

*Look if you wish to reap a harvest,  
but look thoughtfully, patiently, watchfully,  
and know why you look.*

(From *The Harvest of the Quiet Eye* by Janet E. Stuart)

### **The Quiet Eye of Social Justice**

From July 2013 through July 2014 the Society of the Sacred Heart and its affiliates celebrate the centenary of the death of Janet Erskine Stuart, RSCJ. The events will surely recognize her great intellectual and spiritual gifts made manifest in her writings and her leadership. However, we give only passing recognition to the fact that she was also a sportswoman and a great lover of sport as if this “post script” somehow makes her more human. It is precisely this that I would like to focus upon: How it is that perhaps her keen insight into human nature and the depth of her spiritual life stems in part from her experience as Janet the sportswoman.



Her essay “The Harvest of the Quiet Eye” found in her book *Highways and By-ways in the Spiritual Life* reflects what dedicated athletes everywhere know and what brain research in elite athletes has been telling us for the last 15 years: Where we fix our outward discerning gaze and how we introspectively process the object of our gaze will guide our actions toward the desired goal. If our goal is to work toward a vision of balance and right relationship in the world; to recognize the dignity of each person; to work for social, evangelical justice then we must cultivate the Quiet Eye. Justice in the intellectual, juridical sense of equity and equality coupled with justice in the affective sense of compassion and solidarity.

Stuart describes three distinct trains of thought: an unquiet eye, a quiet eye and the harvest of the quiet eye. An *unquiet eye* gathers no harvest because passion makes it intent on one thing at the exclusion of other things and in so doing becomes its own object. That is, the object of its love, fear, desire or aversion. “Your eye sees *itself* and its own thoughts reflected in everything but self is not a harvest.” How often do we say we are working to advance the mission, to work for justice or to accompany others in their spiritual journey, and really practicing the unquiet eye? That is, where are we more attached to ideas and initiatives because they are *ours* and our investment in the outcome reflects our attachment to ourselves rather than our service to God and to our brothers and sisters?

The *quiet eye* is more open and receptive; it is contemplative that it may see and reasonable that it may discern. It is not at the mercy of a “sudden gust of impressions or a thunderstorm of conflicting passions, or a blight of discouragement and inaction.” The quiet eye looks purposefully, attentively toward a particular end. It does not merely “look about” aimlessly but rather it fixes its gaze on something and knows *why*. Do we take the time to truly observe the world around us as Stuart encourages? Do our eyes flit about from one cause or project to another? The eye that looks, really looks, focuses the mind and spirit; the eye that looks about dissipates them. The quiet eye then takes time for reflection to allow the seeds of facts and information sown in the mind to germinate in the

heart. In a world where the blink of an eye sets the tempo of life, do we really take this time for introspection to allow the “cries of the poor” and the anguish of creation to germinate within us? To allow the mind to speak to the heart and together see what stirs within us, what seedlings of a vision may shoot up? The quiet eye weeds out the weaker seedlings which Stuart calls our own “favorite thoughts” and those things that distract us from our truer aim. Do we know what parts of ourselves to let go of in order to let God act through us? Are we clear on our justice aim and how to hit the mark as educators called to discover and reveal the love of the heart of Christ?

This same quiet eye has been the subject of brain research and the training of elite athletes since first proposed by Professor Joan Vickers at Calgary University in 1996. The quiet eye (QE, as it is known) refers to the gaze behavior immediately prior to movement in aiming tasks such as the free throw in basketball, shooting the goal in soccer or hockey, or that blasted putt in golf. It is visually processing information from ball (current state/mission) to target (future state/vision) back to the ball holding the goal end in your mind’s eye. It is a tight focus which blunts distracting mental chatter and allows the brain to process the information it just gathered and direct the body in the proper motions to get the ball where you wish it to go. Do we move our eye from institutional mission to world vision and back again, then allow intellectual processing and spiritual reflection to guide us to action?

Quiet Eye training is an attempt to get people to stop flicking their focus around, but it is not just about keeping your eye on the ball. It is about looking at the ball long enough to process the aiming information. It involves focusing on the exact spot where the athlete wishes to send the ball, and then settle her eye on it and holding it there. Brain research shows that experts – that is more experienced athletes – have a longer “quiet eye” period than less skilled practitioners and they allocate their visual attention more efficiently. *This is the harvest of the quiet eye: Something “that cannot be bought for all the wealth of the world; something a wise person cannot impart to a foolish one.”* It is ... experience. Have we learned from our experiences? Do we value the experiences of others and what *they* may teach us regardless of their educational level and professional training?

Researchers concur in their conclusion that a quiet, focused eye seems to encourage a quiet, focused mind which then makes for more accurate action. Our call to live the mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart wherever we are and whoever we may be requires a “quiet eye” open to the possibility of a different world and receptive to the fact that in the process it is we who may also need to be or do differently. So, keep your eye on the ball, fix your gaze on the goal and look thoughtfully, patiently, watchfully, and above all know *why* you look.

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