

David Steindl-Rast

~A
LISTENING
HEART~

THE ART OF
CONTEMPLATIVE
LIVING

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Introduction

A Listening Heart is a small collection of essays harvested from the life of a man of paradox. Brother David Steindl-Rast is a professed monk of St. Benedict. He is dedicated to togetherness in the space/time community of Mount Saviour Monastery. Yet he is also a hermit of the Benedictine Grange. He is a perennial person who gives present witness to the ancient tradition of contemplative Christianity. But he lives in the depths of modernity. He is a man of silence. Yet he is a pioneer of East-West dialog. Most of all, he is joyful. For he recognizes that "It is not happiness that makes gratefulness, but gratefulness that makes happiness." These essays are not words about prayer but a graced act of prayer. This is a man whose wisdom comes from doing the truth of the heart rather than merely analyzing it.

The keynote essay gives the book its title. It illuminates the nature of a religious attitude rooted in the heart, that "center of our being where we are most fully one with all that we are and all that is." It is here that we give over our being to a unique call of the Word and find the obedience and detachment for living by the Word.

In "Environment as Guru" the controlled environment of the monastery, a setting for the pursuit of the contemplative attitude by professional contemplatives, becomes the paradigm for our discovery of sacred order. Silence and asceticism not only dispel confusion but allow us to surren-

der to that listening awareness that hears “the universal harmony to which we hope to dance.”

The essay “Contemplative Community” points directly to an experience of meaning found poised between the two poles of solitude and togetherness. In the inner world of recollection and mindfulness, doings are transformed into play and thus activity becomes meaningful. It is here that we become what we already are.

“The Contemplative and Monastic Vocation” repeats and restates many of the earlier themes but emphasizes the call of the heart that we hear at the depths of ourselves. It is in mystical moments that we learn to savor the world rather than manipulate and use it. The paradox of every vocation and especially the monastic lifestyle is that we must face the reality that we are most truly ourselves when we lose ourselves.

Haiku, an Eastern form of poetry, is shown by Brother David in his essay “Mirror of the Heart” as a reality method, a way to discover the still point of the heavenly paradox seen reflected in the mirror of humanity.

“A Deep Bow” completes the collection by pointing to the universal Eucharistia as the root of a listening heart. In gratitude we experience gift as gift and enter the cosmic celebration—a thanksgiving sacrifice at the heart of the Christian life.

The natural repetition that occurs among the essays was allowed to remain for each essay and brings new and fresh highlights. The universal sphere represented in this collection is perhaps the most complete symbol for mapping our spiritual journey through the labyrinth of life. This collection is offered to the reader with the words of William Blake:

I give you the end of the golden string,
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven's Gate
Built into Jerusalem's wall.

RICHARD J. PAYNE

A Listening Heart

The key word of the spiritual discipline I follow is “listening.” This means a special kind of listening, a listening with one’s heart. To listen in that way is central to the monastic tradition in which I stand. The very first word of the Rule of St. Benedict is “listen!”—“*Ausculta!*”—and all the rest of Benedictine discipline grows out of this one initial gesture of wholehearted listening, as a sunflower grows from its seed.

Benedictine spirituality in turn is rooted in the broader and more ancient tradition of the Bible. But here, too, the concept of listening is central. In the biblical vision all things are brought into existence by God’s creative Word; all of history is a dialogue with God, who speaks to the human heart. The Bible has been admired for proclaiming with great clarity that God is One and Transcendent. Yet, the still more admirable insight of the religious genius reflected in biblical literature is the insight that God speaks. The transcendent God communicates Self through nature and through history. The human heart is called to listen and to respond.

Responsive listening is the form the Bible gives to our basic religious quest as human beings. This is the quest for a full human life, for happiness. It is the quest for meaning,

for our happiness hinges not on good luck; it hinges on peace of heart. Even in the midst of what we call bad luck, in the midst of pain and suffering, we can find peace of heart, if we find meaning in it all. Biblical tradition points the way by proclaiming that God speaks to us in and through even the most troublesome predicaments. By listening deeply to the message of any given moment I shall be able to tap the very Source of Meaning and to realize the unfolding meaning of my life.

To listen in this way means to listen with one's heart, with one's whole being. The heart stands for that center of our being at which we are truly "together." Together with ourselves, not split up into intellect, will, emotions, into mind and body. Together with all other creatures, for the heart is that realm where I am paradoxically not only most intimately myself, but most intimately united with all. Together with God, the source of life, the life of my life, welling up in the heart. In order to listen with my heart, I must return again and again to my heart through a process of centering, through taking things to heart. Listening with my heart I will find meaning. For just as the eye perceives light and the ear sound, the heart is the organ for meaning.

The daily discipline of listening and responding to meaning is called obedience. This concept of obedience is far more comprehensive than the narrow notion of obedience as doing-what-you-are-told-to-do. Obedience in the full sense is the process of attuning the heart to the simple call contained in the complexity of a given situation. The only alternative is absurdity. *Ab-surdus* literally means absolutely deaf. If I call a situation absurd I admit that I am deaf to its meaning. I admit implicitly that I must become *ob-audiens*—thoroughly listening, obedient. I must give my

ear, give myself, so fully to the word that reaches me that it will send me. Being sent by the word, I will be obedient to my mission. Thus, by doing the truth lovingly, not by analyzing it, I will begin to understand.

The ethical implications of all this are obvious. Therefore it is all the more important to remember that we are not primarily concerned with an ethical but with a religious matter; not primarily with purpose, even the most exalted purpose of good works, but with that religious dimension from which every purpose must derive its meaning. The Bible calls the responsive listening of obedience "living by the Word of God," and that means far more than merely doing God's will. It means being nourished by God's word as food and drink, God's word in every person, every thing, every event.

This is a daily task, a moment by moment discipline. I eat a tangerine and the resistance of the rind, as I peel it, speaks to me, if I am alert enough. Its texture, its fragrance speak an intranslatable language, which I have to learn. Beyond the awareness that each little segment has its own degree of sweetness (the ones on the side that was exposed to the sun are the sweetest) lies the awareness that all this is pure gift. Or could one ever deserve such food?

I hold a friend's hand in mine, and this gesture becomes a word, the meaning of which goes far beyond words. It makes demands on me. It is an implicit pledge. It calls for faithfulness and for sacrifice. But it is above all a celebration of friendship, a meaningful gesture that need not be justified by any practical purpose. It is as superfluous as a sonnet or a string quartet, as superfluous as all the ultimately important things in life. It is a word of God by which I live.

But a calamity is also word of God when it hits me. While working for me, a young man, as dear to me as my own little

brother, has an accident. Glass is shattered in his eyes, and I find him lying blindfolded in a hospital bed. What is God saying now? Together we grope, grapple, listen, strain to hear. Is this, too, a lifegiving word? When we can no longer make sense of a given situation, we have reached the crucial point. Now arises the challenge that calls for faith.

The clue lies in the fact that any given moment confronts us with a given reality. But if it is given, it is gift. If it is gift, the appropriate response is thanksgiving. Yet, thanksgiving, where it is genuine, does not primarily look at the gift and express appreciation; it looks at the giver and expresses trust. The courageous confidence that trusts in the Giver of all gifts is faith. To give thanks even when we cannot see the goodness of the Giver, to learn this is to find the path to peace of heart. For happiness is not what makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.

In a lifelong process the discipline of listening teaches us to live by *every* word that proceeds from the mouth of God without discrimination. We learn this by "giving thanks in *all* things." The monastery is an environment set up to facilitate just that. The method is detachment. When we fail to distinguish between wants and needs we lose sight of our goal. Our needs (many of them imaginary) keep increasing; our gratefulness (and so our happiness) dwindles. Monastic discipline reverses this course. The monk strives for needing less and less while becoming more and more grateful.

Detachment decreases our needs. The less we have, the easier it is gratefully to appreciate what we do have. Silence creates the atmosphere for detachment. Silence pervades monastic life in the same way in which noise pervades life elsewhere. Silence creates space around things, persons and events. Silence singles them out and allows us gratefully to

consider them one by one in their uniqueness. Leisure is the discipline of finding time to do so. Leisure is the expression of detachment with regard to time. For the leisure of monks is not the privilege of those who can afford to take time; it is the virtue of those who give to everything they do the time it deserves to take.

Within the monastery the listening which is the essence of this spiritual discipline expresses itself in bringing life into harmony with the cosmic rhythm of seasons and hours, with "time, not our time" as T. S. Eliot calls it. But in my personal life, obedience often demands that I serve outside the monastery. What counts is the listening to the soundless bell of "time, not our time," wherever it be and the doing of whatever needs to be done when it is time—"now, and in the hour of our death." "And the time of death is every moment," says T. S. Eliot, because the moment in which we truly listen is "a moment in and out of time."

One method for entering moment by moment into that mystery is the discipline of the Jesus Prayer, the Prayer of the Heart, as it is also called. It consists basically in the mantric repetition of the name of Jesus, synchronized with one's breath and heartbeat. When I repeat the name of Jesus at a given moment in time, I make that moment transparent to the Now that does not pass away. The whole biblical notion of living by the Word is summed up in the name of Jesus in whom I as a Christian adore the Word incarnate. By giving that name to every thing and to every person I encounter, by invoking it in every situation in which I find myself, I remind myself that everything is just another way of spelling out the inexhaustible fullness of the one eternal word of God, the Logos; I remind my heart to listen! This image might seem to suggest a dualistic rift between God

who speaks and the obedient heart. Yet, the dualistic tension is caught up and transcended in the mystery of the Trinity. In the light of that mystery I understand myself as a word spoken out of the Creator's heart and at the same time addressed by the Creator. But the communion goes deeper. In order to understand the word addressed to me, the word I am, I must speak the language of the One who calls. If I can understand God at all this can come about only by my sharing in God's own Spirit of Self-understanding. Thus the responsive listening in which my spiritual discipline consists is not dualistic communication. It is the celebration of triune communion: the Word, coming forth from Silence, leads by Understanding home into Silence. My heart, like a vessel thrown into the ocean, is filled with God's life and totally immersed in it. All this is pure gift. It remains for me to rise to the occasion by all-embracing thanksgiving.

The Environment as Guru

What I wish to share with you is aimed at making you feel at home in a monastery. We might begin with the question: "What should this environment do for us?" Maybe some of you have never been in a monastery; perhaps others have spent most of their lives in one. But it might be worthwhile for all of us to ask ourselves, "What is a monastery actually?"

The easiest answer, of course, and probably the best, is to say, "Come and see!" And if one came quietly enough, one might find out much without any talk. If, however, we have to speak about it, I would suggest that a monastery is, first of all, a controlled environment, with all the advantages and disadvantages included in this notion. It's inevitably a somewhat artificial environment, for a particular professional pursuit.

We know there are controlled environments for other professional pursuits. The monastery is a controlled environment for the professional pursuit of cultivating man's contemplative dimension. Those who live in a monastery have made this their profession. They have made public profession of dedicating themselves radically to the task of cultivating that contemplative dimension, which in fact belongs to every one of us. If we call monks the professionals of

the contemplative life, this does not mean that they are better at it than amateurs may be. We all know that very often, when you need your sink fixed, an amateur plumber will do a much better job than a professional. That someone is a professional does not mean that he or she is better at the relevant professional skills; but it does mean that one ought to try harder. When we say that monks are professionals, therefore, we are saying that they have accepted the responsibility of cultivating professionally what many enjoy merely as amateurs, the contemplative dimension.

But what do we mean by "contemplative"? If we follow our own particular tradition as Benedictine monks and trace the very word to its Latin root, we may come to see an aspect of contemplation that might complement those that stand more in the foreground of other traditions. I stress this because Father Damasus, the founder of Mount Saviour monastery, used to consider it of great importance; in our tradition the notion of contemplation hinges on the Latin word *contemplari*. The image and, originally, the reality that stands behind this notion, is that of the Roman augurs, who marked off a particular area in the sky, the *templum*. Originally, *templum* was not a building on the ground, but an area in the skies on which the augurs, professional seers, fixed their eyes in order to find the immutable order according to which matters here below should be arranged. The sacred order of the temple is merely the reflection of the sacred order above. The Reverend Father Damasus kept stressing the fact that contemplation consists in the bringing together of the two temples, as the *con* in *contemplari* suggests.

Along with this Roman notion there is the biblical pattern: Moses built the sanctuary exactly according to the vision shown him by God on the mountain. Again and again the

Bible stresses the faithful correspondence between the temple on earth and its heavenly exemplar. In this sense, Moses truly fulfills the role of the contemplative. And not by chance; what he attempted and what the augurs attempted springs from the same root. The contemplative gesture is deeply rooted in man's heart, in his longing for universal harmony. Throughout the ages man has longingly looked up to the harmony and order of the starry universe and attuned his heartbeat to its measured movement. *Measure* seems to be the basic meaning of the linguistic root from which stem not only cognates like temperature, temperament, template and temporality, but, of course, temple and contemplation. To measure one's step by a universal rhythm and thus to bring one's life into harmony with a universal order—this is *contemplatio* in our tradition.

To move in step, one needs to listen; to sight one's course, one needs to look. The monastery is, therefore, conceived as a place where one learns to keep one's eyes and ears open. "Listen!" is the first word of St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries, and another keyword is "consider!"—literally meaning to lay your course by the stars. St. Benedict, the patriarch of Western monks, wants them to live *apertis oculis* and *attonitis auribus*, with open eyes, and with ears so alert that the silence of God's presence sounds like thunder. This is why a Benedictine monastery is to be a *schola Dominici servitii*, a school in which one learns to attune oneself to ultimate order.

But such an order means nothing rigid. That would be the great danger, that would be the trap into which one could fall, to conceive of ultimate order as static. On the contrary, it is profoundly dynamic; the only image that we can ultimately find for this order is the dance of the spheres. What

we are invited to do, what we are to learn in the monastery, professionally, is to listen to that tune, to attune ourselves to that harmony to which the whole universe dances. St. Augustine expresses the dynamism of order when he says, "*Ordo est amoris*," which means that order is simply the expression of the love that moves the universe, Dante's *l'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle*. But the fact is that while the rest of the universe moves freely and gracefully in cosmic harmony, we humans don't. It costs us an effort to attune ourselves to the dynamic order of love. At some point it even costs the supreme effort of, yes, making no effort. The obstacle which we must overcome is attachment, even the attachment to our own effort. Asceticism is the professional approach to overcoming attachment in all its forms. Our image of the dance should help us understand it. Detachment, which is merely its negative aspect, frees our movements, helps make us nimble. The positive aspect of asceticism is alertness, wakefulness, aliveness. As we become free to move, we begin to learn the steps; to listen to the music, listen and respond.

Asceticism may thus be understood as training in detachment (negative aspect) for the sake of being in tune with universal harmony (positive goal). But if this harmony is to be truly universal, it must encompass all of reality. If contemplation aims at "bringing the two temples together," all of reality must become transparent to its innermost luminous structure, ultimate order must find its expression in space and in time. Asceticism must, therefore, cultivate its own environment, as well as its awareness of space and time, as a form of obedience to the environment as guru.

If I understand it correctly, the word *guru* means dispeller of darkness. Not in the sense that there is something good or

light, and something that is bad or dark: two parts of reality. I understand dispelling of darkness in the symbolic sense of dispelling confusion. If it is the guru's function to dispel confusion—beginning with the confusion that there are two parts to reality—the result will be order. Only let us keep in mind that it is the dynamic order of life and love, the mysterious order of the great dance. The various traditions have developed a great variety of forms for learning to put one's life in order—into this order. Prominent among these forms is what we might call an environmental asceticism of space and time.

Both in our tradition and in others, asceticism of space, the training in detachment as it relates to any given place, centers on learning to be present where we are. This is the first step: how often do we fail in it! We are ahead of ourselves or are hanging behind; we are neither stretching out to the future that has not yet come, nor hanging onto a past that is no longer here—and yet, we are not in the present, either. We are here and not here, because we are not awake. To be present where we are means to wake up to this place.

In the Jewish-Christian tradition a classical *locus* for insights regarding the asceticism of space is the spiritual exegesis of the scene in which Moses confronts the Burning Bush. The voice out of the Bush calls to him, "Take off your shoes! This is holy ground." To take off one's shoes—this is the asceticism of space. To take off one's shoes means being truly there, fully alive. The shoes or sandals we take off are made from the skin of dead animals. As long as we wear them, there is something dead between the live soles of our feet and the ground on which we are standing. To take off this deadness means taking off that familiarity which breeds

contempt and boredom: it means coming alive in primordial freshness to the place where we are.

At first it is a specific place, the sacred precinct, which we enter barefoot. But then comes the next step, the decisive one: you come to realize that wherever you take off your shoes, you stand on holy ground. "All around in every direction: Holy of Holies" (Ez. 45:1), a passage Father Damasus never tired of quoting to his monks. All you have to do is to "take off your shoes" and you will realize this. In the Benedictine tradition this insight determines the attitude required toward every detail of the environment. The Rule of St. Benedict is concise to the point of being abrupt, yet it devotes an amazing number of passages to the various parts of the environment: the architectural layout, the use of tools, the food and clothing of the monks, the furnishings of the monastery. The final proof comes when St. Benedict says that every pot and pan in the monastery should be treated like the sacred vessels of the altar. This means: "Take off your shoes and recognize that you are standing on sacred ground; this whole place is a temple."

Any place is sacred ground, because it is, potentially, a place of confrontation—confrontation with the divine Presence. As soon as we take off the shoes of "being used to it," and come alive, we realize: "If not here, where? When, if not now?" Now, here, and/or nowhere, we are confronted with Ultimate Reality. "In the fields or on a journey, in whatever place the monks may find themselves when it is time to pray, let them reverently bend their knees then and there," enjoins the Holy Rule. And thus the asceticism of place opens up toward the asceticism of time. To the here, the holy ground, belongs the now, the Kairos, the holy moment, the acceptable time, the today of which we sing in the liturgy over and

over again. "Today, when you hear his voice, harden not your hearts"—a decisive passage. And this today is always.

Time is something entirely different in the monastic context from that which a chronometer could measure. Time is not ours. When T. S. Eliot says, "Time, not our time," he points toward true detachment from time. We claim to have time, gain time, save time; in reality time does not belong to us. It is measured not by the clock, but by when it is time. That is why bells are so important in a monastery. Not only because most monks cannot wake up without a bell, though no one will deny the importance of that. But the really important thing is that in a monastery we do things not when we feel like it, but when it is time. When the bell rings, St. Benedict wants the monk to put down his pen without crossing his "t" or dotting his "i." Such is the asceticism of time.

There are occasions when it is time for something, whether you like it or not. And if you come only five minutes late, the sun is not going to re-rise for you; it is not going to re-set for you; and noon is not going to come a little later because you turned the clock back. Those are decisive moments, around which the whole monastic day revolves—moments that the bell indicates, not just arbitrary time of some timetable someone has made up. Let all these bells which you will hear ringing remind you that it is time, not our time.

The moment we let go of our time, all time is ours. We are beyond time, because we are in the present moment, in the now which transcends time. The now is not in time. If any of us know what now means, we know something that goes beyond time. For certainly the future is not, it has not yet come; and certainly the past is not, it is no more. So we say, "Well, but now is." But, when is the now? Is it in time? How

long does this now last? Assign the shortest span of time to the now—you can still divide it in half: one half for the future, one half for the past. Is the dividing line then the now? As long as it remains a span of time, you can divide it again and again, *ad infinitum*. And so we find that in time there is only the seam between a past that is no more and a future that is not yet; and the now is not in time at all. Now is beyond time. And we humans are the only ones who know what now means, because we exist, we “stick out” of time. That’s what it means to exist. And all those monastic bells are simply reminders for us: now!—and that’s all.

To work through this asceticism of space and time from confusion toward order, from darkness toward light—that’s what we try to do at the monastery. Of course, we cannot claim to have accomplished it. To quote Eliot again:

For most of us, this is the aim
 Never here to be realized;
 Who are only undefeated
 Because we have gone on trying . . .
 (The Dry Salvages, V)
 For us, there is only the trying. The rest is
 not our business.
 (East Coker, V)

We are trying to enter into that asceticism of space and time, to open ourselves to the environment as the dispeller of darkness and confusion, thereby finding peace.

Our Latin tradition defines peace as *tranquillitas ordinis*, the stillness of order. Order is inseparable from silence, but this is a dynamic silence. The tranquility of order is a dynamic tranquility, the stillness of a flame burning in perfect calm, of a wheel spinning so fast that it seems to stand still. Silence in this sense is not only a quality of the

environment, but primarily an attitude, an attitude of listening. This is a gift that each of us is invited to give all others: the gift of silence. Let us, then, give one another silence. And let us begin right now. Let us give to one another that gift of silence, so that we can listen together and listen to one another. Only in this silence will we be able to hear that gentle breath of peace, that music to which the spheres dance, that universal harmony to which we hope to dance.