

Inductive Imagination:  
A Methodology For Life (or 'What did I not see?')

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*"One of the greatest tragedies of the fall is that we get tired for familiar glories"* (Clyde Kilby)

**Epiphany in the Pool and Eugene Peterson**

I was a pastor serving in a small suburban congregation and in my eighth year of tenure. On 30/11/2011 I was doing my regular routine of exercise in the gym pool and no doubt thinking of the cyclical pastoral tasks ahead of me for the day and for the remains of the week. I was doing my regular 20 laps in the pool on that Wednesday. Then it happened. It dawned upon me that I was not enjoying swimming the lap immediately at hand because it was simply a number to clock up to get ahead and complete the quota. Once that was done I would likewise do the next thing to get it done to get ahead to do the next thing, and so forth and so on. I was not paying attention to what I was presently doing or enjoying: swimming. The lap was merely a number, 13, having its significance in being seven away from usual number 20. What gave revolutionary impetus to my perception was that it was symptomatic. The way I was swimming was the way I was living, a personal psychology carried into every activity. I had become habituated into consuming present things at hand upon the altar of an unknown future. Shocked by this awareness I resolved to enjoy the quality of each length and not let the quantity of the laps dominate. No, this epiphany did not make me jump out of the pool and shout out *eureka! eureka!* in the streets of the Strand. I rather got out, said No! to the usual impulses of distracted routine, and decided to take a leisurely shower, enjoy it (!) and take time to look around in the gym and the people there. I began to practice 'the sacrament of the present moment' by resisting an artificial focus on the illusory things 'that side of the horizon' at the expense of the concrete realities this side of it. Thus began my experience of doing usual things in an unusual way, of practicing a different methodology of life.

Now to be honest, there was a metanarrative, a bigger picture. I had been reading an autobiography of pastor and translator Eugene Peterson called *The Pastor*.<sup>1</sup> His subtitle of choice was *Every Step and Arrival*, a line from a poem by Denise Levertov *Overland to the Islands*. Every step - every lap! - an arrival, I thought. I got it! The initial impact of my epiphany in the pool felt as if I was having an unexpected yet miniature Copernican revolution, and this phrase was a fitting description of that experience. The power of that moment during lap thirteen had not only infallibly self-diagnosed the habits of my soul, but it also existentially confirmed for me so much of what Peterson was seeking to pass on to pastors in all his books.

Eugene Peterson had also introduced me to the coupling of two words that defined this perspective: Inductive Imagination. Taking two words that appear opposites, one from the realm of science and the other from that of poets, Peterson describes and advocates in all his books this methodology for life. In this book he tells the story of how he came to personally

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* ( New York: Harper One, 2012).

discover these things. His father was a butcher in Montana and there in the butcher shop he learned 'inductive method':

Carving a quarter of beef into roasts and steaks was not a matter of imposing my knife-fortified will on dumb matter but respectfully and reverently entering into the reality of the material at hand... It was a submission of the will to the conditions at hand, a cultivation of humility.

Anyone what has been suddenly asked to carve up the roast chicken for Thanksgiving or Christmas knows what he experienced and what 'inductive method' is all about. Imagination became essential for Peterson in his pastoral work within the same congregation for 30 years. The relentlessly pedestrian, parochial and routine responsibilities of a pastor required him to see these mundane or prosaic realities in the light of the glories of God, creation, souls, sin, salvation and eternity. Connecting the local work of a pastor to these colossal and universal realities was done by a biblically sanctified imagination. I had read his book but after that day in the pool it all came together. I was on his wavelength now. 'Every lap an arrival'!

### **Inductive and Imagination**

In our time together I want to explore with you inductive imagination as a methodology of life. I believe my experience and Peterson's experience are common experiences and the sooner we adopt this method of life, implicitly or explicitly, the better for us all.

So first, **Inductive**.

Induction as a scientific method is a way of learning that attempts to always take the point of departure from the Subject itself under observation rather than from abstractly projecting something alien onto that Subject. It is a disciplined and directed way of learning that attempts to receive first rather than to give. It is expositional rather than 'impositional'. Karl Barth, that mountainous 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss theologian, in his swan song *Evangelical Theology* read to audiences in the USA in his one and only trip to 'the new world', defended the 'science of theology' buy saying that:

[All] humanistic sciences seek to apprehend a specific *object* and its environment in the manner directed by the phenomenon itself; they seek to understand it on its own terms and to speak of it along with all the implications of its own existence.<sup>2</sup>

The great virtue of all universities should be the goal of knowing things on their own terms (truth) and that the nature of any subject must determine what we can know and how it can be known. *Projections, Prejudice and Abstractions* are the great sins on any campus. Is not this task the content of what the work 'critical' (Greek *krisis*) means? Universities are devoted to *professional* training. Would you not agree that a professional is someone who is committed to a certain subject *for its own sake*, someone who cultivates an apprehension, understanding and love for a certain subject without an eye to using that subject as a means to another end. We want doctors who are inductively studying the human body and are interested in health (and

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 3.

not wealth). We want Lawyers who believe in the virtue of legal integrity as an end in itself and not as a status or 'career' to advance something else. We want to train creative men and women to love the texture of their subject, be it food, wood or marble or music, *and who don't prostitute their profession for mercenary motives*. We want English students to learn how to 'simply' read a poem well and become disciplined in paying attention, tenaciously, before they interpret it. We want to train theologians and pastors who love their Subject passionately and subordinate their entire being to His reality and His Word *on their own terms*. As Professors, we are posted here at the boundaries and crossroads to ensure inductive work takes place, nothing more nor less.

This is true for all departments, and particularly in Biblical Studies. Wisely, the Swill-German theologian Adolf Schlatter summarized hermeneutics as 'seeing what is there'. His definition of scholarship is memorably summed up: 'Scholarship is first observation, second observation, and thirdly observation'<sup>3</sup>. – a good manta of the inductive method. The now proverbial 'Look at your fish' injunction of the celebrated Harvard biologist and professor Louis Agassiz, is also pertinent here. When an aspiring scientist Samuel Hubbard Scudder attended his first sessions with the famous professor he was given by this professor the perplexing task of simply and singularly examining a preserved specimen of a Haemulon fish using only his hands and his eyes. He was expecting a lot more from the professor! He inspected his fish and on his return the professor listened discerningly and then simply said 'look again, look again'. He returned and the same scenario followed until the student had learned to cultivate a close-up analytical (inductive) relationship with his smelling specimen, seeing new things with new eyes at every fresh inspection. 'Look again, look again!', is another good mantra. This is the reason why in my Greek classes after we have attempted an initial translation of what the Greek text says I impose upon us that crucial question: *now what did I not see?* It is a diagnostic question that should be used all the time in all areas of life. May this inductive method be nurtured and protected at Universities.

But, briefly, this is not just an academic method, it's a methodology for life. It's how we should transact with everything. It's how you should shop, speak to people, play sport, read a book, go on holiday, be at university. It's a method which cultivates the wide open reception of what is right under your noses. It listens to people in a way that asks 'now what did I not hear' and that simply pays attention to the present and does not use it 'to get to number 20'.

### Secondly, **Imagination**

Using this focused adjective 'inductive' let's couple it with the expansive noun 'imagination'. What an unlikely marriage of a rational adjective to modify the romantic noun! But the truth is that for each of the subjects receiving our studious attention via induction there is more to them than they initially appear to be. The magnitude of the realities we observe requires imagination: that is, the ability to see the larger context of our subject and to begin to make the connections between our subject and its bigger picture. Imagination is a way of seeing things in the light of a wider canvas or lens. It's the proverbial brick layer seeing only the

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Love your Enemies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), vi.

wall or the whole cathedral, the doctor who is not prescribing symptomatic relief but seeing the whole life and 'soul' of the person before her. The familiar story of President John F. Kennedy was visiting NASA headquarters for the first time in 1961 is good to recall. While touring the facility, he introduced himself to a janitor who was mopping the floor and asked him what he did at NASA: "I'm helping put a man on the moon!" He had imagination that made the connections.

Imagination uses metaphor to make the connection with greater reality. Thus the Book of Revelation uses a profusion of metaphor and seeks to reinterpret the imperial Roman ideology of the day and its ruthless execution of *Christianois* in a totally new light: 'Christians' are victorious when they are defeated by the 'beast'. They will wear the crown with Christ. As the now deceased British artist Julian Barrow perceptively said: "You put two things together that have not been put together before. And the world is changed". Here in Revelation is martyrdom and coronation, a juxtaposition that caused many to go to their deaths singing.

C S Lewis in his *Last Battle* of the Narnia series captures this imaginative mindset when the schoolboy Digory answers the last king of Narnia's question about the small stable they have been cornered into. On entering:

Tirian looked round again and could hardly believe his eyes. There was the blue sky overhead, and grassy country spreading as far as he could see in every direction, and his new friends all round him laughing.

"It seems, then," said Tirian, smiling himself, "that the stable seen from within and the stable seen from without are two different places."

"Yes," said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside."

"Its inside is bigger than its outside". Imagination sees each of you here as more than you appear, as persons created by God with a unique and profound story, living your life on a narrow battle ground with infinite happiness or misery at stake. God, creation, sin, redemption are the biggest narratives in which we are enscribed. Imagination sees dimensions in history, whether genealogical or geographic or local, and sees that it is more wonderful and tragic than any fiction can describe. Imagination realizes that that every-time someone calls your name they are recalling history: the history of your parents who named you and ancestors who surnamed you. Imagination sees Carson Newman, it sees Jefferson City, the County, Tennessee, USA, World, Earth, Solar System, Milky Way, Cosmic Web, the Uniform Cluster, the 'Universe', creation, a God. It connects your fleeting breath and fragile existence to that huge story. It sees the 'arrival' in 'every step'. Only imagination can take you there. It's a window that brings depth and dimension to all things. And its Imagination that tells the Christian that the greatest things are the invisible things.

This yoking of the adjective Inductive with the noun Imagination is essential since both words mutually interpret each other. The imagination and the accompanying astonishment and wonder it brings to us is always quite a specific type of astonishment, since it is determined by its subject. This marriage produces an honest astonishment that is not fanciful. The 'inductive'

adjective always directs and informs the content of the imagination. This coupling means that imagination always travels along certain objective paths and keeps it from being enslaved to any and every subjective projection. Fanciful imagination is thus avoided. We are not free to create our own world but to rather personally enter into the world that is there, where we have been placed –and how unbelievably expansive that world is!

### **True to Life and True to Scripture**

I am proposing to you that you need to adopt a specific ‘methodology for life’. The grounds for such an appeal can be made philosophically. But I want to be more pragmatic and show that such a method goes with the grain of both life in general and Scripture in particular. Inductive Imagination is a method which I believe is true to life, a fitting way to live and relate to our ‘environment’ (lit. the surroundings seen around us). Developing this psychological cast of soul or ‘perspective’ in all things fits the nature and conditions of life. Let me demonstrate this starting again biographically.

When I arrived at Carson Newman University from South Africa and had eventually settled I caught myself wondering when my wife and I would travel and get to see all the great things in America, seeing all the publicized tourist places and doing all the expected things in the area. Then I realized I had forgotten inductive imagination and ‘every step and arrival’. I had caught myself out again. Rather, pay attention first to the things around me. Don’t look to things over the horizon but first look this side of the horizon. So I decided to learn about Greer House (our accommodation), about Dot and Hank Greer’s gift to the university which had opened ten years before Heather and I arrived here. Let me contemplate the history of Carson Newman and enter the story of history right here first of all, for *‘its inside is bigger than its outside’*. G K Chesterton, that great apostle of inductive imagination, helps us avoid this great sin of ‘taking things for granted’. How applicable were his words to my horizon gazing:

*The aim of life is appreciation; there is no sense in not appreciating things; and there is no sense in having more of them if you have less appreciation for them.... I would maintain that thanksgiving is the highest form of thought.*<sup>4</sup>

My own experience has helped me understand what Professor Agassiz meant when he told his inquiring students on his return from the summer vacation: “I have spent the vacation travelling and made it half-way across my back yard!”<sup>5</sup>

Beyond our specific history and location, this method is required above all in our relationships with people. And it is here in the realm of personhood that we see that this method is the methodology of love. Love really means taking people on their own terms, listening to them and seeking to foster their own well-being – and what a peerless and unique subject each person is! Unless we pay loving attention to them and take them seriously as unique inimitable

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<sup>4</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image Books, 1958)

<sup>5</sup> Mentioned in Eugene Peterson, *Eat this book: A conversation in the art of spiritual reading* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 45.

divine creations, persons, (inductive imagination is needed!) we will be out of gear and against the grain of reality.

Art museums also show us that inductive imagination is true to life. Keeping in mind that it is documented that in art museums people spend on average 15-30 seconds in front of a picture, C S Lewis, had this memorable advice on how look at a piece of art:

*We must look, and go on looking, till we have certainly seen exactly what is there. We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.*

*A work of art [or a text] can be either 'received' or 'used.' When we 'receive' it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we 'use' it we treat it as assistance for our own activities. The one, to use an old-fashioned example, is like being taken for a bicycle ride by a man who may know roads we have never yet explored. The other is like adding one of those little motor attachments to our own bicycle and then going for one of our familiar rides. These rides in themselves may be good, bad, or indifferent. The 'uses' which the many make of the arts may or may not be intrinsically vulgar, depraved, or morbid. That's as may be. 'Using' is inferior to 'reception' because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it.<sup>6</sup>*

Further, Inductive Imagination is, I believe, not only the method worthy of persons, places and even art appreciation, it is essential for reading the Bible and receiving its content.

Consider the fact of the Bible itself. The library it contains is simply phenomenal and we should always pick up a Bible with a profound gratitude and humble appreciation. Its centuries deep history of content and preservation is incalculable. We fail to appreciate all the painstaking and sacrificing activity that has been employed to bring us this gift of our Bible. What Jesus said in another context applies to so much else: 'others have labored and you have entered into their labour'. We need an imagination fit to conceive all what the Bible actually is. For this reason the Bible will only reveal its infinite treasures to those who, in the words of Eugene Peterson, define exegesis as 'loving the Bible enough to listen to what it says'.

Consider how essential having this perspective is for the message of the Bible as it narrates how God's people should relate to God. Two incidences come to mind:

In John 1:29-51 we have a pericope that contains an inclusio from vs 35 and 51 with the thematic idea being that of 'seeing'. For John 'seeing' is a metaphor for perceiving the truth of Christ that merges into believing. This 'seeing' of each other climaxes in vs 51. Jesus here in effect says that when you see this Nazarene young man in front of you, you see the Temple of God! He's more than meets the eye. 'The inside is bigger than the outside!' Or in biblical idiom: 'the one who has an eye to see let them see'. Jesus later announced in Luke 17:20-21 that 'the

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<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 88.

Kingdom of God is in your midst!' In him the Kingdom of God was mysteriously present, it was 'at hand'. Faith was the only way of tuning into what was already present, despite the fact that the conventional Messianic hopes for the nation were not materialized. The whole of the Incarnation of God in his virgin conception, his death on a Roman Cross and the empty tomb contains a miracle far greater than any miracle Jesus did in his ministry. Yet so few realized how in these three great acts of God in Christ *'the inside is bigger than the outside'*. We need inductive imagination to be in tune with what God is revealing in Christ and to see 'The Kingdom of God', the biggest word in the world. As the Scripture said to a group of Christians who were tempted to look over the shoulder of Christ to other things: "In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and understanding'

So inductive imagination is a method of life basically because it goes along with the grain of both life and Scripture. It is a method determined by the nature of things, and is the reason why we all concur with John Piper when he says 'I don't want to arrive at the Alps and after a week there end up watching TV in the chalet - We are excited by trivia and bored by grandeur".

### **The Jesus Way**

Let's now pull all this together in closing. I am echoing again what Peterson writes in his important book *The Jesus Way*, that we need mostly 'the purification of means', i.e., of our methods, before anything else. A purified way, this Christian Way, is a way of living that cultivates attentiveness, reverence and humility before the breath-taking realities of God, Scripture, people and the creation around us. I have wanted to get you hooked on this, and feel the call to convert to inductive discipleship as a methodology for life, which I believe is our summons to a Christian methodology. How then can we take some baby steps and progress on such a particular Way? Let me suggest the following as a start:

Firstly, pay attention to the few things at hand. There's a prodigy of options and issues out there beckoning and feeding our cultural ADD, distractions to be rejected as we chose to contemplate only a few things. Consider the singularity and focus of the following Scriptures:

Psalm 27:4 "One thing I have desired of the Lord"

Jesus, in Luke 10:41-42 "but one thing is needed" (Grk ενος δε εστιν χρεια)

Paul, in Philippians 3:13 'but one thing" (Grk "εν δε")

Hebrews 13:3: "being content with the things at hand"

Change must begin here and now with our attention on a few things at hand. Live this side of the horizon. Most of us are not brilliant minds, so master a few things. Rather get to know a few books very well than many books superficially - and read those few things well! Stop sleep walking through life. Its costly work and you must 'pay' attention. If we think hard about a few things we will not need to read or bother with so many things. So many things today are the copious consequences of erroneous and lazy thinking. Hard thinking provides the right

prescription for this malady and keeps us from the plethora of nostrums on offer today. I beg you: know a few important things really well. With all the books in the world, remember that the Bible is too wonderful for words. It deserves the holy attentiveness and quality of study we see in Psalm 1.

So, remember to slow down as you go from one thing to the next. Look around you and enjoy the 'sacrament of the present moment'. Don't let your eyes be always looking beyond the horizon 'whilst round about lies green and pleasant pasture'. Look upwards and outwards at all that's around you. If you do you will agree that we don't need so much a change of circumstances as a change of mind, a purification of means. 'In all you do, do it with love' (1 Cor 16:14).

Secondly, practice thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is more important than we realize. Consider how important this is in Scripture, for example: 'giving thanks always for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father' (Ep 5:20). The fact that Christians are children of a Sovereign and Provident Heavenly Father over all in their lives for good is the ground of their thanksgiving. The fact of this divine arrangement of our lives, antecedent to anything from ourselves (this is spelled G.R.A.C.E) is the reason for these unconditional and universal imperatives of thanksgiving. Knowing this frees us from so much and allows us to slow down and enjoy what God brings to us in the present. Heartfelt and God-ward gratitude to the Father for these indicatives of grace is a large part of the Christian 'methodology for living'. Give thanks!

Thirdly, continually humble yourself. Don't presume you know things. Again G K Chesterton somewhere reminds us that in the valley all is large but on the mountain top all is small. The smaller you are in your own eyes, the bigger other things become. Humility of mind and spirit will enable you to feel the wonder of the 'simple' things in life and will keep you from many false trails. Remember that when you are humble you experience the truth, for all things are small to God. 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'.

Lastly, pray. We live in a culture with a suicidal and acute condition called S.A.D (Spiritual Attention Disorder). A consciousness of the presence of the Almighty is the *sine qua non* for being truly human and alive. The Hebrews called in *Jerat Yhwh*, the fear of the Lord, and believed with it was the foundational ingredient of wisdom. When we directly interface with God in prayer, allowing who he is to overshadow who I am, we are never more whole, free and ourselves. In prayer we know what things truly are and get our bearings for our lives. It's the indispensable divine method, the 'how', for cultivating a Christian methodology for life.

T S Elliot, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great poets, famously said in his *Little Gidding*:

"We must not cease from exploration;  
and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know that place for the  
first time"

May God gives us the grace to be able to continuously and honestly ask ourselves that simple but life changing question: '**Now what did I not see?**' And maybe it will happen to you one ordinary day too.

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