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Final Essay

LEARNING TO LISTEN TO INNER WISDOM



UNLOCKING THE PERSON WITHIN

How often do we say to ourselves, "I just wish I knew what to do"? Often we feel lost and unsure of ourselves during times of crisis or transition, overwhelmed by outside forces, powerless. We may feel we are just rolling with the punches, a victim of fate and that we don't possess the inner resources to move us ahead. At some point it may feel like the Peter Principle has kicked in, the idea that we reach the pinnacle of our potential and everything we attempt after that is just futile beating our heads against the wall, further attempts toward higher achievement will only result in our shortcomings becoming plain to everyone. If we buy into this limited concept, where does that leave us? Feeling inadequate the rest of our lives? Mid-life crisis?

At this point many of us living the Western, fast-paced life look around frantically for some way to reinvent ourselves. Feeling that we lack inner resources we may search desperately around outside ourselves for power, peace and fulfillment. Where do we find new hope, new strength, wisdom? Must we go outside ourselves? **Who should we listen to?**

Communication researchers have begun to look at the energy we put into listening, comparing it to currency, a limited resource. Much as we would like to say we

could listen all day long and do whatever it takes to hear everyone, that simply isn't true. Even the most devoted listener runs out of energy. So, if we need answers to important questions, and we only possess limited energy for listening, it would be helpful to look closely at where we spend our listening currency.

If we are in committed relationships, our mates require a certain amount of time and energy. If we have jobs, they often demand a big piece of our listening energy. Our supply of currency is already hit pretty hard. Children, friends, social activities, the mountain of messages coming at us from advertisements, newspapers, television and radio, all line up to gobble up our listening currency. At the end of the day we arrive home "totally spent."

Could we have spent our listening currency more fruitfully? Did we save any for our own needs? Are we overlooking the one relationship we need to nurture the most in order to gain great insight and wisdom? Have we even given the time of day to our inner self? That person resting within us, waits to be consulted, listened to.

Relationships take time. If we want to have a good relationship with our self, we must learn what makes a good relationship. E. C. Glenn (1989), a researcher studying listening discovered that *understanding* (perception) is the most often used descriptor of listening. He went on to look at various approaches to understanding, one of which was *compassion*. Glenn's studies joined with other recent research to suggest that *satisfying relationships may be largely based on understanding, not merely basic comprehension*. So, *gaining a compassionate understanding of ourselves* would be a step toward building a more rewarding relationship with that person resting within us.

Obstacles to Self Discovery

Western attitudes about time well spent

Time spent quietly, alone, is often looked at negatively, especially by Westerners. People want to see results, tangible products. Choosing to spend some of our precious time on contemplation of our inner self has, until recently, been viewed as an activity of the lazy, selfish or confused. In his article discussing contemplation, communications professor and author Tom Bruneau, tries to help his readers examine barriers to achieving a contemplative state (Bruneau, 1997). He describes our society as living in a style he calls, "clock insanity," (Bruneau, 1997:216). The picture he paints is of people shooting rapidly through life in well worn ruts of daily activity, almost mindlessly performing our ritual frenzied list of "to-do's", racing from one thing to the next. We skim along on life's surface, our time so full of purely physical activity that we have no opportunity for reflection. Harkening back to C.S. Lewis' observation in 1927 that "Everything in our life today conspires to thrust people into prescribed tracks, in what can be called a sort of *trance of action*", (Bruneau, 1997:216) Bruneau reminds us that we must learn to manage the turmoil that can consume our entire lives.

So, it is important to begin to take control of our lives, and tune out the voices of the world. Step one then would be:

Choose to spend quiet time each day and value that decision.

Fear of being alone with your "self"

For some, this is a real fear that what they may find within themselves is somehow dreadful, dark, shameful. On some deep level a decision is made not disturb



the sleeping monster that lies deep inside. "What if I don't like what I discover about my self? What if I find a hateful person inside?"

Sarah Ban Breathnach's book, Simple Abundance – A Daybook of Comfort and Joy (Ban Breathnach, 1995), guides the reader on a year long journey of self-discovery and appreciation. Each day is devoted to exploring one new idea in the search for healing of self.

On March 18 of the book we are asked to think of ourselves as Sleeping Beauty, urged to awaken ourselves to our own, beautiful, inner self. We are told a tale of a pretty girl who through a coincidence is asked to have her picture taken sitting on a pile of garbage to illustrate how much had accumulated in a particular town after a strike had halted garbage collection. After the picture appeared in the newspaper, the girl felt publicly humiliated and was teased by her schoolmates. As the story went, the little girl, became a recluse, hiding in her room for a very long time, losing herself in books, much as Sleeping Beauty pricked her finger and fell into a deep sleep.

Sarah Ban Breathnach asks us to think when did we prick our finger? What moments in our lives may have put us to sleep to our inner beauty, drove us to self-hate or unhealthy hiding places? Whatever the incident or influence, she calls us to awaken. As she puts it, still on March 18th, "Your creativity, imagination, and authentic sense of style are far superior to any sorcerer's spell, not matter how strong. Going on to quote author Merle Shain she reminds us "One can never change the past, only the hold it has on you, and while nothing in your life is reversible, you can reverse it nevertheless."

So, even though we fear what we will find inside, we are told to go there and find out for ourselves – to be brave. There are many ways to avoid making that journey. One way to avoid ever having to face our true selves is to [wear masks](#).

That popular saying, “fake it until you make it” may have some merit, but if relied upon for daily coping, you may never “make it”. For as St. Augustine said, “Habit, if not resisted, soon becomes necessity” (Lessin,1993). If we develop the habit of hiding behind masks, not sure if our true feelings or responses would be acceptable, we may slowly lose sight of who we really are. We may think we are the mask.

Along the way we may have unconsciously decided that it is better to keep the acceptable masks on at the appropriate times, to pretend to be an authentic, centered person. Better to keep going, than to risk further self-discovery, or self-disclosure.

In his remarkably honest book about the journey to self, *Wherever You Go There You Are*,(1994) Jon Kabat-Zinn warns those seeking strength through meditation to pay attention that they do not merely don meditation as another mask – another false assurance that they are “supremely invulnerable...one who has everything under control and is wise enough to deal with everything without being caught up in reactive emotions” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994:65). The fact that he situated these ideas in a chapter called, “You Have to Be Strong Enough to Be Weak,” underscores the need to admit our own vulnerability, to accept our own inadequacies as part of our humanness. We humble ourselves when we see that we never “get there”, we’re always on the journey.

In his book, Dropping Your Guard – The Value of Open Relationships, (Swindoll, 1983), Pastor and author, Charles R. Swindoll points out that ,”There is just one major difficulty in this mask-wearing game – *it isn't real*. It therefore forces us to skate rather than relate” (Swindoll, 1983:10). He then, candidly shares his great relief at finally being able to quit “playing a part that wasn't me” and come to “know the joy and freedom of having my guard down.” He goes on to remind us that the better we

become at wearing masks, the more alone we really are – hiding our natural self along with the true feelings and emotions we experience.

Is hiding and aloneness healthy? Can we achieve fulfillment all alone? Swindoll references a survey of over one thousand social science studies led by researchers, Bernard Berelson and Gary A. Steiner (Berelson and Steiner, 1964) that came to the conclusion that “Total isolation is virtually always an intolerable situation for the human adult – even when physical needs are provided for.”

Besides losing sight of who we are and stuffing our emotions, we can actually make ourselves sick by living behind masks. Thomas Baglan in his article, “Intrapersonal Communication and Mediation” (Baglan, 1997:219) reminds us that meditation has been proven to improve health through lowering metabolic and respiration rates, changing the lactate concentration of blood and changing patterns of brain waves.

Christiane Northrup, M.D. in her book, Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom – Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing, (1994), warns us that our immune systems respond according to our belief system. She writes, “A thought held long enough and repeated enough becomes a belief. The belief then becomes biology” (Northrup, 1994:35). Dr. Northrup then goes on to show us how certain autoimmune diseases can become the body's way of responding to self-destructive beliefs. She points to studies that show that stress and loneliness can help cause a latent (inactive) herpes virus to become active. So, as we come to learn that negative or destructive thoughts can translate into illness, we ask ourselves [can I afford to hide my true self any longer?](#)

CHOOSING TO AWAKEN

Reflecting on her own experience with deeply rooted thoughts and beliefs, Dr. Northrup feels they are “completely unconscious and are not readily available to the intellect...They come from that other part that in the past became lodged and buried in the cell tissue” (p. 36). Dr. Northrup believes every patient must go through a healing process that involves the first three steps of Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step Program, steps, Dr. Northrup sees as based on spiritual truths.

The steps are:

- 1) Admit you are powerless over anything that is troubling you
- 2) Believe in a power greater than yourself
- 3) Make a decision to turn your will and life over the care of God as you understand Him (Dr. Northrup changes the word Him to inner guidance or divine wisdom).

So, we have to ask ourselves, **are we willing to risk getting to know ourselves?** At this point we will have to be willing to trust in others – trust their experiences of coming to self awareness. Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994:58) devotes a chapter to Trust. He encourages us to put our trust “in a process or ideal...to cultivate a trusting heart”. If we trust in the many people who have explored the person within, and who encourage self-discovery, we can say, **“YES”!**

Say yes to yourself, choose to discover who you really are

STARTING OUR JOURNEY

Since we've established that we want to get to know our real self, and that understanding our real self is a first step, we may begin to make a plan.

Author e.e. cummings wrote, "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting." So, we're going to have to work at this.

Learning to know ourselves requires a special kind of listening. The Quakers have a saying, "Be present where you are." "Being still" as a pathway to inner strength and wisdom goes back to the ancient belief in divine power resting within us.

In the Book of Isaiah in the Bible, Chapter 30, verse 7 Isaiah implores the Israelites to stop chasing material riches and stop turning to the wealthy Egyptians for fulfillment, he tells them that, "Their strength is to sit still."

Meditation has been practiced by in many cultures for thousands of years. In his book, [Word into Silence](#), John Main, O.S.B., a Benedictine monk, explains that, "Learning to meditate is not just a matter of mastering a technique. It is much more learning to appreciate and respond directly to the depths of your own nature, not human nature in general but your own in particular" (Main, 1981:1).

Being a Benedictine monk, John Main shares his Christian perspective on meditation as synonymous with contemplative prayer seeing the "essential context of meditation is to be found in the fundamental relationship of our lives, the relationship that we have as creatures with God, our Creator." He goes on to say that we must "get

in touch with ourselves first, to get into a full relationship with ourselves before we can turn openly to our relationship with God." This decision to believe in a power larger than our self becomes a foundational step for many people in experiencing the transformation of who they are now to journeying to a new sense of self.

Regardless of one's religious beliefs, the power of meditation to transform lives has been widely acknowledged. In the popular book of the 1970's, TM Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress, (Bloomfield, M.D., et al, 1975), its' authors relay testimony after testimony of the effects of Transcendental Meditation on its practitioners.

A geology professor who had been practicing TM for one year reported:

There's been a quantum increase in the quality of my life since I started meditating. I feel that the clarity of my thinking, the enthusiasm with which I approach my work, the amount of myself I can give to my students and everyone I interact with—all have increased many times. I often feel an increased calmness in tense situations where I work. Even my co-workers say they don't understand how I can be so calm. And it's all due to meditation. Before I started TM, I was totally depressed—I was thinking of dropping out, just disappearing into the woods.

A mother, whose entire family had begun meditating explained the changes this way:

For the first time in my married life I am enjoying my role and responsibilities as a cook, wife, mother and housewife—and mainly because of my good self-image due to my new capabilities and accomplishments. Our family used to argue a lot; now we don't. We speak more softly, with more love and understanding, patience. We enjoy each other more. The children have benefited so much, it still seems miraculous. I am less shy than before; more sure of myself and the value of my opinions and convictions.

Finally, this from a 62 year old man:

I used to suffer from loneliness, anxiety, and increasing despair as I felt my time running out. Now I feel younger and more hopeful. Rather than being preoccupied with bodily aches and pains I am pursuing new areas, carpentry and fishing. Life is more fulfilling—each day has its own rewards. I now feel an increasing sense of wisdom. I would love to live to be a hundred now but I am no longer afraid to die. TM has given me inner peace.

GIVE YOUR SELF A CHANCE TO EMERGE

In order to practice meditation you need to create a quiet place to spend quiet time, free from outside distractions. Enjoy discovering your own special place, whether it is a corner of your home, or a spot in nature that you feel safe, **become childlike and stake out your private place to practice contemplation.**

Browse through several books on meditation. Select a few to read through and find the one or two that speak to you. **A meditation guide is an important part of your preparation.**

Be open to ideas that may sound silly or unimportant. Meditation guides will ask you to pay attention to your posture, your breath and to allow time each day to practice. With dedication and practice a new sense of calm will creep into your life.

Clifford Longley, religious affairs editor of *the Times of London*, (Longley, 1988) tells us that, "It is an extraordinary fact and an extraordinary piece of evidence for the truth of religion, that long hours spent in silent communication with a God who never directly answers is nevertheless manifestly a two-way communication. Such a person is gradually and permanently altered in the depths of his personality in ways which would be inconceivable if there was really "nothing there" at all."

Mr. Longley explains the state of "holiness" one can achieve during time spent in prayer as an experience of being loved. That is what we are hoping to achieve - a state of contemplation where we can meet ourselves, and come **to a compassionate understanding of who we are**, which will result in love for our true self, the self that fell into a deep sleep so long ago.



BREATHE IN PEACE AND WISDOM

Through contemplation of self we may begin to discover amazing power that lies within us. We may begin to relax into it and trust that it was always there and always will be there.

Sitting quietly before a lit candle helps many people become quiet. Staring into the glowing flame draws the focus, and helps put other thoughts aside. There is a certain kind of beauty in sitting quietly and realizing that, in a way, you are, at that moment, doing what people throughout history have done. You are, for that brief time, just the same as a person who lived in ancient Egypt, Rome, Judea or Persia, or perhaps a medieval peasant starting your day, a 16th century soldier going out to fight. Whatever age you can think of, people have practiced the act of quietly turning within for assurance and wisdom.

A poor Methodist woman of the 18th century wrote,

I do not know when I have had happier times in my soul than when I have been sitting at work, with nothing before me but a candle and a white cloth, and hearing no sound but that of my own breath, with God in my soul and heaven in my eye. (Lessin, 1991).

Following is a poem I wrote in 1993 during a time of coping with an injury that had almost totally incapacitated me with strain and pain for four years. Reduced to virtually no physical activity, I searched for the lesson in the experience and came to believe that I needed to find value in just being, not performing tasks or producing, but just being.

MOVING AHEAD

By Deborah Marston

I've looked at myself as defined by my job,
A mistake I made long ago,
Ignoring the fact there's a person inside,
Who's really worth getting to know.

A big part of me got buried deep
Inside what I used to do.
My daily job, the eight to five,
I thought would see me through.

Now I find beneath the loss, the pain,
The doubt and the fear,
My real true self remains intact,
If only I'll learn to hear.

"I've never left, I'm still quite whole;
We'll create a new routine.
Just give us time to sort it out –
Can you hope in things unseen?"

The tasks you did for daily work
Were only a choice you made.
A new adventure lies ahead.
It's normal to be afraid.

Just don't freeze up and shrink from life,
Time can heal your scar.
You must use your time to plot a course
And find out who you really are.

Out of that knowing will grow a new job,
A work to pursue every day.
But, first comes the step of sorting it out
The old job from myself, I say.

Right now your job is to drop the past,
To be willing to learn and grow,
In ways that have little or nothing to do
With the work you used to know.

So, take the brave step of letting go,
And shoot for a bright new star.
Have faith in the fact you can build a new life
With just what you are."

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