

Listening for Yourself—UUFM

October 4, 2020

Quaker educator and activist Parker Palmer writes, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.” Yet so much noise can get in our way, doesn’t it? Noise from our pasts, the residue of toxic childhoods or life choices gone awry. Noise from our anxieties about our place in the world, surrounded by a consumer culture that hands us endless remedies to our ever-unsolvable deficiencies. Noise from a culture that diminishes and tries to destroy some of us, with economic and racial injustice baked into our systems. Noise from a world that is most frustrating and unsatisfying of late, the last six months, too long. How do we clear out this noise so we can listen for ourselves, our truest and most resilient selves, in a time of fear and uncertainty?

Palmer’s words resonate in a context of vocational calling—what am I to do with my life? when that question means: what am I to do to make a living? What job should I be doing. When people like me, and also, it turns out, the Rev. Laura Thompson of the Bloomington church, when we get the “call,” we had to bridge the gap between the work we have been doing and the work of ministry calling to us. A book like “Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation” can help a person in this kind of circumstance.

Palmer’s advice to us resonates in another way, too. Our times, these days, they are calling all of us into new ways of living and being, beyond what we do to make a dollar. These days, it is not easy to change jobs or even get a job or hold onto a job. But the call to listen to your life, to listen for the ways you have already made it through every hard day, to listen for your truest and most resilient self, that is perhaps more necessary now than it has ever been. Whether we are introverts who have been preparing for the pandemic our whole lives. Whether we are extroverts spending all day on phones and screens to have a shred of human connection. Whether our Social Security payments and 401ks are stable or we do not know how we will make the bills this month, we are all surrounded by illness and death, confined within political and economic uncertainty. How will we live in fullness in the midst of this?

Consider for a moment another question, a common enough one: if you could go back in time, what would you say to your younger self. We might have practical advice, gleaned from the mistakes we’ve made: Don’t get into debt. Don’t follow that career path or take that job. Don’t get mixed up with that crowd. Have more fun. Be more serious. Move out of town. Don’t leave home. Perhaps we might have other advice for our younger selves: “Feel the fear inside your chest, Watch it ebb and flow.” “I’d tell me to go slow, This time on earth it moves so fast.” “Feel the love inside your chest, Watch it overflow.” Perhaps we might encourage our younger selves to be more attuned to the basic emotions underlying our human beingness, emotions that we sometimes downplay or ignore in favor of intellectual deepening and practical pursuits.

For better or worse, we can’t go back and talk to our younger selves. But we can talk encouragingly to *ourselves*, when we learn to listen *for* ourselves, that deep part of us we can reach, under the fear and frustration of these times in which we now all live. Each of us has within a center of repose, a quiet spacious room opening into imagination and full humanness. A quiet place like an egg, a moss green

forest sheltering birdlife and more. A place within where we can be still in the storm of the day, calm in the rushing of thoughts. Where we can watch our thoughts swimming like fish. Where we can see newly, as if for the first time, that we are more than our thoughts, more than our pasts, more than consumers, more than prisoners trapped within environmental, social, and political crises.

That space of repose inside us, that space is both respite and strength in these times. We are, all of us, hitting what is called a “six-month wall.” March to October in this pandemic. Too much. Too long. Runners and cyclists know about “hitting the wall,” where you think you can’t keep moving your legs and breathing, but then another thought that you *can* keep going keeps you going. And then you can.

Professor Aisha Ahmad of the University of Toronto is a researcher working to understand the rise of Islamist groups, work that takes years of study, interviews, watching, reflecting, and writing. These are long-term projects to understand trends and wide-scale concerns. Dr. Ahmad “has lived and worked through multiple long-haul crises,” and she offers a unifying, human perspective on where many of us are right now.

She says: ‘The six-month mark in any sustained crisis is always difficult. We have all adjusted to this “new normal,” but might now feel like we’re running out of steam.’ Further, ‘this time, our crisis is global and there is nowhere to run,’ so ‘right now, it feels like we are looking ahead at a long, dark wintery tunnel. But it’s not going to be like that. Rather, this is our next major adaptation phase. We’ve already re-learned how to do groceries, host meetings, and even teach classes. And we have found new ways to be happy and have fun. But as the days get shorter and colder, we need to be ready to innovate again’ ‘The wall is real and normal. And frankly, it’s not productive to try to ram your head through it.’ ‘Don’t expect to be sparkingly happy or wildly creative in the middle of your wall. Right now, if you can meet your obligations and be kind to your loved ones, you get an A+.’

We all get an A+! I find this advice reassuring. It reminds me that I have gotten through all the worst days of my life already. I have a track record. The same holds true for all of you. You all have a track record. I think it pays now to remember that. We all have strategies to strengthen us. We have that room of repose within, if we listen for it.

And, we could all use a little more advice, a bit more help to build our resources and reserves. Organizational psychologist and contributor to Forbes Magazine Nancy Doyle offers some suggestions from clients and colleagues who are “neurodivergent,” that is, they have conditions of brain structure that create thoughts and actions that might look like disability but which offer outside-the-box ways to build resilience in these challenging times. People who are categorized as neurodivergent, and who embrace their differences from the so-called norm, have advice from their lived experiences of meeting and surpassing challenges in the midst of frustration and pain. The advice is from the “experience of long haul living in a world that doesn’t flex to us, that we have needed to flex to in order to belong.” These clients and colleagues share the “wisdom and ideas for hanging in there during crisis fatigue.” A client with chronic fatigue syndrome once relayed their metaphor for managing energy: ‘Never let the battery run to zero.’ An autistic colleague points out that the senses can soothe: ‘Surround yourself with

smells, colors, sounds, or soft clothing that makes you feel warm and safe. This is your self-care bubble.' A colleague with dyspraxia or a challenge with motor coordination, advises to not compare yourself to others. A colleague with multiple sclerosis and long-lasting effects of COVID, who used to be an art teacher, is using art projects and letter writing to stay connected to the prison clients that she cannot visit in person. From someone who became deaf at 45 years old: 'Ask of yourself only one productive day a week.' A creative with Tourette's, chooses his allies when times are rough and prioritizes connections with people for whom he does not need to mask, where he can let his tics rip and know that he is safe and respected. A dyslexic director focuses on what she can uniquely do.

Folks with all these neurodivergent conditions are forced to adapt to a world that they cannot control. Out of their so-called conditions, they have crafted resilient responses. So much good advice. And you all have, we all have, within us our own unique ways of meeting the challenges we face. Listen for yourself, within yourself, and you will find those ways. Find a comfortable place for your body. Unplug the TV, turn off the computer. Quiet the mental chatter and distractions. Sit so still you can hear your heartbeat. Watch your breath, the gentle whoosh of air. Hear the funny noises from your own insides. Marvel at the body you take so much for granted. Pay more attention to what you really want from life. Give less attention to all the nagging, scolding voices from your past.

Listen to the silences between the words. Notice the negativity of space, the vast, undifferentiated, and nameless wonder that underlies it all. Our First Source, a direct experience of transcending wonder, is available to us all, not only when we look out at the glorious world but when we look within for a renewal of spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life. "Feel the love inside your chest, Watch it overflow." Our faith, our Unitarian Universalist faith, is sustaining, even and especially in these hard times, if we let it be.

19th-century Russian writer Leo Tolstoy wrote that "Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them." Our great capacity for love pierces us to our core and also sustains us in the mighty griefs of these times. Remember to listen for yourself. Through the roar, through the rush, through the throng, through the crush, do you hear in the hush of your soul? **May** you hear, oh my friends, through the sky, through the land, may you hear that love inside you calling, sustaining you for this long haul, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together "Amen!"

https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/covid-thinking-about-death/2020/10/02/1dc0f7e4-c520-11ea-8ffe-372be8d82298_story.html

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/drnancydoyle/2020/09/24/professor-ahmads-six-month-wall-rehumanizing-the-virtual-workplace-with-the-human-touch/#12fdac7368ad>