

INTRODUCTION

*Joy in looking and comprehending
is nature's most beautiful gift.⁸*

Albert Einstein

There are times when we receive a gift which appears so slight that its true worth and significance eludes us – maybe forever, maybe just for a long time. It happened to me that hot July morning sitting in the classroom on the last day of term. We were nine or ten and our bright hearts were already turning towards the long summer break. We could barely sit still. Pens in our still small hands, we transcribed from the blackboard a single piece of homework. It went something like this:

1. Find a small patch of nature which interests you
2. With a measuring tape mark out a square
3. Make time each day to visit this square
4. Spend ten minutes really looking at it. *What do you see?*

It didn't take me long to find my square. A miniature world of lichen, woodlice and moss, crowded into the crumbling clefts and cracks of an old stone wall. Sunken deep-dappled in the shade of an ancient beech wood, the wall flanked a bygone country lane. Roots



HIDDEN WONDERS OF THE HUMAN HEART

of a mighty tree lay entangled within it. Wood and stone wrapped around each other in a petrified embrace. They helped each other to stay standing. I sensed that the strength of this tender bond had something to do with the soil-swathed underworld in which the roots had their foundation. I couldn't see this other dimension, but as I traced my finger down to the toes of this ancient foot, to where the roots disappeared beneath the earth, I knew the tree didn't end there.

Years later I learned that this touching point between the seen and the unseen is known as the 'crown' of the root. This sovereign birthing place, where new life first emerges into view, has been my passion ever since.

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My encounters that summer with this small patch of the natural world awoke in me a powerful resonance. At first I could barely endure two minutes of observation, but as the days passed the wall's dull familiarity dropped away and a beauty beyond all recognition punctured my young senses. Tiny alpine blooms in shades of dusty pink and purple mixed with a lattice of ferns and dense green clumps of moss. Each day my eyes found something new. A silver trail betrayed an early morning snail. An overnight shower saturated the stone and transformed its palette. Afternoon shade lowered the pitch. And in the cool darkness between stones, many-footed creatures busied themselves undisturbed. It was never the same square. The wall just kept on giving. Intricate and abundant. Always new.

Somewhere beyond words I began to trust in nature as a source of revelation. Wonder took root in my seeing. I let go of the idea that the wall was self-evident and began to realise that its richness was revealed to me through the quality of my looking. Over time my seeing became more sensitive to nuance, detail, trace and tone.



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It wasn't just the wall that was never the same. My seeing deepened, awakened and enriched me.

This deepening of vision took place because I gave the wall my undivided attention, because in the square I had a bounded field of vision that intensified my focus, and because I returned to see it repeatedly over time. What I couldn't have known then, and I only begin to understand now, is that this simple exercise of attending with concentration over time was to form the foundation of my creative practice as a photographer and the frame for my professional work as a psychotherapist.

In both aspects of my life I like to 'mark out a square' and ask myself *what do you see?* The square is sometimes the viewfinder of my camera, sometimes the sealed chamber of therapy. It acts like an aperture through which my seeing opens and begins to focus into a state of undivided attention. Then, like a piece of light-sensitive photographic paper, I wait, until my seeing reveals more of what is really there.

For in nature, there is always *more*.

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Perhaps it takes the greatest of scientific minds to stand with due humility in the face of nature's unfathomable complexity, depth and intricacy. Einstein recognised that the nature which we think we see, is merely the surface of a vast and vital hinterland:

Nature shows us only the tail of the lion. But there is no doubt in my mind that the lion belongs with it even if he cannot reveal himself to the eye all at once because of his huge dimension.⁹

This unfathomable realm of nature is not just 'out there' in an environment, it is also 'in here' in the depths of everyday human experience. The roots of who we are lie hidden below the surface.