

“Go Deep or Go Home”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

It’s always something.

Some relentless sound to destroy our powers of concentration.
Some noise to quash our hopes for just a little peace and quiet.
Some racket to deny us a real shot at deep listening.

I don’t know what drives you to distraction,
but for the poet, Billy Collins, it’s his neighbours’ dog—
as you’ll readily see in this poem self-knowingly named,
“Another Reason I Don’t Keep a Gun in the House.”

The neighbors’ dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbors’ dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking,

and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor who is
entreating him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful
silence to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.¹

No matter where we live, I suspect we all have a dog in the neighbourhood.

Mine, living downtown in the cacophony of city life:
piercing sirens and helicopters landing on top of St. Michael's,
pealing church bells and drunken college students,
idling trucks and too often the sound of raccoons
trying to break into the green bins on garbage night.

We all live with a sure and steady hum to our urban lives.
Silence isn't just hard to come by, it's pretty well impossible.

As it turns out, there really is no getting used to noise.
For much of human history, we needed to be alert to sounds
as much as any other animal to protect ourselves from danger.

While, relatively recently, we've adapted and gained some skill at tuning out
sounds around us, we're still prone to the same audible triggers as our
ancestors.

Even here in the city, far away from jungle and forest,
we live on guard against the sounds of lions, and tigers, and bears.
Only now, it's the sound of a car horn that sets our hearts beating.

Researchers have found
that there is no physiological habituation to noise.

"The stress of audible assault affects us psychologically
even when we don't consciously register [it]."

A study from 2009 explored the effects on sleeping habits
of those living near an airport.

What they found is that: "even when people stayed asleep,

¹ "Another Reason I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," Billy Collins.

the noise of planes taking off and landing caused blood pressure spikes, increased pulse rates and set off constriction [in the heart] and the release of stress hormones.

“Worse, [they found] these harmful cardiovascular responses continued to affect individuals for many hours after they had awakened and gone on with their days.”²

On top of that outside stress,
we have a symphony of sounds inside our homes,
not to mention the groovy ring tones of our cell phones,
and the little dings to tell us we have a text message.

Like Pavlovian dogs, many of us have become so addicted to those particular sounds that we find ourselves salivating with each new noise.

We check our phones sometimes even when they haven’t made a peep—a real phenomenon called “Phantom Vibration Syndrome.”

What worries me most about this relentless stew of sound we live in is that it can do such an amazing job of keeping us from paying attention, at distracting us from the creativity and deep thoughts that are born only from silence, of distancing ourselves from the truth of our lives and the world around us.

Cutting through the din is no easy task.

My grandfather, a minister who had a big booming God voice, would often complain to a house packed full of his grandchildren, that we were being so loud he couldn’t hear himself think.

This was the sign to me and my cousins that we would do well to take the party outdoors.

And, it was a signal that my grandfather was headed to the privacy that could only be found in the bathroom.

² George Prochnick, “I’m Thinking. Please. Be Quiet.” *The New York Times*. August 24, 2013.

I still recall a little plaque that hung in my grandparents' bathroom,
just above the light switch.

It contained on its face a verse from the sixth chapter of *The Gospel of Matthew*:
“...when thou prayest, enter into thy closet,
and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father...”³

Only later in life did I make the connection between closet and water closet.
Or begin to truly appreciate my grandfather's need for deep silence.

Though my grandfather could pray up a storm, more often, his prayer life,
from what I could see of it, was about listening.

It's been said that that's what real prayer is: listening—
quieting the mind long enough to hear a voice other than your own.

Whether we're drawn to a life of prayer or not,
I think there is a need in our lives for listening,
for listening with intention to the depths of our own being,
and the depths of being itself.

Whether we take what we hear to be a voice from within or without,
that voice can be so easily lost to us
if we don't create the time and space to hear it.

And, even then, it's no picnic.
And there's no guarantee what might happen.

Susan Browne tells the story of her own struggle in the poem “Buddha's
Dogs.”

I'm at a day-long meditation retreat,
eight hours of watching my mind with my mind,
and I already fell asleep twice and nearly fell out of my chair,
and it's not even noon yet.

In the morning session, I learned to count my thoughts,
ten in one minute, and the longest was to leave

³ *Gospel of Matthew* 6:6.

and go [...shopping],
then find an outdoor cafe and order a glass

of [wine], smoked trout with roasted potatoes[,]
baby carrots and a bowl of gazpacho.

But I stayed and learned to name my thoughts,
so far they are: wanting, wanting, wanting,

wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, judgment, sadness.

Don't identify with your thoughts, the teacher says,
you are not your personality, not your ego-identification,
then he bangs the gong for lunch.

Whoever, whatever I am is given instruction
in the walking meditation and the eating meditation
and walks outside with the other meditators,
and we wobble across the lake like *The Night of the Living Dead*.

I meditate slowly, falling over a few times
because I kept my foot in the air too long,
towards a bench, sit slowly down, and slowly eat my sandwich,
noticing the bread, (sourdough),
noticing the taste, (tuna, sourdough),
noticing the smell, (sourdough, tuna),

thanking the sourdough, the tuna, the ocean, the boat,
the fisherman, the field, the grain, the farmer,
the Saran Wrap that kept this food fresh for this body
made of food and desire

and the hope of getting through the rest of this day
without dying of boredom.
Sun then cloud then sun.

I notice a maple leaf on my sandwich.
It seems awfully large.

Slowly brushing it away, I feel so sad I can hardly stand it,
so I name my thoughts; [now] they are:
sadness about my mother, judgment about my father,
[and] wanting the child I never had.

I notice I've been chasing the same thoughts
like dogs around the same park most of my life,
notice the leaf tumbling gold to the grass.
The gong sounds, and back [we go into] the hall.

I [now] decide to try lying down meditation, and let myself sleep.
The Buddha in my dream is me,
surrounded by dogs wagging their tails, licking my hands.

I wake up for the forgiveness meditation,
the teacher saying, *never put anyone out of your heart*,
and the heart opens and knows it won't last
and will have to open again and again,

chasing those dogs around and around
in the sun then cloud then sun.

In the Buddhist tradition, it's called "monkey mind"—
that often vicious cycle of distraction that can keep us
from settling down into the empty, waiting silence.

That silence where we listen for what life has to say to us.

There are many names for what we might hear there:
the voice of conscience, the word of god,
the feeling in our gut, our inmost thought, our best and highest self.

Regardless of what you call it,
I wonder how long it's been since you've heard it?

Here, go ahead, I'll give you some silence in which to ponder.

What did you hear?

Was it only dogs barking out Beethoven,
or was it all about chasing those other dogs,
the ones who run circles through your thoughts?

Did monkey mind take over, or did you find your way to that quiet place where you can truly listen and hear and know?

This month, as we begin this new adventure called theme-based ministry, we're starting, in a low-key way, with the topic of listening.

We're living with the question of what it means to live a life of deep listening.

Over the next two weeks, Lynn and I will be delving into this question from different angles in our sermons.

Those of you in Theme Groups will have a chance next Sunday afternoon to reflect together on the answers that you're finding for yourselves.

And here at the outset of this adventure, this experiment we're undertaking as a congregation, I want to explain why I believe this to be so important.

We live in a world moving at an ever more frenetic pace. It's easy to get swept along on wave after wave of the superficial and limit our concern to reports about Miley Cyrus twerking or the future home of the IKEA monkey.

Friends, we bear both the privilege and the burden of living in a time of unprecedented consequence.

To put a finer point on it: what we do or fail to do in this generation will almost certainly affect the course of human history and maybe even the future of life itself.

That's a lot to take in, I know.

And that's why this world needs people who can listen.
People who do listen.
People who pay attention, through the din of barking dogs, and the dogs that circle endlessly through our minds.

I believe that life in this moment is asking us to go deep.
To cut through the chaos on the surface and find our way to that voice that speaks to what is of enduring, inviolable value.
To what is sacred and true and worth preserving with all our might.

If we will listen, what we will hear may very likely upend our lives.

Wounds and regrets might surface.
But also abandoned dreams and lost causes
to which we know we must return.

Truth be told, hearing and heeding that still, small voice
may turn our lives completely upside down.

And, yet, as terrifying as that might seem,
I find comfort in the thought.

And hope.

Hope in the thought of what might be possible
if we listened deeply enough to truly change our lives
and, with them, the world.

So may it be. Amen.