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The Lens as Paradigm

Adapted by Barb Backler from the Iowa Peace Institute.

Edwin P. Hubble, an American astronomer, did his primary work at the Wilson Observatory, taking photographs of galaxies through the lens of a massive telescope. His greatest discovery was the Hubble Constant, or Hubble's Law, which says that the further galaxies are away from earth the faster they move away from our planet. Hubble's Law proved the universe is expanding like a big balloon. Howard Zehr said in 1995, "The source of many of our failures, I am arguing, lies in the lens through which we view justice, and that lens is a particular construction of reality, a paradigm. It is not the only paradigm."

Though Hubble was an astronomer, one of his gifts was to see things others could not. He assisted greatly in the design of the 200-inch Hale telescope. "With the 200-inch," he said in a BBC broadcast in London, "we may grasp what now we can scarcely brush with our fingertips." "What do you expect to find with the 200-inch?" he was asked, and he replied, "We hope to find something we hadn't expected."

All of us at times struggle with self-awareness and with developing a complete understanding of the "lens" through which we see others and the world. Sometimes the lens we use to see others can make it difficult to see them as they see themselves or to see beyond our own focus. As educators, we work to help people understand themselves, others, and the conflict they are in more fully. We help them to either change the lens they are looking through, or at least adjust the focus, so they can see others in new ways, hear new perspectives, and possibly find what they had never expected.

Edwin Hubble was able to bring what was far away closer and in greater focus. With a closer look, he was able to explain and understand things no one else had understood. Can we examine the lens we look through and the focus we have on others? Can we look for ways to re-focus our view that may allow for greater understanding and new relationships in places we may never have expected?