



To Find Something, Don't Look For It, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Between takeoff and landing, we are each in suspended animation, a pause between chapters of our lives. When we stare out the window into the sun's glare, the landscape is only a flat projection with mountain ranges reduced to wrinkles in the continental skin. Oblivious to our passage overhead, other stories are unfolding beneath us. Blackberries ripen in the August sun; a woman packs a suitcase and hesitates at her doorway; a letter is opened and the most surprising photograph slides from between the pages. But we are moving too fast and we are too far away; all the stories escape us, except our own.

We poor myopic humans, with neither the raptor's gift of long-distance acuity, nor the talents of a housefly for panoramic vision. However, with our big brains, we are at least aware of the limits of our vision. With a degree of humility rare in our species, we acknowledge there is much we can't see, and so contrive remarkable ways to observe the world. Infrared satellite imagery, optical telescopes, and the Hubble space telescope bring vastness within our visual sphere. Electron microscopes let us wander the remote universe of our own cells.

But at the middle scale, that of the unaided eye, our senses seem to be strangely dulled. With sophisticated technology, we strive to see what is beyond us, but are often blind to the myriad sparkling facets that lie so close at hand. We think we're seeing when we've only scratched the surface. Our acuity at this middle scale seems diminished, not by any failing of the eyes, but by the willingness of the mind. Has the power of our devices led us to distrust our unaided eyes? Or have we become dismissive of what takes no technology but only time and patience to perceive? Attentiveness alone can rival the most powerful magnifying lens.

A Cheyenne elder of my acquaintance once told me that the best way to find something is not to go looking for it. This is a hard concept for a scientist. But he said to watch out of the corner of your eye, open to possibility, and what you seek will be revealed. The revelation of suddenly seeing what I was blind to only moments before is a sublime experience for me. I can revisit those moments and still feel the surge of expansion. The boundaries between my world and the world of another being get pushed back with sudden clarity an experience both humbling and joyful.