

The Spirit of Listening

Exiled from Country: Deep Listening to the Spirit of Place

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There's a lake near where Neil and I live in Canberra. It's called Lake Ginninderra. We visit it often. At the moment, we're walking around it most mornings in rain, frost, fog and sleet because (in Canberra's bleak mid-winter) we're training for a 900km pilgrimage in September/October. Earlier this year, over four days at Easter, the contemplative community we lead gathered at the lake on a small island just off-shore. We stood among a grove of paperbark trees on Maundy Thursday and remembered the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane; we looked up to a row of three casuarina trees on Good Friday, placing ourselves at the foot of the cross; and we faced over the water towards the sunrise on Easter day. On my regular retreat mornings, I find myself likewise drawn to the lake to sit on the island, or on a jetty a bit further round, contemplating the birds, the grasses and rocks.

I am starting to be acquainted with the life of this place. There's a willy wagtail who lives near where our walk starts, and black swans who 'own' the island. There are trees the energy of whose presence is palpable – a stately stand of black gum just over the bridge, a larger, more foreboding grove of trees down one side of the peninsula on whose shaggy bark the empty shells of cicadas cling. The more I remember to pay attention, the more I become aware of being immersed in a vast livingness I seem never to be fully present to, and never able adequately to love. The more, also, I'm frustrated by a deep sense of being still separate and disconnected, thwarted in my longing for real communion with this place.

What do I think communion might look and feel like? I don't really know first-hand. I rely on the testimony of others – of mystics and poets. But it seems to have at least two dimensions.

One involves seeing the whole in every part. William Blake spoke of seeing

‘... a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
and eternity in an hour’.

Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye also expressed this profound sense of the whole contained in and expressed by every part. She was from Utopia, 230km from here, and one of Australia’s foremost artists. I read a report of an interview with her, which said that whenever she was asked to explain her paintings, ‘regardless of whether the images were a shimmering veil of dots, a field of “dump dump” dots, raw stripes seared across the surface or elegant black lines, her answer was always the same: “Whole lot, that's whole lot, Awelye (my Dreaming) ... ”’. She went on to name the various elements of her Dreaming – pencil yam, lizard, grass seed, emu, green bean and yam seed – saying: “That's what I paint, whole lot”.’¹

Her vision seems resonant with what Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh describes as an awareness of inter-being. ‘If you are a poet’, he wrote, ‘you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are.’²

In this vision of the whole, everything is connected to everything else. Nothing can ultimately be separated out from the web of life, and to see one thing truly is to see all that it’s related to. This is so for us human beings as well. ‘We emerge from an evolutionary process and are biologically linked to the natural

¹ Emily Kame Kngwarreye, interview with Rodney Gooch, trans. Kathleen Petyarre [accessed http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/utopia_the_genius_of_emily_kame_kngwarreye/emily_kame_kngwarreye, 22 June 2016].

² From *Heart of Understanding* [accessed <https://bodhileaf.wordpress.com/2009/05/25/understanding-interbeing/>, 22 June 2016].

world', writes theologian Ilia Delio. 'The same currents that run through our human blood also run through the swirling galaxies and the myriad of life-forms that pervade this planet'.³ If we have eyes to see, we will truly be able to recognize our inter-being, our communion with all that is. We will know all things (as St Francis did) as our kin – brother Sun and sister Moon, brother Wind and sister Water. This vision makes profound sense to me. I believe it to be true. Yet, yearn as I do, I don't know it deeply for myself. The words of Thomas Merton describe my experience: 'We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are'. But that seems to be the tricky bit.

There's a second dimension of my yearning for a lived experience of communion, as I walk around our lake teeming with life. It's to do with the rumour that the world speaks to those who have ears to hear. What does it say? 'Whole lot'. It communicates itself. Every part offers itself to be heard, to be known. And just as we can 'miss' the real truth, the real *being* of another person, so it seems we can 'miss' everything else. In his poem, 'As kingfishers catch fire', Gerard Manly Hopkins expresses this sense of reality as profoundly self-revelatory:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I'd like to hear more of this radical self-speaking of the life around me. I long to be truly present to, to respect and reverence its independent, mysterious life. And (so the mystics say) if I did, I might also hear something even deeper – the silent voice of the source of all that lives. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the energy that creates and sustains all life is imagined as a word – a word which speaks life into existence out of nothing. What exists is a response to this call, and through what exists we can see and hear this deeper reality. The psalmist sings

³ Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p.21.

that the ‘heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork’. The 14th century Dominican, Meister Eckhart exclaims: ‘Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature’. Yet once again, I feel myself on the outside of this experience. I believe it, I sense its depth and truthfulness, but I don’t *know* it for myself.

To have difficulty realising the radical interconnectedness or oneness of things, to struggle to see and hear the depth dimension of reality, seems a feature of our human condition. Evolutionary biologists and psychologists tell us that the emergence of complex consciousness involves a necessary rupture in our relationship to the whole. We do start out, as a species and individually – you and me – in a state of pre-conscious and undifferentiated union with the world. In the beginning, we have no ‘I’. We’re not separate from our mothers. Our development involves an emerging sense of ourselves as distinct from others and the world around us. This is the growth of *self*-consciousness.

Some scholars see this as the process portrayed in the myth of the fall in the biblical book of Genesis. Humankind begins in a felt state of union, *un*-self-conscious in the Garden of Eden. In the story, Adam and Eve’s being ‘tempted’ to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is lamented. Yet without what some have called this “‘fall upward” into more complex forms of consciousness”⁴ there would be no freedom, no responsibility. According to the wisdom traditions of the world, however, our evolution need not and must not end here. We are called to be reconciled from this necessary dividedness. This is not a return to *undifferentiated* union, but a breakthrough to conscious communion – the dynamic, joyful dance of intimacy and otherness, of being and letting be.

⁴ Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, p.20.

So the journey to maturity, the spiritual journey, is about this movement from separateness towards at-onement. Without this reconciliation and reconnection, we remain trapped – both humanly and individually – at a dualistic level of consciousness. ‘I’ define myself over against ‘you’, ‘us’ against ‘them’, where all too often ‘we’ are good and right, and ‘they’ are bad and wrong or at the least not really like us, and so available for our use and exploitation.

Which brings me to our contemporary situation. As David pointed out last night, Western culture, particularly in the modern period, has been characterized by a strongly dualistic consciousness, with seemingly little awareness of the need to undertake the reconciling journey and few resources for enabling it. In the process, we have inflicted terrible suffering on those we’ve failed to recognize as subjects like ourselves, and to whose cries we have been profoundly deaf: the indigenous people of this country; the land itself. Now at last, in the ecological and social crises of our time, the destructive consequences of this way of being are felt by many white Australians as well.

So where to, from here? There’s nothing like a time of crisis to help you realize you’ve gotten to the end of a way of being. More and more white Australians are realising that what’s needed for true reconciliation with indigenous Australians, with the natural world, and ultimately with our own divided selves, is no less than ‘a shift in the structure of consciousness’. As David said: ‘The ecological revolution will stall until such time as the global mind experiences a *metanoia*, conversion or transformation.’

Of course, we can and must engage with issues of law and policy – regulating agribusiness and mining, promoting renewable energy, reforming social frameworks that perpetuate racism, poverty, exclusion, and so on. But if not accompanied by a deeper shift in our very way of seeing and being-in-relation, these actions remain merely instrumental and so essentially alienated and alienating. It’s the difference between someone who is willing to care for your immediate, bodily needs and someone who cares for you, who ‘sees’ you.

Namaste. And this is all the difference in the world. It's not just about what we do to each other and the land, but how we are *related* to each other and the land.

This gathering is at its heart, I think, about naming the necessity of this shift from dualistic to unitive consciousness and opening ourselves to it, growing towards it. Because, as I've already said, it's not enough merely to *believe* in our inter-relatedness, to be convinced that we are indeed brothers and sisters in the web of life. If we are to participate deeply in the healing of things, we need more fully to realize this truth in our own experience, to deepen our capacity to know and live from it. And this is a matter of practice – the contemplative practice of deep listening.

The Spirit of Deep Listening

We are incredibly fortunate to have with us presenters who'll be leading us in this kind of practice over the next two days, guiding us with their wisdom and lived experience of it. So, in this last part of my talk, I want simply to offer some preliminary thoughts about what the practice of deep listening requires of us, which I hope will contribute to our entering in.

Poverty of Spirit

I think a first essential disposition for deep listening is poverty of spirit.

It's so easy, in this kind of context, to make of our practice a project – an enterprise we're going to be 'good' at, the movement beyond dualistic consciousness something we're going to achieve. And right there, rather than creating space for the other, we are *full* of ourselves. We're consumed by our plans, ambitions, our self-evaluation and self-consciousness. How will we *hear* anything else?

If I want to listen deeply, I must become silent and still – and on the inside, as well as the outside. I must be emptied rather than full of myself, sitting lightly to what I think I already know – about you, about land – in order to be open to the surprise and otherness of the other. This process of self-emptying, cultivating a

spacious interior silence, is not easy. We can't just decide to empty ourselves of ourselves by an act will. We might sincerely want to get out of our own way, to open ourselves humbly and simply to what is not us. But we are largely possessed by what Rowan Williams calls our 'self-oriented, acquisitive habits of mind'. This means that poverty of spirit and real humility, can only be lived into by means of practices or experiences that displace the ego-ic self.

Listening is itself such a practice. So is silent meditation, in which we intentionally let go all our thoughts – again, and again, and again. And then there are those life experiences which provide what Parker Palmer describes as moments of 'unintentional contemplation': experiences of failure, disillusionment and humiliation. These can bring us to the same emptied out place as an intentional contemplative practice since, at times of profound failure, our old ways of being, seeing and imagining life collapse. We undergo the felt experience of getting to the end of our own resources and any illusion that we can 'take it from here'. We are brought to the ground.

We usually resist getting to this place of poverty with all our might. But paradoxically, it is blessing – 'blessed are the poor in spirit', Jesus says, for theirs is the kingdom of God. In the spiritual life, poverty of spirit is always the place of transformation – because it's when we finally get to the end of ourselves, of our self-sufficiency ... often exhausted and deeply sad, with a sense of failure and even hopelessness – it's there that something happens. Call it grace, call it God. Laurence Freeman has said: 'If we want to understand poverty of spirit we have to accept it as the reaching of the boundaries of our being and our capacity, and finding we are unable to go further by ourselves'.⁵ Yet he continues: 'Poverty of spirit is a "grand poverty" because when we have touched this boundary of being

⁵ Laurence Freeman, *Light Within: Meditation as pure prayer* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986 and 2008), p.76.

..., it surprisingly recedes and marvelously our being expands. That is the resurrection'.⁶

It seems to me, that if we let ourselves really be present to our situation – if we touch into our sorrow and bewilderment, our overwhelm at the magnitude of the world's need – we will all experience this poverty of spirit. We have been disillusioned; we are failing; we don't know how to right the wrongs of our history; we don't know how to be healed of our collective wounds; we are stuck, enmeshed in destructive ways of life, and unable to liberate ourselves. The good news is that this felt sense of our poverty opens and empties us. If we want to practice deep listening, we can start from here.

Attention

A second essential disposition for deep listening is attention, the willingness and deepening capacity to pay attention to what is not me.

What's difficult about this is that the energy of our consciousness is usually turned inwards. It is centripetal. Other-directed attention turns this centripetal energy from self-centred compulsion to awareness of another. Iris Murdoch described such a shift in consciousness occurring for her when she looked out of the window one day 'in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings'. Suddenly she observed 'a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything [was] altered. The brooding self ... disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel'.⁷

Importantly, this other-directed attention has a particular quality. 'Most often', Simone Weil noted, 'attention is confused with a kind of muscular effort'. If you say to students: "Now you must pay attention", you see them 'contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes

⁶ Freeman, *Light Within*, p.76.

⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p.84.

they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply ... They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles'.⁸

The attention that is intrinsic to deep listening is not fierce, effortful concentration. It involves non-grasping awareness, the mind and heart non-anxious enough to let reality be, awake enough to let it reveal itself. A friend of mine describes it as a kind of 'middle' voice – both active and intentional, and yet passive and at rest. This attention is a form of receptivity, even hospitality. In Scripture, it is called 'beholding'.⁹ Poet Mary Oliver understands it as ... the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.

Responsibility

And finally, a third disposition involved in the practice of deep listening is responsibility or answerability.

To listen for the voice, the call, the reality of another implies that we might hear something. And once we have heard ... then what? Especially if what we hear is painful or inconvenient or asks something of us, then what?

To hear and then attempt to unhear cannot be done except on pain of denial and bad faith. When the people and priests of Israel wished not to receive the word of the Lord which exhorted them to justice through the prophet Zechariah, we're told they 'refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets' (Zech. 7: 11-12).

⁸ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Fontana Books, 1969), p.70. John Barton similarly identifies 'two different ways of "paying attention"'. One involves straining every nerve to concentrate on something The other is a matter of having a habit of being aware of things that are not ourselves'. John Barton, Foreword, Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), p.8

⁹ Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, p.11.

Notice all those active verbs – *refusing* to listen, *turning* a stubborn shoulder, *stopping* their ears, *making* their hearts adamant. That’s a lot of energy to block out what they’d rather not know. And it didn’t help them in the end. Their deliberate deafness is said to have provoked an answering deafness from God: ‘Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts’. (Zech. 7: 11-13). So the text continues, they were scattered among the nations and ‘the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and a pleasant land was made desolate’ (Zech. 7: 14). Injustice wreaking desolation on the land: it reads like a 6th century BCE version of *An Inconvenient Truth*. We too live in a community which is expending a lot of energy blocking out the painful truth of things, and within an economic system premised on bad faith.

If we embark on a practice of deep listening, then, we must be responsive to and answerable for what we hear. This may not be easy. It hurts to hear earth crying, to see the desolation of the dispossessed. Sometimes it feels more than we can bear. Especially when we don’t know how to help, when we’re overwhelmed and despairing, we struggle to remain present, to give our attention to what needs to be listened and heard into even deeper speech. Because mostly what’s needed in the first instance is not a rush to premature so-called ‘solutions’, desperately, often violently, imposing my will and preconceived ideas in order to ameliorate my discomfort. Rather, it’s the willingness to ‘be with’ what is, as it is, bearing witness, receiving, patiently discerning what might truly serve and the nature of my participation in that. The disposition that’s called for is the vulnerable and open-ended availability of those who answer simply: ‘Here am I’.

Conclusion

So – poverty of spirit, attention, responsibility. These are intrinsic to the practice of deep listening. Most of us struggle to enact them – to varying degrees we are full of *ourselves*, distracted, inclined to denial or grasping after easy answers. Yet

here we all are – responding to a call that’s drawn us here and to which we seek to listen.

French philosopher Jean-Louis Chretien has written an extraordinary and very dense book, titled *The Call and the Response*. He reflects on the biblical stories of the call of Moses and Jeremiah, pointing out that the ‘initial response of the one who is called is to say that he does not, and will not, know how to speak’. But that very incapacity to respond is itself a response. And Chretien goes on: ‘No response will ever correspond. The perfection of the answer will lie forever in its very deficiency, since what calls us in the call is from the start its very lack of measure’.¹⁰

The modern west is realising more acutely than ever before the limits of our dualistic consciousness; we know we cannot go on as we have been. As in all times of ending, the seeds of what’s being called for and called forth are already being glimpsed. I see them in the widespread renewal of contemplative practice, in the work of ecologists, eco-philosophers and theologians, in artists and poets, in a new openness to the wisdom of indigenous peoples, and in gatherings like this where, haltingly, tentatively, humbly we seek to feel, to listen our way into a deeper and truer way of being.

When I contemplate the spirit of our place, Lake Ginninderra, I’m conscious of being called by a reality that always exceeds me, to which I can never be adequate. Yet, I trust that somehow being faithful to the call despite the inevitable deficiency of our response is what ultimately will draw us beyond ourselves into communion with one another and the whole web of life. This is a work of love. I hope we realize it more completely in the coming days.

¹⁰ Jean-Louis Chretien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p.23.