

# Your Inner Gift: Cultivating the Art of Simplicity in Photography

## Session 2: *The “Eye” – seeking simplicity in the environment*

### \*\*\* Exercises \*\*\*

- **Exercise S2-1: *Goethian seeing***

Read two wonderful essays on Goethian perception. One is by Craig Holdredge, co-founder and director of *The Nature Institute*<sup>1</sup> (pages 16-19 deal specifically with Goethe’s ideas about plant perception):

<http://natureinstitute.org/pub/ic/ic31/goethe.pdf>

The other is by Henri Bortoft, who has arguably done more than anyone else to promulgate Goethe’s holistic way of “seeing” (see footnote 4 at bottom of page 14):

<https://waltermckone.wordpress.com/osteopathy/goethes-organic-vision/>

Then look at a short YouTube video on the nature of perception. It is a short excerpt of an interview with Craig Holdredge and Arthur Zajonc, physicist and one-time president of the *Mind and Life Institute*:<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gckaX49uDrA>

- **Exercise S2-2: *Batesian seeing***

Look at a short YouTube video on Gregory Bateson delivering a lecture on perception:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaHQBA8Z2Yc>

- **Exercise S2-3: *The art of attentive observing***

Find a quiet spot in your office, study, kitchen, or park bench; wherever you can be alone for 30 minutes or so. Either bring with you some small object to study (say, a plant or leaf, to best follow in Goethe’s footsteps, though any object will do), or choose to focus attention on an object in your immediate environment (say, a coffee maker or stove if in your kitchen, or a tree that might be outside the window of your study). Whatever the object, spend 20 to 30 minutes observing it. I’ll use a leaf as an example, but the process will be the same regardless of what you choose. Look at the leaf, examine it with your eyes and fingers. What details can

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<sup>1</sup> <http://natureinstitute.org/about/staff/choldrege.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mindandlife.org/>

you see? What is the texture like? Is it rough, smooth, or bumpy? Are there tiny hairs? What is its overall color? What gradations of color do you see? Are there certain parts of the leaf that are more, or less, “interesting” than others? If the leaf has veins, look at them individually. How is one different from the others? Is the leaf pristine, or decayed? If it is an old leaf, does it have holes and other bruises? Draw the leaf in front of you. How does your drawing compare to what you see? In what ways; try to articulate as best you can. Has your drawing reproduced the contours of the leaf to your liking, or is your rendering off; in what way? I could go on, but the basic idea should be clear. Spend some time getting to know your “object of interest” without a camera. In the process, you will learn (a great deal, I suspect, if this is something you have never done before) about how you see things. Bank this experience as you go out into the world with camera in hand.

- **Exercise S2-4: *Learning to saunter, Part I***

Read this wonderful summary of Thoreau’s essay on walking:<sup>3</sup>

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/11/17/thoreau-walking/>

If you are so inclined, you can then read Thoreau’s essay itself (it is relatively short), and published online by *The Atlantic*:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/>

- **Exercise S2-5: *Learning to saunter, Part II***

Set aside some time in a nearby park, the neighborhood around your home, or backyard; anyplace you can be sure you’ll be alone for an hour or so, and not likely to be interrupted. Go for a walk *without* your camera! Take note of what you would have liked to take photographs of, if only the camera were with you. What catches your attention? Look at the details of light and shadow; the textures, the forms. Walk over to whatever object has caught your gaze. Examine it from multiple perspectives; hunch down, move your head back and forth, look at it from a higher view (stand on a rock or tree stump, if you can), see it in a different light (e.g., wait for a cloud to pass if it was shrouded in sunlight). When you lose interest, move on. See what else catches your attention. Do not willfully direct your attention anywhere (this is the tricky part); just let the moment take you where it may. Be attentive but intellectually disengaged (do not *reflect* on what you are doing, just do it); let your eye roam freely to what your unconscious mind finds interesting. Later, when the exercise is over, and as you prepare for bed, try to recall details of what you saw and felt during your saunter. You will use this experience in an exercise for a later session to actively engage your photographer’s eye, the next time with camera in hand!

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<sup>3</sup> The essay is by Maria Popova, who is author and editor of one of my favorite blogs on art, science, and life. I encourage all of you to peruse this wonderful site. You will be rewarded with great reads and ideas to pursue in your mind and with your camera. Link: <https://www.brainpickings.org/>.