

First Steps to Seeing

First Steps
to
Seeing

*A Path Towards
Living Attentively*

Emma Kidd

Floris Books

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In loving memory of Kirsten Llewellyn

1976–2015

Whose smile was brighter than a sky full of stars.

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Emma Kidd
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Author's Preface

I have always had what you could call, a 'keen eye', and a natural attentiveness towards my sensory experience in general. I love observing and sensing life. However, despite my professional background in design, and my lifelong passion for photography, I now realise that I had not given much attention to the *process of seeing* whilst I was caught up in the everyday rush of life and work. Seeing was something I just 'did' and got paid to do – that is, until I met Henri Bortoft.

What led me to first study with Henri in 2008 at Schumacher College in Devon, England, was unfortunately not my love for seeing but my intense discomfort with what my eyes had *seen* whilst travelling and working overseas as a lingerie designer. During my years spent designing and developing garments for mass-production I got to *see* the size and scale of the fashion industry with my own eyes; and whilst visiting the factories that manufactured my designs I gained a poignant first-hand experience of the way in which the people who made these garments were treated with a distinct lack of humanity, as though they were no more than just parts of a machine.

After much time spent researching the business models and economic systems which were driving this industry, I soon understood that, at that time, I could not change this cold, mechanical approach to design, to business, and to life, from the inside. Therefore, I left the fashion industry to investigate alternative ways of thinking about and doing business. What I did not expect, when leaving my 'life' and profession behind me, is that these explorations would take me right back to the very foundation upon which my career in design had initially been built, my way of seeing.

The dynamic way of seeing that I will be describing to you within this book is *dynamic* by nature and, as such, has no set form. In some sense it is similar to a chameleon, actively seeking to make itself invisible so that it can unify, as much as is possible, with the life that

it is directly experiencing. It is this chameleon-like tendency of a dynamic way of seeing that has led to some quite unlikely sources of research and case studies being referenced in this book, these include: 'self-help' books, a Welsh jeans manufacturer, a study of failing marriages, and an educational initiative for schools which does not aim to 'teach' anything. What is most important in this seemingly bizarre collection of sources is not *what* they each 'appear' to be, but the *way* in which they have each come-into-being. Consequently, as with everything we encounter in life, I would encourage you to 'notice' any judgments that arise in relation to these unusual sources but then to set those thoughts to one side in order to give these studies and projects your full attention.

Far from presenting this work as a paragon of perfection I offer it more as a record of my knowledge and experience to date, a collection of 'noticings'. It is also very much a platform upon which I can share the noticings of others, not least, the work of the late Henri Bortoft. I am eternally grateful to Henri for turning my world upside down, and for turning my way of seeing the right way up. I very much hope that this book will serve, at least in part, as a beginners' guide to Henri's work and will inspire the reader to explore his work first-hand in *The Wholeness of Nature* and *Taking Appearance Seriously*.

Therefore, as a gift of appreciation and gratitude for all that I have been blessed with in life so far – the good, the bad and the ugly – I would like to share my thoughts, insights and experiences with you in the hope that they may then set you onto your own journeys and discoveries; enabling you to fully participate in, and to co-create with, the wonder of what it means-to-be a human being, right here, right now, on this fascinating earth.

Introduction: Living Through the Senses

Before I start introducing this book, I invite you to stop for a moment. Use this opportunity to temporarily step away from the rush of everyday life, to slow down and to give full attention to your sensory experience, right here and right now. When you have finished reading this paragraph, set a timer on your watch or phone for two minutes, close your eyes and focus your complete attention on experiencing life through your senses. First, take a few deep breaths and then pay attention to the soles of your feet as they rest upon the ground. From there, slowly guide your attention up your legs until you reach your torso and observe how it feels reclining in your seat. Finally, lead your awareness up through your abdomen, chest and neck, right up to the top of your head, and focus your attention on your thoughts. Take a moment to notice what your thoughts are doing. Whether they are judging or analysing this exercise, or filling your mind with a to-do list, pay attention to them briefly, accept them and then let them go. For the remainder of the time enjoy gently sitting still, with your attention open to the world. Start your two minutes now.

To develop a practice of living attentively I invite you to repeat this short exercise every time that you pick this book up to start reading again, whether you last got through two pages or two chapters. The exercise serves as preparation, in part, for what this whole book is inviting us to do – that is to slow down and to give our full attention to noticing the life that surrounds us, both inside and outside of ourselves. This gesture of slowing down and giving our whole attention to life, one experience at a time, is what we seem least able to do in our frenetic modern lives. Therefore, in view of the countless social and global issues that appear to accompany this fractured way of life, this book brings the process of 'living attentively' to the forefront our attention.

To get us started, the chapters of this book form a series of stepping stones that can lead us towards developing the dynamic way of seeing that is needed in order to give life our full attention. However, at the end of the day, these words are only, ‘... like fingers pointing at the moon, not to be mistaken for the moon itself’.¹ Each chapter is designed, not to provide knowledge, as such, but to offer an invitation for us to explore and experience the processes that it describes for ourselves.

First Steps to Seeing is designed to take us on a journey, one that encourages us to fully notice life by paying acute attention to the ways in which we see, think and act, everyday. I would be deceiving you if I did not warn you that this type of inquiry is not for the faint hearted. As we move through the book we will begin noticing, and fully experiencing, aspects of life that we do not usually notice in day-to-day life. Depending on the depth of attention that we bring to this process, this ‘noticing’ may elicit extreme highs, and moments of intense wonder and amazement. However, the process of giving our full attention to life, as radically and as honestly as we can, is challenging, and it may well also shed light on aspects of the world that we would rather not see. Making an effort to really see ourselves as we are and to see the world *as it is* takes courage, it requires us to let go of everything that we think we already know and to open ourselves to the unexpected, whatever that may be.

In Part One there is a series of practical exercises embedded within the chapters which are designed to bring our attention to experiences, and to habits of mind, that we routinely do not notice. The exercises in Chapter 1 will demonstrate that there is ‘more to seeing than meets the eye’ and turn our attention towards the ways in which our minds automatically define, and organise, everything that we rest our eyes upon. The exercises in Chapter 2 then require us to set aside these perceptual and intellectual shortcuts, which we normally rely on everyday, so that we can focus our full attention on our sensory experience.

This process of intentionally bypassing our own in-built, time-saving methods of seeing the world can, at times, feel quite frustrating, as our minds love shortcuts! However, despite any initial frustration that may emerge, I encourage you to persevere. What our minds fail to show us on a moment-by-moment basis, whilst delivering

these convenient ways of side-stepping life, is that just beyond these cognitive shortcuts is a sense-perceptible world which is more alive, complex and full of expression than it is possible to know until we have experienced this complexity and dynamism for ourselves.

Aside from our own habits of mind, which distract our attention away from our experience of life, with the rise of mobile technology and the ever-increasing speed of communication today we have also become intimately acquainted with digital distractions. These additional diversions, such as constant alerts pinging on our mobile devices, fracture and splinter our focus and attention. As a result, we are less and less used to the lingering immediacy of participating with only one experience at a time.

First Steps to Seeing offers an antidote to these seductive distractions by providing a pathway towards living attentively which makes it possible for us to rediscover our own experience of life. As the scientist John Medina writes in his book *Brain Rules*, ‘The brain’s attentional “spotlight” can focus on only one thing at a time’.² Therefore, our capacity to pay attention is not capable of multi-tasking. Focusing our attention on just one experience at a time seems to be the way in which our brains work and learn ‘best’. This is exactly what ‘living attentively’ does, it involves experiencing the process of fully attending to our experience of life. That is, noticing our experience of life as we are experiencing it, rather than analysing it after the event.

In Chapters 2, 3 and 4 we will explore the way in which paying full attention to life develops our innate capacity to get to know life in terms of itself and on its own terms. This process involves extending our understanding far beyond the definitive forms of knowledge that we commonly produce in order to tell us about life. Instead of relying on pre-conceived knowledge, this way of seeing life requires us to notice the qualities, patterns and relationships through which parts of life naturally express their essential nature and unique character.

Therefore, the process of paying full attention to life, as it is laid out in this book, involves temporarily leaving all that we think we know about life behind. This means letting go of what we think we already know about our husband or wife, our boss or colleague, our clients or students, our organisation or city, and then learning to immerse ourselves in the ‘other’ in order to think *with* them. We will do this by refining our skills of focus and attention, and exercising our capacities

to fully notice, describe, imagine, open ourselves to, and reflect upon, our lived experience as precisely as possible.

In Part Two we will explore how our way of seeing is directly connected to the way we relate to ourselves, and also to those around us. This is incredibly important for our personal lives, our relationships and for all of the interactions that we have with other people, every single day. By developing an understanding that there is more to seeing than meets the eye we can begin to open ourselves to seeing our friends, loved ones, colleagues, and even strangers, with a greater clarity; and through becoming aware that there is also more to hearing than meets our ears we can bring a greater degree of focus and attention to the way we speak with, relate and listen to, other people.

Living attentively, in our personal and professional lives, enables us to transform the way in which we relate to ourselves, to other people, to our work and to life in general. When we practise this dynamic way of seeing, and relating, we create the possibility to see further, to feel deeper, and to notice more – in other words, to become more fully human. We can then start to use ourselves as accurate instruments to gather a living knowledge of life *as it is* and in context. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 we will then explore how this ‘living knowledge’ can inform the ways in which we live our lives, the ways we work, and the ways we design and create the systems and organisations that our lives and work are built around.

Despite the sober disclaimer which came at the beginning of this introduction, in essence this book is a practical, playful guide in how to fully encounter the livingness of life and how to learn to think in accordance with life itself. As much as possible, the inquiry can and should be undertaken with gentleness and with joy. Regardless of the challenging realisations that it might present along the way, the process of living attentively is not something that we need suffer through. Practising the sustained, focused attention and empathic openness that a dynamic way of seeing requires can offer us many experiential benefits. For us as individuals, on a day-to-day level the practice can improve our focus, attention, and concentration. It can also bring many of the associated physical, and emotional, health benefits apparent in other contemplative practices, such as mindfulness and meditation, like stress reduction, and improved well-being.

Developing a dynamic way of seeing and relating to life asks us to become more gentle, vulnerable, open and intimate in our encounters with the world. It requires us to be much more attentive to our experience than our everyday perception usually allows and to be radically more direct and disciplined in describing our experiences of life. Through doing this we can begin a process of ‘leaning back’ from our everyday lives, and ‘business as usual’, in order to honestly explore life *as it is*. This enables us to develop a fresh perspective on life, whilst still remaining connected to our own experience, and allows us to commence a journey towards wholly understanding life, as it is, and in terms of itself.