

Learning How to See

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I believe in the importance of seeing something new each time we see the familiar and seeing into and beyond the words we hear.

In high school, I had two teachers who made me aware of these concepts, although it took many years before I appreciated them fully.

One day, Mrs. Lambert, my advanced placement English teacher, brought in several baskets filled with all kinds of things, tchotchkes, bric-a-brac, and stuff. Each of us took something and wrote a composition about it for homework. The next day, the baskets reappeared, and we were instructed to select the same object. This time we had to write a composition about the object without repeating anything from the first one.

Over the next few days the same thing happened, with each day bringing an increasing sense of frustration as we tried to see something new in an otherwise uninteresting object. I will never forget the last piece I wrote about my blue and white Delft fisher boy. After struggling to find something original to say, I got inspired to write a sonnet. It allowed me to see beyond the porcelain figurine and into the essence of the character. Mrs. Lambert had shown me how to use my own eyes and creativity to see what I otherwise would have looked at and dismissed in an instant.

The other teacher was Mr. Kramer, who taught a civics class called Problems of Democracy. At a time when the spirit of McCarthyism was still quite powerful, he dared to be liberal and open-minded. Returning from Cuba, where he fought alongside Castro and Che in the Cuban revolution against the dictator Batista, he taught us about propaganda in all its forms. We learned the techniques used in politics as well as in advertising from a teacher we all admired, a man who was unafraid of challenging the fears of the time. I never thought much about what he had taught us until I began seeing and hearing all the misleading commercials that run rampant on TV today. I see how through small print and deceptive words, the public is manipulated. I don't know if I would have the same awareness were it not for Mr. Kramer.

Fifty years later, as I remember Mrs. Lambert and Mr. Kramer, I wonder, are schools today showing kids how to use their own eyes and ears to see into and beyond the superficial? This, I believe, is the most important lesson a child can take into adulthood.