

WHAT IT MEANS TO PERCEIVE

Poetry is a portal, a means of perception. All art is. And just as we can see the very energy of existence through a microscope, we can see the vibrancy at the center of all life through our heart or our mind, when we are clear of bias and noise. Under all the shaping of words, poetry is the threshold of perception through which we taste the shimmer of Spirit that informs everything.

The word “perceive” and the word “receive” have the same Latin root, *percipere* which means “to understand,” from *per* which means “entirely” and *capere* which means “to take.” To perceive, then, means “to take things in entirely, completely, in a way that covers us with understanding.”

But first, we must put down our screens and filters. Once life enters us, then it is useful to discern what has entered. But often we block the true gift of perception by sorting things before they reach us and touch us.

The gift of perception resides in sustaining our sensitivity to wonder, which means that, while we can always learn from others, we are called to be touched by life directly. We are called to maintain our firsthand experience, which then can be integrated with the experience of others. For true perception takes place below all the values and maps we inherit. The great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore taught his students not to conform to others but to think freely for themselves. And the profound painter Vincent van Gogh affirmed this when he said, “I dream my painting, and then I paint my dream.”ⁱ

My second book, an epic poem called *Fire Without Witness*, came to me in such a dream of perception, which then took ten years to bring to life. The book centers on Michelangelo’s painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and how the characters he paints

come alive to tell their stories as well. And I confess I didn't have a clue where this was going. I was just following the path of perception as far as I could, trusting that another part of the path would present itself, which it did.

The epic poem showed itself like Ariadne's thread. In 1978, I had finished a manuscript and was going to take a break. As I went to sleep that night I had a vision—I have no idea why; perhaps it was intuition—but it was a vision of Michelangelo pondering the empty ceiling. I thought maybe it was an image I'd use somewhere, so I jotted it down. The next day as I was on my way to a workshop in Schenectady, I realized I had no idea what the ceiling looked like. I'd stared at it in books but hadn't truly *seen* it. I quickly went to the nearest library and pulled out several texts. I spent three hours taking notes, and by the end of the next day, the structure of the entire epic poem was clear in my head.

Six months later, I had written a hundred pages. Then I realized I didn't know enough to continue. But I had written enough that the challenge of the project became clear. A symphony of voices was emerging and I began working more as a conductor than a poet. I could let the voices haphazardly interact or have them echo and counterpoint across the book. That meant I had to plan the journey of the book. That caused me to do *real* research. It took six years before I went back to writing the poem.

During that time, I assembled over four hundred pages of notes and charts and schematics—enough to teach art history. It became clear, as I read all the biographies and different takes on Michelangelo and his time, that history is an eye witness telling an ear witness telling a pen witness. As you get farther from the eye witness, there are just clusters of opinion where the many imaginings of others overlap. And the most exciting challenge is where there isn't any corroboration of incidents. Then, the facts become

buoys in a channel, but how you storytell your way from buoy to buoy becomes the terrain of historical fiction.

After all that research, the book had a gravity all its own, and though I was obsessed with it, I could only work on it for three or four weeks at a time. It would beat me up and I would have to take a break. But it was never an option to stop altogether. I was so far into a deep, mysterious tunnel that the only way out was to find the end of it.

When we let life in, it will guide us and form us. For the rush of perception comes as a gift that will call who we are into being, if we can accept life as our teacher.

After finishing my epic poem and exhausting my out-of-balance creative drive, I was struck down by cancer. In this unexpected tumble, the depth of my perception expanded vastly because of my near-death experience in my thirties. I was rushed by life so fully and harshly that I had no choice but to take in life entirely at a felt level. There, I was ripped free of all the maps I had inherited, and covered so thoroughly with understanding that I feared I would drown.

But there was a particular moment of perception that transformed me completely. I had had a bone-marrow sampling and a spinal tap during the same hospital visit. Afterward, I was sent home a bit battered and told to lie still for six to eight hours, because moving before the spinal fluid had a chance to regenerate would cause a migraine. Well, it was hard for me to be still, and every time I moved, I was thrust back down on the couch in pain.

It was as if the force of life was insisting that I be still. When I was, I finally looked out the window to see an apple tree in my front yard. I had seen this tree a hundred times, yet never really looked at it. Now, unable to move without inducing pain, I was forced into

a moment of indigenous perception. Seeing the apple tree freshly, it came alive, and I *listened* to the tree for the very first time.

Strange as it was, the apple tree spoke to me, not in words but with a bare presence that said, “When you survive this, there will be no more making things up. When you survive, you will only bear witness to the truth of things as they are.”

There is no explaining such a moment of apprehension. You can dismiss it if you want—as some have—as an hallucination due to the medicine or the pain. But I know the truth of that mysterious moment and it has shaped my life to this day.

I called my experience with the apple tree a moment of indigenous perception. What do I mean by this? Let me unfold it this way. Taking in the sea completely with our mind allows us to grasp its enormity, while taking in the sea completely with our heart allows us to hear the ancient sea speak. This is the crucial difference between modern perception and indigenous perception.

Modern perception expands our horizon and timeline, while indigenous perception allows us to relate to everything, more deeply, as a center of living unto itself. This is what the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber expanded on in his naming of the I-Thou relationship. When we receive life this thoroughly, everything we encounter appears as a living center unto itself. Then God or Divinity appears in the unrehearsed conversation between living centers. This is another way to understand the gift of perception. It brings to life the conversation between living things.

When forced to be still—when forced to stop thinking and planning and worrying—I apprehended the apple tree as a living center unto itself. Doing so, I was able to *experience* the tree, rather than outline and grasp it with my mind. And, as Buber would say, God spoke through the tree in an unrehearsed moment of conversation with life.

When open to life this thoroughly, perception is the courage to cross the invisible wall between us and life, ten times a day, with no expectation of what we might accomplish. It takes courage because the wall always seems taller and thicker before we take that first step.

But step we must, even if our effort of perception is only for a minute. We must step into the garden of our heart, into the walk with our dog, into the woods for a run, or sitting down to journal, or taking a shower to let the water of Eternity rush through the showerhead, briefly erasing our fears.

Let one small perception lead to the next, knowing that letting things in completely is traveling as far as going around the world.

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An Invitation to Perceive

- *In your journal, describe how your interest in something has become a passion. It might be gardening or taking engines apart or collecting stamps or reading about a certain part of history or volunteering at a food kitchen. Describe how your effort has led you to perceive more and more, and how your perception and immersion have changed you. If you have yet to experience this, describe this process as you witness it in a friend or loved one.*
- *In your journal, describe a moment of indigenous perception, when you related to something or someone as a living center unto itself. Recount the conversation of presence that appeared between you and this piece of life. How have you heard and received this teaching?*
- *In conversation with a friend or loved one, discuss an area of perception that took time to reach you. Describe how over time you were covered with a greater sense of understanding.*

ⁱ“**I dream my painting...**” Vincent van Gogh, from *The Sun*. Chapel Hill, NC, Issue 428, August 2011, p. 48.

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