



The Practice Of Soft Eyes, by Parker Palmer

In a sacred landscape, with its complexities and convolutions, surprise is a constant companion: it lies just around the bend or hidden in the next valley, and though it sometimes startles us, it often brings delight. But on the flatlands of a desacralized world, where we grow accustomed to seeing things approaching us long before they arrive, surprise is neither expected nor welcomed. When it suddenly arises, apparently out of nowhere, we are stricken with fear and may even respond with violence. [â€¦]

It is possible to respond differently to surprises, to allow one new idea to generate yet another in us â€” a process sometimes called thinking. But in a flattened, desacralized culture thinking is not what happens when we are taken â€” or threatened â€” by surprise. Instead, we reflexively defend ourselves by reaching for a weapon that we know how to use, an old idea whose use we mastered long ago. [...]

This reflex is rooted in a million years of evolution, so it may seem inexorable. Yet there is some physiological evidence that this need not be the case. Normally when we are taken by surprise, there is a sudden narrowing of our visual periphery that exacerbates the fight or flight response â€” an intense, fearful, self-defensive focusing of the â€œgimlet eyeâ€• that is associated with both physical and intellectual combat. But in the Japanese self-defense art of aikido, this visual narrowing is countered by a practice called â€œsoft eyesâ€•, in which one learns to widen oneâ€™s periphery, to take in more of the world.

If you introduce a sudden stimulus to an unprepared person, the eyes narrow and the fight or flight syndrome kicks in. But if you train a person to practice soft eyes, then introduce that same stimulus, the reflex is often transcended. This person will turn toward the stimulus, take it in, and then make a more authentic response â€” such as thinking a new thought.

Soft eyes, it seems to me, is an evocative image for what happens when we gaze on sacred reality. Now our eyes are open and receptive, able to take in the greatness of the world and the grace of great things. Eyes wide with wonder, we no longer need to resist or run when taken by surprise. Now we can open ourselves to the great mystery.Â