



You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet

By Chris Webb

I've spent a great deal of time these last twenty-five years learning about and reflecting on the difficulty we have with seeing what is right in front of our noses. In my investigations, one of my most illuminating and successful experiments has been lemon chucking.

It's a simple experiment I've now conducted dozens of times with a wide variety of test groups: large and small groups; academics, churches, and schools; young and old. Here's how it works. I stand at the front of the room and ask people to give me their undivided attention. Then I start taking lemons out of a bag and chucking them around the room. I use a mixture of looping underarm lobs and zinging baseball pitches to keep people focused. Once the lemons are liberally dotted around the crowd, I give them a simple request. "OK. Tell me about lemons."

Then I start collecting the responses. Lemons are yellow. Egg-shaped. Rough skinned. Citrus fruits. Someone will soon say, "They're sour." So, I ask: how sour? People start trying to describe the sourness. Then another person talks about the seeds, so I ask how many seeds there are in a lemon. People start guessing. I let this kind of conversation drift along for about ten minutes or so. It's amazing how much people can say about lemons.

What's more amazing, though—and has been universally true, in every context, in a number of different cultures and countries—is that no-one ever says anything about the lemons I dramatically threw at them only minutes before. We are, it seems, perfectly happy to offer long descriptions of lemons, to discuss the flavour and texture and fragrance of lemons, to guess the internal structure and juiciness of lemons ... without ever troubling to examine an actual lemon, even when we have one sitting in our hands.

And you think that's weird? Then get this: one time I heard a voice in the room saying that a lemon is "a species of small evergreen tree in the flowering plant family *rutaceae*, native to Asia. The tree's ellipsoidal yellow fruit is used for culinary and non-culinary purposes ..." I looked across the room—and I swear this is true—to see that someone had put their lemon on a table, opened their laptop, Googled "lemon," and was reading the Wikipedia entry to us all.

Astounding!

But, in fact, we all do this, all the time. As we grow and develop in childhood we form a mental picture of the world around: a furniture of the mind populated with images of trees, dogs, clouds, pencils, saucepans, lemons, and a million other objects which make up our picture of reality. Throughout the rest of our lives we are constantly refining these images, making them more subtle, detailed, and refined.

The problem is, though, that we spend most of the time looking not at the real world, but at the images in our heads. When confronted by a tree, we often don't really see the gnarled upsprout of raw life bursting from the ground to throw its sap-drenched leaves into the sky. We see the tree in our head: the idea and image of a tree we brought to the encounter. As I said in Section 5 of *God-Soaked Life* ("God in Everyday Life") it's really hard truly to see a tree. I know; I've tried.



Plato once famously compared us to people trapped in a dark cave watching shadows parade across an illuminated wall. If we ever break out of the cave and see objects in the real world for themselves we're liable to be blinded, overwhelmed, and confused. And if we tried to describe the experience, who would believe us? Try telling someone they've never seen a tree and see how crazy it sounds, to them and to you. Again, I know; I've tried.

As a remedy, Plato encouraged his disciples to gaze upon the eternal qualities of beauty, goodness and truth revealed in each individual part of creation. His student Aristotle translated that into a careful attentiveness to the particularities and peculiarities of the material world which became a foundation stone of modern science. Zen Buddhists intentionally confuse their thinking minds with koans, impossible riddles, to scramble the ruts of abstract thinking and open them to a moment of pure seeing. (There's a wonderful story of a Zen abbot who stood his most promising monks in front of a water jug and said, "You may not call this a water jug—so what will you call it?" when one monk simply kicked the jug over and watched the water spill out, the abbot appointed him as his successor.) The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, as I describe in *God-Soaked Life*, wrote poetry to expose the "inscape" of the unique pieces of creation he saw.

We sometimes see this happening, this opening of the eyes, at the retreat center where I serve. People arrive hurried, flustered, busy, distracted. You can see it in their eyes when you greet them; they kind of see you there, and kind of don't. The house is gorgeous, they tell us, and the natural landscape is beautiful. All big and abstract and mostly in their heads.

Then over the next few days they slow down. Get quiet and still. Focused. They start to notice things—little things, real things. At some point they tell you, "I watched a dragonfly among the reeds beside the pond. Just sat and watched it flit from reed to reed for ten minutes or so. I don't know why, but it really touched me." And I want to say to them, "Maybe it touched you because it's the first real thing you've seen in years." But usually I don't—they're not ready to hear it yet. Still, it's a good start.

So, here's what we do. We stand in church on Sunday and sing, "Open our eyes, Lord; we want to see Jesus." And we can't even see a tree, or a butterfly, or the grass growing in our own front yard. Our eyes are open, but our vision is clouded with all that mental furniture. We can't see clouds and rocks, let alone the guy who drives our bus or the colleague working at the next desk. And we want to see God! Maybe we should start small, try to see something simple and obvious and close, before we set out to see the transcendent Lord of all creation in his mystery and magnificence ...

You know what might be interesting? Pick something to see. Anything, really. A lemon, maybe, or a table, a book, a stick. I chose a tree. Nothing fancy. Imagine that you've never really seen it, whatever it is. Set out to spend time with it, every day. Look at it. Waste half an hour on it. Give yourself to it. If it's small enough, carry it around with you. Of course, you'll feel foolish for a good while, because what you're doing is ridiculous and no other sane person is doing it, only monks, mystics, poets, and artists—and they're all mad, as everyone knows. Still, stick with it.

One day, I promise you, you'll see it, truly see it. I don't need to describe what that's like; in fact, I can't. But you'll know it when it happens. Something real will touch you in the core of your



being, and that's an unmistakable experience. When you've recovered enough, move on to something else. See one more thing. Then another, and another. Learn the skills (warning: this is the work of years, not days).

When you can truly see some things, you can truly see anything. And when you can see anything, you can begin to see a person, an honest-to-goodness made in God's image human being. It's a startling experience. And when you can see people—well then, my friend, you really start to get a glimpse of God. And at that point, hold onto your hat. If you thought lemons and trees were astonishing (and you will), you ain't seen nothing yet ...