

After being diagnosed with terminal cancer, Donald Nichol told his friend, Gerard, “I’ve been thinking. I think that thinking is part of the punishment of the Fall, so I have given up thinking and spend my days in gazing.”

Gazing is a most profitable occupation, for in gazing, instead of controlling our thinking and feeling, we allow thoughts and feelings to arise in us. For example, in gazing at a landscape, we may find ourselves at peace and delighting in the beauty and spaciousness of the scene.

This experience of peace and delight may make us more aware of its lack in our ordinary lives. Gazing deepens our awareness and raises questions of fundamental importance for our well-being, questions which we are normally too busy or too afraid to consider.

Much of modern life is perpetual motion rooted in restlessness. As soon as we stop moving we suffer a profoundly disturbed disequilibrium. If all we can feel is loathing at the discrepancy between what we would wish the world to be and what it is in reality, we will be incapable of achieving the stillness, the silence to behold the beauty around us.

When our granddaughter was young (6, 7, 8), she participated in Earthwalk Vermont, a program that taught children how live in the natural world. One exercise required each child to go into the woods alone and find a “Sit Spot,” a place to sit in silence for an hour and observe. They were learning to be still, to gaze, to behold.

The word “behold” is arguably the most important word in the Bible, says Maggie Ross, and by extension in spiritual life, which it epitomizes. Despite the word’s centrality in the Bible, it has been dropped by most modern translations, changing and draining the essential meaning and theology of many passages.

The word “behold” appears over 1,300 times in the Bible. Depending on the translation, the word “hope” appears 130 times, the word “faith” appears around 400 times, and the word “love” somewhere between 350-550 times.

The English word “behold” accurately conveys the many psychological and theological nuances of both the Hebrew (*hinneh*) and the Greek (*idou, theoreo*) from which it is translated. “Behold” is a word that alerts us to pause, however briefly, to be vigilant, because something new, something startling, is about to be revealed.

Beholding is a process in which the mind is temporarily brought to silence—the analytic, conceptualizing faculty is paused—to allow for the arrival of a new perspective.

Mandy Lee Catron remembered a study by Arthur Aaron, which built on earlier studies, where strangers gazed in silence into each other's eyes for four minutes. The strangers reported increased feelings of passionate love for each other.

She and an acquaintance with whom she was having dinner decided to try the experiment. They began by answering a series of questions: Would you like to be famous? When was the last time you sang to yourself? The questions became more intimate: When did you last cry? How is your relationship with your mother?

Following the time of sharing, the couple, in silence, gazed into each other's eyes for four minutes. Mandy describes it as one of the more thrilling and terrifying experiences of her life. She spent the first moments trying to breathe properly. There was a lot of nervous smiling until, eventually, they settled in.

The real crux was not that she was really seeing someone, but *she was seeing someone really seeing her*. Once she embraced the terror of this realization and gave it time to subside, she arrived somewhere unexpected. She felt brave, in a state of wonder and love.

*Seeing someone really seeing you* is what beholding is like. John does not exclaim, "Look, here is the lamb of God," as a child might excitedly point and exclaim, "Look, a deer." No, John exclaims, *Behold, the lamb of God* (John 1:29).

To behold entails a mutual holding in being. To behold we must cease from frenetic activity and in silence see ourselves being seen. In beholding we know ourselves being known by the God who sustains us in existence and holds us in eternity.

In the depths of beholding the lamb of God, in the silence of the loving heart of God, each of us in our uniqueness and strangeness, are transfigured into the divine life. In this self-forgetful beholding, this eternity of love gazing on Love, of Love holding love in being, we are healed.