vermont Law School. She currently lives on the coast of Maine, where she consults on shoreland zoning, coordinates a watershed council, and is learning to surf.

