

## INTRODUCTION



# Sunflowers and Souls

Light: Without it we die. Physically. Spiritually. Our very lives depend on light for photosynthesis—energy from sunlight that converts into adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the fuel used by all living things. That’s why sunflowers track the sun across the sky, sea otters bask while floating in the ocean, and I look for an excuse to go to Florida in January. All God’s creatures move toward the light—flowers, trees, people. Light is constant and ever present. At least that’s what we assume. Then the power goes out or a month of clouds rolls in. We grumble and moan and whine until the light comes back.

But even more than physically, we respond to illumination emotionally and spiritually. Light—depending on its strength, tone, slant—changes how we perceive the world and people. Light sets a Midwestern sunset apart from a Western desert sunset, a Goya portrait from a John Singer Sargent portrait, and a joyful spirit apart from a mournful one. Yet even though light is all around us, we often don’t notice it and the difference it can make in our souls. That’s where an old Quaker saying—“Mind the Light”—offers help. “Mind” in this case means many things—including

heed, tend, notice, observe, and obey. Minding the Light is a way of deep seeing.

I need help seeing. I've been nearsighted since high school and joined the bifocaled folks when I turned forty. I'm also diabetic. That means I go to my optometrist annually and have my eyes thoroughly checked. At a recent examination, Dr. Groninger talked me into trying contact lenses.

I liked the immediate results. I looked days younger with them—so much younger I considered getting a toupee and dyeing my beard. But I had trouble reading. I saw faraway stuff. But not near. The first day I went out to lunch with people from the office and picked up the check. That's about all I did, because I couldn't read it. I had to trust a coworker to fill in the amount for the tip.

So I went back to the doctor. She made an adjustment. Much better. I could read. But then I started driving. My distance was blurrier. Another week and I was back. "What do you think?" Dr. Groninger asked. "Well, I like not messing with glasses. I like the freedom. But I'm still having trouble—now it's distance." "Let's try modified monovision." She explained that she was going to power up my left eye for reading and my right eye for distance. "Oh, we're going to trick my brain, huh?"

"Not really," she said. Then she explained that sight already tricks our brains. We favor one eye over the other all the time, based on what our needs are. If we're in a concert and someone with a big hat sits in front of us, the eye that can see the show tells the brain, "Hey, pay attention here and forget that hat." And we do. So now I'm learning to see in a new way and tell my brain what to pay attention to.

The poet Tess Gallagher writes:

My father loved first light.  
He would sit alone  
at the yellow formica table  
in the kitchen with his coffee cup  
and sip and look out . . .

My father picks up his  
cup. Light is sifting in  
like a gloam of certainty  
over the water. He knows  
something there in the half light  
he can't know any other way.

That's what *Mind the Light* is about: A way to learn things in the light, whether at Formica tables with coffee cups or quietly reading a spiritual memoir or in the middle of our workaday world. Minding the Light adds a further dimension to eyes and brain: our souls. It helps us pay attention to God's Light around us and in us. How we see our lives changes as this illumination leads us to a deep appreciation of the soulful things of life. Minding the Light is an invitation to experience a new way of seeing that shows our brains and souls what to pay attention to. It's a way of seeing our inner and outer lives with spiritual eyes and discovering the connectedness between inner and outer sight.

Throughout *Mind the Light* you'll encounter boxed text labeled "Illuminating Moments." These are meant as brief exercises in Minding the Light. Illuminating Moments are based on the Quaker practice of asking Queries. The

Religious Society of Friends (as Quakers are officially known) have used Queries for almost 350 years as a way to examine our souls, seek clarity, and gain spiritual insight. Queries are a practice that can be used by anyone looking for God's Light in life. The Illuminating Moments in this book are not about mystical experiences of God, though they may occur. As you read the Illuminating Moments, let your mind and soul fill with words, ideas, or images. Using the Light of God inside and outside you, look deeply into the Holy.

Learning to Mind the Light is CPR for the soul. It's an encounter that will save your light.

## CHAPTER ONE



# Minding the Light

## The Spirituality of Seeing

Four points of golden light shone back especially bright. “What do you think they are?” asked my wife, Nancy, as she relaxed in the passenger seat after a late supper. I had flipped on my high beams after turning up our driveway late one night. The light shone the fifteen-hundred-foot length of the graveled lane and into the woods at the end. “Probably squirrels. Could be coyotes,” I answered, flicking the beams on low. “Let’s find out.” As we pulled into the garage and shut the lights off, I grabbed the portable searchlight my dad had given me for Christmas. Nancy made her way into the house and I went to sit on the front steps. Flipping the searchlight on, one million candlepower shot across the field in front of our house (when we say “let there be light,” we mean let there be lotsa light). I moved the beam slowly and picked up more golden points of light. As I focused on the shining eyes, the forms of four deer swam into view out of the nighttime ground fog. The deer looked away, moved a few steps, and then looked back up at the light. Nancy came out, leaned over, and whispered, “What

is it?” I nodded down the light beam. She smiled and settled in next to me. “Beautiful,” she sighed. I nodded. We watched the deer for about fifteen minutes, moving, grazing, looking at the light, moving, grazing, looking at the light. A car passed on the road, its muffler needing repair. The deer started, then raced across the field, and leapt into the woods.

Later, thinking about those deer, I remembered other nights I’d shone the light across the field, picking up squirrels’ and rabbits’ eyes. One night I lit up a pack of coyotes. They didn’t turn away from the light. They looked straight at it. Two of them even began racing toward the light. As they did, I snapped off the searchlight and ran inside. I grew up a city boy—what do I know from coyotes?

That deer and coyotes turned toward the light shouldn’t surprise me. Our former feline Stephanie Vandercatten used to move her lazy, lithe, Siamese body from spot to spot in the living room following the sun’s rays passing through the windows. I turn the plants on my office desk so that the leaves don’t all grow toward the window, leaving a bunch of stalks for me to gaze at. Even free-range plants—black-eyed Susans, daisy fleabane, spiderwort—stretch toward the sun. The most blatant examples of plants’ moving toward sunlight are sunflowers, which relentlessly follow the sun, turning their heads to track the sun each day across the sky.

All creation seeks the light. When the sun breaks through after a stretch of cloudy winter days, the people in our office stand and gaze through our large windows at the courtyard bathed in brightness. When folks in Indiana

sign up for winter vacations, they're not usually heading to Canada's Northwest Territories—they're off to someplace sunny.

We laugh about some folks being sun worshipers, but our moods are better and so is our health when we soak up some sun. Even a fair-skinned bald guy like me enjoys the feel of the sun and feels better for being out in it. I can tell when Nancy's been working outside on a sunny day just by the way she smells—she has what I think of as the scent of the sun. It's a pretty attractive aroma.

ILLUMINATING MOMENT

Breathe deeply.

Relax your body and mind.

Think about the following slowly and gently.

Savor each thought.

*Have I ever smelled or felt or tasted or heard light?*

*What were those sensations?*

Humans are solar powered: The St. Petersburg/Clearwater Area Convention and Visitors Bureau advertises its sunny climate with that phrase. But it's more than some outrageous advertising claim; they're right. The energy that beats in our hearts originates in the core of the sun. It's pretty complex and I don't fully understand it, but I do know that there is a link from nuclear fusion in the sun to the energy released by our cells. Vitamin D from sunlight also helps protect against lymphoma and cancers of the prostate, lung,

colon, and skin. Exposure to bright light in the morning boosts energy levels throughout the day.

“One reason for the fatigue that is rampant in our society may be light deprivation,” says Michael Terman. Terman is director of clinical chronobiology (in short, the study of the rhythms of our bodily functions) at the New York State Psychiatric Institute in New York City. His research suggests that exposure to bright light in the morning boosts energy levels throughout the day. Terman and other scientists aren’t exactly sure why, but they think it may be because light stimulates neurotransmitters in our brains. Now I know a little bit more about neurotransmitters than I do about coyotes. I know this because I take a medicine that improves the response of a neurotransmitter called serotonin. Serotonin and other neurotransmitters improve mood and increase motivation.

According to the studies, while exposure to any sunlight provides a little boost, “the dawn signal” (as Terman calls it) is particularly beneficial. I think the strength of this signal depends on the person—Nancy’s reception to the dawn signal is much stronger than mine. This probably has something to do with my so rarely being awake at dawn. It turns out that taking a morning walk or stepping out to Starbucks for an AM cuppa joe on even a cloudy day offers enough light to have a stimulating effect on the brain. Our bodies crave light.

So do our souls. Springing from deep within our spirits, this yearning for light is more than physical. It is also a yearning for God. The Bible tells us that “God is light; in him is no darkness at all.” When I think about that, I understand a bit more clearly why my desire for light carries me

closer to God. I am hungering for a connection to the divine. God is light. God made light. Light invites me into the presence of the divine. The Light of the divine presence remakes me in ways that are restrained and not so restrained. Sometimes it's through a gentle stirring of love. At other times it is in a flash of revelation. That may sound mystical and radical. But, then, perhaps we don't have quite enough mystery and radicalness in our daily lives to feed our spirits adequately. Maybe we're not getting enough of our recommended daily allowance of spiritual light.

Nancy and I take a train trip to Washington, D.C., every time one of our grandchildren turns ten. Usually we take the young person with us. Since I am a one-time art major, one of my favorite things is to visit the National Gallery. My stated goal is to introduce our grand-offspring to the glories of fine art. On a recent trip, we stopped in front of Jean Siméon Chardin's "Fruit, Jug, and a Glass." Painted around 1755, it is a stunning study of light—on a jug and fruit and shining through a glass of water. I was trying to explain to my grandson how Chardin worked his alchemy of bringing oil paint to light. I ran out of adequate words. I couldn't find a way to express how deeply this subtle use of sunlight moved me. As I stood there I was amazed at how his artist's eye captured the splendor of everyday items in such a way that more than two hundred years later I was transfixed by his vision. This led me inside to a quiet moment of praise for the God who created both Chardin's artistic ability and the light that inspired his painting. I tried to say something to Austin, but finally gave up. He just looked up at me, smiled, said, "Cool, huh?" and

turned back to look at the picture with me, standing just a bit closer to me than before.

Every one of us experiences powerful moments like that one, and they feed our souls. If we take time to look back at them, we find that many of them are filled with light, whether it was looking at a piece of art, standing under a heavenly host of stars that caused our hearts to murmur, “Glory to God in the highest,” or watching a child’s face brighten with the surprise of an unexpected present. These experiences reveal the call our spirits feel to the light. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe recognized this when he wrote:

Were the eye not of the sun,  
How could we behold the light?  
If God’s might and ours were not as one,  
How could His work enchant our sight?

Light, more than some physical fact or phenomenon, calls us to the holy. Artists throughout time have been good at seeing that connection. Hildegard of Bingen, the great twelfth-century German mystic-artist, described an artist as a person “. . . who can say God has illumined me in both eyes. By them I behold the splendor of light in the darkness.”

The ability of being illumined in both eyes—the eyes of our body and of our soul—makes it possible to feel a sublime connection to the divine. That’s why Paul Cézanne said, “When I judge art, I take my painting and put it next to a God-made object like a tree or flower. If it clashes, it is not art.” God’s realism is the ultimate reality. Artists—painters, sculptors, musicians—have long known that being

attuned to the light, the ability to see deeply, connects us with the holy in a fresh and new way. To each of us, Minding the Light opens the artists' way of seeing. As we Mind the Light, our souls open to receive the gifts of God in the same way a morning glory opens to greet the dawn.

ILLUMINATING MOMENT

Breathe deeply.

Relax your body and mind.

Think about the following slowly and gently.

Savor each thought.

*When have I felt my soul open in response to light?*

I am reminded of this every time I sing one of my favorite hymns, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.” Written by Walter Chalmers Smith, a pastor in the Free Church of Scotland, it contains a powerful line that captures the essence of God—“Unresting, unshining, and silent as light.” Every time I join a group of Sunday-morning singers launching into that hymn—even if some of them are off-key and I’m singing flat—I reflect on what that line tells me about God and about light. One is that light is unshining—light never turns off the light. It shines on and keeps on shining. Another is that it’s not hurried. We all know that light is fast. It travels at 299,792,458 meters per second. Science also says that that’s a constant speed. Unlike my MG on the back roads, which sometimes goes forty-five or sixty-five and sometimes goes . . . well, forget about that, light is steady. It is unshining—not rushing.

Finally, Smith reminds me that light is silent. That appeals to the Quaker in me. But his words make another point. Light is not heard—it is seen. So much of our sensory experience is based in surround sound or the presence of a soundtrack in our lives. In the movie *As Good As It Gets*, Jack Nicholson’s character, Melvin, heads out on a road trip with CDs labeled for all occasions—even one stashed in the glove box titled “In Case of Emergency.” When I look at my own 200-plus CD collection (sorted alphabetically by artist and then by release date), I see how easily I could be like Melvin and try to fill every moment with a soundtrack. While that might be okay for him, a day, or a life, filled with preplanned music would make it too easy for me to miss seeing God’s Light.

That’s because light doesn’t shout. Occasionally it hums if a fluorescent fixture needs fixing, but most of the time light flows over and around us while not calling attention to itself. Since light is silent, if I want to notice it I have to be silent, too. I can’t really pay attention when I’m noisy. My attention is diverted or distracted by sound—whether CDs for every occasion or a conversation between coworkers in the hall. The kind of seeing that feeds my soul means I have to pay attention. If I don’t, then I move into a sensory overload mode where the immediacy of life and what is going on around me blinds me to the subtle influences of the spirit. My eyes are still functioning, along with my ears, and nose, and fingers, but to see the Light, I must find space to pay attention—if, that is, I want to move beyond seeing and into beholding. That’s a word we don’t hear often. The word *behold* reminds some of us of childhood Christmas pageants

where we dressed up in old bathrobes and marched onstage to play shepherds and wise men while the prettiest girl in fourth grade swept onstage dressed in a white gown and proclaimed, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.”

*Behold* is a good, if unused, word. *Behold* implies a depth of seeing that’s beyond the ordinary. It means taking a really good look. I can be in a crowded room and see lots of people, but when Nancy comes in, I behold her. She’s the love of my life, and the sight of her continues to bring me joy. Beholding is how we see someone or something that we love dearly and that brings joy into our lives. The artist Alex Grey says, “In the act of deeply seeing, we transcend the boundaries between the self and the otherness of the world, momentarily merging with the thing seen.” So when we behold and take a really good look, we somehow blur our separateness and become one with the other person. Perhaps this happens in the same way (less physical, but just as mystical) that sex blends two bodies into one for an eternal instant. To think of it this way is to charge seeing with an intimacy we don’t usually experience. Yet, that sort of depth of experience is when the light—the sight—breaks through. Beholding leads us to an intimate encounter with God.

#### I L L U M I N A T I N G   M O M E N T

Breathe deeply.

Relax your body and mind.

Think about the following slowly and gently.

Savor each thought.

*When is a time that I have beheld a light charged  
with a divine intimacy?*

Everything we experience in this life—plants, animals, each other—was created after light was. Yes, God is light, but paradoxically, light is also among the first things God made. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good.” One of the things about God’s creating light that I didn’t catch for a long time was that “God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night.” Yes, I knew there were a sun and a moon. I’d read that Bible verse many times. But I had never picked up on the significance of the part about two great lights. Once I did, I came to love the phrases “greater light” and “lesser light.” Part of that eye-opening enjoyment came from seeing that, concerning these “great” lights, “God saw that [they were] good.”

The idea that both kinds of light—daylight and nightlight—are good was something new for me. I grew up in the city. There we tried to defeat the nightlight by overpowering it—streetlamps, patio lights, mercury lights, road lamps, freeway lamps—each adding more and more light. I remember the first time we drove toward our home in Columbus, Ohio, on a cloudy evening and saw the underside of the clouds aglow with light reflected from the city below. The effect was cool, but spooky at the same time. Even as a kid I thought this scene seemed unnatural.

One of the things I’ve learned since moving to the country this time is the goodness of the nightlight. Many people love moonlit walks, but my first real experience of this nightlight came when I walked down our long lane over to Nancy’s dad’s nearby house. Nancy spent many hours there taking care of her father during the last few years of his life. A

night helper often came to relieve her around ten PM. Some nights I would hike over and walk Nancy home. One fall night the moon was full, so I left my flashlight at home. That night, as I walked along, with just a bit of nip in the air, the stone driveway shone silver. The moon was so bright that the trees cast flickering shadows across my path. Stars glittered in the sky and the world seemed at sleepy peace. It fed my soul—a soft light moving gentle stirrings inside me of gratitude and grace. For the first time I felt as if I understood that all of God’s light is good. It’s easy for me to see the daylight as good—that’s the light that shines on the flowers, in my grandkids’ eyes, and lights my way as I drive my tractor across the field. It takes a bit more beholding on my part to recognize that nightlight is beautiful and illuminating in its own worthy way. Things are dimmer. Less focused. Softer. All of which are good things, but I don’t usually notice them as I flip on the high beams of my life while rushing through the darkness from one point of brilliant light to another. That night the old Quaker phrase “Mind the Light” came alive to me.

Now, when Friends use this phrase, we usually mean that we are to pay attention to the movement of God in our souls. The word *mind* in that expression means “pay attention to” or “heed” the light—not *mind* as in “be bothered by.” Before Friends called themselves Friends they referred to themselves as the “Children of Light.” They warmed to the spiritual idea of the immediacy of Christ’s presence preached by a young man named George Fox. He spoke of “Christ within” each person, a presence he called the “Inner Light.” That’s based on John’s saying that “the true light,

which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world”—referring to Jesus as the true Light. From Fox’s preaching and their reading of the Bible, the early Quakers understood Jesus to be the Light of the world. They referred to Christ as the Inner Light alive inside everybody. They also chose the name “Children of Light” because they wanted people to know that they were walking in the Light of God. Their name came from John’s Gospel that says, “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become [children] of light.” They wanted to be known as women and men whose faith grew from a direct spiritual encounter with the living Light of Christ. They believed this Light was present in every spiritual seeker as an inward guide and teacher. So they invited others to experience the Light. Experiencing the Light was absolutely fundamental to their witness. They felt that they were the people that the prophet Isaiah had talked about—“A people that walked in darkness has seen a great light.” They urged themselves and others to, as the writer of Ephesians says, “[Walk] as children of light . . . for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.”

Friends still believe that the Light of God shines within each person. This *Light Within* is more than intellect or conscience. The Light Within is like a flickering flame implanted deep in our souls that, when responded to and tended in love, grows to fill our entire lives with light. Minding the Light then helps us live with integrity and follow God as best as we can.

While certainly not a Quaker, Thomas Merton experienced the feeling of Minding the Light. In *The Seven Storey*

*Mountain*, recalling his experience of the amazingly paradoxical immanence and transcendence of God as light, he writes:

It was a light that was so bright that it had no relation to visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience. And yet the thing that struck me most of all was that this light was in a certain sense ordinary—it was a light (and this was most of all what took my breath away)—that was offered to all, to everybody, and there was nothing fancy or strange about it. It was the light of faith deepened and reduced to an extreme and sudden obviousness.

ILLUMINATING MOMENT

Breathe deeply.

Relax your body and mind.

Think about the following slowly and gently.

Savor each thought.

*Have I ever experienced light that was ordinary and profound?*

A light that is bright, profound, intimate, and ordinary while being beyond ordinary is something Danish architect Jørn Utzon works toward. Utzon designed the Sydney Opera House with its evocation of sails, shells, and gull wings. His work with light moves from the inward focus of the

Quakers and Merton to outer light. He says that the effect he is looking for in his work is that of seeing a Gothic church. “You never finish with it while you move around it or see it against the sky. This interplay with the sun, the light, the clouds is so important that it makes the building into a living thing.” This idea that light moving around a structure can imbue it with life may seem a bit of a stretch—or a bit spiritual. Yet, while the skeptic in me says, “Sure,” the soul of me, intrigued, begins to look at how light plays around the very room in which I’m reading those lines. It’s early evening; the sun is setting in the west, and casting a thinning golden light into the trees to the east of the house, which is in turn reflected back through the two-story windows into the living room where I’m sitting. As the light lowers in the west and climbs the eastern trees, it moves through the living room—shining now on the clinker-brick hearth, scaling the wooden posts, and illuminating the paper needlework “Welcome” sign resting on the mantle. The room feels alive with memories of the mason who laid each of the clinker bricks for the forty-foot-high chimney, the crew that set the posts and beams framing our house, and Nancy’s great-grandmother who carefully pierced paper with thread to welcome friends to her home.

A simple, rectangular building with gray, horizontally sided walls and white trim on West 26<sup>th</sup> Street in Houston, Texas, is another place where holy light plays. From the outside, Live Oaks Friends Meetinghouse, designed by the artist James Turrell, hardly seems to be a space conceived around the concept of being able to Mind the Light well and intentionally. The interior doesn’t give any immediate clues, either, as it

consists of an area for people to gather to visit prior to worship, another area with bathrooms and a table for meetings, and the meeting room. The meeting room is square, with plain plaster walls and tall windows. Worshipers sit on plain, white oak benches that Turrell designed. Then there's the high, vaulted ceiling. That's where the "skyspace" is—a twelve-by twelve-foot square opening at the apex of the curved ceiling. The skyspace offers a view of the sky's changing character and light, all in a spiritual setting. It's as if an unrelenting, unhasting, and silent panorama of light and art is unfolding over anyone who would take time to look up through it. Turrell, a Quaker, said, "I guess I like the literal quality, or feeling, or sensation, in that I want to feel light physically. We drink it as vitamin D; it's actually a food. . . . We also have a big psychological relation to light. All or most spiritual experiences . . . are described with a vocabulary of light."

"We generally use [light] to illuminate other things," James Turrell has said, "but I wanted to force people to pay attention to the thingness and revelation of light."

This paying attention to the "thingness" and revelation of light is suggested by the concept of Minding the Light. Turrell's words remind us that light has substance—as does God. There's a *there* there. Light is good simply because it is—light is one of God's creations, the same as birds, bees, sunflowers, coyotes, and us. Because light is also revelatory it shows us things as well as thingness. Light enlivens us to the world around us, enabling us to see with spiritual eyes both God and God's creation.

“Light I acknowledge as the energy upon which all life on this planet depends,” said photographer Ruth Bernhard, who turned one hundred years old in 2005. “Light is my inspiration, my paint and brush. It is as vital as the model herself. Profoundly significant, it caresses the essential superlative curves and lines.”

ILLUMINATING MOMENT

Breathe deeply.

Relax your body and mind.

Think about the following slowly and gently.

Savor each thought.

*How would I describe the “thingness” of divine Light?*

It’s easy to miss the light—to not see it. A good friend and I were driving across Indiana recently when she looked out the window and asked, “What are you seeing?” On another, earlier trip she’d asked that question while we were deep in conversation about landscape and light. I’d waxed eloquent about the qualities of light that lit fields filled with corn stubble and that had illuminated the soft contours of Midwestern rolling ground. I had spoken eloquently enough, at least, so that she seemed to enjoy the conversation and my view on things that she didn’t seem to see with her hillier, woodier New England eyes.

Her question stopped me cold. I looked around. I saw a not-too-unusual cloudy Indiana day in the middle of harvest. Some fields were picked. Some were not. I began to explain how to tell the difference between corn and bean fields,