

Fall: Listening for your soul

by Courage & Renewal Facilitator Paul Michalec

How often do you give yourself the gift of pausing your professional activity long enough to listen for the wisdom of your inner teacher, doctor, lawyer, counselor, or pastor? I rarely do. It often takes either a sudden calamity that sends me diving for my books of inspirational poems or a full-scale retreat before I take the time to sit and listen to my soul. Thankfully though, wisdom plays the role of the trickster and mysteriously reveals itself in unexpected locations and in unanticipated ways in my life. Let me share a recent story about such a time and invite you to think about ways that your inner voice is waiting to offer guidance to you.

Just a few weeks ago a new book of poetry, *Leading from Within – Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead*, edited by Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner, arrived in my mailbox. The book is a collection of poems submitted by a diverse group of leaders; words of wisdom that have sustained, supported, and challenged the contributors during hard times. As I read through the book the following poem grabbed my attention.

Listening

My father could hear a little animal step,
or a moth in the dark against the screen,
and every far sound called the listening out
into places where the rest of us had never been.

More spoke to him from the soft wild night
than came to our porch for us on the wind;
we would watch him look up and his face go keen
till the walls of the world flared, widened.

My father heard so much that we still stand
inviting the quiet by turning the face,
waiting for a time when something in the night
will touch us too from that other place.

William Stafford
From *A Scripture of Leaves*, 1989

“Listening” stuck with me through the day and I found myself returning to its images and metaphors again and again. This is how the trickster works. I started getting that retreat feeling of being more fully present to myself, listening for the “little animal steps” of my soul. It wasn’t what I expected from another Wednesday of office work.

For me, “Listening” evokes images of fall and the time of year when nature is busy creating seeds to hold the essential life force of a plant. In the Courage tradition fall is also a time to think about seeds, but in this case it is the season to explore seeds of true self. Like a metaphorical seed, true self is that package of unique characteristics you carry around deep in your being. It is named in various wisdom traditions as soul, heart, inner self, spark of God, inner voice, spirit, or inner being.

I invite you to experience the potential of “Listening” to speak to your inner guide, your seeds of true self. To begin, re-read the poem and this time, mark it up with underlined words, comments in the margins, or questions that speak to your inner life. Don’t judge your choices, just go with your instincts; analysis and insights will come later. Take notice of your wonderings and wanderings around and through the poem. Set aside your notes for a moment, and let’s try a different access point into the poem. I invite you to close your eyes and move back in time through the many and varied falls of your youth. What experiences, scents, sounds, colors, textures, or smells come to mind? Take a few more breaths and relax back into that time in your life when fall contains the most potent memories. Let those images coalesce and then take a few minutes to write them down.

I remember fall as a time to take in all the colors, scents, textures, and warm days before the onset of winter. But more importantly, I remember fall as time of listening. Then as now, I find myself listening to the wind as it strips the trees clean of leaves. I listen as the leaves dart across the hard surfaces of parking lots, driveways, and side streets. I listen to the skeins of geese flying overhead announcing their intention to

leave and their promise to return. I listen to the ever-slowng call of crickets as the temperature drops degree by degree every night. But my favorite sound is the constellation Orion, the hunter, as he stalks up from below the horizon to take his place in the late fall sky. For me, his steps mark a turn of the season and a time of listening for winter's approach; a time to take stock of my inner gifts.

Let's return again to the poem "Listening" and see what it offers in the area of understanding fall and seeds of true self. What did you underline or mark up in the poem? What questions did you write to yourself in the margins? I was drawn to the following lines: "hear a little animal step or a moth in the dark," "every far sound called the listening out," and "waiting for a time when something in the night will touch us too from that other place." These passages speak to me of slowing down, waiting, and listening for signs of my true self. They remind me of times I was caught mid-stride in woodlands, swamps, or deserts listening intently for "a little animal step." I can picture myself listening with a forceful sense of longing, a hopeful wishing that something knowable would appear out of the thicket, night, or murky water; while simultaneously resisting the urge to make imagined sounds into real beings. Far too many times I have fooled myself into thinking I knew my inner voice well enough to predict what it would offer as guidance, only to be proven wrong.

Where was your attention drawn in the poem? If we were together on retreat, what would you share into the circle of trust about the condition of your soul? If it helps, here are few journal prompts to consider:

1. Take a walk out into nature or into some quiet location within a city space. Sit down. Breathe deeply and slowly. Close your eyes and listen to the sounds of that space. What do you hear? What captures your attention?

2. What are the "far sounds" that call you to listen; to listen way beyond your outer ears to your inner ears? What are you starting to hear from the voice of your soul that speaks of your true nature?

3. The poem suggests that an important aspect of listening is the discipline of waiting: "waiting for a time when something in the night will touch us too from that other place." When do you find time or create time to wait? What are the things, habits, people, and responsibilities in your life that make it difficult for you to listen to your soul? What would it take for you to remove or lessen those blocks?

I find listening to be hard work. At times it can be quite exhausting and seem so useless and time ill spent. Imagine how foolish I might look if you saw me standing alone in a fall woodlot completely still, head tilted, and listening to the soft sounds of woodland animals. Imagine how unwise you might look to your colleagues if they noticed you waiting and quietly listening for the wisdom of your true self. But imagine making important personal/professional decisions without access to that deep well of knowledge that comes "from that other place", way beyond your usual range of hearing. I know of fewer more productive fall activities than listening, listening for the seeds of true self, even if that only means taking a minute while standing in my office, book in hand. Consider giving yourself that gift too.