

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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To See and Be Seen

Our beloved Harriotte Hurie Ranvig and I have never laid eyes on each other, but, like all of us who experience the joy of knowing her, I always feel deeply, lovingly seen by her. Harriotte, blind since she was a young child, has a superpower: she “sees” with her whole body, and sees profoundly.

This sermon is for the rest of us, who rely on our eyesight for almost everything, and who have a different superpower, if we chose to use it: the power of making eye contact.

A few months ago, I read a story about the impact of not having someone — anyone — make eye contact with us. While most of us connect with others every day — meet their eyes, exchange a word, or have a chat — for people living on the street, this is heartbreakingly rare. If everyone’s hurrying by you, ignoring you, after 20 people or so pass, the affect is cumulative. You begin to feel yourself disappearing. Part of the crisis of homelessness is feeling invisible.

Writing for InvisiblePeople.com, author Kayla Robbins writes, “Imagine a day [when] none or your [neighbors or] coworkers would look at you, your (friends and) family all ignored you when you tried to speak to them, and even strangers on the street went out of their way to avoid you. How would [you] feel? Now imagine it happening every day.”¹ The cumulative effect is devastating. And it’s so profoundly dehumanizing. People living on the street become living ghosts.

It strikes me that not making eye contact is a credible threat to civil society. I invite you to join me in reflecting on eye contact as a spiritual practice.

¹ Kayla Robbins, “Making Eye Contact with Homeless People is Important.” Please see invisiblepeopletv/making-eye-contact-with-homeless-people-is-important/

Does any of you know Peter Wong? Peter sells ice cold bottled water from a cooler strapped to a platform on his electric wheelchair out on Arlington Street. He was born with spastic cerebral palsy and institutionalized. But when Peter was 13, Warren Dahlin, a graduate student in occupational therapy at BU, was touring the hospital and watched as a nurse turned away from Peter and he reached over and playfully lifted her skirt. Warren asked about him and was told that Peter was profoundly intellectually disabled. Warren wasn't so sure, and added Peter to his case load.

When Warren — now Stonehill College's Professor Warren Dahlin — tested Peter, his IQ was very high. "Physically," he said, "Peter is one of the most disabled people I've ever know and worked with.... [But] in his spirit and mentally, Peter is the least disabled person of everyone I know."

We know the rest of the story — Peter has his vendor's license and is a hardworking businessman.² But I know people walk by him, or are frightened by the fact that his speech can be hard to understand. Don't miss him. He's delightful. I invite you to look him in the eye, say hello, and make a difference in his day and in yours.³

Has any of you been mown down by a baby stroller while the operator was on their phone? Worse, has any of you watched someone who was caring for a child completely buried in their phone while the child languished? And worst of all, have you seen someone nursing or bottle-feeding an infant who was gazing up at them looking not at the baby, but at their phone? There's a word for this — it's called "technophere" — and to the terrible outcomes of cellphone use or abuse such as "car fatalities, sleep disturbance, empathy loss, relationship problems, [and] failure to notice a clown on a unicycle" we can add babies' development being seriously impaired.⁴

It turns out that, more than worrying about kids' screen time, we should be worrying about parents' and caregivers' screen time. "Language is the best predictor of school achievement, and the key to strong language skills are those

² Please see boston25news.com/news/real-people-real-stories-peter-wong-1/140981900

³ Many thanks to Vincent Licenziato, who introduced me to Peter Wong many years ago.

⁴ Erika Christakis, "The Dangers of Distracted Parenting" in *The Atlantic* 7-8/18. Please see theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/07/the-dangers-of-distracted-parenting/561752/

back-and-forth fluent conversations between young children and adults.”⁵ When those conversations are interrupted by a text or a quick peek at how an eBay bid is faring, the “ancient emotional cueing system, whose hallmark is responsive communication,” is interrupted. The effects of our chronic distraction and what technology expert Linda Stone calls “continuous partial attention” to our kids have been studied, and it’s bad — really bad.

In fact, it is better to put a toddler in a playpen or send the kids out to play than to be physically but not emotionally present to them. Through our non-engagement, we send the message that the child is less valuable than an email. Erika Christakis, writing for *The Atlantic*, says, “We seem to have stumbled into the worst model of parenting imaginable — always present physically, thereby blocking children’s autonomy, yet only fitfully present emotionally.”

The takeaway is that “child development is relational.”⁶ We need to look at the babies, not the screens; we need to talk with children without the interruption of beeps and dings; we need to look them in the eyes.

It’s no surprise that elders are also profoundly affected by not being seen. Loneliness can cause depression, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Being isolated accelerates cognitive decline. And “lack of social relationships is as much a risk factor for death as smoking.”

Patricia Churchland, a contemporary philosopher who focuses on neuroscience, says, “We long to belong, and belonging and caring anchors our sense of place in the universe.” When elders withdraw from society, they’re adrift; “their sense of self feels threatened,” and they respond as if physically threatened, resulting in the release of stress hormones in a cascade of negative effects.

To be seen is to feel connected. It’s that simple.⁷

And how about all of us?

Here’s a little bit from leadership coach Dr. Larry Cornett:

⁵ Psychologist Kathy Hirsh-Pasek as quoted in Christakis, *op cit*

⁶ *op cit*

⁷ Senior Loneliness: How it impacts health, and what to do about it,” at whereyoulivematters.org/aging-isolation-and-the-value-of-connectedness/

“You’re at an event and meet someone. You begin talking, and things seem to be going well. But then, [their] gaze begins to drift. [They] stop making eye contact with you and [start] sweeping the room, apparently looking for someone more [interesting or more important. You can feel them leaving the conversation].

“How does this make you feel? [Awful.]....

“Giving someone [our] full attention is ... the right way to communicate, ... period. Sometimes, ... we’re [not] even aware of how hurtful it can be to withhold eye contact and make someone feel ignored and unimportant.... We can ... choose to ... use eye contact to communicate care, attention, and respect....”⁸

Over the past decade or so — a time that coincides with the advent of the iPhone, by the way — it’s been documented that people are making less eye contact with each other. To create a sense of emotional connection, we need to make eye contact about 60-70% of the time. When it was last measured, we’re down to making eye contact just 30-60% of the time.

Once we’re aware of it, we can watch for it. Watch the interactions with someone taking an order at a counter — a barista, for example. Customers “are looking almost everywhere except that person’s eyes — [they’re looking at] the menu, the register, ... their purse or wallet, their phone, or their companion.” There’s this really disturbing sense that they’re acting as if there isn’t a sentient human being right in front of them — someone with feelings.⁹

Dr. Larry Cornett continues, “Yes, there is always that one person who looks you in the eyes during a conversation and never looks away, rarely blinking.... [That’s not right, either!] However, I used to have [business] meetings with [someone] who would turn his head and stare at the wall while he was talking. And another person I met frequently would ... [sit facing] the window across the ... table and watch himself talk in the reflection.” Or how about those discussions where everyone is seated around the table staring at their laptops? Or those

⁸ Dr. Larry Cornett, “This Is Why Looking Others in the Eye Changes Your Life,” 8/7/17 at medium.com/invinciblecareer/this-is-why-looking-others-in-the-eye-changes-your-life-769a87cc55e

⁹ Cornett, op cit

presenters who are looking at their slides instead of the audience, or “[sweeping the room] like a ... lawn sprinkler instead of making ... eye contact with [anyone].”¹⁰

Larry Cornett acknowledges that he’s not a natural when it comes to making eye contact. He’s an introvert, and he’s shy when he first meets people, standing in a corner and promising himself he’ll stop attending networking events. But he got it, — the importance of looking at and seeing people — and he decided to try. He says, “It changed the conversations and interactions dramatically....

“People sometimes act startled at first that you’re truly looking into their eyes, and then they light up, especially when it’s paired with a genuine smile. They’re immediately friendlier, more helpful, and I’ve discovered that they remember me more.... Studies show that appropriate eye contact can make you seem more confident, likable, attractive, trustworthy, attentive, and memorable. It also makes the recipient feel recognized, understood, and validated. It’s a virtuous cycle.”¹¹

And this isn’t just about virtue. In one study, “when applying for a high-status job, applicants who gazed regularly at the recruiter were given significantly more favorable evaluations compared to those who avoided eye contact. [It’s helpful to know that ...

- * “lowering your gaze signals lower status and submission....
- * Denying others eye contact signals that you perceive them as lower status or uninteresting; and
- * Maintaining appropriate eye contact shows respect for the other person, and also makes it clear that you’re confident with your own status....”¹²

Did anyone else’s parents yell at them to “Look me in the eye when I’m speaking to you!” It turns out we were just signaling our lowliness in the face of parental rage. How about the opposite: “Don’t give me that look!” There they are, mad again, asserting their higher status. In case we needed reminding that we’re merely primates, it’s all in the gaze.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ What’s appropriate? In America, 3-7 seconds can signal interest or attraction, but holding someone’s gaze for 10 seconds or more can imply aggression. Go for short and sweet. ~ Cornett, *op cit*

¹² Cornett, *op cit*

It's all in the gaze. Larry Cornett concludes, "You may not realize the gift that genuine eye contact can be, and you will be amazed by how people react when you start doing it more. Everyone wants attention, understanding, and respect. Looking someone in the eye is an easy way to provide that.... [It] will improve your daily interactions on both a personal and professional level.... Making deeper connections will benefit [everything]." ¹³

It all comes down to acknowledging another human, engaging even for a split second by making eye contact, and so acknowledging our shared humanity. I know, especially with people living on the streets, it can be uncomfortable. It would be even more uncomfortable for many of us if we really took in the fact that the average middle class family in America — whatever that is, but stay me here — most people are just three lost paychecks away from losing their homes if they suddenly lost their jobs.

Who can bear to imagine that? Who can bear to imagine that we're just bad luck or a few bad choices or low self-esteem away from being that person, asking us for our spare change? I find it overwhelming ... which is why I'm trying to make it a spiritual practice to look them in the eye and inviting you to join me. Let's look into their eyes and the eyes of people living with disabilities, babies and children and elders. Let's look into each other's eyes.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Eye contact is a gift,
making the invisible visible.
We all want to be seen.

Let's embrace this spiritual practice,
acknowledging our deep connection,
and so embrace our shared humanity.

Look me in the eye.
I love you.

¹³ *ibid*