

**INTO  
LISTENING PRESENCE:  
THE HEART  
OF CONTEMPLATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY**

by

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## *ABSTRACT*

*Into Listening Presence* is an inquiry into the practice of listening as a way of knowing. It explores the notion of the listening body throughout the art of attending to the body's voice, rhythm and wisdom. Contrary to the idea that listening is something we do, this thesis invites a shift of perception from the notion of doing to ways of being. Listening as spiritual practice arises deep from within our bodies and speaks of a wisdom of the heart open to the presence of Mystery in the daily round.

The contemplative nature of this thesis lingers in movements as chapters which include: listening gracenotes, listening presence, listening guideposts, listening service, listening questions, listening whispers, listening flow, listening beginnings, listening body, listening offerings and listening memories. Contemplatively listening through each movement autobiographic narratives flow throughout a theoretical framework of phenomenological curriculum research, spiritual theology, feminine discourse, women's autobiographical writing and contemplative ways of being in research.

Specifically, I focus on the awareness embodied in attending to the details of daily living. As such, this thesis is a living, experiential work through which the reader may gather their own interpretations and ruminations of listening possibilities.

The challenge in this piece is in creating a listening space for the reader to dwell within as listening is an experiential phenomenon. It asks the reader to slow down, to be willing to rest within the pauses between the words, listening with the ear of the heart. This thesis contributes to theories of embodiment and spiritual practice which arise within a lived curriculum, a listening pedagogy, a curriculum of reverence.

**DEDICATION**

*In*

*loving memory*

*of my grandparents*

*Marie Louise Saunders*

*1900 – 1972*

*&*

*Harold Lionel Saunders*

*1894 - 1970*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Dedication .....	v
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Table of contents .....	viii
Prelude: LISTENING GRACENOTES .....	2
<i>Blood- red Tulips</i> .....	5
Movement one.....	12
<i>Dominos and Spiderwebs</i> .....	20
Movement two .....	24
<i>Soundscapes of birthing blossoms</i> .....	36
Movement three .....	40
<i>A daily Gift</i> .....	46
<i>discarded beauty</i> .....	47
Movement four .....	49
<i>Moments of Earthly Dialogue</i> .....	54
<i>A birth of gentle questions</i> .....	54
<i>What does it mean ?</i> .....	64
Movement five .....	66
<i>Whispering Works</i> .....	72
<i>Grief</i> .....	83
Movement six .....	85
<i>Math Notes of Presence</i> .....	103
Movement seven .....	107
<i>Inter/rupting Academic Inter/pretations</i> .....	123
<i>Skin of my belly</i> .....	131
Movement eight.....	133
<i>Shifting Dis/ease</i> .....	137
<i>Questing Quiet Wonder</i> .....	156
<i>Where do the World's words go?</i> .....	159

*To wait for God, the mind must become naked*

*~ Margaret Guenther*

# *LISTENING GRACENOTES*

But what is it then that sits in my heart,  
That breathes so quietly, and without lungs –  
That is here, here in this world, and yet not here?

~ Mary Oliver

*Prelude:*  
*LISTENING GRACENOTES*

Some time ago, a friend suggested I might enjoy reading Annie Dillard's, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I was struggling to find a topic to pursue for my Master's thesis in education. I had many ideas floating around in my head but it seemed that, inevitably, as soon as I thought

I had 'got' one, another would float by, and I would be off chasing it and running again in a new direction.

I began to ask others who were in the middle of writing, or who had finished their theses, just how they had gone about this process. I told my friend about a conversation I'd had with a colleague who'd suggested that as a way of finding a research topic, I might meditate on the question, "What preoccupies my thoughts, my attention?" Once I uncovered this, she said, I would embark upon a path which would guide me to where I needed to go.

Why do you never find anything written about that idiosyncratic thought you advert to, about your fascination with something no one else understands? Because it is up to you. There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain. It is hard to explain because you never read it on any page; there you begin. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.

~ Annie Dillard, 1989

I sat down to read Annie Dillard's work and was immediately, albeit slowly, guided through a series of interconnected meditations about the art of seeing. I say slowly because I found I could not read her words quickly. I couldn't flit through her book as I had been known to do sometimes, primarily spurred on, I suppose, by the quest

Find what haunts you and you will discover what to write about.

~Natalie Goldberg

of finding out what 'happened'. I found myself reading a page or two, or sometimes just a single sentence, and somehow I knew I couldn't continue without pause.

At times, I felt drawn to simply gaze outside my window, listening to the burbling creek beside my house, sensing the stillness within my body that her words seemed to evoke. And, at times, I felt caught in an eddy of tension between gentle ruminations and riveting prose, as Dillard brought me to see the world at Tinker Creek through her reverent eyes. With the words of Einstein spurring her onwards to "[n]ever lose a holy curiosity," she invited me into her world as she lifted her "microscope down from the shelf, spread a drop of duck pond on a glass slide" and proceeded to "try to look spring in the eye" (Dillard, 1974, p. 123).

I began to wonder what my "holy curiosity" was really all about and what I might feel impelled to spread along a microscope's glass slide so that I, too, might "try to look spring in the eye.' Yet, in this field of wondering the one thing I knew without question was that I felt at home in this space.

## BLOOD- RED TULIPS



*Photo 1 © Bill Perdue, 2003 by permission*

Blood-red tulips. I saw a field of blood-red tulips on my morning walk today. They seemed to be awakening, being gently nudged to open by the caressing rays of a spring day's warmth. Kneeling down upon the earth's soil, still moist from the morning dew, I slipped the bowl-shaped velvet petals into the curvature of my palm. They seemed to fit.

Closing my eyes, I drifted into a quiet listening presence as I sensed the coolness of the last remnants of a winter breeze brush along my skin. I came to hear the tulips, the breeze, the sun and soil whisper what I needed to know. I needed to be patient, to receive springtime according to nature's plan, not mine.

I found myself, just for a moment, remembering the backyard of my childhood. At the age of nine I wasn't much interested in pulling

out weeds and planting bulbs, shovelling manure, and watering invisible creations which seemed to lie as impossibilities beneath the earth's soil for so long. Even so it didn't seem an unnatural pastime for me to simply sit upon the stone steps in the backyard as I watched my dad, his sweat dripping down his brow in the basking sun, as he attended to his garden of blood-red blooming tulips.

In the space of remembering on my morning walk, I began to wonder what it was that I knew at the age of nine. I wondered if in my nine-year-old body I had already unearthed my 'holy curiosity'. Maybe somehow in this space of my childhood backyard were the paths I needed to return to, to answer the question of what preoccupied me. Maybe if I could quiet myself enough to return to the sound of the blood-red tulips, perhaps they might just lead me back to finding a way of 'looking spring in the eye'.



As I continued walking and remembering, I had a sense that I was onto something. And I suspected it was deeper and richer in substance than all the other ideas which had floated through me before. Or maybe, whatever this was, it was simply the weavings of all these previous thoughts, visions, and inklings meshed into one. It had that feeling about it, that feeling you get when you know the word you want to say and you know it because you feel it on the tip of your tongue. Yet, whatever you long to express seems to remain hidden, concealed somehow and beyond your control.

My mother, a gifted pianist, once told me of a book she had read on the life of the great violinist Sir Yehudi Menuhin. I don't recall the details of the story but for some reason his name seemed to stay with me.

In the house where I grew up I would often listen to my mother gently playing music on the ivory keyboard of her baby grand piano. The piano came to rest just inside the door to our family room after being carefully shipped from my grandparent's home in Manitoba to our home in Ontario. In the springtime, I'd find myself perched upon the red velvet covered piano bench, gazing outside the window into the garden of blood-red tulips.

I was taken by surprise recently as I searched through the stacks at the Vancouver Library to come across the book, *The Third Ear: On listening to the world* (1989). It startled me in the sense that I wasn't looking for a book on listening, yet it appeared to be glaring out at me, ready to offer itself to me, amongst the many hundreds of other books. And what prompted me to take it home was the fact that the forward had been written by Sir Yehudi Menuhin.

As I began to read, his words invited me to consider a thought which was to become as firmly ingrained in my body as his name; the idea that "to begin to comprehend the Mystery of life it is not sufficient to touch and to see - we need to hear, to listen, and thus to unite heart and mind and soul" (p. 7).

And shortly thereafter, on page 11, I read the words of Lorenz Oken, a scientific researcher and philosopher of the nineteenth-century. "The eye takes a person into the world. The ear brings the world into a human being."

And so it  
space of these  
memories of  
keys and blood-  
embark upon a  
back to  
which I had



Photo 2

came to be that, within the  
words nestled within the  
gentle music upon ivory  
red tulips, I began to  
path which would guide me  
uncovering a 'holy curiosity'  
intimately known as a child.

A 'holy curiosity' played to the notes of grace. 'Grace notes'.  
Remembering back to those unearned moments, of the "divine  
breaking into one's life unexpectedly" (Patterson, 2003 p. 121).

Prayer .....does not complete itself in an instant, nor does it move on a level plane,  
but thrusts itself forward through depths and heights, through detours and byways.  
It runs its course as a gradually advancing action, from word to word, from thought  
to thought, from feeling to feeling.

~ Abraham Heschel

# *PART ONE*

# *LISTENING PRESENCE*

Just sit there right now

Don't do a thing

Just rest.

For your separation from God,

From love,

Is the hardest work

In this

World

Let me bring you trays of food

And something

That you like to

Drink

You can use my soft words

As a cushion

For your Head

~ Hafiz

# *M o v e m e n t   o n e*

## *L I S T E N I N G   P R E S E N C E*

**R**ooted in contemplative traditions around the world, the art of listening invites a sacred historical way of knowing.

This way of knowing reclaims a genuine wisdom dimension grounded in spiritual practice predisposing the listener to a sense of Mystery in the daily round. Practices of prayer, meditation and contemplation bring forth various ways of living, deeply sensitive, to a sacred alchemy that beats within the rhythms of the everyday. A willingness to surrender to these ancient rhythms of life uncovers buried roadmaps guiding the body into living a listening liturgy receptive to a divine presence within all. Cultivating a listening practice is core to relationships of intimacy, central to spiritual practice, a conduit of divine consciousness and a

way which leads to opening the interior terrain of the heart, the graced receptor of wonder. (Nouwen, Merton, Palmer, Norris, Heschel, Bourgeault, Steindl-Rast, Pert)

Many of our greatest spiritual books contain instructions on listening. The Upanishads says: the ear is the way. Spiritual traditions of Judaism, Islam, Zen and many shamans tell us: listen to the divine voice; you can hear that still small voice within; listen to the inner voice; close the eyes and look inward. Listening is referred to ninety-one times in the first five books of the Old Testament. (Berendt, 1992, p. 24-26).

Jesus said "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9)

"Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions and attend to them with the ear of your heart" (RB Prologue : 1)

The Sufi poet Hafiz wrote, "Everyone is God speaking. Why not be polite and listen to Him?" (Ladinsky, trans. 1999 p. 269)

Listening is an embodied practice calling forth all of our humanness as we seek to learn, discover and live the fullness of life.

Distinguishable from scientific domains of hearing information through the ear and processing it in the mind, listening within spiritual practices is alchemic in nature. It bares the potential to transform a level of communication, into a space of communion whereby the body quietly distils the mind's words dropping deeply downwards into sounds of silence. Yet, paradoxically, its presence proclaims itself within the physicality of the body bringing voice to the communal Mystery. It brings forth what Norman Brown (1985) once called "the resurrection of the body" whereby the primordial body dissolves a division of mind and body and soul. It invites a liberation of the senses, awakening the Wisdom rooted in the communal body.

The alphabet of the body, a language rooted in the sensory life of the body, is written deeply in the marrow of our bones. The gift of listening to this interior landscape nourishes the spirit; it is the milk and honey, the wine and blood, a luminous connective tissue of life. Listening contemplatively is to live with "rapt attention" (Hall, 1998, p.9), a loving gaze, attuned to the body's whispering emotions, sensations, tones and intuition, the body's affective faculties.

"Listening is an awareness that not only are we present to each other, we are present to something that is spiritual, holy, sacred" (Lindahl, 2002, p.14).



The heart's contemplative nature attunes the body rhythmically for dialoguing with life. This Wisdom way fractures habitual ways of reacting, shifting reactive patterns into a responsive relational flow. It ushers in new ways to attend, to care and thus to nourish the inner landscape, the perennial source of our spiritual lives. Responding with a listening heart is an ethical action, an act of courage, a co-creative relationship as the world arises from the ways we live. It requires a stance of integrity and trust involving an element of vulnerability for in the call to respond with care we come to risk ourselves. We must let ourselves be touched. As teacher and writer Ralph Fletcher suggests, "To affect someone you have to first allow yourself to be affected by them" (1991, p.65). Listening is a pedagogy of love, a living curriculum of reverence.

Listening contemplatively with the 'ear of the heart' is not a spiritual feat but a generative dimension of being human, a manner of deep knowing that invites a path of transformation when one begins to practice the counsel of the listening body.

Responding to the sacred dimension of life evokes an awareness of something other than ourselves as we come to bear witness to the divine through the flow of relationship. This relational flow expressed

through the body arises from a biology of love. (Bunnell & Forsythe 2001, Pert 1997, Nakagawa 2000) The very contemplative nature of love is a seed for a manifestation of the sacred. Although the word *contemplation* is often used in an everyday vocabulary to signify a muted solitude, bringing to mind images of escaping life, sitting atop the mountain peak, it is really about how one lives fully aware and receptive, offering the fruit of attentiveness to that which takes place in daily life. The Buddhist tradition speaks of 'mindfulness', or what Chogyam Trungpa (1973) refers to as "being in a state of awake" (p. 177). In responding to what calls, contemplation is relational in nature, as "our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One" (Merton, 1961, p. 3). As such, contemplation is a way that joins stillness and action together as we move through the human journey.

The notion that contemplation and action share the same tap-root is explored through the many works of Vanier, Nouwen, Norris, Vest, Bourgeault, Merton, Parker, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Catherine of Genoa, Julian of Norwich to name a few. Highly respected writer and teacher, Parker Palmer, (1990) suggests that when we speak of contemplation and action, we might do well to let the hyphens speak (contemplation-and-action), as one cannot exist without the other. Life calls to us and action becomes our form of response. Failing to reside in the space of paradox between contemplation and

action we sink into a paradigm of 'either/or' often choosing a fragmented hectic life of doing, losing touch with the essence of our being. "We think the world apart" (Palmer, 1988 p. 62).

This thesis seeks to live the heart of listening presence, weaving autobiographical narratives throughout a theoretical framework of phenomenological curriculum research infused with spiritual theology, feminine discourse, women's autobiographical writing and a contemplative way of being in research. It is an invitation to dwell within the heart of a contemplative life which implies an awareness that both question and answer are really one (Merton, 1961) as one considers such questions as: Is it possible to say what listening is? How are the elements of listening known? How does it feel to listen? How does it feel like to be listened to? How do we listen in our daily lives? Might listening be a verb? How does the body sense listening? What is the language of listening? What does listening look like? How does one describe an experience of listening? How does one share and gift listening. Can one learn to listen? How is it that one comes to know the mystery of listening? What does it mean to dwell with listening presence?

My interest in the phenomenon of listening stems from a personal history in care-giving vocations, working with youth,

teaching, and parenting my own three children. Throughout these years I've witnessed the practice of listening as dustless transference, a mystery of presence among those in relationship. Its gift of mystery can shift perception, heal what is broken and transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. By simply doing nothing more than listening with a deep attentiveness to the person who stands before us, our responsiveness arises from a place of care, the ontological, existential structure of the human being (Heidegger,1996). Listening is a way to stretch and bend and expand the taproots which shape and compose our ways of being.

In this living work, I hope to embrace and extend a greater sensitivity, alertness and appreciation for the Wisdom tradition of listening, living deeply awake to all the paradoxes in our storied lives. The purpose of this work is to explore how one cultivates a contemplative listening practice in the daily round. Writing from a space of deep receptivity the listening itself becomes the methodology while the writing process becomes a threshold into life's dynamic endless possibilities. Writing through my desire to reside in the matrix of the heart's mystery I long to know my research as a way of living prayerfully. In this work I hope not so much for answers as breathing places where transformation, conversion and renewal are birthed through listening soundscapes.

Mary Oliver said it best. "I want the poem to ask something and, at its best moments, I want the question to remain unanswered" (2000, p. 24).

This work supports a contemplative phenomenology of listening as spiritual practice contributing to the ongoing, never-ending pedagogical conversations in the every day. Spirituality is ultimately about how we dwell within the issues brought about through the bread and butter of daily living, how we "channel our eros" (Rolheiser, 1999, p. 11), "the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life" (Palmer, 1998, p. 5) The 12th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen spoke of feminine spirituality as "greening power" (Fierro, 1994, p. 9), a quality of being that requires renewal, openness and fresh expression in every moment.

This work I hope will invite a metamorphosis, a mysterious immersion into the heart of grace. Accepting the invitation requires a slowing down to breathe the whispers of life welcoming whatever avails itself as part of sacred time, walking the unknown footsteps of a contemplative phenomenology. My reference points are maternal, Western and Christian, but I hope that this work will speak to all our multiple ways of living a listening life receptive to Wisdom and grace of spirit.

## DOMINOS AND SPIDERWEBS

I awoke this morning to grey covered skies. The morning's mist and last night's rain danced together illuminating the forest outside my window.

Now, the rain has ceased and the mist is giving way to clearer skies. An hour ago you wouldn't have known there were islands across the way. But now, as the veil of mist lifts and disappears into forested spaces, a new landscape unfolds before me.

A tugboat slowly glides upon the ocean's body, past the outstretched islands. The more I listen, the more I hear. The more I hear, the more I listen. A bird outside my window snaps his beak around an insect in flight. The sun's rays work to lift up last night's rain into her arms.

The spider works, spinning her web between two pillars on the front deck, two pillars holding her web in place. It is in the centre that she performs, building outwards, creating inwards, an ebb, a flow. And when the sun reflects off the surface I see her creation. But as the sun shifts or a cloud passes by, her work no longer becomes visible to my human eye. If I move, sometimes I can see it again. Other times, I need to be patient and simply wait for the cloud to pass, the earth and sun, the light, the shadow, to shift.

I wonder if this isn't much like the daily work of our lives. Sometimes the evidence of work is clear. The laundry is neatly folded, our e-mails have all been answered and our bills paid. But what about our work of the heart?

Is it as visible as the freshly ironed shirts hanging starched and ready to go in the closet? I used to think the answer to this question was no. But now I am beginning to wonder if this is so.

Maybe the work of the heart is just as visible once we become receptive to witnessing its acts of creation. And perhaps this witnessing requires us to be fully present, not only in sight but through all our embodied sensitivities – to know that the eye is not restricted to just sight as the ear is not constrained to only sound.

I am reminded of lining up a row of dominos, as a young girl at my grandparents' cottage. All lined in a row, each strong by itself, space existing between each. Yet, when the first in the row was gently nudged it leaned into the other and the next would guide the other until they all came to rest.

Maybe the work of the heart is, after all, like the dominos and the spider web. At times, it is difficult to see and almost impossible to hear. Its creations may seem to be hidden. Perhaps though, once a shift in the sun's rays illuminates us to what we have not been able to receive before, we become drawn into the possibility of being surprised by its Mystery again. As we become more present to the Mystery in this gesturing landscape we begin to listen to the Mystery that speaks in our everyday lives.

Just like the dominos there becomes no stopping or turning back. When the first domino touches the second, the cycle propels itself and all we can do is lean into the movement as we find our place within the Mystery. For even in our resistance we cannot stop it's becoming. It simply is.



# *LISTENING GUIDEPOSTS*

The day on which one starts out is not the time to start one's

preparations

~ Nigerian Folk Saying

## *M o v e m e n t   t w o*

### *L I S T E N I N G   G U I D E P O S T S*

**T**he ways of St. Benedict, an Italian monk living in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, may serve as spiritual counsel in a search to reunite with a tradition of contemplative listening practices. The wisdom in the Rule and the ways of phenomenological curriculum research may perhaps bring about a shift in perception for attending to the daily rhythms of life through 'the ear of the heart'. Guided in the ways of a monk who desired to establish...

*"a school for the Lord's service" (RB Prologue)*

... moving outside the ways of rational thinking may bring about a change of understandings. The word Wisdom, with a capital 'w', suggests Cynthia Bourgeault (2003), an Episcopal priest, writer and

contemplative retreat leader, is not limited to one specific particular path but rather flows “like a great underground stream” whose waters provide “guidance and nurturance, as well as occasional sharp course corrections” (p. 4). It is rooted in the heart’s desire to live fully the blessing and promise of one’s being.

A desire to sift through the various ways we are called to live requires guidance, a modeling of sorts. Translating a tradition into the uniqueness of one’s being is a way of gathering and mixing all the necessary ingredients together in a unique practice. It behooves us to remember that in our uniqueness we are joined together in our sameness. Recalling what unites us grounds us into the very fabric of life, alert to the different textures, colors and fibers, yet cupped together in acts of creation. It is within this context that I find St. Benedict’s teachings vital to this work.

Most of what is known about Benedict of Norcia comes from stories written down by Pope St. Gregory the Great in the 590’s. They are found as Book II of a four-part work entitled *The Dialogues*.

Born of middle class at the town of Nursia, now Norcia, southeast of Perugia around c.480, Benedict was sent as a youth to be

educated in Rome at the time the decline of the Roman Empire was well under way.

Before completing his education in Rome, Benedict decided to devote himself to spiritual life. After a period of rudimentary religious community at Enfide, east of Rome, he became a hermit for several years in the nearby deserted locality of Subiaco.

Word of his holiness spread. Noblemen of Rome sent their sons to Subiaco to be educated by him. For those who sought him he set up twelve monasteries each housing twelve men.

He remained at Subiaco for some thirty years. Around 529 Benedict moved to Monte Cassino, Campania, accompanied by some of his followers. Towards the end of his life he wrote what we call today *The Rule of St. Benedict*, a summary of his thoughts on the monastic life. His Rule sought to embrace ways of living the daily rhythms of *ora et labora*, "prayer and work" (Vest 1997, Chruttister 1991, Fry 1998). Benedict's Rule was neither about governing one another through strict law enforcement nor dictating how and what to think in specified terms. Rather it was about learning to live with intention transcribing all actions as movements of love, acts of prayerful labour.

Benedict wrote as a layman dedicated to the search for God, for a community composed mostly of laymen. Members of the community might be selected for ordination, and priests and clerics might join, but there was to be no distinction between the ordained and the non-ordained in their status as monks. Benedict, recognizing individuals and communities are shaped by one another, devoted much of his time to the ways people interacted with each other. His main concern was that love be the intrinsic motivator behind our actions. He worked for inner transformation rather than outward compliance.

Benedict encouraged self-discipline in all the ordinary circumstances of life, a continuing education with the implicit aim of achieving self-respect, an adaptation to the uniqueness of individuals and a reverent relationship with God.

St. Benedict didn't try to avoid life, rather he sought ways of living the ordinary life deeply and extraordinarily well (Norris 1994/1996/ 1998, Vest 2000/1997, Chittister 1991, Steindl-Rast 1999). Bringing attention and awareness to life through the tasks of daily living, the rule reflects that living is a community effort, not exclusively an individual enterprise. A monk's education had to extend beyond theory and contemplation to the realities of contemporary life,

to building, nurturing and sustaining life. To understand the Rule is to live its Wisdom teachings, the work of the deep self.

Its tone is distinctively Benedictine, claiming to require “*nothing harsh, nothing burdensome*” (RB Prologue: 9), for “*he should use prudence and avoid extremes; otherwise, by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, he may break the vessel.*” ~ RB 64:158

Listening, community, obedience, humility, contemplation, hospitality, good stewardship, prayer and work are central to Benedict’s teachings. Living life alert to the presence of the divine, every tool, talent and living creature is perceived as a pure gift from God. For Benedict, a way of seeking God, *seeking* from the Latin *sagire*, “to perceive quickly or keenly” (Klein, 1967, p.1411), came through listening, recognizing the manifestation of God in each other and in our works.

Service ...

*“point[s] out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words.” ~ RB 24.*

From its beginning Benedictine tradition has touched lives of many beyond those in monasteries. Benedictine communities have been likened to families, having their own customs and ways but interacting with their neighbours, living out the truth of Martin Buber's words, 'Just to live is holy'.

On March 21, c.543 Benedict died in the oratory. The stories tell us that he was standing on his feet with his hands raised in prayer. Benedict's Rule, rooted in Gospel values, did much to articulate and foster Wisdom ways. A "*little rule for beginners*" (RB 73:8), it guides those who read it in the way of the heart.

*Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide.*  
~ RB Prologue 9

"It is the embodiment of a vision and a philosophy that is perhaps better lived in the spirit of its origins than as a legal document."

~Moore in Fry, 1998, p.xvii

A reproduction of the oldest existing copy of the Rule of St. Benedict is *The Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, Vol. XV, The Rule of St. Benedict* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 48) edited by D. H. Farmer (1968). This reproduction is the only one written in uncial script with insular capitals in which all letters are capitals formed by simple rounded strokes rather than the several strokes required to form each letter in classical square script. Uncial Greek and Latin scripts emerged in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. and were the dominant script form for centuries till the development of a more compact minuscule script after 800 c. The manuscript reads as a continuous row of letters with no punctuation or word spacing.

The concept of written literacy involved converting the spoken word into a coded string of phonetic symbols. Reading literacy involved tracking along this code, reading slowly, aloud and remembering a good proportion of the text by heart.

Known as "one of the most sumptuous surviving manuscripts of its time" this reproduction reflects the visual beauty of the scripted word of this historical time period, embodying the grace, care and artistry embedded in the written word. This artistic form nudges both



writer and reader into a gentler pace inviting its contemplative nature to wash over one's response.

"In modern life we read mainly for information or entertainment, and writing about books tends to be critical rather than appreciative and exploratory. We have yet to rediscover the monastic practice of contemplative reading which is carried out with care, attention to beauty and form, and a meditative attitude" ~Fry, 1998, p. xxiii.

*"If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day"*

~RB 64:159

The Rule challenges "*all you who seek the Heavenly home*" (RB 73.8) to live with conscious intent, accountable to self, community and God. It is a way of living that takes the "dust and clay of every day and turn[s] it into beauty" (Chittister, 1991, p. 7). With 73 short chapters, translations comprise no more than one hundred pages.

At first one may be tempted to close the book at the sight of the word Rule. After all, our lives already appear inundated with too many

rules: rules from the time we must get up, to how we perform our work, to when we pay our taxes.

If we are patient enough though to seek beyond the obvious, we find the word rule comes from the Latin word, *regula* (Klein, 1967). In the ancient sense, the word rule meant guidepost or railing, something to hang on to in the dark, something that points out the road, that gives us support as we climb. Its Wisdom keeps us safe as we live in the Mystery of life's hidden and latent gifts, our holy curiosities.

Researching a word's etymology provides an invocation to discern meaning beneath the obvious generating opportunities to distil a genuine vocabulary rooted in a tradition of 'word made flesh'. The word *genuine* comes from the Latin word *Genero* meaning 'give birth to' (Funk, 1950, p.381). I suggest attending to the 'etymological essence' of one's narrative life serves as a guide in recovering an authenticity of voice, returning the body to its own rhythms of sound, silence and action.

"Language finds its source and its continuing power in remaining close to silence. Words with power speak to the silence within. Words then, in themselves, when spoken or written embody a particular presence, felt experience or texture of silence."

~ McMorrow, n.d. p.100

*A wise man is known by his few words.*

~ *RB 101*

A life lived in the tradition of St Benedict asks us to give the best of ourselves in whatever area of life we are called to serve. The cultivation of contemplative practices nurtures a listening life, bringing to voice the divine presence in the world, guiding and informing our ways of being through the whispered flow of loving presence.

Perhaps, if St. Benedict were living now he might bear the title of a true pedagogue, "someone who has endured in the faith and therefore is able to lead by example, not simply by word" (Pratt, Homan, 2000, p. 31).

In the words of theologian Frederick Buechner, "You do not solve the mystery of yourself, you live the mystery. And you do that not by fully knowing yourself but by fully being yourself" (1973, p.64).



For a history of the Rule of St. Benedict, this thesis draws primarily upon the work of Timothy Fry, Kathleen Norris, Norvene Vest, Joan Chittister, Lonni Collins Pratt, Father Daniel Homan, Brother David Steindl-Rast, and Cynthia Bourgeault.

For an English translation of the Rule, *The Rule of St. Benedict* edited by Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (1998) is used. Teachings of the Liturgy of the Hours, or the Divine Office, is from *The Work of God: Benedictine Prayer* edited by Judith Suter, O.S.B. (1997).

During the writing of this work I had the gift of visiting with both Brother David Steindl-Rast , a Benedictine monk and Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and Benedictine teacher. Brother Steindl-Rast's words offered a space for deep contemplation through the blessing of conversations shared during a retreat in Cortona, Italy in the fall of 2002. Cynthia Bourgeault's retreats on Benedictine spirituality and the practice of Lectio Divina, have been fruitful opportunities to mindfully witness the written word in living practice.

The work of Kathleen Norris contributes lyrical autobiographical accounts of Benedictine spirituality (1993,1996,1998). I am especially grateful for her meditations on the language of Christianity in *Amazing*

*Grace* (1998) as it serves in the process of learning or more succinctly,  
relearning a living vocabulary of faith.



*Anticipate one another with honor. ~ RB 72:4-10*



## SOUNDSCAPES OF BIRTHING BLOSSOMS

Outside our dining room window, planted close to the house, there's a gnarled, old plum tree. It's the first tree you see as you look through the window into the backyard; and its blossoms are the first to appear in springtime. The tree is my gentle reminder - no matter how old we are, no matter what challenges we must face, the season of rebirth is always upon us.

Every once in a while, my father-in-law Joe, a tree-pruner by vocation, can be found in my backyard - climbing up a ladder to trim some tree, or planting a new seedling in the soil. He comes unannounced, leaves without saying goodbye. Sometimes I don't know that he is there: only the sight of something changed in the backyard alerts me to his presence.

Some years ago, it seems that Joe decided to graft some branches on the plum tree without saying anything to anyone. Looking

outside the window, one day, I spotted the old plum tree looking as if it had bandages of some sort wrapped around its branches. The whole tree had taken on an odd shape: spindly-shaped sticks were taped at odd angles to leafy branches that had once provided shade over the ground below.

In late winter, I'd look at the plum tree and find evidence of Joe's mysterious comings and goings - more branches at the base of the tree, more tape and bandages.

But over the years, the tree has blossomed into a springtime bouquet of fresh-linen whites to vibrant glowing pinks. The palest of colors appear first with the deepest being the last to blossom. The tree has grown from carrying only one flower to now birthing a rainbow of several. And the blossoming seems to last so much longer.

The other day, I was standing on the back porch with friends who'd not seen the tree in springtime. Someone remarked on its wild array of exotic blossoms.

"Wow", a young boy exclaimed. "Cool. Isn't God amazing? A tree with a whole bunch of different flowers on it!"

I chuckled. "Trevor," I put my arm around the boy: "In this case, God's name is Joe." I told the story about Joe and his mysterious appearances and disappearances, and how he took it upon himself to transform the gnarled, old tree over several years.

This morning, as I look outside, it dawns on me, that, well, maybe there's a little more to this story than I first imagined. The young boy was right. God is amazing: working together, Joe and God have created artistry on the limbs of an ageing plum tree and God's beauty has shone forth through Joe's hands.

And I see more than the blossoming beauty that'll soon bear the gift of succulent summertime plums. I witness a story of transformation, birthing life's mystery: I see my 75-year-old father-in-law living the artistry of God's hands, and feel a sacred presence in the union of Joe and God and the plum tree. There is holy beauty in God's presence, there is birthing beauty in the ageing hands of my father-in-law and there is mysterious beauty in the new life, that spring after spring, the ageing plum tree brings forth.



# *LISTENING SERVICE*

The Guest is inside you, and also inside me.

~Kabir.

## *M o v e m e n t   t h r e e*

# *L I S T E N I N G   S E R V I C E*

**A**s experience teaches, there is no blueprint for living well, no singular methodology for being human. There is no full-proof formula for the art of loving, raising our children, being caretakers in the world. Life is filled with unknowns, uncertainties, the great unfixables.

The gift of attentively listening to one another requires honouring the multiple ways of being human. It requires a willingness to receive the flow of whatever offers itself as a river receives the changing seas of the seasons.

Love, writes Margaret Guenther, spiritual director and teacher, is a component of listening (1992). Guenther invites us to consider the image of listener as a midwife to the soul, the literal meaning of which is 'with-woman'. The midwife attends the birth and sees in ways the birth-giver cannot, just as the listener hears in ways the other may not. When a listener attends with the 'ear of the heart' we practice what Guenther deems the art of Holy Listening. Holy listening is a way of listening another's soul into life and may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.

The communal gift of listening arises within a union of self and other situated in a relationship of reciprocity. This certain kind of listening, says educator and phenomenologist Max Van Manen (1990), is what sustains pedagogical thoughtfulness. It is embodied in a vocabulary of hope as a way of being, an act of faith in one another and our world. It is a way of attending and responding to the sense another is making as opposed to trying to direct their interpretation.

Writing on the phenomenology of love, philosopher Max Scheler (1992) maintains that the act of love, as movement, can only be exhibited not defined. Similarly, good teaching, states teacher and writer, Palmer (1998) cannot be reduced to technique, for good

teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. I propose that listening cannot be defined nor deconstructed, or shaped into a technique, without disrupting the spirit. It is not a tool utilized for accomplishing specific goals. It cannot be taught, teaching step-by-step formulaic processes. It can only be deeply known through experiencing it in the body for it is the way of the listening body. As contemporary Wisdom teacher of the Sufi tradition Kabir Helminski writes "We are knee-deep in a river, searching for water" (1992, p.25).

Listening is experiential in nature. Its core is the ineffable essence of Mystery, the way of Wisdom. Receptive to what arises within a lived curriculum we are called to receive with a deep attentiveness that which seeks to be known. Knowing of any sort is relational, rooted in a never-ceasing process of becoming, knowing the narrative textures of our experiences, grounded in community, imagination and spirit (Palmer 1998, Greene 1995, Grumet 1988, Nakagawa 2000).

Listening arises in relationship. It is a gift we have the ability to freely give, a tenderizing salt for the soul. Through a reciprocal flow of offering and receiving, this gift brings deeper and richer insights to our own experiences and understandings. It transforms within the body "a stony heart" into a "heart of flesh" (Ezek 36:22-28).

Listening as an act of hospitality is a way of walking with one another in our journeys. As physician Rachel Naomi Remen (1996, 2000) wisely suggests throughout her work in the mind-body-health field, being part of life's endless conversations affirms and strengthens a belief in the mystery of a divine connection among people and opens an attitude of listening and respect.

*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

*~ Hebrews 13:2*

When we begin to listen with 'the ear of the heart' we respond in receptive ways, open to a willingness to be changed by another, to see in each of us the pilgrim traveling alone, vulnerable in our need of hospitality and home. The hospitable act of listening becomes a reciprocal flow between listener and teller, student and teacher, parent and child, the young and the old. And in this flow dualistic binaries dissolve to receive the mystery of another, to receive the Word of God, whenever and wherever it comes knocking. We must seek to stand by all, to breathe in the living presence of each other, whether in pain, weakness, health, or strength, for listening is a gift for the giving lovingly dressed in a garment of trusting embrace, nurturing an

intimate reverence for life. It is a movement in which we strive unconditionally to know the literal meaning of the word compassion, 'to suffer with'.

At times life can appear to hold little space for attending to one another and the notion of solitude takes on an air of spiritual luxury. Finding time for listening deeply may seem a near impossibility. With a never ending 'to do list' of activities often performed void of meaning, adding another dimension, another 'thing' to attend to can feel at times to be a burden too heavy for us to carry, a frustrating fragmentation of our daily lives. How do we live a contemplative life, nurture a listening presence, foster a sense of meaning in the daily round? How do we find a way? How do we, in the words of Father Ron Rolheiser, "put skin to our prayers?" (1991, p. 84). The idea of 'a way' suggested by Martin Buber (1960) may offer some words of resonance for listening contemplation.

"There is no separation within the human world between the high and the low; to each the highest is open, each life has its access to reality, each nature its eternal right, from each thing a way leads to God, and each way that leads to God is the way" (p.149).

Every action grounded in a listening heart conveys compassion, leading one in the continual work of transformation and communion of self and other. In being of service, writes Ram Dass (2001), we “help through all that we do. But at the deepest level we help through who we are” (p. 227). This listening work of the soul awakens an awareness of self, bringing light to the offerings of each individual in all their strengths and vulnerabilities. Service as the work of the soul becomes a catalyst for inner work and inner work becomes a catalyst for service. “This spiritual path uses as its vehicle for transformation our actions themselves; that is, we gain internal freedom through external action” (Ram Dass & Bush, 1992 p.134). It is from the rhythm of service that Wisdom, creativity and love emanate.

Action as service, within a spiritual context, breaks down an illusion of separateness revealing a larger vision of life. Seemingly, the smallest act of care emerges as an inspirational act of love contributing to the unity of life. Dropping down into the listening body our minds quiet as we attend to the needs of ‘self and other’. A listening practice becomes essential to the breath of life.

*The Lord Waits for Us Daily to Translate into Action,  
as We should, His Holy Teachings.*

*~ RB Prologue: 33-35*

## A DAILY GIFT

Held together in family stories  
Breaths of care feed a family's soul

Our sharing infuses an ordinary life  
Into an extra/ordinary life of presence

Ordinary experiences be/come sacred  
In friendship, family and home

Daily chores done with listening presence  
Ground us with the world around

Function and beauty ignite together  
In everyday caring for each other

A listening path is a wondering path  
A path that whispers and sings to us

Within the blossoming of springtime tulips  
Our world weaves herself in

Words born out of breath



## DISCARDED BEAUTY



*Photo 3*

Just before turning on the garburator, by chance, I happened to witness this palette of autumn colors lining the kitchen sink after preparing the miniature peppers for Easter dinner.

# *LISTENING QUESTIONINGS*

What is this precious love and laughter

Budding in our hearts?

It is the glorious sound

Of a soul waking up!

~ Hafiz

## *M o v e m e n t   f o u r*

### *L I S T E N I N G   Q U E S T / I O N I N G S*

**W**hat does it mean to listen deeply, connecting with the terrain of the heart? How might we seek beyond the obvious, listening contemplatively in search of what whispers beneath the skin, tapping into the wellsprings of wisdom? Can we find ways to dwell within the spiritual artistry of life?

Tapping into the gifts that are hidden deeply within all is a duty each of us carries. It is in the ways we present our offerings that our gifts contribute to transforming elements of an unknown into part of the living mystery. Gifts are not always in the form of function, the

thing itself, but rather resonate within our being. "It may be the quality of love which gives life to a function; it may be a quality of love which has nothing to do with any function" (Vanier, 1979, p. 22-23).

Communities governed by laws and rules prescribe a singular way of being, thinking and performing, stagnating growth, blocking wisdom ways of knowing. They "form-or deform-their members to make them all alike, as if this was a good quality"(Vanier, 1979, p.21).

Mary Catherine Bateson (1990) draws our attention to the notion that composing a life is an act of improvisation. We discover our life not in pursuing that which is already known but by consenting to listen deeply enough to risk ourselves, weaving our 'doing' within a contemplative realm, responding to, and trusting life's essential nature. Reflecting, rewriting, sojourning with the multiple experiences which shape, mould and design a life pulls us into a space of deeply responding to the rhythmic heartbeats of mystery, a place too deep to be grasped in words, a knowing beyond knowing, a paradigm of 'unknowing'.

Might listening contemplatively help us distil a sense of mystery in our lives, invite ways of living beyond the fire of rational thought,

refreshing a dryness of heart? Can we recover ways to make the here and now meaningful, relevant and sacred for us? Is it possible to return to a marvel of blood and bone and flesh, to drink in the nectar, the musical Mystery, recovering a sense of the holy? How might we work through calcified doctrines returning them to the nutrients of their original soil? Might attuning our bodies to new vibrations through soundwork invite talk from the bone?

Igniting these questions generates creative responses from the body as we attend to the abundant ways of knowing through 'the ear of the heart'. Heart rhythms pump the blood of common tap-roots returning us to the soil from where we came, for it is here that we find nourishment for the soul, our listening guideposts.

Questions anoint our wounds and feast the soul. They keep us awake as we journey in our desire "to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" (T. S. Eliot). As Marion Woodman, a leader in feminine development and Jungian analyst, has come to understand, "the answer often lies in the unconscious waiting for the question to be consciously asked" (2000, p. xiii). Yet, the answers one arrives at will be influenced by the orientation and experiences of the person asking them and in turn will shift and change throughout time (Christ 1980, Gilligan 1993, Anderson & Hopkins 1992).

In this universe we are given two gifts; the ability to love and the ability to ask questions. Which are, at the same time, the fires that warm us and the fires that scorch us.

~ Mary Oliver, 2000, p.48

Engaging in the art of questioning may lead us to explore a spiritual epistemology or what Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (1999) call spiritual literacy – an ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experience. I would like to expand this notion to suggest a spiritual epistemology is not only about reading with the eyes but with the ears of the heart, listening receptively to the resonance of embodied experience. It envelops an art of discernment, as supported through the writing of Feminine Mystics such as Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Catherine of Genoa, Julian of Norwich to name a few, distilling what is hidden and obscure, more so than trumpeting dense vocabularies proclaiming the obvious.

“To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being”, writes Van Manen (2001 p. 43). In keeping a certain pedagogical thoughtfulness about the essential nature of the questions we ask, we may connect to

that which is rooted in the deep desire of our hearts. Guided in the words of poet Rainer Maria Rilke,

“Search into the depths of Things: there, irony never descends – and when you arrive at the edge of greatness, find out whether this way of perceiving the world arises from a necessity of your being. For under the influence of serious Things it will either fall away from you (if it is something accidental), or else (if it is really innate and belongs to you) it will grow strong, and become a serious tool and take its place among the instruments which you can form your art with” (1986, p. 15).

If thought begins in the opening of the heart’s questions, how might living a listening practice shepherd us as we journey through the many universal questions of our lives?

# MOMENTS OF EARTHLY DIALOGUE

## A BIRTH OF GENTLE QUESTIONS

Beckoning questions.....

invite us into

seeking deeper understandings

held within thoughtful lingerings.

As I walk along the ocean's shore, waves soothing, lapping up beneath my bare and callused so[u][e]s I dis/cover another text/ure in this water symphony. Translucent water receding backwards, curling under, returning to its fluid home - its caressing gentle touch sliding in and out and around a pebbled landscape - I h/ear, for what I re/member to be the first time, a maraca playing.



Water washing

loosening pebbles

water washing out rhythms

among dry storied stone.

Another music maker awakens within spaces of liquid bodies.

As I walk and listen I un/cover what I have missed before in my morning walks, questions seeping through my dry storied porous skin.

Inwards and outwards, absorbing the space around me, nature's breath beacons me to ask. And in this asking, echoes of sound re/sound, swelling like the ocean's surge, sing within my body.

The ocean's text teaches and engages me in the ever-present dance between question and answer. Constant fluid rhythms, back and forth, up and down - spiralling waves knowing and releasing, understanding and letting go. And in this place, this space of in- between, the ocean invites me to rest, to linger in a space woven of wondering questions and wandering answers.

I watch the water floating down towards the ocean carving out a stream from the embankment into and through the sand. The water flows around the stones. It does not stop and retreat, turning backwards, but rather finds a gentle way around that which rests in its path. For what is resting in its path is simply resting. Water is strong. Water is soft. Water wisdom.

Returning to the cabin, I find my mother knitting - a meditative art. Softly speaking, just a note or two above the gentle rhythm of gliding knitting needles, she mentions the delicate pink blossoms of the magnolia tree reaching upwards beside the deck.

She says, "I didn't know there was a magnolia tree here."

"Their bloom doesn't last long," I say.

This seaside landscape teaches me how life is ever changing, constant in its motion, constant in its movements of birth, death, and rebirth. Its passionate presence teaches always. But I am only aware of these teachings when I am quiet enough to listen.

Each day as I walk down to the ocean a new landscape emerges. Yesterday's landscape has made space for today's designs, today's learning, today's questions, today's answers. If I walk with yesterday clenched tightly in my fists, I will not sense the wind today caressing the palms of my hands. How do we soak in this day's beauty? How do we find ways of bodily presence?

The clouds in the distant sky appear to hang as hand embroidered Irish linen hung with little breeze. Yet as I squint my eyes, reaching closer to the clouds, pulling myself into an attentive presence, I notice they are anything but still. They move. They change in shape, size and density. A cloud to my left reminds me of a woman dancing across the sky, arms with the grace of willow limbs and a torso of upholding strength. And I am reminded that even in our stillness, we move.

Witnessing the clouds above that day, I re/member a day, not long ago, when driving to school. An opening, a patch of tall grass appears outside my right-hand window. The sun beats down on the grass deeply alive with color. A gentle breeze tangoes in the emerald blades.

How I longed to pull off the road, to wriggle in the grass, feeling,  
listening and taking in the scent of the earth's green cloak wrapping around  
my skin.

Sunshine, feather clouds, mist - filters we listen through. The light,  
reflection - so bright I squint looking out across the ocean. The morning  
sunshine beckons me to awake. The ferry sounds her horn. The water has  
few ripples in her this morning. The ghost-like vessel travels through the  
mist gliding atop the mirrored water. I can see the ferry reflection in this  
liquid stillness. What propels this vessel lays hidden to my searching eyes. In  
the stillness the watered mirror reflects and I start to listen to the silence.  
What misted mirrors I wonder are my words reflected through? What is  
left un/said in the listening silence?

Mist travels through the trees, floating by the window and I  
re/member again another moment. Dancing pollen - I saw, but for a moment.  
It seemed to be whisked off the weeping willow tree outside my kitchen  
window. A breeze. Clouds of pollen - fairy dust- scattered through the  
evening sky.

A chance moment.

A moment of chance.

Looking up from my t/ask of washing dishes. And I wondered if I was seeing the pollen or seeing the wind? Did I see the shape of the pollen or the shape of the wind meshed between the sculpted pollen? Could one, I wondered, exist without the other?

If I desire to listen to the sights and sounds and senses around me, I need to let go of what I expect. I need to re/lease. I must remember not to label what I see, for when I label, fluid form becomes shaped into pre-cast statues of my previous experience. Empty expectations - they, and I, become what I already know. I long to know in the un/known. I long to listen to the world as a lover, to awaken the sleeping teacher of soulful knowing - a sacred wisdom.

Receptive listening desire - listening to the presence of sounds floating through my body. My body is the blade of grass that moves as with

the wind. I move with the sounds around me as they and I perform our life dance of listening presence. We move together. We still together. Rejoice in an emerging we.

A blade of grass stands tall towards the sun. I stretch tall towards the sun. I open my torso. I feel spaces within me vibrating, resonating with what surrounds me.

I found a stone on the beach today. At first touch, it reminded me of a woman's torso. Later I saw the palm of my hand. Each bearers of life. A woman's womb holds life's be/coming; a hand holds life in its be/coming. The stone becomes my teacher. The stone becomes my messenger.

I brought the stone to class one day and showed it to my colleagues; some saw a woman, some saw a palm.

The stone continued to teach.

Some saw an eagle.

Some saw a seal.

Some were simply stilled in its presence.

It was returned to me deeper and richer in story than when I first offered it to others.

Do I listen to understand or do I listen just to listen? And in my listening what do I have to offer?

I heard frogs last night in the pond outside my bedroom window. I was wondering where they had been. Was I too early or too late for them this spring?

I am coming to wonder, as I listen to the early springtime dialogue around me that maybe it is not about being too early or too late.

Maybe, it is not so much a question of asking what I have missed. Maybe it is about asking what I have not missed. And this asking, I'm beginning to understand, has something to do with faith.

Maybe it is faith which teaches me "that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them" (Dillard, 1999 p. 10). The least we can do for the grace of these gifts is be present.

And if in our trying to practice a faithfulness of presence to what we may or may not h/ear, or see or sense, we re/member the wisdom of Meister Eckhart, that if the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank-you it will be enough, then maybe that is enough.

The rain drips down from the eaves trough onto the pine tree needles outside my livingroom window. I remind myself to listen. I open the sliding glass door and walk out into the rain. And now the rain drips off my body too, and the tree and I, sky and rain commune in quiet conversation. And I am awakened into the presence of sound wor[l]ds once again.



I suspect, as does Rachel Remen that, perhaps, just maybe, part of the secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company.

earthly dialogues

gentle questions

blessings of good company



*Photo 4*

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN ?

What does it mean to live in the world

Open

To the presence within us

Open

To the presence around us?

To know the pulse of mystery

Arising through us

Beholding our humanness in grace

Inviting drink from the waters

Of enrapturing space?

What does it mean to live in the world within

Open

To a pedagogy of heart with us

Open

To a pedagogy of heart around us?

To know the liquid resonance of love

Arising through us

Beholding us in grace

Inviting us to dance

In the arms of enraptured embrace?

# *LISTENING WHISPERS*

The wind blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but you  
do not know whence it comes or whither it goes.

~ John 3:8

## *Movement five*

### *LISTENING WHISPERS*

**L**istening invites living a life fully alive in deep and quiet ways. In the words of Meister Eckhart, 'Nothing in the universe is so like God as silence'. The Desert Fathers did not receive silence as the absence of sound but as whispers of the soul. Silence opens our hearts to breathe the mystery, feeding the human craving for communion. The music of one sings in varied keys yet all are part of the whispered mystery. It is part of what enables us to live in ways surprised in the wonder and grace of one another.

Listening is a movement rooted in spiritual theology. It dances a language grounded in the body, an embodied pedagogy, a way of

learning loving speech and tenderizing silence. Listening is a spiritual discipline that teaches through non-direction and silence if we let it touch us.

Just as there is no perfect time to pray, there is no perfect time to begin a family, attend to the needs of an aging parent, travel in pursuit of an unknown, examine one's life, write a thesis or.....to listen.

There, simply is, no perfect time. There is only now.

To do only what we want when we want, to pray only when we can fit it in or to listen only when we feel like it, is to seek consolation not risk conversion (Norris, 1991, p. 31).

*On hearing the signal for an hour of the divine office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand and go with utmost speed, yet with gravity and without giving occasion for frivolity.*

~RB 43: 140

Benedictine spirituality infuses our daily tasks with meaning through an awareness of the presence of God. Listening as a way of

prayer brings us back to remembering why we do what we do – it brings us back to the sacred presence of one another.

St. Benedict doesn't say much about how to pray or *how* to listen. He does not prescribe a detailed methodology. He asks only that we live in ways that prayerfully listen wherever we are – at a red light in rush hour, in the grocery store line-up, attending to a sick child, while preparing dinner, or as we lie awake in the tender hours just before dawn.

Regardless of what is happening, monks show up for prayer day after day, all the days of their lives. How one feels or whether the job at hand is complete does not matter when the bell tolls bringing you to prayer. When it's time to pray, you pray.

Is this not, I wonder, much like the work of a parent, a friend, a lover? When the bell of another tolls it brings us back to remembering why we do what we do. The bell returns us to sacred time. When it is time to attend, we need to attend. When it is time to listen, we need to listen. Many of us were taught to think of the words we read as our prayer to God. Prayer was a form of asking. Our prayers took on the shape of requests and became one-way monologues severely

diminishing the idea of living in relationship with God. This way of prayer fostered a malaise of the soul.

Yet the early monastics had another path of prayer, a listening way.

“Prayer is not sending an order and expecting it to be fulfilled. Prayer is attuning yourself to the life of the world, to love, the force that moves the sun and the moon and the stars”

~ Steindtl-Rast & Lebell, 1998, p. xix.

Contemplative listening opens an interior reservoir within the body for the voice of the divine to resonant. The heart is the receptive instrument that dialogues with the silence as it wraps around our words in communion with God. The rhythms, the heartbeats between word and silence is a threshold to prayer, a listening pathway to living attuned to the sacred. “In prayer a self-centred monologue becomes a God-centered dialogue” (Nouwen, 1997, p. 70-71).

To listen in full presence is no small act of immersion in community, love and life. In Mary O’Reilly’s sensitive work, *Radical Presence : Teaching as a Contemplative Practice* (1998), she says that

it is in the art of spiritual *practice* that we learn to live the essence of our spiritual selves. Whatever else goes on is really far from the point. "The point is to keep the prayer hall open" (p. 5). We need to endeavour to keep the prayer halls of our soul open, listening to the resonant echoes within the monastery of our lives. Listening is intimate practice, a pure form of prayer.

To remember to pray is one way,

to remember to live prayerfully is quite another.

To remember to listen is one way,

to remember to live the listening is quite another.

Prayer shifts one's attention. Contemplative prayer is experiential in its way of knowing, a way that listens beyond the obvious. It seeks to quiet the mind, attune the body and awaken the soul to the notes of divine whispers. When the whisper goes deep it re-connects to the creative source deep within our bodies. Listening with the heart prepares a pathway for us to receive and respond to the gift of prayer. A listening life is a conduit to the divine rooted deep



within us. "It is in the feeling, not in the facts, that we find meaning"  
(Patterson, 2003, p. 76).

Worship is a way of seeing the world in the light of God.

~ Rabbi Heschel

## WHISPERING WORKS

For some time now, I've heard whisperings.

Whispers that linger in words

brushing beneath my skin

and whispers that appear

but for a fraction of a second

behind my sleeping eyes.

They seem to emerge unexpectedly and disappear but all too quickly.

And just when I come to realize that they are present, I become no longer present to them.

I desire to stop  
and listen  
when they come.

I desire to bask  
in the warmth  
of their rhythms.

Yet, I am guilty.

I am guilty of being so easily distracted in the business of other sounds. These sounds fill my body with noise, a noise that seems so visible, so urgent, and so obvious, that I cease to listen.

I silence the listening desire.

These whisperings though persist - they softly re-emerge, persistent in their invitations. And I am beginning to sense them as I sense my breath. They live within me, outside of me, through me and in me. Always present.

My t/ask now, is to listen to the whispering flow, the moment-to-moment circling discipline of be/coming ever present to and with these re/emerging whispers.

In this listening I find understandings blossom in the possibilities of living with the prefix 're' in front of my life.

re/veling

in the

know

re/vealing

not

of

do

re/membering

I

and

what

re/searching

This way of listening though, I find is not an easy task.

It requires a willingness to live in a way that disrupts what my eyes readily see. It requires a willingness to question, to re/write, to re/learn. In order to live my life well, I find I need to un-do all that I have done. A messy work of art, this questioning is. Listening to this re/writing seems to demand much from my body.

It demands that I find a way to live gracefully in spite of it all.

It demands that I find a way to fully be awake even in the hours of my darkest longing.

It demands that I begin to know my restless yearnings deep within my body as occasions of celebration and joy.

It demands that I learn to surrender my desire to orchestrate my life according to my desires alone.

It demands that I work vigilantly to uncover the glistening gem in all that I encounter.

Its demands  
are unyielding.

It is in the quest to live these demands that my writing, my listening, and my body need to learn ways of surrender, paths of abandoning.

Natalie Goldberg and John Lee tell us to write as a way to discover. And so I write, often in the dark of night, or in the glimmering light of morning. I write with eyes of moisture, bandaged limbs and a hungry heart. But as I return to the words I have written, I often desire to shift them, delete some, or simply toss them as they are into the trash can beside my feet.

And then there are times when there seems to be an urgency to do something with these words of mine - to live the listening of these words.

There are even times when I find my body feeling queasy about reading these words upon the page. Somehow, it seems, they no longer fit. I begrudgingly try them on for size again only to soon realize I want to give them, I need to give them, away. They no longer feel like my words. They no longer fit. They and I find different dwelling places and a new relationship of deeply listening to the spaces between us emerges.

I find I question every word I write. I long to find the right fit, the right combination, the right phrase.

I think I've got it, only to return to it later and find I hear it differently - I no longer seem to wear these words well. And I find myself frustrated, searching for a word or words to hold the essence of my thoughts.

But in stillness, the whisperings around me ask, why? Why do I find myself writing the words 'hold' and 'essence' in the same sentence? Why do I desire to hold that which cannot be held?

How might my writing be different if I shift my place of being in language from outside the shapes and sounds of classification, of visible descriptions, to a space that evokes sounds for gazing, inviting time to linger, offering a place to listen to the whispers? To know that words of gazing and lingering and places of listening are slippery words, impossible to hold.

And this is where so much of my difficulty with words seems to arise. As I search for words to write, I realize it is not the word I seek. It is the depth of mystery the word evokes, I long for. It is a presence of listening prayer.

Yet as I work, peeling away layer after layer I find myself sinking into the impossibility of finding just the right word to speak what I desire to say.

I attended a writing workshop once filled with people who wanted to write autobiographically. At the beginning of each class, we'd share pieces of our writing.

Lucille, a woman who wore the struggles of her childhood on her face, was writing to try to understand more of what made her mother the person



she was. Lucille did not have fond memories of her childhood and wondered if she sought to discover more of her mother's life, if she in turn might come to discover more compassion for this woman who gave her life.

Although she didn't say so, I wondered if she was looking for a way to have more compassion for her own life.

She shared a piece of writing with us filled with descriptive details of the family farm her mother had grown up on. Her story seemed to weigh heavy on my ears with phrases of 'robin nest blue' and 'dirty old floor boards'. But then quite unexpectedly, and for only one brief moment, I plummeted into a different space as she read, "...her mother wouldn't even let mom peel potatoes, because she believed mom would peel too deep, wasting some of the potato."

I heard the rest of her story, but my body lingered in this space of peeling too deep.

And I wonder if that is what I am searching for with words - a peeling away. And I wonder if all too often we use our words as a way of preventing

ourselves and preventing others of peeling too deep. We write and write and write, add on, build up and enlarge. Our words and our world take on a weight that seems often to become such a burden for our bodies to carry. Life becomes heavy, our bodies sluggish and our breath stale and uninspiring.

Peeling deeply, I'm beginning to think, is an act of courage. We do not know what we might uncover, what lies beneath. And what, we might wonder, will happen when we peel away, layer after layer, only to end up with nothing visible in the palm of our hands?

To listen deeply, to listen to the re/emerging of our bodies and the world's body, to be willing to become the listening, I am beginning to understand takes courage and faith. To become a vehicle for God's spoken word requires surrender. It takes courage to peel away the layers of words spoken by others as you seek to hear the ways intended for your own life.

It takes courage to pay attention to our whispers. It takes courage, for once we hear the whispers, they will continue to knock, to persist, to be ever present even when we might try with all our strength to cover them up, again and again and again.

And it takes faith to trust the paths hidden in these persistent knockings. I've heard it often said that we write what we need to know, and we teach what we need to learn.

I need to re/member the divine spirit that whispers within each of us, that guides with gentle hands, and invites us to join in communion with each other. Why? I do not know. But perhaps, it has something to do with sharing a common moment, a communal whisper, remembering we too are "a need of God" (Heschel 2001, p. 54).

We need to cultivate postures of listening prayer as we learn to listen to all that whispers through shades of darkness and light. An invitation, a gift of attending. Through dropping deeply into the belly of what lies within, perhaps we begin to connect to the creation of living prayer, bringing the world into the hearts of one another.



*Photo 5*

Is there a human voice, Rumi asks, that doesn't give out soul sound?

# GRIEF

Last week I went to see a therapist  
She asked me about my days  
I told her at times I desired to be a monk  
I told her at times I was lonely  
She told me I was grieving

She gave me homework  
Call three friends  
Apologize for not calling them when you were lonely she said  
I asked her why  
She said I needed to learn to ask for help

Yesterday I went to see a friend  
He asked me about my days  
I told him at times I desired to be a monk  
I told him at times I was lonely  
He told me I was in prayer

He gave me a book to hold  
He told me to listen to my desires  
He told me not to be afraid of my loneliness  
I asked him why  
He told me I needed to learn that I would be safe in darkness

And I wondered if what I longed for was not to escape my loneliness but to  
live more deeply the sacredness of its teachings.

# *LISTENING FLOW*

“Help us to find God,” the disciples asked the elder.

“No one can help you do that,” the elder said.

“Why not?” the disciples asked amazed.

“For the same reason that no one can help fish to find the ocean.”

**Chittister, 1991**

# *M o v e m e n t   s i x*

## *L I S T E N I N G   F L O W*

**S** imply stated, the English translation of Lectio Divina, is “sacred reading” or “spiritual reading” (Chittister 1991, Sutera, 1994). An embodied prayer path dating back to the fourth century, it is central to Benedictine spirituality.

Lectio is not Bible study. Beginning with the perception that all human beings have the ability to hear God, Lectio is a movement, whereby sound awakens the body’s awareness of the divine building bridges between our inner and outer lives.

Approaching the end of the Middle Ages this ancient contemplative way of prayer gave way to formalized systematic

methods of mental prayer. Its inherent contemplative core became accepted as an extraordinary grace restricted to a few elite in religious life, which was in direct contradiction to the teachings of the first fifteen centuries (Hall, 1998), whereby contemplation was a way to the normal fulfillment of prayer. A resurgence in the practice of *Lectio Divina*, suggests Cynthia Bourgeault (2003), is a reaction to the cerebral academic relationship with scripture. The way of mental prayer has been shaped into a cognitive experience whereby contemplation transcends thinking and reasoning, taking us into a realm of knowing beyond knowing. *Lectio* is a way of embodying the refreshment of unknown wonder, a resting within God's word.

*We must know God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words.*

~ RB 20

Fostering ways to be present to the sacred requires a slowing down from within. Its journey cannot be rushed or hurried. In the resting note, the silent space, we breathe, we soften. Part of the work of the spirit is the art of transformation which weaves itself into daily interruptions. In music the rest appears as interruption, yet is also an essential beat to the creation and flow of the whole. The rest gives



pause to receive the music; it gives the notes space for resounding meaning.

Part of the mystery of transformation is in discerning the perfection in the imperfection. The tradition of sacred chanting, or a children's song sung in round, invites one to listen to the harmonic resonance which emanates from all ranges of voices and personal skills. Whoever happens to be present, sings. As such, imperfections are inevitable but more than this, they are essential to the composite harmony of the whole.

Integral to the core of Lectio, ancient chanting and jazz improvisation is trusting that what comes forth from the gifts and skills of those involved is what is meant to evolve. Each movement, each note, each experience is unique. In a time when we seem compelled to label, categorize and define, despite the wisdom of theologians, educators, and parents who know that when we label we limit, these forms of Lectio, chant and jazz have much to teach. Never able to create the same experience twice despite the fact that we assign names to outline these forms of movement, what happens in the process simply happens. There is no name for it. And therein lies the Mystery, the beauty.

When we extend the gift of listening presence to one another we risk singing our imperfections. Yet in the listening tradition of midwifery, birthing another soul's into presence, we come to know that those who stand before us will receive us, imperfections and all, in the spirit of celebration and praise, the fragrant knowing of divine beauty, the artistry of love.

"The importance of beauty to our lives", writes photographer Freeman Patterson, "requires no explanation and we never need to explain our reasons or apologize for actively seeking it out" (2003, p. 68 ). Beauty in all its variegated shapes and sounds is a refuge for the soul, a messenger of prayer. We can choose to seek it, to be aware of it. We can be healed by it, softened by it, and guided by it. Or not. The choice rests within us.

Any relationship grounded in love, whether between parent and child, siblings, lovers, friends or God takes disciplines of patience, attentiveness, balance and surrender. They demand a shifting of center. The work of the heart is notoriously difficult and wonderfully simple. Consciously joining together in all of life's prosaic tasks, the ebb and flow of routines, the heart begins gradually ever so slowly and subtly to respond to the daily rhythms, blossoming and deepening, with our feet placed firmly on the ground. These disciplines posture

humility, attuning the body to a pedagogy of care that silently dwells in relationship.

Everywhere the world calls to us if we pause long enough to listen.

“How did the rose ever open its heart and give all this world all its beauty?”  
asks the Persian poet Hafiz.  
“It felt the encouragement of light against its Being.”

~ Hafiz in Ladinsky ed., 1999, p.121

Risking oneself enough to love deeply spirals a 'lectio' continuum of discovery, desire, yearnings and longings as we learn to surrender our very souls to the Beloved. This knowing percolates a loving “balm for the soul” (Patterson, 2003 p. 126) as the heart feels 'the encouragement of light against its Being'. The wisdom of Saint Teresa of Avila shows us through the paradox in all of this as we can only truly surrender self when we come to live and know the Mystery of ourselves. “True abandonment is right and proper, but it can take

place only when we are in full possession of ourselves: you can't give what you don't have" (Flinders, 1993, p. 179).

Lectio, the backbone of Benedictine spirituality, manifests the divine within the vessel of the body. The artistry of prayer is attuned to the rhythms beating between body and word.

*"We may call our body and soul the sides of this ladder, into which our divine vocation has fitted the various steps of humility and discipline as we ascend."*

~ RB 7:64

I suggest that the way of Lectio echoes what Joan Borysenko (1999) refers to as a hallmark of feminine spirituality, which is relational and connective in nature, an intuitive rather than logical knowing. An acknowledgement that it is essential to one's spiritual growth to find a way to celebrate God that "feels right and authentic" (p.128) is supported in traditional mystical writings (Flinders,1993), maternal pedagogy (Ruddick,1995) and feminine epistemology (Belenky et al,1986, Fischer,1988).

Lectio is an organic process, not an objective technique to be worked and studied as a system leading to an end result. We do not have to understand it, we need only delight in its process. When we love, singing our lover's praises is pure joy.

Engaging only at a purely cerebral level limits our ability to listen, deafening a poetics of prayer. The epistemological core of Scripture, poetry, beauty, and breath speaks to the wisdom of our heart. In holding listening intentions, subtleties of the heart pulsate with life's whispering works.

The 'nonmethod method' of Lectio Divina or the "methodless" method (Hall, 1988, p. 9) begins with the first movement Lectio, or reading. This manner of reading the Psalms is more attuned to attentive listening, an intimate personal interaction, rather than reading for information. Reading is not merely taking in the words of the text. It is in the way we leisurely, contemplatively and prayerfully receive the text into the body. The language of the Psalms is organic embodying "earthly prayers" (Nowell in Sutera Ed., 1994, p. 16). The word, rhythm, and metaphor, penetrate not strictly our heads but our hearts. The language of a lived curriculum, writes educator Dr. Ted Aoki (1993), is poetic and provocative. Our souls find breathing space within these carriers of prayer. The heart in Wisdom traditions is

spiritually known as a sensitive organ of perception and fluidity including the abilities to think and feel, both consciously and unconsciously (Helminski, 1992, Bourgeault, 2003).

Consistent with practices of prayer, one begins with preparation, settling into a quieting of body and mind. Conscious to find a posture which will not impede circulation or breath, this preparation helps to de-clutter, center, shifting one into listening awareness. Choosing a text, 'preferably short' (Hall, Fry, Chistter), one begins to listen interiorly as they slowly read. If some word or phrase takes hold, one returns to it. If nothing seems to speak welcome its nothingness simply soaking in the stillness, as it is a way of being rather than doing, a way of being in prayerful presence, reticent of attending at the bedside of a sick child or an ailing parent.

Within the desire to live deeply we need to trust our restless yearnings to know them in deeper, fuller, richer ways, as we listen to that which haunts us, our holy curiosities. Being respectful of these Mysteries, one spends time with them, rolling their words over in one's mouth, wrapping oneself completely around them. Simply put, it is an invitation to let the language of God echo within the canyons of our bones, nourishing the body's sacred hunger.

We meditate scripture. We do not meditate *on* scripture. We take in the words of the Psalms, an ingesting of sorts. When we eat we do not consciously break down food into components of carbohydrates, proteins, enzymes, molecules, articulating the process of swallowing, as the food is transported down our oesophagus, into our stomach, liver etc. We simply receive, chew and swallow trusting our body to do what it is created to do delighting in the sensuous, fragrant, delicate banquet of nourishment. We need to trust that prayer too, will do what it needs to do.

Prayers of the heart awaken intrinsic longings when we lay down our defences and expose our inner vulnerabilities in a willingness to listen and be affected. In quieting, scripture moves from a monologue to a piercing dialogue with the soul. The text we read becomes a part of our heart engaging us on an affective level. Yet, we cannot turn on an affective switch and there will be times when we don't move into that place we long for. We cannot expect it to happen, we can only trust and prepare ourselves for its gifts when it is offered. As poet Susan McCaslin reminds us, " One can prepare the heart for poetry, but in the end it is a gift" (McCaslin, ed., 2002, p. 58).

In *contemplatio* or 'resting in God' one flows into a contemplative gaze. Our faculties drop out as prayer moves beyond

into a state described as emptiness. Contemplation is not the completion of prayer but rather the groundwork for prayer, the womb of creativity and what guides us from the literal to the imaginative. Prayer is gestational time. It is an attitude of the heart of which the practice of Lectio guides and opens a way not only to prayer but to ways of living prayerfully.

I suggest that pathways of Lectio echo with those we hear in living a contemplative phenomenology. The flow of each is a listening way rooted in the lived experience of the everyday. Being receptive to experience and sensitive to the language of the body understandings become fleshed out. We cannot control the experience; we can only know it experientially daring enough to participate in life's 'narrative in the making' (Greene, 1995). Engaging in a process of living a research path receptive to the divine, our research becomes a "ministering of thoughtfulness" (Van Manen, 2000 p.12), "the graced knowledge of love" (Hall, 1998, p. 23). In slowing down, with an embodied intention to consciously be present to each other and our world, we invite God's artistry to wash over our being in all we do. Seeking ways of living that refuse mere compliance is to awaken the hidden monk within us, ingesting generative ways of listening to the nectar of infinite possibilities.



A contemplative listening practice is a crack of light in the dark growing brighter and stronger through the life force in our relational connective experiences. To explore the essence of a listening practice is to become attuned to the phenomenon, listening to the metaphors, symbols, images and felt-experience as a way not to analyze, diagnose, judge or project one's own interpretation onto another but rather, to engage in an ongoing conversation distilling meaning in the everyday. Contemplative narrative writing seeks to invite us into the silences within the text, co-creating a sense of meaning through the relationship between writer, reader, word and silence.

In a contemplative phenomenological inquiry of listening one settles into a process of waiting in the every day, receiving whatever is revealed as in the practice of *Lectio Divina* and prayer. One seeks to sink into the ways we experience the world fostering our innate desire to "understand how human beings are embedded in human beingness" within the works of Brother David Steindl-Rast, Timothy Fry, Thomas (Aoki, 1992, p. 23). It calls us to slip into a primordial remembering or what Rilke calls 'blood remembering' (Mood, 1975, p. 94).

In learning to dwell within life's listening spaces the listening itself becomes the research as one actively begins to know the phenomenon from the inside. There is a different bodily presence

experienced in writing at the computer, meandering with a lover through the forest or pushing through 'the wall' to complete a triathlon. Listening to the rhythms of the body is a way of living a contemplative phenomenology which begins to shift one's center. Research becomes not so much something one does as how one lives weaving one's attention of ways of doing with ways of being.

The question Van Manen (2001) poses of phenomenological writing, "How do we capture and interpret the possible meanings of such experiences, for the things we are trying to describe or interpret are not really things at all?" speaks also to the impossible possibilities of Lectio and prayer. How do we live the paradox of holding that which cannot be held?

It is here that I turn to the aesthetic work of poet and teacher Carl Leggo. In his essay, *Research as Poetic Ruminaton* (Neilson, Cole & Knowles, 2001), Leggo dwells for a time with the word *extract*, taking the reader through a variable feast of nouns, verbs and Latin roots bringing breath and celebration to impossible possibilities.

His research is not about "seeking the root of a quantity" nor "the essence of an experience" nor to "pine to savour the extracted juice of an expansive story." Rather he hopes to "draw out and in and

around and over a stretch of space and time, infinite and eternal, always available for grasping, always beyond grasping" (p.184).

It is the dance, the rhythm, the pure delight of Leggo's wordplay and soulful presence, I imagine, that returns the reader and research to the soil of the soul. The difficulty in using 'ordinary language' to convey a phenomenon writes Van Manen (2000) is that the rich reservoir of human experience can become "silted, crusted or fossilized in such a way that the original contact with our primordial experience is broken" (p.61). This notion is also supported in the work of Dr. Ted Aoki (1992), Margaret Guenther (1992), Kathleen Fischer (1988) and John O'Donahue (1999). Our experiences are preverbal and our linguistic conceptual minds are limited in describing these (Bai in Hockings, ed. 2001, Abrams 1996, Van Manen 2000, Leder 1990).

A language of scripture returns us to awakening the body's alphabet with ears attuned to a listening heart. The poetic metaphorical form of the Psalms invites the reader to be stilled in the rhythms of word and silence, savouring an ambience of ambiguity. Invisibility becomes visible. A silence of sound sings. The poetics of research returns us to the root of scholarship (Leggo, 2001) as we leisurely breathe in the Mystery of rhythmic soundscapes. To be a true scholar one must have leisure employed in reading, research,

meditation, and intelligent discussion” (Funk, 1950, p. 241). Living as a poetic scholar attunes the body to co-create with the world, to swim deeply in the slow ceremonious waters within and around us. In this way, research itself becomes an act of prayer.

Perhaps in remembering what we once knew at the age of nine, when maybe we were more in tune to living receptively with the world’s poetic presence we may rediscover the ‘methodless method’ of listening, returning to a life rooted organically in scholarship.

Without a formula for ‘doing’ research there is no procedure chiselled in stone. Phenomenological curriculum research is resonant of the Rule of St. Benedict, the practice of Lectio Divina, the teachings of Mystics, prayer and Wisdom ways, each honouring a “*methodos* – a way” (Van Manen, 2000, p. 29). Each requires a listening sensitivity, reflection, contemplation, insight, and a willingness to remain open to all. It is the *methodos* of mystery that calls forth our attention.

The rigour of contemplative phenomenology is demanding and intense in ways which ‘light’ us and ‘scorch’ us. Its lingering frustrates and disrupts as it entices the researcher into sojourning, dallying, dawdling and loitering, drawing out, prolonging our labour with blood that sweats with a reluctance to leave, as we sense fulfilment in

dwelling within the threshold of mystery's *methodos*. The ecstasy of transitional birthing haunts us in all its glory and pain, erupting life's divine interruptions. The rigour is ever present in the desire to be fully present to the inquiry.

Swaying back and forth amongst the various questions multiple layers of meaning emerge, expanding curiosities into further questioning, extractions, contractions and possibilities. The research itself becomes an ongoing process exploring and deepening various ways of knowing through a poetics of life, embracing all humanness in a process of living a curriculum of reverence for all that whispers in these possibilities.

Feminine discourse invites different ways of knowing from those embedded in perceptions of exclusion, separateness, division, mastery and dominance. Feminist writers such as Cixous (1993), Christ, (1986), Mairs (1989, 1994, 1996), and Ruddick (1995), to mention just a few, explore the notion that bringing the maternal body back into our understanding of lived experience is essential to our journey of learning, knowing and ways of being. Recovering embodied practices is intrinsic to intentions of inclusion, connection, and mutuality in relationships. Organic in its core I suggest that feminine discourse is infused with the understanding that everywhere we walk, we place our

souls upon sacred ground for the earth always holds the possibility of encounter. As the mystic Hildegard of Bingen, knew the body is a sensitive and poetic expression of the soul. The art of listening to the body is central to feminine discourse and essential in bringing one's voice to speech as demonstrated in the richly textured works of Fischer, Guenther, Mairs, Ruddick, Cixous, Myss, Grumet, Greene, Snowber, Borysenko. In listening we midwife, assisting "the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it" (Belenky et al, p.217).

To be educated is to  
be ever open to the call of  
what it is to be deeply human  
and, heeding that call, to walk  
with others in life's ventures.

~ Ted Aoki (The  
Educated Person -  
BC Teacher,  
Oct/Nov. 1987

Women's autobiographical writing, such as the works of Nancy Mairs, Marion Woodman, Sharon Butala, Toni Morrison, Rachel Remen, Alice Walker, Annie Dillard, Etty Hillesum, and May Sarton, amongst many others, resound the notion of multiplicity expressed through the

embodied wisdom language of heart, mystery, movement, breath and eroticism. These works bring to life a pedagogy of the body (Snowber, 1995). The art of metaphor invites the reader into a space of discovery, a way of journeying into the listening soil of life. Its pattern is not linear, rather it draws out, distils the complex webbing of multiple layers of experiences and understandings.

A question arising at the onset of bringing to consciousness various ways of living a contemplative phenomenology is whether one turns to traditions of phenomenological work in the initial or later phases of one's research. I draw upon the work of Pratt and Homan in *Benedict's Way* (2000), to suggest such questions often reveal more about us than we may at first realize. If our research seeks to breathe multiple and generative ways of being, questions seeking a step-by-step linear methodology perhaps need to be revisited, for such questions presuppose one specific way and thus one specific way of being. As Carl Leggo says of his writing, it "includes research, explication, logic, reason, argument, and persuasion, but the ingredients are mixed in unfamiliar ways" (Leggo in Neilsen et al, 2001 p. 176).

It is here that the notion of writing to discover informs, disrupts and transforms the researcher's understanding. Research as a way of living is an invitation to dance with the multiple gracenotes of life delighting in all formless forms. "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent" (Palmer, 2000, p.3). Listening evokes transformative spaces of conversion, "where the old self dies and the new self is born" (Nouwen, 1981, p.15). Writing transforms the body's blood into ink.

Life cannot breathe in congested, thick, coagulated spaces for the body lives in whispering ways, extracting, peeling, and undressing, enticed with the promise that somewhere along the way a ray of light will pull us into the cracks and for a moment we will listen. And what sensuous freedom resides in knowing that these moments will never last long nor can they ever be captured for they are the unearned moments of mystery, gifted by the divine to capture us. Subtraction can at times be addition.

Forms of discipleship are shaped by history and the context of one's life yet an underlying principle remains: each of us is called out of our narrow individualism by love. Living with reverent obedience, the origin of which comes from the Latin root *audire*, which means 'to listen' (Klein, 1966) attentive and simple in presence, trusting our holy curiosities, we will perhaps walk as disciples upon the earth. A contemplative phenomenology, I suggest, invites life's gracenotes as a light along a pathway of peace. A contemplative body is a listening body. The disciple will always be surprised by God.

No one suspects the days to be gods. ~ Emerson



# MATH NOTES OF PRESENCE

He left me  
a note she says

He wrote

*Hi, Nanny*

*Here's my work number -  
call me if you need me*

*Love Matt*

My absence invites  
space  
for a grandson to offer  
gifts of presence to his Nanny.

My absence becomes  
addition  
not  
subtraction.

You and I



Photo 6

THE JOY IN KNOWING THAT

WE

ARE NOT SEPARATE

# *PART TWO*

# *LISTENING*

# *BEGINNINGS*

In the beginning was the Word.

The Gospel according to St. John.

It takes two things to make prayer come to pass;

a person and a word.

~Rabbi Heschel

## *M o v e m e n t   s e v e n*

### *L I S T E N I N G   B E G I N N I N G S*

**E**ncouraged by those who have gone before me, I am told to write.

Now at first glance this may sound like a fairly simple, common and straightforward task. And I suppose for some, it might be.

*Write.*

I'm told.....

.... *just write.*

But write about *what* I ask?

*Write.*

I'm told.....

*.... just write.*

Many of us aren't  
practiced at using  
writing to learn what  
we know rather than  
to state what we  
know.

~ Ely, 1997

How contradictory this appears to be. Growing up in the fifties and sixties, I've been taught to write only as a way of telling what I know. But now I'm being told to simply write, to let the words just flow through my pencil watching them appear upon my page. Don't edit or judge or critique. Just let it be. I'm told to trust this process which I do not understand.

*Write.*

I'm told.....

*.... just write.*

Simple, direct, clear instructions.

Just write!

I feel an internal resistance to all of this, these instructions of exploration and freedom, as if my body is somehow armoured against them.

I procrastinate and in the process find myself wandering around my surroundings as if searching for something which will tell me what to do. An instruction manual of sorts, I suppose, telling me exactly where to go and how to do it, a roadmap to show me how to manoeuvre through this unfamiliar territory. I want to have a certain assurance of where this is all leading before I begin.

I notice a certain 'definability', a 'staidness' in the world surrounding me. Everything appears on the surface, at least, to have a specific function. Take for instance my home. The kitchen is for cooking, the dining room for eating, one washes in the bathroom, sleeps and makes love in the bedroom, but where, I wonder, does one go to write? Virginia Woolf's, *A Room of One's Own* comes to mind and I spend time rearranging furniture.

Yet the voice

*Write.....*

*.... just write*

persists.

My children tell me they need the right shoes to play volleyball, which of course differ from the shoes they need to play basketball and differ again from those they wear when cross-training. My husband needs the right screwdriver with the right handle grip before he can repair the leaky faucet in the bathroom. And so wondering if maybe I



too need these things, I set forth in pursuit of the right tools, the right foot wear.

It seems reasonable to assume that a writer needs a writing utensil yet I have never really paid too much attention to what one uses. I know I'm not very fond of the Bic blue point pens lying next to the phone. And I'm sure the HB pencils found in various drawers around the house won't fare well as they require high maintenance and inevitably the sharpener won't be readily accessible during those critical times when you're having an epiphany. The pencil lead will be dull and inevitably the words of one's epiphany will be all but smeared illegibly across the page.

I begin to notice what tools others use.

My daughter, Michelle, color codes her notes with her Artline 205 Elegance pens purchased at Wilson's Stationery. I've witnessed her sauntering through the stationery departments in various stores, trying out this pencil, that pen. She never appears to rush this process and to observe her one might think she is making one of the most important decisions of her life. Perhaps she is. I don't know, though her focus tells me this is a process not to be rushed, a decision not to be taken lightly.

One can sense a certain reverence about it all. It is as if her gestures hold a subtle awareness that these writing utensils offer themselves to her for expressing her way of transforming the ordinary into reflections of her own art. As Benedict taught, “[W]hen we begin to accept and treat gently our tools, we will begin to accept and treat gently ourselves and others” (Pratt & Homan, 2000, p. 91).

I’m reminded of Parker Palmer’s thoughts in *The Active Life*, (1990) exploring concepts of action as instrumental or expressive acts. An instrumental action, he suggests, is a means to a predetermined end with a measure of whether our goal is reached. It is an action rooted and driven by something outside of ourselves. An expressive action though is fuelled not by a desire to achieve a specific goal separate from oneself but rather to express a conviction, a truth, a way of being which resides inside ourselves and is reflective of our true nature. One’s way of expression is what makes the action a unique and intimate movement in life (p. 23).

When you look at Michelle’s notes safely kept within her binders decorated with the utmost care and thoughtfulness, her words seem to cry out to you to pay attention to them. Her notes become more than

just a record of the facts she is learning in history, science and English.  
They become a reflection of how she is learning to live her life.

I take heed and go to Wilson's Stationery. Yet, all the while the  
voice

*Write.....*

*.... just write*

continues.

It's beginning to haunt me. And it is only in a process of quiet  
reflection that I come to realize what at first may be perceived as  
procrastination, perhaps might really be a form of preparation, ritual  
and contemplation.

*Let the tools of the monastery and its whole property be regarded as if  
they were the sacred vessels of the altar. RB 31*

*Allow no one to treat the monastery's tools and implements in a  
slovenly or careless way. RB 32*

The voice awakens me in the tender hours just before dawn. Those who urge me to write warn that sleepless hours will at some point inhabit this body. I rise guided by the morning light sensing an urgent restlessness within my bones. Silence draws me into the dawn with words appearing as tear droplets upon my page.

These moments feel thin, void of predictability and familiar frontiers, yet pregnant with possibility. What is it about this silence that awakens the body? I suspect within this silence the body begins to teach the ways one is called to live in the world. These ways appear to lack orderliness and we may be at a loss to explain them but in

silence our body resounds their truth. I sit for awhile in the arresting beauty I find brought forth through Rabbi Heschel's words that "[w]hat we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe" (Dresner ed., 2001, p. 3).

These thoughts are deserving of our respect, our contemplation, our wonder.

*Write.*

I begin to hear.....

*..... just write.*

It will take time for me to come to know these 3 a.m. writing sessions as sacred time situated in prayer, listening for those unearned moments 'of the divine breaking into one's life unexpectedly'.

*If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts.*

*~ RB Prologue*

At times it is as though I have sat in front of this blank page for hours with nothing to show for it. And yet, there are passages of time, when clock time appears to gently slink away leaving me changed somehow, having deeply sensed a presence of life's mysteries. I wonder if I am coming to understand more deeply a way of living in liturgical time, time that is "essentially poetic time, oriented toward process rather than productivity, willing to wait attentively in stillness rather than always pushing to 'get the job done'" (Norris, 1996, p. xiii).

Understanding a monastic meaning of the word "hour" helps me trust my longing for these poetic moments for here the word *hour* does not represent a precise unit of time. It can be traced back to a Greek word, *hora*, which signifies not a numerical measure, but a soul measure (Steindl-Rast & LeBell, 1995, p. 3). Perhaps these moments when linear time slips away are when the soul's mystery works through the body, opening ways of relearning to know the world spiritually, listening more with the 'ear of the heart' than exclusively the head. They help to remind us that soul is not a thing that lives inside the body, rather that the body lives within the soul. Perhaps one might say these moments attune the body towards a *lectio* orientation, listening attentively to the full resonance, the rhythmic nuances of living experience. We come to know a way of listening that tills the soil of the heart.

Yet despite all I am learning, this process of writing remains just plain hard work. Each time the blank white page stares up at me its starkness stirs the rawness of solitude, "the furnace of transformation" (Nouwen 1981, p. 13). Its fiery stillness forces me to listen to the desert sounds that emanate from within my body, the inhalations, exhalations, heartbeats, the flow of blood and the movements of bone, that return me to suspect that "the truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul" (Merton, 1961, p. 80-81). The vast desert, I remember, is always complete.

What is this spirit I wonder that seems to live in both disciplines of prayer and writing, steeped in spaces beyond words? How do we live a methodless method, attune to the whispers of our life, walk as Meister Eckhart suggests "the Wayless Way, where the Sons of God lose themselves and, at the same time, find themselves."

The fourth century desert monk St. Anthony said that perfect prayer is one you don't understand.

~ Norris, 1996, p.143

*Write.*

I hear.....

*... just write.*

Having written before, essays and papers, documents, reports and faxes, memoranda, mission statements, grocery lists, recipes and 'to do' lists, I am no stranger to words. Why then do I struggle so? Despite Nancy Mairs' (1994) reassurance that our own writing is deeply grounded in our own experience because that experience is all we reliably have that no other writer can offer, I continue to wonder if, perhaps, I am just inept.



*Write.*

I hear.....

..... **JUST WRITE**

School was the place I learned about writing. Stories were to be written on the plot line with the primary elements of plot, atmosphere, character, theme and setting. One began at the beginning, moving along with a rise in action, eventually falling off into a conclusion. Stories, we were taught, should follow the plot line, a linear progression with a

I think that if I and other teachers truly want to provoke our students to break through the limits of the conventional and the taken for granted, we ourselves have to experience breaks with what has been established in our own lives; we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again.

~ Greene 1997

definitive beginning and ending. No repeats, no pauses were allowed. Everything was to be kept marching forward till the end. This way, a story could be contained for when it ended, it simply ended.

In University I attended a talk on First Nations storytelling.

The presenter told us the line lied.

Part of the line's thinking he said was to make everyone's story fit along the same line suggesting a sameness of experience, silencing the voices of those who do not fit along the line. He asked us to imagine our story in the shape of a circle. More specifically we were asked if the circle or the line best represented our lives.

As a graduate student I listened to Don, an art teacher, share stories of what he'd learned through his many years of teaching. Don said that traditionally we've handed our students one size of paper expecting all children to create their story within this uniform 8x11 space.

Don's story reminded me of my grade one art class. Our pictures had to have a blue stripe at the top of the page, for the sky. The stripe on the bottom of the page was to be green, for the grass. And if we used our rulers, to define the sky and grass, on our paper of 8x11 our work was judged neat and tidy, a work of value. The rules stated:

1. Fill up the entire piece of paper, leaving *no* empty spaces.
2. Make it look *'real'*.

“If we teach children when they’re young to reject their epiphanies, then it’s no wonder that we end up with so many adults who are mathematically, poetically, and theologically illiterate.”  
~ Norris, 1996, p .60

When my teacher, Mrs. Murray, didn’t see what I saw as *'real'*; skies and grass that couldn’t stay still, I began to wonder if what I knew was wrong.

As I write this I can’t help but wonder if we have blinded our eyes to seeing only a convenient geometry of predictability, an orderliness that ensures us that one plus one *always* equals two.

Yet when our bodies saunter filled with the whispered wonder of cathedral forests, the very voice from which we come, what reveals itself is alive and vibrant, singing a choir of chaos, with the promise that a three leaf clover holds a prophesy of, perhaps, sometimes becoming a four leaf clover.

Has emphasizing a convenient geometry somehow contributed towards a crisis of faith, silencing contemplative, organic ways of

knowing? In a world that teaches one plus one is the *only* way, the *only* truth, and no matter how hard we might try it will never be otherwise, is it no wonder that our bodily senses thirst? Without water life is dormant, lifeless and without voice.

In a world that perceives truth *only* in convenient geometry, perhaps it is our body's chaotic, full flowering, ever changing choreography that becomes known as the lie as we learn to betray the truths inherent in the body. The less we trust the listening body, the less attuned we become to the whispers of the world. We silence the longing to search for the four-leaf clover.

As Catholic scholar and writer, John O'Donahue reminds us, "When you limit your life to the one frame of thinking, you close out the mystery" (1999, p. 19).

Listening sinks us deeply into the body's internal labyrinth, where knowing has a transitory essence, a way of faith. It is unhurried in nature, "a thousand times slower than the eye" (Berendt, 1992, p. 19).

*If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with  
patience.* ~ Rom 8:25

# INTER/RUPTING ACADEMIC INTER/PRETATIONS

Memories imbedded  
in bone and blood  
disrupting assignments of  
sense-making  
forms

Non-sense un/masks  
f [r]onts hidden  
deep within  
the shadowy white  
marrow of memory

Voices in my head  
drown the Body's  
ancient solitude song  
deeply known beneath  
my skin

Like lace corsets  
camouflaging wriggling folds  
of draping flesh  
disengaging fonts  
camouflage my despair

my body senses..... my body knows.... my body teaches.....

wind touching air

layers of skin supping fluid wisdom

breathing worded rhythms

Back

And

Down

And

kcaBack

And

D  
O  
W  
N

Earth reddened roots

draping cloaks of green

azure water moon

jewel hidden majesty

Spirit wind moves

through darkened pause

my feet

know where to go

Open limbs

ground spreading roots

it is dark

this journey home

Moss draped rocks

star lit skin

widening wild/erness

awakening storying bodies

Burrowing

sweet fragrant soil

feeding this body of mine

conceived in darkness.

My body's language is not neat.

It does not move from left to right in perfect linear form, compartmentalizing, labelling, defining.

It does not.....

live

alone

It **oozes**, s

p

I

lls

**outwards, cries, and h**

**S**

**I**

**W**

**O**

**for home in s**

*s e a r c h i n g*

*p*

*i*

*r*

**never-ending .....**

*a*

**never static, it arches**

*l*

*ing*

**breathes**

*of*

**fragrant eros**

**abundant chaos**

I search for home amongst wondering landscapes yearning for a place of dew moistened emeralds, flowing blood red liquid, burnt charred ochre, azure winter moons. The language of academic texts separates, and disengages my body. It silences wisdom.



*Estranged from the soil of the soul, our words do not grow fruits of insights, but are found as sapless clichés, refuse in the backyard of intelligence.*

- Rabbi Heschel

My body's geography breathes.

It breathes in spaces of quest/ion/ing re/search

into un/covering mis/under/stood/ inter/pre/ta/tion/s.

My body's language s[ear]ch/es to be/long with/in its long/ing – s t r e t c h l n g  
con/ver/sa/tions - shifting dialogue to earthly com/munion. My body finds home in the  
space of alchemic back/strokes.

Inter/rupting Inter/pretations

My body lingers in 'I'  
in vert[ic]al and hor[iz]ontal

Re/cover  
Re/interpret

Spaces in/between  
Un/said knowing

Re/search

Re/cover

Re/search

Silent listening

Re/interpreting

crossroads, pauses, breath

I de/light in quest/ing my/ste(o)ry

fluid fonts

grammarian strokes

of

bodily spills

shape liquid letters

over/flowing

communal wine

dis/connecting language

clotting blood

like floating aneurysms, taunt and explosive, fragility of breath

letters barricaded

[inside margins]

restrict

wombing muscles

*my body knows the world in languages of reddened blood, shaping  
and sculpting its curves, sensing communion, imaging within*

writing through breath and blood and beating hearts knowing energy and rhythm

in my fonts

rhythms of breath inviting a choreography of my geography  
sculpting and shaping language, seeking the wisdom in the  
back stroke be/tween inter/ruptions

the body's language is full of

*ripples,*

and *curves,*

and flowering moisture,

liquid tears,

and

breathless

pauses.

The body sings into being.

Languages of flesh break loose restricting breath postured into  
singular functional form. Storied bodies resist constriction, into confining  
antiquated corsets.

My biology screams to freely swoon upon wisdom's wings, to dance the  
rain drenched redness of the earth's rooted voice.

We write through the body's biology, un/covering its geography tapping into the roots of our biology, the nectar of our words. Swimming deep within its fluid geography we un/cover the Greek root of 'graphy', *graphein*, to write. To live well within our bodies perhaps is to find the courage to write in and through and over and around our body's ink. It is to live the willingness to pluck deeply enough to un/cover the body's alphabet.

Bodily intuition sinks swiftly and deeply into marrow swimming beyond and beneath our rational knowing. It calls us to pay attention to the body's capacious poetic form in relationship of earth and body. It is in the h[ear]t and the [ear]th that we are carried into the un/ said, into silent pauses, sounds of whispering bodies re/covering listening ears.

We locate ourselves in the practice of our re/search, in an ongoing process of coming into form. The "I" is birthed in the lived curriculum in fluid spaces, in the pushing and pulling, stretching and groping, burrowing beneath, yearning beyond, as we search to recover and live the language of the body.

# SKIN OF MY BELLY

Embodied fabric  
Caressing palettes of possibilities

Motherhood's artistry  
painting pathways of hope  
listening limbs breathing scars of life

Spiraling interruptions  
Arresting flow texturing spirals  
spring forth fluid forms

Life of interpretations  
birthing and dying reddened memories  
luminare trans/ruptions

My scarred belly bears by knowing  
Love is not convenient.



Photo 7

# *LISTENING BODY*

The call to write is a call that's received in the body first. It calls us to feel, not dimly, not safely, but wildly, passionately, in every cell and fiber.

~John Lee

There is a self within each one of us aching to be born.

~Alan Jones

# *M o v e m e n t e i g h t*

## *L I S T E N I N G B O D Y*

**I** plod forth, trying to write through my days. This writing process demands acts of self-discipline and appears to be, more than anything, disruptive in nature.

Alert to stiffness in my body one morning, life seems to come to an abrupt halt as I attempt to get out bed only to discover I'm unable to stand or walk. My body doesn't support, its core gives way.

The immediate diagnosis, a strained back requires a focus of daily trips to the chiropractor, massage therapist and of course, rest. Yet, these treatments coupled with a potpourri of traditional and

alternative methods of working with the body seem to be doing very little over the course of several months and frustration sinks deeper and deeper. A practitioner sums it up in one simple phrase: Back pain is sometimes a mystery - we don't always understand it.

I try to live in the mystery of not understanding, to simply accept without resistance what I can't make sense of, yet there is a part of me that silently screams 'you're not listening to me!' through the endless lists of questions that never seem to result in any answers.

Eventually, I'm referred to a Chronic Pain Clinic.

It doesn't occur to me, that maybe, it is *I* who isn't listening.

*If it seems slow, wait for it,*

*It will surely come.*

*~ Hab 2:3*



Healing by definition, is a sacred art. Practically all of the ancient texts describe the art of healing as a divine process in which healing the body first requires healing the spirit.  
~ C. Norman Shealy, M.D.

Significant shifts rarely happen without a perception of being lost or called by something. We sense what T. S. Eliot called the 'vacant interstellar space' or what medical researcher, Joan Borysenko calls the "circumambulation of the center" (1999 p.83) where the very ground we walk upon seems turned into quicksand sinking us into a nonlinear consciousness. As John Shea writes, "This experience of internal war pushes us beyond ourselves" (Shea, 1978, p.31-32). We become receptive to the body's Mystery as a way of seeking explanation and healing.

Attending to these whispers that consecrate, set aside, displace, and derail us is an invocation to listen to the realm of mystery in everyday life.

It is in the space of ordinary relationships, the challenges, the angst and celebrations when life stops us, our children disrupt us, our routines get interrupted, the body stills us, that there becomes space for unearned divine moments to whisper unexpectedly. Is it any wonder, when we silence the body's listening desire we no longer wait

in attentiveness to receive its whispers? The words passive and passion and patience come from the same Latin root, *pati*, which means *to endure*. Awaiting listening whispers is vibrant resonating, chaotic work.

The truth knocks on the door and you say, "Go away. I'm looking for the truth," and so it goes away. Puzzling.

~ Robert Pirsig

Now it is winter and my body rests in a state of pneumonia. A yearly

episode of bronchitis arrives this time with greater impetus. Shut off from daily life, alone, and unable to move or breath without pain, I can't help but wonder if there is something I am not getting. Breathing, I read in Tilden Edward's *Living Presence* (1997), is God's holy wind, which inspires life. A symbol of God's Spirit and our spirit, "breath reveals the illusion in any sense of ultimate self-isolation and separateness: we are always drawing it into us and returning it, demonstrating the fluidity of

Journal Entry  
Dream.....  
I am sleeping. A tube is inserted into my throat. It hurts and restricts my breath. This tube I discover allows others to record my voice whenever I speak. I sense I am in danger if my voice is heard. I realize I must write my thoughts if I am to remain safe.

our embodiment, its literal interdependence with the rest of life"

(p.21).

# SHIFTING DIS/EASE

I am quiet  
My voice whispers  
I sleep

Dreams guide me  
ancient rhythms bathe my longing  
to h(ear)  
the music of my  
h(ear)†

Voices dance

dishevelled  
lamenting  
longingly  
waiting  
for my body to h(ear)  
its cry

un/covering silenced psalms

I dream of being water

I dream of living raw warmth  
liquefying body  
breath/ing  
opening limbs  
awakening tissue

I dream of being pregnant

mystery  
creation  
skin touching skin

In the dark of morning  
I awake  
palms caress my belly  
salty tears bathe my cheeks

Life's pregnant paradox  
calls my body into the ocean's wetness

It pushes me outwards  
It pulls me inwards

sweeping me back  
again  
and  
again

into quest/ining vastness

I yearn to be held  
melting  
in its body of cradling caverns

I do not want to fight  
to stay afloat as my body  
re/members  
frozen skin

drench me in your beauty  
breathing ancient rhythm  
hearing ancient wisdom  
living ancient cour(age)

.....you are my s(our)ce...

My body coughs its shadowy darkness

I collapse re/sisting

Shadowed echoes  
deep inside me  
sever  
convulsing g(rasp)ing breath

My body is frightened

Bronchitis.....dis/ease.....shifting

Deafness stifles my lungs  
My breath is weighted, heavy, aching

Prayerful words  
beckoning

surrender

opening limbs  
I swim  
into spirit space  
sensuous wind filled breath  
I breathe deeply  
taking in the source I am part of  
around me  
through me  
in me

I float deeply in the ocean's mystery  
being held  
gently  
fluidly

in God's hands  
warmed of gentle breath

Soul desired  
communion

I open my mouth  
and sing for a time

Bronchitis.....dis/ease.....dis/locate.....shift

I sleep  
floating  
in  
and  
out

I float back to a violin's music  
singing  
with the wind  
darkness  
stillness  
stars lighting the way  
beneath my feet

The violin's voice echoing from within its treed body  
resonating earth reddened roots  
its symphony plays in the dying leaves  
dancing with wind  
my being  
delights in the  
campfire's rhythm

The violin does not play music alone  
It plays with the music of the human  
holding each other  
birthing space

gathering all that surrounds  
breathing light in earth's symphony  
.....I float  
.....I breathe

I know I will breathe deeply again. And I know that my need for rest.....my  
for/rest need.....will strengthen me and I sleep

## Voice

singing

resonates of bone and blood

**ing**

**ris**

**a**

es/sence of soundprints

awakening luminous cells

**s**

**p**

re/vealing dissonance

**i**

bursting fluid of frozen crystals

**r**

harmonic healing

**a**

of ancient

**l**

storied tissues

**i**

**n**

**g**

## **Words**

cracking open into the space of vibrating keystrokes

rhythmic *pulsing waves*

*dancing*

***Faith***

An invitation

into uncovering listening pathways

of infinite possibilities.



Books become my solace and I read with a voracious appetite and a hungry heart. Initially these books, many of which are autobiographical, seem only to offer an escape. Yet gradually I find myself hoping to find some connection or answer to my confusion in the stories of these people's lives.

When new awareness of life is brought into previously deadened areas of the body, women begin to experience writing the world differently.

~ Trinh T. Minhha, in Price & Shildrick, 1999, p.258

Along with Annie Dillard's words, I drop down into the rhythmic lives of Nancy Mairs, Sharon Butalla, Sarah Ruddick, Hannah Arhendt, Caroline Myss, Celeste Snowber, Mary Catherine Bateson, Rachel Naomi Remen,

The study of other women is also a pursuit of inspiration and guidance. They look for affinities, or search for authority in women. They speak of conversion. Few would even have begun their projects had they not been prompted by some as yet misty, if puzzling, element of identification with their subject.

~ Inbetween Women

Kathleen Fischer and various others. Their stories evoke moments of such deep sacred longing I find myself frustrated that I didn't take up speed-reading. It's as if my body yearns to inhale their words, to have *their* wisdom be part of *my* life, and to have it *right now*. I am growing increasingly impatient at breathing life through a nebulizer.

"Like the tree that puts roots deep into the clay, each of us needs the anchor of belonging in order to bend with the storms and reach towards the light."

~ John O'Donahue, 1999, p.xxiii

Contemplative practices invite opportunities to understand the body as receptive listener, or as David Abram writes, "not as a mechanical object, but as a magical entity" (1996, p. 15). It is a site from which we receive deep knowledge, hospitable to wisdom, carrying in its core all possibilities of creation. Listening manifests possibilities. As the body listens to its truth, its words return to its center birthing itself into being.

Distinctive ways of knowing and criteria of truth, Sara Ruddick (1989, 1995) philosopher, mother and feminist, reminds us, arise out of practices. Our practice - the ways in which we live - breathes in the body. Supported by feminist epistemological research the idea that we engage in life's fullness through the entire body brings forth the understanding that we do not simply have bodies, we are bodies (Minha-ha, Cixous, Mairs, Griffin). Life imprints itself into the body as we exchange ourselves with the universe in every breath. We come into being in the liquid sweet wonder of "aesthetic absorption" (Leder, 1990, p. 166).

Listening to a language of the body attunes us to what Carol Gilligan (1984) calls a language of love, that which "encompasses both knowledge and feelings, a language that conveys a different way of imagining the self in relation to others" (p 91). The body's alphabet, a

history of flesh, is grounded in a biology of love (Bunnell & Forsythe in Hockings Ed. 2001, Manturana 1987, Pert, 1997). Akin to Margaret Guenther's model of listener as mid-wife the listening body is a site hospitable in nature, oriented towards thoughtful care, intuition, and rooted in an 'alphabet of grace' (Buechner, 1989). The communal body is an empathetic body which comes alive in the flow and liquidity of relationship, community and love.

Consistent with Nel Nodding's work on empathy, Feminist writers Belenky 1997, Ruddick 1995, Fischer 1988, Grumet 1988, Woodman 1993, as well as the writings of mystic Julian of Norwich, support the notion that personal experience is an unfailing form of knowledge, one to be listened to and trusted, with empathy residing at its core. Attending to the voice of the bodily experience becomes a catalyst for inviting the self back into the equations of knowing.

The listening body exudes a fluidity of presence rather than an outward stance. "I do not project." "Rather, I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other" (Noddings, 1984, p. 30).

As I write this, Nel Nodding's words bring to presence a story my son Patrick shared with me recently. Returning home after the Volleyball team he coaches won the Provincial Championship, I asked

him if it was different sitting on the sidelines as a coach instead of playing. "Oh ya!" he replied without hesitation. "It's hard. You can't do anything. You've just gotta trust 'em to do what they're supposed to do."

He continued, telling me about Morgan, a player he'd worked with all season. She'd never played the position of setter before but Patrick encouraged her to try it throughout the season as he saw something she did not. She ended up walking away from the tournament with the Provincial MVP award.

But what struck me most in his story was what happened to him. "It's difficult to find the words, mom," he told me, "to really tell Morgan how proud I am of all her hard work and commitment to the team. I told her after the tournament – I went 'on and on and on' of how proud I am of her. I even phoned her the next day to tell her again."

And then, his chestnut eyes penetrated mine as he said, "You know, mom – I always remember you telling me how proud you were of me – and when you were always there at every game of mine – I always thought – well yeah – you're just being my mom. But now that

I really know what it **feels** like to be proud of someone and I really understand what you've been saying all these years."

Feminine metaphors of listening bring to presence images that poetically bridge and connect, flowing forth and releasing: water, wine, tears, milk, blood, birth. They are present in the writings of female mystics standing in sharp contrast to masculine metaphors of stagnation, confrontation, and hierarchical images. (Flinders,1993) The disconnected body senses a standing alone, unable to recognize its soul rhythms, or the rhythms of others as Anne Morrow Lindberg writes in her tender book *Gift From the Sea* (1995), "When one is a stranger to oneself, then one is estranged from the other. Only when one is connected to one's core is one fully connected to others"(p. 44).

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century the body has been primarily identified with its scientific description; a material object characterized to general scientific law which dismisses the body's maternal wisdom. (Leder 1990, Pert 1997, Northrup 1998, Price & Shildrick 1999, Ruddick, 1988) The body has been viewed with suspicion, and readily forgotten when functioning optimally. The mind has become the nucleus for the exploration of higher concerns giving strength to the Cartesian mind/body split. The mind became attuned to the voice of reason, or

what Belenky and co-authors (1997) refer to as the voice of separate knowing.

Suspicious of intuitive ways, the way of separate knowing is sceptical of what feels right. Its nature is adversarial, disconnected and separate.

Exploring the practice of writing, Goldberg (1986), suggests that we need to continually trust our own voice and process, the "wild forest where we gather energy" (p. 13). Attending to the body's voice is a continual practice which calls us into new styles of understanding, generative and energetic in nature, mirroring the complexity of life and deepening our presence on earth. All forms of attending are really ways of listening to the whispers of God. It may not be the means we lack but rather the depth.

Writing through the body necessitates a living commitment to stay in the writing long enough to hear its whispers, despite our training to abandon that which is not clear or focused, dismissing the process before much is revealed. A complex process that is often blurred, understanding veils itself in the multiple layers of meaning. Its process of distillation asks for patience, the intravenous drip for the soul. It calls us to seek ways to live, step-by-step, moment by

moment, or as writer Anne Lamott recalls, to “[j]ust take it bird by bird” (1994, p.19). It requires, I suggest, an act of faith for although it is “often wrenchingly difficult, lonely, and brutally upsetting” this process, this passage, “also holds the promise of a certain glory” (Ely et.al, 1997,13).

*“Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief” ~ Mark 9:24.*

Practices of listening and writing breathe possibilities and questions, impregnating the body with wonder, birthing the child of chaos, paradox and Mystery. Perhaps, because of this, we should ask the same commitment of our writing as we ask of our life as our biology pours forth from the body’s ink.

Metaphors pertaining to the body have clearly been influenced for sometime by mathematical, scientific, mechanical and bounded principles. Language plays an essential role in healing the mind-body split as witnessed in the work of Pert 1997, Friedman L. & Moon S. 1997, Woodman 1993, Fischer 1984, Pinkola 1995, Northrup 1998, Snowber 1995, Abram 1996. A re-acquaintance with the body’s voice of wisdom sparks a journey of recovering a language infused with the feminine breath, trusting the integration of self into the equation of



understanding. This way has mysterious far-reaching consequences for the listening body deepening contemplative ways in the world.

David Abram (1996) contributes thoughtfully to this conversation in his sensitive work, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. “[M]eaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation. Language, then, cannot be genuinely studied or understood in isolation from the sensuous reverberation and resonance of active speech” (p. 74,75). Language vibrates. We learn it not mentally but bodily. It dances and doodles and ripples and dawdles, bleeds and heals. The body’s fluids respond ‘vibrationally’ to the sounds our words bring into presence. Language bears the potential to love and destroy.

“Singing,” writes Northrup (1998), “is part of the emotional body’s digestive system” (p.602). The sound of our body’s voice is vibrational medicine. It travels in spirals reverberating through the body. Its ‘osteophonic’ resonance, (Dodd, 1999) can dissolve the body’s crystallizing liquids into free flowing waters again as we return to a listening through the bones. Sound is a way of massaging the body’s inner landscapes, a way of waking up the deadness, the primordial rhythms which have been denied expression.

The divine sounding of love begs us to journey close to our flesh. Vital to the life of spirit, attuning our listening to the body's vibrating sound is akin to exploring unfamiliar landscapes, lit only by the song of an unknown promise. It births an understanding that what

To walk safely through the maze of human life, one needs the light of wisdom and the guidance of virtue.  
~ Buddha  
(Labowitz, 1996 p. 85)

is experienced as sacred, is indeed sacred for knowing something is to enter into relationship with it.

Phenomenological research supports the idea of

body-as-experiencer (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), drawing a distinction between the German word *leib* (living body) as opposed to the word *korper* (physical body). (Leder, 1990, p. 5)

Commonly, it is only when the body, perceived as the physical body, does not function as we expect it to that our attention is turned towards it. Physicians, medical intuitives and academics, such as Carolyn Myss (1996), Christiane Northrup (1998), Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1995), Jean Houston (1996), Greenwood & Nunn (1992), Norman Shealy (1995), Alexander Lowen (1969), explore generative possibilities beyond the medical model of the body shifting perception outside the physical to incorporate other models such as spiritual and mythical models of the body.

Illness becomes an invitation to return to the body. It is, in and of itself, a listening presence. Symptoms of dis/ease in the body are often the only way that the soul can get our attention (Northrup, 1998, p.45). Bodywork, that which Yoshiharu Nakagawa (2000) calls somatic education, situates illness, dis/ease within the framework of the communal body.

"True spirituality," writes Louwen (1969), "has a physical or biological basis.... and is rooted in the deep biological process of the body" (p. 12). Faith is a quality of being, a way of being in relationship with oneself, life and the universe.

It unites us with family, community, and earth manifesting a life force that breathes nourishment into all the cells of our biology. The skin, a porous receptor, soaks in and breathes the presence in the world.

Chronic pain is relentless in calling forth one's attention to the body. It does not diminish in intensity; its cry is received throughout the body. "Pain reorganizes our lived space and time, our relations with others and with ourselves" (Leder, 1990, p. 73).

Our presence pulls inwards, to the here and now, enveloping the threshold into the inner chambers of the body's voice. Attending to the body's affective call may lead to what at first appears to be a crisis state. The word crisis is derived from the Greek word *krisis*, to separate. Taken back to its Indo-European base *krei*, it means to shift, separate. Yet a crisis of separating from old ways of knowing can bring forth the grace of new ways, heal old wounds, for listening deeply is an elixir for the soul.

Illness is an opportunity to descend into the body, to enter the body's spiritual womb. The choreography of the body delights in all shades of darkness and light eagerly embracing all the unknown parts of life. To embrace all of the living body no matter what its form, texture, taste, or scent is to cross over the threshold into "the kingdom of swoon" (Oliver, 2000, p.45).

My writing is becoming steeped in questions even though I am still fooled into thinking it is answers I seek. Is there a connection between the way we write and the circumstances of our life?

I write through the multiplicity of experiences that comprise a life desiring to listen to all the vast echoes, vespers and whispers that breathe the listening body.

It seems these unfamiliar dwelling spaces, these ripening questions of intrigue, tantalize the juice beneath my skin. At times it feels as though the sanctity of grace is just too raw, too vibrant and sacred for this body to be an elemental part of the whole. Standing naked before God, soaked in life's grace, the body's marrow and blood begin to whisper and we write ourselves into well being.

Journal Entry -  
Dream.....  
I am wiping renovation dust off the walls in my room. There are a lot of cobwebs. This is a job I know I have to do before moving on.

## QUESTING QUIET WONDER

Last summer words oozed out of my finger tips like blood from knife-pierced skin.

My body still-fully trembles with re/mem/brance.

I read the broken words.

Softened heart beats  
rhythmically mend my shattered letters

Voices cradle beneath my skin and I now - can - rock gently with them. The storm's surge has passed.....for a moment.....

and now....

I linger.....  
among the weathered logs  
swept upon the shore birthed in  
white- capped furore.

Back then.....

the deeply etched words had no choice. It was time.....

to surrender.

The sheer brute force of life was too callous. Life's fury like an ocean's roar hurled upwards, squelched my breath into spiralling dust until -

in one final wave I lay breathless,  
as charred logs lie tossed upon a beach,  
discarded, skin scathing, bleeding flesh torn, aching for rest.

And there the water's edge offered grace in rest/for/rest -  
grains of sand inviting re/questioning rest.

Questions, questioning, questing -

questions

spiraling  
downwards  
through  
the  
vibration  
of rhythm.  
discovery the  
yet through  
pulling upwards

searching upwards ... arms outstretched.

Now - it seems- my writing is different.

Gentle joy - quiet strength - maybe listening of a different kind.

Pulling inward.

Warming wisdom.

A pregnant listening - birthing into the body's way.

Wonder fuels my words.

Gentle questions - the words of stillness - creation quietly emerges  
and my body quiets. And maybe this is what I need to learn - to listen to the  
birth of quiet questions.



# WHERE DO THE WORLD'S WORDS GO?

This morning the snowfall  
begins to melt outside my office window  
and I find myself wondering  
about the world's words.

I wonder about quiet words  
lying still within our bodies  
and I wonder about disappearing words  
fading within melting snowflakes.

Where do the world's words go  
when the grass becomes green again  
and our present melts  
with our past?

I wonder about the stories they create  
and the unending  
always emerging flow  
of possibilities.

I wonder about all that my body remembers  
that appears to lay dormant  
through the course of  
hectic work days.

And I have been  
spending hours  
in desire  
longing to re/member.



*Photo 8*

# *LISTENING OFFERINGS*

“After much thought, I realized that the trouble I had writing that bleak Friday afternoon was due to my approach. I was trying to analyze....trying to explain rationally....I was failing miserably because I was approaching the task through my head.....I had to drop into my belly”.

~ **Marion Woodman**

## *M o v e m e n t   n i n e*

### *L I S T E N I N G   O F F E R I N G S*

**N**o matter how messy or unyielding our words upon the page appear, what will implode from listening to our hearts, our blood and bones, matters.

Writers such as Madeleine L'Engle, John Lee, Natalie Goldberg, Carolyn Heilbrun, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Vivian Paley, Kathleen Norris, Maxine Greene, Mary Catherine Bateson, Marion Woodman and Nel Noddings suggest that living creatively is critical in the formation of how we desire to live in the world. We may come to re-write, reshape, reinvent ourselves in ways which help us to attend to the grace at hand integrating all the threads into the fabric of our becoming. This is

not, as Tilden Edwards (1995) suggests, a once in a lifetime event. Conversion continues to work in the inner landscape of our lives, to the degree we are willing to let go, shifting our orientation in various ways and processes as we work it out throughout a lifetime. Meister Eckhart says it well. "The fruit of letting go is birth" (Eckhart, 1980, p. 309).

In these writing movements of space, commas, rests, and backslashes I begin to release, writing as a way into the music of the gentle whispers I hear in God's holy breath.

*Write.*

I hear.....

*.....JUST WRITE.*

And through the course of a slippery winter, I begin to feel the healing warmth of spring stretching out within me, leading into a fresh new way of being in the world's words. It is as if my body becomes the garden of blood-red tulips fed by soul sounds of gentle hands upon an ivory keyboard. A w/riting, a word-play, a spacing of words invites my body to breathe and my words to sing, tumbling and falling and laughing, picking themselves up within the moist green meadows of

aesthetic soundscapes remembering through it all the wisdom teaching of mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg, "Great is the overflow of Divine Love which is never still but ever ceaselessly and tirelessly pours forth, so that our little vessel is filled to the brim and overflows. If we do not choke the channel with self-will, God's gifts continue to flow and overflow" (Flinders, 1993, p. 69).

*During the winter season, Vigils begins with the verse:  
Lord, open my lips and my mouth will proclaim your praise  
(Ps. 50 [51]:157). ~ RB 9:1*

# HOLDING WILD WONDER

Graphite strokes  
of horizontal vertical lines  
birthing through static thoughts  
into ever changing fluid forms

I wonder through words  
as they breathe unforeseen rhythms  
upon the manila pages  
in front of me

Playing with spaces  
between  
said and un/said  
back slashes and semi colons  
a pray/ful desire  
frees my weighted mind opening

vulner/able  
tender  
soft  
newborn wonder

my words nuzzle  
in trusting spaces  
sleeping safely  
until they awaken  
to explore once more.

## LEFT-HANDED QUESTIONS

I wonder about my left hand. What does it know?

What may I be ignoring when I write with the movement, strength and understanding my right hand offers? In my right-handed writing do I hear all that my body knows?

Will I listen differently to what my body knows if I write through my silent limb – my left hand?

If I write to know, do I shift where I locate myself, and perhaps my source of understanding? What if I write with an intention to tap into what I know through the word left instead of the word right?



I light the lavender candle beside me as I offer a blessing for this time. I notice it is my left hand that steadily holds the matchbook – the silent supporter – silently powerful – the supporting limb.



My right hand initiates the movement to ignite the flame. Every action, every movement, comes through a source of stillness: stillness in motion, fluid e/motions. And I'm reminded of a line I once read - that it is stillness that the bird flies through.

I also remember a child's words - that maybe it is the movement of the tree that creates the wind - maybe, just maybe, it isn't the wind moving the tree after all.

It is this quiescent movement, this silence of touch, which gives voice to our knowing. It guides our motions through re/ceptive, per/ceptive spaces of creation.

What does this stillness have to tell us when we ask - and we must ask - for our asking is not so much a movement offering stillness permission to speak - rather it is in our asking that we are brought into awareness, a relationship with stillness, as we wait. And in our waiting, birthing bodies of flesh and bodies of stillness, we are offered a moment to surrender. And in this surrendering perhaps we may find our body opening just wide enough to

sense the cracks of inviting listening space. And although it may not be possible to linger long, this brief moment discloses a newness of understanding, taking us to a place of re/birth, for the very first time, each time.

stillful cupping still/ness

whispering un/spoken voice

body quieting inquiring limbs

Those who desire to hear the still/ness of wor[ld]ds seldom ask their questions through sound. They ask, while resting at home within their bodies, bodies of softened eyes, knowing skin, alive in the breath of poetic pauses.

An energy of desire, sensed in the air between, a desire to know one's story softens the protective layers containing us, maintaining us, separating us from what we think we do not know.

In the desire, the desire to know, to know another's story, love is born. The fragrance of time speaks of sacred time, not as a thing to be carelessly wasted, filling up space with empty questions of rhetoric. Communal con/version pushes conversation through my body's deadened walls.

What I seek, what I desire to know is embodied in the choreography of my body. Simmering deep within my body's choreography I un/cover my core.

The letter 'h' embedded in my body's choreography speaks of many things.

When my core is weak, the 'h' in my choreography pushes downwards through my marrow into clotting blood, weighting my body's core. Life then becomes my chore.

'H' helps me to breathe. I push my breath outwards with my h's touching sighs of lips and tongue. As I write the letter 'h' my body senses its

need for stilling rest. 'H', a simple letter moves me - to where I find hope to rest my core amongst my c[h]ores.

And as I rest I remember the 'h' in heart. This 'h' opens a pathway for my ears. Sensing comfort in the shape of 'h', my body's silent longing searches for ways of listening with ears of h/ear/t. I long to listen with ears of h/ear/t, to hear silence's expansion of breath resting still, resting still beside the h/ear/th of h/ear/t.

In the choreography of my body I re/cord my stories, choreographing my body's land/scapes and sound/scapes as I re/member, sinking deeper and deeper into the interiority of my body, into the interior wisdom of what my body knows.

My left hand is moving through silent space, spreading, stretching letters wide across the page in unintelligible designs. My letters remind me that creativity is not neat, nor tidy. Creativity disrupts the noise of wor[ ]ds, pulling us, oh so unexpectedly, into unsettling silence.

My words born out of 'h's' breathe, disrupt. Unpredictable, left-handed weaving words, weave my worlds. My writing magicians craft and shape and sculpt my alphabet body into daily wisdom filled with grace. As I rest upon my 'h's' and remember to dot my 'i's', I need to stay present to what speaks inside, to trust as my exterior sinks deeply in the body of words that creates and shapes my story.

Interweaving the threads of my interior and exterior languages I desire to re/enter, re/create and re/imagine strolling spaces of wandering wonder. To become a pathetic amateur - pathetic because its roots mean 'filled with soul' and an amateur because its roots mean one who loves what they do, and one who does what they love. (Guenther, 1992)

Just look at the letters 'L' and 'R'. Consonants we're told.

Consonant

in harmony or agreement; in accord

harmonious in tone

Prosody having consonance

Consonantal - any speech sound produced by stopping and releasing air stream (p,t,k,b,d,g) by stopping it at one point while it escapes at another (m,n,l,r) by forcing it through a loosely closed or very narrow passage (f,v,s,z,sh,zh,th,H,kh,h,w,y), or by a combination of these means.

Stopping and releasing

Stopping at one point while it escapes at another

Forcing it through a loosely closed or very narrow passage

Combination of these means.

These images remind me of birth.

I look at the consonant 'l'. It reminds me of resting under a tree, my back supported by the strength of its trunk. I gaze upwards into the boughs of the tree seeing shapes form in the spaces between the boughs, the sky and the sunshine's radiance. I am captured into a daydreaming dance with 'l'.

I look at the consonant 'r' and it reminds me of bending in prayer, a bowing of my torso, palms held gracefully together offering my body in

prayer. I am stilled in silence, feeling held in a loving presence and I know I am safe in the space of 'r'.

Play and Pray.

Maybe, here, we are taken to a playground that arises between the consonants of l and r. How does this realm emerge I wonder?

What happens to us as narrative beings when we write the letters that shape our words?

What can these words teach us?

What can we learn in play/ful prayer and prayer/ful play? Maybe we can remember an embodied sacred place of presence.

Writing, says Natalie Goldberg (1986) is 90% listening.

A baby's hearing, David Abram (1996) says is "at first, an aesthetic, bodily generalized feeling, a bodily felt attunement" (p. 71). We move our bodies to listen to the soundscapes around us. We listen to the ebb and flow which cups us, letting it wash over us, penetrating our skin and resonating deep within us. Listening is Eros we know through our bodies.

Palaeo-linguistics suggest that early human beings discovered the world in the same way as a baby does - "tentatively moving from the known to the unknown by way of associations" (Berendt, 1985, p. 56). They investigated anything new and compared it to what they already knew. Meaning arose analogically not logically. Words used by early human beings arose from aspects of our human bodies. Maybe this is why writers like David Jardine and Kathleen Norris write of traveling back and down, living in descending spaces.

Reading once again the dictionary definition of the word 'consonant' I desire to dig below the surface to find that which moves me so I can feel the meaning within my body. And so I reflect upon the word 'Prosody'.



Prosody:

the science or art of versification including the study of metrical structure, rhythm, stanza forms.

My lips pucker with the letter "P".

I roar with the sound of "Pro".

I whistle with the letter "S".

I want to dance with the body of "prosody".

I continue to dig.

If I can come to sense the poetic harmonies through the body's consonants, maybe then I can write and breathe and live in the world through eyes and ears and hearts of love - harmonious Eros igniting ecstatic experiences.

In vocations of care do we not need to see the sacred harmonies in all who cross our paths? For in touching that beauty within each of us we are open to the e/motion of love. We will search for the Eros in all that we

breathe and in our searching we will un/cover. For the more we listen, the more we un/cover and the more we un/cover the more we listen.

And maybe our letters dance with the Eros of wondering, the sacredness of listening and the beauty of creativity if we choose to accept their invitation.

Writing with my left hand takes time and in this left-handed space of writing I'm invited to descend further into what my body knows.



I began to rejoice and celebrate and wriggle with words. And in this playful place of creation back slashes became my breath, my pausing places.

I started to listen to the sound of words strung together like the tongue twisters we used to play as children and I started to sense what it felt like to have words swirl in my mouth again.

What was this all about I wondered. Did it have something to do with a new relationship with language? What might it mean to consider living in relationship with the wor[ ]d's words? What happens when we shift our attention from seeing words as something outside this body, static and rigid in stance, detached and separate from the mystery of who we are, into attending to the stillness they hold, fluidly listening from whence they come, trusting that they are as much a part of our be/coming as the bones and blood of our body? That maybe they too need, just as our muscles and tissues do, to move fluidly, softly, whimsically breathing in a daily renewal in an on-going process of ever changing motion.

Writing with images of circles, and spirals and zigzags as a way to listen, I find an invitation to let go. Carolyn Myss (1996) tells us

that our desire to create is housed within our body. Creative energy fractures habitual patterns. Spiraling, circling, zigzagging writing - these motions tap into another way of knowing, another way of listening deeply, another path to prayer. I begin to attend to the 'grammar of the gut' (Snowber,1994) and to my body's way of breathing the practice of forever becoming present within a listening presence. And I come to know within my bones that my etymological dig of words is somehow not just about the words themselves, it is an etymological dig of my life.

# F/EAR NOT

The present:

.....catch it if you can. ~ **Annie Dillard**, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*



In the beginning it seemed to be a sense of intrigue that

beckoned

in the night forest

It was the flame that called me there.

Its randomness.

Its unpredictability.

Each flame is perfect burning alive without definition.

Its dance of chaos and devilish blaze should, it would seem,  
frighten.....

yet a vulnerable simplicity is carried in its breath.

Sinking deeper into the fire's rhythmic chaos, I hear....

the path is dark

the forest wise

Fire wisdom kindles beyond.

Stirring these ambers of intrigue I rise to follow these  
smouldering whispers.

The path is dark

The forest wise

Whispers spiral in a garment of ancient fear echoing the  
reverence and wonder of which Jesus spoke in the words, 'Fear not.'  
Fear in the old sense of awe. Inviting us to "recognize the holy in our  
midst, fear that gives us the courage to listen, and to let God awaken  
in us capacities and responsibilities we have been afraid to  
contemplate (Norris, 1999, p.144-145).

This body journeys forth safe in the womb of the forest.

Nature's femininity cradles the muse's perfect form. Her cloth of purple amber prances singing sonnets of her heart. Her body creates playful labyrinths of prayer upon the forest's soil.

Impossible to capture.

Their truth I cannot explain..... yet my bones remember.  
...knowing that as I listen to the forest voice.....the forest listens to me.

The path is dark.

The forest wise.

Fear not.

Trusting the process is based on a belief that something valuable will emerge when we step into the unknown. ~ Ted Aoki

*We believe the divine presence  
is everywhere. ~ RB 19:1*

The words are chasing *you*. Slow down so that you can be caught. ~ John Lee

# COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer; since to remain constantly at work will cause you to lose your power of judgment. Go some distance away because the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a glance, and a lack of harmony or proportion is more readily seen.

~ *Leonardo Da Vinci*



I am in a tiny bedroom above the Tuscan village of Cortona.

I am on a refuge in this 12<sup>th</sup> century Monastery, this place of retreat, because I long to live the listening desire which my body senses.

I am searching for a sacred pause  
a holy dwelling place.

I am searching for listening ways.



I have heard it said, that no matter where we go, we are always with ourselves. My retreat, I suppose, could be called an impossible vacation from myself.

Travel heals wounds, my friend says. In travel you don't forget about life. You discover yours.

And so I have come to try to listen to the mystery of what life speaks. And I hope that embedded in the sunburnt soil of this spacious landscape, sculpted out of mountain ranges, ancient stone and ripening olive groves, I will sense the rapture of vulnerability in the waxing and waning of a generative knowing, sinking deeper into a listening landscape which echoes the symphony of God's wisdom.

A retreat offers time away from our daily routine.

I know a retreat does not have to entail travelling half way around the globe. A momentary sanctuary can avail itself in the middle of a feverish workday simply by taking a deep breath for a second or two before another phone call - or stilling in the morning sunrise as we wrap our hands around a freshly brewed morning cup of coffee at the breakfast table. And I try to consciously be present to possibilities in my daily life as mother, wife, student and teacher. It helps me to, at least, feel like I am seeking a balance in my life.

But this time, I heard, I had to go away.

It felt like I had little choice.

A persistent gnawing pestered inside of me – and each time I tried to dismiss it, it grew painfully more persistent.

And in its persistence,  
I grew to understand,  
I could not ignore it.

Travelling in an unknown country I have no sense of how things *should* be. And so I watch and listen and learn with maybe less baggage than what I carry with me at home. I begin to attend to the details of what I do not know.

Details of our lives work to write who we are as we write life in the details. And I have heard it said that God lives in the details of our lives.

And so now I desire to undress the many layers of words around my body, which at first glance may seem to define me. I desire to listen to the ineffable whisperings of life, the daily details of simply living. And I hope that if I can hear these overtones, undertones and tones of silence, I will come to know the rhythms of our be/coming as God's voice. There is a raw wisdom in

our bones, gently nudging us into the dawning of each new day guided with the body's footsteps of faith.

There is no right way to do a retreat and so I listen to what feels right. As I work to piece together possibilities, to realize these persistent wriggings inside of me - obstacles - barriers - voices of self-doubt do not magically disappear.

Yet I weep, drenched in a longing to live the risk, coming face to face, skin to skin, heartbeat to heartbeat, with the daring desire to chance, that someday I might live the prayerful presence that so often seems to resonate inside my body. And in quiet conversation with a gentle friend I confide my self-doubting thoughts. She asks me one simple question, "Would God be pleased with your decision?"

I walk along unstable cobblestones where histories of footsteps flow as arterial inner wells. Meandering through landscapes of body and breath, sensing a marriage of water and wine, I begin to drown into conversations with God, daring for just a moment to get bare enough to listen. And in the colors, textures, tastes and soundscapes, which offer home in this venerable land, I sense God's blessing.

The abyss of emptiness fills me.



It is fall time.

September.

The month of my birth day.

What a miraculous birthday gift to simply be held in the slow ceremony of life cupped in the wisdom of this mountainous terrain.

Each morning I awaken to resting in a space held between earth and sky. The mist of thick translucent clouds floats beyond my open window shutters. A devotional silence escorts me as I go about my morning ritual of washing, dressing, singing and meditation.

The clouds gently dissolve. Where they go my eyes cannot see. And in this dis/solving, the mystery of life held within the dripping beauty of the reddened landscape, fills me with gratitude. Just as I begin to distil more of the mystery each day that I am here, the clouds make way for revealing heartbeats of what lies beneath.

I share lunch in the company of a Buddhist Monk. He tells me that travelling to a country where one does not speak the language can be

relaxing. You tune in, he says, on a different listening vibration. Others do not expect you to respond with words and so permission is offered in the unsaid for you to simply be caressed in the music of communing conversations.

His words sit with me as I listen to different sounds spoken around me seeping through my skin. And I remember the image of our bodies as cellos. An instrument's strings alone do not create music. Music is created within the vessel of the instrument where emptiness offers space for resonance.

I begin to imagine my body as a cello.

Inner and outer spaces.

If I fill up, add on, accumulate, congest these spaces,  
there is no room for music.

I listen to these conversations at the dining table.

I envision my bones

as the cellos strings.

My desire to listen, to abandon, to seek, I am becoming to understand, may be part of what Brother David Steindl Rast shares with me on an afternoon walk through the garden. The antidote to exhaustion may not be rest, he says, it may be the need to hear ourselves. For it is not possible to have a deep conversation with another until we know how to have a deep

conversation with ourselves and God. It takes courage, the way of the heart,  
to have a conversation.

I am coming to savour the sensuous scent of this nurturing gift, a  
listening presence. The ordinary miracles of daily life open our hearts to the  
fluid flowing waters of birth and reciprocity.

I delight in the curvature of my soles upon the cobblestone streets,  
Listening to the bark peeling away from the trees,  
walking slowly enough to smile at the woman passing  
me by whose language I do not speak.

To stand in awareness  
of the slow grazing gestures of the horses in the pasture,  
to rest along the road side  
even though my body is no longer tired.

To pause, to awaken, to breathe.  
To simply be.

And I am reminded as I close my eyes at night beneath the Tuscan  
moon, that there are parts of our body as ancient as the stones we walk  
upon.

That I, and the tree together, peel away layers of our exterior and that maybe the stranger and I do speak the same language after all.

And I am reminded that much of what we desire lives in life's moisture, the earth's greening natural pastures of presence.

We grow with roots reaching downwards and limbs stretching upwards. Darkness and lightness and somewhere in between, our hearts beat, our breath inhales, exhales and our senses open the listening of courageous conversations. And I am reminded that conversation requires two. And its design is fluid, responsive and loving. And maybe that is why in these conversations I am beginning to hear the music of God.

# *LISTENING PEDAGOGY*

The flute of interior time is played whether we hear it not,  
What we mean by “love” is its sound coming in.  
When love hits the farthest edge of excess, it reaches a wisdom.  
And the fragrance of the knowledge!  
It penetrates our thick bodies,  
It goes through walls –  
Its network of notes has a structure as if a million suns were  
arranged inside.  
This tune has truth in it.  
Where else have you heard a sound like this?

**Kabir**, version by Robert Bly



# *Finale*

## *LISTENING PEDAGOGY*

If it is so that the world arises in the interplay of our living together, then which ways do we live together to co-create a world to be one we desire to live in?

Education is about the relationship which arises between student and teacher, a mentor-pupil kinship ultimately based on love (Manturana, Bunnell, Oliver, Palmer, Noddings, Greene, Brunner, Guenther). As Thomas Merton once said, "the way of education is to help us define ourselves authentically and spontaneously in relation to our world" (Merton, 1979, p.3). The Rule of St. Benedict, monastic

ways, practices of prayerful living, Lectio Divina, artful writing inquiry, phenomenology and a contemplative listening way of being in research ask us in various ways to bear the challenge of moving beyond the obvious as a way of entering into a deeper, richer, more intimate stewardship with our world. Each embraces a monastic spirit attuned to the listening body, essential to a life well lived, inviting and receiving moments of divine interludes where our listening becomes too deep for words, giving way to a "peace which passeth understanding" (Hoffman in Etty, p. xi, 1996).

I have often wondered if it was perhaps the persistent hum of sound memories that pulled me into this listening work. Primordial sounds which still continue ever so quietly to vibrate within. My mother's fingers gently bringing to life music upon the ivory keyboard, my father's garden of blood-red tulips, the rhythms of island life at my grandparents' cottage, echoed memories which summon me back to remembering a way of knowing at the age of nine.

As I write this I pick up the Tibetan singing bowl which rests atop the piano in my office. Tradition teaches that request for permission to play the bowl is an essential way before one begins. I gently tap the side of the bowl. It responds. I play.

No matter how many times I play the singing bowl I continue to learn. When I first picked up the bowl I was hesitant to play. No one had shown me nor taught me *how* to play it. And it certainly didn't come with an instruction manual.

At first I naively thought it was I who would play the bowl. I would make the sound by touching the outside of the bowl with its hand carved wooden handle and I would be able to control the sound, volume and rhythm. How wrong I was.

Any tendency to take charge is thwarted with a resistance felt within the bowl itself and transferred immediately to my palm in which it rests. It continually teaches me to slow down, to sense the dustless transference between the sound of its body and my own. I alone do not play it.

"Things men have made with wakened hands and put soft life into", wrote D. H. Lawrence, "are awake through years with transferred touch and go on glowing for long years. And for this reason, some old things are lovely warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them."

When the bowl and I finish the vibration continues and I sense that it comes full circle returning to the soil beneath my feet filling my body with a fragrant whisper of this wisdom sound. I am learning that when it beckons I need to listen.

Looking up from my computer screen I stand witness to last night's raindrops suspended from the branches of the Japanese maple tree outside my window. Their glistening body lights the way for birthing the spring-time leaves that are gestating within the strong yet fluid branches. The tree dancing with the gentle breeze beckons and entices the perfume of spring.

To those who are drawn to live in contemplative ways within the daily round, life requires the on-going practice of listening deeply. I cannot say for sure what this practice is really all about, nor can I define what it is that this way teaches. Do I really know? Do I truly understand it? I don't know. Yet I delight in the suspicion, in the constant hope and embodied joy the prospect of this way brings forth. And this suspicion, fuelled by my desire to live constantly awake to the whispered Mysteries around us, is good enough for me.

A lingering silence, a poetic pause, incomprehensible wonder - spaces from which arise the rhythms between rest and musical note.

Perhaps it is in the whispered silence of these gracenotes, that life's listening interruptions become living interpretations of life's holy curiosity.

*L I S T E N I N G*

*M E M O R I E S*

The child whose gaze is met learns that the world is real, and desirable -  
that the child himself is real, and cherished.

~ **Mary Oliver**

# *E n c o r e*

## *L I S T E N I N G   M E M O R I E S*

### *Whisperings of a Red Bench*

Every day at 12:00 my Grandpa's friend Mr. Graham comes whistling through the bush for a drink. I'm not allowed to disturb them, my Nanny tells me, as they pull up their chairs on the front porch mumbling about adult affairs. What could be so important that I have to be ignored each day at noon, I wonder? And so I pout on the back stairs, disdain for Mr. Graham oozes from my six year old soul.

Now, dinner is finished. Mr. Graham is long gone until tomorrow.

Grandpa says. "OK, Mac - let's go."

Yes! Finally it's my turn!

Grandpa waits for me to push open the screen door. One, two, three - the screen door slams behind us. We stroll down the path to the dock leaving the clatter of dinner dishes behind.

The weathered red bench waits for us down on the dock, cradling the last rays of warmth from the afternoon sun. Grandpa grunts a little as he sits down and the red bench creaks its welcome. He pats the seat beside him: my cue. I snuggle tightly into his body.

Grandpa pulls out his pipe. My eyes close. I listen.

My ears know by heart. His red pocketknife grinds away the old tobacco from inside the pipe's barrel.

Thump once.

Thump twice.

Thump three times.



He whacks the pipe barrel upside down into his palm.

Whispering winds whisk the stale tobacco away into its breath.

His right hand rustles around in his right breast pocket.

Muffled crackling.

The yellowed torn tobacco pouch lulls gracefully in the palm of his hand. They fit - just like me and Grandpa.

He reaches inside the pouch and begins the evening ritual of packing fragrant fresh tobacco into his pipe.

A sigh, a hum, a sniff.

Smack!

His lips prepare.

Click.

The top of the silver lighter opens. The flame whistles with the breeze.

Like a tunnel drawing in the wind Grandpa puffs his pipe. His chest rises and falls. His puckered lips sucking on his pipe remind me of a toothless kiss. The fragrance of pipe tobacco touches my skin. I am home.

My chest rises and falls.

I inhale deeply puckering my lips.

I am safe.

I snuggle a little closer.

"Must be the Parrishes - coming from the city," Grandpa says. "Yup," I say. The humming of the neighbour's boat engine wraps around the island. Grandpa raises his hand and waves as they pass by. Even though my hand is much smaller, I wave too.

We listen to the mallard ducks fluttering upon the waves in rhythm to the music of the lake. Waves slosh against the sun-cracked old tires on the dock. Grandpa's boat sways gently left and right, at rest inside the boathouse. I breathe in the scent of gasoline, a summertime perfume.

Grandpa and I nod our heads together in the rhythms of our lives. We sit in time.

Beating hearts

Lapping water

Whispering winds

Puffing pipe tobacco

Slamming screen doors.

A creaking red bench.

Breathe.

Listen.

Life.

I am seen. Each night we walk down to the dock after dinner. Grandpa pats the red bench. I snuggle.

Listening.

Time stood still on the red bench.

It stood still listening to the forest of autumn leaves, sap dripping into tin cans.

It stood still listening to the trees harmonize with my rope swing, as I flew through the air.

It stood still listening to rain dance on the red cottage roof.

And it stood still listening to Mom's tears tell me Grandpa had died.

But he taught me to listen to the world around me, not through words but through stillness. And in his stillness, he continues to teach, to love and to listen.

Time stands still as I close my eyes to the breath of new life in my arms.

It stands still as I listen to life in children's song.

It stands still as I listen to knowing tears stream down aged cheeks.

And it stands still as I listen to the fullness of the moon's light dance across the ocean's body. And it stands still as I write,

I learn

I remember

and

I listen.

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