

Listening For The Deeper Music In Our Life and Work

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From

Spirit At Work

As a pianist and composer, I can explain everything about a musical composition except the part that really matters. Yet it is the part that really matters that makes the difference between a composition that works and one that doesn't. This 'something other' cannot be mapped, analyzed, measured or weighed. It is like an invisible and emergent field that envelops me and the piano and the listener as I play. This informing spirit originates not in me or in the piano but in the space in between. And I do not go to it, it comes to me. While it seems perfectly ordinary when it is there, it seems impossible to find and hold when it is not. It comes to all of us in different ways. I feel it first in the quality of touch. It is like a tactile sensation in my fingers as they contact the piano keys. Then I hear details in the thematic development and rhythmic patterns that went unnoticed before. My fingers seem to merge with the instrument, passages which would have been technically impossible a few moments before are executed with greater ease as my fingers fall more lightly into the keys. Instead of striking or forcing the notes I sink into and mold or shape them as I play. With this new found ease, my hands now take the lead and suggest where the music goes next. They do so with an inner necessity and purposefulness that leaves little doubt that they know what they are doing. This is not noodling as my piano teachers of the past once suggested.

On the contrary, I believe that when I am willing to open a space to explore the music's ever changing form, I am creating an opportunity for another aspect of intelligence - like an experience that has been invisibly enfolded into the notes - to emerge. When this occurs, the roles between the left and right hand become more transparent, neither one tries to dominate the other. Instead each instinctively seems to know how to complement and add to what has gone before. When this happens, it feels like I am no longer playing with two hands, but with four. The challenge here is to be porous enough to not inhibit the flow or allow the fear that takes hold when I feel this much out of control to let me escape into a structure or analysis, because this pulls the life out of the music each time. In this respect it helps to remember the words of a jazz guitarist who, in speaking of his experience, said simply; "It is a particular kind of love."

My first encounter with this experience came as a child one day when I was playing with a set of replicas of tin soldiers with my friends. As they lined up their infantrymen and horse mounted cavalry, I created the sound track for it all. Suddenly, in a moment of self forgetfulness, I experienced what T.S. Eliot spoke of as the exhilaration and terror of that 'awful daring of a moment's surrender'. The piano was no longer a collection of strings and pins and wood, it was alive, for a brief instant I could not tell whether I was playing the piano, or it was playing me. As soon as I tried to analyze it, it was gone. In the years that followed, I became an apprentice to a set of practices that helped evoke this field and hold it. I also learned that these practices had less to do with talent or technique but with cultivating a certain sensitivity, a way of being that became a way of living a life.

For many centuries we participated in this larger field of being. The sense that there was 'something other' that informed and animated our lives was an integral and essential part of how we lived. It was like a music or tonal atmosphere which, about the time of the Industrial Revolution, came to a stop. The imagination suddenly became suspect. In an effort to contain and control its unruly impulses the artist's role in society was professionalized. In that moment the artist that

lived inside each of us was orphaned or died. Now the mystery of dark forests, of children at play, the spontaneity of animals, as well as the life of dreams and images, of innocence and sensuality became reminders of a legacy with life's deep generativity, which we deliberately tried to forget. In the words of Blaise Pascal, the imagination was now seen as a source of deception and the enemy of reason. From the definite moment in history we systematically began to separate art from work, wisdom from knowledge, beauty from usefulness and feeling from thought. In the process of objectifying our world, we created organizations - and work - without art.

It is timely therefore that we return to the arts to explore how they can serve as a metaphor for learning how to heal this split in human consciousness again. When our metaphors change, our culture changes. The word metaphor itself means to transform or cross over,. A good metaphor acts very much like an energy transformer, heating up the imagination, producing powerful and fertile images from which new knowledge can emerge.

Furthermore, despite the elaborate structures and relationships of our modern corporation, not one of Fortune 500's largest companies is a match when compared with the elegance of a Beethoven symphony, a Chopin nocturne or even a good poem. Perhaps this is because each of these works has flowed out of the informing spirit of which we have spoken. Thus the arts have much to teach us and our organizations about how we can introduce these subtle fields of thinking and feeling - or bring the deeper music - into our lives and work again.

EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

Finding our way into the delicate and fragile territory of the imagination however is not easy. Too often we find ourselves wandering into territory for which there are not maps and many lose their way.

The great American poet William Stafford found his way in by following what he described as 'the golden string'. William Stafford wrote a poem each day. When

asked by poet Robert Bly how he accomplished such a remarkable output of poetry he replied; "I lowered my standards."

By this he meant that he did not wait for the 'right' impulse to come along, but took notice of whatever was immediately close at hand. Through following and enhancing that, the golden string led him into the poem. For Stafford, whatever he noticed was significant and therefore worthy of his attention. He had absolute faith in the authority of the golden string to lead him in. It knew where it was going, his work was to follow it without imposing his will or getting in the way. Being obedient to and trusting this impulse is an essential part of creating the ground for this 'something other' to emerge. It means not being too ambitious or goal driven or pulling too hard or the thread will break. Instead William Stafford adopted a neutral and trusting stance, including a willingness to welcome open-heartedly whatever came, whether they be thoughts, feelings, sounds, images, and impressions. His work was to maintain a state of readiness because he could not foresee what was about to enter into his field of awareness nor what he would be called upon to do. All he knew was not to resist these nudges, even if following this trail of emerging meaning did not mean much at the time, it would take him somewhere important if he just hung on. What was essential was to follow and trust its lead even if it seemed to be leading him into a dead end. The 'Heaven's Gate' we are being led to is not necessarily fame or fortune or superior insight or even greater serenity. It is an awareness of our own true nature and an appreciation of that which is most centrally ours to do. "Who are you really, wanderer?" William Stafford asks in his poem; "What If It Were True." It is towards the awareness of this deep purposeful of life and to the riches it holds that this thread we are following eventually leads.

LISTENING FOR THE DEEPER QUESTION

Being in the question helps us notice things. The questions slows our thinking down. A real question leads us more in the direction of uncertainty and mystery

than to the answer. Unfortunately, asking questions for which we do not already have the answer in our back pocket can also be seen as a career limiting move. Yet to hear the deeper music, it is towards this mystery that we must go. We don't begin with the great questions, we grow into them. Holding to the question creates a reciprocal relationship between the question and ourselves. In other words the intelligence that underlies all creation depends on something more than just ourselves to do its work. The existence of the other; whether it is another person, a musical composition... or a tree... establishes a pattern of alignment wherein the insight that guides our thinking is found not in me, or in the other, but in the space of meeting which exists between the two. Thus we hear spoken in the ancient words;

To listen to you
or to listen to me
is not to hear us
but to hear the God who sent us both.

WHO WILL PLAY YOUR MUSIC?

Shortly after college, where I had majored in music and psychology, I left piano to develop a career as a consultant and educator. I did this for many years, playing the piano only for myself and a few friends when the occasion called for it. But through all this time I stayed close to the question of how to bring the music back into the centre of my life. And I waited. It was only in hindsight that I discovered how much the consulting work served as a cover for the music to develop quietly and without my interruption. Fifteen years passed this way until one evening during a management seminar in a small hotel, when an older man approached me as I played quietly for myself and after a brief conversation, asked pointedly; "Who will play your music, if you don't play it yourself?"

That question was a defining moment in my life. He had heard me in a way that gave me the courage - and permission - to bring the music fully into my life, even though I had very little idea where this commitment might lead. Several years

later an unsolicited phone call led to an introduction and I became the founding artist with the newly formed Narada Records. The visit with the old man led me to wonder; is it possible that when another truly hears and gives voice to our dream - seeing in it a possibility greater than that which we hold for ourselves - they are setting free an energy that enables this promise to be fulfilled in the world.

When the questions themselves trouble us, it is not because they are too large, but because they are too small. When we are living the real questions, the one's that really matter to us, and which we deeply care about, the answers become less important. We come to love the question for itself because it has set us on a trail of emergent meaning that is giving us back our life. The journey becomes the goal. We don't want the inquiry to end too soon.

In fact, life often favours us by not revealing our destiny too soon. For example, if I had seen the concert stages I was to perform on as an adult when, as a child I wondered where my piano lessons might lead, I would have been terrified. The image would have been too much for my young body to hold. I am sure I would have quit my lessons and joined my friends on the soccer field instead.

It is possible also that we would not recognize the answer even if it did come. As Joseph Campbell suggests in his accounting of the Hero's Journey, the answers that really belong to us rarely come to us ready made. Nor can we rely upon the intellect to help us here because it does not naturally move towards nor assist us in navigating this uncharted world. On the contrary, the intellect was always designed to serve as a guide for the imagination, it was never intended to function on its own. Instead we need to have imaginative powers that are sensitive enough to pick out what's moving out of the corner of our eye. The new leader, in other words, needs to be not only a decision-maker who can think strategically, but a sense-maker who creates context, recognizes patterns and can sense into that which cannot yet be seen.

CULTIVATING AN IMAGINATIVE RESPONSE TO THE WORLD

This sensing capacity involves more than mastering a skill, or a tool or technique. It involves nurturing an imaginative response to the world. The imagination is primarily an imaging and a sensing organ. We hear the notes and chords and the rhythms and the harmony in the music and the imagination also hears 'something else'. The imagination is our way into the invisible field of being. It uplifts and animates our perceptions - we begin to hear and feel the deep music that flows like a great mythic river just beneath our feet. If we try not to be too reasonable about it, this river will guide our growth.

The Aboriginal of Australia spoke of this as their 'song line'. This song line was a part of a labyrinth or invisible pathway which matched precisely the rising and falling of the contours of the land. It was in the singing of their song that the Aboriginal found their way in the bush. When one was asked why they sing, he replied; "Oh, it helps to bring the country up." In bringing the country up, the sparse wilderness of the Australian outback was transformed into a richly textured musical score.

Art finds its root in the words 'to join'. It awakens us to the experience of the sensuous. When we make the effort to use our imaginative power to see even one tree - we are granting the entire world its being. When we offer ourselves to the world in this way, we provide a surface large enough for life to find us, then the world can give itself back to us as well. It becomes enlivened through our appreciation of it, and comes to experience something more of itself through us. But we must make the deliberate effort to notice the world first. By naming each thing on their song line... the tree, that animal and the bush, the Aboriginal sang their world into existence. In this moment synchronicity happens. The field is alive with possibility, events and people appear magically in ways we cannot foresee., Dreams are fulfilled...life rushes in.

For the Aboriginal this ability to 'bring the country up' was also essential for their survival. It helped them to respect and feel into the subtle underlying complexities of the larger ecosystem of which they were a part. In a very practical way, it also helped them to sense what lay beyond the next hill before it could be seen. This

capacity becomes essential for us because when we are truly following where the thread is leading us we cannot see very far ahead. It is a journey that must be taken with a candle rather than a flashlight, using the urgings of an imaginative heart as our guide.

To participate in the world in this way means living a life which is more improvised than planned. By setting aside our repertoire we create the ground for new perspectives and insights to emerge. In this spirit of openness and curiosity we begin to find the end of the golden thread that will lead us in. Following this lead without resistance becomes the key that unlocks the door to the longing for home that rests deep within each heart. Nourish the longing, the Sufi Poet Kabir once said:

"For it is the intensity of the longing that does all the work."

The longing leads us to our own truth, a truth which we discover is not a concept which is fixed or solid, but a feeling that changes as we engage with the unfolding reality of our own life. This is our songline - a songline of the heart. To follow our songline is an act of great faith because our heart will often lead us in directions contrary to what our logic would suggest. As we listen to and respect its direction with innocent eyes and innocent ears, a stillness comes upon us - we are present now in the emergent field of being. In this moment our life feels that it has just begun even as our long journey into it is not perhaps complete.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Each of us possesses a unique quality of perception and experience which is our own truth, one that cannot be expressed by anyone else but ourselves. When William Stafford asks; "Who are you really, wanderer?" he is inviting us to go down into the very marrow of our life. What awaits us there is the realization that we belong not only to organizations and careers, but also to a story, the mythic proportions of which is unfolding whether we are aware of its legacy in our life or not.

We have always been a part of this story. It is a living narrative that offers glimpses of itself in those moments of surrender when we are unsure whether we are living our life or it is living us. Without knowledge of our story, it is difficult to know how to live our life. When the music stopped, our story stopped as well. We forget where we came from and therefore had no way of remembering where we are going. Knowing that this narrative lives in us still, gives us the confidence to be full participants in our own life. To find the narrative, we have only to follow the golden thread. To feel this possibility is the first step, but, in itself it may not be enough. We also need the perspective that the other brings because it is only through this sense of 'otherness' that we find the 'I Amness' within ourselves. In the absence of this unifying bond of mutual reciprocity...

a pattern that others made
may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home
we may miss our star.

From the poem;

a Ritual to Read to Each Other

William Stafford.

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